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EDITOR: JOHN CARNELL

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This is the last in our series of Guest Editorials and it is perhaps fitting that it should be written by a practising psychotherapist, who only discovered s-f 5 years ago—he bought a second-hand car and found that the previous owner had left a pile of s-f magazines in the boot! From there on he was hooked . . .

possible worlds of
the mind
by l. h. barnes

One test of the validity of any art-form is the variety of response it evokes in its audience. Science fiction certainly passes, in contra-distinction to, say, the Western whose basic, and almost total appeal is to the pioneering instinct suppressed by modern society. In s-f too, of course, there is a common factor of simple pleasure—escapism, at its lowest assessment—but its dimensions extend beyond this. One man may read it out of an interest in the continuity of myth, another for the insight it gives into the possible extensions of technology. I, as a psychiatrist, find that it stimulates my thinking on the relation of man to society.

Indeed, s-f itself may have a positive place in that relationship. W. M. S. Russell and his wife, in their encyclopaedic book *Human Behaviour*, consider that it could function as a meeting ground for science and art. The scientist is concerned with validation, the artist with accuracy of observation and the liberation from repression of what is normally suppressed—as is the psychoanalyst. The Russells observe that Samuel
Butler knew more about "behavioural inheritance" than did Freud, and Shakespeare more about the complexities of human relationships than any psychologist. *Erewhon* and *The Tempest* are, of course, works of science fiction.

The shortcomings and ant-like aspects of both art and science are due, it is suggested, to dissociation, deception (a failure of communication) and various forms of rigidity and over-speculation. The right hand of human culture often is unaware of what the left hand is doing. A technically competent machine may turn out ugly, badly designed products. Science tends to make life a nightmare instead of a greater fulfilment—hence such dramatic nightmares as the Triffids.

Amid such a jungle of conflicting ideas and motives, certain spurious anti-social growths flourish. One is the advertising entertainment industry, dedicated solely to creating artificial needs and the products to satisfy them. It owes its existence to mass-production and the repetition job. A spirit of enquiry or exploratory restlessness at the factory bench can only lead to a falling off of production, so that individual initiative is habitually suppressed. This leads to a feeling of tedium, boredom. Books come to be read, films and TV to be watched, not to enrich appreciation of life or to inform our actions, but to take the place of living. That notorious dictum of 19th-century decadence: "Living? We leave that to our servants" might well be up-dated to: "Living? We leave that to our machines."

But more than one s-f writer (notably Matheson in his *The Waker Sleeps*) has been alert to this tendency, and to others whose effect could be cumulatively inhibiting. On the other hand—and this is another of its virtues—in s-f one finds an awareness of the opportunities of the current situation, as well as its dangers. Even politicians, in a world whose potential for destruction has rapidly escalated through local war to total war to total annihilation, have had to re-think—in an "agonising re-appraisal" of basic concepts. If modern techniques tend to automatise the individual, at the same time they provide leisure, and a build-up of data, for us to give more rein to the intellect in its explorative functions.

I have seen surveys of s-f readership according to occupations and income levels, but a geographical survey would probably

*continued on page 125*
James White's latest novel in serial form is considerably different in general construction to his already famous "Sector General" stories. This time he takes a planetful of human POW's—technicians, admin personnel and even high-ranking officers—and sets up the Great Escape against impossible odds.

open prison
by james white

part one of three parts

one

When Warren had been extricated along with the other survivors of the erroneously named Victorious and made a prisoner of war he had thought that he knew what to expect, his expectations being based on the knowledge of how enemy POWs were handled by his own side.

With the other officers he had been moved to an enemy heavy cruiser and confined in one of its storage compartments, into which had been pumped what the enemy thought was an Earth-like atmosphere and where there was introduced at regular intervals substances which were the enemy's idea of what human beings ate. The air had had to be breathed but the food could only be eaten after the processes of starvation were well advanced. Then had come the expected series of transfers between supply ships returning from the the battle area until eventually they found themselves being herded aboard a vessel of tremendous size which was in orbit around a planet. Within a few hours they were moved again, this time to a ship which was obviously a ferry, and now they were landing.
But on the final approach Warren was able to see that the planetary surface was green and heavily forested and that its night side showed no trace of artificial illumination—two facts which, considering the enemy’s marked preference for dry worlds and harsh, blue-white lighting, came as a surprise to him. He was still wondering about it when the ship landed in a clearing and they were directed to the airlock and down a ladder which had not been made for human feet, on to grass still smouldering from the effects of the tail-blast. Nobody followed them out of the ship and neither did they appear to be under any form of restraint, which surprised Warren even more.

But all he could think about at that moment was the sheer joy of breathing air that was clean and fresh and tainted only by the not unpleasant smell of burnt grass, so that these odd happenings did not worry him unduly. Then above him the ship emitted a low, humming sound. The ladder retracted suddenly and the outer seal of the lock began to swing closed.

“Run!” said somebody harshly.

Seconds later the ship took off with a sound like a continuous crack of doom and a blast of heat which, because their reactions were fast, was horribly uncomfortable instead of being instantly lethal, and even though the dwindling thunder from above told them they were safe, they didn’t stop running until they reached the trees.

Long before they had their breaths back they were all trying to talk, and some of the language was not lady-like even though it was one of the ladies present who was using it. Warren looked slowly around the tragically small group which had survived the destruction of one of the mightiest battleships ever built. At the twenty-six officers in the green battledress uniforms devoid of all insignia or decorations, whose anonymity had been a ruse originally intended to confuse the enemy as to the relative importance of prisoners but which was now simply a matter of tradition. Just as it was traditional for the female half of a ship marriage to retain her own name so as to avoid the confusion of having two officers with the same name aboard ship.

There were no conventions to guide them in their present situation, Warren thought, as he listened to them vocalising some of the thoughts which were going through his own mind at that moment. He did not say anything himself because
there was nothing constructive he could say, and he could not have got a word in edgewise anyway.

"Why the stinking, lousy Bugs . .!"

"This isn’t a POW camp! They’ve marooned us here, without food or . . . or anything . . .!"

"They tried to kill us with their tail-flare . . .!"

"I’m not so sure about that,” a quieter voice said amid the uproar. “The Bugs have never been deliberately cruel. There has to be a reason for all this . . . ."

"The reason being,” another voice put in, “that after sixty years of war they’ve grown to dislike us?”

"Very funny. But I still say . . . ."

"Why they did it isn’t important at the moment,” a quiet, competent-sounding voice immediately identifiable as belonging to Major Fielding joined in. “If we have been marooned, the first problem is to ensure our immediate survival . . . ."

Ruth Fielding was a small, dark-haired girl who had been the medical officer and psychologist aboard Victorious. She was the type who could fly into a tizzy at some trifling upset and yet remain completely and utterly calm when everything and everybody around her was going to Hell on horseback. Warren had never been able to make up his mind whether this odd but very valuable aspect of her character was due to courage or sheer contrariness.

". . . We must build shelters,” she continued quietly, "and arrange protection against the weather and possibly dangerous animals. We must find water, search for edible plants and animals, fashion weapons . . . ."

While she was speaking, everyone began looking at the surrounding greenery, at the tight, almost spherical clumps of bushes whose shadows might conceal anything and at the tall, proud trees with their yellow-veined bark and leaves like big green seashells. From some of the branches, brown, hairy fruit hung, or possibly they were parasitic growths or nocturnal creatures asleep for the day. The insects were too small to be seen, but as the thunder of the departing ship died away they could be heard droning to themselves.

When they had finished looking around them the crew began glancing furtively at Warren, plainly wondering if his vast fund of tactical experience equipped him to handle this sort of problem. Because they were all intelligent and highly-trained people who would not be thrown into a panic by the immediate
problems of survival which Fielding was mentioning, many of them would already be considering the longer-range, Warren knew, already thinking in terms of the second and third generation while she was still making her final point.

"... Because our observations on the way down," she concluded in a voice which seemed loud only because everybody else was holding their breath, "makes it pretty certain that we have this planet all to ourselves."

Nobody spoke for a long time. No slightest breath of wind stirred the alien leaves and even the insects seemed to join momentarily in making the silence complete. Then the stillness was shattered by the sudden rattle of drums from the forest around them, the measured though erratic beat making it plain that intelligence of some kind was being transmitted. To the drum-beats was added the sound of whistles blowing and distant shouts, and an unmistakably human figure was running through the trees towards them.

"Oh, well," said Fielding in a highly embarrassed voice, "maybe we don't have the planet all to ourselves..."

The running figure slowed as it approached, from a sprint to something which was not so much a fast walk as a ceremonial quick march. After one quick glance around the group he marched unhesitatingly towards Warren and came to a halt before him. There he tore off one of the tightest, smartest salutes that Warren had ever seen.

"I am Lieutenant Kelso," he said crisply. "Are you the senior officer of this party, sir?"

Before replying, Warren looked the lieutenant slowly up and down. He noted the details of the kilt which the other wore, the calf-length boots and the sundry other items of harness all of which must have been worked by hand out of animal hides. He noted also the colour contrast between the leather of the kilt and boots and that of the pouches and harness, realising as he did so that he was not seeing just a collection of animal skins tacked together for protection or utility but a uniform, with all that a uniform implied.

Kelso himself was tall and thin, topping Warren's five-eleven by at least three inches, but well-muscled. He looked to be in his early thirties and his face and chin were raw as if from constant shaving with a very blunt instrument. His hair, which looked as if it had been cut with a knife, was short and plastered
flat against his scalp with something which smelled to high heaven.

Punctiliously, but without the bone-wrenching precision which had gone into the one he had just received, Warren returned the other’s salute and said, “That is correct, Lieutenant.”

Kelso nodded, then said quickly, “I have to escort your group to the nearest committee post as fast as possible, sir. I know that you’ll have questions to ask, hundreds of them probably, and my job is to answer them. But first we have to get moving . . .”

“What the blazes is this place?” somebody behind Kelso burst out harshly. “We expected a POW dome, with Bug guards and . . . and . . .”

“What about those drums . . .?”

“Committee! What committee . . .?”

Warren cleared his throat irritably and all at once there was silence—except for the drums and distant shouting. He said, “Go on, Lieutenant.”

Looking suddenly impressed by Warren where before he had been merely respectful, Kelso resumed, “I will answer all your questions, sir, but first I must get you to the nearest committee post as quickly as possible. There are others out searching for you, too, and it is imperative that we avoid them—I’ll explain about that, as well. So if you don’t mind, sir, I’d like us to walk as we talk . . .”

The Lieutenant was still standing rigidly to attention, but he kept swaying forward on to the balls of his feet in his urgency to get moving. Warren decided to have pity on him before he fell flat on his face.

“I have yet to meet a Lieutenant who did not know all the answers,” he said drily. “Very well, Kelso. Lead on.”

With the Lieutenant at his side and the other survivors from Victorious crowding their heels in an attempt to stay within earshot they moved off. The pace Kelso set was a fast walk, but each time a drum started on a new message or there was a fresh burst of shouting in the forest he increased it. When a few minutes had gone by without him saying anything, Major Fielding decided that she couldn’t wait.

“Why are there others searching for us, Lieutenant?” she said breathlessly. “Who are they and why must we avoid them . . .?”
Kelso looked quickly towards her, then looked again. The regulation battledress uniform, tight-fitting and designed so that with the addition of a fish-bowl it became a short duration spacesuit, did nothing for an ageing officer like Warren with his thickening waist-line and tendency towards bow legs while for officers like Ruth Fielding it did quite a lot. When he replied Kelso was smiling and he spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"To answer that we must first fill in some necessary background details," he began. "As you know, for the past sixty-odd years the Bugs and ourselves have been fighting the first interstellar war, and one of the biggest problems on our side was looking after the prisoners of war . . ."

Two

Almost a century earlier, at a time when the culture of Earth had spread to fifty inhabited systems and her colonisation programme was still expanding, mankind had made contact with another intelligent race. The name this race had for itself was a short, clicking sound which could be reproduced only by a few of Earth's top linguists, the difficulties of communication being extreme on both sides. But even so it quickly became evident that the only thing which the aliens had in common with the human race was intelligence.

To the ordinary beings of both species their physical aspect was mutually loathsome, their thought processes mutually incomprehensible and perhaps the correct course would have been to mutually ignore each other's existence. But there were also some extraordinary beings on both sides—beings possessed of high intelligence and an overpowering scientific curiosity who were excited by the possibility of exchanging ideas with another race despite all the difficulties of communication. Beings, in short, who were objective enough to see past an alien and utterly repulsive exterior to the mind within. They could not understand the more subtle workings of each other's minds as yet, but they wanted desperately to go on trying. So instead of being broken off, contact between the two cultures began gradually to widen.

But there were a vast number of people on Earth and on its colony worlds who were not top-flight linguists, nor possessed
of the driving scientific curiosity coupled with the fine objectivity of the men who wanted contact—even though these people were themselves kindly and intelligent and as civilised as the next man. It was just that when they saw something which was soft and pallid and crawled wetly on six legs they wanted to stamp on it, and sometimes did before they could stop themselves. The reaction was instinctive, something they couldn’t help, and the fact that the thing they wanted to stamp on was nearly as big as themselves only made their reaction that much more violent.

The number of violent incidents grew until, some thirty years after first contact had been made, they reached the proportions of an open war. The people on both sides who had been pleading for greater objectivity when dealing with the aliens were powerless to stop it, but they did retain some influence. Before diplomatic relations were severed completely, they reached agreement on certain rules of conduct for the coming war.

It was not to be a total war. Both sides hoped that it would not go on forever so there was to be no unnecessary slaughter of combatants who were no longer able to defend themselves, or cruelty towards such beings when they were taken prisoner.

In the first two decades of the war the number of major engagements fought increased steadily to a point which would have been considered utterly impossible at the beginning of hostilities, because each side was evenly matched technologically and neither had been capable of realising the tremendous war potential inherent in a confederation of fifty inhabited systems. Because it was not a war of senseless heroics—the space personnel were much too stable and intelligent for their heroism to be anything other than the cool, calculated sort—there were prisoners taken. During the first five years of the war the number of Bug prisoners taken passed the million mark, and the flood of enemy POWs kept pace with the accelerating tempo of the war, and, plus or minus a few hundred thousand, the Bugs took as many as they lost.

One of the chief reasons for the POW agreement in the first place was the fact that space personnel were extremely valuable people. They represented the cream of the younger technical and scientific brains of their respective cultures and they were people which neither side wanted to lose. But the war showed no indication of ending and the few attempts at arranging an
exchange of prisoners failed because of already difficult communications problems rendered insuperable by the mounting tensions of war. So the number of prisoners held by each side grew. And grew.

Millions of men and vast quantities of war material were tied up merely in providing for Bug prisoners. The facilities for taking care of them—their food and air required special processing and their housing had to be seen to be believed—became increasingly strained. It quickly reached the point where the whole war effort was being affected by this hampering burden of prisoners, and seemingly there was no solution to the problem . . .

“. . . But twenty-three years ago the Bugs found the solution,” Kelso went on quickly. “It is a nice, economical and very humane solution. Looked at objectively its only drawback is that we didn’t think of it ourselves . . .”

Above the sound of the Lieutenant’s voice and the considerable noise made by his listeners as they blundered through the undergrowth in his wake, Warren could hear the whistles and drums of the other searchers growing louder by the minute. He felt angry and afraid and very short of breath, and he wished fervently that Kelso would get to the point of at least letting him know what it was that he was afraid of. But seemingly the Lieutenant intended telling everything in his own way and in proper sequence, and any interjections would serve only to delay the process.

“. . . What they did was to pick one of the worlds in their own sector which was suitable for human colonisation,” the Lieutenant rushed on “then they dumped fifty thousand or so prisoners on to it with enough supplies, shelters and simple agricultural machinery to enable them to continue as a self-sustaining colony. Other prisoners arrive from time to time, but for the past ten years these new arrivals have not been accompanied by tools or supplies—they don’t want us to have any more metal than the bare minimum already supplied by them to begin with, you see. And just in case we did succeed in throwing together a spaceship out of our surplus ploughshares, they have a guardship in orbit to keep an eye on things . . .”

The explanation of the Bug POW system would, in ordinary circumstances, have caused great surprise and excited dis-
cussion, but the other was pushing the pace so hard that all Warren and the others had breath for was a few incredulous grunts. Even Kelso’s breathing was becoming laboured now, but he still continued doggedly with his history lesson.

In words which were becoming more and more emotionally loaded, the Lieutenant described the situation as it had been shortly after the first prisoners had landed. Briefly he detailed the influences and personalities which had brought about the original disagreement among the prison population—a split which had continued to widen so that, when Kelso arrived six years ago, the differences on each side were so strongly held and basic that there was little hope of ever uniting them again.

It was generally agreed that a planet-sized POW camp was an ingenious idea and caused the minimum of physical distress to its prisoners. What they could not agree on, and from this disagreement all the later difficulties had stemmed, was that the prison was escape-proof . . .

“. . . Because there are no domes or guards always in sight, a lot of these people forget that they are in a prison camp!” Kelso went on hotly. “Not only have they stopped thinking of themselves as prisoners of war, they’ve forgotten that they are officers and even, judging by the way they act, that there is a war on! They’ve gone civilian. But on the Committee side, however, we have not forgotten that we are prisoners. Or that it is the sworn duty of any officer taken prisoner in time of war to do everything possible to rejoin his unit . . .”

It was at that point that Warren threw his hands out from his sides, palms backwards in a visual order to halt which he did not have the breath to vocalise. The party came to an untidy halt around him. Kelso, whose impetus had carried him several yards ahead, pulled up hurriedly and came trotting back to them. He looked worried and impatient as he waited for Warren to speak.

“These . . . these Civilians you talk about,” he got out finally. “Are they dangerous? Will they eat us, or something? From what you’ve told me . . . they’re just . . .” He broke off to suck in a lungful of air, then demanded harshly, “Why the blazes are we running . . . !”

Kelso did not answer at once. They had reached the base of a long, thinly-wooded slope on whose crest Warren could vaguely make out a high stockade. This would be the Com-
mittee post which the Lieutenant had mentioned several times. The civilian searchers were all around them, with the nearest group sounding so close that if it hadn’t been for the screen of trees they would probably have been in plain sight.

"I . . . I can explain all this much better at the post, sir," Kelso began.

"Now, Lieutenant," said Warren.

"Well, sir," Kelso said helplessly, "they won’t harm you physically. What they intend is analogous to brain-washing. But what makes it so horribly effective is the fact that most of them don’t consider what they’re doing to be a form of coercion—they think they are simply being hospitable . . ."

Somewhere on their right there was a shout followed by a long blast on a whistle. Immediately all the other whistling and shouting died away so that Warren could hear the swish and crackle of feet running towards them. Kelso swore but did not look round.

Trying desperately to hold Warren’s attention he rushed on, "They begin by welcoming you to the camp, although they’ve stopped thinking of it as that. Then they over-feed you on their home cooking, which is particularly effective considering how long you’ve had to exist on Bug synthesised food. And because it would be too much of a strain on any one farm to take care of all of you, you will find yourselves scattered all over the place. You will lose touch with each other and have no way of knowing for sure what each other is doing or thinking. They won’t ask you to work at first, but you’ll feel obligated for all the hospitality shown you and you will insist on helping out. And they’ll keep talking at you all the time.

"As you know, sir," Kelso went on hurriedly, his voice rising in volume as the sound of running feet approached, "most highly trained and intelligent people find pleasures in performing menial, non-cerebral jobs. But very soon these pleasant, manual tasks become a way of life. You grow mentally lax and begin to think slow, farmers’ thoughts. Soon it would be hard to remember that there is a war going on and that you are an officer with certain obligations and duties to perform . . ."

Three Civilians arrived at that point. They were large, bearded men clad in the same type of animal skins as those which covered the Lieutenant, except that they favoured long,
shapeless trousers and an open-at-the-front vest-like garment instead of a kilt. Two of them carried spear-like weapons, the shafts of which were upwards of eight feet long and terminated in a cutting blade whose condition suggested that they might be some kind of farming implement, although the men were not holding them like farming implements. In addition one of them carried a hide-covered drum slung across his back. All three of them looked surprised and angry at the sight of Kelso, and it was the one with the grey beard and the angriest expression who spoke.

"So you found them first, Lieutenant..."

"Yes, sir," Kelso broke in quickly. He was holding the older man's eyes and ignoring the long, dirty but very sharp blades pointed at his midriff, although the tension in the muscles of his neck and shoulders showed the effort it cost him. But his voice was steady as he went on, "Since I have found them before you did, sir, you will kindly not hinder me or attempt to talk to them while I escort them to the Post."

"You found them by sheer luck," the other said furiously, "and a single, unarmed man isn't capable of protecting maybe thirty people against battlers or anything else! In such circumstance the rule of first contact is ridiculous! I'm ordering you back to the Post, Lieutenant, and you can tell them there that..."

While the argument had been going on the three Civilians were joined by six others, three groups of two all of whom were armed with the long spears. When they had been some distance off they had waved and smiled at the new arrivals, but when they saw Kelso their expressions changed. As they crowded around the Lieutenant some of them looked really murderous.

"You're being unfair, sir!" Kelso protested. "The rule is that the officer who first finds—"

"Silence!" the other man shouted, then in a tone only slightly more quiet he went on, "Rule or no rule, Kelso, I won't allow you to walk off with nearly thirty new arrivals! To make them into trouble-makers and unsettle them so that it'll take months or years before we can make them think straight again..."

He broke off suddenly to gape at the five men who seemed to have grown out of the grass at their feet. Warren had not seen or heard the men approach and obviously neither had
anyone else. They wore the same kilt and harness as did the Lieutenant and they carried weapons resembling cross-bows which they held at the ready. After the first startled look around, Warren’s attention was practically dragged back to one of them, a short, heavily-muscled man who at some time had been terribly burned about the head, shoulders and left arm. The injuries must have had deep psychological effects because the eyes which glared out of that terribly disfigured face were more frightening than the face itself. This man held his cross-bow much readier than any of the others.

The five new arrivals did not speak. Apparently they had heard enough of the argument to understand the situation.

Until the arrival of the Civilians, Warren had thought that he, too, had understood what was going on. One side was Civilian, comprising officers who accepted their position as hopeless and who were determined to make the best of it. The other side was Committee, obviously taking its name from the escape committee which every POW camp contained, whose members had not given up hope of escape. It was natural to assume that there would be a certain amount of bad feeling between them. The Committee would feel jealous and angry about their happily vegetating colleagues and the so-called Civilians would also be angry because their collective conscience was being continually pricked by the presence and activities of the Committee.

But this was more than simple bad feeling. Kelso and the grey-haired Civilian were glaring at each other, plainly on the point of going to war on each other with their bare hands. The eight Civilians armed with spears were spread out facing the five Committeemen, whose weapons were now cocked and aimed. The situation had deteriorated suddenly to the point where a shooting war was likely to break out at any second, and Warren, all too conscious of his position in the undefended centre of things, could not think of a single thing to do or say which might stop it.
“I think it’s nice to have grown men fighting over one,” Ruth Fielding said suddenly. “It boosts a girl’s morale no end.”

It was a completely stupid fatuous and selfish remark, the sort of remark which might be expected of a certain type of beautiful but dumb female. As well, her expression and tone while making it, only strengthened the impression that she was pretty, dumb and selfish, but the Committeemen and Civilians had no way of knowing what her rank and position had been aboard Victorious, although if they had been thinking straight they would have known that the selfish and stupid personalities were never chosen for space service, no matter how nicely they were wrapped. However, these people were not thinking straight, and Fielding had successfully injected a note of ridicule into an extremely grave situation.

Both Kelso and the grey-bearded Civilian turned to gape at her, and the Committeeman with the devastated face pulled back the two stiff masses of scar tissue which were his lips in a smile, although the look in his eyes still made Warren uneasy.

All at once Warren felt angry at himself. He had been mentally asleep on his feet and Fielding had created the diversion which might allow the argument to be resumed with words instead of physical violence, and his self-confidence—or was it his pride?—had taken a beating. The rest was now up to him. He still felt angry and ashamed, but only the anger showed in his voice.

“I seriously doubt, Major Fielding, that they were fighting over you alone,” Warren said harshly. “And it is not nice to have officers fighting among themselves, for any reason whatsoever.

“What I would like to know, gentlemen,” he continued bitingly, with a definite stress laid on the word “gentlemen,” “is why we are worth fighting over? Do we ourselves have a choice in this matter? Are we property of some kind, a potential slave-labour force perhaps . . . ?”

“Oh, no, sir . . . !” began Kelso.

“Certainly not!” the Civilian protested, practically shouting him down. “The very idea is ridiculous! You won’t be asked to work until you ask us to give you a job, believe me. Even then the work will be easier and much more useful, than the senseless jobs the Committee would give you . . . ”
He paused briefly to snap “Be quiet, Lieutenant!” at Kelso, who was trying vainly to break in, then went on, “For example, a few hours after you arrive in the post up there you will begin what is known as De-briefing. You will understand that everyone, here, Committeemen and so-called Civilians alike, are curious regarding the progress of the war or the latest news from home. You would expect them to suck you dry of all the news and gossip from our various home planets. But the de-briefing involves much more than this.

“For days on end and for anything up to six hours a day you will be questioned,” he continued grimly, “with the emphasis on the last few days before your arrival. The interrogation will be conducted under light hypnosis, if you’re lucky enough to be a hypnotic subject, and in any event will consist of the same line of questioning repeated over and over. Because the Committee wants to know everything it possibly can about the guardship, and that means everything you saw during trans-shipment and while on the shuttle coming down, together with everything you saw or heard or otherwise noted without knowing that you did so. Without the proper drugs, digging for these trace memories and peripheral images is a long and exhausting business, and what makes it even worse is that it is a complete waste of time . . . !”

“Sir!” Kelso broke in sharply before the other could go on. “I must insist that you say nothing further to these officers. I found them first and—”

“You found them, yes,” the Civilian snapped back at him, “but you couldn’t have protected them and so your claim to be escorting them is sheer—”

“I can protect them now, sir,” said Kelso in a dangerously quiet voice.

Warren saw the spears and cross-bows being raised again. Two powerful and mutually-opposed ideologies were struggling for his allegiance, it seemed, and he still did not know enough to mediate. All he could do was to attack one of them before they could attack each other.

“Why do you call him ‘sir,’ Lieutenant?” Warren asked sharply. “You’ve told me that he is a Civilian—someone who, if not actually a deserter, is at very least a person to whom you would not show respect. Yet you call him ‘sir’ and he appears to be giving you orders . . . !”
“Because he is Fleet Commander Peters,” Kelso replied, without taking his eyes off the other man. He sounded bitter as well as angry as he went on, “Because he is the senior officer on the camp. To prisoners like myself who are trying not to forget that we are officers, his rank and position must be respected even though he himself may no longer consider them important . . .”

So this large bearded man dressed in animal skins was a Fleet Commander! In the service an officer of that rank, holding as he did authority over the personnel and facilities necessary for the supply and maintenance of a fleet of anything up to one hundred interstellar ships, was a very potent individual indeed. In the ordinary way a Lieutenant regarded such august beings with much more than mere respect, and Kelso’s open contempt towards an officer so vastly his senior suddenly angered Warren. He had to remind himself that this particular Fleet Commander had ‘gone civilian’ while the Lieutenant had not, and that going civilian in Kelso’s book was a very shameful thing to do . . .

“I’ve had enough arguing!” Peters shouted again, his voice squeaking with sheer fury, “and more than enough, Lieutenant, of your respectful insubordination!” He swung abruptly to face Warren and, lowering his voice slightly, went on, “I don’t have to go down on my knees. As the senior officer on this planet I can order you to come with me . . . .”

“You can try,” Kelso broke in savagely. He turned and began raising his hand in some kind of signal to the waiting Committee bow-men . . .

“Hold it!”

The sheer volume of his voice made everyone jump and surprised even Warren himself. He must be angrier than he realised, he told himself, to have let go with such a blast of sound. He felt no less angry as he went on, “A few minutes ago I asked if we had any choice in this matter. I’m still waiting for the answer.”

There was a long, tense silence which was finally broken by the Fleet Commander.

“I don’t really want to pull rank in this, you understand,” Peters said in a voice which he was trying to make pleasant. “All I can do is explain the situation and trust your natural intelligence to guide you correctly. The choice, however, is yours.”
"The rule..." began Kelso, then shook his head angrily and ended, "You have a choice, sir, of course."

"Thank you," said Warren.

Considering the available information as objectively as possible, Warren thought that there was little to choose between either faction. Kelso had made a strong first impression and his outline of the situation had seemed fair and balanced. On the other hand Peters' contention that the place was escape-proof and that the prisoners should accept the fact was also, on the surface, eminently sane and logical. All the evidence was not yet in, however, and until it was he was reduced to basing his choice on the effect the two people had had on him.

Where Kelso had been concerned the effect had been good. In a service where practically every operation consisted of several minutes action sandwiched between months of boredom a very special type of person was required to stand the strain. Warren had spent most of his early life in the service with people of that kind—intelligent, stable, yet enthusiastic people who never seemed to give up. A man who remained clean-shaven when to do so entailed a considerable amount of trouble and, to judge from the many raw patches on his face, pain, might very well be one of those people.

The Fleet Commander, so far as Warren could see, was one of the people who had given up. There were far too many officers like him in the service since the continuing war had forced down the entrance standards. He felt sorry for Peters and a little ashamed of himself for not according the other man the respect due his rank—although he had been so busy trying to keep the two factions from killing each other off that there had been no time for the niceties. He was sorry, also, because the Fleet Commander, who obviously had been having things all his own way on the planet for a very long time, was in for an unpleasant shock.

"I'll go with the Lieutenant," said Warren.

The Fleet Commander's teeth came together with an audible click. "Very well," he said stiffly. He turned to face the rest of Warren's group and his voice was almost pleading as he went on, "You officers also have a choice. I trust that some of you will see the sensible course—"

"My officers will do as they're told," Warren broke in quietly. By way of softening the blow he added, "Until such
time as we have complete information on both sides of this question and are capable of making a final choice we will stay together and, for the present, go with the Lieutenant."

Warren could not see the Fleet Commander's expression as Peters wheeled and strode away, snapping orders at his men to disperse as he went. Within seconds Kelso was asking the Committeemen if they would mind taking up escort position around the new arrivals, and Warren realised suddenly that every single member of the escort outranked the Lieutenant although they obeyed his polite requests at the double. Then, as they were once again moving up the slope towards the post, with Kelso fighting hard to keep his grin of triumph within dignified limits, Peters came striding back.

"I'm anxious to hear the latest war news, Lieutenant," the Commander said in a carefully neutral voice. "I take it you've no objections to me listening to what they have to say for a while . . .?"

There could be no objection to what on the surface was a completely reasonable request, and Warren began to consider the possibility that he had been a trifle hasty in his estimate of Peters' character—on the present showing the Fleet Commander did not appear to be a man who gave up easily . . .

All the way to the post however, Peters walked at Warren's side without speaking. Several times he looked as if he was about to say something, and on the other side Kelso edged closer so as to be ready to counter it, but he never progressed farther than clearing his throat. Warren took advantage of the silence to examine the layout of the post.

The stockade which surrounded the post was roughly twenty feet high, composed of logs which had been either buried or driven deeply into the ground, and was supported at each corner by four massive trees. The trees had had their lower branches lopped off up to the level of the top of the stockade, and above this the larger branches supported what seemed to be defence or observation platforms linked by a system of catwalks and ladders to the platform which ran along the inside of the stockade.

Because the position of its corner posts was governed by nature rather than human design, the plan-view of the structure was not quite square and its walls, which had a tendency to curve outwards towards the support of smaller intervening trees, were anything but straight. Entrance was by way of
a section of log wall, which dropped open like a draw-bridge and was hauled into position again as they passed through.

Inside the stockade extensive use had again been made of naturally growing trees, which formed the main supports of several large structures and many smaller huts had been built under them, some with extensions into the upper branches. Only the lower branches had been stripped from any of the trees which Warren could see, so that the whole of the stockade's interior was in shadow. He was beginning to realise that the Post was a larger and more complex place than he had at first thought, and that it would be practically impossible to spot it from the air.

Or space.

They were shown into a large, log building in which a long table with benches on each side of it occupied one wall while the three other walls were filled with shelves containing hundreds of what seemed to be loose-leaf files. He wondered briefly where all the paper had come from, and added that question to the others on his list. Despite the fact that the log walls and ceiling had been stripped of bark it was still too dim inside the place to make out details.

"When the sun rises a little higher you'll be able to see comfortably," Kelso explained as he saw Warren peering about. "The de-briefing can wait until after you've eaten. It's only breakfast, I'm afraid, but there's plenty and it will probably taste like Christmas dinner after the Bug food. But there are a few preliminaries which we can get out of the way while we're waiting . . ." He broke off suddenly as someone called to him from the other side of the room, then said hastily, "Excuse me, sir. Be right back."

The buzz of conversation in the room was growing into a muted roar as the Committee members extended themselves to make the new arrivals feel at home and answer the questions being shot at them from all sides. Warren did not realise that Peters was speaking to him until the Fleet Commander gripped his arm.

"... Wondering why a Fleet Commander was out looking for you," Peters was saying in a quiet, urgent voice, "and your siding with him was partly due to your feeling of sympathy for the underdog. But Lieutenant Kelso is not an underdog. He leads the Committee just as surely as I lead the so-called Civilians. Six years on the Inner Committee has given him
lots of practice in giving orders which sound like polite questions, and similar forms of verbal sleight-of-hand. He uses his superior officers and he’ll use you . . .”

Across the room Kelso had ended his conversation with a Committeeeman and was pushing his way back through the crowd towards Warren. Peters went on quickly, “The Committee is in bad shape. It has been steadily losing officers to me for years—its highest ranking officers, which should prove something if you’ll stop and think about it. Kelso desperately needs a big stick to wave at me. All he has is a few Flight-Colonels and a Flotilla-Leader long past retirement, and none of them has the rank or temperament to oppose me directly. I’ve eaten Colonels before breakfast and—”

Irritated suddenly, Warren said sharply, “When I’ve heard the Lieutenant’s version I’ll listen to yours. Without interruptions and for as long as you like. That’s a promise.”

The Fleet Commander seemed to droop, and Warren realised that, despite his powerful physique and hair that was more black than grey, Peters was close to retirement age. When he spoke his voice sounded hurt rather than angry as he said, “I expect a certain amount of impertinence and insubordination from Committeeemen, but new arrivals usually show me the respect due my rank . . .”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake! I didn’t mean to sound . . .
Yes, Lieutenant?”

“As I was saying sir,” said Kelso, rejoining them, “we would like to list the names, ranks and ships of origin of your people. Beginning with yourself, sir.”

“They all came from my ship,” began Warren, then stopped.
“Please go on, Captain,” said Kelso. It was plain that he had already calculated the size of Warren’s ship, based on the number of survivors added to the much higher figure of those who had not survived, and the result had impressed him. Doubtless he had already calculated the rank of such a ship’s commanding officer.

“I wasn’t the Captain,” Warren went on, and saw Kelso look slightly less impressed. But the Lieutenant was still jumping to wrong conclusions, he thought, as he turned to face Peters.

Almost apologetically he said, “The ship was the battle-cruiser Victorious. My flagship. I am Sector Marshal Warren . . .”
He had done his best to soften the blow, but Peters’ expression simply proved to him once again that there was no painless way of telling a man that he is no longer the Boss. Warren turned back to the Lieutenant.

Kelso no longer gave the impression of being an intelligent, efficient, eager young officer. His mouth had gone slack and his eyes had an odd, unfocussed look as if he was contemplating some glorious inner vision.

Perhaps it was the vision of a big stick.

four

It wasn’t that he was being forced to do anything, Warren thought dourly as he mounted to the roof of the administration hut and began the long climb to the main observation platform; there wasn’t a single Committeeman on the post who wouldn’t jump to his bidding. Yet for the past three weeks he had done all the things which had been required of him. Or was it perhaps that he was doing all the things which Kelso required of him . . .?

His interrogation during De-briefing had been long and painfully thorough. After Peters’ remarks on that subject Warren had expected Kelso to waive, or at least tone down, that part of the business, but the Lieutenant had told him that they had no wish to make a liar out of the Fleet Commander, and that the data gathered during de-briefing was really of vital importance—so much so that they would risk the displeasure of even a Sector Marshal rather than omit a single hour of questioning.

With the others of his party he had submitted to wearing fatigues. There had been no direct pressure involved in this, it was simply that the climate made wearing them more comfortable—especially during drills and weapon practice when the kilt gave complete freedom of movement. But the Committeemen’s reason for wearing fatigues, they had told him, was to keep the lightweight spacesuits in operable condition against the time when they would be needed to take the Bug guardship.

When they took the guardship, Warren had noted, never if . . .
From all over the Post the sound of voices drifted up to him as he climbed. Some were quiet, some excited and many of them were interspersed with shouts of laughter. The merriment was probably coming from the group receiving instruction in the handling of a cross-bow, and another sound like a flock of woodpeckers labouring not quite in unison originated from the group doing elementary Communications on sticks and tree trunks before being turned loose on the signal drums.

He had submitted to and accepted many things, one of the most difficult being his replacement of Peters as senior camp officer. Because of his rank Warren had had no choice in the matter, but it had shaken him a little to find himself the supreme authority on a planet containing upwards of half a million prisoners a few hours after landing on it, but not seriously, because Warren was accustomed to wielding such authority. What did bother him was Kelso's assumption that he would automatically head the Escape Committee. The Lieutenant was forcing matters by putting Warren in the position of heading a project which he had not yet finally agreed to join, and he wanted to have a long, hard think about it before the meeting of the Inner Committee which Kelso had called for that afternoon.

Also, while he was thinking he did not want eager young Committee men jogging his mental elbow, which was his main reason for climbing to the highest observation platform on the Post. That was why, when he was negotiating the final ladder and the sound of voices drifted down to him, he felt considerably annoyed.

"... At night or during overcast conditions," one of the voices was saying, "we use signal drums. A big drum slung at this height, provided the wind is in the right direction, has about the same range as the heliograph, which is this contraption here. The sighting arrangement is accurate although we haven't had much luck with silvering our mirrors."

"How about the telescope?" a female voice asked, and Warren recognised it as Ruth Fielding's. "Big for a refractor, isn't it?"

"That's for keeping tabs on the guardship," the first voice replied. "The clockwork mechanism is mostly wood, and provided a breeze isn't moving the whole tree-top through several degrees of arc and seeing is good, we can keep it centred pretty well. But chromatic aberration is fierce—most of the
time the ship looks like some sort of Christmas tree. There's enough definition, though, to let us know when another ship joins it in orbit or the shuttle leaves to land more prisoners.”

The words were apologetic but the tone was not, Warren thought. It was the voice of a person justifiably proud of having accomplished much with practically nothing. It went on, “The glass comes from the coast fifty miles north of here. Maybe it’s the wrong kind of sand, or maybe we’re just lousy glass-makers, but we’re experimenting with . . .”

The voice stopped suddenly and a Committeeman with a Major’s insignia picked out on his harness was looking down at Warren. The Major gave him a hand up, saluted and stood to attention.

“Thank you,” said Warren, then; “I want to speak to Major Fielding. Alone, if you don’t mind.”

That removed the Committeeman from the scene, but telling Fielding to scat would have to be managed a little more tactfully—if he decided to send her away at all. It might be a good idea to discuss some of the aspects of his problem with a psychologist.

“Well, Ruth,” he said, ducking under the mass of cordage which radiated from the telescope mount and coming to within a comfortable talking distance. “What is your opinion of this place? Personal and professional, that is.”

His use of the first name signified just two things, that the officer currently being addressed was not in his bad books and that he wished to conduct the ensuing conversation without the usual hampering load of “Yes, sirs.”

“Good morning, sir,” said Fielding. She had been about to salute but on realising that this was to be an informal discussion she smoothly grabbed an overhanging rope instead. The rope gave with her and high above them a branch heavy with leaves moved aside, allowing a shaft of sunlight to strike the heliograph mounting behind her. Fielding took her hand away quickly and the leafy camouflage rustled back into place. She laughed.

“Personally I like it,” she said enthusiastically. “I think we all like it, and a lot of us have had much worse times and enjoyed ourselves a whole lot less when home on leave—although that isn’t saying much since our home planets are pretty grim places these days, and since that battleship on legs tried to climb the stockade last week, nobody objects to being
confined to the Post until they learn how to use a cross-bow properly."

"And professionally?" said Warren.

"There I have an objection," Fielding replied seriously. "Just look at me . . . !"

Fatigues, female officers for the use of, consisted of a sleeveless hide shirt without shape and shorts which were too baggy and too long. Wearing them Fielding was still a good-looking girl, but after the manner of a Cinderella before the transformation scene. Warren smiled.

"This is a professional objection?" he asked drily.

"Yes, sir," said Fielding, still seriously. "It points up the fact that this is a man’s world. Oh, I know that the Committee-men could not be more polite in their treatment of us. But there’s a tenseness about it—they act almost as if they were boys out on their first date, which is ridiculous since there must be as many female officers on the planet as there are males. Also, they never discuss anything of real importance with any of the girls, and the jobs we’re given are all in the third leg category—mere time passers! So far none of our girls has noticed this, but it seems obvious to me that female officers are not wanted on the Escape Committee!"

"Go on," said Warren quietly.

Fielding looked surprised, as if she had expected a more violent reaction than this, then she continued, "From a few things I’ve heard and from data I’ve gathered from the files—I was on a paper-cutting detail for a week—the situation appears to me to be something like this . . . ."

According to Fielding the Committee considered women to be a bad risk. Their basic drives—the maternal instinct, the need for security and so on—pre-disposed them towards the Civilian philosophy, this being proved by the fact that practically every unattached female officer went Civilian during the first six months, and that even the husband and wife combinations rarely lasted longer. This caused a heavy surplus of women in the Civilian camp, so that the ones who had not been fortunate enough to find Civilian husbands had to do their best to snare, and convert to Civilian ideas, one of the Committee-men.

This was encouraged in every way possible by the Fleet Commander, and the result was a further erosion of the
Committee ranks in addition to the losses caused by the usual propaganda methods. As things were, Peters would have been statistically certain of getting two thirds of the newly arrived officers if one of them had not happened to outrank him. Peters was winning, and without having to work really hard at it . . .

"... But the ones who stay in the Committee are tough," Fielding went on. "They are not misogynists exactly, but their urges in that direction have been pretty thoroughly sublimated to the idea of Escape. They have found that, generally speaking, females can't be trusted. That the few who do honestly want to stay and work for the Committee only cause trouble anyway, and that it is better to discourage them gently from the start.

"And I do mean gently," she added quickly. "We couldn't possibly take offence at anything they've said or done. But the situation here—on the planet as a whole, not just in the Post—is psychologically unstable. Dangerous even.

"Professionally," she ended, "I don't like it."

In the silence which followed, Warren thought very hard. Fielding's outline of what to her seemed a dangerous and unstable situation was fairly accurate, but the truth was that it was much more serious than she realised. Warren also had access to files, the files restricted to members of the Inner Committee, and he did not like the situation either. He was aware, too, that Kelso was pushing him. Warren did not mind that so long as he was being pushed in the direction he wanted to go, and he had climbed up here to try to decide exactly which direction it was that he intended to take. But now, and without him having the chance to hear Peters' side of it, the decision was being forced on him.

A burst of laughter drifted up to him, followed by the sound of someone getting a good-natured bawling out for missing the target and losing cross-bow bolts in the long grass. It was very hard just then for him to think of these pleasant, efficient and enthusiastic young Committeemen as being a threat.

"Would you like to help found a dynasty?" he asked Fielding suddenly.

Fielding's face went red. "Are you serious?" she said. Then realising that her tone could have given offence on several levels of meaning she altered it subtly so that the question sounded mildly improbable instead of utterly ridiculous, and repeated, "Are you serious, sir?"
Warren did not reply at once. He was thinking that the Committee as it now stood was something of an elite corps, that the officers who had remained in it had survived in spite of extreme psychological pressures, and that to do so they must be little short of fanatical in their devotion to what they considered was their duty. It had also occurred to Warren that out of a prison population of half a million widely scattered and disorganised farmers they represented a well-disciplined and relatively mobile force of something like twenty thousand, and that if Peters had his own way much longer and succeeded in trimming their numbers even further so that they themselves realised that an escape was no longer possible, then the Fleet Commander and the Civilians he represented would be in very serious trouble indeed.

At present they were something less than respectful towards senior officers who did not share their ideas, and it would be only a short step to the point where a further reduced and hence even more fanatical ex-Escape Committee took over the place by force.

Such a military dictatorship might not be too bad, Warren thought, except that civil war must follow inevitably and soon. Far too many of the Committee officers were of equal rank, and there was bound to be furious disagreement as to who would be Boss. All these things, although distant in time, were not only probable but virtual certainties, and Warren had been trying for more than a week to devise a plan which would put this probability into the impossible class. Founding a dynasty—remaining in his present position, that was, consolidating it and passing his ideas as well as his supreme authority on to his descendants—was a nice if rather fanciful idea, but even the stability of a monarchy was not always certain and judging by Fielding’s first reaction to the suggestion and bearing in mind the fact that she was a doctor as well as a psychologist, the idea might be physiologically impossible anyway.

Of one thing he was sure, however. The Fleet Commander was ultimately on the losing side no matter which choice Warren made. Even if he should side with Peters and use his considerable weight of authority against the Committee, he would succeed in further reducing their numbers but at the cost of making them a more closely-knit and fanatical group. No matter how he looked at it, the situation was a potentially
dangerous one which must sooner or later lead to a shooting war.

Warren sighed, bringing his mind back from a probably disastrous future to a present which was, literally, full of laughter, sunshine and excitement. Smiling, he said, "Relax, Doctor. The question was purely rhetorical."

So far as Warren could see there was only one solution to his problem. He must join the Escape Committee. And escape.

five

Shortly after the meeting began the rain started and the light which made its way through the natural camouflage and into the administration hut became so dim that Warren could barely make out the faces of the four other officers around the table. Proceedings were held up while Kelso lit the lamps and positioned their reflectors so as to direct all the available light on to the map which had been attached, in sections, to the largest clear area of wall.

Nearly eight feet high and twenty long, the map showed the prison planet in Mercator projection. A large, elongated diamond-shaped continent was centred on the equator and was connected to a smaller continent, triangular in shape and also lying on the equator, by a long chain of islands. The large continent, the islands and the two indistinct land masses at each pole were little more than outlines, but the smaller continent was shown in considerable detail.

Major Hynds, who was chief of the Intelligence subcommittee, spoke as Kelso resumed his seat.

"As you will already have guessed, sir," he said, "the smaller continent is the one occupied by the prisoners. From data gathered by Committee exploration parties and from the observations of people lucky enough to be near a port on the shuttle coming down we have obtained a fairly accurate idea of this continent’s topology. Everything else on the map, however, was pieced together from the interrogation of the few officers who were able to view the planet from the guardship’s orbit. Because of the acute angle of observation, the unfortunate fact that continental outlines have a habit of being obscured by cloud and because some people just have not got the ability to draw what they remember seeing, this must be considered unreliable."
Hynds was a small, lightly-built man with a tendency towards sarcasm. He wore glasses which had been repaired so many times that their nose- and ear-pieces were shapeless blobs of paper and gum. He steadied them with a finger and thumb while he talked, using the other hand as a pointer.

The positions of Committee posts were marked by red feathers, farms and farming villages by green, Hynds went on to explain, with the roads connecting these civilian installations shown in black. Committeemen used these roads extensively, since they had been instrumental in building most of them, but great pains were taken to ensure that the Civilian road system was not linked, even by a forest path, to the Posts. The existence of the camouflaged Posts was not known to the enemy, as was proved by the fact that this one had been built within a few miles of a favourite landing spot.

The two black triangles were ore-bearing mountains, it having been found that the widely-dispersed ore effectively screened the small masses of refined metal underlying it from the guardship’s detectors. These were the sites of the Committee smelting plants and advanced training units, the existence of which was not known even to the Civilians . . .

So the movement was already going underground, in both senses of the word, Warren thought drily. He had been right to join them because he certainly could not have beaten them. Not completely.

“You mentioned advanced training units,” Warren broke in suddenly. “Would you expand on that, please.”

“That is Major Hutton’s department, sir,” said Hynds, seating himself and glancing towards the officer beside him.

The table jerked and made scraping noises against the floor as Hutton got to his feet. He was an enormous man, fantastically muscled and with a mat of chest hair so thick that in places it concealed the straps of his harness. Despite this, his expression was intelligent, apologetic and eager to please, and Warren was reminded of a good-natured and well-meaning bull to whom the whole world was a china shop. When he spoke his voice was barely audible, as if it, like his tremendous body, had also to be kept constantly in check.

“As you can understand, sir,” Hutton murmured, “a large amount of preparatory work is necessary before the escape plan can be put into effect. Experiments with the extraction and processing of metallic ores, which presents certain
difficulties considering the limited facilities at our disposal and the need for concealing the work. We have teams working on glass-blowing, chemical explosives, air liquifaction and storage problems and so on. Then there is the work on the guardship mock-up, and on the dummy itself.

"We need men to build and maintain the wood-burning steam engines used for the heavy jobs," Hutton went on quietly, "a steam engine being the best our machine shops are capable of producing at present. Even if we could make one, the ignition of an internal combustion engine might be picked up by Bug instruments, so steam is safer—although we've drilled successfully for oil, which is used mainly for lighting the tunnels and labs. In actual fact, however, a machine shop is little more than a mediaeval smithy . . ."

"Major Hutton is being over modest, sir," Kelso put in quickly. "Despite the handicaps, his Technical and Research section is further advanced in its part of the plan than any of the others."

"Maybe so," Hutton returned, his voice rising almost to conversational level and becoming something less than apologetic, "but it is my job to train a certain number of officers for maintenance and support duties and I'm not getting enough of them, nor am I getting the right kind of man. The people sent me are the ones Hynds considers least likely to go Civilian, not officers whose previous specialities best suit them for the work in hand . . .!"

"Nonsense, sir!" Hynds protested, glaring at Hutton. "I've sent him every chemist and metallurgist I could scrape up. What does he want me to do, send him Civilians . . .?"

Hutton was staring at the table top, looking more sullen than angry. Hynds was trying to murder him with his eyes and Kelso was looking from one to the other, obviously annoyed at the impression his two superior officers had created. The other officer at the table, Major Sloan, showed no perceptible reaction. Subtle variations of expressions were impossible for his ruined face.

"Since I lack data on this subject," Warren said sternly to the two Majors, "my comments at this time would be valueless. However, an escape plan has been mentioned several times. What exactly does it involve and when do you propose putting it into effect?"

He looked at Kelso.
"There have been a number of plans submitted to the Escape Committee from time to time," the Lieutenant said brightly, trying to dispel the unpleasantness of a few minutes previously. "The custom being to label them with the names of their originators. There was the Fitzgerald Plan, which was very well detailed and called for an attack on the guardship with two-man, chemically powered rockets. Quite apart from the fact that the Bugs would be unlikely to stand around doing nothing while we developed the technology to build the ships, the plan was not feasible because of the length of time required in the preparatory stages.

"The plan which was adopted," Kelso went on, his tone becoming more serious, "was the one put forward by Flotilla-Leader Anderson . . ."

Anderson had begun by accepting the fact that the only practical way of getting off the planet was to use a Bug ship, his idea being to lure the shuttle rocket to the surface at a predetermined point and in such circumstances that the prisoners would be able to capture it. With the shuttle in their hands it would be possible to effect the capture of the guardship itself, an obsolete battlewagon which was easily capable of transporting anything up to one thousand ex-POWs to an Earth base, where the news of the existence and position of the planet could be given to the proper authorities.

It was a simple, daring plan which at practically every stage was packed with things which could go wrong. But Anderson had been able to eliminate enough of the uncertainties so that it would be workable with just the average amount of good luck instead of a multiple chain of miracles.

The bait which would lure down the Bug ferryship would be a metal dummy of a crash-landed enemy reconnaissance vessel, assembled during a time when the guardship's orbit kept it below the horizon, from parts prefabricated and hidden in undetectable caches. Then to make sure that the guardship simply did not bomb this mock-up as they had bombed earlier collections of metal on the surface, carefully positioned fires would be started in the surrounding vegetation to make it plainly obvious to the guardship that a vessel had crash-landed, a vessel which on closer inspection would show to be one of their own scoutships.

By displaying signs of life from the dummy ship and perhaps going to the extent of seeming to attack it with human prisoners
it was hoped to bring the Bug shuttle down on a rescue mission.

Listening to Kelso's low, impassioned voice as he went on to describe the work already done on the plan, Warren felt excited in spite of himself, and suddenly he found himself wanting to re-examine his motives for doing what he had done.

Granted that his chief reason for joining the Committee had been to try to effect an escape, that being the only sure way of avoiding dissension, civil war and an ultimate descent into near-savagery. This did not mean, however, that the Committee were war-mongers or murderers at the present time—far from it. The people on the Committee side were a group of able, intelligent and resourceful officers who had maintained and even increased their enthusiasm despite years of constantly mounting opposition and steadily dwindling numbers, and Warren was beginning to admire them.

Another reason, and one which he had not yet made public, was that the war was going very badly for the human side and that the Earth forces were urgently in need of the officers who were rapidly going to seed on this prison planet. At one time an elite corps which accepted only the best, the space service was scraping the bottom of the personnel barrel these days for crews. This was something Warren knew from bitter personal experience.

And yet another reason, a purely selfish one this time, was that Warren badly wanted to have officers serving under him again who refused to believe that they were beaten, or that anything was impossible . . .

All at once he became aware that he had missed a lot of what the Lieutenant had been saying, and that Kelso’s customary tone of enthusiasm had changed to one of anger and frustration—the combination of emotions which were, apparently, the nearest a Committeeman came to feeling despair.

“. . . But the most galling fact of all,” the Lieutenant went on bitterly, “is that the plan had already been initiated years before any of the officers here had arrived! When I came here there were half a dozen concealed observation posts in operation close to the most likely landing areas. The first smelter was working and the maximum safe quantity of metal which could be collected in one spot, both on the surface and buried at various depths underground, had been ascertained experimentally—the experiment usually consisting of increasing the
quantity until the Bugs noticed and dropped a couple of tons of old-fashioned HE on it. The special commando which were to take the Bug shuttle and later the guardship were already being trained, together with the Supply and Intelligence groups to support them. By this time we should have been off this planet, or at least have made a damned good try at getting off it!"

Kelso took a deep breath and exhaled it angrily through his nose then he went on, "Instead, the plan has been hampered and sabotaged at every turn. We on the Committee, who are trying to retain our traditions and self-respect and discipline as officers, are very often forced to obey people we consider our superiors but who are at heart merely people who have given up and who want everyone else to give up, too, so that their consciences can get together and call black white. The result is that we’ve been forced to conceal nearly everything we do from fellow officers who by rights should be giving us the fullest co-operation."

"At the present rate of progress, sir," Kelso ended hotly, "we’ll be lucky if we can make the attempt fifteen or twenty years from now!"

Further along the table Hutton and Sloan, the officer whose specialty was assault training, nodded their agreement. Major Hynds, still holding on to his spectacles as he turned to face Warren, said, "A conservative estimate sir, but based on the assumption that we do not lose any more of our officers to the Civilians . . ."

He stopped speaking as one of the drums in the tree above them began rattling out the signal, three times repeated, which summoned the night guard to their stations and simultaneously announced "Lights Out" to everyone else. Like puppets controlled by a single string the four officers at the table pushed back their chairs and rose to their feet.

"Sit down," said Warren.

He did not raise his voice, but quite a lot of Kelso’s anger and frustration seemed to have rubbed off on him and Warren made no attempt to conceal the fact. At the same time he had no intention of allowing his anger to develop into an uncontrolled outburst of fury, because he knew that a leader who was subject to fits of temper might inspire fear in his subordinates rather than confidence and Warren wanted to
inspire both. These Committeemen wanted a leader, and as Warren began to speak he did everything possible short of flaying them with whips to give them the idea that they had acquired one who could drive them as well as lead.

To begin with he was merely bitingly sarcastic regarding officers who had practically conditioned themselves to jump when drums banged or whistles blew, going on to suggest that it was this too-rigid insistence on discipline which was one reason for the continuing loss of Committeemen to Peters’ Civilians and that if the present trend continued, the Escape Committee would become a hard core of performing monkeys who did things when somebody made a noise and remained at attention at all other times.

Without altering his scathing tone of voice in the slightest his remarks veered gradually from the derogatory to the constructive.

He was deeply concerned over the dwindling numbers of the Escape Committee, he told them. Not only must this steady erosion cease but they must win back a large proportion of these so-called deserters, and every possible method of influencing them must be explored ranging from subtle psychology to outright blackmail if necessary. The shortage of manpower was the basic reason why the plan had never got off the ground, in both senses of the word, and this was a problem which must be, and would be, solved.

And taking all the foregoing as read, he now required a breakdown into previous specialities and present aptitudes of all prisoners, also the minimum numbers and training needed by these officers to allow the four sub-committees represented here to bring the Anderson Plan to complete readiness in a reasonable time.

Fifteen years was not a reasonable time, Warren insisted. He suggested an absolute top limit of three years.

“. . . According to Lieutenant Kelso most of the data we need is available on this post,” Warren concluded, his tone becoming slightly more friendly, “and I intend going into it fully with you now. So I am afraid, gentlemen, that the lights will not go out in this building, nor will any of you see your bunks, until together we have set a date for the Escape . . .”

The faces along the table looked chastened in varying degrees by the tongue-lashing which had gone before and startled by
his bombshell regarding the setting of the escape date, but these emotions gave way quickly to a steadily mounting excitement which was reflected in shining eyes and lips which were trying hard not to smile. There was no incredulity, no objections, no verbal response of any kind, and Warren knew suddenly that these officers did not have to be driven to do their duty and he should have realised that. Watching them he felt the warm, tingling contagion of their excitement again and all at once he wanted to praise and compliment them for what they were and for the glorious and well-nigh impossible thing they were trying to do. But a Sector Marshal did not pay such compliments to junior officers, even when they were deserved. It was very bad for discipline.

Instead he allowed his manner to thaw some more and said, "I’m a reasonable man, however. At this time I won’t insist on setting the hour . . ."

six

It was E-Day minus one thousand and thirty-three and the officers on the Post were beginning not to smile self-consciously when they referred to it in that way, and they did not smile at all if they were discussing it with the Sector Marshal.

Warren had taken over the main administration building as his headquarters, partitioning off one corner of the big room into an office and sleeping quarters. The office portion, which had a hole in the roof to accomodate the ladder going to the communications platform, was so placed that all maps, records, dossiers, Post personnel, messages via drum or heliograph and an appreciable quantity of rain reached him with the minimum of delay. The office also gave an illusion of privacy, although the hide walls were so thin that every word carried clearly to the men and women he had staffing the outer room.

Present for their regular morning meeting were Major Sloan, the officer in charge of Supply and Assault Training, Major Hynds of Intelligence and Lieutenant Kelso whose job was Co-ordination, Major Hutton having returned to his subterranean smithy two weeks previously, taking with him seven officers from Victorious whose training, past hobbies and/or present enthusiasm made them useful to him.
When the salutes had been exchanged and the men stood at ease, Warren said briskly, "It goes without saying that our work in the past has been seriously hampered by the fact that the so-called Civilians outrank the officers on the Committee. And that the same situation occurs within the Committee in that officers who possess ability often do not possess the rank which should go with it. In order to act effectively such officers must employ flattery and cajolery and similar verbal stratagems, and this you will admit is a gross waste of time and ability.

"While my rank gives me wide powers in the matter of promoting able officers serving under me," Warren continued, "I am forbidden to exercise this power while held prisoner of war. But this does not mean that I cannot employ the principles of general staff command and relay my orders through junior officers, delegating such authority as seems necessary. This being so, the present heads of sub-committees are hereby appointed to my Staff and Lieutenant Kelso, because of his recognised ability to handle people nominally his superior, will become my personal aide . . . ."

Warren paused to note their reactions. Kelso and Hynds were grinning hugely and Sloan was showing more teeth than usual. They all had an anticipatory gleam in their eyes, as if mentally rehearsing what they would say the next time they met the Fleet Commander or any other high-ranking Civilian. In short, the reaction was as expected.

Tapping the uneven wood of his desk for emphasis, Warren resumed sternly, "As officers on my Staff, you will accord your seniors, whether Committee or otherwise, the respect due their rank. You will pass on my orders but you will not throw my weight around. You will be polite and respectful at all times, but you will not accept no as an answer at any time . . . !"

More than any other single factor, the success of the Anderson Plan hinged on the presence in the escape area of a tremendous volume of manpower, every single unit of which would have to be trained and rehearsed in their movements beyond any possible chance of error. Hutton's section could be counted on to prepare the dummy ship sections and train the technical support groups, while Hynds and Sloan took care of communications and the assault. But transporting the metal sections to the escape area and assembling them, all within the severely limited time during which the guardship's orbit
took it below the horizon, was an operation far beyond the capability of the Committee at its present strength.

Their first concern, therefore, must be to gain recruits.

As Warren saw it, the reasons for an officer leaving the Committee were three-fold. Serving with the Committee was a hard life, the hardship was pointless since they had come to believe the Committee's objective impossible of fulfilment, and since they were unable to take part in the war the sensible course seemed to be to enjoy their enforced peace.

From his study of the available data, however, Warren went on to explain, he was pretty sure that the consciences of these officers gave them considerable trouble—a significant indication being the touchy way most of them reacted to being called Civilians. So if it could be shown that the escape plan was more than just a pipe dream, and if certain of the rules which hitherto had been necessary for Committee membership were to be relaxed somewhat, Warren was certain that many of the so-called deserters could be persuaded to rejoin.

The first step would be for the Committee to wipe out of its collective mind the word "Civilian." All non-Committee officers would be treated with respect, and the respect should be in no way diminished merely because the officer held different opinions to oneself. They must be made to feel needed and important—that their co-operation was vital to the success of the plan, which was in fact the case. Even partial co-operation, part-time membership of the Committee, would be welcomed. The main thing was to instil the idea into the prisoners' minds that the escape was possible, *that it would take place...*!

"...With that fact generally accepted," Warren continued, "we will be in a position to bring more direct pressure to bear... Yes, Lieutenant?"

At the news that he was to be Warren's aide, a position which in effect made him second-in-command and chief advisor to the Marshal, Kelso's face had displayed a look of almost wolfish pleasure, but as Warren had elaborated on his plans the Lieutenant had become increasingly restive. Something was definitely bothering him.

"Security, sir," he burst out, then hesitated. "You shouldn't discuss details with... with..." He nodded violently towards the partition. "There are women out there, sir!"
Warren toyed for a few seconds with a selection of sarcastic retorts, then pushed them, reluctantly aside. He said, “Explain yourself, please.”

Kelso opened with some muttered remarks to the effect that he approved of women in general and of the surviving female officers from *Victorious* in particular, and that they had been very efficient in chasing up Committee records and progress reports for the Marshal. Nonetheless, the unpleasant fact had to be faced that women on the Escape Committee had demonstrated time and time again that they were a bad risk. Kelso went on to cite instances, and Major Hynds nodded agreement each time. For the best interests of the movement, the Lieutenant insisted, all female officers should be got rid of as quickly as possible, because girls were born to be civilians . . .

“Get them off the Post!” Major Sloan broke in suddenly. The bass rumble of his voice—like a distant volcano, Warren thought, deep, powerful and with overtones of instability—must have carried much further than the outer office. “And not politely, either! The longer they stay the more they unsettle the men. They’re soft and they make the men soft. Get rid of them!”

There was a tense silence during which nobody looked at anybody else and even the noises from the outer office seemed to stop. Warren, keeping his face expressionless, regarded the big wall map and tried to decide whether to squelch this Major Sloan now or later, or at all. He knew that normally Sloan did not have much to say for himself. He was responsible for non-technical field training, road and bridge construction, procurement of food and skins by hunting parties or through trading with the farms, and a host of subsidiary jobs. In these duties the Major was quietly and almost fanatically efficient, and this was one of the two reasons which made Warren inclined to make allowances for a certain lack of charm in the man.

The other reason was that on the day of his arrival the Major had not run quickly enough when the Bug shuttle had begun to take off. The burns he had received were of such severity that by rights he should have died from shock, but Major Sloan had been and was an unusually strong man and he had survived despite the absence of proper medical facilities—the Bugs did not supply prisoners with drugs or instruments, so that home-grown and relatively ineffective substitutes had been used in an attempt to relieve his pain.
For nearly two days the Major had screamed, Warren had been told by a Committeeman who still looked sick at the memory of it, and for three weeks after that he had been unable to talk coherently because of the pain. Eventually, however, his body had healed itself although it was plain to anyone who spoke to the Major that the process had stopped short at his mind.

Warren sighed inwardly and was about to speak when Hynds forestalled him.

"I agree with the Major, sir. And if I had as much trouble with this particular problem as he has had, my language might be even stronger . . ."

Obviously Hynds had been expecting Warren to blow up over Sloan's outburst and he was trying desperately to head the Marshal off, not by apologising for the Major but by agreeing with him. As quickly and as quietly as he could, Hynds went on, "... The desertion of female officers to the Civilians is a statistical certainty, and we have been simply hastening the process in various subtle ways. Their uniforms, for instance, and paper-making. You know that we get paper—sheets of thin, fine-textured wood, actually—fairly easily. One of the trees here, when the sections of the trunk are boiled to remove the resin, comes apart at the growth rings. The Committee couldn't exist without this paper, but getting it is a horribly messy job and one definitely not suited to women—the gum stains their hands and if it gets in their hair . . ."

"It's necessary and valuable work," Lieutenant Kelso said, catching the conversational ball neatly, "and when they've had enough of it we don't just kick them out. They go to Andersonstown on the coast. That's a large Civilian farming community which grew up around the post responsible for fishing the bay and nearby river . . ."

It had been at a time when relations between the Committee and Civilians had been more cordial that the post had been set up, Kelso went on to explain, and the idea had been to trade fish as well as meat and protection against marauding battlers for grain, fruit and similar necessities. But the scheme had backfired badly so far as the Committee was concerned.

In those days the Civilians had been allowed to build farms very close to the Committee Posts, and they had done so, and because even in those days there were a lot more females
than there were male Civilians, and these female officers naturally refused to share a husband with another woman, the only hope they had of getting a husband was to subvert a Committeeman. This they had done to such good effect that the Post had had an almost complete turnover of personnel every year. Flotilla-Leader Anderson, the Anderson whose plan had been adopted for the escape and who had been the commanding officer of the post in question, had given the settlement its name when he had gone Civilian. Gradually, the surplus females from all over the continent had moved to Andersonstown and the Post had lost more and more of its male officers until eventually the Committee had withdrawn all males from the Post.

"... Now it is manned, if you can call it that, entirely by female officers," Kelso concluded, grinning. "Girls who can't find Civilian husbands or who don't want to leave the Committee for some other reason. They do some very useful work as well as being a very disturbing influence on the Civilian farmers in the area."

As the Lieutenant stopped talking Warren found himself thinking about these highly-trained and intelligent girls who, although they might be as eager to get off the planet as anyone on the Committee, were denied the chance to contribute towards the escape. It was not anger at Sloan's insubordination or at the attempts of the other two to cover for the Major which hardened Warren's voice when he spoke.

"Your comments on this matter are appreciated, gentlemen," he said, "although they in no way alter the decision which I have already made regarding this problem.

"A point which you don't seem to grasp," he went on grimly, "is that the survivors of Victorious, because it was a tactical command ship, are very special people compared with the usual run of serving officers today. I don't want to see any single one of them, male or female, going Civilian! And a second point is that fifteen or twenty years ago, at the time when most of the people here were taken prisoner, these same officers would not have been considered special at all. Which shows you how drastically the standards of the service have been lowered and how vitally important it is for the officers on this planet to be returned to active service—such an event would almost certainly bring about the end of the war in our favour! It should also explain why I want every prisoner,
regardless of sex, to be serving on or to be in some way associated with the Escape Committee.

"With this in mind," he continued almost gently, "I have appointed Major Fielding, the psychologist and medical officer from Victorious, to the staff."

Warren paused, regarding the suddenly stricken faces staring down at him, then he smiled.

"Please don't look as if your best friends had just died," he said chidingly. "Our half of the human race has managed to co-exist with the females of the species, peacefully on the whole if not with complete understanding, for several millenia. I am simply asking the members of the Escape Committee to do the same for three short years . . ."

seven

Next day Warren dispatched Kelso, Hynds and two other responsible officers from the post on a good-will mission to the surrounding farms and settlements, at the same time signalling the other Posts to send out as many officers as could be spared with similar instructions. These orders designed to show the so-called Civilians that a major change of policy had taken place within the Committee, and while explaining the ramifications of this change, the visiting Committeemen were to bend every effort to be frank, friendly and helpful to the farmers—especially in the matter of doing odd jobs of construction and maintenance and in putting down marauding battlers.

They were also ordered to show all due respect towards these fellow officers, being particularly careful to avoid dumb insolence or sarcasm, and on no account were they to refer to these non-Committee officers as Civilians—they were to refrain from even thinking of them as such. These non-Committee men and women were to be regarded simply as imprisoned officers, who on a certain day already fixed in the not too distant future, would be breaking out of their prison and that any assistance they felt like giving, whether it was full-time service with the Committee or an hour or so a day on preparatory work, would be very much appreciated . . .

Already drafted were a series of follow-up orders in increasingly firm language, which would not go out until the present tension between the two factions had eased considerably and
the preparations for the Escape were far advanced, one of which stated, "Owing to the necessity of gathering up-to-date information on the disposition of friendly and enemy forces prior to the Escape, all officers are asked to interrogate new arrivals regarding these matters or, if they feel unable to execute this duty with the required efficiency, to escort them to the nearest Post without delay."

To Ruth Fielding he said, "You've been appointed to the Staff because I need a good psychologist who can evaluate the overall situation here and help me guide it in the direction I think it must go, and who is also capable of seeing it from the woman's angle. We don't really need the help of every officer on the planet, but the ones we do want—the chemists, metallurgists and engineers that Hutton is screaming for—all seem to have married or gone civ . . . Oops, sorry, I mean they have left the Committee. To get these men, it seems to me, we must first interest their wives in the project.

"This might be accomplished," he went on, "by you mentioning at some length the absence of civilised amenities here, such as decent feminine clothing, make-up and whatever else it is that you and they miss. If you can make them feel discontented, they will bring additional pressure to bear on their husbands and friends to support the Escape.

"With this in mind I am going to make a tour," Warren continued, standing up and indicating a sequence of farms, villages and Posts which included both Hutton's mountain and Andersonstown. "One of the most important calls will be Andersonstown. It was there that some of our best Committee men were lured, trapped or otherwise inveigled into joining the other side, and it is only fitting that we choose the same place to start winning them back again."

Warren resumed his chair, smiled and went on, "But this whole area is literally crawling with husband-hungry women, which is another and more selfish reason for me wanting to take you along. The way I see it, arriving in company with a female officer who is well above the average in looks will, as well as showing them that the Committee is no longer composed entirely of misogynists, be the only way of keeping these ravening females at bay and protecting me from a fate which is, the way Sloan tells it, worse than death . . . What did you say, Ruth?"
“Sorry sir,” said Fielding. “I was muttering to myself about my lack of experience in chaperoning Sector Marshals. And for the other flattering things you said, thank you, sir.”

“Not flattery, Major. Fact.”

“Well, well,” Fielding returned, grinning. “It seems there are two good psychologists here . . .”

Hastily, Warren ended the interview before it developed into a mutual admiration society by telling her that he wanted to leave that afternoon and that they both had arrangements to make.

However, the preparations for the tour did not go smoothly, and by the time Warren had expected to set off he had what amounted to a mutiny on his hands.

It began when Sloan insisted that the Marshal was too valuable a man to risk travelling without a proper escort, and in the same breath refusing to order his men to a duty which would take them into hag-ridden Andersonstown—nor would he go there himself. It took every scrap of Warren’s authority, persuasiveness and invective to finally effect a compromise, which was that a single Committeeeman from the post should act as guide to Warren and an escort made up of six members of Warren’s original crew who were fairly proficient with their cross-bows.

The delay meant that they would not be able to stop the night at the farm thirty miles to the south as planned, but the idea of roughing it the first night out did not seem to bother anyone. They marched in single file with packs on their backs their cross-bows carried at the regulation Committee angle and with their hair plastered with the strong-smelling grease which was supposed to discourage insects and battlers—if the battlers did not happen to be feeling hungry or mean, and it was only on rare occasions when battlers were not feeling both—and eager to put into practice all the things they had learned as drill at the Post. It was only their guide, an officer named Briggs, who seemed worried.

Tactfully but at frequent intervals he suggested that they might not be as proficient as they thought.

The two-hour trek through the forest, which was often so dense and thorny that Warren longed for Civilian trousers rather than his trim, Committee kilt, did not noticeably dampen their enthusiasm and when they reached the road which would
eventually lead them to the farm they began to make good time.

It was Warren's first experience of what until then had been only a black line on the wall map. The road was little more than an unpaved trail, grass-grown and overhung by trees except where it crossed a river or ravine by way of a strong and surprisingly well-designed bridge. Warren had to remind himself that the road had not been built solely for pedestrian traffic but was meant to take the heavy metal sections of the dummy, and that the whole Escape could fail if just one of those sections was to end up in a ravine.

Three hours before sunset Briggs called a halt, saying that due to their lack of experience it would be better to allow plenty of daylight in which to catch their supper. Then later, when the fires were going well and the men were returning in triumph with the small rabbit-like creatures which abounded in the forest, Briggs had some gently sarcastic things to say about the large number of arrows which were apparently necessary to kill these ferocious, eight-inch long herbivores. When there was nothing left of the supper but the appetising smell he made further attempts to spoil the general air of well-being by talking about some of the horrible accidents which could occur through hammocks not being properly hung. Warren felt a little sorry for him because nothing that he said or did could make Fielding and the men stop behaving as if they were all on a glorious picnic.

Some of the things which Briggs had warned them about came back to Warren however, as he climbed the regulation thirty feet into one of the trees chosen for them to sleep in. Thirty feet was the minimum safe altitude, the height above ground level to which a fully grown battler reared on to its hind legs and with trunks at full extension could not reach. The trouble was that branches at this height tended towards thinness, Warren thought, as he attached his hammock to the one Briggs had pointed out to him and checked all the fastenings. Under his considerable mass this one sagged alarmingly. It required a distinct effort of will for him to climb into the hammock even when its fail-safe device—a length of thick rope looped around his waist and tied securely to the branch above—was in position.

As he pulled across the flap which was designed to keep out the rain or dew he was painfully aware of the distance between
the ground and himself, and of the fact that he was not going to sleep this night . . .

He awoke suddenly to the sounds of shouting, cursing and cries of pain. The sky between the leaves above him was light blue and the leaves themselves reflected pink highlights from the rising sun, and in the next tree Briggs was clambering along the branches methodically whacking the undersides of the hammocks with a stick. Warren did not think that the man would subject a Sector Marshal to such treatment, but rather than put it to the test he pulled himself astride his branch and began untying the hammock preparatory to stowing it in his pack. Half an hour later they were on their way, munching on the hard, Post-baked biscuits as they marched.

They reached the Nelson farm just before noon, finding that it comprised a fair-sized log house and a larger but more crudely constructed building for storage purposes, both of them being enclosed by a stockade which sagged badly in two places. A large tree served as the main support and a ladder led up to a platform covered by a skin awning. The platform was above the thirty foot level, a refuge for the Nelsons should a battler succeed in breaching the stockade.

Warren had hoped to stay overnight at the farm, and the Nelsons had insisted on him doing so and saying that they could easily accommodate his people between the house and the barn. Despite their offer of hospitality, Warren could see that they did not want him there. Mrs. Nelson seemed very ill at ease and when he talked to her husband, sounding him on the possibility of his contributing a few hours work a week to the Committee and testing his arguments generally, he found that he was not getting through to the man at all.

The reason, or to be more accurate the three reasons, were quite obvious. He mentioned them to Fielding as soon as they were alone together.

"Three children," he said in a strained voice. "Between six months and seven years. I wasn’t prepared for this."

Fielding was silent for a moment, then she said, "The Committee keeps records of all arriving prisoners, but they are the only new arrivals which concern them. I did expect something like this, although I would say that three is above the average. You must remember that the dangers of pregnancy
are aggravated here—the lack of proper medical facilities and the battler menace to name only two . . .”

"The medical facilities are pretty good, m'am, considering," Briggs broke in defensively at that point. Warren had not realised that the guide was within earshot. Briggs went on, "There are some very good ex-medics on the Committee, and among the Civilians too, of course, but their doctors don't have the same local know-how. Our people, under Hutton, have conducted systematic research into the medical properties of the local flora, and a couple of them have died carrying it out, but these people feel awkward about sending for one of our men at a confinement. They know what we think of bringing kids into a prison world, that such an officer is not likely to take the risk of escaping, or dying, or bringing down Bug reprisals maybe, if he has kids."

"That," said Warren with great feeling, "was what I was thinking."

"Sorry to butt in like that, sir," Briggs went on, "but I wanted to ask permission for our men to repair this stockade . . ."

According to Briggs the farm stockade was in such a state of disrepair that a baby battler could push it over, and as fixing it was a job calling for the concerted efforts of upward of six men, Nelson was probably waiting until some of his neighbours could come to help with the job. All the indications were that the Committee party would not be staying the night, so Briggs suggested that they do something before they left which would leave a good impression. Besides, if his men fixed the stockade it was the unwritten law that Mrs. Nelson would give them dinner and supplies for the journey, and while the farm bread would not remain edible as long as Committee biscuit, for the time it did remain fresh it made the biscuit taste like sawdust.

As he gave the necessary permission Warren thought that words had failed him here and that a nice good deed might salvage something from the situation. He knew that the Nelsons would not mind feeding his hungry mob—Civilian cooking was one of the chief weapons used to convert Committee men—and he resolved that his good deed should have no other strings attached. He would not even mention the Escape again, and for a while he would be very chary of talking about his ideas to non-Committee people.
He was going to have to change his approach, Warren told himself grimly, and develop a whole new set of arguments.

To Fielding he said thoughtfully, "Mrs. Nelson was Senior Warp Engineer on a battleship—she must have more degrees than she knows what to do with—and her husband, a relative moron, commanded a destroyer. It seems a great shame to me that two such brilliant people should be stuck here for the rest of their lives. It's a criminal waste of brains!"

"Yes, sir," said Fielding.

"Did you see those hand-made books lying around?" Warren went on. "Full of simple sketches and short words in block capitals. They're accepting it, and beginning to think about teaching their children. I think they've given me some useful ideas . . .""

"About founding a dynasty, sir?" said Fielding.

Irritated suddenly, Warren wondered why all psychologists seemed to have one-track minds, the track becoming a deep and well-worn gully where female psychologists were concerned. They had not been that sort of idea, and he suspected that Fielding knew it as well as he did, but perversely he refrained from telling her about them. Like his arguments, they needed to be worked into better shape. Because it had become very plain to Warren that the main obstacle to the success of the Escape was not, as he had hitherto thought, the Bug guardianship . . .

Muffled by the thick log walls, but still plainly audible, the Nelson baby began to cry.

To be continued
Below we present two amusing short stories by Brian W. Aldiss in which he sets problems to be solved by the central characters—and the readers, too.

1. counter-feat
   by brian w. aldiss

Parlyne Joss, Fimbel's black-uniformed chief of police, lashed his tail against his shining boots.
   "Here comes Baker," he said. "I can see him at the top of the street now."
   Behind him in the white-washed room, Caloon Lay drummed his fingers on the desk and chuckled deeply.
   "Has he got his android with him?" he asked.
   "No."
   "All the better. If Baker got too upset about our little trick, he might have used the android as a weapon. Considering he's only an Earthman, he's very resourceful. As it is, he'll have to take what's coming to him. Oh, I'm going to enjoy this, Parlyne. How does the biped look? Tell me, be my eyes."
   Caloon Lay had been blind since birth. Perhaps that handicap had helped to make him the most cunning Intelligence Chief Fimbel had ever known—and Fimbel was known for cunning throughout the galaxy. Now he was old and ran to fat; the fur round his muzzle and ears had rubbed away with the mange many icy winter ago, leaving his blue skin bare. But for all that, he was still as artful as a barrel full of terres-
trial monkeys, and the trap that had been laid for Martin Baker was of his devising.

"He's wearing his big sloppy-brimmed hat," Joss was saying. "He's carrying just one case of belongings. I think he's looking at the gravity ship, but I can't be sure from this distance. The beggars are round him, giving him a last going over. We know how he hates them!"

"Why isn't his android with him? That creature is so human it would fetch a fine amount in the market, and if Baker's cashed in on it, then our little money trick won't work."

"I've taken care of that possibility," Joss said, peering out of the window. And taken care of it he had, just as they had taken care of this furless tailless git of an electronic engineer ever since he first set innocent foot on the planet.

The latest move against Baker was taken only the previous day, while the man was getting his few possessions packed. Caloon Lay sent him notice of severe restrictions in the weight of personal belongings to be taken aboard the Feline Queen. He had limited the amount of luggage Baker could take on the experimental ship so drastically that his android would have to be left behind. And Joss had put forward the lifting time of the ship to this early hour so that the market would not be open until after Baker left. Such few personal Fimbellan friends as Baker possessed had long since been scared off by police ruses, so the human had no course but to leave his valuable android behind, its value unrealised.

They'd been clever with this wily Baker! For the year he had been here—his contract with the shaky Fimbel Stellar Corporation had been for only six months, but Joss knew how to wreck contracts—they had engaged in perpetual move and counter-move, with the Earthman always managing to keep his head. This time, they had him cold. Terrestrial arrogance was in for a beating this time.

The situation was perfect. The new gravity ship, Feline Queen, stood awaiting take-off in the waste lot at the end of the tumbledown main street. It stood virtually next to the police H.Q. in which Joss and old Lay were awaiting their final bit of fun with Baker. Two customs officers lolled in front of the ship, preening their whiskers—both idiots, Joss reflected, but well primed for their role in the comedy. Baker would have to be inspected by those men before he climbed aboard for the trip to Earth.
Before he went to the customs men, Baker would have to call in at the Police H.Q. Joss rubbed the hard pads of his hands together in anticipation. With the help of Fimbel Stellar Corporation, they had fixed it so that Baker did not get paid the two-months salary owing to him until this morning. The money, eleven lakursts in all, was waiting downstairs for Baker—and Baker was going to have more trouble collecting than he guessed. If the human did not wind up spending the rest of his days on Fimbel, working for a pittance, Joss was going to be greatly surprised.

The human figure down the street was being almost mobbed by beggars. Suddenly this ragged crowd dropped on to all fours and ran to the side of the road, fighting together in the gutter. The biped hurried on.

"Ah, he's thrown a lak to the ground to get rid of the beggars. It's probably his last, too!" Joss said, for Caloon Lay's benefit. A lak was a tenth part of a lakurst.

"It's time we shot some more beggars," Lay growled. "It's not only bipeds they impede, blast them."

The biped, having cleared a way for himself, walked rapidly down the street. Outside the Police H.Q. he paused, stood and looked at the polyhedron of the ship whose complex circuitry could never have been completed with Fimbellian skill alone, and then turned smartly into the door of the Police H.Q.

"He's arrived!" the police chief exclaimed.

Joss marched over to the railing and looked down into the lower court. Caloon Lay heaved himself up and joined his companion, leaning heavily over the rail to listen to what was being said.

"What's the biped doing?" he demanded.

"He's seen the eleven little piles of money lined up in front of Sergeant Marhow and is perhaps beginning to suspect that something is wrong. He is as self-controlled as ever."

The cat-figures lolling below were smiling openly at the biped, who stood absolutely still for a moment. Then he said casually, "There's the usual stink of cats in here."

The smiles vanished. The duel began. Sergeant Marhow leant forward and said, "Biped Martin Baker, here are the eleven lakursts due to you as payment for your last two months' work with Stellar. Unfortunate formalities have delayed the Corporation paying up until now."
"Formalities, my foot!" Baker said. "You overblown leopards are crooked enough to make a space warp look straight. Anyhow, hand it over now and let’s be done."

"Not so fast, Two Legs," Marhow said. "You think you are going to get away unpunished from this planet, yet you have committed one of the worst crimes in the book."

"Don’t kid me you can read books, sergeant. What am I supposed to have done now, used heating on a National Freeze Day, or one of those tomfooleries?"

"More serious than that. We have evidence that makes us believe you are the dangerous forger who has been making his own laks, and thus disrupting the whole economy of Fimbel."

"Don’t tell me you have anything so well-organised as an economy on this dump," the human said, but old Lay thought he detected an undercurrent of dismay in the man’s tone. He nudged Joss and knotted his long clawed fingers together in enjoyment.

Below, Baker said, "What’s this supposed evidence, anyway?"

"In the Corporation workshops, we found half-melted moulds in a disused furnace. You had access to that furnace."

"You call that evidence?"

"Fimbellians would not be so dishonest as to forge false coin."

"Now don’t give me that!"

"Also counterfeits identically resemble real laks."

"Ha, I see! And no Fimbellian has enough gump to produce a virtually undetectable counterfeit! Well, I’m admitting nothing, but you must admit that if I did any forgery I had provocation enough—you kept holding back my money. The very first day I ever set foot on this lousy world, I was robbed. You gave me police protection, but I’ve been burgled a dozen times—probably by your four-footed coppers themselves. I’ve lost every penny I had. I’d have starved if it hadn’t been for—well, if it hadn’t been for friends."

Sergeant Marhow stood up and leant over the table.

"We don’t want to hear your arguments, Martin Baker. But we give you this warning. Waiting by the ship that will take you safely back to Earth are two customs officials. They will search you before they allow you aboard—just a routine check, eh? But—if they find any counterfeit coin in your possession, you will be flung into goal here for a considerable term of imprisonment. Understand that? Clear, eh?"
"Please yourself. I’ve not a bean on me, genuine or counterfeit. Give me my eleven lak hurlsts and let me get going."

Sergeant Marhow turned to the money, indicating it with a dramatic gesture of his paw.

"You may take all your money, Baker Two Legs. There are eleven stacks, of ten laks each, making the due sum of eleven lak hurlsts. There is just one point—one of these piles, and only one, consists of nothing but your forged lak coins. Now, pick up what you want and go to the ship—via the customs officers."

There was a stir of amused interest among the police lolling round the court. They liked to see anyone faced with a thorny problem, particularly an Earthman. Thorny problems were by way of being a planetary pastime.

The Earthman stood absolutely still.

"I see your game," he said. "If I pick up the forgeries, I get stopped outside and flung into one of your stinking cesspits of prisons."

"It will only begin to stink properly when it gets you inside," Marhow said. "Why not leave all the money behind and be safe?"

As the others laughed over this quip, Baker bent over the table and peered at the eleven little piles of money. He stood gazing at them as if hypnotised. Silence fell.

"He won’t be able to tell the difference between fake and genuine will he?" Caloon Lay muttered to the police chief.

"No, visually they are indistinguishable," Joss said. "Give the hyena credit for producing a good copy. The only way you can tell the difference is that the real lak weighs 5.05 gumms and the false 5.06. It’s only by the fact that the frauds are each that .01 of a gumm heavier that we can tell them apart. But Baker won’t be able to tell the difference without weighing the piles pretty accurately. You can’t detect the weight difference simply by balancing them in your hand."

Down below, there was still no move from Baker, still silence as he stood looking at the rigged piles of money.

At last he said, "I’m dashed if I’m going to leave behind cash I’ve endured so much for. You’ve got a weighing machine at the back there. Let me borrow that."

Behind where Sergeant Marhow stood, on a table at the rear of the court, stood a scale of a type common anywhere in the
galaxy, with a flat platform and the weights—here in Fimbellian gums—marked round a dial swept by an indicator.

“What, lend you that scale?” the sergeant exclaimed. “That’s government property, and police regulations state that government property must not be used by aliens—particularly two-legged aliens. Besides, if you had the scale, it would make the whole thing too easy for you.”

A gust of laughter showed how much the police appreciated their sergeant’s wit. But Parlyne Joss leant over the rail and called down to him.

“Sergeant, as this is a special case, and as we are all so grateful for the work the biped has done for us poor backward people, please lend him your scale. But make this stipulation—he can only use it for one weighing. That will allow him the element of luck.”

The biped looked up, staring at the two cat-men who were visible as little more than shadows under the low roof. He had no expression on his face as he turned back to see Sergeant Marhow place the scale beside the eleven laklursts. The police gathered in a little closer to see him decide which of the eleven piles he should weigh. They smiled—for how could weighing help? It was a thorny little irony their Chief had prepared, and their tails lashed keenly.

After studying the scale and the money for a minute, Baker looked up at the figure in the gallery.

“You say I am allowed only one weighing?”

“Yes, yes,” Joss called down. “Pile any amount of coins on, but government regulations declare that departing aliens are allowed only one go at government scales.”

Again the growling laughter as Baker turned to stare at the problem before him. The laughter died, quiet came, everyone was motionless. Fimbellians were expert at remaining motionless.

“Have I got this right, that only one of these piles contains counterfeit coins, and that one pile consists of nothing else?” Baker asked.

“That’s what I said. Do you want it in writing?”

Baker ignored the sergeant’s joke. He put out his hand.

From the first pile of laks, he picked one coin and placed it on the scale, which then read 5.05 gumms. From the second pile he took two laks, placing them on the scale, making it read 15.15 gumms. From the third he added three, making
30.3 gumms. From the fourth, he took four, and so on. But this time, the police, sensing that he had some sort of plan, had crowded about him, making their humming noise of appreciation that to an Earthman was so startlingly like a purr.

Although Joss could not see the figures on the scale dial from where he stood, his lynx eyes picked out clearly what Baker was doing. Angrily, he explained to the blind Caloon Lay.

"Arrgh, how will that system work?" Lay demanded.
"My maths has never been any good."
"It's not a matter of maths but of logic," Joss said.
"Whichever it is, you've let the biped make a fool of you, and now he'll get away! Once his report gets back to Earth, do you think we'll ever see a defenceless terrestrial on Fimbel again? You've slipped this time, Joss."

Joss snarled to his companion to be silent.

Down below, Baker had completed his work. He was just placing all the ten laks of the tenth pile on to the platform of the scale, making a total of fifty-five coins stacked there altogether.

Had all the coins been genuine, and each of them weighed 5.05 gumms, the scale would have read 252.5 gumms. Instead the pointer now stood at 252.58. Solemnly, Baker reformed his stacks of coins until the pointer was back at zero. He solemnly passed the scale back to Sergeant Marhow.

"Supposing the eleventh pile had contained all the forgeries," Lay said. "He never weighed any of that pile. We'd still have had him then."

"Not so," Joss said. "With a figure of 252.5 on the scale he'd have known that he had weighed only piles of genuine coins, leaving number eleven to be the pile of forgeries."

He stopped, for Baker had picked up the eighth pile of coins. He flung them down on the tiled floor so hard that they rang.

"There are your counterfeits, you cheating cheetahs!" he cried. He scooped up the ten other stacks of coins and loaded them into his pocket. The police looked, on, vacant-mouthed without moving as he strode towards the door.

Growling savagely in the back of his throat, Parlyne Joss flung himself into action. He went down on to all fours and ran down the stairs.

"Stop that biped!"
His shout stirred the police into action. Moving rapidly, they cornered the man before he could get into the street. With his back to the wall, Baker faced the yellow-toothed visage of Parlyne Joss.

"I beat you at your own fool game—now let me go," he said. Joss ignored him. His fur bristled, his tail swished savagely from side to side.

"Get this creature to the cells!" he said. He stared at the biped’s face as his orders were carried out. All Earthmen looked alike to Fimbellians and it was next to impossible to interpret the expressions on their stupid bare faces—but he hoped this one was looking suitably terrified.

He followed the posse down into the filthy and freezing prison below the court. The biped was flung into one of the cells. He turned immediately, and began to bellow and rattle the bars of the door.

"Cut that racket out!" Joss snarled, striding forward and facing the man.

"You are imprisoning me unjustly. What am I here for?"

"Counterfeiting!" He curled his lip in triumph. "You gave yourself away, Martin Baker, with your clever little trick of weighing—because only three people know by how much exactly the counterfeit coins exceed the weight of genuine ones, Sergeant Marhow, myself, and the forger. So you are the forger, and in that cell you will rot!"

"You stinking four-footed feline!"

Joss’s left paw lashed out, his claws emerging from their sheaths. He slashed down through the bars, taking Baker’s left cheek off with the blow.

The prisoner staggered back.

A cry went up from the bunch of police. Where the flesh had been clawed away from the biped’s cheek, a ridge of plastic showed. There was no blood.

"It’s the thrice-aborted biped’s android!" Sergeant Marhow said. "I thought it was too crafty for a human."

The police chief wasted no time on words. He turned and ran, back into the court. On the threshold of the outer door, he collided with the two customs men who were just entering.

"We searched him, boss," one of them said. "He had no cash on him at all, so we had to let him through."

"Fools!" screamed Joss. Flinging them aside he rushed into the street.
But the hatch of Fimbell's first gravity craft had already closed. Already it was rising into the air, slowly and grandly, on its non-stop voyage to Earth.

From the transparent control dome set in the top of the polyhedron, a human figure stared down at the chief of police. It was Baker, who had reached the ship and safety while his android acted as decoy. He raised a hand and made a final derisive gesture at the tawdry world he was leaving.

Joss ground his molars together and did not reply. He was listening to the derisive laughter from inside his H.Q.

2. one-way strait

Both suns, the blue and the yellow, were nearly at zenith and only a few degrees apart. From the cabin of the plunging jet, they seemed to whirl across the sky. Desperately, Max Ross fought to pull out of the spin. Smoke and flame spurted from the panel before him, and he knew he was done for.

He swore as the one-man craft fell. It would be sabotage, of course. This had been fixed by one of the two races of silicon hominoids that inhabited this dead-end world of Usquibarbb. They nursed their own eerie brand of hatred, and exercised it, too.

Coughing in the fumes, Ross stared out at the landscape rushing up to meet him. A tawny wilderness, pocked with wave upon wave of hills marching to the horizon. What a place to crash in! This was equatorial Usquibarbb, where water was almost non-existent and the shattered hills were a haunt for sand wolves. His darting eye caught a gleam on the horizon—a gleam of spires. He saw them as they spun round again. A fair-sized city, no more than thirty miles away!

He could not make it. The jet was so much scrap. Looking for the city again, he saw one wing buckle. Squeezing his eyes shut, Ross jabbed the button that flung him and his ejector seat clear.

He lost consciousness. When he came to, he was sprawled
on the ground within a hundred yards of the wrecked craft. He freed himself from his harness and crawled away from the heat of the flames. With conscious effort, he stood up and looked about. Sand showered from his uniform.

Ragged hillsides were all that met his gaze, their shadows the double ones that gave human eyes such a queasy feeling of being unfocussed. Down a dry and crumbling gulley, a sand wolf trotted, its siliceous coat gleaming. It wedged itself behind a boulder and looked out at Ross, exposing its tongue and teeth for his inspection. As yet, the burning plane kept it from attacking; but already the flames were dying down. As yet, the burning plane kept it from attacking; but already the flames were dying down. He looked about. Several of the beasts were gathering. They showed no sign of haste; their self-assurance was enough to throw him off balance.

He pulled out his burner, snapped its shield into place, and held it in his hand. The equatorial desert stretched a thousand miles in every direction—except in the direction of the city he had seen from the air. Unless he got rapidly to the city, he would undoubtedly die, by the wolves if not by thirst and heat exhaustion. But he could make it to the city if he went straight there, for the burner would keep the predators away.

There was just one snag.

He did not know in which direction the city lay.

All his instruments were burning steadily in the jet. He looked up at Usquibarbb’s two suns, and shook his head. Trouble was, he was not an experienced man; he had arrived from base only a week back; this had been his first solo flight, a posting to a unit on the other side of the planet. The position of the suns told him nothing. Only their combined heat told him something: that he had better get moving before dehydration set in.

Scrambling in the loamy sand, he climbed one of the low ridges of hill. These hills were little more stable than sand dunes. The wolves adjusted their vantage points, keeping him tagged. When he picked one off with a pellet from the burner and watched it flare into a heap of ash, he felt better.

He did not expect to see the city from the top of his hill. Between him and the city must lie a hundred thousand dunes. But he hoped to see something that would give him some sense of direction, if it was only a higher hill.
Instead, he saw an oasis. Fortune had not entirely deserted him. Ross’s heart began to hammer with hope. It made him realise how pessimistic he had felt a moment before about his chances of survival. He stood there staring with his mouth open until the feel of his dry tongue made him shut it.

Hopeful sign though it was, the oasis was nothing like a terrestrial oasis. Usquibarbb was a planet almost without water. Its oceans were no more extensive than the Great Lakes beside which Ross had been born, and they lay at the poles. Fifteen inches a year rainfall was heavy—and none fell in the massive equatorial belt. There was just heat here, crunching up the mountains. Heat—and hominoids.

There were two distinct races of the silicon beings on Usquibarbb, known unimaginatively enough as the Yallers and the Azures. The Yallers were a bright and shiny yellow, the Azures an equally vivid light blue. Theory had it that this could be explained by the fact that the two suns were in the yellow and blue range, but man had not been around this neck of the universe long enough to put that two and two together yet.

Some things were clear enough though. It was clear right from the start that both Yallers and Azures, in their different ways, were horrifyingly clever. They had picked up Galingua, the universal language, within months of first hearing it, although their own tongues were a baffling mixture of long and short clicks that sounded like a complex version of the old Morse code. And they were logical; each race had its own separate logic—and each of those logics was one that Earthmen might visualise in theory but could never comprehend in practice. In fact, here for the first time in the exploration of the galaxy was a case of an Alien Intelligence! It was the need to study such alien thought forms that kept man on such an uninviting planet.

Ross was looking at two of the aliens now. They sat huddled in the shelter of a hut, with hats over their eyes, so that he could not see whether they were Yallers or Azures. But they were reassuringly there; repugnant though they were, he was glad to see them. He sensed they were staring across the intervening waste at him, and drew back behind a pinnacle to think.
His presence would cause them no surprise. The smoke from his jet, rolling across the sky, would have put them on the alert.

Although the silicon races were profoundly hostile to the presence of man on their ruinous planet, they would offer Ross no direct harm. He had heard enough about them to know that. They were subtle in their distribution of death. But he knew that their rigid logic and consequently rigid social customs would defeat him unless he had his every move planned before he confronted them.

Going down on all fours, and trying to ignore the heat of the double suns on his back, he crawled to a saddle of copper-coloured rock and peered over it.

The oasis was not so called because it boasted water or anything an Earthman would regard as a sign of fertility. Its only distinguishing feature was an outcrop of stone, a whitish sort of marble. This the aliens had quarried and shaped into three of their igloo-shaped dwellings. There was no water here; the silicon metabolisms did not need it. There was no shade, except what the dwellings themselves provided. One of the aliens, his shape vaguely human beneath his flowing robes, went into the hut against which he had been leaning. In a minute he came out again, his face lost below the brim of his great coolie hat. He sat down beside his companion and both became absolutely immobile. Though it shimmered in a heat haze, the scene looked as if it had witnessed no movement in a million years.

"I want only one thing off those devils," Ross said to himself, "and that's the direction of the city. It's all I'm likely to get. They've nothing else to offer."

He bit his dry lip, made to step into the open, and then hesitated.

Scattered white stones caught his eye. There were two lines of them, each comprising no more than a dozen stones. One line led from the alien huts towards him, and the other in the opposite direction. Now they had caught his attention, he saw the stones marked the start of two trails that led into the wilderness in opposite directions.

Some of his uneasiness was allayed. He dreaded the encounter with these strange and silent creatures, but at least the paths made one thing simpler—the city he must get
to lay either in one direction or in the other. He had only to ask which path to take.

Hunggrily he thought of the city. His glimpse of it from the jet had reassured him about its size and importance. There would be at least a terrestrial representative there, and that meant transport and water and food and safety. It remained only to get some sense out of the Yallers or Azures, whichever these hut-dwellers were.

Still he hung back. Sight of the sand wolves beginning to lope together into small groups decided him. Tricky the aliens might be; they would not want to eat him.

He slid down the hill and stood up. He squared his shoulders, muttered "Wish me luck" to no-one in particular, and marched round the corner towards the oasis.

He staggered in a rut, crunched over the detritus of erosion to the path, and walked forward with his gaze fixed alertly ahead.

The coolie hat brims raised slightly. Brown snake eyes watched his approach. Otherwise the two figures remained where they were, unmoving in the out-of-focus shadow of their dwelling.

"I've got the etiquette quite straight," Ross muttered to himself. "Either race will allow a stranger to ask them one question for free. To ask more than one question entails giving them a gift, and I've nothing to give them. Boots? Helmet? Jacket? Burner? I'd be mad! And if a stranger meets two or more of them, he's still allowed to disturb their confounded tranquility with only one free question. Heck, one question's plenty. I only want to know which way the city lies."

Yes, it was in the bag—provided they spoke Galingua. But rumour back on the base said that all of both races spoke the language fluently within a month of the first hominoids' learning it. Hell, what else was there for these creatures to do on such a benighted planet?

It could be because the biosphere of the planet was so rigid and unco-operative that the thinking of the Yallers and the Azures had developed along such rigid and unco-operative lines. For there was one thing in particular that was impressed on every Earthman the day he materialised out of vacuum on Usquobarbb: the Yallers were absolute maniacs for literal
fact and never spoke unless they could speak confirmed truth; whereas the Azures practised only deceit and never spoke without lying. Neither race could admit a half-way position. Undoubtedly it was this unyielding aristotelianism that had driven them into a symbiotic and peaceful relationship, the one race with the other.

Recalling this now, Ross halted before the two squatting forms and cleared his throat.

He had to behave with a delicacy he was far from feeling in the circumstances. Their stubbornness and taciturnity seemed to come up at him with the heat.

Putting his burner away, he squatted down on the dusty path and assumed, as far as that was possible, the attitudes of the aliens. He looked into their eyes.

The psychic shock was considerable. Four brown eyes regarded him without emotion; they had never known emotion. Each face bore between its eyes a sunken nostril pit from which an occasional trace of steam issued. Below the knobbly cheek bones, a lipless mouth stretched. The faces were without skin; the bone structure was covered with flat and chitinous petals.

One face was yellow, one was blue.

Ross had to look away from that concerted glance. He saw there the hideous logical sanity that seemed so like madness to his own race. The perpetual deceit of the Azures was no more repugnant than the habitual literalness of the Yallers; they were merely two sides of the same chillingly ultramundane coin. However, just because he was outstared was not to say he was outsmarted. He had merely to ask his way from the Yaller hominoid the literal truthful fellow, and be off.

"Er—" he said.

Or was it the Azures that never spoke anything but the factual truth?

No, the Azures always lied and concealed the true facts. Or was that the Yallers? His mind performed a somersault; He had forgotten which way round it was.

He crouched where he was, not a yard from them, as unmoving as they were. It was unfair; they should never have posted him from Base until he was properly trained. Now who were the liars, the Yallers or the Azures?
He did not know. He could not recall.

He stood up too fast, and his legs were stiff with cramp. The blood drained from his head and he rocked to keep his balance. One of the silicon beings moved a rag-swathed foot infinitesimally to avoid contact with his boot.

Suppose he asked the Azure, “Am I right for the city?” He could check by asking the Yaller the same question. But that would not work, and anyhow in the circumstances he could afford only one question. So that question should be “Do you speak truth?” But that too would get him nowhere. And when he settled on his question, to which hominoid should he ask it? And they would both clam up after allowing him the one question unless he gave them... No, he’d been through that; he had nothing to give them. His brain whirled. He had to sort out the way to the city and which race lied, which spoke true, with only one question, delivered to whichever he chose of these inexorably waiting bundles of rag.

Ignoring the sweat that dripped from his temples on to the dust, Ross stood where he was, letting only his mind scamper, for fear that movement might somehow offend their psychotically rigid sense of protocol.

Then he almost laughed. The problem was elementary. Momentarily, he had let excitement and tension obscure its simplicity.

All he had to do was phrase his question so that the answer was like an equation in which common factors cancelled. It was a mathematical puzzle posing as a semantic one, of a kind that he had been asked in high school. The answer was based on the elementary fact that a minus quality multiplied by a minus quality made a plus, and that a plus times a minus made a minus. These guys, being of the two different Usquibarbbian races, would not both lie and thus give him a resultant truth. One of them would lie, giving a resultant lie. All he had to do was frame his question properly, so as to ensure he got in his answer one lie and one truth, making a resultant lie. It would not matter to him from which of the aliens the lie came. Simply by taking the resultant lie and reversing it, he would have the truth he sought. Simple!
Moistening his lips, Ross squatted down again, within range of those deadly eyes. He had his question ready now. Snuggled under their hat brims, the alien faces were little but blurs of blue and yellow.

He made the Usquibarbbian sign of greeting, two raised fingers with thumb interposed, and addressed the alien with the yellow face, at the same time pointing back carefully in the direction he had come from.

"If I asked your companion if this was the way to the city, what would he say?"

The Yaller made no move. Ross's stomach flipped, as for a moment he wondered what he would do if the aliens did not understand Galingua. Then the Yaller spoke.

"My companion would say it was not the way to the city."

Nodding, Ross rose to his feet. No further word could or need pass between him and the hominoids. The positive and negative had amalgamated to make a negative, no matter whether he had addressed the deceiver or the truth-compulsive. Obviously the way he had pointed was the way to the city.

He looked down ironically at them. Now that they had answered, they raised their hats at enough of an angle to survey him from under them. Still their eyes remained without expression. He spat in the dust, turned, and walked back deliberately the way he had come, hefting his burner to guard against the sand wolves he would meet on his way. It would be a close-run thing, he knew. But with the triumph of his encounter strong in his veins, he would make it.

Only when he was out of sight of the oasis and obscured by hills did the aliens move. The one Ross had spoken to removed his yellow mask from his blue face, threw it down before him, and turned to stare at his Azure companion.

A mouth gesture, almost like a smile, passed between them. They sat motionless in the double shade, listening to the noises from the wilderness.

brian w. aldiss.
Being the Historian in a revolutionary country could be something of an onerous task if the Historian himself is a robot—the more so if he keeps a secret record contrary to the government regulations.

Have you ever experienced a Revolution?

My fingers have been flickering along the Recorder keys since early morning telling the story of our latest. It was our sixth in as many years.

When it happened I was sitting, half attentive, looking down at the green paved Square which is at the centre of our City. I was very much at ease considering everything. I had even come to terms with my long spells of boredom when time hung heavily. The great bank of dials and the twin sets of lettered keys that seemed to be always under my fingertips were barely glowing with life. There had been little to feed into the Memory Banks during the night and I had drifted into something like sleep and it rested my mind.

In one moment the peace was shattered. In one moment there was a hush like death and the next I saw the familiar flashes, like shoals of silver fish, darting from one building to another, seeking life to rip with their teeth. I felt the old urge to run. I seemed to feel my old legs shaking as they had on
other occasions so long ago. My hands were palsied and the beads of imaginary sweat stood out on my forehead. Strange ghosts! I could do nothing other than stay put as usual and record the details.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust the three-inch armour plate windows. It was just the natural reaction to robots with scatter guns. It wasn’t that I didn’t know it was coming either. In fact I knew it was expected this morning because it was on my timetable along with a Memorial Service for the dead of the last Revolution. I had my place there in the Presidential Broadcasting Studio just to record such events. Nevertheless, when it came I was shocked.

It was like a speeded film and at the first blast of fire everything that moved seemed to be endowed with an urgent acceleration against a background of buildings which remained still and solid and disapproving. I felt my fingers, like nebulous flashes, touching the two sets of keys and telling one story on the left board and another story on the right. Feet running, arms loosely flailing, people seemed to be lost and not to know where they were going in the heat of the moment and yet by the old miracle the Square was almost cleared in a split second.

From the ancient wedding cake spire of the City Church a thousand birds, like some fragmented purity, flew up in a fanning white cloud scared from sanctuary below. The deep murmur of chanting followed them but it ceased a second or so later as if it had been shut up in a box.

I had recorded every minute sound and every tiny movement. All the light, the shadow and the blackness went into my mind and was sent to the Memory Banks. Even the small crumpled body near the fountains had his place in the Record.

The fountains play eternally at the very middle of the Square and the body was curled like a child asleep very near them. So near in fact that his face was touched by spray and it looked as if he were weeping. He was a man who had waited too long and had caught a stray bullet. Only his white doctor’s coat gave a hint of why he had waited.

Already the Doctor was a Hero of the Revolution although he didn’t know what it was all about and the Party P.R.O.s were ignorant of his motives for being there in the Square. I received through the sensory equipment in the Recorder a host of reports from both sides as each gave the dead man the benefit of a propaganda blast and castigated the other side as
butchers of innocence. I can feel and I can see so much when there is activity on radio and vision. The sights and sounds flood in and are collated and cohesed in a beautifully balanced pattern of activity. Now I can see the character of the men of valour who aspire to rule this place. They slither into their inheritance with remote control robots and sit in bunkers at a safe distance, with their women of the horse-whip type, surrounded by dials and dogma.

Mere mortals find it hard to recall who is in and who is out of office. They find it hard to know whether the Left or the Right, those ancient symbols of power, have any relevance at all to what is done in the name of the people. I know who is in or out. I know that they do nothing sensible because they no longer have a cause to care about. All the material wrongs have been righted.

The Left was out at the beginning of this bloody charade and I am sure that their Party contained the elements of our previous stable sovereign Government. They were thrown out by the Party of the Right who were elected by popular acclaim enthused of course by a large number of hand guns.

Now the Loyal Opposition is back to ask for a vote of no confidence in the Government who deposed them. They appeared in the Square with brave slogans and guns backed by penny-dreadful intrigue and brain-washing. They were there to continue the pattern of ups and downs which makes our political system the envy of every madman. It would be impossible to understand the motive for it all if you weren’t aware of the opportunities for graft and debauchery the short spell of authority gives the victor.

I had better introduce myself since you were so good as to look for me under these conditions. My name is Julius. I was once the Senior Historian to the Tenth Republic. Perhaps you will remember the Tenth Republic although it ended over fifty years ago. That was a Golden Age indeed.

My task has always been to record. In life I was a spectator and it was natural for my colleagues to give me this task rather than to trust my courage in space. They gave me the Recorder and an indestructible body instead. They knew I understood the wayward nature of our culture and they concluded that they must leave it controlled when they left for space.
Great men devised the Recorder. They knew the instability of the race and set about counteracting its absurd pattern. The Recorder takes down and analyses the trend of political and national events. It does this quite automatically by contacting its spy cameras and listening posts round the country. However, because all events have a human aspect, they gave me the task of writing a commentary into it which made sense of things in human terms. The Recorder’s ordinary records and my commentary are sent into the Memory Banks. If the overall picture ever becomes too black and we head for final collapse, then the Recorder is supposed to order the National robots into action against the whole ruling faction. Quite simply to blow their heads off.

It had occurred to them in those early days that one day the rulers would try to suborn me in one way or another. How right they were! The top people of our Nation made delicate threats in public and dire noise in private and it came to blackmail. My family would survive and indeed the City would survive just as long as I wrote down nice things for the Recorder. Not that they cared a damn for posterity but they did like their heads very much. So on the right hand keyboard I wrote their lies while faster than the eye could see my other hand wrote the truth on the left hand keyboard as the engineers of old had planned. You see, the rulers had been told that the Recorder was rather like a piano and needed two sets of keys to produce the right kind of phonetic harmony. Everyone thought it impossible for a man’s brain to tell two different stories in the same instant of time and write the stories on the keyboards as well. They are right. It is impossible for a man’s brain but not for me.

Now the lie which they all want is reproduced on tapes in the National Archives for all to see but the truth goes into the Memory Banks where no one can read it. The upshot is that everyone is happy. They think they have blackmailed me into compliance but I know I can be a coward and do my duty so I’m all right too. What I can’t understand is why the rulers haven’t lost their heads yet. They’ve exceeded my wildest dreams of decadence and I should have thought that the preset controls in the Recorder would have reacted by now. Odd.

The Great Communication Building had the doubtful honour of being the focal point of every Revolution. It was like some satirical election booth. They were in fact after this, when I
first saw them, like a bunch of out of work actors after an audition. Silent fire, like waterfalls on a cliff face, was cascading down its armoured-plated tower. Its huge bulk like some enormous firework was dissecting the early morning sun, dividing the light so that the Square at its foot was halved by shade and reflected glare. The building was white and thrusting upwards to the sky. It looked impregnable. So I thought. I never believed anyone would dare to use weapons on it which could destroy it, for those weapons would have to finish the rest of the City in the same instance. It’s so easy to be wrong about people, isn’t it?

The Government of the day had always surrendered when it became apparent that the other side must win. Though they were convinced that, through the ages they had suborned me, there was always a small suspicion, almost a superstition, in their minds which made them take care. They were afraid some of their wickedness might slip into the unknown depths of the computers. The trouble with people who cheat is that their lives become overburdened with imagination. They fear the retribution.

Once inside the Communication Building the rebels, according to time-honoured convention, would brand their image on the eyes of their people with snappy vision broadcasts. They assault the ears of millions with a brash song of liberation and slogans as irksome as cheap adverts. The songs, blared brassily with a chorus of baseball voices, cheer a message so unpoetic, so full of time-worn political platitudes and earnest hypocrisy, that they are the insults immortalizing the injury already done. Announcing victory for the people it thrusts itself on their ears. This unmusical blast, without mercy until they are sick of the sound and sick of the fear that makes them listen hour after hour. We have a saying that if a man wishes to die in bed he must swallow his throat. It was hard not to cry defiance but my fellow countrymen have always managed to turn the other cheek in times of danger with an alacrity unsurpassed in the world. They live with blatant suppression and ignore it as if it were a belch at a tea party. Until today I thought they were utterly lost. Until today there have been times when I wanted to throw off my shackles and my immortality in an effort to rescue them. If I had the courage it might be a worthwhile swop just supposing I wasn’t throwing over my real task with it. Who knows?
I was not alone in the studio. My great-grand daughter, Tina, was with me. So was her fiance, Captain Egan, as well. The President and his immediate staff were in another room. They were enjoying the spectacle on closed circuit vision. The room had specially reinforced defences and it would have taken an automatic charge to winkle them out. They rely on the poor cameramen dangling out there in the open to get them a bird’s eye view. Stray shots picked the brave lads off sometimes but, of course, there was always another to take their place. The money is good.

Tina should be very special since she was born into my family. The family, it goes without saying, is a famous one. Not in the realm of titles or riches but in that other more select realm of talent and intelligence. The family descended from one of the world’s greatest intellects. Me. Tina, however, seemed less than perfect sometimes, less than a whole woman. I know you will think me boastful when I say that I think she should have been perfect. As I was perfect. Possibly some of the family’s powers have been waning and reverting to nothing over the years. Just as the old fashioned Victorian Democracy became inadequate, slowly debased into a system of opportunities for opportunists, and the ‘isms’ became too machinelike as an alternative, so my family has fallen short. I had something to hand on to her grandfather but perhaps he managed to dissipate it without my knowing.

We began simply enough. I was born into the bosom of middle-aged parents lost in the rotting anathema of a European industrial town over a century and a half ago. There was no reason why such a man as I should have been thrust into life in that old, brown bedroom on a winter’s day. I don’t suppose there is any reason either, why the power that came with me should have survived in the glossy sublimation which is the civilisation of our time. Possibly our Revolutions are a paradox harking back from everyday safety to the exciting violence of the past in the hope that the benefits of stress can be rediscovered in that way. Special strengths are often the result of special stresses and the end of the twentieth century was without equal as a time of stress.

Then there were many great intellects pinching and pulling us out of that mounting crescendo of pain and confusion. When they solved the contemporary problem most of the great intellects disappeared into space to find others. Possibly they
too realised that the existence of their abilities depended, as did their emotional stability, on challenge. Artificial challenge is oddly enough not sufficient. It is more often than not merely frustration. I think you might agree that human beings know when they have a real risk on their hands. Perhaps that is what I was looking for myself through the chain of days... a real risk and a real if temporary solution.

Tina had inherited the family beauty and emotional ease but she seemed to have forfeited the intellect. Admittedly she couldn’t look at me in my metal body and find anything but intelligence in my present appearance. I can’t even cry. Once though, I too, was beautiful and my emotions were tuned like a piece of music and I was full of life. I suppose it is something that she is gentle and good to look upon and better than the dark shadows I have seen lurking behind some personalities. They could be straight from the Dark Ages with its blackness in the soul. Tina is at least a child of her age.

The age is a difficult one for everyone. The trouble with all scientific improvement or social reforms is that they often leave behind greater problems than they solve. Overcome the drudgery of maintenance and you may breed insecurity and dependance on specialists who are never there when they are needed. Our culture had become afraid of its own mechanical ability and as a result it involves itself with pseudo-experience. Those many great men who left our scene did give the world a few of their number to carry on, and admittedly they gave them very useful, even fantastic powers, but there were just too few.

Captain Egan, whom I suspect was originally set to watch me as well as to enjoy Tina’s company, was really the perfect match for her. He had some comfortable and restful traits but he was a bluff soldier as seemingly dim as good breeding can make a man. He came from a bluster of hereditary warriors most of whom must have been crossed with good bloodstock. Every time he spoke I could hear the crash of hobnailed boots and smell the tang of old cordite. In truth I could find something better in him at the last but I think oddly enough that the President was mainly to blame for that.

On the surface however, there was really no wonder that Cornelius, the old power maniac, chose him as an aide. He saw Egan as the perfect agent. You must realise that Cornelius
had a clinging tenacity to office. The ancient incumbent of Bray must have been very like him and he must have had a Curate like Egan, a good hound to the hunt, ready to jump on command, ready to take the rap. How one man can use another to such an extent is a mystery to me. Cornelius who started his career writing slogans on walls with a white paint brush and then scuttling away fatly at dead of night was not the creature to rule the scion of a good family but he wasn’t the man to rule a nation either. History is peppered with such rulers as he, almost as if the Devil chooses his own.

In my earlier life I considered myself more than a historian in the historical sense. I thought that I was rather an interpreter, a social catalyst, who works on human events to find their motives. Perhaps my fellows saw the joke when they gave me this particular task. Anyway there is plenty of confusion you see, about history, and such confusion leads to bad ends.

The past, for instance, was first thought of as a succession of dates associated with national pride. I can assure you it is nothing of the sort and as eternity spreads before me I can discern the true impulse of events from the time they burst from an individual’s emotions until they bear fruit universally. The past was thought of in terms of achievement. The more heroic dates a country had the happier everyone was. Even though some of the dates were known privately to be doubtful successes.

Conversely if history had booted your Nation into defeat, time and time again, then you became obsessed with putting the record right. This involved self-deception. You burnt all the more objective teachers with their books, banded your new ‘ism’ together and pasted the daylights out of as many neighbours as possible. Just like a human being with neurosis. There is hardly any difference between the private emotion and the public expression of emotion once the cheerleaders are out. That’s why Cornelius can say, “We can do as we will but you must do as you are told.”

Egan, I recall, was close to the window when the battle started to hot up. Even he was shaken by the ferocity with which it developed. He had one of those silly switches in his hand which used to be the insignia of a cavalry officer and he hit the side of the console with it several times until I had to remonstrate with him. It was juddering my vision.
His soldier’s eye found detail and relayed it to me but I was looking for motivation and becoming more and more despondent. I had certain aids inside my angle of view within the Recorder which I could refer to and the incident of change they displayed was at a high rate. Up to now these revolts have been to a certain extent routine, but for some time I have sensed that each party was less and less inclined to give in easily. It was reaching the kind of climax in human affairs which is always the finale. When the game becomes unplayable because both sides are obdurate and the rules are forgotten. Then comes the last madness.

The politicians who arrange these annual junketings had in the course of time become opposed in truth and despite the common background they shared with their enemies, both historically and educationally, they were beginning to take winning too seriously. What used to happen in the boardrooms was being played out in the streets while I took the Minutes. I used to say that our patricians had the brain and chins bred out of them and that their only asset was a kind of condescending selfishness, but now I realised that their selfishness might be of a rasher kind which put their ancestors at the top in the first place. It might be the courage that grows from feuding.

"Damn it, Mandel has really gone too far, Julius. He can see that there's too much against him out there. Why doesn't he give in like a good fellow." Egan's voice broke into my reverie with the barking cough that distinguishes it and I saw his face pressed redly against the window. Egan has never felt any embarrassment in talking to me. I suppose he spoke to his robots and tanks in the same comradely way just before battle or in their quarters afterwards when humans and machines were getting oiled up together, so to speak.

Mandel incidently is the Executive Commander for the Right, if he is still alive. I found it interesting, too, that Egan was beginning to share in a small way the fears that had beset me. I followed his gaze and picked out the unexpected number of robots the Left had gathered in the Square. I tried to make contact with them but they all returned 'Battle Station Command' to the Recorder which means, in effect, they haven't time to talk. The moment was not yet then. The politicians hadn't gone too far for the preset punishment of the Recorder. Yet I felt in my bones they were committed to the final path of destruction which would take our culture with it.
It's still fashionable to think of robots as toys. They are not. The most frightening sight in the world is to face these monsters across an undefended area and know there is nothing to stop them. You can appreciate how the old infantryman felt when he heard the clanking rumble of tanks through the mist if robots attack you. Just before I was given my new body, which sits here at the Recorder, I had such an experience. It turned my limbs to jelly. Fortunately the little wires of fear that preserved me in such encounters sent me on my belly at an impossible speed for cover. It's surprising how far you can go on cavorting stomach muscles, elbows and rapidly drumming feet when it's needful.

I remember Tina's voice fluting inanely. "Is it bad out there, dear?" I shuddered that such a delightful mouth could utter such idiot triviality and I wondered whose blood was to blame, mine or my long dead wife's. When I thought of my wife I endured the usual pang of melancholy and loneliness and took the blame on myself. I know now why men have short lives. It is the constant temptation to fall into a kind of comatose disinterest and live in the past with your first, fresh experiences, which makes immortality difficult. Only pain keeps you awake, the pain of knowing you can't go back and recreate the happy permutations of the past.

"There's enough firepower to finish the City." Egan had looked back at Tina with open adoration when he answered her silly question. If he hadn't been a soldier he would have seen that it was unanswerable and left it alone without putting the torch to my terror. He went on, damn him, without apparent thought and plenty of technical detail and added more horror. "Ten of those robots concentrated together could bring the Moon down from the sky. One focal point of fire can burn miles through anything. Mandel should know that and give in. The Left have nearly two dozen robots in Battle Square down there. I haven't seen that sort of tactic since the Alien War."

I felt suddenly weak and hopeless as I sat there. Of course I wasn't weak or hopeless because they were only impressions lingering in my mind from long ago. My intellect and emotions were bound together by magnetic fields and other forces I don't understand, not blood and muscle. I was only sitting in the sense that the metal body I controlled was sitting. Don't get me wrong, that body wasn't a useful robot you could move around. It was stuck there at the Console forever and its
body was a long metal case joined to the main Console at many points. The fingers I talk about were merely lights playing on very delicate wires and the keyboards were also very small. I could see them as lettered stops with lights flashing behind them and my mind was actually activating each contact between my wire fingers and the right buttons. To the ordinary human eye they were like fine hairs sparkling as they touched a large number of fine keys with ciphered caps and miniaturised to the size of an old matchbox. Perhaps I have given you a wrong impression of my actual size. I am scarcely more than a foot high.

True the Console which is part of my sensory experience is enormous but the container which holds the essential me is very small. It is also very vulnerable for that reason. However, the designers built into the computer special protections. Using new techniques they made it in such a way that it became hard for a man to destroy because it appealed to some deeply ascetic feeling in human beings both by its shape and the subtle musical cadences that are always coming from it. The old computers frightened men but the new ones attract them. Over the years the people have come to regard the computer as a friend and ally and my Recorder as the best of these because it contains me as a personality like themselves. They could not let anyone destroy it. It would be sacrilege.

If only Cornelius would let me broadcast to the people through my oral mechanism. I can’t do it without his help because my Recorder is not connected to the vision network for the purpose of broadcasting, only for reception. That is reasonable enough for a Recorder. Perhaps I could persuade the people that these revolts are leading them to death and degradation and it is only really them that suffer.

Cornelius is supposed to be neutral, a constitutional official of sorts and that’s why neither side ever deposes him. He is neutral in that he never allows spilt blood to affect his position in the centre. I know he enjoys the whole thing in a sadistic way and without doubt, if the country was a saner place, he wouldn’t be Head of State. Tina sometimes says, with an odd insight that sometimes grows like a flower in a desert, that the people need a martyr, someone outside the hotrun of politics and prepared to shed his skin for the general good. There must be someone like that somewhere. I can tell them that it wouldn’t be such a hard sacrifice, this life, when immortality is so much
harder. If only some of the others of my kind had stayed and hadn’t been shot off into space as if space was a dustbin for inconvenient personalities.

My voice boomed at Tina. “If only they would come back.”
Tina actually looked peeved and that was unusual. By jumping the logical steps as a woman can she answered me shortly. “The ships will never come back, Old Man. They don’t even try to contact us now. I wish you would stop talking as if you thought they cared.”

“If they knew they would come back,” I stated it positively with the kind of unshakeable faith which usually reaps the reward of being made to look foolish if nothing worse.

Egan looked at me queerly and with what looked like compassion. It occurs to me that only soldiers can get away with compassion, presumably because they understand men under stress. “I think we can resign ourselves to their loss or infidelity. They had thousands of new worlds to explore and, in any case, aren’t they in a new time element? What is a century to us could be a much shorter period for them, so they wouldn’t mentally adjust to our problems here, even if they knew about them.” I thought he spoke rather kindly and with just that right touch of deference as he knows my kinship with the men out there. He ended with a comment on something else which betrayed a certain knowledge of my habit of thoughts at least. “There will be no lost legions coming back to Rome, Julius.”

Suddenly I wished I had known him better. His joke about my obsession with Rome was shrewd enough. My eyes were on the grey phalanx of robots formed in the Square facing the Communication Building when he was speaking and I was reflecting the art of war hadn’t changed much. They were in a battle square with their long radiation shields locked round their flanks and long barrelled guns pointed upwards. It was quite classic. My mind often turns to the earliest promise of mankind when there were a lot fewer of the genus about the World. I yearn for the clarity of thought that seemed to exist before the Dark Ages and the Great Mechanical Revolutions. Was there another burst of intellectual genius in the thousand years of Roman Empire as there has been in this last hundred years? Are we descending into decline in just the same way as they eventually did? Is the spring of intelligence that started in the Renaissance run down to nothing again? It
seems that darkness contains the seeds of light and light the weeds of darkness and the pendulum swing is almost inevitable.

"Egan," I spoke quickly in case I lost my nerve. "Does Cornelius know the risks that are being taken? Does he realise that this could be the final adventure for the politicians and they are heading like lemmings for a sea of destruction?"

Egan's eyes flickered uneasily to the communicator in the corner. He seemed strained and worried for a second, then his face relaxed a little. The communicator to Cornelius' room was off. No red light of warning. "You can afford to talk like that, Old Man. The Blanks can do nothing to you. I warn you that they would extract their revenge from Tina, though, and apart from the fact that I love Tina, I don't think you would want her harmed."

The Blanks are a Security Force and they keep an eye on sedition for the President. "Blank," is an old word which means "empty or vacant" and it describes these monsters very well indeed. They are members of a dreadful and soulless organisation, with no compunction in their dealings with people, who kill, and torture before they kill, for the barest of reasons. They are a common denominator in the history of nations such as ours, pervading the lower strata of life like an uncouth worm. I have tried to find some cause for their existence but they are an enigma of the human personality without any real use but as a focus for terror. They are a criminal type, which gains ascendancy in some situations and not others, associated with the cult of personality.

An urgent criss-cross of signals between the Recorder and my mind signalled a flare-up in the engagement outside. Several windows in the Communication Building shattered as the white heat of concentrated small arms radiation struck upwards. A dozen or so of the human defenders fell like turning sticks of wood from the upper parts of the building. Smoke curled lazily from the sparkling flame of an electrical fire mixed with the foamy haze from the extinguishing equipment.

Tina, her fair hair lankly on her shoulders, turned to Egan with concern on her face. "They must be stopped, Egan. I don't care what happens to us, someone must make a stand now. Cornelius must let Julius broadcast to the Nation. They will listen to the Recorder, I'm sure of that."
Egan’s face was white and drawn. “If he heard that, he would kill you, Tina. He won’t allow a broadcast until the rebels capture the main studio and make their usual announcement. He is very strict about that. I don’t want you to end up a martyr for nothing.”

“It would be for nothing too, Tina. A sacrifice must be significant to make an impression and one girl would never be that.” I was sorry to hurt her but it was true. Her gesture was useless.

“We must do something, Julius, and I am going to do it.” Her voice had just a slight touch of hysteria, I thought. “We shall have a significant martyr. Tell me, Julius, wouldn’t you sacrifice your immortality to bring real life back into the Nation?”

I agreed with her wholeheartedly. “If I could I would.”

“That answers my moral question.” She said this quite firmly and turned away from me.

I was rather exasperated by her naive view. She knew that I couldn’t become a martyr or do anything physical that could help my people. There was only one answer and that was a direct speech by me to the people.

“Don’t you see that this isn’t a game anymore, Egan? Cornelius is playing with men’s lives. He doesn’t know what he is doing.” In my mind’s eye I could see the announcer nagging at the brow-beaten citizen as he eats his breakfast. The citizen was thanking his lucky stars, as he tucked into his morning chaff, that it was a Sunday and there was no need to take the hoverbus to the City. The announcement, like the threat of unemployment during this age of automation, was merely a device to keep him in his place. It was intended to frighten him half to death and confuse his sense of loyalties. Let him know who was boss and he behaved like a lamb when fleeced. He was safe at home. Not like the man down the road who tried to help that kid with a robot standing over her. He didn’t stand a chance. Then there was that distant cousin, wasn’t there? The one who went around calling the President ‘an unworthy man.’ They sent him home in pieces.

“Don’t be a fool, Julius. He might be listening and remember, I am his aide. There is such a thing as loyalty.” Egan was angry now.

Tina was standing near the camera control looking very white and strained. Her hand was on the communicator which
linked us with Cornelius as if she wanted to prevent a word getting into the dead microphone. "You hate the President, don't you, Old Man?"

"He's ruining the country and making a peepshow out of us for tourists with a yen for debauchery and anarchy. It's only a matter of time before he brings down the retribution of the Recorder on everyone's head. I think he wants the politicians to fight it out to the death. I think he's completely mad."

Egan spoke back at me suddenly with bitterness. "Don't you think that everybody wants an end to all this so that we can sleep properly at night? Cornelius has no sway with the politicians. The Army hates the game and so do the civilians, but we can't fight robots."

"The Army must have the capacity to bring order whatever you say." I hesitated for a moment, knowing this was the time to hit with the unqualified truth. "The President is to blame, whatever you think. He is old and he wouldn't mind going out in a blaze of glory if he could take the rest with him. He talks like a broken down old alley cat and he's no more fit to run the country than a Blank."

"That's not what you have written in the archives, Old Man. I think you are a hypocrite of the worst sort. Our people are weak and helpless just as you are weak and helpless against the system. They must have a tough hand. Everything is useless against the robots. Missiles and radiation are as much good as peanuts. Only a mass attack by human beings on every robot in the same instant of time would be effective. Smother the things by sheer weight of bodies while one man opens the control panel with a screwdriver. It would be murder though."

"I have written much in the Recorder that was never seen in the Archives." I was furious with his slights on my courage. "I tell you, if the Recorder is still working as it should be, the day of reckoning is near. The people won't have to destroy the robots to finish the rulers. The robots will do the job for them as they were meant to if things went too far."

There was a long silence and I observed the struggle in Egan's face as clearly as if it were a wind on a rough sea. "You have managed to falsify the archives, but how?"

I said simply, "Two keyboards and fantastic mental duplication."
Tina sighed from the camera console. "Ah, I thought so. So our dear great-grandfather, the beloved of the people, has been deceiving his peers. Isn't that the worst treachery, Cornelius? Don't you see what he has done to you? If you don't destroy this monster who has lived far too long in his evil metal case, then you are doomed. Beaten by a hunk of protoplasm and old iron."

I looked at the Communicator. The light was on red! Tina had betrayed me without pity. I stared at Egan, though to him I must have seemed unmoved because my smooth exterior had no expressions. "You and Tina have done this between you, haven't you?"

"Not I," he began, then stopped abruptly, his eyes rooted on his woman's white face. "How could you...?"

The vision screen lit up as I should have expected it to do a second later and the heavily lined face, or the mottled grey distortion that the President chooses to call a face, appeared. He leered at me and shook a sad, sausage finger. "Naughty recorder. Naughty Julius. Now you are most terribly compromised, aren't you? You see, you should never trust a girl. I never have. Never trust potential 'in-laws' either. I must say I was shocked when Tina switched your voices through here just now. I was also interested to hear you confirm what I have always suspected—that there was a duplication from the Recorder. I had been counting on it, in a way, to make an interesting spectacle one day, preferably the day I was on the last lap myself." He stopped talking and looked at Tina with rape in his small red eyes. "However, now isn't the time, Julius. I must do something about you. What do you say we do, my dear?"

Tina said simply, "Smash him."

I laughed at them. "How can you smash me? It is psychologically impossible for a human being to destroy me without such remorse it would break him mentally. That's the way they made me. I am the father figure."

Tina was looking straight at me and her face was almost abstracted with some tremendous effort of will. "You can do it, Cornelius. You and the Blanks. You can, can't you?"

"Don't be stupid!" I shouted with fury at her intellectual ineptness. "No-one is without guilt or conscience. It can't be done."
Cornelius was laughing now. "What the hell do you think the difference is between the top dogs and the rest, Julius? What do you think is the quality or lack of it that makes a Blank? You know I'm foolish, Old Man, I always had the power to finish you and I never used it. It took Tina to do that. to tell me how! I can finish you right now and just for the blow of a hammer. Simple!"

I realised that he could do it in that moment. Without me they could rig the Recorder in some way and make it ineffective. If it was ever effective and not a huge bluff. "Are you going to tell the Politicians the truth?"

His eyes opened widely like two bloodshot saucers of dirty milk and their pupils were black pinpricks. I could sense the shadow of evil that stood over him and the two persons that were in his breast. No normal human dares to be completely bad unless he is at war in himself. Many deny the existence of a soul and blame it on a primitive dream but I think that what proof there is lies in the inner conflict inside a man.

"I'll tell them nothing, Julius. First I'll destroy you and then I shall ask my scientists to find out whether they can make arrangements for my immortality but with some better methods of self expression."

He smiled at me and then his jelly face cavorted with laughter. "I shall send my friends along with a hammer now and I will stop here with a watch and time the experiment. If you had gone on we would have had the other nations singing the Glory Song over us and bleating about human rights, if somehow the true records got out. What a shame to have to repent in front of all those other nasty decadent countries. You'd have made me a laughing stock, Old Man." His ugly face vanished but my subtle sensory equipment seemed to hold on to a shadowy eminence on the dark screen which lingered on.

I heard the stamp of heavy jackboots and the imaginary hair stirred on the back of my neck. Egan was waving a gun about undecidedly and the noise outside seemed to have subsided.

"Father!" Tina called to me.

"I am not your father," I spoke to her coldly as she stood on the raised dais behind the main cameras, "and you are not my daughter. You are a traitor to your family and your country. To save your neck and advance yourself for such men as Cornelius who throw away your people's protection and leave them naked."
She ignored my comments. "Look!" The light on the camera was red. I looked as the two Blanks faced me across the room and she was demure and beautiful and uplifted like a Joan of Arc.

A second or so later my attention was understandably taken off my beautiful descendant. I did hear her say to Egan, "They will think him a true martyr, they will, I know it. They will respond." Then I began to feel as a rabbit must feel when the weasels are after him. The Blanks, their black uniforms modelled on ancient lines and draped closely to their bodies came towards me. Their peaked hats set off the utter emptiness of their faces as a pit sets off its snakes. They had small bright rods in their hands.

I remember the great hollow rapping on my casing like the crash of fate knocking on a door. I recall screaming, although I could feel no pain. I saw the TV camera as my container broke loose from the console and fell to the floor. It was swinging down at me with its round glass eye missing nothing. I saw that Tina was crying and Egan had his arm round her as she steered the camera. In his face I saw a terrible anger and he had his gun raised. There were two shots and my torture was over as the Blanks toppled to the floor like wet and floppy dolls.

Then there was the explosion.

I lay in the rubble afterwards and began to speak into the oral mechanism which by some chance still connected me with the Recorder. I knew that the case was leaking away my power but it seemed to be flowing into some other presence and not to be dissipated into darkness. I knew that Tina was huddled in Egan's arms on the floor and both were still. The windows had splintered into a thousand pieces and it was as if I could hear and see with my natural ears and eyes again. Somehow it became an obsession to speak to the people to vindicate myself and them in confession.

Outside, as I lay here telling you my story, I can hear a thundering of voices. There are thousands out there and they are singing. I know there are ordinary folk and patricians and soldiers together. They are singing and swaying as they sing and I seem to be in the air above them. They are looking up at me with innumerable white blob faces. It's not the old, dead song of victory. It's a new song which is rough and
moving and alive. There are smashed robots in the centre of the crowd where they have left a space round the white-coated doctor. The bells are ringing from the City church and the chanting is a descant for the song. I can’t believe it but there below is the proof.

The people have risen . . . the people have risen . . . the nation has redeemed itself. The Recorder failed . . . or did it? Was this the way it was meant to be? Was it all intended to be an act of compassion that would make the issue very clear to the people as retribution could not? Did Tina realise this and force me to do what I was too cowardly to do? The people have found the courage from somewhere. I haven’t time to work it all out because in a minute I shall go like a gently snuffed candle or I shall be facing a different reality somewhere else.

r. w. mackelworth

the literary line-up

Apart from the second part of James White’s fascinating new serial, “Open Prison,” which hots up in more ways than one, next month, there is a fascinating short novelette with an “inner space” background by J. G. Ballard entitled “Terminal Beach,” which has all the ingredients of what Kingsley Amis recently quoted as “Ballard-land.” Basically, the overwhelming craving of a bomber pilot to return to the scene where he dropped an H-bomb . . .

Story ratings for No. 134 were:
1. Lack of Experience - - - - - John Garforth
2. To Conquer Chaos, Part 2 - - - - - John Brunner
3. The Game - - - - - James Inglis
4. The Rotten Borough - - - - - R. W. Mackelworth
5. Not By Mind Alone - - - - - Michael Moorcock
6. Deep Freeze - - - - - John Rackham

Story ratings for No. 135 were:
1. To Conquer Chaos, Part 3 - - - - - John Brunner
2. Breakdown - - - - - Hilary Bailey
3. Man-Hunt - - - - - John Rackham
4. Forty Years On - - - - - E. R. James
5. Yutzy Brown - - - - - Pino Puggioni
6. Project 13013 - - - - - Bill Spencer
How explain to a man who does not understand our method of telling time, the functions of a clock? Especially when he is a time-traveller with a different sense of temporal movement . . .

the time dweller
by michael moorcock

Dusk had come to the universe, albeit the small universe inhabited by Man. The sun of Earth had dimmed, the moon had retreated and salt clogged the sluggish oceans, filled the rivers that toiled slowly between white, crystalline banks, beneath darkened, moody skies that slumbered in eternal evening.

Of course, in the sun’s long life this stage was merely one interlude. In perhaps a few thousand years, it would flare to full splendour again. But for the meantime it kept its light in close rein, grumbling in its mighty depths and preparing itself for the next step in its evolution.

It had taken time in its fading and those few creatures who had remained on its planets had managed to adapt. Among them was Man, indefatigable; undeserving, really, considering the lengths he had gone to, in previous epochs, to dispose of himself. But here he was, in his small universe consisting of one planet without even the satellite which had slid away into space long since and, in its passing, left legends on his lips.

Brown clouds, brown light, brown rocks and brown ocean flecked with white. A pale rider on a pale beast thumping along the shore, the dry taste of ocean salt in his mouth, the stink of a dead oozer in his nostrils.
His name was the The Scar-faced Brooder, son of the Sleepy-eyed Smiler, his father and the Pinch-cheeked Worrier, his mother. The seal-beast he rode was called Urge. Its glossy coat was still sleek with the salt-rain that had recently ceased, its snout pointed eagerly forward and its two strong leg-fins thwacked the encrusted shore as it galloped along, dragging its razor-edged tail with scant effort. The Scar-faced Brooder was supported on his steed’s sloping back by a built-up saddle of polished silicon that flashed whenever it reflected the salt-patches studding the ground like worn teeth. In his head, held at its butt by a stirrup grip, was his long gun, the piercer with an everlasting ruby as its life. He was dressed in sealskin dyed in sombre rust-red and dark yellow.

Behind him, the Scar-faced Brooder heard the sound of another rider, one whom he had tried to avoid since morning. Now, as evening quietly flowed brown and misty into black night, she still followed. He turned his calm face to look, his mouth tight and white as the scar which rose from its corner to follow his left cheek-bone. She was in the distance, still, but gaining.

He increased his speed.
Brown clouds boiled low like foam across the dark sand of the flat, and their seals slapped loudly over the damp shore as she neared him.
He came to a pool of salt-thick water and Urge splashed into it. It was warm. Still she followed him, even into the water, so that he turned his steed and waited, half-trembling, until she rode up, a tall, well-formed woman with light brown hair long and loose in the breeze.
"Dearest Tall Laugher," he told his sister, "for me there is no amusement in this game."
Frowning, she smiled.
He pressed his point, disturbed, his calm face earnest in the fading brown light that was all the clouds would let pass.
"I wished to ride alone."
"Where would you go, alone, when together we might be carried to more exotic adventure?"
He paused, unwilling and unable to answer.
"Will you come back?"
"I would prefer not to."
A cold, silent wind began to buffet them as it came in suddenly from the sea. Urge moved nervously.
"You fear what the Chronarch might do?"

"The Chronarch has no love for me—but neither has he hatred. He would prefer me gone from Lanjis Liho, to cross the great salt plains of the west and seek my fortune in the land of fronds. He would not trust me with a small part of the Future, as you know, nor give a fraction of the Past into my safekeeping. I go to shape my own destiny!"

"So—you sulk!" she cried as the wind began to mewl.

"You sulk because the Chronarch delegates no honours. Meanwhile, your loving sister aches and is miserable."

"Marry the Big-brained Boaster! He has trust of Past and Future both!"

He forced his restless seal-beast through the thick water and into the night. As it moved, he reached into the saddle sheath and took out his torch to light his way. He depressed its grip and it blazed out, illuminating the surrounding beach for several yards around. Turning, he saw her for a moment in the circle of light, motionless, her eyes aghast as if he had betrayed her.

Oh, I am lonely now, he thought, as the wind blew cold and strong against his body.

He headed inland, over the salt-rocks, towards the west. He rode all night until his eyes were heavy with tiredness, but still he rode, away from Lanjis Liho where Chronarch, Lord of Time, ruled past and present and watched the future come, away from family, home and city, his heart racked with the strain of the breaking, his mind fevered fire and his body all stiff from the demands he made of it.

Into the night, into the west, with his torch burning in his saddle and loyal Urge responding to his affectionate whispering. To the west, until dawn came slowly up from behind him and covered the barren land with soft light.

A little further through the morning he heard a sound as of cloth flapping in the wind and when he turned his head he saw a green tent pitched beside a shallow crevasse, its front flap dancing. He readied his long piercer and halted Urge.

Drawn out, perhaps, by the noise of the seal-beast’s movement, a man’s head poked from the tent like a tortoise emerging from the recesses of its shell. He had a beak of a nose and a fish-like pecker of a mouth, his large eyes were heavy-lidded and a tight-fitting hood hid hair and neck.
“Aha,” said the Scar-faced Brooder in recognition.

“Hmm,” said the Hooknosed Wanderer, also recognising the mounted man confronting him. “You are some distance from Lanjis Liho. Where are you bound?”

“For the land of fronds.”

He resheathed his piercer and clambered down from the high saddle. He passed the tent, its occupant’s head craning round to follow him and stared into the crevasse. It had been widened and deepened by human tools, revealing pieces of ancient wreckage. “What’s this?”

“Nothing but the remains of a crashed spaceship,” replied the Hooknosed Wanderer in such obvious disappointment that he could not have been lying. “My metal diviner found it and I had hoped for a capsule with books or film.”

“There were never many of those. I’d say they had all been gathered by now.”

“That’s my belief, too, but one hopes. Have you breakfasted?”

“No. Thank you.”

The hooded head withdrew into the tent and a thin hand held back the flap. The scar-faced Brooder bent and entered the cluttered tent. There was a great deal of equipment therein; the Hooknosed Wanderer’s livelihood, for he sustained himself by bartering some of the objects he found with his metal diviner and other instruments.

“Apparently, you have no riding animal,” said the Scar-faced Brooder as he sat down and crossed his legs between a soft bundle and an angular statuette of steel and concrete.

“It was necessary to abandon her when my water was exhausted and I could find none to replace it. That is why I was heading for the sea. I am exceedingly thirsty, am suffering from salt-deficiency since I have no liking for the salt which grows in these parts.”

“I have plenty in my saddle barrel,” he said. “Help yourself—good salt water, slightly diluted with fresh, if that suits your taste.” He leant back on the bundle as the Wanderer, nodding sharply, scrambled up, clasping a canteen and left the tent.

He returned smiling. “Thanks. I can last for several days, now.” He pushed aside his clutter of antiques, discovering a small stove. He activated it, placed a pan on top and began frying the leg-fish he had trapped recently.
"Which city was your destination, Brooder? Only two are in easy reach from here—and both lie still many leagues hence. Is it Barbart or Piorha?"

"Barbart in the land of fronds, I think, for I should like to see green vegetation instead of grey or brown. And the ancient places thereabouts have, I must admit, romantic connotations for me. I should like to go and wallow in racial memory, sense the danger of uncontrolled Past, insignificant Present and random Future..."

"Some feel it as that," the Wanderer smiled, shuffling the leg-fish on to plates. "Especially those from Lanjis Liho where the Chronarchy holds sway. But remember, much will be in your mind. You may see Barbart and the land of fronds, but its significance will be decided by you, not by it. Try to do as I do—make no judgments or descriptions of this world of ours. Do that, and it will treat you better."

"Your words seem wise, Wanderer, but I have no precedents by which to judge them. Perhaps when I have placed some of the Future in the Past, I will know."

"You seem tired," said the Wanderer when they were finished eating, "would you like to sleep?"

"I would. Thanks." And while the Hooknosed Wanderer went about his business, the Brooder slept.

He rose in the mellow afternoon, roused Urge who had taken advantage of his master's slumber to rest also and wished the Wanderer goodbye.

"May your blood stay thick," said the Wanderer formally, "and your mind remain open."

He rode away and by dusk had come to the moss which was primarily grey and brown, but tinted in places with patches of light green. He took out his torch and fixed it in its saddle bracket, unwilling to sleep at night because of the potential danger of predatory life.

Once the light from his torch showed him a school of oozers, moving at right angles to his path. They were far inland for their kind, these great white slug-creatures that raised their heads to observe him. He felt he could hear them sniffling at his body salt as perhaps their leech ancestors had sniffed out the blood of his own forefathers. Urge, without prompting, increased his speed.

As he left them, he felt that the oozers represented the true native of Earth now. Man's place was no longer easy to define,
but it seemed that he had been superceded. By remaining alive
on the salt-heavy Earth he was outstaying his welcome. If
there was another home for Man, it did not lie here but in some
other region; perhaps not even the region of space at all but in
dimensions where natural evolution could not affect him.

Brooding, as was his bent, he continued to ride for Barbart
and, by the following day, had reached the delicate frond
forests that waved golden green in the soft sunlight, all silence
and sweet scent. Urge's bounding gait became almost merry
as they fled over the cushions of moss between the shaded
spaces left by the web-thin fronds waving and flowing in the
gusts of air which occasionally swept the forest.

He dismounted soon and lay back on a bank of comfortable
moss, breathing the scented breeze in luxurious self-indulgence.
His mind began to receive disjoined images, he heard his sister's
voice, the sonorous tones of the Chronarch denying him a
function in the House of Time—a function which he had
expected as of right, for had not his grand-uncle been the
previous Chronarch? He saw the twisting many dimensioned
Tower of Time, that wonder-work of an ancient architect with
its colours and strange, moving angles and curves. And then
he slept.

When he awoke it was night and Urge was hooting at him to
wake. He got up sleepily and hauled himself into the saddle,
settled himself, reached for his torch and adjusting it rode
through what seemed to be a network of black and stirring
threads that were the fronds seen in the cold torchlight.

The next morning he could see the low-roofed houses of
Barbart lying in a valley walled by gentle hills. High above the
roofs, a great contrivance of burnished brass glowered like rich
red gold. He speculated momentarily upon its function.

Now a road became evident, a hard track winding among the
moss dunes and leading towards the city. As he followed it he
heard the muffled thud of a rider approaching and, somewhat
wary for he knew little of Barbart or its inhabitants, reined in
Urge, his piercer ready.

Riding towards him on a heavy old walrus came a young
man, long-haired and pleasant featured in a jerkin of light blue
that matched his eyes. He stopped the walrus and looked
quizzically at the Scar-faced Brooder.

"Stranger," he said cheerfully, "it is a pleasant morning."
"Yes it is—and a pleasant land you dwell in. Is that city Barbart?"
"Barbart, certainly. There's none other hereabouts. From where are you?"
"From Lanjis Liho by the sea."
"I had the inkling that men from Lanjis Liho never travelled far."
"I am the first. My name is the Scar-faced Brooder."
"Mine is Domm and I welcome you to Barbart. I would escort you there save for the fact that I have a mission from my mother to seek herbs among the fronds. I am already late, I fear. What time is it?"
"Time? Why the present, of course."
"Ha! Ha! But the hour—what is that?"
"What is 'the hour'?" asked the Brooder, greatly puzzled.
"That's my question."
"I am afraid your local vernacular is beyond me," said the Brooder politely, but nonplussed. The lad's question had been strange to begin with, but now it had become incomprehensible. "No matter," Domm decided with a smile. "I have heard you people of Lanjis Liho have some peculiar customs. I will not delay you. Follow the road and you should be in Barbart in less than an hour."

'Hour'—the word again. Was it some division of the league used here? He gave up wondering and wished the youth 'thick blood' as he rode on.

The mosaiced buildings of Barbart were built in orderly geometric patterns about the central quadrangle in which lay the towering machine of burnished brass with its ridges and knobs and curlicues. Set in the centre of the machine was a great round plaque, divided into twelve units with each unit of twelve divided into a further five units. From the centre arose two pointers, one shorter than the other and the Scar-faced Brooder saw them move slowly. As he rode through Barbart, he noticed that facsimiles of this object were everywhere and he judged, at last, that it was some holy object or heraldic device.

Barbart seemed a pleasant place, though with a somewhat restless atmosphere epitomised by the frantic market-place where men and women rushed from stall to stall shouting at one another, tugging at bales of bright cloth, fingering salt-free fruits and vegetables, pawing meats and confectionaries amid the constant babble of the vendors crying their wares.
Enjoying the scene, the Scar-faced Brooder led his seal-beast through the square and discovered a tavern in one of the side plazas. The plaza itself contained a small fountain in its centre and benches and tables had been placed close by outside the tavern. The Brooder seated himself upon one of these and gave his order to the fat girl who came to ask it.

"Beer?" she said, folding her plump, brown arms over her red bodice. "We have only a little and it is expensive. The fermented peach juice is cheaper."

"Then bring me that," he said pleasantly and turned to watch the thin fountain water, noting that it smelt of brine hardly at all.

Hearing, perhaps, a strange accent, a man emerged from the shadowy doorway of the tavern and, tankard in hand, stood looking down at the Scar-faced Brooder, an amiable expression on his face.

"Where are you from, traveller?" he asked.

The Brooder told him and the Barbartian seemed surprised. He seated himself on another bench.

"You are the second visitor from strange parts we have had here in a week. The other was an emissary from Moon. They have changed much, those Moonites, you know. Tall, they are, and thin as a frond with aesthetic faces. They dress in cloth of metal. He told us he had sailed space for many weeks to reach us..."

At this second reference to the unfamiliar word 'week,' the Brooder turned his head to look at the Barbartian. "Forgive me," he said, "but as a stranger I am curious at certain words I have heard here. What would you mean by 'week' exactly?"

"Why—a week—seven days—what else?"

The Brooder laughed apologetically. "There you are, you see. Another word—days. What is a days?"

The Barbartian scratched his head, a wry expression on his face. He was a middle-aged man with a slight stoop, dressed in a robe of yellow cloth. He put down his tankard and raised his hand. "Come with me and I will do my best to show you."

"That would please me greatly," said the Brooder gratefully. He finished his wine and called for the girl. When she appeared he asked her to take care of his steed and to make him up a bed since he would be staying through the next darkness.

The Barbartian introduced himself as Mokof, took the Brooder's arm and led him through the series of squares,
triangles and circles formed by the buildings, to come at length to the great central plaza and stare up at the pulsing, monstrous machine of burnished bronze.

"This machine supplies the city with its life," Mokof informed him. "And also regulates our lives." He pointed at the disc which the Brooder had noted earlier. "Do you know what that is, my friend?"

"No. I am afraid I do not. Could you explain?"

"It's a clock. It measures the hours of the day," he broke off, noting the Brooder's puzzlement. "That is to say it measures time."

"Ah! I am with you at last. But a strange device, surely, for it cannot measure a great deal of time with that little circular dial. How does it note the flow . . .?"

"We call a period of sunlight 'day,' and a period of darkness 'night.' We divide each into twelve hours—"

"Then the period of sunlight and the period of darkness are equal? I had thought . . . ."

"No, we call them equal for convenience, since they vary. The twelve divisions are called hours. When the hands reach twelve, they begin to count around again . . . ."

"Fantastic!" the Brooder was astounded. "You mean you recycle the same period of time round and round again. A marvellous idea. Wonderful! I had not thought it possible."

"Not exactly," Mokof said patiently. "However, the hours are divided into sixty units. These are called minutes. The minutes are also divided into sixty units, each unit is called a second. The seconds are . . . ."

"Stop! Stop! I am confounded, bewildered, dazzled! How do you control the flow of time that you can thus manipulate it at will? You must tell me. The Chronarch in Lanjis Liho would be overawed to learn of your discoveries!"

"You fail to understand, my friend. We do not control time. If anything, it controls us. We simply measure it."

"You don't control . . . but if that's so why—?" The Brooder broke off, unable to see the logic of the Barbartian's words. "You tell me you recycle a given period of time which you divide into twelve. And yet you then tell me you recycle a shorter period and than an even shorter period. It would soon become apparent if this were true, for you would be performing the same action over and over again and I see you are not. Or, if you were using the same time without being in its power, the
sun would cease to move across the sky and I see it still moves. Given that you can release yourself from the influence of time, why am I not conscious of it since that instrument,” he pointed at the clock, “exerts its influence over the entire city. Or, again, if it is a natural talent, why are we in Lanjis Liho so busily concerned with categorising and investigating our researches into the flow if you have mastered it so completely?”

A broad smile crossed the face of Mokof. He shook his head. “I told you—we have no mastery over it. The instrument merely tells us what time it is.”

“That is ridiculous,” the Brooder said, dazed. His brain fought to retain its sanity. “There is only the present. Your words are illogical!”

Mokof stared at his face in concern. “Are you unwell?”

“I’m well enough. Thank you for the trouble you have taken, I will return to the tavern now, before I lose all hold of sanity!”

The clutter in his head was too much. Mokof made a statement and then denied it in the same breath. He decided he would cogitate it over a meal.

When he reached the tavern he found the door closed and no amount of banging could get those inside to open it. He noticed that his saddle and saddle-bags were resting outside and he knew he had some food in one of the bags, so he sat on the bench and began to munch on a large hunk of bread.

Suddenly, from above him, he heard a cry and looking up he saw an old woman’s head regarding him from a top-storey window.

“Ah!” she cried. “Aah! What are you doing?”

“Why, eating this piece of bread, madame,” he said in surprise.

“Filthy!” she shrieked. “Filthy, immoral pig!”

“Really, I fail to—”

“Watch! Watch!” the old woman cried from the window. Very swiftly, three armed men came running into the plaza. They screwed up their faces in disgust when they saw the Scar-faced Brooder.

“A disgusting exhibitionist as well as a pervert!” said the leader.

They seized the startled Brooder.

“What’s happening?” he gasped. “What have I done?”
“Ask the judge,” snarled one of his captors and they hauled him towards the central plaza and took him to a tall house which appeared to be their headquarters.

There he was flung into a cell and they went away.

An overdressed youth in the next cell said with a grin: “Greetings, stranger. What’s your offence?”

“I have no idea,” said the Brooder. “I merely sat down to have my lunch when, all at once . . .”

“Your lunch? But it is not lunch-time for another ten minutes!”

“Lunch-time. You mean you set aside a special period to eat—oh, this is too much for me.”

The overdressed youth drew away from the bars and went to the other side of his cell, his nose wrinkling in disgust. “Ugh—you deserve the maximum penalty for a crime like that!”

Sadly puzzled, the Brooder sat down on his bench, completely mystified and hopeless. Evidently the strange customs of these people were connected with their clock which seemed to be a virtual deity to them. If the hands did not point to a certain figure when you did something, then that act became an offence. He wondered what the maximum penalty would be.

Very much later, the guards came to him and made him walk through a series of corridors and into a room where a man in a long purple gown wearing a metallic mask was seated at a carved table. The guards made the Brooder sit before the man and then they went and stood by the door.

The masked man said in a sonorous voice: “You have been accused of eating outside the proper hour and of doing it in a public place for all to see. A serious charge. What is your defence?”

“Only that I am a stranger and do not understand your customs,” said the Brooder.

“A poor excuse. Where are you from?”

“From Lanjis Liho by the sea.”

“I have heard rumours of the immoralities practiced there. You will learn that you cannot bring your filthy habits to another city and hope to continue with them. I will be lenient with you, however and sentence you to one year in the antique mines.”

“But it is unjust!”

“Unjust, is it? Watch your tongue or I will extend the sentence!”
Depressed and without hope, the Brooder allowed the guards to take him back to his cell. The night passed and morning came and then the guards arrived. "Get up," said the leader, "the judge wishes to see you again!"

"Does he intend to increase my sentence, after all?"

"Ask him."

The judge was tapping his desk nervously at the Brooder and his guards entered.

"You know of machines in Lanjis Liho, do you not? You have some strange ones I've heard. Do you wish to be released?"

"I wish to be released, of course. Yes, we know something of machines, but . . ."

"Our Great Regulator is out of control. I would not be surprised if your crime did not provide the shock which caused it to behave erratically. Something has gone wrong with its life core and we may have to evacuate Barbart if it cannot be adjusted. We have forgotten our old knowledge of machines. If you adjust the Great Regulator, we shall let you go. Without it, we do not know when to sleep, eat or perform any of our other functions. We shall go mad if we lose its guidance!"

Scarceley understanding the rest of the judge's statement, the Brooder heard only the fact that he was to be released if he mended their machine. On the other hand, he had left Lanjis Liho for the very reason that the Chronarch would not give him trust of any instruments. He had little experience, yet, if it meant his release, he would try.

When he arrived again in the central plaza, he noted that the machine of burnished bronze—the Great Regulator, they called it—was making a peculiar grumbling noise and shaking mightily. Around it, trembling in unison, stood a dozen old men, waving their hands.

"Here is the man from Lanjis Liho!" called the guard. They looked anxiously at the Scar-faced Brooder.

"The life-core. It must certainly be the life-core," said an ancient, tugging at his jerkin.

"Let me see," said the Scar-faced Brooder, not at all sure that he could be of help.

They wound off several of the machine's outer plates and he stared through thick glass and looked at the luminous life-core.
He had seen them before and knew a little about them. He knew enough, certainly, to understand that this should not be glowing bright purple and showering particles with such constancy.

He knew, suddenly, that in an exceedingly short space of time—one of these peoples’ ‘minutes,’ perhaps—the life-core would reach a critical state, it would swell and burst from its confines and its radiation would destroy everything living. But, he ignored their shouts as he became lost in the problem, he would need considerably longer than that if he was to deal with it.

Soon, he realised helplessly, they would all be dead.

He turned to tell them this, and then it struck him. Why could not he, as he had guessed these citizens capable of, *recycle* that moment, personally?

Since the previous day, his mind had been trying to see the logic in what Mokof had told him and, using parts of things the Chronarch had told him, he had constructed an idea of what the process must be like.

Experimentally, he eased himself *backwards* in time. Yes, it worked. The core was now as he had first seen it.

He had never thought of doing this before, but now he saw that it was easy, requiring merely a degree of concentration. He was grateful for the Bartarians, with their weird time device, for giving him the idea.

All he had to do was to remember what the Chronarch had taught him about the nature of time—how it constantly and imperceptibly to ordinary beings re-formed its constituents to give it the apparently forward movement which affected, so broadly, the organisation of matter.

Shifting himself into the time-area he had occupied a short while before, he began to study the temporal co-ordinates of the life core. He could think of no physical means of stopping it, but if he could, in some manner, lock it in time, it would then cease to be a danger. But he would still have to work speedily, since, sooner or later, the temporal structure would fail to hold and he would sweep onwards, losing time continuously, until he was brought to the moment when the life-core began to spread its radiation.

*Again and again he let himself drift up almost to the ultimate moment, shifting himself backwards, losing a few grains of time with every shift.*
Then, at last, he understood the temporal construction of the core. With an effort of will he reduced the temporal coordinates to zero. It could not progress through time. It was frozen and no longer a danger.

He fell back into his normal time-stream, his body wet with sweat. They crowded about him, questioning in shrill, excited voices.

“What have you done? What have you done? Are we safe?”
“You are safe,” he said.

They seized him, thanking him with generous words, his earlier crime forgotten. “You must be rewarded.”

But he scarcely heard them, as they bore him back to the judge, for he was brooding on what he had just accomplished.

As a man might step backwards to regain lost ground, he had stepped backwards to regain lost time. He had his reward. He was most grateful to these people now, for with their weird ideas about time, they had shown him that it was possible to exist at will in a point in time—just as it was possible to exist in a point in space. It was, he realised, merely a matter of knowing such a thing was possible. Then it became easy.

The judge had doffed his mask and smiled his gratitude. “The wise men tell me that you worked a miracle. They saw your body flickering like a candle flame, disappearing and appearing constantly. How did you achieve this?”

He spread his hands: “It was extraordinarily simple. Until I came to Barbart and saw the thing you call clock, I did not realise the possibilities of moving through time as I could move through space. It seemed to me that since you appeared capable of recycling the same period of time, I could do likewise. This I did. Then I studied the life-core and saw that, by manipulation of its time structure, I could fix it in a certain point, thus arresting its progress. So simple—and yet it might never have occurred to me if I had not come here.”

The judge passed a hand over his puzzled eyes. “Ah . . .” he said.

“And now,” the Brooder said cheerfully, “I thank you for your hospitality. I intend to leave Barbart immediately, since I shall obviously never understand your customs. I return to Lanjis Liho to tell the Chronarch of my discoveries. Farewell.”

He left the court-room, crossed the plaza through crowds of grateful citizens, and was soon saddling Urge and riding away from Barbart in the land of fronds.
Two days later he came upon the Hooknosed Wanderer grubbing in a ditch he had just dug.

"Greetings, Wanderer," he called from the saddle.

The Wanderer looked up, wiping salty earth from his face. "Oh, 'tis you, Brooder. I thought you had decided to journey to the land of fronds."

"I did. I went to Barbar and there—" briefly the Brooder explained what had happened.

"Aha," nodded the Wanderer. "So the Chronarch is educating his people well, after all. I frankly considered what he was doing impossible. But you have proved me wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I can tell you. Come into my tent and drink some wine."

"Willingly," the Brooder said, dismounting.

From a plastic flask, the Wanderer poured wine into two cut-glass goblets.

"Lanjis Liho," he said, "was founded in ancient times as an experimental village where new-born children were taken and educated according to the teachings of a certain philosopher called Rashin. Rashin regarded people's attitude towards Time as being imposed on their consciousness by their method of recording and measuring it—by the state of mind which said 'the past is the past and cannot be changed,' 'we cannot know what the future holds' and so forth. Our minds, he decided, were biased and while we continued to think in this way we should never be free of the shackles of time. It was, he felt, the most necessary shackle to cast off. He said, for instance, that when the temperature becomes too hot, a man devises a means of keeping himself cool. When it rains he enters a shelter or devises a shelter he can transport with him. If he comes to a river, he builds a bridge, or if to the sea—a boat. Physical difficulties of a certain intensity can be overcome in a physical way. But what if the difficulties intensify to the degree where physical means can no longer work against them?"

The Brooder shrugged. "We perish—or find some means other than physical to combat them."

"Exactly. Rashin said that if Time moves too swiftly for a man to accomplish what he desires he accepts the fact passively. Rashin thought that with re-education Man might rid himself of this reconception and take as easily to adjusting Time to his requirements as he adjusts nature. A non-physical mean's you see."
"I think I understand a little of what you mean," said the Scar-faced Brooder. "But why is it necessary, I wonder?" The question was rhetorical, but the Wanderer chose to answer.

"On this world," he said, "we must admit it, Man is an anachronism. He has adapted to a degree but not sufficiently to the point where he could sustain himself without artifice. The planet has never been particularly suitable for him, of course, but it has never been so inhospitable as now.

"The Chronarch, as I have said, is a conscious experiment. Time and Matter are both ideas. Matter makes a more immediate impression on Man, but Time’s affects are longer lasting. Therefore the Chronarchy, down the ages, has sought to educate its people into thinking of Time in a similar way as they think of Matter. In this way it has been possible to produce a science of time, like the science of physics. But it has only been possible to study time until now—not manipulate it.

"We may soon master Time as we once mastered the atom. And our mastery will give us far greater freedom than did our nuclear science. Time may be explored as our ancestors explored space. Your descendants, Scar-faced Brooder, shall be heir to continents of time as we have continents of space. They shall travel about in time, the old view of Past, Present and Future abolished. Even now you regard these in an entirely different light—merely as convenient classifications for the study of Time."

"That is true," he nodded, "I had never considered them anything else. But now I am unsure what to do, for I fled to Barbart originally to settle and forget Lanjis Liho where I went unhonoured."

The Wanderer smiled a little. "I do not think you will go unhonoured now, my friend," he said.

The Brooder saw the point and smiled also. "Perhaps not," he agreed.

The Wanderer sipped his wine. "Your journeyings in space are all but ended, anyway. For space is becoming increasingly hostile to Man and will soon refuse to sustain him, however much he adapts physically. You and your like must enter the new dimensions you’ve discovered and dwell there. Go back to Lanjis Liho of your birth and tell the Chronarch what you did in Barbart, show him what you did and he will welcome you.
Your reason for leaving no longer exists. You are the first of the Time Dwellers and I salute you as the salvation of mankind.” The Wanderer drained his glass.

Somewhat overwhelmed by this speech, the Brooder bade the Wanderer farewell and thick blood, left the tent and climbed upon the back of Urge.

The Wanderer stood beside the tent, smiling at him. “One day you must tell me how you did it,” he said.

“It is such a simple thing—you just live through the same period of time instead of different ones. Perhaps this is just the start and soon I will be able to explore further abroad—or is the word ‘a-time?’ But now I will be off for I’m impatient to tell my news to the Chronarch!”

The Wanderer watched him ride away, feeling a trifle like the last dinosaur must have felt so many millions of years before.

Once again, the Scar-faced Brooder rode along the sea-shore, staring over the sluggish waves at the brown sky beyond.

Salt shone everywhere across the land, perhaps heralding an age where crystalline life-forms would develop in conditions absolutely unsuitable for animal life as he knew it.

Yes, the period when Man must change his environment radically had come, if Man were to survive at all.

The Earth would cease to support him soon, the sun cease to warm him. He had the choice of living for a while in artificial conditions such as the Moonites already did, or of completely changing his environment—from a physical one to a temporal one!

Definitely, the latter was the better choice. As the sky darkened over the sea, he took out his torch, depressed the handle and sent a great blaze of light spreading across the inhospitable Earth.

The first of the Time Dwellers goaded his seal-beast into a faster pace, impatient to tell the Chronarch his welcome news, impatient to begin the exploration of a new environment.

—Michael Moorcock
One way of cheating the insurance companies is to die legally and then assume another name. However, when computed statistics eventually catch up with the policies involved, some very strange results can be expected.

"What's keeping old Foggy now?" David Hird paced the polished cellar floor anxiously, his heels making a click-clack tattoo on the plastic surface. In his movements, he trailed the fingers of his hand to caress the gleaming framework of the master panel, with its arrays of light-points. To the primly erect girl who stood by the far end of the panel, he appealed, "Doesn't the silly old fool realise that time is money, nowadays? That there's not much point in designing a complex like this, especially to cut time-waste, if he's going to keep it hanging on his whim?"

"Mr. Fogart is a very important person," she said, icily. "He has many other things to do. He will be here just as soon as he can." She was Mr. Fogart's personal secretary, very aware of her position, and making no secret at all of the contempt she felt for Hird. He recognised it, knew that Miss Preed had no time for him, or what he stood for. An iceberg, he thought. Beautiful, undoubtedly, but a chilly iceberg just the same.

He went back to his restless pacing to and fro in front of the machine, giving her a side-glance from time to time. No more life than a shop-window dummy, he thought, and old Foggy is just as bad. Living in the past, clinging to outworn
ideas of propriety and decorum. ‘The whole thesis of life-
insurance is founded in dignity and the human approach,’ he
could hear old Foggy’s words again. ‘It does not lend itself
to this obsession for computerisation.’ Well, he’d been able
to talk the old man past that initial hurdle, anyway. Lord,
what was the point of employing efficiency-experts, if you
didn’t take heed of what they said?

His ears caught the hum and hiss of the lift and he cut
short his pacing to hurry to the lift-gates. Miss Preed stirred
into action, too, and came to stand beside him, her every
movement a subdued poem of grace. A Priestess, awaiting
the descent of the Prophet, he thought, irreverently.

“Miss Preed . . .” Mr. Fogart held out a slim folder to her.
“Take care of this. To be dealt with as soon as we’ve finished,
here. Ah, Hird. All in readiness? Very well, I am willing to
be shown!”

Miss Preed took the commission as if it embodied an
eleventh commandment, stepped aside, and arranged herself
at the Boss’s right hand side. Herbert Fogart, Managing
Director of Universal International Life, was ill-equipped to
look the part, being short, pot-bellied and bottle-shouldered,
but he made up in attitude what he lacked in structure.

“I am in your hands, Hird,” he said. “Show me!”

Hird almost fell over his feet in his eagerness to demonstrate
his dream-child. “It is all done from here at the moment,”
he explained. “Later, as soon as the appropriate offices have
been established upstairs, it will be done by remote control.
If I may have your indulgence, just to run over a point or
two of theory. Actuarial tables, as we all know, are simply
a set of tabulated values, showing potential life-expectancies
for various age-levels, in various circumstances. On these
tables the whole structure of life-insurance is based.”

“And very efficient they are, too,” Fogart rumbled.
“Constantly being brought up to date, in line with every
new discovery calculated to affect health, life-span and
income.”

“Quite so,” Hird smiled, smothering his irritation. “But
there is one major drawback to actuarial tables, in that they
are averages, statistically accurate, but averages, just the
same. By definition, this means that there will always be
those who live longer than they should, and upon whom the annuities and endowment sections will inevitably show a loss . . .”

“No no!” Fogart interrupted, indignantly. “We had this out before, Hird. We do not show a loss. The tables are adjusted to compensate . . .”

“Yes, sir. But that is my whole point,” Hird fought to control his exasperation. You could get juice out of granite easier than you could get a stuck idea out of this old man’s head. “We adjust the whole tabular rate to cover variations. So everyone has to pay a higher premium than is really justified. This way . . .” and he waved a proud hand at the waiting machine, . . . “we can quote a premium rate for each individual ‘life,’ and beat the competition hands down.”

Fogart frowned. He didn’t like the idea of competition, or the cut-rate spirit. It wasn’t dignified.

“Within the memory banks,” Hird moved to the console which was the heart of the complex filling the rest of the extensive cellar of the old building, “we have full physical details, a complete history of every ‘life’ U.I.L. has ever insured, right from the very beginning.”

Despite himself, the old man was impressed by that. Actual figures were something he could appreciate. Hird could see his lips moving silently as he multiplied out the enormous total.

“Every one, for one hundred and fifty years?” he breathed.

“Every last one. And there’s room for a hundred times as many more. It beats micro-filming, doesn’t it?” Micro-filming files was the last great concession U.I.L. had made to the moves of progress. It had also been one of Mr. Fogart’s own, and rare, enthusiasms. His face tightened. Hird, skating hurriedly over the gaffe, sat himself before the panel, rather precariously on an abandoned carton.

“Now,” he said, “we have all that data. Every life we have ever had, including those policies currently in force. Suppose we wish to register a new client. The insurance agent in the field will gather the particulars, exactly as now, entering them on a special questionnaire card, punched in the appropriate sections. I have one here, specially prepared.” He got it out from his wallet. “No contract is yet drawn up, nothing signed. I insert the card into the machine. Then,
at great speed, that data is first of all put into a file of its
own. Then every item on it is checked and compared with
similar items throughout millions of previous lives, the com-
puter section runs an estimate of the probable life and quotes
a premium plan which will, simultaneously, give the client the
best possible value, and completely cover our risk.” He left
the card in the slot and swung round dangerously.

“Think of that, as a selling line, sir!” he demanded. “A
policy individually tailored to you, personally. Not just an
entry in a ledger, a faceless statistic, one of the millions, but
as a person. Universal International Life cares for you!
Doesn’t it catch at your imagination?”

“It has a certain fascination,” Fogart agreed, unwillingly.
“We do believe in the personal touch, to inspire confidence
and a sense of security. You say the machine is fast? Surely,
with all the modern miracles, it must take time to hunt
through all those records, and then work them out?”

“Not really sir,” Hird turned to his panel again. “It’s a
matter of selection and breaking down by subdivision.
Typically, the flow-pattern will go like this. Male-female;
that cuts the task in half at once. Married-single; cut by a
third, again, roughly. Then age, by birthdate; that selects
quite a small remaining section. And so on. It is really quite
fast. The advised policy-details are fed out here, on a chart.
within seconds.”

“Seconds? Indeed!”

“Oh yes, sir. It’s fast. If you care to observe, I’ll run this
test card through, and you’ll see.”

“It’s all ready to go, then?”

“Quite ready. All I have to do, once the card is entered,
is press this button . . .” Hird depressed the button, firmly,
“and . . .” He got up and moved back. Mr. Fogart moved
back with him. So did Miss Preed. A red light had sprung
up on the board almost immediately. Then another. Then
several more. Far off down a lane between impassive module-
boxes a bell rang stridently. Somewhere beyond that, in the
maze, a hooter began to savage the silence. Silence no longer
as a low hum grew, became a thunderous rattle.

“Something’s gone wrong!” Hird gasped, catching his
breath on a sudden stink of smouldering insulation.
“Shut it off! Stop it!” Fogart squealed, losing his dictatorial poise. “You lunatic! You’ll blow the whole building up!”

Hird crept forward, waving away a swirling mist of smoke, to reach for the master switch. It burned his fingers as he touched it, making him snatch his hand away. There was a muffled ‘poof’ as a whole panel burst out of the front, clattered on the floor, disgorging a snaky mess of spitting, sparking cables. Miss Preed screamed, hoisting her already short skirt up around her shapely thighs and dancing an abandoned fling as the sparks struck at her ankles. The iceberg melts, Hird thought crazily, as he wrapped his handkerchief round his fingers and tried again. This time, he succeeded.

A wild cacophony of sound wailed, sighed, dwindled into silence. The pall of grey fumes hung lazily in the quiet. Fogart coughed, dusted off his shirt front and turned a furious gaze up at Hird.

“You and your progressive schemes, your computerisation! Bah! You will pay for this, Mr. Hird. Every penny! I was a fool to listen to your crack-brained ideas in the first place. Fortunately, this ridiculous venture is covered, to some extent at least, by insurance. Industrial insurance. We shall recover some of the damage.”

“I can’t understand it, at all,” Hird mumbled, staring at the silent cabinets and the unlit board. “There’s no reason why it should have done that. It’s all perfectly straightforward, in design . . .”

“The rest, the cost of clearing out all this . . . this rubbish, getting the original filing-cabinets replaced, and everything as it was before, and any leeway, you will find, Hird.”

“But that could run to thousands!”

“It may well be as much as that,” Fogart stiffened an implacable finger, wagged it under David’s nose. “That will teach you a valuable lesson. I will personally see to it that every possible penny of your salary is garnished until the deficit is met. Come, Miss Preed!”

He swung round, his back like a bent ramrod, and stalked to the lift-gates, leaving Hird still half-stunned by the sudden reversal of his dreams. Miss Preed arched her lovely eyebrows, parted her immaculate lips in a sneer and put a slim hand down her thigh.
"And these," she said, exhibiting a very attractive leg, drawing the skirt well above the knee. "These stockings cost me seventeen and six!"

He goggled at the leg she seemed in no hurry to withdraw and then at her. Something jarred about the performance. Then he stared even more as she leaned forward, still sneering, to whisper, "You fool!"

Long after the pair of them had gone, leaving him to crouch on the carton and stare at the wreckage, the tone of her words echoed in his mind. He knew that she despised him, from her eminence as the Managing Director's personal secretary, but there had been something more than that in her voice. A gloating revenge? But that was ridiculous. And it was equally ridiculous to sit here and wallow in failure. That wouldn't achieve anything. Besides, it wasn't his fault, in the last analysis. That idea lodged, flowered and grew into indigation in his mind. He went in search of the nearest telephone.

"This is the residence of Gordon Broome," a toneless electronic voice recited. "You may speak freely, there is no-one listening."

Hird snarled, silently. Up until quite recently, he had regarded Broome's eccentricities as amusing, as evidence of a super-brain playing its own high-level jokes on mankind. Broome was an 'X'-person, utterly and at all times without reverence for anything or anyone. With his superior talents, he could do anything, however outlandish, and get away with it. Hird had felt uplifted, proud, that a man like Broome would call him friend and treat him as a brother. Now, he wasn't so sure. With painful patience, he recalled the trick-control of this robot telephone-answering gadget.

"Tobor," he said, "get Broome here. I want to talk to him." Anything following the enunciation of 'Robot' backwards was so much waste of time, but he couldn't resist it. He knew that the gadget would immediately disconnect itself and emit a loud hoot, telling Broome that it was someone wanting him in person, but his growing fury ran away with his tongue. It was still over the boil when Broome's casual voice struck his ear.

"You and your unprintable computerised insurance schemes," he said, forcefully. "I have just been strapped by
the big boss himself. Set up a demonstration, to show him how fast and efficient it was, and the adjectival thing blew up in my face. His face, too."

"Fun!" Broome said. "Stay there. I'll be half-an-hour."

Hird met him at the marble and chrome entrance hall of U.I.L. and conducted him past the uniformed commissionaire back down to the deserted cellars. Broome would never have been allowed in on his own. Respectable insurance officials tend to look suspiciously at a man who shows up in a maroon-coloured track-suit, sandals and a cigar, at eleven in the morning. If the individual in question happens to have bright red hair and a waving wisp of ginger beard, their suspicions might amount to deliberate obstruction. Genius or not, Hird thought, he might just wear a collar and tie for once. Broome, of course, was utterly unconscious of his appearance. He was much more interested in the cellar lay-out.

"Wasted a lot of space," he said, waving a limp hand at the serried cabinets. "Transistorized? Could have got it all in one stack of modules."

"One has to make concessions to the official mind. Most of this is for appearance. But it's all according to the basic layout you gave me, and checked three times for continuity by the technicians. All installed by the people you recommended, Baxter & Harding."

"Good firm. That part's all right, then. Tell me exactly what you did." Hird told him, step by step. Broome wandered to the master panel. He had that air of just happening to drift wherever he wanted to be.

"This the test card I see. And then? Can you remember which red light came up, where"

Hird remembered only too well, and showed him.

"That one You're sure? And then . . . ."

When all the tale was done, right down to the last closing lines from the outraged observers, Broome stood quite still for a long time. It was moments like this which served to counteract all the more infuriating aspects of his behaviour. Just standing there, completely remote from everything. Hird sensed that he was "working" at a tremendous rate and then,
without changing any visible factor, he seemed to slow down and come back to life.

"Fun!" he said. "Great fun. David . . ." he turned to look at Hird, his eyebrows twisted in an odd stare. "How long will it take you to pay for the damage and forget all about it?"

"Years! But I'm not going to. This is some silly mistake, isn't it? A fault, somewhere? Gordon, I can't spend the rest of my life paying off. Besides, it would mean my being an insurance man, solid, all that time, and it's not my line. You know that. I'm an efficiency expert. I've got a future. I did have, anyway, until this happened. If I just accept this, and settle down to slog, and pay it off, I'm ruined! You know what I mean?"

"Yes. Natural. But it might be safer."

"Safer? What does that mean? Gordon, do you know what went wrong, and can it be put right?"

"Yes, twice. All right. On your own head. Telephone, get B & H to send a couple of men and a few spares. Never mind, do it myself. Point me towards the instrument, eh?"

Half an hour later the pair of them sat in a coffee-bar, just across the busy road from the U.I.L. building, sipping and watching out for the B & H van. Hird was on edge with curiosity, but Broome refused to talk on anything but women.

"Queer creatures" he mused. "They have gifts, you know? I had to use up three women to finally pin down one of them. Intuition, they call it. A name. Doesn't mean anything until you analyse what they do. You ever go dancing, David?"

"Of course. What has dancing to do with it?"

"They take it all for granted. Go backwards. Know exactly what you are going to do next, even when you don't always know yourself. Went into the whole thing once, got a most impressive set of data, turned it over to a colleague of mine. He's working on it, now. Making a diagnostic machine. Tells you what's wrong with you far faster and more accurate than any doctor. He makes machines. Called Arundel."

"Let's hope he makes better ones than the fizzer I just put together," Hird groaned. "Do any of his ever blow up in his face?"
“I expect they do, sometimes. Part of the fun. Point is, never trust a female too far. Unknown quantity. Like this Miss Preed of yours.”

“She’s not mine. Nor do I want her to be. What’s she got to do with all this?” Hird grasped at a possible straw. “You mean, she might have been messing about with the machinery? But that’s ridiculous. She lives for old Foggy all the time. I can’t see her getting her hands dirty for anything.”

“Soon see. There’s our van, now.” For all his apparent aimlessness, Broome was on his feet and away before Hird had moved. Later, down in the cellars again, the technician from B & H flipped the winder of his portable meter and shook his head, wonderingly.

“Duplication-overload,” he said. “No doubt on that. You should’ve designed for a cut-out for that, it seems to me. I can fix one now if you like, right here on the panel.”

“Duplication-overload? I don’t get you. What does that mean?”

“Simple enough. Look, your sorter-machine circuits deal with forty-two major factors for each individual unit, right? And your computation section takes the comparisons and runs an evaluation on them. But, if you get two sets which match, exactly, all the way down the line, then you get a temporary overload, through here.”

“That was no temporary overload” his colleague declared, and the first man agreed with a heavy nod.

“You must have had at least a dozen duplicates, there. Now, I can put a shunt in here, if you like. Then, if you hit a duplicate again, it will light this warning lamp, and stop the machine until the fault is clear. That all right?” Hird struggled, not with the technician’s question, but with the sudden impossibilities which flooded his mind. From the corner of his eye he caught Broome’s glance, the gentle signalling nod, and shrugged.

“All right, you do that” he said. “You’re the experts. How long before it’s all working again?”

“Couple of hours. Not much real damage done. All these modules have safety circuits built in, you see.”

Hird withdrew to a distance, to confer with Broome in guarded whispers. “You suspected something like this?”
“Pretty obvious. Fun, eh?”

“Fun, my eye! There’s some kind of swindle going on here. Gordon, you know as well as I do that the chances of two people showing exactly the same physical characteristics is so remote as to be practically zero. What beats me is why no-one ever spotted this in the files before.” He began to glow as another thought struck him. “Old Foggy is going to look sick when I tell him. And grateful, even if I have to twist his arm.”

“A swindle, yes. But what kind One person taking out duplicate policies? Why would anyone do that?”

“Why, to get . . .” Hird paused, and frowned. That wouldn’t be a very clever thing to do, now that he considered it. You’d pay out double premiums to get double benefits, but what would you gain? If one policy was good business for the firm, then a duplicate policy, for the same person . . . wouldn’t make any difference, at all.

“All right,” he muttered, angrily. “How else can the machine be knocking out duplications by the dozen”

“Wait and see,” Broome advised.

The repair men were as good as their promise and left the machine in working order well within the stipulated time. Broome was still holding the test-card which had started all the fireworks in the first place.

“We’ll try it again, shall we?” he suggested, slipping the card in its slot. “But this time, let’s ask the machine whether it already has these figures in the files,” and he set the panel controls accordingly. This time, there was no display of excitement, just an eager hum and a click and then a machine-gun chatter from the print-out. Broome caught up the drooping end of the paper and read out, “Amelia Preed, female, single, no issue, no extant relatives . . .”

“Hah!” Hird said, awkwardly. “I meant to tell you. That card is made out on Preedy’s statistics. I did it myself, for test purposes, just to show old Foggy what sort of policy the machine would advise, against the actual policy she does have. I know it’s a duplication, Gordon, but the thing is supposed to deal with that, isn’t it? On the first level, I mean. When that first red came on, that was fine. But then it went mad and started showing reds all over the place.”
“I'm not surprised,” Broome nodded. “Quite right, the analyser is designed to spot whether an offered set of figures is already in the bank. But what about this?” and he held up the written-out sheet. It was far longer than it had any business to be. Hird took it, read, and felt his head swim. “Angela Parsons; Alice Palmer; Anne Peters . . . ! What's it all mean, Gordon? Why does it advise, here, on Miss Preed's bit, that she's a bad risk? She's a first-class 'life' and in excellent shape, whichever way you look at her. The damned machine is crazy.”

“Possibly. But what would you advise, David, if you were asked to write a policy for someone who has, three times already, died of Dunn's disease at age thirty. That's what it says, here. Fifteen years ago one Anne Peters, duplicating your Miss Preed's statistics precisely, took out a policy, at age twenty-five, died of Dunn's disease five years later. One year later, same again, calling herself Alice Palmer, this time. She died, too. Same way. Then, look, Angela Parsons. And now, Amelia Preed. If this is anything to go by, she's due to 'die' in about six months time, of Dunn's disease.”

“Faked?” Hird mumbled, grasping for sense out of the confusion.

“The disease, you mean? I doubt that. It's new, but it's all too common these days. An accelerated sclerema thickening of cellular walls due to a combination of all sorts of things. Accumulated pesticide traces, fall-out traces, polluted atmosphere. It's quick, once you've got it, and incurable, so far. And unmistakable. Besides there'd be medical certificates, wouldn't there That's what this symbol stands for, I think.”

Hird put out a shaking hand, grasped the panel for support and leaned on it. You take out an insurance policy. You die. You come back to life, somehow, and then take out another. And you make a comfortable fortune, if you can get away with it.

“Beneficiary!” he gasped, all at once. “Who's collecting?”

“It’s a racket. I don’t know how, but it’s a racket. It’s got to be. What’s more, Preedy’s in it, right up to her glasses. I want to have a chat with her, right away!”

“About what?” Broome asked, negligently. “How she dies and comes back to life, at will?” He struck an attitude, put on a hard voice “Tell me, Miss Preed, how is it you have died three times already, and refuse to stay dead?” He switched attitudes and voices, pretending to cower. “You must be mad! I’ll call the police. Help!”

“Clown!” Hird growled. “She must know what’s going on. She’s got to be made to talk. She’s swindling U.I.L. stone-blind and you know it. If I went to old Foggy with this . . .”

“He’d call the police. David, simmer down. You know. I know. But all we have is what the machine says. Who’s to believe it, except us? And why pick on Miss Preed? How do you know she’s the key?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Remember the technical bod? At least a dozen, he said. I thought so, too, when I first looked the thing over.”

“You mean, there’s more?”

“Let’s look, shall we?” Broome studied the panel again, critically. “That shunt circuit will come in very handy,” he murmured. “We set it up so, and so, and then this, and away she goes. Now, if I’ve done it right, it will scan the memory-banks and count up all the duplicate sets of readings . . .”

An hour later, Hird groaned as he shifted his aching gluteus maximus into another twinge against the unsympathetic plastic of the floor and groaned again at the ache in his mind. Draped across his knees he had a long strip of read-out chart, the crystallisation of hundreds of extracts.

“Fifty-three of them,” he said, unhappily. “They’ve all died at least twice already of Dunn’s disease. Certified dead. They’re all paying premiums on active policies, at this moment. And U.I.L. has paid out hundreds of thousands, in hard cash, to those three fake firms. Gordon, this is awful!”

“Great fun, yes. I did suggest, remember, that you pay up, let the whole thing go, and forget about it.” Broome was leaning casually against a cabinet, toying with his beard.

“You know I can’t do that. This is wholesale robbery.
It's got to be stopped. You can't just walk away from a thing like this."

"Perhaps not. All right, what now?"

"I was hoping you'd have the answer to that." Hird got to his feet, fighting another groan. "After all, you're the genius, aren't you?"

"Irritation won't help," Broome shook his head. "I suggest we have a talk with your Miss Preed. No..." he put up a gentle hand, "... not your way, with threats. Just a chat, curious to know how she comes to be working for somebody who knows how to raise the dead?"

Hird was still trying to swallow down the irrational chill that phrase had provoked, when he and Gordon Broome trod warily up to the garden gate of the neat suburban home to which Miss Preed had led them. So far as he could tell, she had not suspected anything, had parked her little car and walked up to the door, had gone inside, without a backward glance. It was a very peaceful, unspectacular scene. The row of houses backed on to an open space of overgrown weeds and stunted bushes, and, in the distance, a derelict building looking like a 'Folly' of some kind.

"Nothing sinister, so far," Broome said. "Lead on, David. Just a nice, friendly visit, remember."

Hird marched up to the door, putting on a confidence he didn't feel, pushed the bell and waited. He should have been rehearsing some opening conversational gambit, but nothing would come. The door opened, and Miss Preed stood there, smiling.

"Mr. Hird. This is an expected pleasure." He could hardly believe his ears at this tone in her voice, and she wasn't surprised, either. "Won't you come in, you and your friend?"

That didn't sound right, either. There had to be something wrong with a person who could take Gordon Broome at first glance without a tremor. Hird hesitated, felt foolish, plucked up his nerve, and went into the hallway, Broome following.

"I apologise for bursting in on you," he began.

"It's quite all right," she took his arm, and Broome's on the other side. "You were expected. Come on!" He tried to hold back, but she was suddenly strong. Clamping his
arm in hers, she strode forward, into her small living room, dragging him with her, like it or not.

"Gordon!" he cried, struggling. "Don't... it's a trap!" But he was too late. As they passed the curtain-hung archway, a strong hand took his shoulder, something hard and heavy hit him at the base of his skull and the world vanished in a burst of bright light.

He awoke unwillingly, knowing by some physical instinct that there was an awful pain very close by and that if he did anything sudden, he would run into it, or break like glass. The last thing he remembered was a sensation of falling, but now he was sitting. And there was a strange hum and regular click, in the background, like a very slow clock. He opened his eyes, very cautiously and the pain stayed where it was, just a breath away. He was at one end of a long low room, with a white ceiling, blue-tiled floor and brick walls, against which were ranged cabinets, benches and a mixed collection of laboratory instruments. The floor-space, too, was littered with apparatus of various kinds and the whole lit garishly by a series of lamps dangling in no apparent order from the roof. Naked bulbs, on the end of swinging wires; muddle and confusion; half-seen figures in white smocks, away in the distance; humming machinery; that infernal hum-and-click... and Broome's phrase... "Somebody who knows how to raise the dead!"

Then he saw Gordon Broome, off to one side, tied helplessly in an old-style dentist's chair. He stirred, looked down at himself, tried his arms, experimentally. He was tied, too.

"Ah, you're awake now. Your head hurts, I expect." The voice came with an old, grey-haired, sharp-eyed man who had moved into Hird's line of vision from some point around the back. He, too, was in a white smock. He had a pleasant smile and a friendly manner. "I'm sorry one of my boys had to cosh you," he said. "Here, have a sniff of this. It will take the ache away." He held a bulb under Hird's nose and squeezed it gently. Then his bright eyes moved to glance across at Broome and his friendly expression went away like the turning out of a light.

"Broome! Gordon Broome! The devil take me, what are you doing here?"
“Was just about to ask you the same question, Doctor. Allard Peters died twenty years ago, so far as I know. You’re pretty lively for a dead man, aren’t you?”

“Allard Peters!” Hird gasped. “The body-snatcher?” He remembered the case well, even though he’d been only a schoolboy at the time. It had blazed in world headlines at the same time that accelerated sclerema, named Dunn’s disease for the doctor who had first diagnosed it, identified it, and died of it, had begun to rival cancer for humanity’s number one scourge.

“Yes,” the old man nodded, “I am Dr. Allard Peters. Yes, I died twenty years ago. But here I am, still.”

“And you’re the one who is responsible for raising all these people from the dead, and defrauding the insurance companies?”

“Only one company, Broome. And no fraud intended at all. The money will be refunded soon. All of it. But I wish you were not involved in this, Broome. You will upset everything. This is a devil of a mess. Just a minute, please.” He hurried off and they could hear him calling, “Anne! Anne, where are you?”

“This gets crazier every minute,” Hird groaned. “More dead people, and why was he so worked up about you?”

“I expect we shall be told in good time. You know, the case against Peters was very weak. I doubt if he would ever have been convicted, had he lived to face trial. When he died of Dunn’s disease, plenty of people said it was a judgment on him; others that he had contrived it, by drugs. But it was mass panic, more than anything, that raised such a fuss. There was no solid evidence of any crime, unless it’s a crime to try to save a life.”

“Stole a body from a crematorium, didn’t he? To experiment on?”

“They say. And, if he did, so what? Shh! Here he comes again.”

This time, Peters was accompanied by someone very well known to Hird. She looked even lovelier in a neat tight-belted white coat, and her glassy primness had somehow evaporated. Hird did some rapid guessing. Anne Peters had been a name on a list. Miss Amelia Preed had been an icy enigma. But both had the same vital statistics.
"My daughter Anne," Peters announced, removing the need for guesswork. "You probably understand that she is the reason why you are both now in this mess. Your computer-complex, Mr. Hird, was bound to show up the tricks we had been working. But for you, no-one would have suspected anything."

"I tried as hard as I dared to talk Mr. Fogart into rejecting your plan," she admitted, cheerfully. "I was delighted when the silly thing blew up, of course."

"Why did you call me a fool, in that tone of voice?"

"Ah, well," there was just a tiny bit more colour in her cheeks than the circumstances warranted. "One doesn't like to see anyone make a complete fool of himself, does one?"

"I did that, all right," he growled. "That card I ran through the machine was carrying your statistics."

"I see! No wonder the thing went crazy. I apologise. I thought it was just incompetence on your part."

"Suppose it had worked properly?" Broome enquired. "What then, for you, I mean?"

"I would have spun old Foggy a story, of course. Would he have been willing to accept resuscitated dead men, d'you think? I could have handled him, all right. Why d'you imagine I got myself that position, anyway? As his personal secretary, it's my job to see that he doesn't suspect—just a minute," she swung her attention back to Hird. "What made you pick my vital statistics, Mr. Hird?"

"Does that matter, my dear?" her father put in, impatiently, but she stilled him with a slim hand.

"It matters, if he had any reason to suspect anything. What he saw, somebody else might see. What, Mr. Hird?"

David swallowed, felt himself going pink and looked away. "Haven't you ever looked at yourself in the mirror, for Heaven's sake?" he mumbled.

"Oh dear," her voice was quite soft, all at once. "I'm sorry, and flattered, too. I wish I'd known."

"Never mind," he growled. "The thing is, what now? You can't keep us tied up here. We'll be missed. You've got to let us out sometime and your secret with it."

"Eventually," Peters said, quietly, "we will let you out, yes. But not until I am ready to let you go. Until then, you will stay here."
"For that matter," Broome said mildly, "we don’t know what this great secret is, anyway. The most we do know is that you have discovered some way of restoring dead people to life. Or is it, Doctor, a cure for Dunn’s disease?"

The idea struck Hird like a blow. "A cure? But you can’t cure a man after he’s dead!"

"On the contrary," the old man smiled. "That is the only way there is, so far. That’s the whole trouble. That is the snag I am working on, and for which I need the money to maintain this place; the equipment and expenses are heavy, although my staff work without pay, and the building costs us very little in the way of rent. You are, of course, in a concealed addition to that derelict eyesore you undoubtedly saw at the back of Anne’s home. We use her house as our link with the outside world, travelling by underground passage. But that is mere detail. The point is, we need income, and this so-called ‘fraud’ is the only way we have of getting it."

"Research funds are easy enough to come by," Hird objected, but Peters shook his head, his smile a trifle bitter. "For a giant corporation, or a recognised authority, yes. For the infamous Allard Peters, the ‘body snatcher,’ the quack . . . ?"

"Just what was the inside of that story?" Broome asked. "I guessed that the body from the crematorium was an arrangement of yours that went wrong, but the subsequent commotion made fact-finding very difficult."

"It was hysteria and superstition, mostly. I knew the risk, of course. Funny, you know, but it all began with a fish, a rare tropical fish." The old man settled his hip on the corner of a nearby bench, and shook his head in wonder at his own thoughts.

"Twenty-five years ago and it seems a life-time. That was when we of the medical world were first startled by the discovery of a whole new range of hallucinogenic drugs from the sea, from strange species of fish. There was one in particular. In very minute doses, it produced what was at once called a ‘surrender syndrome,’ a sense of being about to die. So solid and genuine is the illusion that the injected person actually lies down and waits for the end. And, what is even more startling, the body does die, so far as any
medical inspection can determine. The reaction bears strong similarities to what is known as hypothermic anaesthesia. That is the effect produced by controlled freezing. Somehow, and we are still not sure how, the near-suspension of breathing and heartbeat is overcome by some mechanism of the body itself.

"So many fascinating problems still remain to be cleared up. As you will realise, drugs such as these have profound military implications and the whole business of studying them is hag-ridden with security measures. Now, I was heading a small team, engaged on just one small aspect of this field. And I blotted my copy-book rather badly. I went off after something else. One of my modified preparations showed a really remarkable similarity, in general symptoms, to the then new Dunn's disease. Quite simply, a person with the disease went through certain phases, and then became unconscious and died. My drug, on a number of very courageous volunteers, produced exactly the same history, except that, after waiting the proper time, and then injecting the approved antidote, my subjects recovered. You see?"

"I can see where you'd have trouble with authorities, on that," Broome chuckled, and Hird wondered how he could have the nerve to be amused in such a situation.

"How on Earth did you get volunteers, for a thing like that?"

"Anne, my own daughter, was one," the old man said, proudly. "And I, myself, later. But then there was that crematorium business. The man who was actually responsible for operating the machinery was a friend. We arranged to 'take' a body; someone who had died, in the classic symptoms, of the dread disease, and then we would wait the proper time, make the injections, and see. But, as you all know, the story got out. I confessed to everything, including some things which were not quite true, to save my friend in the crematorium. And they put me in prison. Because, you see, that body did not recover."

"Good God!" Hird groaned. "How can you just sit there and recite it all so calmly? It was a young girl, as I recall. Her parents went through Hell, on your account!"

"They would have been in Heaven had she recovered," Peters said, with sadness. "These are the risks we must take."
My daughter died at the same time, remember! But she recovered. And I was in jail, a monster!"

"Fun!" Broome murmured. "I take it you then tried administering your drug ahead of time, to someone in the early stages of the disease?"

"Of course. That was it, but it took us months to come to that simple conclusion. Broome... I wish it had been anybody but you, here. Or that you could have come in with us earlier. I don't mind experimenting on myself. I died in jail, as you will remember. It's a terrifying experience and traumatic. One needs the very best of care and attention during the recovery period. I don't want to do that to you. Anyone else, but not an 'X'-person. There are so many still unknown factors. I don't know what it might do to you. It has benefits, too, mind. One is quite definitely rejuvenated, to a degree. Switching off the metabolism like that seems to give the body a new lease of life. But what will it do to your brain, your unique brain?"

"You could let us out, and trust us," Hird suggested, desperately refusing to admit to himself what the old man was getting at. But Peters sighed, sadly.

"I trust no-one, not even my own staff. Except Anne and those others who have died and live again. They know I am right, in a way that no-one else could possibly know."

"The insurance idea was mine in the first place," she said, out of a long silence that made Hird jump, "and you two aren't going to upset it, not now. When my father 'died,' the cheque from U.I.L. was a surprise I hadn't looked for, but it gave me the idea. I studied their methods and policies, and then I took out a policy of my own. And 'died' again. And then I went hunting for the right people, husbands with the first symptoms of Dunn's disease. And wives. And I offered them a deal. They would administer small doses of our drug, free of charge, we would assist with cremation expenses... and we would 'restore' their loved ones. All in dire secrecy. They would share the proceeds with us, as a fee. We are, in fact, 'curing' Dunn's disease, right now, but illegally."

"And you have access to all U.I.L.'s files!" Hird gasped. "You are masterminding the whole swindle, from headquarters!"

"A swindle!" She came to stand before him, eyes ablaze.
"Would you be so ready to shout swindle if your wife was dying and we offered you the chance to save her life?"

"Why do you still need the time?" Broome asked, curiously. "You have a new development in sight?"

"Six months. A year at the outside." Peters said, and there was a fire in his eyes now. "We have a new test, to detect Dunn's disease long in advance of the distressing symptoms. With that, sufficiently confirmed, we can do something more. We can use our drug therapy, quickly, bringing the pseudo-disease into existence and curing it again, in a matter of hours. The subject is then immune. He is also cured of quite a number of minor ailments. And we believe we have a lead into a cure for some cancers. But we must have time, time enough to be sure that we are not making any silly mistakes, or have overlooked any side reactions."

"And you're going to keep me here, for a year?" Hird still could not accept the verdict. "You can't. I'll be missed. There'll be enquiries."

"I can take care of all that," Anne said. "I shall tell old Foggy that you've run away rather than pay your debts and persuade him not to set the law on you. After all, there is a good insurance cover for your machinery. Then I will inform the affected departments that you've been transferred to another branch. A letter to your landlady will cover that angle, too, and then a 'friend' will call to collect your things. You won't be missed, Mr. Hird."

He strained against the ropes which held him and groaned. "You're mad, the pack of you. You can't keep me locked up, like a prisoner! Think of all the trouble I'll be, trying to escape."

"You'll be no trouble at all," Peters said. "One little shot of our drug and you will die. And recover, of course. But you won't know who you are, or why, or anything. One of the more interesting traumatic effects is an almost total amnesia. You'll be quite happy here until we are ready to release you. Then we will just have to tell you who you are, and you will be yourself again. You see?"

Hird fought his ropes again, desperately, and a sudden sweat of fear made him clammy all over. Then Gordon Broome said,

"But what about me?" and, from his voice, you'd have thought he was asking for another cup of tea at some function.
“I don’t know,” the old man sighed. “I don’t know what to do about you, Broome. I shall have to think. In the meantime, we will put both of you out of the way,” and he waved a hand to some of those busy white-coated people in the distance.

“What’s this place?” Hird wondered, squirming over on his front and looking around. Dim light came through a high window. The glass was filthy, the walls bare brick and the floor hard. “A cellar of some kind?”

“The whole thing’s a glorified cellar, isn’t it? We seem to spend all our time in cellars,” Broome was sitting with his back to the wall. They were both securely tied, still.

“If only I could get loose!” Hird strained his aching arms against his bonds for the dozenth time. “In stories, the hero is always tied up so sloppily that he can get loose. I suppose I’m just not the hero type. Even Preedy called me a fool.”

“Miss Peters,” Broome corrected, mildly, “and she apologised. I did warn you about her, you know. Suppose you were loose, then what”

“Crouch behind the door. Somebody eventually comes. I clobber him, put on his white coat, make a get-away, somehow . . .”

“And then?”

“I don’t know,” Hird groaned. “I suppose a chap ought to go to the police. This thing is illegal, whichever way you look at it. But, I don’t know. If they really have got a cure for Dunn’s disease and all they need is cash, there must be some way of legally getting it.”

“Substitute officially there. Whether a thing is legal or not is something only a lawyer can decide. What these people need is a business efficiency-expert, right? And that’s you, right? So get thinking along those lines.”

“But what’s the point, so long as we are stuck, here?”

“I can get you free any time,” Broome declared, casually. “You get on with the thinking. How can you put this operation in the money? That’s your problem. You tell me you’re good at your special field. Let’s see you demonstrate.”

“I think better with my hands untied, Gordon. And how . . .”

“Wasting time.” Broome shook his head, straightened up, came across to where Hird lay and began unfastening his
bonds. "Old Peters and his lads are not expert villains. Should always search a captive. There, now you're comfortable. Get thinking!"

"You're as crazy as they are," Hird gasped, as he watched Broome go back to sitting on the floor against the wall. The eccentric genius took a stumpy cigar from some place of concealment under one leg of his track-suit, lit it, and blew out a cloud of smoke. "I believe you like being here!"

"My kind of fun, yes. But not for you. Get thinking!"

So David Hird thought, hard and anxiously, juggling all the facts he knew against possible moves and schemes. The obvious but chancy way was to cut right into the heart of the matter, go to the root, or the fountainhead, whatever you liked to call it. But that would need meticulous preparation. And a deal of brass-bound nerve.

"I've got it," he said, at last. "It's a bit of a gamble, but what isn't these days? Gordon, given the chance, I can 'sell' this whole operation to a very interested party."

"Smart," Broome said, approvingly. "By the sound of it, here comes your chance now. Get set to clobber." Hird scrambled up as the feet stopped by the door and the lock clicked. Flat against the wall, he saw the door swing open, and, in the poor light, someone in a white coat came in. He sprang, clutched, and was startled to hear a very feminine scream, and soft curves. But he was desperate and held on tight.

"Don't try anything funny with that needle, or whatever it is."

"And just what do you think you're going to do, now?" she demanded, ceasing to struggle and threatening to upset his train of thought, just by being in his arms.

"Tie you up, and then out of the window."

"And then, I suppose, you'll bring the police down on us?"

"That's what I ought to do, I suppose. But I have a better idea. Something you could have thought of, if you hadn't been so obsessed with persecution mania. I'm going to beard old Foggy in his den and let him have the whole story, just as it stands. Plus proof, out of his own files." She seemed to wilt, just a fraction, then stiffened again. The next few seconds were hectic as she fought him like a wild-cat. By the time
he had finally managed to pin her down, helpless on the
floor, he was out of breath and bearing scars.

"Now will you hold still, idiot," he panted, "and let me
explain? Foggy will cough up. U.I.L. donates quite a packet
to research, you know that. He will steer it our way. He's
got to. Can't you see it? Or we threaten to release it to half
a dozen drug firms. And U.I.L. will ache in their bank-
balance right away. Doctors will still certify death from
Dunn's disease. Clinical death. U.I.L.'s policies all carry
that stipulation. And the beneficiaries will collect small
fortunes. They'll take it in turns to die and grow rich. And
there's that matter of rejuvenation your father mentioned.
That will crimp the endowment section, if they don't take
action against it. Think! Foggy has got to help us and give
himself time to re-design all future policies... or we can
break him, and U.I.L."

She lay quite still for three long breaths, then, "All right.
You can let me up. I'll behave." He sat back on his heels
and dabbed at a hot place on his cheek. She peered at him
in the gloom. "You think it will work, just like that?"

"With the evidence right there, in his own files? Of course
it will. Fogart may be a pompous old fool, but he does know
insurance."

"I'll come with you," she said. "David, I can help. And
I would rather do it this way. It's a chance Daddy would
never allow me to take. He has an obsession, as you said,
on persecution. Can we make it look as if you had over-
powered me and carried me off."

"Perjury," Broome said, from his seat beside the wall,
"is up to me. Smash the window and fly, leaving me here
as ransom. I'll tell them a tale to keep them quiet."

"You might have helped!" Hird said, indignantly. "In-
stead of just sitting there."

"I'm helping now. Get on with it!"

The cold grey of dawn was breaking in the east by the
time Hird drew his little car up alongside the railings again
and led Miss Peters back to her own front door. This time
there was a different kind of welcoming group.

"There you are," he said, weary but triumphant, laying a
cheque down in front of the anxious old man. "Ten thousand.
And another like that, every three months, until you announce
results. And you can take your time with that last bit. There's no hurry."

"No hurry?" old Peters looked up from the cheque. "This is urgent, in the name of humanity."

"Naturally. But . . . well, you just don't know what a lot of frantic work this is going to entail. Half a million current policies to be adjusted. A whole new scheme of conditional insurance to be worked out. He's going to need my computer-complex like never before. So you just take your time, take all the time you need."

Miss Peters led her father away, still clutching the cheque and looking stunned. Hird sank into a handy chair.

"What a night," he sighed. "There was a time, back there, when I thought it was all over for me. End of the line, you know? If it hadn't been for you, Gordon!"

"Yes. Fun!" Broome said, sadly. "Had to put the idea into your head, of course. Every man deserves a chance in his own field."

"You sound as if I'd done you a bad turn."

"Ungrateful? No, not quite. But it might have been fun, to 'die' and come back. Interesting. Not for me, though. Handicaps of genius and all that. My wonderful brain!" He sounded bitter. Hird looked at him, then shook his head helplessly.

"I shall never understand you," he said. "I shan't try. I'm too pleased with this night's work to spoil it. Anne is a marvellous girl. I don't know how I could have ever thought of her as cold."

"That too?" Broome nodded, as if he had expected it. "It's only fair, David, to remind you. She was a comely young woman when you were just a schoolboy. Think about it."

"I know she's older than me. I hadn't forgotten. A little thing like that won't matter, not the way I feel."

"Possibly not. She's older, but you'll soon catch up."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"Worry, jealousy, that kind of thing. Never trust a woman. They know what you're going to do next, before you do."

"Oh, you're just a natural born bachelor, and a cynic."

"Yes? Possibly. And a genius. It's not all fun!" Hird watched him wander away, puffing at his cigar. For the very first time since he had met this odd man, he no longer envied him.

john rackham.
tell us something more—that the readership tends to be the urban population of technologically advanced countries, with a distinct emphasis on those cities which stand at the cultural crossroads—the capitals and centres of commerce and ideas. I would also venture to predict, with slightly less confidence, that there would also be a tendency for readers to have been influenced by several contrasting social group-norms, as is the case with the educated son of uneducated parents, the immigrant or son of immigrants. These individuals are the first to feel the impact of new social forces.

These cultural crossroads, however baffling they may seem at times, do provide points from which lead an infinity of "possible worlds." We need to know and visualise—and here again science fiction helps us—what the various possibilities are. The automated anarchistic society? The back-to-nature society? A hedonistic one, based on the search for the orgasm-perfect? Or a puritanical society based on hardship and self-denial?

Some writers suggest that the society of the future will not be scientific, but "psionic." Teleportation, not spaceships; telepathy, not improved forms of TV. As a psychologist I have much sympathy with this form of speculation. I feel that the human mind will not for ever be shackled by the human body or its purely mechanical extensions. Wiener has referred to the possibility of sending a man by telegraph, as we now send his photographic image. But would one bother to send the whole man? Could not certain things be usefully omitted—as a surgeon removes an appendix or gall-bladder—such as the id, the super-ego and a few assorted vestigial instincts?

Such speculations are an illustration of the effect of s-f ideas on the reader (and, one presumes, of similar processes in the s-f writer's mind)... one starts from a point of stimulus and the mind branches out into the countries of conjecture. This is parallel to the free association technique in psychiatry. "Relax and say whatever comes into your mind," says the analyst. The result is not gibberish. Each statement can be related to some sector of the mind albeit deeply unconscious. The unexplored "antipodes of the mind"—might they not be identical with "parallel worlds?"
The true artist is capable of accepting and discovering new ideas and of fashioning them into new patterns. The pseudo-artist either plays endlessly at making fresh patterns out of old ideas or at imposing the same old pattern on new ones. The good s-f writer, almost by definition, falls into the first category of true artist. But the pseudo-artist, unfortunately, also finds plenty of scope in the field. Space travel—in the hands of a hack—can take us monotonously into the realm of adventures bearing an exact resemblance to the exploits of the Wild West. Space opera, in short.

Such dubious "s-f" can serve only for personal fantasy building. But good s-f can warn or inform us and give us some instrument for finding our way in the present world. The human imagination has the power to conduct experiments and create models. Battles are fought now on the drawing-board, the prototype discarded as superseded before ever going into production. Computers have already waged nuclear war and counted the dead—but nobody has died. Part of the mental equipment for being the better sort of s-f writer or reader is an unlimited readiness to create a mental model and subject it to all imaginable conditions; or to take some technological development and set out a civilisation based on it, letting this suggest the kind of being who would live in such an environment. Extrapolation on the one hand; on the other, what might be called extrapolative feedback.

The mainstream of science fiction seems to me a contribution to the effort of modern man to survive mentally, and keep some kind of grip, in a world in flux. Relativity has jumped out of the sphere of physics into that of society. Shakespeare, four hundred years ago, grasped the idea of the relativity of social norms when he said, "Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so." The good writer is himself an embryo scientist in a sphere of existence largely untouched by systematic investigation, one in which we—the psychoanalysts—have not got far beyond the description of data. I refer to human and animal behaviour and the recesses of the human mind itself. An area where the psychologist and the sociologist breed theories like a dog fleas, but, so far, make few of them stick, and where the great writers of the past have contributed as much as anybody. And the science fiction writers? Writing of the future, they—least of all—can complain if their true assessment has to be deferred until then.

But they have earned our interim gratitude.

I. H. Barnes
Brian Aldiss' potentiality as a major novelist in the modern science fiction idiom is fully realised in his new story The Dark Light Years (Faber, 16/-) and, in my view, has reached at last his literary maturity in this long cynical look at Man on his interstellar emergence. At best as savage as any Swiftian satire, at worst a highly amusing lampoonery, this is a brilliantly painted picture of conflict of divergent life-forms—an alien civilization, whose philosophy and physical peculiarities have been conditioned by an astronomical oddity, at the mercy of arrogant, selfish and stupid Man. It is a cry from the heart of an intellectual at the outrages of philistinism, and despite its occasional nods at the current trends of dust-bin theatricality, it is a courageous and inventive novel of an alien culture and the inevitability of non-communication. Thoroughly recommended.

Kingsley Amis' and Robert Conquest's third anthology Spectrum III (Gollancz, 18/-) is a splendid collection, their best to date. As promised in their introduction these eight stories are all genuine dyed-in-the-wool science fiction, from the suspenseful action of Ted Sturgeon's "Killdozer" (with its background remarkably authenticated from personal experience), the thrill of Jovian exploration by means of mind-projection in Poul Anderson's "Call Me Joe," and Murray Leinster's exciting Colonial Survey adventure "Exploration Team." These are balanced by Arthur Clarke's serious homily "The Sentinel" and Peter Phillips' whacky story of the drastic psychiatric cure for a deluded s-f writer, "Dreams Are Sacred." But the two I liked best were "Fondly Fahrenheit" the identity mix-up between an android with glandular trouble and its unfortunate owner, in Alfie Bester's economical and devastatingly effective style; and the impressively cerebral discourse on genetics and the mystique of time in J. G. Ballard's haunting "The Voices of Time."
Oh yes, and the horrific little piece by Mark Rose, "We Would See a Sign" about what happened to the man who pressed the final button.

I cannot praise too highly *A Century of Science Fiction* edited by Damon Knight (Gollancz, 21/-)—an ambitious project but completely and successfully realised by this brilliant analyst of the genre, likewise author and critic. In this important and valuable anthology, introduced by Mr. Knight with a gem of informative definition, he incisively and cogently, under seven broad thematic categories (Robots, Time Travel, Space, Other Worlds & People, Aliens Among Us, Superman, Marvellous Inventions) gives what is tantamount to an illustrated lecture and survey of the history and development of science fiction—the illustrations being stories or excerpts from stories from various sources and by such authors as Wells, Heinlein, Stapledon, Bierce, Aldiss, Verne, Asimov, Bester, et al. The fiction is excellently chosen and is collated with the connecting commentary for maximum effect. Altogether a useful *vade mecum* for the *aficionado*, and a masterly and knowledgeable introduction to science fiction for the new convert.

*leslie flood.*

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