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volume 46

Relative
Genius

philip e. high

johathan burke

r. w. mackelworth

robert presslie

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no. 137

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SCIENCE
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CONTENTS

short stories :

relative genius	<i>philip e. high</i>	4
when I come back	<i>jonathan burke</i>	17
the cliff-hangers	<i>r. w. mackelworth</i>	32
no brother of mine	<i>robert presslie</i>	48
the tee vee man	<i>r. a. hargreaves</i>	60

serial :

the dark mind	<i>colin kapp</i>	72
<i>part two of three parts</i>		

features :

guest editorial	<i>roberta rambelli</i>	2
the literary line-up		119
book reviews	<i>leslie flood</i>	127

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guest editorial

One of the most interesting of many outstanding speeches at the recent Trieste S-F Film Festival, was the following 'paper' by one of Italy's most prominent translators and incidentally, editor of Galassia, one of that country's leading monthly s-f magazines

s-f and mythology

by roberta rambelli

It was Sergio Solmi, one of the most famous and important Italian literary critics of our century, who first suggested a new standpoint for the general judgment of science fiction, establishing in his well known essays (and chiefly in that one which introduces the first science fiction anthology to appear in Italy, *Le meraviglie del possibile*, published in 1959 by Einaudi) a strict relationship between science fiction and the poems of chivalry, since science fiction, in its difference from contemporary literature's mainstream, aims at satisfying the inborn desire for heroic adventures and contacts with the Unknown.

Sergio Solmi's definition is a particularly important one and is perfectly right and valid for what concerns one of the three stages of science fiction—the adventure stage—and partly for the technical stage, too. However, in my opinion, science fiction can be analysed from another viewpoint and one which offers wider perspectives and a more complete identity. That is, a comparison between science fiction and mythology.

From a mythological viewpoint, different mythologies may easily be classed in three definite categories : teratomorphical,

theriomorphical and anthropomorphical. In spite of these high-sounding definitions, the classification is a very clear and understandable one.

Teratomorphical (from two ancient Greek words, the first meaning "monster" and the second "shape," that is, monster-shaped) mythology is that one founded chiefly on the gods, or demons, with horrible or twisted or monstrous shapes, their monstrousness often reflected in their moral characteristics. Theriomorphical (from a Greek word which means "animal," "beast,") mythology is marked by the presence of gods and demons with animal features, while anthropomorphical mythology is the one which has gods shaped as men, even in their moral and psychological attitudes.

Now, these three categories exist clearly in science fiction and, what is more important, they have the same historical characteristics which we find in ancient mythologies.

If we study the most ancient religions, we find a definite preponderance of teratomorphical gods ; and so, too, teratomorphism is one of the main characteristics in adventure science fiction, chiefly in its early stages. The Assyrian demon of storms, Pazuzu, the monsters of Tall-Halaf, with mixed features of scorpion, lion, eagle and man, the ten-headed Hindu demon Ravana, the scorpion-men and the Khumbaba that we meet in the epics of Gilgamesh, the female-drake Tiamat, symbol of chaos and killed by the liberator Assur, the evil drake Nidhogg, which, in Scandinavian mythology, seizes the dead—all these find an easy counterpart in early science fiction literature, which swarms with flying medusae, dragons, monsters from the Black Lagoon, King Kongs, gigantic tarantulae and horrible "things from outer worlds," starting from the classical krakens of Verne and the classical Martians of Wells, down to the less worthy creations of today's minor s-f. Both ancient monster-gods and s-f monster-beings are irremediably symbols of evil, danger and menace.

The theriomorphical stage, which in ancient religions reaches its most important expression in the Egyptian mythology, is also found in science fiction, starting from the first blooming of technological science fiction down to our present day and reaching its greatest splendour in the perfect theriomorphism of Simak's narrative and more recently in James White's (whom I personally discovered after the suggestion of

Mace was in a foolproof prison, yet he could not remember why he was there or if he really was a person named Mace. So he decided that he would really have to escape if he wanted to know the answers . . .

relative genius

by philip e. high

His prison was cube shaped, it was ten thousand paces long, five thousand paces wide. One fifth of this area consisted of the prisoners' cells, the hospital, workshops and administration buildings. The rest was open space, lawns, shady walks, recreation space and an open air swimming pool.

It did not look like a prison, through the high privet hedge—which he later discovered was synthetic—he could see rolling hills, woodlands and, on a clear day, between two hills, a strip of silver which he knew must be the sea.

At first he did not know he was a prisoner. He was like a man slowly awakening from a drugged sleep and his appreciation of his surroundings was fuddled and chaotic. Slowly, however, he began to recognise and identify his surroundings and relate them to himself. He could not, however, remember who he was or how he had got here. Yet he knew things, he knew that at a certain hour he must rise, join the queue of prisoners and proceed to the dining hall. He could read the printed instructions above his bed, he could perform the simple tasks demanded by the daily routine.

With each passing day, however, his awareness increased and with it, strangely, an increasing caution. He must be careful not to betray his new-found understanding, because one never knew what 'They' might do or how 'They' might react.

'They' of course, were the prison authorities and he distrusted them instinctively. Not that they had ever hurt him, on the contrary, they were unfailingly gentle but even in the first few weeks of his awareness he had doubted their humanity.

Oh, yes, they looked like men, they had the faces, the gestures and the mannerisms of men and yet—somehow they were anonymous, secretive, elusive, they gave him the feeling that he was the subject of study, an animal in a zoo of a rare and almost unknown kind. They conducted, regularly, strange and incomprehensible tests, which seemed to have no relation to the human race at all. And always, whenever these tests took place, a freeze-robot would be circling a bare foot above his head like a glittering bronze soap bubble.

He had only experienced the effects of the freeze-robot once in the early days of his awakening and had no wish for a repetition. Sudden and complete paralysis, although painless, was a terrifying experience and he had learned his lesson quickly. After that he had permitted 'them' to check his physical health without striking at the nearest bland face but it was still a temptation.

As his awareness increased he became increasingly certain his captors were not human. In groups they behaved dumbly, occasionally making abrupt gestures with their hands but never speaking. It seemed that they only spoke when they addressed him personally and then their command of language was laboured and halting as if they had to *think* of the correct word before they uttered it.

They called him Mace, in a thick kind of way, so he concluded that was his name or the nearest they could get to it. When they called he obeyed, he had no intention of arousing their suspicion.

Nonetheless, after a careful scrutiny of his surroundings to make sure there were no spy or freeze-robots in his immediate vicinity, he tried to force his way through the synthetic privet. The result was startling, the more he pushed, the more the mock growth forced him back. It was some months before he was able to understand and classify the phenomena as a class M force screen.

Occasionally the hedge was broken by doors but to his consternation they proved to be 'trick' doors. They opened to the touch but as soon as he passed through them he was, in some inexplicable way, about-faced so that he returned once

more to the wrong side of the hedge. He noted, however, that his captors could pass through without difficulty.

Mace, decided wisely, that he was banging his head against a brick wall. Without the necessary data his hope of escape was a waste of time and effort.

He returned to his cell—his captors persisted in calling it his 'private living room'—and thought. The prison, he knew, had an extensive library and, good God, come to think of it . . .

He rose, slid back the door of a wall cupboard and stared at the small black box within. It possessed a headband and handgrip terminals. In clear print on the right hand side of the box were the words: "Hypno-tutor (Constructed for educational and fictional tapes)"

There followed a brief list of simple instructions which he followed precisely. Until now he had considered the instrument with suspicion, regarding it as some sort of indoctrination device but now he was prepared to take the risk. He could shut down fast if there was anything like that, couldn't he?

As he switched on, the instrument ejected a long list of subjects and, after some thought, he selected elementary chemistry. Shaking a little, he placed the headband round his temples, gripped the hand terminals to complete contact and waited.

Almost immediately a precise and pleasant voice began speaking clearly but, it seemed at a great distance, somewhere inside his head, followed almost immediately by a series of mental pictures to illustrate the subject.

He lost his nervousness and became absorbed. In one hour he gained a complete outline of a subject which would have taken six or seven terms of intense study by conventional methods. Within three hours, he had a working knowledge of advanced nuclear chemistry and was capable, given the necessary compounds and facilities, of constructing artificial radio-actives.

From that day onwards Mace became a sponge, venturing from his cell only to procure more tapes. He passed from chemistry to electronics, from electronics to advanced mathematics but he had only one thought in his mind—escape.

He decided after two weeks study that his captors must be fools. He had enough knowledge now, given a battery and a few simple chemicals, to blast his way out of any prison ever devised.

He was wary, however, it might be a trap and there was no doubt that there were certain significant omissions in the library. There were no history tapes, no medical records, no psychological information and no direct reference to weapons or warfare.

Mace's thirst for knowledge, had he known it, had not escaped the notice of the authorities . . .

"Significant, yes, but it is early to draw conclusions."

"But surely such a big step . . ."

"A man may step sideways, my friend, the significance of progress must be measured in direction not in the distance covered . . ."

Mace decided he must put his knowledge to practical use and made a cautious survey of the prison workrooms. There was no forced labour in the prison but all inmates were encouraged to work constructively as therapeutic relaxation. The workrooms were, therefore, generally crowded with prisoners making furniture, painting pictures, constructing elaborate gimmicks or simply experimenting vaguely without real aim.

Many of them, he realised were incapable of doing more than making baskets or fumbling at attempted pottery.

The facilities of the workrooms, amazed him. Good God, if only he had known sooner ! He returned to his cell and sank into deep thought. He must have a precise and careful plan before embarking on the construction of elaborate escape instruments. He must have weapons, reserve food to keep him alive while he got well clear of the prison, easy enough that, he could *make* protein concentrates in the laboratory. On the other hand, all of it must be done while constructing some outwardly innocuous object to allay possible suspicion.

Secondly and very important, he needed a partner and if not a partner a stooge to cover him while he did the work. He had already discovered the secret of the trick doors and knew he would need at least thirty seconds to short-circuit the mechanism while someone covered his unprotected back.

Mace realised without surprise that he was quite ruthless. If the stooge got frozen before he, too, could escape, well, that was too damn bad but it wasn't worth a regret, the essential thing was his own escape.

The escape too, must be after lock-up—the cell doors sealed themselves regularly at eight o'clock—when his captors would be less alert. He had already studied the lock mechanism, a simple magna-link device which he could easily short-circuit without triggering the short-wave alarm.

The next day he entered the workrooms early, commandeered a workbench, selected the necessary equipment and began to work.

Almost immediately a spy robot drifted across the room and hovered stationary above his right shoulder.

He was prepared for this and continued to work.

"What do you intend to build, Mr. Mace?" it asked, tinnily.

He was prepared for this also. "I intend to build a chair for my living room, a rocking chair."

"Why the transistors and the electro-solar cell?"

"It will be a powered rocking chair which I can switch on to rock or off if I wish it to remain still."

"Then why the chemicals—coesium sulphides and paprezene are dangerous compounds."

"I propose building the chair of maleable plastic and need the chemicals for hardening purposes."

"Do you understand the process?"

"I do."

"Explain it to me verbally."

Mace did so volubly but with restraint, inwardly he was fretting with impatience.

The robot swayed slightly above his shoulder. "You appear to have mastered your subject but I shall make frequent checks on your progress. Any attempt to divert these compounds to other uses will be severely punished—you understand?"

"I understand."

"Good. Lapses of memory or change of plan will not be accepted as valid excuses." It drifted away.

Mace knew it, or its controller, was suspicious and it would soon be back. Swiftly he began to work, but there were certain crystalline by-products to the hardening process which he concealed and allowed to dry beneath some moulding equipment. These he later transferred to a box of boiled sweets which was a normal weekly ration from the canteen. Once there, they were distinguishable only by touch and he breathed a sigh of relief. So far so good and with a few extra 'sweets' each time he should soon have enough.

Next he treated several strips of paper and concealed them in his pocket, these were harmless but he needed them for certain tests.

The robot returned several times, examined his progress closely, checked the level of the chemicals but made no comment.

Mace smiled to himself inwardly, obviously his alien captors were mediocre chemists or under-rated his ability, most likely the latter. With some effort he stopped himself laughing aloud, ten boiled sweets were not the dried crystalline by-product of a plastic hardening process but they *looked* remarkably like it.

It took him almost four weeks to build his chair and when it was finished, he was justifiably proud of it. Outwardly it was a rather clumsy article of furniture possessing no artistic merit whatever. On the other hand it worked and, most important of all, it contained all the instruments *and* the weapons for his proposed escape.

That night, when the cell door sealed itself, he drew the 'treated' paper casually from his pocket. There were two bronze coloured studs set high in the wall of his cell which he strongly suspected were surveillance devices. These he must check or they'd catch him before he'd really begun.

Standing on a chair, however, and pressing the paper against the studs invoked an extraordinary dizziness. It seemed, briefly, that there was a voice in his head which tried to speak to him.

Shakily he climbed down, replaced the chair and examined the paper. There was no reaction, had there been any electrical discharge which every known spy device required, the paper would have turned blue.

He frowned, stroking his chin. The only conclusion he could reach was that they were restraint studs, mediums for restraining the prisoners in case of riot. As he had noticed similar studs in other cells he had passed and that, further, they were set at intervals outside, it seemed to suggest that this was the most likely explanation.

He spent the next few weeks searching for a suitable partner. Until now he had held himself aloof but now he began to mix and converse with the other prisoners.

He was surprised to find that many, like himself, had no recollection of life outside the prison, neither could they explain what they had done or what crime they had committed and most were permanently embittered.

There was one point, however, upon which they all agreed—*their captors were not human*. Most of them suspected that their past lives had been erased in some way which, on the face of it, was logical enough. If the aliens had conquered or captured a number of human beings it might, in their own interests, be politic to erase their memories. Those memories might be violent, bitter and seething with thoughts of revenge. This way, however, the captives were more or less docile and could be studied at leisure.

There was one prisoner, however, who claimed that in his case, the technique had been ineffective.

“Oh, yes, they kept shoving this blasted helmet on my head but for some damn reason nothing happened. They kept saying ‘do you remember?’ Well, of course, I am not quite a fool so I said: ‘remember what?’ until they became satisfied.” He clenched his fist suddenly. “Murdering swine!”

Mace studied him thoughtfully before asking the obvious question. The other called himself Korvair and held himself rigidly erect. He had a habit of standing still, hands clasped behind his back as if about to give an order. There was about him a something which Mace described to himself as an ‘aura of fury.’ It was as if Korvair was seething with anger and, at any moment, might explode into violence. He was a big, determined looking man with deeply sunken blue eyes, bushy eyebrows and an aggressively jutting chin. He looked as if he might be a very useful man in a fight but Mace was not prepared to commit himself yet—he asked the question.

Korvair shrugged and laughed without humour. “It’s damn funny that *you* should ask me that or would be if it were not so damn tragic. You’ve all been erased, had your memories sponged away so you can’t get excited about the past. You’re lucky, very lucky, some never regained their intelligence, if you could see the gibbering things in building five. God!”

He stopped, frowning. “They never beat us by guts or science, you know, overwhelmed us by numbers, a dozen ships to one of ours. We never expected, had no idea—we fought but they drowned us by sheer weight of numbers.” He sighed. “Now look at us, fish in a bowl, animals in a zoo, bugs in blasted test tube.”

“What exactly happened?”

“Eh? Oh, yes—” Korvair’s recollections were vivid and compelling. Mace could almost see the armadas of enemy ships coming in from deep space, he *heard* the orders, *saw* the searing discharge of weapons, *cringed* in the humiliation of final and overwhelming defeat.

When the picture was complete he said, cautiously: “You seem to have a great deal of inside information.”

“I should have.” The other averted his face. “My God, I should have, I was called a Space-Commodore once.”

Mace was silent and finally Korvair looked at him directly. “I was in charge of the final assault, you know, seventeen battered ships, that’s all we had against the Tule’s hundreds.” He paused. “Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake, if we had run—but, God, we had no alternative. We had to stand and fight or leave Earth defenceless, not that it made any difference. I dare not tell you what they did in the way of reprisals—”

“This is Earth, not an alien planet?” Mace had to have data.

“Eh? Oh, yes, this is Earth, their Earth now, but if we could break out of this damn prison—”

“Would you be prepared to break out?”

“Prepared! Good God, I’d give my right arm for half a chance, but it’s hopeless, old man, absolutely hopeless. We’d need supplies, weapons—”

“I have weapons.”

“We would also have—” Korvair stiffened. “*What did you say?*”

“I said I have weapons, I also know how to beat these trick exits but we need a plan.”

“These are real weapons? I mean you can knock down a freeze-robot with a stick if you’re quick but if they turn the restraint-robots from building five loose we’d need something more than a club.”

“These weapons will stop one at twenty-five feet. Shall we get down to something practical now?”

They spent several days preparing a plan, careful to limit their meetings in case their captors became suspicious.

The brief and intense discussions did not escape the notice of the prison authorities, however:—

“*I doubt if these discussions have intellectual value.*”

“*Agreed, this is an unhappy association, such personalities brought together could become critical.*”

"It is regrettable we cannot perceive the motivations in their minds."

"That is a constant barrier as you know. All we can do, under the circumstances, is to increase our vigilance."

Mace looked at the wall clock of his cell and nodded to himself. The door had sealed itself five minutes ago. They had agreed to wait an hour for the prison authorities to relax.

At nine-five precisely he began to dismantle his rocking chair with a skill born of weeks of intense practice.

First he removed the mechanism from the rockers and laid out the parts in a precise line. Next he turned his attention to the armrests which curved downwards in a kind of clumsy artistry.

These proved to be hollow and separated into two sections. Working swiftly but without panic he began to insert the parts from the rocker mechanism. A skilled technician would have soon recognised the beginnings of a simple but effective automatic firing and loading device. The pea-size electro-solar cell fitted snugly into a special orifice at the top and was quickly wired to the firing mechanism.

Mace then removed the supports from the seat to the rockers and screwed the forward and longer one into the curved armrest. Then he took the rear support and screwed it in below the first. He had now a rather clumsy looking weapon vaguely resembling a miniature version of the ancient sawn-off shot gun with the lower barrel slightly shorter than the upper one.

From a wall cupboard he removed his box of boiled sweets and filled the lower barrel, carefully sealing the end when it was full.

He smiled to himself. The real sweets had gone down the disposal chute of the workroom, these 'sweets' would be a nasty surprise for anyone who tried to stop him.

Twenty minutes later, the second weapon was ready and he turned his attention to the chair seat. This was constructed of interlocking sections and broke down into convenient 'slabs' with which he crammed his pockets.

The 'slabs' were, in truth, protein concentrate covered with an incredibly hard plastic which would dissolve harmlessly on contact with human saliva.

The back of the chair broke down into a number of convenient tools which he would need later. Thank God, the spy

robot had lost interest or was no longer suspicious after the first three days.

Now he was almost ready, he picked up what remained of the rocker mechanism and constructed a simple breaker-circuit. With this he by-passed the magna-field on the door and slid it open without triggering the alarm.

Tucking one of the weapons in his belt and gripping the other in his right hand, he looked swiftly into the corridor outside, ready to fire at the first sign of movement.

The corridor, however, was deserted and even in the shadows there were no floating spy devices.

Sliding the door shut behind, he sprinted silently down the corridor and turned the corner at the far end. It was the work of seconds to open Korvair's cell from the outside and slide back the door.

"Ready?"

"Ready!" Korvair was almost crouching in eagerness.

"Catch!" Mace tossed him the gun. "I've told you how to use it, point and squeeze the stud—come on."

They raced together down the remainder of the corridor and came to the wide heavy door which led out of the building. This one had a stress-lock and it took Mace almost thirty seconds to by-pass the reactors.

"O.K., Come on." Mace was sweating. There had been nothing about the lock to suggest an alarm system but one never knew.

Panting they raced together across the short grass of a wide lawn and stopped by a clump of trees to regain their breath. They had another hundred yards of lawn to cross before they reached the privet and the door to outside.

"Right!" Mace sprinted again with Korvair at his side. He was acutely conscious that he was now in full view of the administration buildings and, for all he knew, the entire area of the lawn might be criss-crossed with detector rays.

"Made it!" He flung himself full length beside the step of one of the trick doors, took out one of his tools and began to work rapidly at the inspection plate concealing the door mechanism. "Cover my back."

He had the inspection plate off when Korvair croaked: "Robots." He sounded on the verge of hysteria.

Mace turned and rose, the gun in his hand. There were two copper soap bubbles sailing unhurriedly towards them about six feet above the ground.

"Oh, my God." Korvair was shaking visibly and had not raised his gun.

Mace kicked his leg brutally. "Pull yourself together or I'll kill you first—clear?" He raised his own gun, the things were now well within range.

"Shoot, you fool." Mace squeezed the stud of his own gun and his simple firing mechanism instantly came into action. A trigger-lift flicked the crystal from the lower barrel into the firing chamber of the upper barrel and the electro-solar cell discharged a brief burst of energy. Instantly the crystal converted into gas, hissed from the barrel and ignited spontaneously.

The thirty-foot jet of searing blue-white flame struck the right hand robot and knocked it backwards. The device had not been constructed to withstand a temperature of 350 degrees centigrade and almost immediately it flared whitely, crumpled and fell to the ground.

Mace never discovered whether it was the kick or his initial success which inspired the other but Korvair fired almost immediately afterwards, knocking the second one to the ground.

Mace dropped to his knees and once again began to work frantically. The mechanism had a peculiarly alternating stress-field which meant a complicated arc over two active terminals.

"Restraint robots." It was more of a whimper than a warning.

Mace sprang to his feet. He had never seen a restraint robot before and the sight unnerved him a little. They came racing across the lawn on invisible cushions of force like six-foot beehives, the four rubbery restraint arms trailed out behind them like brown weeds in a swift river.

Mace regained his nerve and fired. There were only three.

He hit the first one and it came to an abrupt stop, settled slowly on the ground and began to smoke.

Korvair hit the second and it crumpled into molten shapelessness.

"By God!" Korvair waved the gun. "Let them come, just let them."

“ Shut up.” Mace dropped to his knees again and made the final adjustments. “ Now !”

They jumped for the door together, wrenched it open, and plunged through.

“ Wait.” Mace slammed it shut behind them and fired at the exterior inspection plate. They wouldn't be followed through that door now, the few seconds grace might mean all the difference. He became aware of Korvair beside him, the man had his hands over his eyes and was moaning softly. “ It's a trick, a filthy alien trick.”

“ Don't be a—” Mace stopped, conscious of an icy sensation in his whole body. Yes—yes, Korvair was right, a trick—a trick !

There were no green fields, no woodlands, no glimpse of a distant ocean, nothing which they could have dreamed or their imaginations conceived.

They stood on a wide highway which, all too clearly, was a balcony terminating in a curved, transparent glass-like substance.

Stiffly Mace walked over and looked down. Below him, impossibly, clouds were drifting and he realised dully that he was standing at the window of a gigantic building. Spread out in front of him were the spires and canyons of a city so vast it terrified him. Buildings miles wide at the base which reached upwards in fantastic shining spires beyond his vision, and a maze of shimmering spidery bridges which hurt his eyes to follow them.

The air was filled with flying things racing about in what, to him, was indescribable confusion. Some of the larger ones, presumably moving along fixed lines of forces, rushed into tunnels bored through some of the buildings and emerged on the opposite side. He put his hands over his eyes, unable to bear it.

When he opened them again, ‘ They ’ were coming, a group of prison officials and some dancing robots.

He shrugged inwardly. It didn't matter now, nothing mattered any more.

A freeze-robot paralysed his torso leaving his legs and head free but he only stared in front of him with blind and furious resentment.

A trick, either the fields were an illusion or this was.

"There, Mace, it's—all—over—now." The same halting infuriating gentle speech, if only he'd had the presence of mind to kill some of them. Yes, they were blasted aliens, no doubt about that, not even speaking to each other.

One of them went through his pockets. "*Protein, gas gun, quite a little genius in his way.*"

"*Genius is relative. He is about seven thousand years behind his time and still disbalanced.*"

"*Alas, yes, we have so much to learn in this field. We can rebuild and repair damaged cellular structure but we cannot say how it will function when we have finished.*"

"*This is a tragic set-back, we had such hopes for Mace.*"

"*True, but once he accepted his partner's fantasies we knew he was lost . . .*"

Mace heard none of this, the conversation was not for his faculties and he was only dimly aware of Korvair shouting hoarsely.

"Who the hell do you think you are? Take your filthy alien hands off me, I'm Korvair, Commodore Korvair, I demand my rights as a senior officer."

One of the authorities leading him away shook his head tiredly and resignedly. "Oh, for God's sake, shut up. Your name is Smith, Korvair has been dead five thousand years."

Mace, for his part, was still trying to find an explanation for his failure to escape. Those studs, those damned bronze-headed studs, there were several even out here, they must project some sort of illusion.

He was almost right. The studs did project something but not an illusion. They projected, for those capable of receiving it, a mental message. The race of man had evolved to telepathy and, outside his prison, the printed word had long since been discarded.

One of the studs said : "*To the elevator.*"

Another said. "*Harmel Building, level six hundred.*"

There was even a stud above the door from which he had escaped. It said :—

RESTHAVEN

(State Institution for the insane and mentally retarded)

philip e. high

Alan's daughter Marion was apparently possessed—at least, she went away 'somewhere' in her mind. When she did come back she hated everyone, including her parents.

when I come back

by jonathan burke

She was away for two days and nights the first time. We called in the doctor and he shook his head and tried to look knowledgeable but it was obvious that he was baffled. His professional soothing noises did nothing to reassure us. My wife stood by the bedside crying as he trotted out his glib platitudes.

Marion lay as she always lay, her face turned up placidly towards the ceiling, her plump little mouth set in a half smile. She was anybody's dream picture of a ten-year-old daughter. But we were used to her waking up in the morning, her mouth moving, her eyes opening, the sound of a yawn and a little giggle. Now she would not wake up.

"She's breathing normally," said the doctor. "No tension. Nothing abnormal. Everything perfectly in order. Really" even to himself it must have sounded absurd—"there appears to be nothing to worry about."

In spite of which he was worried. Not as appalled and desperate as we were, but certainly unhappy. If it went on another day, he said, he would call in a specialist or have Marion transferred to hospital for observation. He was clearly hoping that before that became necessary she would wake up and everything would be all right again. So were we. And the third morning she did wake up, just as usual.

Well . . . not quite as usual.

Janet and I had been taking it in turns to sit by her bedside at night. We didn't want her to come to herself once more in the darkness and not know what had happened. For her sake and for our own sakes we wanted to be there when she returned to us. That morning I was dozing in the chair when the first light seeped like a slow tide into the room, gathering strength and depth, its ripples drifting across Marion's face—and across her open eyes.

I jolted upright. "Marion . . ."

Slowly she turned her head and looked at me.

She said: "Who are you?"

Janet must have been wide awake in the next room. She heard our voices and in a matter of seconds she had come hurrying in.

"Is she—"

"And you," said Marion with that particularly earnest, enquiring note in her voice that we knew so well: "who are you?" Then she let out a lost little whimper.

The early morning light was not as thin and cold as our fear. We looked into our daughter's eyes and met no recognition.

"Darling," sobbed Janet, stooping over the bed.

Marion lay unresponsive for a while. Then her arms went round Janet's neck and she held on tight. One could almost feel her groping for reality. Abruptly I switched the light on, then shielded my eyes against it; and when Marion had blinked in protest and turned her head away for a few seconds, she was wide awake. She knew us again. But in the haze of waking she could not understand what the fuss was about.

"You're in here awfully early. What's the matter? Daddy, what's happened?"

I said: "You've been asleep for a long time. We've been waiting . . ."

Janet waved me surreptitiously to silence. She was right. It was best not to scare the child.

"A long time," echoed Marion thoughtfully. Her mouth puckered. She was remembering. "I was somewhere else."

"You've had a horrid dream," said Janet as firmly as she could manage. "But it's all over now."

"No." Marion was careful but firm. "It wasn't horrid. It wasn't anything. It was just ordinary. It was just living—living at home."

We stayed with her until it was time to get up, and then Janet dressed her with shaking hands.

At the breakfast table, with everything safe and normal, Marion began to delve back into her dream world in spite of our attempts to keep her mind off the subject. She told us that she had been spending some time in another place. She could not describe it but it had all been very clear. It was real. She talked about it as though it might have been an hour's train journey away, beyond the city and over a hill. She had had a mother and somehow she had belonged.

But how could she have one mother there and one here ?

"We do dream funny things, don't we ?" said Janet, forcing a laugh.

"I felt," said Marion, "that I'd been living there for some time and getting used to them. In fact, I *am* used to them. And in the end I can stay there." She dropped her spoon with a clatter and for the first time fear crept into her tale. "But I don't want to stay there. I don't want to. It's so . . . so red there. So dried-up and so red. It hurts. It *hurts*."

She was staring into a vision we could not see.

Janet said : "It's all right now, darling."

"It was a horrid dream after all. I don't belong to them, do I ? Do I ? I belong to you."

"Yes, darling. You belong to us."

"I won't ever go back there."

"No."

The doctor gave us a sedative for her and we kept her away from school for a week. Janet took her for little jaunts into the country. We organised life so that everything could go slowly and smoothly, allowing Marion's jumpiness and nervousness to subside. We established a slow, soothing rhythm of daily routine so that no distorted dreams would be provoked by tiredness or over-excitement.

But at the end of the week Marion went away again.

Once more she slept for two days and nights. Once more the doctor came and examined her. He found her just as before. This time he wanted to take her into hospital, but Janet refused. Marion had woken up safely the last time and there was no reason why she should not do so again. It was odd, but no more than odd : not dangerous, not worthy of hospitals and specialists and disturbing things like that.

Marion lay there as before. If she was dreaming, she gave no sign. She did not jump or writhe in her sleep and the expression of her face did not change.

When she came back, she took longer to recognise us. There was a dragging reluctance in her manner that was more alarming than her rapt sleep had been. At last she knew us ; but there was no happiness in her face.

She said : " Why did I have to come here ? I don't see why it has to be me. I don't see why one of the others shouldn't come."

After that outburst she was quiet for a long time and made no attempt to answer our tentative questions. She dressed in silence and ate most of her breakfast in silence. We tried not to stare at her and not to oppress her with our worry.

It was Janet who plunged into the disturbing lull ; Janet who could not restrain herself any longer. She said :

" What was it like ?"

Marion did not say a word.

" Your mother's speaking to you, Marion," I said, sounding like every pompous parent I had ever criticised in my life.

Marion said with a politeness that was forced yet impeccable:

" Oh. I'm so sorry. What did you say ?"

" Darling, I just wondered what it was like. This dream of yours—the place in it."

" You can't say ' was.' The place *is*. And everybody in it. And it isn't a dream."

Janet opened her mouth and I could see she was going to say something sharp. She was upset, teetering on the verge of tears. I wanted to keep it calm and reasonable until Marion was herself again. I broke in quickly :

" You haven't told us exactly what it's like."

Marion deliberated for a moment as though wondering whether it was really worth her while to tell us. Then she nodded in a casual way that was older than her years.

" It's a town," she said. " A white town where there's no dirt and no noise. And," she added with a strange sidelong glance at Janet, " no fools. We all know one another and we're all part of the same . . . the same life."

" What do you mean ?" I asked.

" You wouldn't understand. It would take too long to explain, even though on the surface there are no obvious differences. There are families just as here, but they all combine to make up a larger family. There are no inadequacies of communication and no fundamental misunderstandings . . ."

She went on lucidly and coherently, yet I could make no sense out of what she was saying. I was startled by the phrases she used. She had an adult personality and vocabulary. She described—or rather, tried to describe—a community that sounded more like a philosophical concept than a collection of human beings, and I could not imagine where she got her ideas from. Even in a dream a child could hardly reach so far out beyond her own personal experience. Marion was a gay, bouncy little girl who didn't spell terribly well and didn't make much of a hit at school and had difficulty with long words. This was not like her.

I found that I was hardly listening after the first few minutes. I was too busily occupied with trying to hold on to the idea of Marion—of Marion herself. There seemed to be two of her now : one our own Marion, trying to explain things to herself as much as to us, and the other a separate being who put words in her mouth, or, every now and then, snatched them away and slyly diverted her.

“And outside the town,” she concluded, “there's what is left. Not like here.” Her gaze went past us, out towards the garden and the brief slope of the field behind it. “It's so green here,” she said. “So horribly green. It hurts.” She put her hand over her eyes. “I've got to get used to it. We've all got to get used to it. But it hurts.”

We debated whether or not to keep her away from school again. It had done little good the last time. Perhaps the safest course was to let her mix with her friends and get caught up again in the everyday ritual of school and lessons.

It appeared to work out. She went off at the usual time and came back at the usual time. She was not quite the chatterbox we were accustomed to, and did not babble on about the misdeeds of her friends and enemies in the familiar way ; but she did not complain. Janet and I asked her no questions, and asked ourselves few questions. In a way we were holding our breath, not wanting to admit that anything was seriously wrong. Leave her alone and she'll be all right—that was what we silently assured ourselves.

In the middle of the week I met her teacher outside the public library. Miss Rossiter was a stringy spinster with a severe manner and a deep, complex affection for her pupils. As soon as she saw me she came loping along the pavement with one arm raised in a characteristically declamatory gesture.

"Mr. Seddon, I'm so glad to see you. I've been meaning to send a note home with Marion, but you know how rushed one is."

"Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Well . . ."

"Come on, Miss Rossiter," I coaxed her. "We're not difficult parents. You ought to know that by now."

She flushed. "Of course I know it, Mr. Seddon. It's not that at all. It's simply that I am not sure how to put this matter into words."

"Has Marion been behaving at all oddly?" I tried to make it sound light and unconcerned, while I waited to hear the worst.

"Oddly; yes. Did you know she had quarrelled with Penny?"

This I didn't know. Penny was the daughter of our next-door neighbours, and she and Marion had been inseparable friends for five or six years. They had their inevitable bickerings, but nothing had ever really shaken their friendship.

I said uncertainly: "They'll get over it."

"Indeed I hope so. But it has all been rather disturbing. I don't know the source of the disagreement, but I have observed that Marion now regards little Penny with out and out contempt. She literally looks down on her—and, I'm afraid, on a lot of others in the class. At present she appears to be making friends with a girl called Lucille Banks in the next class."

This was surprising. I knew the Banks girl. She lived round the corner from us, and quite apart from being older and a lot cleverer than Marion she had always struck me as being a quite antipathetic type. When the two girls passed in the street you felt a sort of internal snarl, like two dogs bristling at each other. That they should have struck up a friendship was unsettling.

"Also," went on Miss Rossiter, "I'm at a loss to account for Marion's sudden progress in class. What did you do with her that week she was away—cram her with Maths?"

"She did no work at all," I said. "She was resting."

"Then I simply do not understand. She is now not only the most brilliant child in my class, but may well be one of the most brilliant in the school. Within a few days I have been convinced of this. She's incredible. Mr. Seddon—what has happened to the child?"

What, indeed, had happened to our child?

Janet reported trouble. After I had told her about the split between Marion and Penny she had tried to dig the truth out of Marion. She had been slapped down for her pains. It was none of her business ; she couldn't be expected to understand : that had been Marion's derisive attitude. The child had treated her mother like dirt. "I've no time for simpletons," she had declared, and it had been difficult to decide whether she was referring to her mother or to Penny.

That night in her room I talked to Marion myself. From the way she glared at me I knew that Janet had not been exaggerating.

I said : "Why do you hate us ?"

"We don't hate you."

"Who do you mean by 'we'?"

"It would be a waste of time trying to explain." A complete stranger was talking to me and looking at me.

"Marion, what's got into you ?"

"Into me?" The concept seemed to amuse her.

And undoubtedly there was somebody else within her. Somebody else was studying me through her eyes and gradually taking her over, taking on a new strength and character.

As though she could read my mind she said : "When I come back I'll be stronger."

Before I could press her any further she turned over and went off to sleep immediately.

She was late waking up in the morning, and we thought she would once again be away for a couple of days. This time we began seriously to consider the idea of sending her to hospital. We discussed it in undertones as though afraid of waking her.

"I know it's an awful thing to say," Janet murmured shakily, "but . . . oh, I almost wish . . . I don't know that I want her to come back. Not the way she has been. I don't think she ought to come back. I'm scared."

We quarrelled, still not raising our voices. I accused her of callousness and of having some psychological kink, even though I knew it to be untrue. I vented my own unease on her and she spat back at me. Perhaps it helped to relieve our feelings. We were both exhausted by the controlled, suppressed outburst.

There was no telling when Marion woke up. She might have been awake for a long time, listening to us. If so, she

showed no sign of being upset. We simply became aware that her eyes were open.

She got up silently and began to dress herself.

Janet cried : " You've been away again, haven't you ?"

" Yes." said Marion indifferently.

My wife clutched my arm. I wanted to order her not to start a row all over again and not to alarm Marion, but that would have been absurd. Nothing now would alarm Marion. She was in complete possession of herself—or perhaps it was more accurate to say that she was now completely possessed.

" Where is she ?" sobbed Janet. " Where is Marion ?"

" Somewhere else," came the placid reply.

" Why ? And who are you ?"

" You wouldn't understand." It was the same, repetitive phrase. " This is the only way across. It has taken us a long time to find it—a long time to build up the strength—but we're here now. And we stay here."

" Marion—"

" She's happy enough. She'll be all right for the rest of her life—short as it's likely to be."

" What do you mean by that ?" I demanded.

" There's not much left over there. Not much food, not much air. Not much time." Her eyes narrowed with pain. " We've got to start moving the older ones across soon. It will be easier for them now that we know how. It's not that we want to come here. Not to this dull planet, back to primeval conditions. But it has a long way to go—and ours hasn't."

Janet said again, faintly : Marion."

" It will be short," said the child impassively, " and painless for her."

She got ready for school. As she was in the hall putting her hat on, Janet said urgently to me : " She's got to be stopped. Before . . ."

" Before what ?"

" I don't know. But we've got to act, Alan."

Marion appeared in the doorway and looked from one to the other of us. It would not be true to say that she appeared weary : she was too utterly remote even for that.

We watched her go. She did not offer to kiss us, and did not look back as she went down the path to the front gate.

That night when I came home it was to find that Janet had killed her.

Marion's arrogance had increased by the time she got back from school, as though feeding on the inferiority of her classmates. She had made only the sketchiest of attempts to be polite to her mother. Janet, her nerves on edge, had spoken to her as most distraught mothers speak to their children from time to time, finishing up with the familiar shout: "Do you know who you're talking to."

"Yes," Marion had replied insolently. "But *you* don't know who *you're* talking to."

She had then gone upstairs to her room, dismissing the whole thing. Janet had raced upstairs in pursuit. They had stood on the landing, Janet screaming at her; and Marion had coldly flailed her with humiliating contempt. At last Janet had hit her. And Marion said: "Scum."

Janet reached for the first thing that came to hand. It was a small but heavy wooden statue of a grinning animal which I had brought back from Burma years ago and which now stood on the landing window-ledge. Janet slammed it twice against Marion's head, and Marion staggered for a long moment and then fell down the stairs. She was dead when she reached the bottom.

Janet was sitting in a terrible stupor when I reached home. I left her while I had a look at Marion, and then I went away and was sick. When I had washed my face and had a drink and stopped trembling, I took the wooden statue and looked despairingly around. We had no open fireplace, and I couldn't risk putting it in the dustbin. Right now it was just a matter of getting it out of the way. I couldn't bear to wash it—couldn't bear to wipe Marion's blood off it. I took it up into the attic and stowed it away behind the cistern for the time being, and then came down and tried to get Janet into some sort of shape before we called in the doctor and the police.

It was an accident, of course. I did all the talking. They were all very sympathetic towards Janet, and she managed to confirm that she had seen Marion falling downstairs. The doctor told of the child's two inexplicable bouts of unconsciousness, and gave his opinion that she must have been overtaken by a dizzy spell in some way connected with the illness. She had struck her head against the stairs and the wall on the way down. That was how she died.

After it was over I had the task of shielding and comforting Janet. She was in danger of a breakdown. She began to

reproach herself bitterly. It was too easy to forget what Marion had been like these past few weeks and to remember how adorable she had been before that time. Janet felt that somehow, in some way she could not comprehend, the whole thing must have been her fault.

I did all I could, but deep down I knew that the dark shadow could never be driven out of the house.

Little Penny next door was heartbroken. She, too, remembered only the good things about Marion and forgot their recent quarrel.

Lucille Banks was a different matter.

I passed her on the corner of the street one evening and she looked straight at me. Just looked ; said nothing. It was like being struck across the face. In her eyes was the same expression I had seen in Marion's after she had ceased to be Marion. I got the impression that she was waiting ; but waiting for what ?

Janet began to dream.

One morning she told me incoherently that she had seen Marion again—*our* Marion.

“She's still there. She hasn't changed. She was so glad to see me, so . . . oh, Alan, if you knew . . . It's so red over there. It hurts. But she's Marion, and we were talking, and . . . oh, why did I have to wake up ?”

I didn't go to the office that day. I stayed at home and tried to dig out of Janet what she had seen. But it was like any dream : by the middle of the morning it had faded, and after a while she grew impatient at my questions. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to be left in the sombre silence of her thoughts.

That night she dreamed of Marion again. She told me so, but would not go into detail.

I wanted to shake her out of this mood but dared not be too brusque. The death of Marion would prey on her mind for years—perhaps for ever—and she must be treated carefully. Apparent normality was important. The next day I went back to the office, once more with the belief that proved so foolish in Marion's case—the belief that if you pretend everything is normal it will somehow become normal of its own accord.

In the evening my slippers had been put in their usual place. Janet cooked an excellent dinner, and though we ate without saying very much I began to feel that things weren't too bad,

that it was all going to come right. We watched television, and Janet suggested that we went to bed early. If there was a note of appeal in her voice, revealing that she was anxious to get back to her dreams, I didn't let myself hear it.

When I tried to put my arms round her in bed she moved instinctively away. I felt that there was a great distance between us. Long after she had gone to sleep I lay awake and wondered apprehensively if we were going to drift further apart and if she was going to retreat into herself and hide away from me and from the world.

Gradually tiredness claimed me. I hung for a long time between the drowsy reality of our bedroom and the soothing slumber of forgetfulness. Finally I relaxed my grip and slid down into the shadows.

And the shadows began to move and to take on a life of their own.

First of all there were strange white shapes jutting up at irrational angles through a red haze that refused to clear. I stumbled among them, and as I went on they grew firmer in outline, though still obscured by the swirling dust.

Somebody spoke to me in a language which I had never heard before yet which was on the verge of making sense.

I knew that I was being drawn on and that after a while I would find myself in a place more solid and more comprehensible. At once I stopped. Something in my nature refused to be coaxed in this way. I wasn't going to be lured on : I wasn't going to give up, wasn't going to let the very essence of my being suffer the strange distillation that was being prepared for it.

There was anger in the air. They were not used to being thwarted. In some way which I could not explain, I knew that they had not encountered resistance before, and their response was an immediate viciousness. Some force slammed into my mind as though to throw it off balance. Like a patient resisting hypnosis, I fought back—and it was like clambering up out of a morass, finding solid ground here and there and gradually emerging into safety.

I awoke, and it was morning. Janet lay staring at the ceiling. I said : " Have you been having any dreams ?"

" Dreams ?" she said blandly. " No, not a thing."

I was chilled by the fixed, almost mocking self-assurance of her gaze as she sat up and looked down on me.

Her expression remained like a taunting ghost in my mind all the time I was in the office. Occasionally it blurred and mingled with other ghosts—tantalising shapes from nightmare, sometimes seeming to offer vague promises and at other times uttering threats.

I tried to pull myself together. At this rate my work was going to suffer and that would do nobody any good. The business of living had to go on.

I passed Lucille Banks again on my way home. She watched me all the way along the street until I reached my own front door. I was glad to get inside and close it behind me.

Janet did not come out into the hall to meet me. It was not until I had hung up my coat and walked into the sitting room that I found we had visitors. The police were waiting for me.

They were very polite but very bleak. They asked their questions as though they knew all the answers and required from me only formal confirmation. Janet sat with her head bowed, apparently not listening yet hearing every word that was said.

The bloodstained statue sat on a clean handkerchief in the middle of the coffee table. It looked squat and evil, like some obscene animal god sated with sacrifice. But I mustn't let myself be caught up in such fancies. It was nothing but a heavy piece of carved wood which my wife had hysterically slammed against our daughter's head.

The police inspector said: "It would appear, then, that your daughter did not in fact fall downstairs as you claimed. Before falling she was brutally struck with that object—struck with intent to murder."

I could not answer. I stared at him and then at Janet. Her head was still lowered.

"Having killed her," the inspector continued, "you were clear-headed enough to make immediate arrangements to hide the instrument of death. Not until it was safely tucked away in the attic did you send for the doctor and the police."

I wondered desperately how they had found the statue and why they should have been looking for it in the first place. Even if I knew the answer, it wasn't going to help. The evidence was here. There was no concealing it now.

The inspector said: "Don't you think you'd better tell the truth, sir?" Before I could grope for some sense in all this,

he added formally : " I must warn you, of course, that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence."

Tell the truth . . . and implicate Janet. It was unthinkable. Yet what was the alternative ?

At last Janet raised her head. She was going to speak. I wanted to shout at her, to stop her, to tell her not to incriminate herself, to give me time to sort it out. Then I saw her face and I was struck dumb.

" Alan," she said very softly, " don't you think it's better this way ? I can't go on covering up for you for the rest of our life. I can't stand it. I'm sorry, Alan, but it won't work."

Her voice was gentle and persuasive, full of calculated affection. It was most convincing. But the satisfaction in her eyes was a negation of every word she uttered.

I need have no compunction. This was no longer my wife. Janet had gone, just as Marion had gone. I sensed that she would never come back. She had been . . . *replaced*. And she and her people, whoever they were, must not get away with this.

I said : " You're on the wrong track, Inspector. I admit I concealed evidence, but there were reasons. Now those reasons no longer apply. It was my wife who killed Marion. You will find her fingerprints on that statue."

He looked at me with undisguised loathing. When he spoke, he snapped the words out as though anxious to hurl them in my face. " Your wife's fingerprints are on the statue," he conceded. " Hardly surprising, since it was she who carried it downstairs before telephoning us and telling us the story of what really happened. But they are not as marked as *your* fingerprints."

I remembered how tautly I had gripped the thing as I carried it up to the attic, holding on to it with all the force of my mounting terror at the time.

" And," the inspector went on remorselessly, " if you are thinking that a wife cannot give testimony against her husband, or that you might try to swing the blame on to her and fog the issue in Court, I have to inform you that she is not the only witness. One of your daughter's school friends was in the house at the time, watching. You didn't know that, did you, Mr. Seddon ? It was she who persuaded your wife that the truth must be told."

" Who was it ?" I asked although I already knew the answer.

Janet said : " It was Lucille. I didn't tell you that day, Alan, because I was so scared. She had been here playing with Marion, and when you came home she hid, intending to get out of the house without meeting you. She was frightened of you—as we all were."

" But why ?" I burst out, unable to hold it in any longer. " Why frame me like this ? If you . . . you people hate Marion's murderer, you know as well as I do that it wasn't me. Why pick on me ?"

" Alan," said Janet in that same hurt, persuasive voice, " you're resisting the truth. You've always resisted it. And it's no good."

The police inspector nodded solemnly. But he didn't know what she was talking about. I was the only one who understood what she meant.

They had given me the opportunity. They had contacted me and I had rejected them. I wasn't susceptible : they couldn't come in through me. I was a potential danger to them, living with Janet, beginning perhaps to understand more and more of what was going on and in the end perhaps being able to warn others. There were bound to be casualties, as there had been with Marion ; but they could forgive that if Marion's killer could herself be converted in the end to their own purposes. For me there was no chance.

And nobody in this world would now believe a word that I said.

Nobody does believe. The evidence has been piled up against me and my defence is regarded as a cunning attempt to establish insanity as an excuse.

Lucille Banks made a good showing in Court. She was so obviously an honest little girl, so obviously fond of her dead school-friend. She lied so admirably about the stories Marion told her about me—the brutal father of whom she was so afraid, of whom her mother was so afraid. And Lucille had hidden, shivering, under the stairs when I came in, and had heard me yelling at Marion and then attacking her. Lucille . . . who never once set foot in our house until she came to work out her plans with Janet.

There was not much hope from the start. And when I looked along the jury and found there three faces that were the same as Janet's, the same as Lucille's, the same as Marion's had

been, I knew I was finished. There were nine people on that jury who didn't believe my story, and three who did ; but their verdict came to the same thing.

They have decided to hang me, though I hear that there is a movement afoot to ask for a reprieve. Some people think I am genuinely insane, and even if I'm not they favour a life sentence rather than a death sentence. For myself, I favour the swift dark. If I were to linger on I would always be yearning for those others, those people from the other side—wherever it may be—to contact me again. And I don't think they intend to. If they did, I might still not be able to give in to them. Unlike Janet, who succumbed so easily and smoothly because part of her longed to see Marion again and was willing to sacrifice everything to accomplish that, I know I would fight against being taken over. Even when I wanted to go, I would stay stubbornly here.

For the sake of the human race I hope there are others like me. I hope there will be enough resolute, dogged men and women to hold out against the invasion.

And for Janet and Marion . . . for them I hope that there is happiness in being together. Wherever they may be, and however short their time is in that red, alien world to which they have been banished, at least they are together and the pain will not be too terrible.

I wish I could be with them.

jonathan burke

'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.

Rhodes contracted to sabotage a rival company's computer—apart from safety devices, his greatest problem was the fact that his employers could watch his every movement, which didn't make for happy relations

the cliff-hangers

by r. w. mackelworth

There were five men in the room. Four sat in plush, executive chairs and the fifth was a projection on a tele-screen. The room was stamped with the set, ancient pattern of such places. In the room, secrets were whispered by earnest mouths into open ears and bold, hypocritical speeches bored dull holes into tired ideals. It was a Boardroom. Its brown and polished aspect betrayed it and the filter-cleaned safety of modern cigars mingled with the still potent fumes of old brandy giving it a special atmosphere.

Lounging around the screen, from left to right, were the habitual tenants of the Boardroom. Their tenancy would last until death or Company politics winkled them out. Opinions were hardly ever permitted in the warm fug of meetings and the only joy for the majority of the Directors were the fat fees which waited for the good boys and the pleasure of rubbing shoulders with the best. The men with the real power were these four.

Klauss was the Secretary. He was flabby faced, round and rumble bellied. He filled his chair like a football and his tiny features were somewhere on the top like the laces of the ball. It was a rare thing to hear him speak but his hand continually made neat, shorthand notes on a pad at his side. His eyes

never seemed to look at the pad because they were always on the faces around him. Klauss was the squid at the bottom of the pool, silent and observant, biding his time as he marked down a prey.

Next to him was Laudel. He was thin and cynical and discreetly sympathetic. His special genius was the careful manipulation of money so that dividends were pleasantly large even if salaries were shaved to do it. Unfortunately he had a sly shadow of a heart and his sudden urges to liberalism had to be watched. He was forced to defend his weakness, and his unexpected conscience, with raw sarcasm which didn't endear him much either.

On the right was another man. He was still in his twenties and was there for his name and the number of his shares. They had been garnered by generations mainly by the impetus of favour rather than hard work. A loose mouth and a frightened chin might have revealed his origins to anyone inclined to generalisms and unwarranted judgments. Such a person would have thought rashly that he was the weak branch of some entrenched, aristocratic family. They would have been right. The selfishly unenlightened eyes and the drawling voice with its inflections of education and good breeding clinched the matter and so did the lank hair groomed carefully so that it clung flatly to the high, thin forehead. Marriot Scott Dandy was a soul with a background and he had no function but speech.

The figure in the centre, facing the screen, had the tireless look of a man with a goal. He was elegantly dressed and he was oddly faceless. His hair was immaculate and tinged with silver and his self control was like a rock. He was the ultimate power in the Boardroom and the power flowed beneath his fingers as if it were a live thing which he understood and loved beyond measure. Igor Todd was a very sharp businessman and but for his beautiful accent he might have done well in an Eastern market. In fact his grandfather had done just that and an impoverished country still had laws on its Statute Book to prevent it happening again.

The screen at which they were looking was a marvel of office technology. It created an impression of expensively, precise manufacture with just the right colours and three dimensional perspective. The man it held trapped in its pastel light and the scene which surrounded him were precisely

duplicated. The screen had cost a lot of money but then money was only a tool. So was the man in the screen.

“Are you ready, Rhodes?”

The man nodded to the Managing Director. His face was emotionless but it was possible to discern a personality lurking there which was human and brave. Rhodes did have courage, professional courage rather than hot impulse, but it gave him something beyond value. It was possible to trust him and depend on his word. Promises were hard to keep in the tight, self-centred world of his day, but he did keep them, whether it was for cash or liking, even if it was at high cost to himself. He was big bodied and chunky faced with eyes of great beauty. Despite his size he was as light on his feet as a boxer though he wasn't a pug by any means. Actually he had more technical ability than most and at least as much natural intelligence as his employer of the moment.

He stepped out of sight of the view of the watching men. The picture however remained. It was a perfectly ordinary scene. The long lines of a corridor reached to a pinpoint of light far away. The light was the clear glare of sunlight outside the steel and glass building which housed K and K Industrial and Space Consultants Limited.

“We will be able to see what Rhodes sees as he carries out his task, but, happily, we won't share his dangers.” Todd stroked a pepper pot protrusion in the arm of his chair concealing an amplifier. The sound linked with the screen became a possessive thing until they could hear Rhodes' breathing and his heartbeat and his soft footfalls on the bright, plastic floor. The breathing and pounding began to pervade the room and seemed to strive to take over their conscious thoughts. They began to be afraid.

Laudel broke the tension. “Did we have to do it this way, Igor?” He tried to sound moderate and unconcerned but they all knew he was scared of the risks they were taking and sorry for Rhodes. His regrets were soft and sorrowful worms and they wished them elsewhere.

Todd was moderate too but his voice was hard. Laudel's vacancy for guts made him sick sometimes. “It's not profitable to do anything unnecessary. The Government contract is worth a million. Rhodes cost us five thousand. Even with tax and a little out of the till for all of us, the million will please the shareholders. We can replace Rhodes but we can't replace

the cash and prestige from the contract. You are an accountant, Laudel, think about it a while."

"Rhodes is our thin red line," Dandy said pleasantly. "One of my ancestors wrote in his private journal that they were splendid fellows. Died for their country they did." He stuttered as he saw Laudel's quizzical stare and Todd's look of disapproval. The Secretary's face lacked expression but he had stopped writing and his hand hovered like a fat, white dumpling over his pad. Dandy blundered on. "I mean he is like a Queen's Guardsman isn't he?" He faltered. "Big, strong fellow."

Laudel saw a chance to redeem his previous error. He hated the historically vested interest which presented families like the Dandys with a perpetual place in the sun. "What do you think Rhodes is? A boy scout? He has three degrees, Dandy You couldn't pass the preliminaries."

Rhodes was at the end of the corridor now. They could see the Walkway outside, through his eyes, and it was as if they were separate persons inside him peering out nervously. The only sense uninvolved was touch. They shared sight and sound with him and they could even share the smells if it was required. In the large glass buttons, sewn to Rhodes' tunic were miniature cameras and the sensory equipment to produce sight, sound and smell. They could not participate in his feelings exactly but the increased rhythm of his heartbeats and his taut breathing induced a growing sense of expectancy, of fear.

"You see, if we allowed our rivals to tender for the Government contract, then we would stand a good chance of losing. We can't afford the odds. If Rhodes can put their Brain out of commission for a time, then we are in. There are only two computers with sufficient capacity in the country." Todd was talking informally, as he would to an old and trusted friend, but he wasn't addressing anyone in particular. "It's strange that giant concerns depend so much on single assets like computers. They are so easy to destroy in theory."

"But not in practice?"

Todd nodded benevolently at Laudel who had asked the question. "We had a number of problems to face. Firstly we had to get Rhodes into Bondi's main building and then we had to work out methods of beating their defences between Reception and the computer."

“Didn’t you try to buy them out of this deal?” Laudel was very uneasy about the action Todd had taken and he looked upon the whole business as ill-conceived and dangerous. He knew the others thought he was a coward but he sincerely hoped this misconception arose from a lack of proper emotional balance. They fell so easily into errors of judgment. In any case, if they were right and he was a coward, then it was true that a coward could be described as a sensible man who avoided risks until he understood where they led. His natural prudence was his fortune and security. He would always be safe as long as he remembered that. His father had always walked in the middle of the road in business until his death. It was a pity they never discovered who ran him over.

“I went to Grace, their Chairman, and I offered him enough loot to make his shares in Bondi’s look silly. I’m sorry to say he turned out to be as straight as a schoolmarm and twice as pompous. He turned my offer down flat. I really do hate these ‘holier than thou’ types who get into business these days. They are like honest politicians. All they do is dissipate power into the wrong hands.” Todd seemed politely aggrieved, “So much cash has been put into that computer of ours and Grace wants to stop us getting it back. I tell you, gentlemen, I think he’s an unethical swine.”

“Unethical?” Dandy was shocked though he couldn’t think why. He had been trying to follow the Managing Director’s reasoning for once and found himself a very puzzled man. He would have been better off in his usual trance.

“The winning side is always unethical,” Laudel explained confidentially. “Mind you, some people don’t really understand what they mean by ethics and others do but prefer to ignore them.” He looked significantly at Todd’s profile as if he was some kind of evil angel who had led him astray.

Rhodes’ voice, barely above a whisper, crept into the room over their chatter. “I’m very near Bondi’s now. If you look you can see the main entrance. As I’m in the uniform of their own Security Corps and I have papers to establish my identity in that role I don’t anticipate any difficulty in getting past the human checks. Once inside, however, the difficulties will begin. If your man has managed to arrange the short circuit I need and can cut the lights right on time, then I will have a good chance of getting past the mechanical defences too. Assuming all is well, I will be beside the computer in ten minutes.”

Todd nodded sagely as if he was rather proud of himself. "I've seen to the details of the power cut myself. Your real enemy is the Chief scientist in the computer room. He always makes sure that visitors are all they make out to be and he has some rather interesting devices to help him. For instance, there's a little tool which can measure the brainwave pattern of the subject. If you don't fit the expected pattern then he will sound the alarm. There's some variation from time to time in any individual but people can still be effectively grouped. Then, of course, there is the old fingerprint method but that can be defeated now. All you need are the prints of the man you are mimicing."

"I can't mimic his brainwaves, Todd."

"I know that. I arranged the blackout of power in Bondi's for that reason. It's timed to come just before the Chief can start his tests. After all, I can't allow you to suffer, can I? It's in your agreement with us, isn't it?" Under the smoothness of the Managing Director's approach, there was a hint of sadism, of the desire to be a cruel child, and he enjoyed the thought of a man humbled. From the Directors to the office boy he liked to see humbleness. It succoured him. For that he was prepared to pay money. "Then there is blanket defence. I'm told it's devilish but then you are trained to deal with such things, aren't you?"

There was nothing humble about Rhodes and defiance could be heard even in the whisper which was all he could deliver through the throat microphone. "No man could cope with the kind of defence you so glibly talk about. If he has eyes to see, then he is as good as dead or worse. I've learnt a lot about you, Todd, and your lackeys, since I joined K and K. I know I would never have signed a contract of service with you if I had realised just how low you four are. I thought a big concern would be better than the run of the mill racketeers I've had to work for. You are just bigger racketeers, that's all."

Todd shrugged eloquently. "When your contract expires you can ask your Association to find you another job. It's not long, after all."

The whispering voice continued until an uneasy feeling of tension hung in the room with the cigar smoke and the old brandy. It touched them all as they listened. The slow walk to Bondi's had seemed to deepen the despondency which had come upon them, so unexpectedly, as if they were indeed in

Rhodes' shoes. The touch of his feet on the ground in a measured tread and his slow restrained breathing were his whole being and made more impression than his words. "How can you justify this sabotage, Todd? Bondi's aren't real enemies except in the normal sense of competition. Their computer is doing a good job providing services to millions of people. I tell you, if I wasn't tied by contract you could do the job yourself and if I find one breach of any clause then I will bow out."

No one answered him. They were too busy thinking about what he had said, in their different ways. If he didn't put the computer out of action then K and K would have to tighten its belt. If he did, K and K was eternally dishonoured. The sight of the big, glass box, like a goldfish bowl housing a million small fry, was enough to impress them with the strength of the opposition. It was enough to justify dishonour too.

Rhodes was near the main door now and the marble floor of the reception area could be clearly seen. Its apparently solitary guardian was a good looking brunette. She sat at an oversized desk near the centre of the floor, like a small flower in a polished desert.

The speech which Rhodes had made was still rankling in Todd's mind. He wanted to silence any further homilies. Tame dogs shouldn't bark at their owners especially when they had made agreements with them. "Stop." His tone was authoritative and lofty as if Rhodes was a tea lady who had forgotten his sugar. "Before you go in, Rhodes, take off your throat microphone and put it in a waste disposer. I want no more useless comment from you."

It wasn't merely the comments which had forced him to make the last minute decision, though he could well do without that. It was the risk of someone seeing the flesh-coloured blob on Rhodes' throat. Homilies were nothing, but, expert as he was, Rhodes might allow passion to overwhelm him and someone might connect the small flaw in his skin with his slightly moving lips. The fact that his agent would lose his right to withdraw from the venture if he couldn't communicate was another point too.

Rhodes had stopped walking. Perfectly central in the picture was the brunette who hadn't apparently seen him framed in the great doorway. A dark shadow passed across the view briefly and they realised it was Rhodes' hand. The shadow reappeared

almost at once, this time from top to bottom of the screen. "I will not remove it. This is a trick, Todd. I will not surrender my right to pull out of this job if I find you have contravened our agreement."

"Be careful man. There is a world of difference between legal contravention and any slight you might imagine. Your contract with us is very wide in its terms." The Managing Director smiled thinly and studied his beautifully manicured hands. "You are being very tiresome, Rhodes. I will have to make you pay for that."

"My professional duties aren't as wide as your idea of our agreement, Todd. There are limits. You will have to abide by my understanding of the obligations." The whisper which was Rhodes took on a sarcastic tone. "Like most of your kind, you interpret duty more liberally than payment. I'm covered by the Labour Laws you know."

"Labour Laws!" Todd laughed softly but with just the right amount of derision. "I'm afraid I've never thought of your job as being labour, my friend. I would say it was rather like cliff-hanging. Your only right is to choose your cliff and you've done that, haven't you?"

Dandy echoed the laugh and drawled. "Cliff-hanger? Very good. A cliff-hanger threatening us with mutiny. Don't you think that's good Laudel?"

Laudel stared at him unhappily, as much occupied with the inane droop of Dandy's jaw as the words issuing from the slack mouth above it. He whistled to himself, as if he was rightly surprised at what he saw and heard, then threw a quick glance at Klauss. "Did you record that remark, Mr. Secretary?"

The fat and improbable ball shook its fat, flabby face with the uncontrolled mobility of a dancing jelly. He didn't attempt to speak or change his blank expression. Klauss never wasted energy on speech or expressions. Only his pinprick eyes worked. His eyes and one chubby hand.

"Afraid of Dandy's dad?" Laudel leaned across to Dandy and grinned wickedly. "This isn't a game of soldiers, little boy. We are being very, very naughty. What we want to do to Bondi's just isn't legal."

"I don't know what you mean." Dandy was slightly affronted but not as angered as he should have been because he didn't understand the insult.

"I'll spell it out, lad. All you've ever done, that was intentionally illegal, is to phone for a woman and pay through the nose for it. We are really bad. We are going to destroy a lovely, big computer. Now Todd, Klaus and I are doing it for money but you are here just because we want your father's name linked with it. If Mr. Rhodes could find a way out he would, but we haven't left him one legal loophole. It's that dangerous. So please just bless us with your name and shut up, will you?"

"I never go near women." Dandy was protesting fiercely now. His whole body shook with passion. "I won't let you say things like that to me."

Laudel was highly amused. "Did you hear that Todd? Dandy never goes near women. Tell him what he's missing, will you?"

Todd's face turned a little red under his carefully nurtured tan. "Laudel, restrain yourself. If Rhodes hears any of this he might get ideas. I can't give him instructions if you keep blathering." Todd could erase speech as he wished by taking his finger off the broadcast button in the arm of his chair but he was afraid that he might not react quickly enough to prevent a few stray words reaching Rhodes. Their division and enmity was not for the public ear. If Rhodes lived to talk to the Satirists they would have enough material for a month. It would be terrible to star in one of their programmes.

"I'm waiting, Todd. Do you still want me to take the microphone off?" Rhodes sounded impatient. "I look a damned fool standing in the entrance of Bondi's like a doorman."

"All right Rhodes, you win this time. Get on with it before someone starts to ask questions."

The girl at the desk seemed to move towards them steadily. The screen was so effective that they felt they could reach out and touch her. They heard her beautifully modulated voice and saw the momentary gleam in her eyes when she looked up at Rhodes' face. "Can I have your pass, please?"

This time they heard Rhodes' reply loud and clear. It was accentless as befitted the years of special education he had received at an Establishment where learning was more important than social affectation. "I'm here to check on the junior personnel using the computer. You should have received an advice from Central Administration saying I was coming."

As he spoke he dropped a small, circular button on the desk with a raised design on its coloured face.

The girl picked it up. "I ought to do a visual check." She was regretful as if it was a sin to inconvenience anyone so attractive as Rhodes and her feminine feelings fought an inconclusive war with the regulations.

"It's nothing. I'm ready if you are." He said it as if he were truly unconcerned but all the men listening, except Dandy, knew it took a clever man to deceive a shadowgraph.

The receptionist touched a button and a small silver screen rose at the other end of the desk. The girl had placed a small projector facing it across the wide mahogany surface and she slipped the small identity disc into a slot at the bottom. Immediately a bright light outlined the shadow of a head on the screen.

The group in the Boardroom couldn't see Rhodes as he stepped into the shaft of light, which had sprung up from an oblique angle, throwing the shadow of his head on the screen beside the first black, etched profile. They weren't in a position to judge the comparison either but the subtle alterations which he had made to his face with mouth pads and muscular control satisfied the girl. Todd had managed to pick a Security man who not only loved a big bribe but also looked very much like Rhodes. The traitor hadn't time to enjoy the bribe because Todd didn't like the possible risk of a last minute confession. The disposal of the man had given Rhodes a clear field.

The girl smiled up at Rhodes. "That's very good. Are you here for long?" Her tone was young and hopeful and belied the hard, poised look which Bondi's make-up consultants had imposed on her face.

"Only for this job."

"I'll get you a guide." She was anxious to help him.

"Damn it!" Todd cursed the girl. It was an unforeseen act of charity which could spoil their chances if the guide proved too efficient. It meant Rhodes would have to go the Chief Scientist's office first. The only hope would be if the short circuit came at exactly the right time.

The guide appeared from the far end of the Reception Area and he was tall, hard faced and very alert. "Checked him out, Miss?"

The girl nodded. "Of course."

They watched the narrow back of the guide leading their man along one corridor after another. It was like a pre-fabricated rabbit warren devised by an architect with a nightmare complex for mazes. Nothing was said and all they could hear was the hollow rap of feet echoing about the claustrophobic confines of the thrusting shafts. Sometimes a white-faced employee scuttled by with properly bowed head and busy look and sometimes there was the sound of mumbling voices from an open doorway. Within a minute or so Rhodes would be in the Computer Hall.

"There's still time to call him back, Todd," Laudel had dropped all pretence now and was actually appealing. "If they connect him with us, where will it lead?"

The Managing Director honoured him with one short, cold glance. "They will put us all in prison, Laudel. You will lose your place on whatever roll of honour they keep at your Institute and so will Klauss. If indeed our worthy Secretary is still on his, which I doubt. There will be much rolling of drums and breaking of swords. Even the basest of club bores will disown us. It will be the end."

"K and K will sink with us?"

"It will." He smiled to himself. "Think of all those earnest and loyal servants of the Company who will have to accept Government charity. It's sad."

He reflected on his power to destroy. It was rather like the man with the big bomb. The kind of bomb which people feared so much. He could wreck the rest before they finished him. An old man's dream. Never fry alone was as good a dictum for the wicked as any. Then there was the Government Contract of course. What a worthy instrument it was. They wanted to know if the economic structure of the Nation could be replanned. The waste economy had become too wasteful as the cost of producing more and more complicated machines and systems went up. They wanted to know if they could reduce the costs as an alternative to reducing the number of consumers. There simply wasn't enough elbow rooms for the best families these days, so they were tempted to the latter, but then, of course, that might get out of hand. One could never be sure if you would make the right impression abroad if you wiped out your own surplus population. Streamlining and reassessment might be best.

The Government needed the computer, it could be either K and K's or Bondi's to work out the mess urgently. Even then it could take months. As he thought about the time element, a small stirring of suspicion in Todd's mind made him feel extremely uncomfortable. His hunches had always started as such nebulous emotions before they suddenly blossomed into clarity.

"It's stupid, Todd. We can live without the Contract." Laudel was afraid to upset the Managing Director but his inner conflict was pushing him into further protest.

Laudel's intrusion spoiled the intuition which was forming like a cloud in Todd's brain. There was a peculiar bite to his words. "I can't live without it, friend." He couldn't live without it because he had worked out just how much power it would give him over desperate people in fear of starvation or extinction. "If you don't like it then you can get out now. Your shares are nothing."

"I might do that. You see." Laudel was threatening but nevertheless he sat tight and restricted his defiance to a heavy frown which might have been disapproval or possibly nervous indigestion.

A bell trilled softly and Todd picked up his receiver. It was an outside call. He muttered a few words which the others couldn't hear and slammed down the instrument. His attention returned to the screen. "It's time, gentlemen."

Their man had just entered the great hall which housed the computer. It stretched, it seemed, for miles and the hum of its life was a warm, powerful presence. It was like some slumbering giant and the white-coated men walking around it were like respectful priests. No one seemed interested in Rhodes or his guide and it was as if the problem of watching the gleaming banks of smooth dials occupied all their minds.

Opposite the main bulk of the computer was an apparently plain wall but it was possible to discern a series of glass pebbles set into it.

Todd leaned forward. "See it, Laudel?"

The Treasurer looked at the wall as Rhodes must have been looking at it. "I've never seen anything like it before. It seems innocent enough."

"It's diabolical. You talk of innocence. The man who thought it up must have had a mind like a schizophrenic snake." He sounded enthusiastic. "I've heard that the effect is impossible to survive. It's one of the most refined

methods of torture ever invented. Grace is like so many upright citizens. He likes to chastise the wrongdoer and he would trap a burglar or saboteur with as much compunction as Dandy's charming ancestors would have used a mantrap. I wish we could afford one."

"But Rhodes knows how to survive. He's trained to do the impossible." Laudel was trying to obtain a reprieve for his conscience. "He is an expert."

"One of the best." Todd was complacent almost as if he was now enjoying the whole business. "But that won't help him if he makes a mistake. You see, the phone call I received was from one of my men inside Bondi's. If Rhodes crosses me my man will warn Grace and he, without doubt, will set off the defences."

Laudel was shaken with an inner convulsion of guilt. "You would give him away?"

"In fact, I think I will do it anyway as soon as he has finished his work." Todd sounded vicious. "I won't be defied. Remember that Laudel."

The Treasurer had to leave the room. The cruelty had become too much for him. Klauss allowed his eyes to follow him as he headed for the Directors' washroom and Dandy giggled a little. Todd wasn't bothered.

The guide was talking to Rhodes again. The voices were loud and clear in the room. "You must go over to the Chief's office and present your credentials. He will take care of you."

Rhodes seemed to hesitate. "Where is his office?" It was obvious he was waiting for something to happen which would save him an encounter with the Chief Scientist and further tests.

Todd glanced at his watch. "That confounded man. He should have dealt with the fusebox by now. Rhodes will be out on a limb if we don't have the power cut on time. If he gets caught out by their Chief and lives to tell the tale we are beaten and for nothing." Todd was really worried. If Rhodes lived he would talk his head off. True, his Association had guaranteed him and said he was proof against all coercion and bribes, but Todd couldn't believe it. Sufficient cash presented in the right way would persuade any man. Panic touched his usually calm soul. "What the hell has happened to that man!"

The guide was pointing at a glass cubicle when the screen blanked out as the lights in the Computer Room failed. For a moment there was silence. Then there was a babble of question and counter question urgently filling the darkness. Men were calling for the emergency lights and others were shouting that even these had failed.

A voice, suitably hysterical, shouted 'fire' and there was a confusion of sounds. It had been Rhodes who had given the spurious warning but it had convinced the blinded men. They were struggling towards the entrance with the best pace they could muster.

Rhodes whispered very softly as soon as the noise subsided. "There are still a couple of men in here. They are the do or die boys who must remain whatever happens. They are trying to find the cocks for the fire sprinkler equipment. Never mind, I can get to the main memory bank without disturbing them."

There was a slithering noise and they heard his carefully controlled movements as his acute senses discovered a way along the alleyways between the sections of the computer. His eyes were big and beautiful but they were also almost as effective in the dark as the light. "This is it. In a few seconds it will all be over."

The seconds he had promised dragged by very slowly. They dragged as if they would take up all eternity. Finally he spoke again. "It's nearly done. Now we can safely leave it to start its work of destruction and that will be the end of Bondi's computer."

Todd sighed with relief. Just a few seconds and he would ring his man at Bondi's and the Wall would finish Rhodes. He would have a grandstand seat. Like a Roman he could watch the gladiator torn to pieces by the lions. What satisfaction!

A memo screen lit on the side wall and dragged his eyes from the blacked-out screen. He noticed, with some irritation, that Klauss was already noting its message. The words were etched in black against the clear white background. It read: Government Official Message. Second thoughts on Contract. It has occurred to us that there would be an advantage in using both computers. Two computers will do the job in half the time. We are willing to pay a full fee to both the Companies in view of the inconvenience we have put them to as long as our requirements are treated with urgent priority.

The Managing Director felt a major explosion where the intuition had lingered earlier. "The damned fools. Why didn't they think of that in the first place?" Suddenly he was white and strained. All his famous poise had vanished. "Rhodes you mustn't destroy the computer. I have just heard . . ."

"I don't care what you have just heard, Todd," Rhodes voice was clear and relentless. "It's too late. The computer is doomed. I used a corrosive pill and it's eating into the delicate coils like acid on butter. Once the process has started, it can't be stopped."

"It can't be true, Rhodes. You are doing this to spite me. Look, the Government want both computers. You stop the destruction and I will look after you. Your Association will see you are all right. Please stop."

"If I touch that pill I will get my arm burnt off or worse. You ordered me to do it and it's your pigeon." There was a certain contentment in his reply. "I should think the Government will take your assets to repair this damage if they find out who did it."

Todd snapped at him. "Honour among thieves. I knew I shouldn't have trusted you and your damned Association. What are you but a bunch of cuthroats running a protection racket? You batten on innocent people and swindle innocent businessmen. They won't help you, those criminal friends of yours, when I ask my man at Bondi's to tell Grace where you are."

Rhodes was calm and his voice was even, unafraid. "Our Contracts are valid to us as any Contract is elsewhere. You asked for me and signed an agreement. One of the clauses was specifically to do with my safety. You swore to protect me. You swore that no action of yours would betray me either to the police or your competitors. No amount of money or influence will buy that off. The Association will avenge me because they have to. Unity is their only protection against the modern police force and welshing customers."

Todd muttered to himself angrily, almost delirious with new fears. "They won't do anything, I'll call my man. You're bluffing."

"I'm not bluffing, Todd."

"We'll see." He picked up his phone and called out a number. In a second or so he was through to his man at Bondi's and giving his instructions.

Rhodes whispered softly to him. "You will regret this. I'm not scared of dying because I'm always ready for it. You aren't and you will go like a worm, wriggling with terror. Goodbye, Todd, and remember me when it comes to you."

Todd was calm and strangely self assured—when the lights on the Wall sparkled into being and lit the screen indirectly. The glass pebbles were full of an odd life now, though he couldn't see them directly. He tried to imagine them as they drew Rhodes head round in their hypnotic glare. He thought with pleasure of the completeness of his revenge on Rhodes. The high and mighty super-criminal. It struck him too that should it be right about the Association's attitude, if and when they found out, he could easily shift the blame to Laudel. He had done the actual signing, with Klauss.

Klauss had his eyes on the screen and was sitting very still. He seemed to have dehydrated in some way and to be cringing back into his chair. He was wondering whether he could work up the strength to scream.

Dandy was wondering what it was all about.

The picture began to tilt a little. The reflections became actual lights. It took Todd a long moment to realise what was happening. The threat Rhodes had made was coming true. Either by accident or design his body was rolling over so that it faced the Wall. Todd tried to turn his head, to bury it in the soft plastic of the chair back but he couldn't. The pattern of the lights was too compelling. It was like being caught in a spider's web. The lights flashed and wove in a myriad of colours and sequences. They pulled the eyes from the head and shocked all the nerves in the body. Shock! That was it. There was too much to cope with and the mind sought release.

Klauss went first with a long sigh like a shrivelling balloon. Dandy yelped and fell forward from his chair soon after. Todd didn't know they were dead even as he wriggled like a worm in his chair fighting against the darkness.

Laudel sitting in safe isolation in the washroom was trying to work up enough courage to resign. For a long time he struggled with the idea. In the end he knew he couldn't do it but at least he knew he had been quite sincere in his effort. When the two poker-faced officers from the Crime Association arrived later he explained this very point to them but they didn't seem to care.

Mr. Presslie's short story this month is a play on human characterisation, the major event which occurs is lost in the welter of conflicting personalities

no brother of mine

by robert presslie

Davey ducked as he came in the house the back way, through the kitchen door. He was too slow about it. He blinked at the sting of the slap on his left ear.

"Where you bin?"

"Just out. You said I could, Ma."

"I didn't say all night."

"Seven o'clock isn't all night."

Davey's mother lifted her hand, dropped it again. It took more courage than life had left her to slap the face of an angel when the angel's blue eyes stared innocently into hers.

"Don't you lip me," she said. "I said you could go to the recreation park with Billy Joe Damon for an hour after you came out of school. And school's bin out since four. You wait till your father gets home. We'll see what he's got to say about it."

"We went to the park. Me and Billy Joe."

"You didn't get all that dirt just playing in the park. How d'you think I'm going to get the dirt off your clothes? You think I got nothing else to do except clean up after you and your old man? Dirt, that's my life. Cleaning other people's dirt. If it isn't you it's your father, and if it isn't him it's this house. All day nothing but cleaning dirt."

Davey put an arm around her. He was big enough now to do it man-style. His arm went round her waist. But he still had to look up to let her see his face.

"We'll get out of here someday, Ma. When Pa gets his new job. Then we won't live in an old house like this old house. We'll get a new one, littler, shiny new and easy to keep clean. Like Pa says we'll have when we move to a new town."

The female form under the boy's arm tensed then relaxed again. Davey's mother sighed. She twisted herself out of his embrace.

"The day your father gets us out of here I'll drop down dead from the shock."

Davey's ears analysed the tones of her voice and he relaxed. Her anger was gone. Her complaints had subsided to a routine level.

"I'll get washed before Pa gets in," he volunteered. His cherubic face masked the conniving shrewdness of a Machiavelli.

"You do that, son," his mother said and he knew he had said the right thing. He made for the staircase.

"Davey!"

"What now, Ma?"

"Your shoes. That mud on them. You never bin near the park, you little liar. I know where you bin. You bin down that pot-hole again. You know what I said would happen if you ever went near that pot-hole again?"

"What pot-hole, Ma?"

"Don't what pot-hole-Ma me! You know what pot-hole."

"It isn't a pot-hole. It's a bit of the mine they don't work any more. Pa said so."

"Pa said so! Pa said so! Your old man talks through the back of his head. Every day it's in the papers how some pot-holer's got hisself killed down there and if the papers say it's a pot-hole, it's a pot-hole."

"Not every day."

"It - is - a - pot - hole. Get that into your thick skull. You and your father, you're a pair of worms. Both of you. God's Earth isn't good enough. You got to go crawling down into its bowels. Him in the mines and you in that pot-hole. And all that talk about moving to a new house an' a new town. Him! He'll never leave 'cos it'll mean leaving the mine."

"He promised, Ma."

“He’s bin promising since afore you were born. More’n twelve years he’s bin promising. An’ all I got for his promises is a kid who thinks he fools me with his angel face but all the time he wants to go down down down to where the Devil lives. Don’t think I’m finished with you, my lad. You get yourself washed then come back downstairs. We’re going to have this out once and for all when your Pa comes in.”

Davey knew his mother-and-son psychology. He took his foot off the stairs and went close up to her. He looked her straight in the eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have been late. But me and Billy Joe, we forgot the time. The park keeper was draining the pond like every summer when it gets cleaned out in case of polio. He had to go to do a first-aid on some kid who got cut falling off his bicycle. So Billy Joe and me went into the pond—there was hardly any water left—and we found a lot of pennies in the mud at the bottom and that’s how we forgot to come home earlier. And that’s the truth, Ma.”

“You mean you never went to the pot-hole at all?”

“I never said I had. It was you, Ma. You jumped to conclusions.”

Davey’s mother softened. “All right, son. I’m sorry too.” Then, because she was still a woman and still his mother: “But you could of bin at that pot-hole. They say it should be closed off on account of it’s dangerous. Could cave in any day. So take a telling. Keep away from it.”

“Some of it has. Caved in.” Davey had long ago learned it sometimes paid to agree with his elders. “Pa says it’s because the new shaft of the mine is so close to it. That’s why I don’t go near it. Not since you told me.”

Davey’s mother made a seldom gesture. She ruffled his hair and cuffed him with the tenderness of a tiger towards its cub.

“Tell you what, Davey. It’s a hour till your Pa gets in an’ dinner is ready. If you want you can go out till then. But just this once, mind you. Don’t think I’m getting soft.”

Davey grinned. “That’s good. Then I’ll only have to wash myself once. Hey, Ma! Is it all right if I go down below? In the fall-out shelter? I haven’t been down there for ages.”

“There’s nothing to do down there.”

Nothing to do, thought Davey. That’s all she knows. Down there, way down, if you put out the lights it was like . . .

. . . but she did know. She knew and dreaded the fascination for depth and darkness that was shared by her son and his father. She knew and she hated it because she could not bring herself to share it with them. It made her an outsider.

She gave in. Wearily. Tired of fighting the inevitable. "All right," she said. "Only for an hour though. And don't touch anything."

Davey had no intention of touching. The emergency generator did not interest him. It could only spoil the magic of the darkness. The tins of iron rations contained none of the food that could nourish the imagination like being deep down could do. And there was nothing much else to touch. They didn't have a well-equipped shelter like the rich folks had that he had seen in pictures. But that was all part of the magic. Its crudity, its stark hole-in-the-groundness was the most appealing thing about it.

"Ma?" The boy hesitated at the door of the lift shaft.

"What is it now?"

"In case I forget again. Will you ring the bell? Tell me when it's time to come up again?"

"If you don't hurry up and get out of my way I'm never going to get your Pa's dinner ready."

Davey translated and smiled. She would ring as he had asked.

Ten minutes later she wiped her hands on her skirts and picked up the intercom. "What d'you want? It isn't time yet."

"I found something, Ma."

"You're always finding something. Either get up here or else stop ringing every five minutes. I got work to do."

"But I really found something, Ma. It's a man."

His mother's grip tightened on the intercom phone. "What man? A stranger? What have I told you about strangers?"

She glanced at the kitchen clock, computed the time to her husband's arrival. "Davey?" She tried not to let him know she was afraid. "How could a man get down our shelter? You sure you haven't bin making things up again? I know what you are. All dreams and fancies like your father."

"He's a sort of a man, Ma."

Davey's mother relaxed a little. "I thought so. You bin doing make-believe again. Now you listen to me, David—"

David was for serious scolding, "—get up here right away, get yourself washed and into bed. You've spoiled things for yourself. That's the last time you ever get down there. I mean it too."

There was no reply. Only the way a phone magnifies the sounds of your own breathing told her she was still in contact with the underground shelter.

"Davey!" she shrilled. Maybe there really was a strange man down there.

"Coming right up, Ma."

She would have slapped him if he had been within reach for making her imagine things as stupid as he did. "What kept you so long? Why didn't you answer? If you're trying to scare me, I'll—"

"I was thinking, Ma."

"That's all you ever do. But you never think that maybe you could help me some about the house."

"I was thinking if I should bring the man with me."

Exasperation snapped her temper. "David. Get up here at once."

"I'm coming. I said I was."

There was a click as the downstairs phone was hung up. Then the whine of the elevator rising up the shaft. In a matter of minutes Davey was back in the kitchen. He stepped aside to let his mother see the elevator cage.

"This is the man," he said, pride deepening his voice.

His mother slumped to the kitchen floor.

He propped her into a sitting position and passed her a glass of water. She took the glass mechanically and tried to sip the water. Most of it dribbled down her front, wetting her thin blouse, making it translucent, outlining the sagging fried-egg breasts.

She sat where was was, with her back against the wheezy overworked fridge. She put the glass of water on the floor. Without looking up, she said, "Get that thing out of here. Take it away, son."

Davey frowned. He knew most of her moods. Her anger and her temper he had learned to deal with. This resigned quietness was something new.

"Where can I take him?"

"Just get it out of here, Davey."

"But it's not an it. It's a he. It's a man. A real man. He won't hurt you, Ma. Look at him. He's frightened. He won't hurt you none."

The man in the elevator cage lay curled in the foetal position. He had not moved since the lift door had opened in the kitchen.

Davey's mother straightened her neck and shoulders. She looked towards the lift shaft. She coloured quickly, a flush of shamed prudery smearing out her pallor. She got up off the floor and stood glaring at the boy. She could not look at the man again.

"Jeeziz," she said. "I just don't know what I'm going to do about you, Davey. I just don't know. Did he touch you at all? Anywhere? You know what I mean."

Davey wondered how women could be so stupid. Everything had to be complicated with women. Nothing was simple and straightforward. They always had to see things that weren't there.

"Well? Did he?"

"I told you, Ma. He wouldn't touch anybody. He's too frightened."

"No wonder he's frightened. I'll tell you why he's frightened. Because if I went and got a copper he'd run him in right off for being a dirty old man. Running around like that with nothing on."

"He wasn't running about. He was just sitting quiet down in the shelter."

"Hiding probably. That's what it is. He's hiding. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd escaped from a prison. You're always reading about them escaping and hiding in houses. Shut the door, Davey. Lock him in."

"What for?"

"So we can get the police. There might even be a reward. Besides, it's not right you should see him naked like he is."

"I'll cover him."

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

"Make up your mind, Ma. Either he stays naked or I cover him. Which is it to be?"

"If I get any more of your lip!"

The back door of the kitchen opened and her threat was cut short. She diverted her anger to her husband.

"And where have you bin?"

"Where do I usually go all day? I've been working. What's got you all steamed up this time?"

"Him. Your son. If it's not stray cats and dogs its pet rabbits or white mice. He's excelled himself today. Brought home a man. A stranger. A stark naked filthy minded stranger."

"She's wrong, Pa. I found him downstairs. All curled up like he is now. I think he's hurt or something. He hasn't moved since I first saw him. He hasn't said anything or done anything like she's trying to make out."

Davey's father looked from son to wife. He said, "You don't look so good, Mary."

"I don't feel so good. I passed out. I got such a shock when he brought up that thing."

"Sit down. I'll take a look."

"Can I watch, Pa?"

"You'd better stay beside your mother."

Davey's father sloughed his work coat and knelt beside the naked stranger. He knew nothing of medicine except what he had picked up at the elementary first-aid lectures given periodically at the mine. His examination was crude and cursory. He rolled the stranger over on his back, felt his chest and listened at the nostrils for sounds of breathing.

"He's exhausted, I think. Likely he's half starved too. Give me a glass of water."

Davey complied eagerly and took the opportunity to stay beside his father while he parted the pallid lips with the rim of the glass and forced water into the mouth of the stranger.

"Look at his eyes," said the boy. "Aren't they tiny? Like the little black beads Ma wears on Sundays."

"At least he's come to."

The strange naked man pushed with hands and feet to back himself away from Davey's father. He shrank into the farthest corner of the lift cage. He put his forearm across his face.

"I didn't mean to be insulting," said Davey. "You can't help it if your eyes are little. You don't have to hide them. I'm sorry I said what I said." Then the stranger bared his face and put his hands over his ears.

Davey stepped back to let the light from the kitchen into the cage. And again the pig eyes were shielded by a forearm. The boy puckered his lips and shrilled out a newsboy's whistle. And the man tried to cover his ears and his eyes at the same

time. Davey's father saw what his son was probing at. He said, "He's blind as a bat in daylight."

"We did bats at school," said Davey, hurt at the prospect of having his thunder stolen.

"Who asked you to butt in?"

"We did bats and the teacher told us how they don't see with their eyes—"

"They should teach you to speak only when you're spoken to."

"And not only bats. Lots of things like bats live in the dark. They don't need eyes."

"I know what you need!"

"It's living in the dark so long, the teacher said. They can't see in the dark so gradually their eyes become useless. They feel their way around by sound. You know, like radar. That's why he covered his ears when I whistled. His eyes are almost useless. He can still see a bit, enough so that light hurts him. An' his ears are developed extra sensitive so that ordinary noises are too loud for him to bear."

"You're a right little know-all, aren't you? No wonder your mother's always complaining about the way you behave when I'm at work."

"What did I do now? I only said—"

"Showing off, that's what it was. You didn't tell us anything we didn't know already."

Davey smelled injustice in the air. He said, spitefully, "All right, Pa, where did he come from then?"

His father hedged. "You should know. You found him."

"I meant before that."

"Could be any number of explanations. Could even be an escaped convict."

"I already told him that," said Davey's mother. "What I want to know is what do we do with him. You're not just going to stand there and look at him, are you?"

"He looks safe enough to me. Let's have something to eat first, then I'll decide."

"Something to eat! What d'you think I bin trying to do if it wasn't to get your meal ready? But no, he has to upset me as usual."

From outside, across the open country, came a long-drawn, persistent, off-tune bleating. Davey's father clamped his mouth and breathed hard down his nostrils. "Jeeziz," he

said. "If it isn't one thing it's another. I'll have to wait till I get back for my dinner."

"You're not going to leave me alone with *that*," his wife said.

"I've got to. Something's happened at the mine and you know the rule when the hooter sounds."

"So you'd rather go and help some of your mates than stay and see that your wife was safe?"

"You can put things the lousiest way, Mary."

"It's true, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't true. And you know it. If I was on that shift and the hooter went you'd expect the other men to go see what was wrong. The same goes for me. Anyhow, you've got Davey."

"Him!"

"I don't *want* to go. I want to stay here. But—"

"But you're scared of what they'll say if you don't go. It doesn't matter if I get raped or something by that animal."

Davey's father gave the woman a look of sheer hatred. He picked up the telephone, got ready to make his excuses.

"I should have known," he said, replacing the receiver.

"It's bound to be engaged in an emergency. I'll call the police instead, have them send somebody over. They shouldn't be long. Should be here before I'm halfway up the street."

"You're not leaving this house until they get here."

Davey's father gave up the struggle. "All right. I'll call them and wait till they get here." He turned on his son.

"What do you think you're doing now?"

"I thought he would like something to eat. You said yourself he was half starved. I gave him some of the dough that Ma was going to make bread with."

"Well, so long as it keeps him occupied."

Davey was vaguely aware that his father and mother took up the argument they had been having. But he was too interested in his find to hear the actual words.

The one thing the stranger had not done with the dough was eat it. His first reaction had been to smell it. Whether because it was unacceptable or unidentifiable as food, he did not eat it. He sat where he was, with his back against the cage wall, and fondled the dough. He seemed immensely impressed with its softness, its plasticity. His fingers kneaded it, shaped it and re-shaped it over and over.

Without warning he lumped it into one hand and stretched the other to the boy's face. Davey jerked his head back involuntarily. Then he saw that no harm was intended and allowed the cold prehensile fingers to flutter over his face. The touch was swift and delicate, no rougher than the hanging wet strings in the dark tunnel of the Ghost Train in the carney that came to town twice a year. But it sent the same kind of shivers down the boy's spine.

The hand returned to the bread dough. The sightless eyes did not look at what the fingers were doing. With the speed and skill of a top-flight sculptor the white hands moulded the dough, making depressions here, protruberances there, precise curves all over. The finished shape was extended for Davey's inspection.

"It's me," he breathed. "It's exactly me. Can I have it to show Ma?" He brushed against the stranger's hands in his attempt to grasp the sculpted head. The hands withdrew at once taking the head with them. Davey glanced over his shoulder. It didn't matter. They were still at it. They wouldn't have been interested.

The man in the elevator cage sat as immobile as the bread in his hands for so long that Davey thought he had died. For he looked, if it was possible, more pallid than ever and his breathing was so shallow it would not have disturbed a passing mote of dust.

But he was not dead. The fingers, at least, came alive again. They pressed the dough into a featureless mass and started resculpting. Davey watched as a new head took shape, even faster than last time. When he saw the resultant image of the stranger himself he wondered whether the speed was due to familiarity or to a desperate fight against time.

Even as he watched the dough he was given another shaping. It was divided into two parts. Both sparts were modelled into heads. Both heads were given eyes no bigger than beads. One of them had longer hair than the other, had a definite female look to it. The other could have been the sculptor's own head except the the features were younger, very much younger.

The bread sculptures were placed on the floor. Two hands until now so gentle and delicate in the touch—were made into fists. And two fists pounded the sculptures into amorphous lumps of dough.

"What did you want to go and do that for?"

Davey waited to see if there was another virtuoso display of sculpting to come. But the hands were motionless. Still clenched in their last gesture of destruction, but absolutely motionless. Davey put an ear to the cold white face. He came out of the cage with tears in his eyes.

"He's dead, Pa. He's dead."

"What? Hold on, there's somebody at the door."

From then on Davey could not get a word in. The two policemen had a look at the naked body, asked a lot of obvious questions. And his father kept wanting to know about the emergency hooter.

"Where did he come from?" one of the policemen asked.

"Down below. My boy found him in the fallout shelter."

"He's dead, Pa. And he told me all about it."

"Funny looking creature. Beady little eyes. No colour to him. Must have been hiding down there for ages."

"I wouldn't know. Apart from a monthly check-up I never go down there. Davey plays there sometimes. All I know is there was nobody there last time I checked. That would be last week."

"He couldn't see, Pa. Living all his life in darkness he never learned to see. So he couldn't draw like we can or like in those cave pictures you once showed me in the encyclopaedia—"

"What's up at the mine? I'd better get along there right away."

"No need to. Nobody hurt. Only a collapse in one of the old shafts they haven't used for years. There you are, that's the all-clear now."

"He's dead, Pa. An' all his family. He had a wife and a little boy."

"Thank God for that. If it had been serious and me not turning out to help I couldn't of gone back to the mine."

"They were killed, Pa."

The policemen gave Davey's father a look of sympathy. They were both married. Sometimes duty had called them out against their wives' wishes. They knew how it was. They said they had better be on their way. They would send a mortuary wagon for the corpse.

"Why doesn't nobody ever listen?" asked Davey.

His mother said, "You'd better do something about that thing."

"I will. I've been thinking. Maybe we ought to get away from here like you've always wanted. Maybe it would be better somewhere else. Tell you what, I'll do it now. I'll phone the mine, tell them I'm not coming back."

"Because I wouldn't let you go when you wanted to?"

"Look, do you want to leave or don't you?"

"Just like that? I get no time to collect my bits and pieces?"

"I think it would be better. You know, just uproot right away. Get in the car and get the hell out of it. I know where I can get a job. Company house thrown in. We could stay in a motel until I got this stuff sent on."

Davey said, "You don't care. Nobody cares. There could be a whole town down there but you don't care."

"Well, Mary?"

"I suppose so. For once in your life you're right. The sooner the better. I'll get my handbag. I couldn't spend another minute here."

Her husband closed the door of the lift shaft, sent the cage down and set the hermetiseal. He fumbled in a pocket, checking that he had the ignition key on him. He noticed his son's tears, put a hand on his shoulder.

"C'mon, boy. You're young yet. You'll learn soon enough a man's got too much to think about concerning his own business without worrying about everybody else's. Let somebody else be a Jesus Christ if he wants to. We've got a long drive ahead if we're going to get to town before dark."

Davey looked out of the rear window of the car long after their house was out of sight. Nobody cares about nobody, he thought. He kept remembering the hands and the sculptures. It wasn't as if it had been an animal he had found. It had been a man. A real man.

Then he faced the front and thumped his father's back.

"Hey, Pa," he said. "Look at that! A whole flight of jets. How high d'you think they are?"

robert presslie

From Telstar to international telecommunications controlled from satellites is now only a minor step—but, think of the high drama which may well be played out in space when something goes wrong !

tee vee man

by h. a. hargreaves

William E. Baldwin, technician, sat cross-legged on his bunk, doggedly chewing the end of a pencil. Wedged between his knees was a clipboard holding a paper covered with neat columns of figures. A passing crewman might have supposed that he was working out the formulae for a world-shaking discovery. "Two hundred," he muttered. "Two hundred and two, specifically, for roofing and chimney repairs, paint, and new fencing. Dammit, even on risk pay we never get ahead."

As he looked away from the unchanging figures, Baldwin glanced at the bulkhead beside him. A trio of smiling faces looked back at him, seeming full of pride for their spaceman hero. "Hero," he bit out grimly. Little did his wife and children know of his true position on the space platform. With sudden bitterness, Baldwin slammed the clipboard into his tiny locker and stretched out tensely, hands behind his head. On this unique platform, this little flyspeck, were thirty-five of the best brains that Earth had produced. Thirty-five genii, gathered from nearly as many countries—and Baldwin, employee of International Communications: Baldwin, the Tee Vee man. His mouth tightened as he sub-voiced the words.

Tee Vee man. It didn't seem to matter that only three of the twenty-seven satellites he serviced were television relays, that the rest were vital navigation, weather, and surveillance satellites. To the indifferent thinking-machines around him he was the TV technician, a target for superior smiles, a body grudgingly given much-needed space, food, and air. These men, designers of most of their own jealously-guarded equipment, would have thrown a fit if a mere engineer so much as peeped into their private work areas, much less traced a circuit. He was unwanted there, and virtually ignored elsewhere when he chanced on conversations involving anything from space medicine to astro-physics. Perhaps it might have been different if he had gone on past his Master's, put off marriage a little longer, even turned down the job offered to him by the hybrid giant that had eventually sent him out here.

The glory of research and design had worn off when he found that international politics could reach into the depths of his lab, but he had not learned the full lesson. It had remained for him to be wooed into space training, to arrive on the space-platform and find himself considered hired help. Only then could he realise that he was caught between two worlds ; in the one a professional who knew too little of business and politics, in the other a hireling of business and politics who knew too little of the professions surrounding him. In neither world, it seemed, was he judged as an individual, by merits that had weight in normal situations.

"At any rate," he growled, "in two months my tour is over. One more after that, and back to solid ground for good. But not back to I.C. Back to school." On that thought, and the probability that he would have to move his family again, Baldwin reached for the clipboard, hoping to work a little magic on the cold figures.

"Baldwin . . . Baldwin . . . Communications."

He dropped into the narrow aisle, stepped to the hatch, lifted a phone and thumbed a button. "Communications . . . Baldwin."

"A wee job for you, Tee Vee," said the dry voice of MacPherson, mathematician. "One of your yo-yos, TV 2, is out of service. Terrible fuss from downstairs, and you're to get on it, as of now. I've run a tape into your bronco, and you've five minutes minus twenty to most favourable position. You go down the North Pole chute this time, and just so you won't

buzz your old folks in Canada I've plotted the whole course. Don't get lost, man, the set in the lounge is actin' up."

"Right," snapped Baldwin, and moved off through the passage toward the Hub and the airlock. He cursed mildly to himself. It would have to be a TV satellite. Probably it had been Melling who sent the message. To him everything was an emergency, since he was obviously uncertain of his future in the company. A holdover from the original, he was in danger of replacement by Zoldovski, his counterpart in the "other" original, and half the time his budget was held up by the Red Asia bloc.

Reaching the airlock, Baldwin suited up, then dropped the air pressure and checked out. Everything working fine, as usual, he thought, and as he flexed the pliothene gloves he added aloud, "probably still too much heat dissipation." Well, he'd had a touch of frostbite every time out. He pumped the remaining air back into the tanks, opened the outer hatch, and drove across to the bronco. He slipped the single mooring cable and closed the hatch, then settled into the huge seat and hooked up his suit connections. "Communications . . . Baldwin. Radio check."

"5 by 5," answered MacPherson. "Your red light shows in ninety-three minutes thirty, so you've not much time to do the job. Up at the South Pole, laddie, and don't be late, as we've a one-shot sighting to take. Besides, your Mister Melling says it's vital to have the African network back in the grid within two hours. Twenty-two seconds, Baldwin. Don't catch cold out there."

Baldwin fumed as the webbing closed around him. The Scotsman seemed to be rubbing it in, as usual. He could just as well have homed on TV 2 and not taken any more time, once he got below the Van Allen Belt. Then, suddenly, he was shoved back into the seat as the bronco took off at maximum gees. For a wild second he considered strangling the Scotsman. "Full acceleration, and then full deceleration," he groaned. A very poor joke, or a nasty way to show him his place. Which-ever it was, he would have a talk with MacPherson when he got back. Then, as acceleration lifted, he turned to the job ahead.

MacPherson had mentioned the African network—it would have to be that area to cause such a furore. If only the satellites had come a little later the dark continent might have had cable

or microwave connections to the world grid, to serve in just such emergencies as this. Then there wouldn't be a scream of anguish every time some South African housewife missed *The Internation Cookbook*. As the bronco's verniers spat briefly, bringing it under the Belt and down in a sweeping arc across Labrador and Newfoundland, Baldwin twisted and looked up at Earth, to spot the dawn band lying full across the eastern Atlantic. New curses rattled behind his teeth as he estimated it to be about 10:00 A.M., in Algiers. Then his head snapped forward as deceleration began, and his temper neared the boiling point.

Below TV 2, at a remote spot in Central Africa, the capital city of a small, newly-independent country was nearing its boiling point too. A mass of contradictions, the city of some 50,000 was a place where anything might happen, and something quite ugly could happen on this particular day. Anyone approaching Ungalah on the ground, along every road including that from the country's one airport, would have been struck by large groups of semi-permanent huts, each housing a few members of a different tribe. Their pointed roofs echoed the lines of a single, great ultra-modern building soaring above and beyond them, at the centre of the city.

At the edge of the city proper wretched, ramshackle quarters of all descriptions huddled and leaned against one another, giving way only a few streets from the huge central square to old shops, then modern, spacious stores. Late-model vehicles mingled with wood-burning buses and oxcarts: neat-suited businessmen and government officials with tribesmen in local costume. Normally the babble, screech and clamour would have been deafening, but today there was an uneasy quiet over most of the city. Only in the square facing the government building was there any sound, any real sense of life. Here four thousand tribesmen from the northern province sat, squatted, and stood, body to body, murmuring among themselves, gesturing toward the end of the square. The assortment of arms among them, carried in open defiance of the law, was antique by modern standards, but nonetheless deadly. That these men and their weapons were a force to be reckoned with could be judged by the numbers of nervous troops ranked in front of the great building, ranged down its flanks, and scattered through the lobbies.

It was neither the tribesmen nor the troops facing them, however, that commanded immediate attention at the moment. Rather, it was a strange device raised precisely at the top of the broad steps leading up to the building. Fully twenty feet high and thirty long, it had a vast hood extending out from its top and down its sides. Even as the tribesmen were becoming dangerously restive there came a crackling, a sudden whine which slowly died away, and a figure appeared on what now could be identified as a TV extension screen.

As the screen brightened, this figure became recognizable, and though none of them had ever been on to the building behind the screen it was obvious to the watchers that he was seated in a room somewhere in that building. A bellow of disapproval rose, and one giant of a man, clad in little more than a massive headdress, waved an ancient sword as he pushed toward the screen through the milling mob. Then as the figure spoke the din slowly settled into silence.

"My friends from the north," the seated man said in grave tones, "it would give me great pleasure to welcome you to the capitol on any occasion, if you had come in peace. Indeed, although I am leader of the opposition party, and the prime minister is of your venerable tribe, you have been most hospitable to me on my visits to your villages. Your response to me when I have spoken to you on the great picture makers in your own province has always been courteous too, so I am told, though you seem not to choose my vote tokens at elections."

Here he smiled tensely, and a wave or ironic comment swept the square. At the far end an old, bent and scarred veteran shouted a rude suggestion about the tokens and the young men gathered around him, lifted him high in the air so he could repeat it. In his office on the top floor, the seated man turned from the cameras and stole a glance out the window at his side, down into the square, to see a ripple of movement spread from the old man like waves from a dropped pebble. He wiped his palms on his trousers, under the desk, and continued.

"I can understand your mood today. You want to see your leader. There are certain people who would like you to think that he is in some sort of danger. They have told you that he has come to harm, that we of the opposition have taken him away, that we have dealt with him as other leaders, in other times, have been dealt with." A hint of revulsion passed across

his face briefly, as below the giant waved his sword again and screamed at the screen, drawing a hideous response from the tribesmen behind him. "First let me say," the voice boomed over them, "that those times are gone. As many things have passed away and new things have taken their places in our lives, so new ideas have come to us, new ways of handling the problems of leadership, new ways of settling differences of opinion. I, Albert N'Galy, swear to you that your leader is safe."

In the pause that followed, men looked to the old veteran, now standing on a stone bench, and to the giant, who suddenly found himself almost under the screen, yards in front of the rest. The old man, conscious of his growing power, once again hurled abuse down the square toward the distant screen, while the giant, uncomfortably close to the troops, turned and voiced his rage to the crowd in incoherent shouts, punctuated by thrusts of his sword.

One, two, five minutes went by as the tumult reached its climax and subsided, while in his office the speaker waited and watched, sweat soaking into his shirt and jacket. Choosing his time carefully, he spoke forcefully but without shouting into his microphone, overriding the dying roar.

"Your leader is safe, I repeat. Although he is many miles away, across the sea, Nicolas N'Thulmah is quite safe. Indeed, he is acting for all of us to receive an honour which we must find almost impossible to conceive. At this very moment he is in the company of the head men of all the great countries of the world : he, our leader, is to speak before them, to carry our thanks for being welcomed into the great assembly of chiefs, United Nations. It is a time of which we should all be proud, not a time to behave like animals."

In the square, the giant was silent as he tried to digest and assess this new information. Behind him muttering began, swelling slowly into a roar, and the old man cried, "It's a trick. Show us N'Thulmah. Show us Nicolas the Beloved."

The figure on the screen stood up, held out its hands. One more time, desperately aware of the scene below him, N'Galy was able to subdue the mob. "Many of you have seen on the picture makers people moving within United Nations on important occasions. It has been arranged that we should see Nicolas N'Thulmah welcomed, as our leader, to the great hall of chiefs. If you see him there, will you believe he is all right?"

The old man pondered this for a moment, as a small buzz of consultations went round and slowly grew into a confused sound of assent. Sensing the mood of those around him, the old man held his silence, content to wait for the right time. The figure on the screen sat down again, and his face grew until it filled the screen. The onlookers could see lines of strain, the look of anxiety, as he stared straight out into the mob.

"Then you must be patient a little longer," he said. "It is only a matter of a little time. There are some problems with the picture maker's workers. They cannot make the picture come across the ocean yet. But it will not be long." His voice increased in volume toward the end of this statement, as he anticipated the reaction below, and it was immediate in coming.

The giant was shouting again, moving toward the base of the screen, and the tribesmen surged toward him. At the rear, the veteran began a chant, and his young followers joined him, spreading it until the whole far end of the square resounded with the one word: "Now . . . Now!" On the top floor, N'Galy nodded toward his office door and an officer moved to the elevator. Below him, harried non-coms moved back and forth, out of sight, cautioning, checking, encouraging their men as the sounds of frustration and disapproval rolled over them.

Frustration and disapproval were still with William Baldwin too, as the bronco homed in on TV 2 and automatically matched course and velocity, with a precision that worked to less than one mph and a thousandth of a degree. He turned on his floods and watched as the turning satellite seemed to move in and up on his starboard side, an inch at a time, until it blocked out the blackness of space. At last all relative movement ceased. He saw the last green light come on, turned his suit on to self-function and disengaged it, locked the propulsion panel, and extended his work shield in a semi-circle around TV 2. One more careful check of the control panels and he climbed out the hatch and along the flooring of his shield.

A fantastic amount of knowledge, some of it gained from painful experience, had gone into the design of this part of the bronco. Here, mounted or stowed in the shield itself, were tools, meters, spare gates and rods, an auxiliary control panel, the visuo-library index for securing all information concerning the satellites under his care. Some things he had installed himself, just as a large amount of the design in the satellites had been modified, on his insistence, to facilitate maintenance aloft.

In the old days, before the platform, a satellite had either worked or been replaced, but when it became economical to service them in orbit, sweeping changes had occurred. Even when Baldwin had no inkling that he would become an early "repairman" he had put nearly all of his time into standardization of design and simplification of access. It had already payed off a thousandfold.

TV 2, antennae automatically retracted by gyroscopic equipment apparently still functioning perfectly, turned on its axis with a deceptively lazy motion that was still too fast for a visual check. Baldwin carefully extended booms, snapped them to the eyebolts mounted on the satellite's axis, and fastened his lifeline. Diving out to the end of one boom, he snapped a switch in the eyebolt and kicked off back to the shield. He brought slight pressure on to the booms and watched the great satellite slow to a stop, moving it in close with the damaged area facing him. Something had holed the skin, peeling it back over a two-foot gash between the points of entry and exit.

He glanced at a meter in the shield, knowing that it would show a reduced internal temperature, but though it was dropping visually, it was still not as bad as he had expected. Working sun-side would make it easier anyway, he thought, and started the Jesperson equilizer. Heat bathed the area as the collectors on the front of his shield began to function and the dissipators spread it around TV 2.

He pulled a cutting torch from its holder and methodically cut away the jagged pieces of fuselage, placing them on the flooring where they clung lightly. This was the simplest part of the job, and as he worked he allowed his mind to return to MacPherson and his colleagues. He knew that none of them realized how intricate or dangerous this work could be. The library was a cute gadget, but actually the technician relied mainly on a crammed memory, ingenuity, and sometimes inspiration. There simply wasn't enough time to do much rehashing at orbit, and if he did pull one and haul it back he had lots of time for review at the platform, though he'd have to sabotage his radio to keep off the abuse from below.

The impact area was cleared now, and he turned back to the job at hand, checking the large chronometer face near the top of the work shield. Twenty-eight minutes to red light. He concentrated on the satellite. "Number three power supply,

all units," he grunted, as he pried at the fused mass. It had thrown a little radiation around too, but not into any vital sections. He flexed his suit gloves thoughtfully and dug deeper into the guts of the satellite. Have to swing one gate at least, he mused, and reached for the magna-key. With both feet planted, and one hand on the satellite, he placed the key over a slug with great precision. Pressing the stud, he activated the magnet and felt the slug move up and out. A half-turn locked it in the out position and he moved to the next.

Six slugs later he was looking at the rest of the damage. Two rods of video useless, all of the power supply, a section of hi-voltage cable, and probably one more rod, to be sure. Quickly, almost mechanically, he extracted the wrecked components, not bothering to replace anything individual. Like pulling hen's teeth, he winced, as tiny prongs twisted and broke in their sockets and he went after them one by one. He took two adjacent rods as an added precaution and spares for these went into place easily. Eighteen minutes to red light.

He wired in the hi-voltage cable with a spot welder. Next the video units went in. One of them went hard, but he got it into place and it checked out. Last the power supply had to be eased in. He even smiled slightly as he hefted the one hundred odd pounds of ultra-light miracle, thinking of what a job it would have been to handle it on earth. All connectors in place, he moved to his bank of meters and remote adjustment equipment. Fingers moving quickly, he set dials, snapped switches, watched a tiny monitoring screen. The antennae slid partway out, just clearing the shield. Power on. A high reading in the video stages . . . damped. On the screen a blurred scene began to appear. He could see a large hall, knew it by sight as the United Nations. He made more adjustments from the panel, and noted the results as they were completed within the satellite. The picture was clearing. Too late he realized that TV 2 was swinging in behind him, that the booms had somehow become unlocked.

As he reached wildly for the boom controls, the bulk of the satellite touched his leg, pressing it against the pile of fuselage fragments. Pain shot through his body, blinding him, threatening to black him out, and then it was over. The huge mass swung slowly, idly backward. It had been a light brush, not enough to crush his leg, but it had been enough. Fighting off

terror, he looked down at his suit. Only a thin line appeared to tell him that a fragment had sliced through the self-sealing suit, and his dial told him that there was no leak. But inside the suit something far more serious had happened. He could feel a jet of warm fluid splashing against his leg, feel the warmth of his own blood seeping down around his ankle, into the boot of the suit. Panic rose in him again as he knew that an artery was severed in the calf of his leg.

Struggling to remain calm he dove across the flooring and whipped out a piece of spare cable. In near hysteria he wrapped it tightly around his leg, a little below the knee. He fumbled with it, managed a clumsy knot, stuck a screwdriver through it, and twisted. The pain became intense, but he felt the pulsing jet slow and seem to stop. No time to judge whether it would hold against suit pressure, or what it would do to air circulation. He shot a glance at the chronometer as he cleared the shield flooring and flipped off switches. Seven minutes to red light.

He grabbed a large piece of patch metal, much too large for the job, but there was no time to cut it now. The satellite was too far out now. Swing the booms—lock them this time. Working frantically he tacked corners and ran a rough weld down the edges. No time to make a further check, no time to lock the gate, the welded section would have to hold it. Dizziness was mounting in him as he moved hand-over-hand to the end of the boom and snapped the eyebolt switch. He dove back to the shield as TV 2 began to spin again. Hit the boom release, climb back through the hatch. As he passed the monitoring screen he could see a black figure, mouth working silently. His last thought as he fell into the seat and wiped his hand across the propulsion panel and shield retractor switches was that he had never checked the audio. Then, as the red light went on and webbing closed around him, acceleration crushed him back into the seat and on into oblivion.

In the city of Ungalah, bolts snicked back on weapons as the troops straightened their ranks to face four thousand surging tribesmen. Far down the square, the old man, carried on eager young shoulders, urged the crowd to vengeance, and at the very top of the steps the giant, all feelings banished now save the lust of battle, waved his sword and screamed a war cry. Muzzles came up as the mob hit the first step behind him, heads

turned slightly toward officers whose arms were upraised to give the signal. Then, suddenly, a new cry rose in the square.

From back to front it swept the ranks of tribesmen and all movement stopped. Every eye turned toward the screen as the face of Nicolas N'Thulmah swam up out of greyness. The view changed slightly and behind him the background of the United Nations Assembly Hall appeared. Abruptly the liquid, smooth voice of their leader filled the air. His language was strange, but it was clearly his voice. Then it was replaced by one speaking in their own tongue, their own dialect.

"Many of you here," it said, "have become accustomed to the welcoming of a new nation to your ranks. A few, more recent members, will understand, will recall, the emotions that fill me as I accept, for my people, a place among the nations of the world."

The rest was lost as a thunder of triumph rattled the windows of the government building, and swords and spears waved a fierce greeting to the leader. The sound seemed almost to shake Albert N'Galy down further into his seat, but as he tilted back his head and closed his eyes he smiled weakly.

Back aboard the space platform, William Baldwin reclined, if one could call it that, in the narrow confines of his bunk. He grimaced distastefully at the bottle hanging from the bunk close above his head, and the tube leading to his arm. Slowly, painfully, he raised himself slightly and looked down the length of his body. His blanket was pinned securely. Well, he thought doctors are the same anywhere, whether they're space researchers or horse doctors. From the feel of it they put ten pounds of dressing on my leg. I'd probably be better off with a horse doctor or a good G.P.

He settled back again and wondered what would happen now. Would they send up a special replacement for him? Melling would have a fit if that were necessary . . . it would take pretty near the whole U.N., portion of the budget for a year to do that. But then, he mused, someone will have to go under and finish the job on TV 2 : it can't be a first-class performer with that patchwork. But why should it be Baldwin who risked his neck again, why shouldn't it be some other sucker sent up to take over this thankless grind, someone with a thicker skin? Then, despite himself, he grinned. That could be taken as a rotten pun. He winced with pain again as he

turned on his side to see who had come through the hatch, and felt a stirring of the anger as MacPherson came alongside his bunk.

"Well," frowned the balding Scotsman, "loafing on the company's time I see, eh Baldwin?" The injured man felt his face flush, and he pushed up slightly to throw a hot reply back, but the Scotsman went blithely on. "I've a wee communication from your Mister Melling for a change. He says you're to take as long as you need to recover, but he would like you to touch up TV 2 in a couple of days. Seems it's a mite wobbly on its axis, and the audio fades."

Baldwin fell back on to his pillow. No reprieve, he thought. I should tell him to go to . . .

"Oh yes," continued MacPherson, "there was somethin' else too." He glanced at a flimsy in one hand. "The U.N. sends its appreciation for your prompt action during crisis. You, uh, removed the possibility of a bloody insurrection in some unpronounceable African state or other." He rolled the words with an exaggerated burr, and for the first time that Baldwin could remember the dour Scotsman smiled. "And we thought the occasion demanded some little token, since you won't be able to go down in person for some time yet. This is from all of us." His face grew serious again as he brought his other hand from behind his back. Between thumb and forefinger dangled a ribbon, obviously cut from someone's underwear, and from it was suspended a gigantic, star-shaped piece of metal. Scratched into it in bold letters was the word, "Hero."

MacPherson turned to leave. "The butcher-boys say you can hobble in three days, and get back to work in a week, but they're like all the male midwives down below. Just between us, can you kind of rush it? The set in the lounge is gettin' really bad now, and we need a Tee Vee man." He popped back through the hatch, whistling, as Baldwin lay back and held up his medal.

h. a. hargreaves

The outside pressures which are being placed on Ivan Dalroi as he attempts to sabotage the powerful Failway Terminal hierarchy bring him to the brink of madness—but it is a madness not of this world and it begins to do strange things to his mind

the dark mind

by colin kapp

foreword

In a harsh political and business world of the future, Failway Terminal is a law unto itself, grinding its minions into the dust of its vast combines and pulling the political strings of a gigantic empire. Much of that empire is situated on other worlds in parallel to Earth, Failway having perfected a technique involving space-time lattices, based on the principle that atoms, and therefore energy, may be transferred from one energy level to another.

Ivan Dalroi, a private investigator working for the Cronstadt Committee (an organisation opposed to Failway) is sent to the Failway headquarters to discover the whereabouts of three Committee members who disappeared after entering there. He sees Peter Madden, head of Public Relations, who warns him that he is likely to be killed if he pursues his enquiries too deeply, but secretly passes him a message to meet him later at the Heavy Goods entrance of one of the Terminal depots on the waterfront.

Leaving Failway, Dalroi enters a nearby bar to telephone his female assistant Zdenka, who warns him that the telephone is tapped. Dalroi leaves the bar just before it is wrecked by a bomb. Later, in an effective disguise, he finds the saboteur and kills him. It is then that Dalroi decides to conduct a personal vendetta of sabotage against Failway, even though it may cost him his life. Before he starts, however, he is questioned by Inspector Quentain, head of the local police, who also warns him that his life is in danger.

Dalroi decides to go underground, leaving a message with Zdenka to interview Harry Dever, a contact who apparently has some knowledge about what is happening behind the scenes at Failway. Dever is later found dead and Zdenka mysteriously disappears, leaving behind an incomplete taped message for Dalroi which infers that the Cronstadt Committee itself, headed by blind Gormalu, is not all it seems.

Keeping his tryst with Peter Madden, Dalroi is trapped by guards and barely escapes with his life. He reports back to Gormalu and suggests that he smash the tuner directing routing operations between Failway and the various lattice-worlds (whose main supplies are all sent from Earth). Gormalu points out that if he does this, the people on the lattice-worlds will all die. He also informs Dalroi that the Black Knights, a secret organisation of the Government, are very interested in Dalroi, who is now wanted for a number of serious offences.

In an argument that follows, Gormalu and two of his henchmen try to kill Dalroi and his body is dumped outside the city, but some indestructible element inside him keeps him alive, his brain burning with a terrible desire for revenge and destruction. Disguised and hiding in a motel, he is once again attacked—this time by a professional assassin named Malmud the Strangler—but survives, evades a police trap, and returns to the commercial quarter of the city to accost Cronstadt himself. Cronstadt maliciously points out that Dalroi now has no option but to fight Failway if he hopes to survive—and once again the overwhelming mental force engulfs Dalroi. After he has left, Cronstadt talks to the Monitor of the Black Knights and learns that Dalroi's mind is developing untapped sources of energy—that, in fact, the dark side of his mind could eventually be a mental Hiroshima.

Dalroi, now a marked man and with his world collapsing around his ears, is finally cornered in one of the city squares, trapped between the police on one side and a group of unknown assailants on the other. In the ensuing fight, he is hit and loses consciousness. When he recovers, he finds that he is a prisoner in Peter Madden's office, but escapes into the subterranean depths of Failway where the shuttle capsules are sent into the polarising matrix-field. Here he starts acts of sabotage which culminate in a huge fire with all the resultant panic, before being caught. Hauled before Madden, he learns that he is to be sent through the polarising matrix-field without the security of a shuttle. Unable to fight any longer, Dalroi's body hurtles into the realms of transfinite space.

nine

He was disintegrated, disunited, yet functioning, curiously as a whole. He fell from level to level of the unendurable cosmos of transfinite space, finding a brief cohesion of his individual molecules only to experience his own re-dissolution with an instantaneous pulse. Around him the hellish suns and unbelievable vortexes of transfinity shifted and phased in a terrible kaleidoscope of new geometrics and unknown colours.

His dissembled senses were unequal to the task of handling the phenomena ; they blocked, substituted and misregistered in an insane attempt to reduce the welter of unhandleable data to resolvable terms. The effect was chaotic. The vacuum and pressure tearing at his flesh tasted of pure, sweet lemon, and excited, vibrant peals of sound burned like shafts of heated steel in his nostrils. Colours never known in the spectrum compressed their weird emotions into fantastic words throbbing with a new approach to rhythm.

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The taste of his cheek on his tongue was a couch of nettles and barbed talons of light raked his flesh with blunt, impressionless styli.

SIC orIFUM Noooore caminorieFUM !! dit dit dit

He screamed, and the sound reverberated in patterns of purple and choking ammonia—

DATADA dit dit dit DATADA

—leaving weals of pain across his soul.

Yet throughout his transposition something remained intact in the storm-driven hail of molecules which was Ivan Dalroi. More terrible than the hideous, shifting byplay of the dissolving levels of infinity was the terrifying cauldron which was deep-sealed in Dalroi's mind ; a blast of raw energy, furious and fatal, which clung to his quivering body with an over-riding possessiveness. It was the seed of the life-force, unquenchable fire, the indestructable thing which lived in the dark side of the mind, determined above all things to preserve its host. It took control of his mind and then his body, fighting the elements of transfinity which racked the hulk, and, though he took more punishment than his body was designed to take, it would not let him die.

He was drawn into a giant vortex, a swirling plasma-drift like a complex nebula of twisting luminosity ; spiralling down an incredible cone with ever increasing rapidity, twisting and tumbling, caught helpless in the draught of some unseen, unfelt wind blowing from nowhere into nowhere. The nightmare speeded, pulsing with some vibrant waveform, spinning him endlessly, crushing his disjointed senses with senseless rhythms of light and pain.

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He was riding a broad wavefront through infinity, scattering galaxies of shrieking stars with a red-tinged shock wave. He was plunging into a hideous coalsack, scraping perilous, constricting walls of sound, plummeting down a nightmare channel of heat and the green of soft spring grass. Into the coalsack . . . nothingness . . . nothingness raised to the infinite power of infinity . . . nothingness so empty that even the quality of darkness was absent.

Time passed. A whimper drew his mind out from the suffocating veils of absolute nil, the sound of a human voice. Only after a dozen such sounds did he realise the crying was his own. He opened his eyes, and the action spun him with nausea. The movement had stopped and he was at his destination. After a while he stood, surprised to find that his body still answered to the ragged nerve.

He was in the centre of an immense golden web. Under his feet a disc of golden luminescence, perhaps a metre in diameter, formed a precarious hub of some fantastic system of radial strands which were crossed at intervals by roughly concentric rings. But it was the scale of the thing which brought Dalroi back to his knees. Looking out in all directions across the surface of the slightly undulating web he estimated he could see for roughly twenty miles before his sense of perspective turned traitor. Above and below, tinged with eternally shifting colours—was nothing at all, vast, unimaginable and unendurable nothing.

Not believing his senses Dalroi instinctively turned his concentration inwards to himself, refusing to accept the evidence of his eyes. He worked outwards from basics, knowing that his sanity depended upon the rationality of his answers. *I think, therefore I am alive ; I'm kneeling, therefore I have a body. Good, so far ! Now where am I ? Answer : in a giant web, nothing above, nothing below. Simply a web of gold*

stretched across a limitless space. But a web must have a beginning, an end, and a purpose. Or must it? Does everything have a purpose? What about the sphere with nothing inside and the inverse of nothing outside? When you jump outside of your own physics what do you use for reference points?

All right, use physics as a basis. There is light, because I can see. Ah, yes! And gravity also. Not much, but sufficient for orientation. Good! Now, a web that is subject to gravity must be restrained from falling. How? Obviously the radial beams must be tethered at the other end.

Dalroi shrugged off the multitude of imponderables which bludgeoned his mind, chose an arbitrary radial strand, and began to follow it. The easiest method of locomotion was to step from strand to strand of the circular component of the web, like sleeper-hopping on a railway. The web was slightly resilient and his motion caused dramatic undulations to spread out in complex waveforms across the luminescent, patterned waste. The light gravity conserved his energy, and with easy synchronized leaps he began to clear two or three strands at a stride.

Four hours later the pattern began to change. The radial strands had diverged until, apart from the one he was following, no others had been visible for nearly an hour. Now a new convergence was beginning, and, despite the fact that he was tiring rapidly, hope quickened his efforts. He was stumbling now, occasionally missing strands and plunging through the web up to his groin. Anxiously he strained his eyes ahead, but the shifting golden radiance deceived the eyes and he was reluctant to place too much faith on visual evidence. And all around him the great featureless emptiness shifted strange coloured harmonies on a background of nothingness.

Then he reached the point where the radial strands converged. In the centre was a disc of golden luminescence perhaps a metre in diameter. No end, no way out; only the centre of another hideous web. A cloud of bitterness and futility settled over him.

He was still trying to figure out the geometry by which divergent straight lines returned to a new point of focus when he noticed something on the surface of the central disc which threw him into near hysteria. Faint footmarks, as from a dusty sole, started from the centre and went off in the opposite direction. He had no need to check to know they were his own. He was back where he started!

This took a little figuring. Had the web been a sphere its curvature would have been obvious ; but it was not, it was a plane. Either he was traversing some dimension the existence of which he was unable to comprehend, or else Euclidian geometry did not apply to this atrocious place.

But if the shortest distance between point A and point A is a straight line, how do you go from point A to point B ? Or, even, is there a point B ? This sort of debate could take a long time, and time was growing scarce. Food he could do without for a while, but water—hell ! He could not go long without water. He had to get out fast or go quietly crazy with thirst, chasing mirages round a golden web like an insane spider after imaginary flies. He had to get out fast or not get out at all.

If walking a straight line fetches you back to your point of origin what happens if you walk in circles ? He chose a circular strand a few yards out and walked round it experimentally, feeling rather foolish when his trip placed him back at the beginning of the circle. But was it the beginning of the same circle ? He inspected the golden hub and began to wonder. His slight footmarks were no longer visible.

Placing a coin on the hub he repeated the experiment, watching carefully. At the last step of the journey the penny disappeared. He was near a hub, but not the same hub ! He could now traverse from point A to point B—except that there was nothing to choose between them. A few more times round the perimeter convinced him that there never would be any difference between them. What else to try ? A parabolic curve, perhaps, or a progressive spiral ? Given a few years and enough paper he could construct a reasonable non-Euclidian geometry for this place. But he had not got a few years. His life expectancy on the web was measurable in days, and the last hours would be anything but happy.

Ombudsmand Walter Rhodes kicked the stool until it smashed against the wall. Time was when the office of Ombudsmand had been a straight fight between his small legal and administrative staff on the one hand and the forces of officialdom on the other ; but the post had changed with the changing world and now he needed a private army of thirty-five dedicated men to challenge the organised graft and guile in high places and to penetrate the black wall of official secrecy. As of now his task-force had been reduced to thirty men. Of

the other five, two were missing, two were in gaol, held incommunicado, and the other one was dead. Officialdom organised business, and plain malicious circumstance had taken a fatal swipe at the champions of the individual, and all that Walter Rhodes could do to relieve his anger was to smash the heavy, resinated pinewood stool.

After a while his customary composure returned and he reached for the communicator.

"Get me the Chief Commissioner, person to person, visual as well."

The screen cleared slowly as the connection was made, and Van't Sellig's irritable, balding head came into view.

"Ah, yes! Ombudsman Rhodes. I was expecting you to call."

"I'll bet you were, Fritz! I've received your file on Dalroi. I think you have some explaining to do."

"Who tipped you off about Dalroi?"

"You know I can't reveal that," said Rhodes. He glanced down at the file placed out of sight of the vision-scanner. The complaint had been unsigned but he had had enough dealings with Inspector Quentain to be reasonably certain of its author.

Sellig grimaced wearily. "Never mind! I'll find out somehow. What do you want to know?"

"It says here that Dalroi was convicted of murder and sentenced to death by electrocution. A death warrant is appended. Also a release warrant dated a year after the supposed execution. Don't tell me that you're practising reincarnation at the police laboratories now?"

Van't Sellig sweated profusely. "You're asking the wrong sort of questions, Walter."

"Damn you, that's my job! You know I don't let go of a thing like this once I get my teeth into it."

"Very well, you've asked for it. The execution wasn't successful. God! Three times I watched him burn in that chair and each time he went into a coma and came out of it under the pathologist's knife."

"I thought those days were over," said Rhodes angrily.

"It was far surer than the rope they used to use for hanging, Walter. For over two hundred years the electric chair didn't have a single failure—then came Dalroi. Why it didn't kill him we can never quite decide, but it's an experience I'll never forget."

"So I should damn well hope!" said Rhodes. "What happened then?"

"Then the Black Knights stepped in and took Dalroi away under section two-nine-four of the National Secrecy Acts."

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know." Sellig mopped the perspiration from his brow. "Two-nine-four covers the use of convicted murderers for experiments involving certain death. They use them as guineapigs in space-flight experiments and chemical warfare techniques, you know."

"No," said Ombudsmen Rhodes, "I didn't know. Thanks for the tip. But what happened to Dalroi?"

"Even if I knew I couldn't tell you. From the legal point of view hand-over under two-nine-four is certified as death, and the case was closed as such. The pay-off was the shocker."

"Keep going," said Rhodes grimly.

"Dalroi wasn't guilty of murder. He killed all right, but later evidence proved he didn't have any option. There's even a suspicion he was framed. We informed the Black Knights and they kicked like hell. Finally they released—somebody."

"Somebody?"

Van't Sellig looked the epitome of misery. "I met Dalroi after his release, and talked with him. I don't know what they did to him, but on his release he wasn't quite the same person. He had no memory of what he'd been through at the hands of the Black Knights. Somehow they'd blanked out a complete year's memories. At a rough guess I'd say Dalroi is still undergoing his execution."

Rhodes drew a deep breath. "If I were you, Fritz, I'd start looking for a new job. From where I'm sitting there doesn't seem to be much future for you as Chief Commissioner."

"I'll take my chances," said Van't Sellig. "Not even you can move against the Black Knights."

"No? With the muck I'm raking up I've enough material to bring down the government."

"Look, Walter, you're out of your depth. Let Dalroi sink or swim in his own way. He'll reach hell just as soon. You can't interfere with the Black Knights and come out of it alive."

"I must!" said Rhodes. "There's a sight more here than appears at the surface, and you know it! And you're still holding two of my assistants. Are you going to release them or do I let the newspapers have the story?"

“ You won’t get away with it. There’s not a paper in the country which’d touch that story today. Something big is in the air and its liable to break at any moment, but Central Security has clamped down a press censorship which is absolute. Nobody would dare to touch Dalroi’s story.”

“ Then what the hell *is* going on ?”

Van’t Sellig shook his head resignedly. “ You asked for this, Walter. I’m going to tell you because you won’t be satisfied until you know. If ever you breathe a word of it I’ll crucify you so fast you’ll come unstuck right round the edges. The Black Knights are making a last-ditch stand against Failway. After the next election Failway will own the government and there’ll be no stopping them from that point on. It’s now or never. The Black Knights are pinning their faith on a secret weapon. Its name is Ivan Dalroi—the man who can’t be killed !”

t e n

Trapped on a web of crazy, discontinuous geometry, Dalroi cursed and wept like a mad thing. *He could not die just yet !* If a man could drink vengeance and subsist on hate then he would do so. If it took him a million years of weeping or a thousand reincarnations he would get back somehow and make Failway pay for every blistering tear and every second of agony. Parabola, hyperbola, vector and cosine, degrees of arc bisecting the minutest degrees of arc. Where the hell was point C . . . or is it D or E or even bloody omega ?

He knew he should have died, but refused to accept the fact. Something, some part of his mind, was stronger even than the terrible cupped hands of death. There was a flame within him possessed of such thirsting for life that he knew his body would be dust long before the final spark flared out.

A pain was lancing through his head like the slow, rhythmic insertions of a hideous sewing machine forcing a carpet needle underneath the skull. A whisper played a fantastic memory in his ears, and he caught the sound and held it, using it as a focal point to grope for all the things he had been forced to forget. Not hallucination, no, this was memory. It was disembodied, unconnected with the pattern of his life, yet it was there !

Then he had it clear. Lissajous figures on oscilloscope screens banked before his eyes, changing patterns, responding to . . . something. The air was reeking of . . . ether, yes, that was it! And noises . . . disconnected . . . bells, unholy sounds, sounds never made nor heard in this life. Sounds that came from within the brain itself.

The shock hit him like a thousand volt discharge. Now he remembered. The terror, the stark horror of having his brain exposed. The saw on the skull, the surgeon cutting tissue and flesh to expose the naked brain; and himself, drugged but conscious, watching the writhing traces and trying desperately to concentrate lest the fear should drive him mad. The probes in the brain; no pain, but noise and sensation, a leg which moved without conscious volition and noises loud and clear which were never there to hear.

But when? A memory must have some origin, some time and place of access. How had these atrocious memories insinuated themselves into an apparently hole-free chain of experience? And why?

Why? Why? The question burned like a whiplash. God, there was a secret here! Something was burning in the back of his mind. He could not see or feel it yet he knew it to be, there . . . something he was not supposed to know. Yet he had to know! Suddenly it became of peculiar importance to him to find out.

It was more difficult than staying alive, more painful than dying. Only an effort of tremendous will enabled him to do it at all. Then, once he had started, it was easier. The same compulsion which had made him reject the thought of death gave him now a diabolical lever, a desperate means of entry into the forbidden depths of his own mind.

Down he went, ruthlessly stripping layer after layer of civilised repression; peeling back dread, abhorrence, disgust and the thousand darker things which fester in the unseen shadows. Grimly he cut down to the dark side of the mind, to the region where the censor, like the dull red doors of a furnace scarcely insulating, masked the spiteful radiance which dwelt beyond. The censor was asleep or dead or worse. He demanded entry, and it was not denied him. The doors swung wide and he entered them in dread and teetered on the edge of an unholy holocaust. At the fringes of the terrible fire which screamed and blistered in the awful chamber of the mind, he stood face to face with his own Id.

This was the seat of the elemental life-force, a molten maelstrom of unbridled instincts and terrible ambitions, stripped clear of the layers of insulation and repression which millions of years of evolution had laid over the frightful incandescent turmoil. He staggered blindly, seeking protection against the blistering fury and untamed malice which radiated like some dreadful alien sun. He was appalled by the hellish ferocity, the unimaginable pressures, and the seething, grinding obullition which threatened to crack the universe by its unbounded intensity.

And with a courage somewhat more than human, he threw himself into the intolerable well of strife.

Raw emotions, millions upon millions of amperes of naked energy, stark, illiberal, completely blind, spat in excruciating arcs forming a continuous pulse of pure liquid fire. The will to live was a fiendish powerhouse suddenly ablaze through surfeit of the terrible powers it was no longer able to contain. Anger and hatred was sheet lightning, spitting flame from merciless heavens, pouring virulent fury on the Satanic inferno. Sex, like a thousand-headed snake, wound its dark coils and convulsed in agony, tightening upon the conflagration and concentrating its malevolence and potency, pulsing the hellish plasma to new levels of atrocious ferocity.

Super-critical now, the hectic ferment knew no bounds. Steaming, spitting, searing, snarling, the flaming torrent burst through his mind like a million tons of exploding steel.

SURVIVE ! HATE ! SURVIVE !

It coursed through his veins, a vaporizing mercurial pressure.

ACTION ! REACTION ! ACTION ! REACTION ! ACT !

Faster. Faster. Aurical, ventrical, artery, vein, nerve, nose, knee. It pounded in his ears like a drop-hammer forging some cosmological crankshaft.

TOOTH! NAIL! WILL! SPITE! HATE! FIGHT!

He was lost, drowned in the furious frenzy, engulfed in the widening tide of naked vengeance, floundering in the hideous incandescent sea whose pulse was the terrible will to live.

ACTION! REACTION! ACTION! REACTION!

His body convulsed on the web, and the web pulsed and whimpered in response. He refused to die ! He seized the power and mastered it. He was God, no, not God—Nemises perhaps. He was bitter scorn, fighting fury, terrible revenge, irresistible force, absolute crushing evil. He was Dalroi ! He had the power to smash the universe.

HATE ! HATE ! HATE !

He took hold of the web in solemn fury and burst the strands asunder. He tore loose the mocking nucleus and hurled the discus far over the seething plain. With a surge of super-human malice he gathered the broken ends of the heavy strands and pulled, distorting the alien geometry, twisting the configuration of the once-stable dimension into something which teetered on the brink of self-destruction. Then he rose up, and by sheer indomitable force, he smashed the dimension back into the miniscule quanta of energy from which all things are made.

Transfinity shuddered. Strange new nebulae leaped into existence, and others paled and were extinguished. Like the ripple of a depth-charge in a lake, the eddying tide of disturbance spread outward from the centre, carrying a wash that was felt even at the farthest ends of infinity and rebounded in complex criss-cross patterns of subtle rise and fall among the strange continua.

And through the flotsam of discontinued strata there floated the body of a man cursing in curious colours and complex harmonies ; a thing of power, dreadful yet afraid of the strange new galleries of knowledge which had opened in his mind.

Somebody destroyed the Consedo International bank. There were several theories as to how this was achieved, but none one hundredth as ingenious as the fact. Consedo, subsidiary of Failway Holdings, was not the sort of place that one destroyed out of hand. But then, this was no ordinary disaster.

The thunder split the heavy darkness of the old town with a bruising shock that shattered windows for a two mile radius and crumpled a street of slum houses on the river's bank. The steel and molybdenum caves of Consedo had tried to contain a star. The blinding blast of energy, which originated in a private safe-deposit box far down in the grim, grey vaults,

opened the skyscraper building from top to bottom like a hatchet through a toothpaste tube. Thousands upon thousands of tons of the finest ferro-concrete shattered and peeled in banana-like submission to fall in a calamitous avalanche across the neighbouring streets and buildings.

But that was only the beginning. Deep under the earth the terrible fire still raged. A mere nutshell of star-stuff, its heat was more than sufficient to turn the alloy-steel jungle into sparkling rivulets of molten metal. The night sky flared with reflected light as girders and crumbling masonry spattered into the hellish pool. The deep vaults were linked under the road and under the foundations of neighbouring buildings, and these too began to crumble and smoke and finally collapse. Down came walls and pavements, pillars, shopfronts, cars and roofs in a grinding cascade of steel, wood, glass and concrete, intermixed with crackling fire; all sliding with tantalising slowness into the widening hell-pit which once was Consedo.

On the edge of the uproar the fire and rescue teams stood in impotent horror watching the crumbling wastes with a helplessness as psychological as it was actual. Nothing like this had ever occurred before.

The shattered glass had torn the curtains into shreds and ploughed great furrows across the desk top. The gaunt oak panels were peppered with glassy spines, and the tri-di murals had imploded to reveal their shattered mysteries. As he rose from the floor, handkerchief blood-red through stopping the cut above his eye, Cronstadt's face was ashen not so much from his narrow escape as from the implications of the angry blow-hole seven blocks away.

"God! What was that?" he asked.

His companion was still absorbing the shock, and moved to the shattered window frames to stare stupidly at the enigmatic chaos. There were no lights, for the power had died with the first shattering blast, but the flicker and flare of the ruins of what minutes ago had seemed indestructible lit the room with a radiance like a foretaste of Hell. For several minutes then neither spoke, not trusting their voices to conceal the hysteria.

"Dalroi?" asked Cronstadt, at last voicing the unspoken question.

"Dalroi's dead," said Hildebrand. "They fired him into transfinity, unprotected. Of all the possible methods of execution, they used the only one which stood any chance of success."

"I know," said Cronstadt, "but what if even we have underrated Dalroi's potential. Suppose not even that could kill him?"

"I don't want to think about it. Transfinite space is a hell to end all hells. Assuming that physical survival was possible, which it isn't, the psychological impact alone would burn out the brain. Even if he survived, there still isn't any way back."

"We can't be sure," said Cronstadt. "Surely the return of Dalroi is less improbable than the chances of Consedo breaking into an unprovoked chain-reaction? In one fabulous micro-second Failway has lost perhaps one tenth of its hold on the commercial world. That is a coincidence which can't be overlooked."

Hildebrand gripped the sill with such pressure that white showed through the flesh of his knuckles.

"You're right, of course. But in this way . . . Lord ! . . . what did he use? Consedo fell like a pack of playing cards and burns like a roman-candle. A piece of the sun in a paper bag would have the same effect."

There was a knock on the door. Cronstadt opened it with difficulty, kicking the misplaced jamb savagely to release the reluctant wood.

"Parcel for you, Mr. Cronstadt. Delivered by special messenger."

Cronstadt took the parcel from the watchman, with a frown. Wrapped in the paper was a case of wood. It was very cold to the touch. Inside a thick layer of thermal insulating fibre cradled a small black orb. He examined it curiously, without touching it, puzzled by the wrongness in the way the sphere accepted light and absorbed it completely without reflection. It absorbed heat, too, and wisps of cool vapour from the air formed inside the open box.

"What the devil?" asked Cronstadt.

Hildebrand looked up, his eyes suddenly filled with hideous comprehension.

"Run!" he said. "Run for your bloody life!"

Cronstadt did not wait for explanations. Fear scabbled with grasping fingers at the back of his skull, and controlled panic threw his feet down known corridors to the nearest emergency exit. Suddenly he too had divined the purpose of the uninvited parcel and he had a rough idea of the nature of

the gift and its potency. They were fortunate. They were two blocks away when the headquarters of the Cronstadt Steel Corporation split wide and joined Consedo as a second flaming warning of the vengeful power that walked the land in anger. Dalroi was certainly back !

For a few minutes the two men stood sweating on the roadside, unable even to speak. Around them confusion seethed and boiled as the fire and rescue teams redeployed their inadequate equipment and found new locations from which to stare stupidly at the new holocaust which had struck out of the night. Police strove to cordon-off roads and alleys in the area to stem the tides of the curious, who, twice shaken from their beds, flocked to the area in excited crowds. Where the tall towers of Cronstadt Steel had been, a new waste of boiling slag was rising.

"Fiends in Hell !" Cronstadt said. "We should have expected something like this. When you twist the Devil's tail . . ."

Hildebrand was watching the surging crowd uneasily.

"Let's get out of here. I think we're being watched."

"Dalroi ?"

"Not Dalroi. Somebody else."

They began to walk. Dark figures, moving out of the leaping shadows, purposefully closed in. In the comparative darkness of a canyon, where tall commercial buildings raked the red-flushed sky, the net closed down. With dark hoods, shadowed faces, incredible precision and timing, the Black Knights pounced.

e l e v e n

The night was wild and as black as pitch. A strong wind sweeping up-river in driving gusts beat the rain against the signal cabin like buckets of grape-shot, and the tide of water sweeping the windows made direct observation impossible. The Yard-master at Failway goods-yard was having a bad night. Goods traffic pouring into the hungry maw of Failway was steadily increasing. Several special-goods had already been diverted into sidings to await clearance of the sheds, and an intolerable line of empty wagons was waiting the return of one of the seven diesels working the yard. With visibility at times down to twenty yards, the stage was all set for chaos.

Failway yard had long since outgrown its original space allocation and now sprawled crazy sections and branches back across the busy main lines where the great expresses touched two-hundred on the iron road to the sea. It was difficult enough to marshal the busy and complex yard with good visibility ; this particular night, with the squalling rain and the wind howling like a hundred banshees, the Yard-master could scarcely detect an engine whistle or see the nearer signals. He was forced to rely on repeaters and the illuminated track-circuit diagram which included only the older sections of the yard. The situation was rapidly slipping beyond him.

The pressures applied by Failway to get more goods and a faster turnround had forced the Railway authorities to throw overboard the elements of good practice and institute many hasty improvisations which were not interlocked to the main system. The Yard-master was sweating, not from the cold humidity, but from the anxiety-stress of the work he was trying to perform ; painfully aware that the crawling traces of coloured light across his board represented in actuality the lives of men and the fate of hundreds of tons of moving steel and goods drawn by the tall diesels across a sea of dark and mud.

The empty wagons were still piling up below the hump, and there was danger of a complete stoppage unless they were cleared immediately. At midnight he opened up the radio and called the nearest diesel shunter.

“ Come in, Seven.”

“ Seven to Yard Control. Can't you do anything about this damn weather ?” Static lashed the loudspeaker.

“ Take it up with the Union,” said the Yard-master morosely. “ That's one thing you can't blame on me. Look, Pete, I'm re-routing you to the hump to take a load of empties across the main to the East yard. Unless we get something out of here soon we're liable to choke the yard completely.”

“ Right ! Give me a time for crossing the main line. The gradient's slipperier than hell, and I'd not care to be out there when an express comes through.”

The Yard-master grunted. “ You worry about the gradient and move out fast when the signal clears. I doubt if I can get more than a minute's clearance across the main line at this hour of day.”

In fact, the main-line controller gave him only a fifty second clearance. It was little enough, but it would have to suffice if Failway yard was to start to clear the specials in the farther sidings. He took his cue from the passing of the *Atlantic President* and gunned the signals as soon as the way was clear, overriding the safety trips which rebelled against such hairs-breadth operation. With agonizing slowness number Seven crawled from the gradient and edged on to and then across the main tracks. The Yard-master watched its progress on the illuminated board where the blocks of light traversing tangentially exaggerated its slowness.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the entry of the fast-freight into the sector panel, and he snatched up the handset.

"Speed it up, Pete. I've got twenty seconds to clear the line."

Pete's reply was unprintable but indicated that his was the major stake in the race to clear the line before the hundred and fifty miles an hour freighter cut his entourage in two.

For a moment it did not look as though number Seven would make it, then the 'points cleared' indicator showed and the Yard-master thankfully thumbed home the levers to clear the main line, watching subconsciously for the repeater to confirm his action. The repeater stayed dead. At first the fact failed to register in his mind, and when it did he instantly slammed all signals to danger and leaped for the radio.

"Pete are you clear?"

"Sure. Now on the down gradient passing into the slip-way."

"Something's wrong with the bloody board. For Chri'sake see if you can see the main gantry and tell me what it's reading."

Silence for a second, then: "All the fast down-lines are at clear."

"You sure? My board still gives the main-line route to siding."

"That's not what it says out here. Lord! If that fast freight goes down the gradient it'll either derail or go clean through the other end."

His last words were swamped by the blare of a whistle. The fast-freight was speeding close.

A sudden squall hit the cabin, the pressure of the wind making it vibrate momentarily, whilst the driving hail obscured all other sounds. The Yard-master jumped to his board to ascertain what was happening, and watched with unbelieving

eyes as the lights winked out steadily, one by one, until the instrument was dead. In a corner of his shocked mind he had already ascertained the only possible explanation of how the board could fail in that particular way : somebody was below in the switching bay pulling out the fuses !

In the second he took to reach the door, catastrophe arrived. Like dark solidified thunder, the fast-freight came off the main, down the gradient, and thundered through the yard, its whistle sounding a mournful swansong and its brakes burning uselessly in the fact of its terrible momentum. The Yard-master forgot the switching bay and stumbled out into the storm, running with futile panic after the swiftly receding rear lamps as if he imagined he could catch them up and halt the unalterable. He was in time only to watch helplessly as the black thunderbolt disappeared into the solid bulk of Failway.

The freighter was doing over a hundred and thirty when it entered the loading platform. The brief horror of the loaders was pitifully shortlived. The locomotive ran the whole length of the bay and hit the end of the line with a driving crash which shook the whole building. It took away the hydraulic buffers, fifty feet of solid ramp and a considerable portion of the wall before the following rolling-stock hammered it together with a hail of debris into the river beyond. Had the rest of the train followed suit the damage would have been relatively slight, but the sudden check in momentum occasioned by the crash explosively telescoped the first wagons and made a convulsive caterpillar of those directly following.

Eighty tons of girder left the sanctuary of a flat truck and took down three roof-supporting columns and a line of offices before it drove to rest. Another hurtling load twisted the huge gantry crane into a weeping, useless metal spider. A fifty-foot low-loader stood on end like a fantastic totem-pole and was shortly demolished by a cable truck whose monstrous drums, like cotton reels on a log jam, began a drunken route down from the moving mountain only to be swallowed by the grinding cataclysm.

The silence which followed was a terrible thing to hear.

The Yard-master overcame his fear. Running back into the signal cabin he paused momentarily at the switch-bay door. The door was open but the room was empty. The floor was littered with fuse cartridges torn from the boards, and much of the wiring had been broken as though with an axe. Only a few circuits still functioned. Long blue wires, which had no right

to be there, looped across the interlock banks, feeding the fatal 'line clear' signal to the main line and setting the points to crushing death. This was ingenious and planned destruction carried out with split-second timing and an uncanny knowledge of the working of the yard.

Upstairs only one instrument still functioned—the telephone. Even as he was making the call the Yard-master imagined he saw the figure of a man running from shadow to shadow between the useless shunting lights, heading into Failway.

Dalroi followed hard on the heels of the disaster, intent on entering Failway before the security net had time to close. The grinding catastrophe had stamped its panic deep into the hearts of the Failway staff, and nobody was sure what had happened nor what, if anything, was still to follow. This was a situation Dalroi knew well how to play to advantage.

His objective was the bay where the immense cylinders of compressed and liquified gases were loaded on goods-shuttles for transfer to the various transfinite levels. In the midst of the chaos he had no difficulty in passing unobserved. The goods shuttles were crude compared with their passenger-carrying counterparts, being simply laminated cylindrical hulls with elaborate vacuum-proof hatches. The loading process was automatic. A capsule on a bogie ran to location at the head of the loader, the prepared load was charged into the capsule, and the hatches closed.

Dalroi estimated his chances, then took the risk. Eight huge gas cylinders comprised the next load, about half of the capsule's capacity. When the charge entered the capsule Dalroi was on top, fighting to prevent his limbs from being crushed as the cylinders settled to the form of the hold. He had scarcely settled when he felt the deadly acceleration as the bogie sped up the outworld track, but the conditions were luxurious compared with the last time he had ridden a Failway bogie. Then: *Foimp! Star scatter . . . shiver . . . inconceivable twisting . . .*

The copper-nickel hull of the capsule shunted the transfinite field and attenuated the twisting disproportionality into something merely conducive to insanity. There were strange lights in the darkness of the capsule hold and movements where there was nothing there to move. Dalroi watched fascinated as the hold appeared to grow shorter as if to crush him, and then longer, seeming to extend for about a mile. Yellow-green

coruscations sprayed off the metal, and his limbs heaved and jumped as his body bucked the trans-dimensional tides. His legs would grow large and hideous then wither to diminutive stumps ; his head would seem to float like a balloon or become so heavy that he feared his skull would crack against the angry iron. He prayed the capsule would not enter a transfinite loop, for such distortions would then assume a permanence which nothing could reverse.

Once the walls became a mirror, and he lay breathless and perplexed in something which reminded him of the interior of a giant vacuum flask, watching his eyes and chin dissolve into each other and occasionally to wander from his features altogether. Then it was over. There was a check in momentum which almost broke his bones, the gas cylinders shifted dangerously under him, and dark normality swam back. He had arrived. The problem resolved simply to getting out without getting killed.

The capsule canted at an angle and the hatches flew open on a ramp, the gas cylinders sliding out. He stayed with the cylinders until he had formed a split-second idea of the situation, then he kicked himself upwards to break the killing momentum and grasped at the nearest stationary object. He was near the head of the ramp, and the cylinders plummeted on below him whilst the downward movement of his body caused friction burns on his hands as he desperately strove to prevent himself following the iron bottles fifty feet to the foot of the slide. Fortunately he stopped before the burns became intolerable. A swift look over the edge of the slide told him of its trestle construction. He moved over the side quickly and was on the trestles and into the shadowy complexity of the supports before any of the crew below looked in his direction.

Even as he descended he was assessing the possibilities of sabotage. He had no doubt of his ability to bring the whole installation to ruins in about seven minutes flat, but on a transfinite pleasure level there could be close on a million lives at stake and any acts of sabotage must be so directed that if possible the innocent were permitted to escape.

The problem was how to force the Failway controllers to allow the exodus of the very people whose lives Failway used as a veiled threat for its continued existence. In spite of the bitterness inside him, Dalroi had no intention of becoming a mass murderer—except in the last extreme.

He stepped cautiously out into the oriental splendour of Failway Two. Tropical sunlight from an artificial sun blazed golden radiance on sandy streets. On all sides splendid architecture rose : palaces and temples, spires, turrets and minarets, domes, towers, and terraced walks. Slender oriental water-gardens vied with majestic, ornamented buildings for pride of vista and excellence of spectacle. The best of the entire old Orient had been delicately blended into a fantastic wilderness of wonder.

The fragile sensitivity of old China and Japan sat serenely side by side with the splendid and the picturesque from Ceylon and the India that was. Myth and marvel ; flowers of fable, rare and exotic ; orchids and incredible fruits—all conspired with the scents of *chianan* and aloeswood and spice to fire the imagination with longing for a lost age of adventure.

Dalroi was suitable impressed. This was the fatal attraction of Failway which kept the visitors coming through its doors. Here, with the trade-winds blowing on his face, and the calm warmth of teak and sandalwood and tea, even Dalroi found it hard to concentrate on the anger in his heart. He had to remember objectively that the air came here as a liquified gas boiling from immense pressure spheres, that the trade-winds were derived from hidden electrostatic jets, and that the broad and wonderful sun was a stabilised tritium plasma furnace. Even the imitation sea, on which plied junk and sampan and catamaran, was but the work of marvellous craftsmen.

He could understand now why public opinion would never support the campaigns to close Failway. This was a place for dreaming, and men do not give up their dreams willingly. Only in the gutter, from which the Failway labour force was conscripted, or in high places, where the political pressures were extreme, was the corroding influence of Failway truly appreciated. It needed a connoisseur of human frailty like Dalroi to know the uttermost depths of human misery and degradation which Failway scattered in its wake.

Dalroi was troubled by a sense of wrongness, something out of phase between the method and the intention, something alien. It seemed almost that the corruption which ensued from Failway practice was deliberate, as if the whole facade of Failway existed only to corrupt. In such a completely artificial and controlled environment the individual was more than usually subject to the pressures of deliberate manipulation. Dalroi, to whom individuality was sacred, knew all too well how strong those pressures were.

twelve

The notice board read :

STRATEGIC DEFENCE RESERVE
REHABILITATION CENTRE

This was fiction, as any who dared attempt to penetrate the defences to a sufficient depth would soon discover. The soldiers were not a fiction. These were battle-trained men on permanent loan from a crack commando unit, and the small carbines which they carried had hair triggers and no safety catches.

Inside the military perimeter was the wire, a broad barrier of barbed malice relieved only by the occasional T.V. pickup and the red warnings of a minefield in the no-man's-land beyond. The electrified fence gave no such warnings. Only a very shrewd eye would read the green ceramic insulators on the posts as indicative of the violent, twisting electrocution which awaited the incautious hand. There were other devices too. Four towers covering the inner perimeter harboured the A.F.I. projectors, the mere scatter of whose radiation could reduce a brave man to a coward. In the path of the beam circuits the ground was baked to brick, and the blackened grass at the edge of the tracks sported curious growth mutations under the fierce irradiation. Over all, the pale-lilac ion cloud crackled with expectancy, guarding the reaches exposed only to the radar-watchful sky.

In the centre of the land enclosed by this fearful barricade stood one of the most secret installations in the world. All that was visible at the surface was a squat, white blockhouse giving entry to the many levels deep below the ground. In these deep chambers, shrouded with darkness and with mystery, was the home of the legendary Black Knights.

The emergency conference was convened in the briefing room six hundred feet below. The assembly at the table was about as varied as one could imagine : Baron Cronstadt, the man of power and authority, whose way of life was chiselled into his commanding features ; Professor Hildebrand, whose lean asceticism but emphasized his intellectual prowess ; Presley, whose staring eyes and unalterable piety proclaimed his fanaticism in the service of a deity whose name was Obedience and Self-denial ; lastly, the Monitor, whose appearance was deceptively youthful and whose pleasant mien gave little hint

of the ruthlessness with which he shattered his enemies and which had carried him swiftly into the top echelon of the Black Knights. Only one man was missing from the group—Gormalu.

The atmosphere was tense. The dark guards around the periphery emphasized the fact that, this time, the members of the Cronstadt Committee were not assembled of their own volition. The Monitor's eyes were grim.

"For some little time there has been an unusual but fruitful association between the Black Knights and the Cronstadt Committee. That association has now ended."

"You have a reason for this about-face?" asked Cronstadt abruptly.

"I do. A Black Knight never accepts anything or anyone at face value. Your own status has been under constant review. I now have sufficient reason to damn the lot of you."

"Specifically?"

"We've been betrayed. Gormalu has sold us out."

There was a stunned silence for several seconds as the others absorbed the impact of the statement.

"Son of a bitch!" Cronstadt's brow was a cloud of thunder. "Where is he now?"

"We think he's in Failway. He had a brush with Dalroi and went straight over to the other side. In the circumstances I don't blame him, but it's my guess that he always was their man. Cronstadt, I'm holding you responsible for his default."

Cronstadt shrugged. "He always was a bad risk," he said, "but his knowledge of Failway was invaluable. I don't see how we could have done otherwise."

"That remains to be seen," said the Monitor, "but right now we're faced with a pretty desperate situation. Gormalu helped us to place most of our undercover team in Failway. From the silence which has ensued since Gormalu went, I doubt if many of them still survive. My God! What a bloody rat-trap this is!"

"What do you intend to do?" asked Cronstadt.

"What can we do? It's criminal to sit still, and lunatic to make a move. If I were to throw sufficient men at Failway I might even win—just about. But I doubt if many of the four million visitors now in Failway would come out alive. My hands are tied by this threat of ghastly retribution. Our only hope now is Dalroi, and God alone knows what's happened to him. After that trick he pulled at Consedo . . ."

"Consedo," said Cronstadt. "I've been thinking about that."

"So have I," said the Monitor. "Now I want to go over it again because the facts aren't in very good agreement with the theory. One of you sons of bitches is holding-out on me. What happened at Consedo was no ordinary act of destruction. It was something new. No short radiation, no radio-active contamination, no fallout—just a pure blaze of energy with the release controlled mainly down into the infra-red and visible bands. SciTech tentatively suggest the reaction was that between normal and contra-terrene molecules. You realize what that implies?"

"Yes," said Cronstadt. "It's a damned impossibility."

"Precisely. To do it you'd need to be able both to produce and handle c-t material, and to be able to control the mode of energy release. The whole concept of such a reaction is still in the realm of the wildest unknowns."

He paused to lend emphasis to his point. "Frankly this hints at a knowledge of physical principles far beyond anything dreamt of by our technology. It's the product of a completely new order of science. Dalroi was bright, but he was not that sort of genius. So how did he come by that sort of knowledge? Hildebrand, you're the expert on Dalroi's brain. Suppose you start explaining."

Hildebrand clenched and re clenched his exquisite fingers. "What am I supposed to answer? You know the theory as well as I. In prehistory the progenitors of the human animal had a fantastic core of survival energy, which became overlaid by evolving brain processes. Dalroi has a quirk which gives him direct access to this darker side of the mind when facing a survival threat. It raises his natural survival potential from the unusually high to the phenominal."

"Go on!" said the Monitor.

"The rest you know already. It was my prediction that exposure to repeated survival threats would increase Dalroi's access to the darkside areas. The more he was hit the harder he would bounce until he became the nearest thing to an unstoppable force that human flesh could contain."

"Now I want the part you have not told me," said the Monitor. "I want the part that explains Consedo."

"Nothing explains it. Dalroi's a remarkable individual even without the darkside access. He has a streak of hatred a

mile wide and a such natural level of mental energy that a session of psycho-analysis with him made the analyst feel he'd been in contact with a sheet-rolling mill. Dalroi's a throwback to the hard core-stock of humanity. As a fighting animal he's probably a hell of a lot tougher and more cunning than most others in the world today, but that shouldn't give him any advantage over any other mortal save that he could kill you before you could think about going for your gun."

"He came back out of transfinite space," observed Cronstadt suddenly. "He didn't do that by conditioned reflex action. There's a hell of a lot we still don't understand here. What sort of creature is Dalroi, anyway?"

"Don't ask me to explain," said Hildebrand, in a voice suddenly both quiet and far-away. "I've told you all it's safe for you to know."

The Monitor was on him in a trice. "So you do know something! Tell me now, or I'll make you sorry you were born. What else did Dalroi find in the dark side of his mind?"

"If I told you," said Hildebrand sadly, "you could not believe it, and even if you believed there is nothing you could do. You're such little people and even the universe is not quite as you imagine."

"Christ!" said the Monitor. "I'll give you riddles!" He motioned for a guard. "Take this man away and hold him carefully. I shall need him for interrogation. Have the necessary apparatus prepared."

"Now," he turned triumphantly back to the table, "has anyone else anything to add to that?"

Presley looked up, his staring eyes proclaiming the fanatical fire which haunted his spirit.

"There is a curious correspondence between descriptions of transfinite space and classical ideas on the nature of Hell; the eternal winds, the torment, the formlessness, the consuming fire which never actually destroys. If this is so then someone at the dawn of legend must also have gone there and returned, in order to leave such description in our heritage. It is possible there is another way in and out of transfinity without using the Failway apparatus—some special act of faith or resolution or despair."

"It's an interesting speculation," said the Monitor, "but we haven't time for games."

“I wasn’t playing. I was thinking of Gormalu. I have never seen a man more surely tainted with the breath of Hades. Where did he come from? What made him blind?”

“You’re wasting time,” said the Monitor. “What’s this to do with Dalroi?”

“Dalroi also went to transfinite hell, and returned with gifts of devilry. But how did he come back? And if he came alone, how many others have trodden the same paths, and for what reason? I would hazard a guess that we are up against a mystery the answer to which is not to be found in this universe: an answer that lies somewhere at the end of a journey the price of which is madness.”

Dalroi’s exploration of Failway Two was rapid and systematic, for he knew a crisis was coming. There was no nailing the exact sensation: an electric tension in the air, a tightening of the scalp, the unease of watching eyes which were never really there—whatever it was, it nagged in Dalroi’s bones, an uniformed instinct to beware. Dalroi had more sense than to disregard a hunch, and primed the radiation pistol in his pocket. He sensed trouble though from what quarter he could not determine.

A moment later he knew. The artificial sun coughed and died and he was thrown into a world of utter darkness; a world of sound without sight, movement without possibility of seeing the mover. *Gormalu’s world!*

He choked back his first impulse to panic and wondered if blindness had struck him without warning, but a rising tumult from the area around him told of others similarly placed. He drew a boron match and rasped it into life. The flame threw back the shadow in a circle about him, and others swiftly moved forward, attracted like moths to the diminutive flickering flame.

“Listen!” said Dalroi urgently. “The sun has failed. Don’t try to run. Find lights wherever you can; start bonfires and wait patiently. Don’t move too far until it’s light enough to see.”

A few more also had matches, and the street began to weave with erratic sparks of fire. Others, less prepared, fought their way from dark places to reach transient flames, which died before the journey was complete. Panic was spreading as the need for light struck home in the hearts of the bewildered assembly. The murmur of complaint and bewilderment mounted like an ever increasing hymn of fright. Soon, to

strike a match was to become the centre of a vicious, screaming scrum fighting for possession of the tiny lighted splint.

People began to run in the darkness, blundering into iron and masonry, striking frenziedly at flesh and stone and empty air ; running no-one knew to where, or from what, or anything except that their souls were terrified of staying in the darkness.

Gormalu's world ! A blind man's revenge ! The idea forced itself into Dalroi's mind. The absence of lighting in the streets and buildings was itself a sinister suggestion that this was no normal mishap. Even the loudspeakers were mute, yet the power was not wholly dead for the deep throb of the ventilators, so low as to be inaudible except by conscious recognition, continued its sullen grumble.

Gormalu's world ! By now Dalroi was certain. This was a piece of carefully calculated maliciousness. Gormalu was here in Failway, somewhere on this level. The diabolical doctor, unseen, malignant, was enjoying his mastery. Hell was at hand and the Devil had come into his own.

Dalroi steeled himself in the darkness, pressed flat against a wall, killing the fear born of eyes that could tell him nothing, forging precise details of the scene from memory. A habit of detailed observation gave him many facets of information an untrained man would miss. Somewhere to his right there should be a service ladder to the roof. He touched the column of steel with his hand and began climbing upward in the darkness.

Gaining the roof, he crossed it and searched along the farther wall. He found the steps and, moments later, the ironwork of the service catwalk. Now he was surer of his ground. In his mind's eye he had a fair plan of the catwalks, simpler than the streets and alleys below, with less obstacles and a surer guide in the darkness. He turned in the direction of the Failway service bays.

An unexpected obstruction on the catwalk brought him down swearing, and something metallic skittered along in the darkness. Something about the weight of the unseen object caught his attention and he searched for it urgently. As his hand found one, his foot contacted another and he drew them to him for examination. They were curiously-shaped boxes with well rounded corners. A short rod or antenna protruded from each and they both had fixing straps. They suggested

something he vaguely remembered. But what? *Two boxes, two antennae . . . walkie-talkies, perhaps? No, nobody makes walkie-talkies like that. Bottom curved almost as though to fit . . . on a shoulder!*

The memory came. In his hands he held Gormalu's bat's-eye radar boxes, the electronic eyes which normally perched like vultures on the blind doctor's shoulders. It fitted the circumstances so well that he had no doubt of his identification. What troubled him was why they had been abandoned. It did not make sense. *In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king.* Gormalu had relinquished his most valuable asset—the ability to move freely in darkness.

Or had he? Suddenly Dalroi knew the answer. *In the darkness Gormalu was not blind!*

The sightless eyes were not sightless any more; eyes that were dead in the daylight were living and useful in the absolute darkness. *Infra-red vision!* It fitted perfectly. Dalroi took the notion further. Infra-red and VHF radio bands overlap. That would explain Gormalu's uncanny accuracy with the bat's-eye boxes. The man could see using wavelengths into the broadcast-radio part of the spectrum. The thought was chilling. What manner of creature was Gormalu?

He considered this silently. Suddenly the tables were reversed and it was Gormalu who was sighted and he who was blind. He moved on with new urgency. He had to find Gormalu before Gormalu found him.

thirteen

Misjudging the course of the catwalk in the darkness he lost his bearings and plunged headlong down a short flight of stairs on to a rooftop, landing with a bone-jarring impact. He was about to regain his route when he stopped and pulled himself in under the stair. Somebody was coming along the catwalk, not cautiously like a man walking in the darkness, but with the swift tread of one who could see in his environment. Not Gormalu for sure, for this was the step of a tall and agile man. Dalroi worked tighter against the stair. The footsteps came nearer and passed.

Dalroi moved like a tiger, swiftly, ferociously, leaping up the steps in the passer's wake, with no illusions about the chances he was taking. He was in the position of a blind man attempt-

ing an assault on an armed man in daylight. With cat-tread he measured the pace of the one in front. Only as he closed in did the dark footsteps falter. Dalroi sprang blindly.

He found a neck and it broke even as the other attempted to react. Following the body to the ground he explored it rapidly with his hands. The soft garments suggested it was one of Gormalu's henchmen, either Timoshu or Matshee, and a short knife completed the suggestion. He then found what he at first thought was a weapon, but which proved to be a small but powerful dark-lamp. He heart leaped. This was the break he had been looking for. He followed the distorted neck to the head and his fingers closed thankfully on a pair of infra-red goggles. He donned them swiftly and dull vision swam back to his eyes.

He was in a world of black and white and grey, like a grotesque monochrome film-set. The major illumination on the scene came from the banks of concealed heaters which supplemented the warmth of the now absent artificial sun. In the valleys of wrongness which were the streets and terraces below him, blind men fought with blind, or hid or collapsed or blundered aimlessly.

Dalroi could see no sign of the figure he was seeking, but the body of Timoshu confirmed his suspicions. *Gormalu was here!* He had to find Gormalu fast, for he sensed the devilry in the darkness. The blind bewilderment of Failway's own staff pointed up the fact that the situation was both unforeseen and quite beyond control.

The screaming began in a farther sector well beyond his range of vision, a mammoth shriek of frenzy and anguish. Swiftly he traversed the catwalks, knowing that this must be the start of what he feared. Even as he neared the spot he could sense the fear rising out of the bewildered crowd. His blood ran cold.

In the square a group of people had gone berserk. With staring eyes and idiot expressions they had reached the mad abandonment born of fear. Naked panic probed with intolerable fingers into the crowd; terror upon crazing terror touched with icy fingers, plucking the senses from their brains. Caustic, cutting, corroding frenzy mazed the intellect. Most inhumanly they fought. They fought the darkness; they fought themselves; they fought each other. Insane with fear, demented under the grip of some power they could neither avoid nor

understand, they reverted to the status of cornered rats, and everything in the helpless darkness was their enemy.

Dalroi was sick. He had seen it all before. During the abortive rebellion which had risen during his youth the police had produced a weapon from the secret stockpiles dedicated to civil obedience. This was the dreaded 'shredder,' based on A.F.I., the artificial-fear-induction process. It was well named. It literally shredded the nervous system of those in its path. Of course the rebellion had fallen to pieces, but fourteen new hospitals had to be established to tend those permanently crazed. Dalroi remembered. The children had been most susceptible to the barbarous radiation. For a long time there had been a shortage of schoolmates in Old Town.

The same memory made him lay aside the radiation pistol. The cartridge-charge of the pistol had a resonant frequency roughly the same as that of a shredder, and he had no wish to become part of the conflagration which resulted from an exploding radiation cartridge at resonance. There was enough murder in his heart now to make Timoshu's short knife adequate for his purpose. His directive was simple : find Gormalu and kill him.

Bitterly he recognized the trap. Somehow Gormalu knew that he was on this level, and this was his own twisted method of bringing Dalroi into the open. He had no doubt that when he appeared Gormalu would hit him with everything available. Dalroi was past caring. If it was true that he was immune to ordinary murder then he had nothing much to fear ; if not, he was going on anyway. If Gormalu wanted to fight he had picked on the right adversary.

The problem of locating Gormalu was answered for him. His nerves twisted with a sudden convulsion which nearly brought him to his knees. Gormalu must have seen him and brought the shredder to bear in his direction. Far away on a farther catwalk he could see the bright i-r halo hovering about the muzzle of the shredder, although the instrument and its operator were too indistinct to be seen. He wondered whether Gormalu realized his identity or if he was merely playing safe. With the second bolt he threw himself on to the cold metal of the walk and writhed with not entirely spurious agony. With an angry gout of fire the radiation pistol burst on the handrail where he had left it.

Ten seconds later the beam shifted and Dalroi breathed a sigh of relief. What was to follow would be difficult enough without having his nerves skinned in advance. Moving now with the utmost caution he inched along the catwalk to where the walkway intercepted the one occupied by Gormalu.

Even as he rose to his feet he held a suspicion in his mind that he could not possibly make it. As the beam swung back hastily in response to his foolhardy frontal attack, the suspicion deepened into a certainty. The first bolt caught him in mid-air and so convulsed his body that he almost missed the guard rail. He checked himself in time, and with a fortitude not completely his own he walked in a cloud of desperate pain straight along the beam-path of the shredder. Something within him snapped. His mind was choked with ascending pressures, and the fierce determination to succeed clamped over his shrieking nerves and forced him to ignore their agonized messages.

Will-power was no use ; no creature was gifted with the will to overcome the racking fire which so crazed the nibbling nerve. Only the intolerably fearful thing which roosted in the dark side of his mind could give the orders to force his muscles to move into mounting and incontrollable waves of pain and fear. Deliberately he walked. The excruciating agony mounted with each triggered burst ; fire upon fire, inconceivable agony, corroding torment eating his nerves. Only the blind hate and desperation within him beat back the protective darkness from his mind, kept him conscious, forced him cruelly on.

He could see Gormalu now, crouched behind the shredder : two bright and dreadful eyes set in the death's head where always before dark glasses had obscured the face. Gormalu was frightened, and with good reason. Nobody could walk along the beam-path of a shredder—nobody except Dalroi ! Nobody would attempt it unless driven by more than ordinary motives. Such endurance needed something more than mortal motivation.

Dalroi kept going, the nerves of his whole body vibrating with hideous discharges and his brain seemingly on the verge of collapse from the conflict of pressures. The knife was in his fingers and Gormalu was only yards ahead. He took the full blast of the shredder in his temple and blood-red images trampled along his optic nerves until he thought his eyeballs would burst. A brush of pure flame traversed his spinal cord. He hit the shredder and it canted wildly on its gimbals.

Gormalu, paralysed with fear, lay before him on the catwalk. Dalroi seized the scraggy shoulder and struck down with the knife, a vicious, murderous stroke.

It never connected. There was an implosion of air into the space where the devilish doctor had lain, and the speed of his removal dragged patches of skin from Dalroi's fingers. The knife plunged through emptiness and clattered uselessly against the steel of the walkway. Dalroi knelt, stupefied with shock, and wept with a blind and futile rage at the unholy trick which had thwarted his revenge.

A welt of scarlet lightning split the black sky. Fearing new devilry Dalroi looked around for cover, but stopped as he realized the flash came from the dead sun. Another flash, and a final pinpoint of lavender showed that the re-ignition had been successful. Power was coming back into Failway Two, and the crisis was over.

But Dalroi recognized the lull before the sickening storm. His encounter with Gormalu had awakened something dormant in his mind. Gormalu, or somebody like Gormalu, was already in amongst his deep perceptions ; the age-old enemy, the bat-blind bogey which lurks in man's subconscious, was not a myth but a reality. Deep laid in the well of impossible recollections was this antithesis of man. Instinctively he now knew what type of creature Gormalu was. His fingers curled with hate.

Picking up the shredder he bent it over the guard-rail with a savage swing and threw the debris away. The act of destruction came so naturally to him that he paused and looked at his hands and wondered what eons of repetition had given his fingers such inborn familiarity. He was treading on the threshold of unknown hell, but the things that he needed to know would not come back to him.

ACTION ! REACTION ! ACTION ! REACTION ! ACT !

He had anger without opportunity. Impotently he was forced to wait for the gathering fury. He pressed the infra-red goggles into his pocket and moved along the catwalks in the weird dawn glare of the re-lit sun, choosing his direction more by instinct than by design. Lights were coming on in the buildings below, block by block, and people were staring upwards, drinking in the welcome light.

He felt like a scene-shifter in the flies of some incredible stage, looking down on the end of a drama such as no theatre could ever know. Grimly he realized the simile was exact. Failway Two was a stage, a grotesque, soulless collection of props and effects, with innocent bystanders as unsuspecting actors playing out a melodrama with real tears and real blood.

Anger slashed through him like a knife. He had to get off of the stage, away from the make-believe. He had to reach the wings where they operated the lights and the strings which kept the puppets dancing. He had to come to grips with the author and the producer and, perhaps, the impresario.

He went as far in one direction as he could. He was no longer awed by the scenery, he was looking for the fact behind the fiction. At last the catwalks angled and he was up against a wall, apparently no different from a thousand other walls, yet when he studied it in perspective it seemed to form no part of any other structure. Following its contours he became convinced that this was one of the limits of Failway Two. With an ear to the wall he could just detect the thump of mighty pistons beating a subsonic rhythm which needed to be felt rather than heard.

Hidden in an alcove a small metal door, slightly ajar, invited his attention. He passed into a dark passage where acrid smoke lay in a horizontal plane on a current of rising warmth. He hurried through, guessing that chance had played into his hands, arriving in a mammoth powerhouse where generators and a myriad giant devices were staggered over a vast and awesome floor. The air reeked with ozone and the smell of burning insulation, doubtless the result of Gormalu's work to sabotage the sun. Machines were starting up, winding upwards with throaty screams, passing resonance with shattering intensity, coming back to life.

One, quite the largest engine that Dalroi had ever seen, was black and broken, with tubes split, bearings torn, castings fractured and fused. It had evidently been the centre of a high temperature explosion. At a rough guess it had once been a liquid hydrogen alternator and somebody had switched the pump input to oxygen. The titanium-tungstate stalactites would need a solar furnace to recast the pattern.

Dalroi was disappointed. It was not here that he could find the answers to his questions, nor any way to ward-off the blow he knew was about to fall. *There must be something more !*

Nobody noticed that he passed. Overhead cranes above the smoke-haze carried beams and crates with a controlled frenzy. A narrow-gauge railway scattered furious electric trucks on unknown electronic errands. Something, a riveter probably, screamed and thumped in the distance, overlaying its own noise with a pattern of explosive echoes.

Dalroi continued the way he was going. After nearly half a mile of the machinery jungle he came up against another wall. This rose so high that it passed out of sight above the tangles of pipe and girderwork. Its thickness was measurable by the fact that the single door which he could find was recessed nearly thirty feet into the concrete.

fourteen

Six hundred feet below the ground the concrete caves snapped back quick echoes of iron-tipped heels on unyielding stone and the occasional snicker of a carbine butt on a black steel buckle. The bolts on the heavy door broke back with the sharp, certain action of powerful solenoids, and the Monitor entered.

In the cell Cronstadt rose warily, blinking at the light. "How much longer are you going to keep me here?"

The Monitor bowed slightly. "Until you rot if necessary. It appears you and your friends have conspired to turn a serious situation into something verging on the catastrophic."

"I swear to God I'm on your side. I had no idea about Gormalu."

"The singular thing about this case is that there is quite a deal that you don't seem to know. How a man of your acumen could have come this far in total ignorance of what you were attempting, is something I shall never understand. I can only assume that your overwhelming avarice completely blinded you to the real issues."

"Damn you! I was not in this alone. You, too, were involved."

"For the very good reason," said the Monitor, "that I knew there had to be something more in the scheme than appeared on the surface. There was a hell of an undercurrent at work and I was just waiting for one of you to show your hand. I must confess to being misled in thinking that the

operation was directed against Failway. Only recently did I realize that it was not Failway but Dalroi who was the target."

"What the hell do you mean?"

The Monitor smiled grimly. "That's right, Baron! Continue to proclaim your innocence. Frankly, your life depends on it. Let me ask you, do you know what Failway is?"

"Yes, it's a big business proposition—dirty but highly profitable."

"No," said the Monitor. "Failway is not what it seems. What you see is only the facade. But a facade for what? That's what I needed to know. And suddenly . . . it's all clear to me. Failway is a trap—a Godalmighty trap laid with terrible jaws set to catch a few certain gifted individuals. It is baited with the most irresistible of lures—power, corruption and oppression. Who set it up and who designed it is something I have yet to learn. But its intended victim I do know. They were after Dalroi. And with the connivance of your committee we've thrown him to the wolves."

"This is madness!"

"I wish it were. Did you never ask yourself about Dalroi, how he came by that immunity to murder? Did you never think any farther than that?"

Before Cronstadt could answer, the communicator on the Monitor's lapel sounded briefly.

"Monitor."

"Communications Lab, Sir. We have the radio receiver down here which was removed from Gormalu's laboratory. It's similar to a sub-etheric set but it won't tune over the usual bands. There's a shoal of stations on it the like of which we've never heard before."

"Damn!" said the Monitor. "I'm coming down to have a look."

"Trouble?" asked Cronstadt.

"I don't know yet. You'd better come too. We've had a team stripping Gormalu's place. There's stuff in there which will take all of twenty years to understand. Gormalu got out of there so fast he didn't even bother to arm the mines he'd left in the basement. That seems to be a measure of the panic which Dalroi has induced into everyone connected with Failway. Gormalu must have been a very frightened man."

"I still can't understand how we let him take us in so completely."

"My dear Cronstadt," said the Monitor, "none of us is beyond suspicion. I don't think Gormalu is the only traitor. You yourself are on record as once having bid for the Failway monopoly. Presley is firmly convinced that it's an antechamber to hell, and Hildebrand . . ."

"What are you going to do about Hildebrand?"

"I don't know yet. Shoot him, probably . . . and how many others also? I've had to place my trust in some very imperfect material. It would only take me about an hour with any of you to come to the real truth in your hearts—but I fear you'd be very little use to me by the time I was finished. You'd be incurably insane."

"You're a strange cuss yourself," said Cronstadt, unabashed. "You don't even have a name. What do we know of you and your ambitions?"

The Monitor laughed lightly, almost boyishly, and pushed back the lank hair which disturbed his brow. "Count yourself lucky you know neither. It doesn't pay to be too curious about the hierarchy of the Black Knights. It is an estate which is entered through a very small doorway."

"So I've heard," said Cronstadt drily.

When he came out again through the door of the Communications Laboratory, the Monitor's smile was gone and his confidence was ripped to shreds.

"My God! Cronstadt! What have we got ourselves into? At a rough guess there's around half a billion stations broadcasting on bands covered by that receiver and not one of them comes from Earthside. It's like a window into another sort of universe, a little keyhole where you can listen in on something which cannot possibly exist. It's unholy, and I don't mind admitting I'm frightened."

"There must be some rational explanation."

"There is. That receiver is picking up transmissions originating from somewhere in transfinite space."

"That's impossible!"

"You think I don't know that!" said the Monitor. "Ask any scientist and he'll tell you that there are only seven even remotely habitable transition levels in transfinite space, and Failway has them all. There are series of equations which prove quite simply by means of progressive variables that no other levels through to infinity can ever contain anything which we can construe as life. I tell you now that those sub-radio

transmissions represent not only life, but life on a scale such as we can only dimly conceive. There must be whole galaxies populated and jabbering at each other on sub-radio channels which we don't even know how to tap."

"Is that so shocking? We've never doubted the possibility of intelligent life in our own cosmos. Is it so terrible that thinking beings should exist in some other continuum?"

"Only," said the Monitor sickly, "when you hear one of them speaking in English, issuing orders that the destruction of Ivan Dalroi must be accomplished absolutely regardless of the cost."

"Fiends in Hell!" said Cronstadt. "And this apparatus belonged to Gormalu?"

"Yes. I just wonder how many more there are around, how many other people I sometimes have to trust, sit at home at nights and receive their orders from the other side of nowhere. You know, Cronstadt, there are times when I hate the whole bloody human race. There isn't one of them who wouldn't sell his soul for money or revenge or martyrdom or whatever their petty spirits crave. The whole race is rotten with the pursuit of cheap excitement."

"I've never doubted it," said Cronstadt. "May I hear these transmissions?"

"Help yourself," said the Monitor wearily. "For all I know they may be intended for your ears anyway."

When Cronstadt turned from the apparatus his face was the colour of putty. "You're right," he said. "We're in trouble. Dalroi versus Failway was odds enough to shake the Devil; but Dalroi versus whatever lives in the transfinite irrational planes could be sheer disaster. What the hell will he have to contend with now?"

"I don't know," said the Monitor, "but whoever engineered this played a masterful hand. The whole set-up was designed to get Dalroi where they wanted him—and like bloody fools we played along. Hell, if Dalroi really cuts loose they're going to have to settle him in a big way."

"But if that happens in Failway it'll be the biggest catastrophe of the age."

"And if it happens out of Failway it won't be a catastrophe, it'll be extinction. I'm going to war: I don't have any option any more. The pogrom we sought to avoid is being thrust upon us, so I don't have any alternative. I'm going to take a task-

force and seal off Failway Terminus so tight a mouse won't be able to get his whiskers in or out unless I say so. And if you don't know any prayers, Cronstadt, you'd better learn some fast because unless I miss my guess we're so far out of our depth that we'd better become amphibious fast if we're going to survive."

It was a heavy metal door, gas but not pressure tight, and fitted with a flux lock. There were ways of tricking the magnetic tumblers of such locks if the sensitivity of the reading-heads had fallen sufficiently low. Dalroi had a magnetic pick-lock in his wallet. He inserted it into the lock and tapped the end with a small magnet. Once. Twice. The ferrite rod of the pick-lock read the residual magnetism in the tumblers and the magnet cycled the magnetic flux to produce the characteristic hysteresis.

He pressed the rod into the reading position and waited. The relay went over with a reluctant click. Kicking the door to upset the tumblers, he pulled sharply, broke the seals, and seconds later was through into the terrain beyond.

Under a pale, blue, artificial moon lay a field of black mutation poppy, a vast sea of broad-petaled poisonous blossoms upturned to an impossible sky—the source of the cepi on which the Failway slave empire was based. Dalroi swore.

The cepi was at once more potent and more degrading than the opium from which it had been mutated. If this was a sample of the almost legendary cepi fields of Failway, then its masters could easily produce enough narcotics to bring the civilized world to its knees. With this ample source of raw material Failway could afford the multiple essential distillations to produce the rarer drugs which, once experienced, were impossible to withdraw without madness intervening.

He moved into the field and examined the broad black petals without touching them. The rare fullness of the growth was surprising, for cepi does not take kindly to cultivation; in this he realized the significance of the ultraviolet moon hanging on a tracery of girders perhaps two miles above his head. These were unnatural plants growing in unnatural conditions under an unbelievable moon. All the shifting madness of transfinite space had seemed more natural than the alien deliberateness of this one field of terrible flowers. Again he sensed something incredibly wrong.

He was almost on top of the pickers before he saw them, so well did the colour of their skins match the hue of the brown foliage. He thought at first he had come across a company of negroes, and it was several seconds before anguished realization told him that the blue-brown of their skins was the result of prolonged exposure to the blue, atrocious moon.

Most were nearly naked, some completely so, and they squatted on their haunches, Asiatic style, between the die-straight rows, eyes staring ahead apparently unseeing, whilst their hands gathered the cepi. Every one was in an advanced state of cepi hypnosis. Dalroi might have been wrong, but he could have sworn that amongst the nearer group of degraded faces he could identify at least two of the members of the fact-finding group he had started out to trace. He shrugged. There was nothing he could do for them now.

There are many ways of gathering cepi. The best way is to puncture the sac before it is fully ripe, and to allow the sap therein to dry in a small, milky tear on the outside of the growing pod. Such an operation needs to be performed with care, for the undry liquor is barbarously addictive and induces raw hallucinations completely without the restraint of prepared cepi. It is easily absorbed through the skin. Those who gather cepi tears with unprotected hands either die or are forced by the power of the drug to remain pickers for the rest of their short, befuddled lives. To gratify such an addiction a man willingly enters a state of slavery on a cepi field, and, since like all cepi derivatives the drug was specific, only that source could satisfy the craving.

Dalroi reconnoitered carefully. There were no guards that he could see; none would be needed, for cepi kept its own narcotic watch on pickers who attempted to default—but a line of sheds and lights on the edge of the shadow suggested an encampment where the pickers slept. Humidifier heads dotted about the rows argued that part of the cultivation process was a heavy drenching of the foliage. The two facts taken together suggested a daily routine or cycle of events. Dalroi became thoughtful.

Cepi was the kingpoint of the Failway slave empire; destroying the cepi destroyed Failway, but it would also bring death or madness to thousands dependant on Failway drugs. It would be a difficult decision to make.

'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.' Cronstadt had said that to him.

And : ' 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 . . . whose innate capacity and ruthless determination . . . transcended all other emotions.'

" A highly intelligent gutter-rat," said Dalroi to nobody in particular. " That's me !"

The sound of his voice shocked him, for he was not in the habit of talking to himself. An alert part of his mind tripped on the incident and analysed it. The answer was worrying. Somehow the subtle vapour from the blossoms was affecting his thinking. Knowing the soporific effect of cepi on a non-addicted person he realized that if he was to take any effective action against the field he had better start quickly. Within an hour the vapour would have robbed him of his purpose ; after two hours he might not bother to leave . . . ever.

Again a voice swam in his mind. This time his own : ' *Failway grows like a malignant cancer . . . you can't remove such barbarous poisons . . . you have to take up a knife and hack out the rotting flesh . . . cauterizing the wound with red-hot iron and cooling the iron with tears of pain.*'

" Damn !" said Dalroi. The decision was made. He looked for a point as far away from the cepi as possible where he could do some serious destructive thinking. Outside the sphere of light from the ungodly moon a vast, dark plain lurked in black bewilderment. There was no indication that mortal foot had ever travelled or explored except where the blue moon shone. Dalroi walked out into the darkness.

fifteen

The cepi field was of earth, declining gently to a flat, glassy surface. Obviously the soil for the field had been imported and laid over whatever composed the basic plane of the continuum. The idea of a dimensionless plain intrigued Dalroi. It was another of those mathematical abstractions become reality. He knelt and tried the surface with his hand.

Not hot, not cold ; glassy and flawless as far as he could tell. As to its composition, he remembered Gormalu's paradox : ' Nothing inside, and the inverse of nothing outside it, or vice-versa according to your mathematical standpoint.'

The picture clarified. The mathematics of Failway projection had located on one side of the theoretical two-dimensional figure. On this surface Failway had set its pleasure installation walled against nobody knew what, and outside the wall they had established a field of cepi. Beyond that the plain stretched to . . . infinity ? Unchanged . . . limitless . . . empty ? The notion worried him.

How do you know a place is infinite until you've reached the edge and proved it not so? How do you know it is empty until something comes out of the darkness and proves that it is not? It is unnatural for men to live on the very edge of the unknown and not be eternally curious.

A sudden dip in the illumination behind him broke the chain of thought. The moon was growing paler and duller with the passing seconds. He returned to the edge of the field and studied the position. The pickers had left the field, and the humidifiers were starting their saturating micro-spray. Here was a change in the cycle. Now, if ever, was the time to make his move.

The half-plan forming in his mind crystallized to completeness. Centrally in the field stood four towers which, drawing together as they ascended, supported the incredible spire on which burned the ultraviolet moon. That the structure was two miles high awed Dalroi not a bit. He was more interested in the fact that the illumination was controllable.

Searching carefully he located the cable-run to the towers, and, near the edge of the field, he found the control cabin, a small blockhouse which straddled the cable channel. Dalroi approached it warily, finally throwing a clump of earth at the metal roof. Nothing happened, so he guessed the technician responsible for dimming the moon had already left.

The door was unlocked, so he entered and closed it behind him. The cabin was warm and vibrating with the surge of power even though the moon was only at quarter intensity. The controls were unfamiliar but a rapid analysis of their functions extracted a guiding principle. Much of the equipment concerned primary ignition, and this he ignored. He was not so much concerned with extinguishing the moon as with

taking it to such intensity that the radiation became intolerable to the cepi. The task could prove dangerous. A meter graduated in novemdecillions, function unspecified, made the hair rise on the back of his neck. One false move when juggling with such power could well roast him where he stood.

With taut hands, and his brow dripping with perspiration, he turned the energy up. Needles climbed scales and approached and passed red warning limits without incident. The hum of power sang through the cabin like the tune of a thousand bees.

The light increased not in linear proportions but exponentially, rising to swift brilliance and still increasing almost as fast as the eye could adapt. The artificial moon became a sun, spilling blue fire. Searing radiation cut into the land and into the dark foliage with merciless intensity. Dalroi drew the shields as far as he could whilst balancing the controls, the next best thing to a prayer hovering on his lips.

The colour-shift of the radiated light told him that the delicate balance of elements in the sun had been destroyed. The visible light shift was towards the red end of the spectrum, and the heat was rising fast as the energy entered the infra-red band.

If this was a simple drift of the radiation frequencies the whole energy output might well enter the E.H.F. radio band, with unpredictable consequences. If, however, the sun was spreading its emissions over a wider portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, part of the energy would excite radiations into the x-ray and gamma-radiation bands. The control cabin had a thin lead shield but this would be no protection against concentrated hard radiation, nor had he any means of knowing when he had received a fatal dosage.

It was a risk too grave to take. He punched the power off fast, hoping that it had achieved its purpose, and waited for the brilliance to subside. He had to time his movements carefully. As soon as the terrain outside was tenable the police squads would be coming out to get him. If he stayed too long he was set fair to be cut down by the local security force: if he moved too quickly he was chancing an unknown density of hard radiation with equally deadly results. Only . . . A glance at the heavily-blued monitoring window shattered his calculations with a new problem which made the others pale into insignificance. The radiation outside, far

from decreasing, had grown tenfold in its brilliance. The artificial sun was going nova.

He had heard of such things from the days when artificial luminaries had been sent into orbit about the earth to eliminate night. One such device, doubtless contaminated by cosmic debris, also went nova. A large continent called Africa changed its contours overnight ; but that was a long time ago and nobody had dared to try it since. Now the hectic plasma-furnace high above his head had started a similar reaction, consuming the very elements which strove to contain it, and continuing without need of the energy input which had brought it into life.

Dalroi hastily brought the shutter over the window. The door was already shut fast but the light outside was so intense that the mere scatter rebounding from the crevices between the door and the frame flooded the interior with a level of radiation which hurt his eyes. An examination of the walls and roof of the cabin showed him that the structure offered but meagre protection, being merely to shield the technicians whilst the sun was being first run up to criticality. No provision had been made for this sort of catastrophe ; indeed, it was doubtful if any sort of protection was possible.

He wondered idly how long the tower would last in the face of the heat which was still building rapidly. A rough calculation assured him that most of it would vaporize when the hyper-critical stage was reached. At about that time also the lead shielding of the cabin would be falling in silvery dribbles soon to be followed by the molten steel of the framework. The point was hypothetical. Dalroi figured he would be dead and dry long before the metals came to pouring point.

The temperature rose mercilessly. Already the walls were too hot to touch and the ventilators were admitting a smoke-laden fug which told of the fire ravaging the cepi on the field. Dalroi shut the ventilator tight. Though he badly needed the air-change he had to avoid the stupefying cepi fumes for as long as possible. Only as a last resort would he welcome its release from pain.

Dull thunder rocked the structure and knocked him on to the floor. A rising, continuous scream, like the voice of a thousand rocket jets, savaged his ears. Everything vibrated as though caught in the teeth of a mighty, rocking storm.

This is it ! thought Dalroi.

Something coming : a million banshees swooping down ; ten million express trains driving down a vertical shaft ; a hundred million intercontinental rockets converging on the same point at the same instant. Upheaval : fire spitting, earth shattering, winding, clawing, driving, universe-shaking cataclysm . . . the terrible removal from disorientation to something worse and back again with soul-twisting transition. Time lapse ! Time relapse ! Time collapse !

" Die ! " said the living fire.

" Hate ! " said Dalroi. " Hate ! "

Universe upended, gravity sideways, entropy turned inside-out.

CONCEPTION ! DECEPTION !

TRANSCRIPTION ! ABSTRACTION !

HATE ! HATE ! HATE !

Bruising shock ; boulder upon boulder ; shoulder twisted ; knee where backbone used to be. Flesh afire, forehead flaming, eyes incandescent.

He could smell his flesh scorching as he struggled to his feet only to find his shoes were burning. Suddenly the light was gone. A swift shift from yellow into red, and he was standing in a helpless darkness that snored like a giant. He fought the shutter from the window, ignoring the blistering heat of the metal. Dying radiation sauntered in.

The sun had disappeared. Before him, far across the wasted field was a young volcano whose slopes concealed the wanton pit which the sun had burned for itself in falling. Somewhere far below, the sun still lived and spewed gouts of red-hot porridge into the loud and dying air. The crisis was over. Only when he noticed the ruined instruments under his hand did Dalroi realize he had no right to be alive.

He moved. The door was buckled beyond repair but he crashed it savagely and the weakened metal buckled and broke. The terrain outside was a fantasy painted in red and black. The cepti was charred black ash, brittle charcoal trceries which fell constantly with minute rhyming tinkles on to the brick-faced soil. The only light was the blood-red radiance from the pit, deepening and dying even as he ran out into the darkness. It was a grotesque shadow-play, a macabre pictorial comment on a contemporary scene of destruction.

Ombudsmand Rhodes looked up as the girl entered. "Your name is Zdenka?"

The girl frowned at the hospital dress in which she had been attired. "What business is it of yours what my name is?"

"It's my job to ask questions about people in trouble. One of my assistants pulled you out of the river. You were so stiff with drugs he didn't know whether to call an ambulance or a hearse. That sounds like trouble to me. Have you anything you'd like to add to the story?"

"Go to hell!"

"Soon," said the Ombudsmand patiently, "but first I have a few questions. Your identity tablet lists you as working for Ivan Dalroi. I'd have thought a girl could get into enough trouble around town without associating with someone like him."

"Dalroi's all right," said Zdenka. "It's just that he goes out and looks for trouble before it comes round looking for him."

"He seems to have found enough this time," said Rhodes critically. "If we're going to get him out of it I need every scrap of information I can get."

"What happened to him?"

"He bulldozed a sizable piece out of the side of Failway Terminal by diverting an express into the unloading bay, and was last seen heading into Failway, purpose unknown."

"That's Dalroi!" Zdenka said. "He was all set to tear the place apart."

"One man?"

"Dalroi's not one man. He's a kilo of fissile uranium with a grudge against everybody who doesn't see life the way he sees it. Failway enticed his girl-friend away, and he means to make somebody sweat because of it."

"As an individual, he can only do so much damage before he falls."

"Then you don't know Dalroi. Dalroi's fights are a well-known local phenomena. When he gets in a tight corner he goes mad. I don't think he knows it himself, but nobody can touch him, and . . ."

"And?" asked Rhodes.

"I don't know," Zdenka said. "I've seen it but I don't believe it. Somehow he—jumps. One second he's being threatened with a gun and the next second he's holding it. You can't see him go. His reaction speed is fantastic."

"That agrees with my own information," said the Ombudsmand. "How much more do you know about what's going on?"

"Not much. Dalroi was working for the Cronstadt Committee, but he never takes anybody's word as gospel. He wanted to know more about the committee itself. I located an ex-journalist named Harry Dever and took him to the cabin at Passfields for an interview with Dalroi. Somebody attacked us at the cabin and Harry Dever was shot. I think they must have used a hypo-gun on me because the next thing I remember was awakening on the river bank with your assistant trying to persuade me back to life."

"And you remember nothing of what happened to you between the time you were at the cabin and when we found you?"

"Nothing, why?"

"You'd been treated with a very full measure of a somewhat exotic truth drug normally available only to police laboratories. Somebody very much wanted some information out of you and didn't much care if he killed you to obtain it. When he'd got what he wanted he dropped you in the river. You were lucky . . . The drugs slowed your metabolism else you'd have died from exposure even though you didn't drown. You were never intended to come out of the river alive. Have you any idea who did that to you?"

"I—I can't remember anything. It's all a blank."

"Very well," said Rhodes, "but try. There's an unseen war going on which could break out into the most bloody massacre of the century. What it's all about I can only guess, but Dalroi's in the middle of it somewhere and if he isn't dead already then it's only a matter of time. Failway against Dalroi is the sort of odds which makes my blood run cold, and I'm not even sure the situation is as simple as that. If you can remember anything at all which might help you've got to let me know."

"Just before Dever and I were attacked he started to talk about Gormalu."

"Anything else?"

"Dever said the Black Knights were looking for Dalroi—asking questions."

"Yes," said the Ombudsmand quietly. "I rather imagine they would be. There's a loose association between the

Cronstadt committee and the Black Knights, but they make strained and unhappy bedfellows. It will be interesting to see what happens to Democracy when the bonds of expediency break down. It will be even more interesting when they learn they've been fighting the wrong battle. Between them they have conspired to put Dalroi precisely where his opponents most wish him to be. In the name of Humanity I've got to help Dalroi in any way I can. That's why I still think you can help me."

"So help me, I've told you all I know."

"I don't think you have. You've omitted one person from the story—somebody who could be vital. I'm familiar with the tactics of Failway and of the Black Knights, and it was neither of their teams who attacked you at Passfields else I scarcely think you'd be alive to tell the tale. Neither of them have need to use rivers to dispose of unwanted bodies. I can only conclude therefore, that the attacker was a friend of Dalroi's—and that raises the question of what he wanted from you. Tell me, Zdenka, why did you kill Harry Dever—and who was it caught you in the act?"

Her outraged reaction was stillborn, nullified by the Ombudsmand's swift horror at something behind her at the door. He reached for the gun at his knee, but the plate glass of the door shattered and a gas shell cracked against the wooden desk-top before he could complete the action. As the vapour fanned out the paralysis was instantaneous. He stiffened and fell, his features locked in outraged amazement and his eyes fixed glassily on the black masks and cowls of the intruders.

s i x t e e n

Dalroi made back to the great wall whilst there was still enough light to give him bearings. He turned away from the door through which he had come and headed into the darkness. Shortly he ran down the earth ramp and on to the glassy basic strata. The light failed completely and only the occasional touch of his fingers on the concrete gave him his bearings.

He was careful. If he lost contact with the wall there was a reasonable certainty that he could wander forever on the black plain and never find anything but darkness and the black, flat floor. He was playing a hunch that somewhere on the perimeter of Failway Two there was another door, one at which

he would not be expected. Against him were the facts that there need not be another door, and even if there was he could easily miss it with his fingertips.

He remembered the infra-red goggles in his pocket and snapped them on. Very, very faintly the wall stood out in contrast to the glassy plain and enabled him to speed his progress. He stopped abruptly when he saw the light.

It was no ordinary light, but a form of dark-lamp with a pencil beam. Approaching cautiously he saw the chain of reflectors on rafts some fifty yards out, a typical beam-trap for those who walked in the darkness.

From this he knew both that there was a door close by and that he was probably expected. The goggles enabled him to pass the beam trap without springing the alarm, and the door was easily opened. He entered, half expecting a more malicious trap, but found none. Apparently, complete reliance was placed on the alarm, and this he had avoided.

He found himself in a tunnel built through the great outer wall of Failway Two. It was similar to the first through which he had passed to find the field of cepi. At the other end was a hall corresponding to the one where the giant generators had been, but this one was concerned with building. Prefabricated palaces and panoramas, constructed with amazing imagination and realism, stood awaiting the craftsmen's final touch. Everything from furniture down to the daintiest bowl was here assembled and matched for atmosphere and authenticity before being introduced into the pleasure world beyond. This was the property department of Failway Two.

The scale of the project was staggering. Fully a whole new town of oriental wonder being assembled in a way no Prince of Orient could possibly have imagined. At this moment the lights were low and nobody was about, as if there was a lull between working shifts. Dalroi moved swiftly between flights of marble steps and gilded minarets towards where he judged the pleasure-ground to be.

Another door, and he was back in the world of make-believe, a furtive figure slinking in the corner of bazaar and alley in the dim twilight of a mock-oriental evening. The shock of Gormalu's unofficial night seemed to have been forgotten by the throng in the plazas. The cafes, dancing rooms and temples of love, were doing good business. Outwardly everything was running as normal, but the tenseness in the Failway staff

betrayed the scent of manhunt. Dalroi realized he needed a disguise if he was to remain long undetected.

A lone figure in a deserted alley gave him an idea. He closed swiftly and struck once, dragging the limp figure into a doorway. Before he could begin the exchange of clothes there was a yell from somewhere overhead, some witness to the assault. Briefly a siren sounded an alarm and men came running. Dalroi cursed and decided to get out fast. He headed up the alley away from the running feet, skidded round a corner and scattered a row of bystanders, adding to the rising confusion.

He had turned into a main thoroughfare, and the pavements were crowded. He plunged through crowds of amazed pleasure seekers, scattering them like skittles by the sheer force of his powerful shoulders. At the next intersection he nearly fell into a trap. Security men had been alerted and waited with drawn guns. He saw them in time to dive into an open door and up a flight of stairs to a balcony. The balcony ran round to the back of the house and from there he leaped down through ornamental trellis entwined with creeper and decorated with lanterns, stumbled through a luminescent fishpond and was away over the walls like a breath of wind.

Only luck had saved him from the first screaming bullets, but it was stamina and desperation which enabled him to clear the closing mantrap. The walks were suddenly alive with running men. Whether or not they knew his identity, Failway was taking no chances. The bullets were intended to kill and no surrender was offered or made possible. Dalroi escaped the only way he knew; by running farther, faster and over obstacles more daunting than his pursuers dared assay. Soon he cleared the more thickly populated zone and broke into the quieter, more select and even more exotic areas which lay beyond.

In a silent street where the scents of luxury were so strong they held almost a life of their own, he paused to regain his breath and to analyse the situation. Time was running out on him. Shrill whistles told of the hunters not very far behind, gathering reinforcements with the passing minutes. By this time the whole area would be surrounded and the net would be closing remorselessly. Only a radical re-thinking of his tactics could save him.

A door opened nearby and a girl looked out along the pavement under the flowering trees. Dalroi caught his breath

and pressed back into a shadow, but as she turned, the lamp-light glowed on her face and tresses and the name burst involuntarily from his lips.

"Berina!" The irony of the situation made his mouth go dry. Because of this same girl was his life dedicated to the destruction of Failway.

"You!" She gave a gasp of surprise.

"Yes, me! Stonehead Dalroi the First."

"What are you doing here?"

"Trying to stay alive—in the face of much opposition."

The girl looked wildly up and down the street. Nobody was in sight. "Quickly, in here."

He hesitated and then followed her through the door into an atmosphere rich with warmth and fragrant with incense. The dwelling was decorated with oriental luxury, overwhelming with its charm and grace. Magnificent drapes, and screens of the finest handworked tracery contrasted brilliantly with couches and redwood furniture of such delicacy that it seemed the lightest usage would make them fly asunder. Here was a cool symphony of seductiveness, refined, poised, exquisitely timeless and unreal.

"Bitch!" said Dalroi, looking round. "I loved you once, with a different kind of love than you dispense here."

She looked at him with a certain puzzled wonderment. "It's been a long time. I hadn't thought you'd still remember me."

"Does the moon forget the sun?"

"That's rather a wonderful thing to say. Is it possible you loved that much?"

Dalroi scowled. "Love is a catalyst. The finest things and the worst a man discovers are already within him. Loving you was an indispensable hell. Such an experience is a window to a new world. Even afterwards the sense of longing continues to corrode the soul."

"My God! said Berina. "I never even guessed you had a soul."

"How could you, not having one of your own. That kind of pain has no physical analogue. Nothing is ever quite the same again."

"Stay with me."

"No," said Dalroi. "That's a mistake I've made before. It cost me a great deal to learn to live with myself again. I'd sooner face what lies out there."

She looked up, her mouth pouting with rare amusement. "I can make you stay if I wish."

"Not any more," said Dalroi. "Once I'd have fallen at your feet and wept at the opportunity. Now I can resist even the temptation—so much can a man lose of himself."

"Poor Ivan! Do I detect another pallid romance? What's her name? Has she the charms of a sweet seductress? Is she skilled in the finer arts of love?"

"You don't understand."

"Can she play your emotions like a harp, as I can; or give you the taste of rare sensations such as you never knew existed?"

"You don't understand!" Dalroi's anger flared. "My present mistress is a far more constant courtesan. Her name is Vengeance: vengeance against Failway, against the pressure, the bribery and the blackmail; vengeance against the rot that has got everything, against the system that took you from me."

"Stay with me," she said. "Don't you hear the whistles? The security men are coming. They're combing the streets."

"I'll take my chances. I'm getting out."

"You don't have to. They won't search here. I can see that they leave this house alone."

"What kind of promise is that?" asked Dalroi. "Those men out there are killers and they're out for blood—my blood."

"I have influence . . ."

"I'll bet you have! The influence of the cheese in the mousetrap. The oldest bait in the world."

She struggled to her feet in fury. "You never change, do you? No time is inappropriate for the vicious gibe or the stab to the heart."

"You've played me false before, remember? What makes you think I'd trust you now?"

She thrust herself between him and the door. "Don't be a fool!"

"Get out of my way!" said Dalroi.

"No, you must not go out there now." She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

There was a sudden crash as the door burst open, kicked violently from outside.

"An intriguing situation," said Peter Madden entering, gun in hand. "I rather thought I'd find you here."

to be concluded

guest editorial continued

John Carnell, who, with Isaac Asimov and Fred Pohl, form my Virgil into the charming "inferno" of science fiction).

This theriomorphical stage, in science fiction and mythology, is marked by a curious parallelism. Egyptian gods had animal heads and human bodies (and therefore, one might suggest, human hearts also). In spite of their looks, they were often friendly and benevolent entities: Anubis, jackal-headed, helped the dead in reaching Amenti, the western Kingdom of Beyond; Bast, the cat-goddess, lovingly protected a town, Bubastis, while the crocodile-god, Pterosukhos, did the same with Crocodilopolis; the hawk-headed Horus was the official protector of a royal dynasty, and also Seth (who possibly had an okapi's head and only in later times was thought to be a kind of evil spirit) was himself an official protector of a famous Pharaoh.

Other examples may be found in Hindu mythologies, where the elephant-god, Ganessa, is, for definition, the most benevolent and kind, and the monkey-god, Hanumat, is the loyal friend of Vishnu (or more exactly, of his *avatar*, Rama) in the war against Ravana. In Assyrian-Babylonian mythologies, where the "lamussa" (winged bull-men) and the "kerubu" (probably the forefathers of Biblical cherubin, but undoubtedly less attractive in their looks) were appointed to protect and to help human beings; in pre-Columbian America's mythologies, where the same father of civilisation was the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl.

In the same way, the alien beings of theriomorphical science fiction—the ones created by Simak in almost every story or novel of his, by Pohl ("Gentle Unpeople") by Presslie ("Another Word for Man") by White in his whole works, by Asimov ("Hostess")—are no longer monsters, independently from their physical look, which might be strange and even disgusting to human eyes: they are simply "different" to men, but they have a common substratum represented by what Simak calls, in his "Here Gather the Stars," "cosmic humanity." That is, a common basis of ethical and philosophical reasoning which is thought to be necessarily shared by all the hypothetical reasoning races of the Universe.

Very often, we must say, those alien beings are not only friendly and benevolent towards men, like ancient therio-

morphical gods, but they may give earthly humans real lectures about morals and philosophy. This is a fundamental concept, accepted by authors of different political and religious creeds, from Soviet author Yefremov, who sees the problem in a most rationalistic way, to Simak, who interprets this ideology in a pantheistic rather than Christian way, to Presslie, who emphasises, instead, just its Christian value.

In its most recently developed stage, the sociological one, we find that science fiction easily compares with the development of the ancient Greek religion, which started from an early and almost forgotten theriomorphical stage itself: the *Potnia theron*, for instance (and this theriomorphical stage left behind a typical trail, each Greek god or goddess had his or her sacred animal—a memory of their earlier look—and often gods and goddesses temporarily took an animal shape for their more or less praiseworthy purposes).

Starting from that theriomorphical stage, Greek religion developed into the most anthropomorphical among polytheistic religions, which, through its rationalisation, brought to full bloom the splendid Greek culture and philosophy. We must not forget, either, that even in older religions, several of the wisest and most “human” gods were taking human features; among Egyptian gods, Osiris, Isis and Nepthis (or, to give them their real names and not those of the Greek transcription Wennofre, Aset and Nebto) who were originally symbols of piety towards the dead; the wise and learned Ptah, and the goddess of Truth, Ma’at, for instance.

Similarly, sociological science fiction is a complete triumph of anthropomorphism. Man becomes, in the same way, the real centre of interest, with his problems and ideologies. Anthropomorphism establishes its foundations through Asimov’s and Clarke’s works initially, then through the writings of Sziard, Sheckley, Tenn and chiefly in Pohl’s novels and stories as well as in the most recent developments by British writers. In this latter class, I also include, despite his American origin, one of the foremost and most European sciencefictioneers (ideologically) of our times, Harry Harrison.

Several minor parallels may still be found between science fiction and ancient mythologies, the lesser ones being none the less interesting. It is sufficient, for instance, to mention that

Sword-God, whose name is unknown, in the Little Gallery of Hatty-Boghazkoy (the modern name of one of the most important cities of ancient Asiatic culture) a very rare but meaningful example of oplolatriy (weapons cult) that has, undoubtedly, an unexpected development in the more or less negative cult devoted to nuclear weapons in science fiction today.

Even in robots we may find forefathers in mythology—not forgetting, of course, that robotic problems are now solved in accordance with technological and ethical principles which cannot be connected with myth. However, it is interesting to find that, while we do not find examples of self-moving machines in the teratomorphical and theriomorphical religions, neither do we find them in the early stages of science fiction, except in those obsolete robots which have today been outlawed from the better s-f narrative.

Some self-moving machinery may be found in the literature of the Greek anthropomorphical mythology, however. In his *A Century of Science Fiction*, Damon Knight mentions the giant Talos, who had a bronze body and who, in reality, belonged chiefly to the Cretan myths (and therefore probably had a Pelaggic origin rather than a Greek one). I would like to mention a better example, however—those self-moving machines which, in Homer's poems, had been built by Ephaistos (Vulcan) and faithfully served Zeus (Jupiter) and other gods in Olympus ; they, because of their typical faithfulness and obedience (although Homer does not waste his time in explaining their mechanisms or actions) might well be considered, for instance, as the only worthy forefathers which classical literature offers to our modern robots, ruled by Asimov's Three Laws.

Starting from a deeper study on relationships between science fiction and mythology, we might extend our investigation to an even more fascinating field—the relationship between science fiction and religion. Several excellent examples exist. From Anthony Boucher, who puts science fiction at the service of his Catholic faith, to James Blish and Walter Miller, Jr., who both seem to avail themselves of religious subjects to plot a suggestive new way for developing s-f. From the already-mentioned "Another Word for Man," by Presslie—which is a courageous attempt at extending the boundaries of religion to a new cosmic

book reviews

by leslie flood

british—hardcover

Anything else Walter M. Miller, Jr., writes must suffer comparison with his *Canticle for Leibowitz*, but the three novellas in **Conditionally Human** (Gollancz, 15/-) can stand on their own. One of them—"The Darfsteller"—I remarked on its appearance in *The Hugo Winners* from another publisher (an unfortunate duplication this, which is becoming prevalent). The title story tentatively explores the effect on mankind of mutated animal pets which substitute in the affections of their owners for the children they are not allowed to have except under strict control, in a future world suffering from overpopulation. In "Dark Benediction," micro-organisms from meteorites loose a plague on the world; the victims—"dermies" suffer a particularly nasty skin change and new talent of hypersensitivity, unfortunately allied to peculiar desires to touch the uncontaminated. Aberrant behaviour very well observed.

On the same level of convincing and consistent development is James Gunn's **The Joymakers** (Gollancz, 15/-) describing in three stages, the rise and fall of universal hedonism. Brilliantly conceived and executed, this novel is a tour de force in a genuine extrapolation of a sociological and scientific trend.

Not before time Robert A. Heinlein's greatest of his "Future History" series **Methuselah's Children** is now reprinted in England (Gollancz, 15/-). This is the novel of the long-lived Howard Families, their flight from Earth and subsequent adventures on strange worlds. Superlative science fiction of the grand scale; Heinlein is so good at this sort of thing that the only possible criticism that comes to mind is of being almost too glib! Even in his so-called "juveniles" such as **Time For The Stars** (Gollancz, 12/6) he excels lesser writers, and this

agreeable story of identical twins capable of thought-transference over galactic distances, the one at home and the other off adventuring in space, is first class.

Isaac Asimov is a name to guarantee entertainment if nothing else, being normally a slick-treatment-of-bright-ideas-man, and in **Nine Tomorrows** (Dennis Dobson, 15/-) the nine stories are taken from various magazine appearances and consider such matters as instant specialist education by tape-impression direct to the brain—then who progressively improves the tapes? Crime detection by a character trait condition by extra-terrestrial environment. Or by a simple yet effective, if a trifle vulgar, normal reflex. The logical conclusion of world control by giant computer. And the omega of a literally universal computer. A time stasis which isolates a neanderthal boy in the present for scientific study. A captured specimen of mankind who saves the world against the aliens. And so on. Good stuff.

The one original novel of the month is **The Fifth Planet** by Fred & Geoffrey Hoyle (Heinemann, 16/-) unfortunately a heavy-handed attempt to achieve topicality and neo-realism with a creaking plot about rival Russian and American rocket expeditions to a planet of a rogue star which threatens our solar system. The first half is dulled by pedestrian style and phoney sex, but the story gets completely out of hand later with alien possession and preternatural powers getting the better of bureaucracy. I struggled after the carrot to the bitter end but no definite conclusion was reached, which indicates, I am afraid, a possible sequel.

Michael Moorcock's stories of Elric, mythical hero-adventurer, apparently filled for many readers of *Science Fantasy* an aching void caused by the lapse of similar material by the late Robert E. Howard (to whose Conan stories a great debt is surely owed for the conception of Elric) and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Mr. Moorcock adds an individual touch by deepening the purpleness of his prose and double-dyeing his mighty warrior with a dabbling of sorcery and insatiable blood-lust. All his five adventures are now collected in **The Stealer of Souls** (Neville Spearman, 15/-).

leslie flood

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