NEW WORLDS SF

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THE LIFE BUYER

by

E. C. TUBB

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Contents

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All manuscripts must be double-spaced, typed on quarto paper with a top-sheet containing title, author's name, word-length and author's address. A stamped, self-addressed envelope must accompany all submissions.

BROADENING THE SCOPE

AS WE MENTIONED in our last editorial, the times they are a-changing and SF is changing to speak with the voice of the times. Whether the subject-matter of a story is technical or philosophical, about society in general or human beings in particular, the field is beginning to open out on all fronts and become a vehicle for serious and entertaining literary expression. In the field of the magazines we must acknowledge the hitherto one-magazine task of trail-blazing achieved by THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION which was the first mature development in the magazine field and which broadened the scope of its policy to include a wonderful variety of imaginative stories. When readers compare the policy of NEW WORLDS with that of F&SF we feel complimented, although we have our own trails to blaze and do not seek to emulate any other magazine, or, for that matter, imitate.

We would guess that Anthony Boucher, during his career as F&SF's editor, had the problem which we have. This problem is—should we insist that a story, no matter what its basic theme, should be carried on a 'standard' SF vehicle, or should we allow the authors to choose their own vehicles and rely on the readers to see the essential SF-ness of the theme, even though a story may not seem at first sight SF of the sort we're used to? Naturally we should appreciate hearing from readers on this score. Should we reject an outstanding story simply because the treatment is not *evidently* an SF treatment? And, it follows, should we take poorer material just because the treatment *is* evidently SF? We think not, but we should like to hear readers' opinions.

If the field is to stay fresh and entertain on as many

levels as possible, then it must broaden its scope. Therefore while our motto won't exactly be 'Anything Goes!', we should very much like it to be 'Almost Anything Goes!'.

The Kilmarnock Mystery

Mr Kenneth F. Slater writes to tell us that some time ago he received a PO for 3/10 for a copy of SF HORIZONS. The postal order was issued from the Kilmarnock post office and dated 31st October 1964. Unfortunately the sender forgot to include their address and since they evidently answered an advertisement in NEW WORLDS, Mr Slater asked us to ask the Person of Kilmarnock to send him a rather fuller name and address so that he can send their copy of SF HORIZONS to them. Are you out there?

Rush, rush to your nearest . . .

We hope you have ordered your copy of NEW WORLDS 150 which comes out next month. This is a special issue and will contain a number of special features by way of celebration. The line-up for the all-star issue so far includes Brian W. Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, John Brunner, E. C. Tubb and Jack Vance. We will also have Charles Harness for you. As the author of *The Rose* and *The Paradox Men*, Harness's appearance should please a great many of his fans. We think you will enjoy all the stories—as well as the photo-features and other items we intend to pack in. Watch for it and grab yours fast or be forever disappointed!

one

MARCUS EDWARD KING, eighty-seven years old, rich as Croesus, devoid of faith, sat up in bed and screamed into the darkness.

"No!"

Glass crashed as he fumbled at a bedside table, water gurgling, phials rattling, a book thudding softly to the floor. A button sank beneath a searching finger and soft rose-light flooded the room.

"No!"

The light brightened, comforting him wth the revelation of familiar things; the statuette carved from Luna stone, the snowflake from Mars, the flask of turgid slime from the ebon depths of Venus. Trapped in a block of water-clear plastic an insect-thing from Ganymede stared at him with blind, iridescent eyes, wings a shimmering skein of colour. A solar clock rested diamond glitters on the hour of four.

"No," he said for the third time. "Damn it, no!"

He sat crouched on the bed, knees drawn up to his chin, arms wrapped around his knees, the covers a crumpled mess at his feet. Warm air circulated through the chamber and dried the sweat on his body.

"Sir?"

A shadow loomed before an open door, anxious eyes searching the room, the ebon face and sombre clothing a vague silhouette aganst the background dimness of the antechamber.

"I'm all right." Marcus glanced at the solar clock. The guard had been fast—but he was paid to be fast. Here, at the summit of the Palace, assassination was a remote possibility but there were other dangers and seconds could spell the difference between life and . . .

"I'm all right," he repeated irritably then softened his tone. One day, perhaps, his life could depend on this man. "You were fast," he soothed. "I shall remember that."

"Thank you, sir."

"That will be all," said Marcus. "You may go."

The guard hesitated.

Beginning a blend of action, mystery, prediction and ideas—a blend the author has made all his own. By Popular Request, Ladies and Gentlemen—

THE LIFE BUYER

E. C. Tubb

1st of 3 parts

"I said—never mind." Marcus restrained his impatience. It was pointless to pay a man to do a job and then prevent him from doing it. And the man was right to be cautious. Fuming he waited as the guard searched the room; a human bloodhound smelling for traps and dangers.

"I had a dream," said Marcus when he had finished. "A nightmare, nothing more."

"Yes, sir."

"It woke me up."

"Yes, sir. I heard. Could I get you anything?"

"No—yes. Get me Fullen."

"Right away, Mr. King."

Marcus nodded dismissal, rising as the door closed, bare feet silent as he padded towards the shower. Chemicals laved him, water caressed him, scented air dried with sterile heat. A wall-mirror reflected his image for critical inspection.

He bared his teeth at what he saw.

The teeth were natural growths; fresh buds transplanted into his gums from the jaws of a child at a basic cost of five thousand to the mother. The hair was growing from the scalp of a twenty-year-old man who had sold it for three thousand and a dozen wigs. The heart had cost much more; bought from a spacefield worker cursed with cancerous lungs, a sense of responsibility and a beautiful young wife. The stomach had been relatively cheap, the kidneys had come from a voluntary donor, the varicosed veins which had once mottled his legs had been replaced by plastic surrogates.

For its age it was a good body. It had cost him over a quarter of a million.

Fullen was waiting when he left the shower. The medic was tall, smoothly made and his voice had the compulsion of an organ. Deep-set eyes invited trust and promised understanding. He was the topmost psychiatrist of his time and had earned fifteen thousand I.M.U.s a year before Marcus had offered him double to renounce general practice.

Thirty thousand Interplanetary Money Units was three

times the salary of the President of the Federated Earth Republics.

"You sent for me, Mr. King?"

"Yes." Marcus settled himself on the couch. "I had a nightmare. I screamed . . ."

"Screaming and inevitably in shock." Fullen seated himself at the head of the couch. "Well, we must find the cause of the dream and eliminate it if we can. Shock is something we must avoid. Relax now and let yourself drift. Breath evenly, don't strain, just settle yourself as if for sleep. That's it. That's fine. Now relax a little more . . . a little more . . . That's better. You feel as if you are floating. Nothing can bother you. Nothing matters. You are utterly detached. Good. Now tell me about your dream. Tell me what you saw and felt and heard. Tell me . . ."

And, suddenly, it was all there. All the ghastly horror of it. The sickening loneliness. The helpless despair as, within him, a countless host of tiny suns winked into darkness; expiring with the universe of his being. Then came the burrowing maggots, the thriving bacteria, the rot and putrescence of decay. The cloying stench of lilies, the numbing echo of sonorous bells, the casket, the soft, wet obscene delving of spades.

And after—

"No!"

"Steady!" Fullen was there, warm, human, alive. "It's all right, Mr. King. It's all right!"

The guard looked into the room, saw that his master was safe, silently withdrew. Neither man noticed the intrusion.

"That was bad," said Marcus. "Bad."

"But not as bad as the original waking," said Fullen quickly. His hands made firm, comforting pressures on the figure on the couch. "Pulse high, respiration ragged, but that was to be expected. You achieved almost total recall."

"Is that good?"

"Very good, Mr. King. By reliving the incident you have diminished its importance. In fact—"

"Rubbish!"

Fullen was patient.

"Gunk!" snapped Marcus. "I could have told you what I dreamt without all this rigmarole."

"You are in a temper," said Fullen evenly. "You are angry, not at me, but at yourself. I am merely a convenient scapegoat."

"So?"

"Every psychiatrist is a whipping boy. Your reaction is not unique."

"All right," snarled Marcus. "So I'm angry at myself. Can you tell me why?"

"Yes. You are afraid of death."

"Brilliant!" Marcus swung himself upright on the couch. "Do I really pay you thirty thousand a year to tell me that?"

"You do not like to be afraid," continued Fullen calmly. "You are angry with yourself for yielding to that emotion. My statement as to the cause of that fear is correct. You are afraid of death."

"I hate it—not fear it."

"We always hate the thing we fear, Mr. King."

"And kill the thing we love?"

"Not always. Would you—"

"Forget it!" Marcus jerked to his feet and began to pace the floor. "Tell me about the dream."

"It was a fear-symbol. The betrayal of a personality which is suffering from a morbid fear of death."

"Morbid?" Marcus halted his pacing. "Is it unhealthy to fear death? Is it unnatural to want to live? Damn it, Fullen, carry what you say to its logical conclusion and every healthy person wants to die."

"Quite a number of them do, the death-wish is very strong, but normal people have the patience to wait. They neither seek death nor worry themselves into insanity trying to avoid it. Those that do usually have a reason based on beliefs which you do not appear to hold." Fullen paused. "They fear to die," he said deliberately, "because they are afraid of what waits for them on the other side."

"Nothing is on the other side."

"No, Mr. King."

"Nothing," snapped Marcus. "Nothing at all."

Irritably he resumed his pacing, passing the flask of slime, the sightless monster, the statuette carved in the shape of a girl by some woman-hungry spaceman. His bare feet thudded on the carpet, anger weighing his tread.

"You said 'appear'," he accused. "You doubt it?"

"I am not sure. There is something buried deep down inside your mind which I cannot reach. You won't permit me to reach it. But why should you dream of a grave?"

"People are buried in graves."

"Not for the past fifty years. Cremation has been obligatory that long. But you dreamt of a grave. And lilies, another odd factor, odder still when coupled with the casket and the bells. You fear death but couple that fear with a burial in the past, not the future." Fullen looked thoughtful, his eyes detached. "An interesting juxtaposition of diverse time-sectors which I feel would be profitable to investigate."

"No."

"But—"

"Forget it!"

"I really think that you should permit me to—"

"Fullen," snarled Marcus savagely, "you are a fool! I didn't hire you to read my mind or to amuse yourself with your probing. You had some interesting theories on psychosomatic ageing which I wanted you to investigate—or have you forgotten?"

"I have not forgotten, Mr. King."

"When can I expect results?"

"Personal results?" Fullen hesitated. "I never claimed that I could arrive at a quick solution of the problem. I suspect that ageing is caused by the conditioning which commences at birth and which teaches that age is always accompanied by physical degeneration. But not everyone grows senile; not everyone exhibits the same degree of degeneration. There is a variable which I suspect could be attributed to an attitude of mind."

"You have nothing concrete for me?"

"No, Mr. King. Not at the moment."

Alone Marcus scowled at the solid wall of crystal run-

ning the entire length of the room. He barked a word and the sonic device altered the polarisation; the wall becoming transparent to the world outside.

Below lay the city, still dark, still twinkling with the fireflies of advertising displays, street lights, windows, moving vehicles. The drifting lights of aircraft were a shimmering cloud of luminescent smoke. Higher the dawn was breaking, just visible from where he stood, a wash of pink and gold rising from the east. There were no clouds. It promised to be a fine day.

A bird, fooled by the transparency, dashed itself against the glass and fell with lifeless wings. Marcus hardly noticed. He was thinking of the dream and of others he had had before. They were all much the same. Dying and death and what waited beyond.

Closing his eyes he leaned against the smooth coolness of the crystal and let his mind skip back through time. Achieve total recall, Fullen had said. Discharge the emotional impact of an incident and diminish its importance. Relive it and forget it. Simple.

But could you forget murdering your father?

He smelt again the sickly scent associated with hospitals, felt the irritation of waiting, the shock of seeing what the doctors had done. They had been proud of their achievement.

"The finest piece of medical engineering to date," one had said. He smiled at the machine beside the bed, the tubes running into the chest cavity, the grey face with sunken eyes on the pillow. He had turned and bumped into Marcus, quick with an apology because the King name, even then, had spelt power. And old J.K. owned the hospital.

Old J.K. Joseph King, seventy-five years old, finally living up to his reputation. Now, literally, he had no heart. Instead he had a machine which pumped oxygenated blood through body and brain.

Marcus hated that machine.

"How long?"

The doctor misunderstood—he tried to be optimistic.

"No one can be sure but, if there are no complications, well, your guess is as good as mine. But theoretically there is no limit. Five years. Ten. Fifty even. It is possible."

A day was twenty-four hours too long.

Alone he had looked at the man in the bed, the machine at his side. It was powered by electricity and to cut the juice would be to advertise murder. But the tubes were plastic and, if they were nipped—so, and held—so, who could prove it was other than accident?

Marcus did what had to be done.

He waited until the grey face on the pillow had become lax with a hollow emptiness before calling the doctors. He had been distraught. They had been very understanding, very sympathetic. They had reason to be.

The King was dead—long live the King!

Long live Marcus Edward King, now the undisputed head of the King financial empire.

And, of course, the new owner of the hospital in which they worked.

That had been sixty-four years ago.

Marcus opened his eyes and stared at the brightening day. Memory had taken time and, outside, the world was coming to life. A supply plane approached the Palace, the crown insignia gaudy in the sunshine, slowing with a tilt of vanes as it angled towards the landing stage. A cargo train crossed the sky in the distance. A police helijet drifted lazily to one side, waspish in black and yellow.

It was a busy, normal scene.

He looked at it, sensing the throb and pulse of life, the intermeshed activity. It was a world in which money was power and he had money.

Money to buy anything and everything he wanted.

Everything!

Impatiently he turned from the window, strode towards a communicator, pressed a button. A startled face stared at him from the screen—the operator had not been expecting a summons but he was eager to please.

"Yes, sir, Mr. King?"

"Get me—"

Marcus paused, eyes narrowed as he looked through the wall of crystal. Some forgotten instinct directed his attention to a point high in the east where, almost invisible against the sun, a tiny black fleck marred the blue of the sky.

"Yes, sir, Mr. King?"

The operator was patient, Marcus ignored him. He was staring at the black fleck, wondering if it were another bird intent on smashing itself to a pulp of blood and feather. Almost immediately he knew it could not be that. Already it was too big, growing too fast, the flight too steadily aimed at the window.

And birds did not have rigid wings or trail streamers of flame.

He turned and ran from the communicator, his fear too great for the strength of his body. He collided with the bed, tripped, sprawled on the floor. He rose and fell again, the discarded sheet hampering his feet. An alarm sounded and he turned, eyes bulging as he stared at the plane, now monstrous beyond the window.

"No!" he screamed. "Dear God! No!"

He caught a flash of black and yellow as the police helijet darted forward. It dissolved in a gush of flame and sound and fury blasted him against the far wall.

"Sir!"

The guard was at his side, ebon face strained as he lifted Marcus from the debris, cradling him as if he were a child.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Out!" screamed Marcus. "Quick, you fool!"

Dazed and shaken he could still anticipate the terror to come. The air reeked with the stench of fuel.

"Out! Damn you! Out!"

The guard obeyed. He lunged toward the antechamber, feet slipping on the littered floor, shielding Marcus with his own body.

Then flame and heat and whining metal completed the destruction of the room.

two

THE PLACE WAS a mess. Plaster littered the broken floor and naked girders rested in splintered concrete. The air stank with the scent of burning and the foam used to kill the flames hung like dirty candy-floss from the walls; an icing to the cake of destruction. A group of technicians clustered around the wreckage of the plane at the far end of the room. A chill wind blew through the shattered window.

Steve Delmonte stood for a moment examining the scene then stepped carefully over a sheeted figure and walked to where Dale Markham stood among his staff. The chief of local police turned at the crunch of broken glass, smiled a greeting.

"Steve!" They shook hands with genuine warmth. "It's good to see you again. Is this visit official or were you just passing by?"

"Official."

"I thought so." Markham looked curiously at the special agent of the Federated Republics. "What's Security interested in this for?"

"Security is interested in everything," said Steve blandly. "Especially when a thing like this happens to a man like Marcus King. As I know you I've been detailed to pick over the pieces—we should be able to work together without friction. Agreed?"

"Sure. You know what happened?"

"I've read the report. How about you filling in the details?"

"We're still trying to dig them out." Markham led the way towards the sheeted figure. "Elgar," he explained. "One of King's guards. He was on duty when it happened." He stooped and lifted the sheet. Beneath lay a charred mess of torn and lacerated flesh and clothing. "He managed to get his boss to a drop-shaft—probably threw him into the opening, then caught the full force of the blast." He dropped the sheet back over the body.

"Drop-shaft?" Steve raised his eyebrows. "Where does it lead?"

"To a bomb-proof in the lower levels."

"An emergency exit." The agent looked at the ruined luxury of the room. "Now why should a man like King want a thing like that?"

"Why should he be guarded day and night?" Markham shrugged. "Maybe he's scared stupid of assassination. Or maybe he's afraid of fire. I wouldn't know."

"You're a liar," said Steve evenly. "But, from the look of it, his precautions were justified. My guess is that he beat the old man with the scythe by the skin of his teeth. Have you asked him about it?"

"No." Markham stepped back as two men came to collect the body. They looked at him and he nodded, his eyes following the stretcher as it left the room. "Not yet. You don't ask a man like King anything until he's ready to be asked. At the moment he's under sedation—or so I was told."

"It can wait. Any other casualties?"

"Two." Markham was grim. "The boys in the helijet. They must have seen the plane coming and tried to deflect it. They died trying."

Steve nodded, sympathising with the acid in the chief's voice, then crossed the room to the shattered window. He stood looking through the jagged opening, feeling the tug of the wind, then glanced to where the men worked at the far end of the room. The plane was almost buried in the structure of the wall which had taken the main force of the impact. He frowned and looked again through the window.

"Something on your mind, Steve?" Markham had joined him.

"Just a thought. What do you make of it?"

"Isn't it obvious? Some crazy idiot flying too fast and too low. He lost control and—" The chief's thumb jerked expressively over his shoulder. He caught Steve's expression as he turned. "You doubt it?"

"I'm thinking about it. Wouldn't a man in a plane do his best to avoid an obstruction like this building?"

"Sure. But if he's lost control what could he do about it?"

"He could try something. No plane ever gets that much

out of control." Steve paused, thinking about it, then shook his head. "Something's wrong here. Unless the pilot were dead or unconscious he would have tried something. If the witnesses are correct it came in fast and low and straight towards the building. If it hadn't been for that heli deflecting it—"

"King would be dead," snapped Markham. "Nothing living in this room could have survived a direct impact. He was lucky. Two good men died to give him that luck. Well, it happens."

"Yes," said Steve thoughtfully. "It happens—to people like King."

A technician called from the group working at the wrecked plane. "Hey, Chief, do you want to take a look at this?"

They had freed the pilot. Steve watched as the photographers recorded the scene, looking dispassionately at the broken body, the unrecognisable face. A metal circlet girdled the skull.

"Hold it," he snapped as a man stooped to remove it. The technician looked his surprise.

"It's only a krown."

"Maybe, but treat it with caution just the same." He looked at Markham, not wanting publicly to override his authority. "I'd like a report on that, Chief. Fast."

"O.K., see to it, Hewitt." Markham stepped back as the man carefully removed the circlet then snapped orders at the rest of his crew. "Right. Get his prints. Send them to Central Registry. Get a retinal if you can. No? Well get his blood-type and do what you can with the rest." He looked at the technician who had called him over. "Have you anything else, Eisten?"

The man looked at Steve.

"You can talk freely," snapped Markham impatiently. He stepped further away from the men clustered about the body. "What have you found?"

"Nothing unexpected." Eisten had a thin, high-pitched voice which suited his arid manner. "The plane was a normal commercial job, a sports model three years old.

It had been fitted with extra rocket boosters and stripped for speed."

"A hot rod," said Markham. "Anything else? Numbers? Markings?"

"All there. Tracing the crate will be simple."

"Naturally," said Steve dryly. "You won't have any trouble identifying the pilot either. Was there any remote control?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"I'm positive." Eisten was offended. He continued his report, speaking directly to Markham. "As far as I can tell there was no mechanical failure but a fuller report will have to wait until after laboratory analysis."

"Naturally," said the chief. "Conclusions?"

"An accident. One of those things. The pilot could have had a blackout. It's anyone's guess."

Markham nodded dismissal then looked at Steve.

"Well? You heard the man."

"I heard him," said Steve, "but what else did you expect it to look like? If the plane had carried no markings or had been gimmicked in some way it would have yelled suspicion. But your man is wrong. It was no accident."

"Trying to make work, Steve?"

"No, but I'm not running away from the facts either. Where's the man who is working on that krown?"

Hewitt had finished his examination. He came towards them at Markham's call, the circlet swinging from his hand. He looked at Steve with respect.

"You were right," he said. "This thing was booby-trapped. Explosive and thermite both."

"Why didn't it blow?" Markham watched as Steve took the circlet from the technician. Hewitt shrugged.

"A freak. It had a kinetic fuse of some kind. A neat idea but it didn't work."

"And if it had?"

"It would have melted itself down into scrap."

Curiosity sparkled in the technician's eyes. "Now why would a man wear a krown fitted with a thing like that?"

"Maybe he liked living dangerously," said Steve. "Who can tell what goes on in a kink's mind?"

"Has a kink got a mind?" said Hewitt.

He left and Steve led Markham away from his men, down to the far end of the room. He held up the circlet, his mouth set in distaste. Crashing sounds came from the region of the wrecked plane. He ignored them.

"All right, Dale," he said. "Now we know. This was no kink-act and it was no accident either. This was a deliberate attempt at murder."

"Are you sure?" Markham's voice was tight with anger. He was thinking of the two policemen who had died.

Steve nodded. "I'm sure. Someone wanted King dead. Let's find out more about it."

The pilot's name was Quentin Murray, 34 years old, married, no children, no evidence of disease, not wanted by the authorities. Unemployed for four years. Now dead.

"A kink." Markham dropped the flimsy from Central Registry on his desk. It was late afternoon and he was looking tired. "Nothing to do, nothing to hope for, nothing to be proud of. So he dived at the Palace. A regular kink trick."

"If the krown had blown it would have looked an accident," said Steve sourly. "Now it looks like a kink-act. Whoever is behind it has brains as well as money."

He leaned back in his chair, only half-aware of the bustle beyond the transparent partition ; the seeming chaos of the local police headquarters. Through a window he could see the soaring tower of the Palace. He looked at it. Markham followed his gaze.

"Get anything?"

"No. King is under sedation. King is going to stay that way." Steve turned from the window. "I've checked the commercial situation. There have been no massive transfers of stock ; no financial manoeuvring. If King is getting ready to expand his empire then he's doing it without trace."

"How about the others?"

"The same. All negative. His competitors are apparently satisfied to maintain the *status quo*."

"They wouldn't have tried assassination anyway," said Markham. "Their killings are done on the market. Their idea of destroying a man is to ruin him. They don't like outright murder—it could backfire."

Markham sounded confident but Steve knew better. To be a tycoon a man had to be strong and, to such personalities, the use of force held a certain appeal. He looked up as Eisten entered the office. The technician held a sheaf of papers. He dropped them on the desk.

"There are the lab reports, Chief. The plane was a sporter, converted six months ago and licensed for private-sky only. It was mechanically sound at the time of the crash." He gestured towards the papers. "You want to check?"

Markham shook his head. "So it was pilot-failure then? Nothing else?"

"Nothing. The plane was registered to the Skyburner's Circus. They're at the Freedrome at the—"

"All right," said Markham. "I know where it is."

The Freedrome was a garbage-filled quarry at the edge of town. A circle of vision-baffles lined the perimeter and posters screamed the attractions of the circus. Empty cartons, wrappers and discarded betting tickets littered the dirt. Past a line of weathered hangars stood an uneven row of caravans. Markham led the way to one of the largest, rang the bell, waited. The door opened and a man looked out.

"Are you Judd Klien?"

"That's right." The man's eyes were cool, speculative. "Who wants him?"

"Police." Markham flashed his badge and pushed his way into the caravan. Steve followed him. The circus owner hesitated then closed the door. He was cautious. He waited for Markham to speak.

"You own a plane," said the chief. "Registered number 243PSO 564S. Tell me about it."

"I already have," said Klien. "Where is it?" He looked at the two men, the corners of his eyes crinkling as if

amused. "I reported it stolen over an hour ago. Isn't that what you've called about?"

Markham looked his surprise.

"Let me get this straight," he said evenly. "You say that the plane was stolen about an hour ago?"

"I reported it then," corrected the circus owner. "I don't know when it was lifted. Sometime early morning, I guess. We found it missing when it was due to go on test." He saw the look of disbelief on Markham's face. "I guess you don't know the score. We get plenty of engine noise and some of the pilots test their crates at peculiar times. So it doesn't signify all that much when a plane takes to the air. I reported the loss as soon as I heard of it. That's all I can say."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Sure I'm sure." Klien's eyes were steady as he looked at the chief. "Have you found it yet?"

"We found what was left of it."

"Damaged?"

"It's a wreck. Who took it?"

"Now how the hell would I know that? We get all kinds. Sightseers, buffs, kinks, would-bes and has-beens. Maybe some junked-up kid figured himself as a pilot. If you've got him you should know." Klien looked at a table bearing a bottle and glasses. "Want a drink?"

Markham shook his head. "Do you know a man named Murray?"

"Never heard of him. Did he steal my plane?"

"He flew it. He's dead. Are you sure you never heard of him? Maybe he wanted a job as a pilot."

"Who doesn't?" Klien poured himself a drink. He looked at Steve who shook his head. Picking up the glass he sat down. "I get them all the time. Warn them of high-G and they laugh. Tell them it takes more than wishing to make the grade and they sneer. Ask them for cash and they run."

"All of them?"

"Not all. Some of the rich kids pay for a crack. I hire them a plane and let them enter the preliminaries. The

boys usually let them gain the edge. They lose it before morning."

"And their money too, is that it?"

"Why not?" Klien shrugged at Markham's expression. "If a man wants to back himself who am I to stop him?" Abruptly he swallowed his drink, slammed down the glass, jerked to his feet. "All right. You've had your say. Now get out of here and let me work."

"One last thing." Steve stepped forward before Markham could speak. "The plane you lost, did you win that on a bet?"

"How did you guess?" Klien poured himself another drink. "Some rich kid fancied himself and didn't trust my planes. So he used his own. He lasted three races and lost his shirt, his ship and some skin." He narrowed his eyes. "You want to make something out of it?"

"Did I say so?"

"You don't have to say. You cops are all alike. Well, to hell with you. I pay my taxes and stay clean. Now get out of here and let me earn a living!"

Outside Steve looked thoughtfully at the hangars and workshops. The scream of tested engines tore the air and a plane, exhaust baffled, soughed in a tight circle overhead. A second joined it and they flew in close manoeuvre, wings almost touching, diving, separating when it seemed they must surely crash.

"Clever," said Steve. "Those pilots know how to handle a plane."

"They should. They're experts." Markham glanced back at the caravan. "So's Klien."

"You think that he was lying?"

Markham shrugged and led the way back to the official car. Talking was easier when the vehicle had carried them from the scream of tested engines.

"It would have been easy for Murray to have taken the plane," said Steve. "Even if the loss had been reported at once it would have made no difference. The person steering him didn't intend for Murray to come back."

"Klien reported the loss to cover himself," said Markham. "He knows more than he's told."

"Perhaps. Maybe he knows Murray, maybe not, but one thing is certain. Whoever was behind Murray knew about the circus. And there's the plane. It was worth any three of the others. I doubt if Klien ever intended to race it—he would have been a fool if he had."

"Are you saying that it was a plant?"

"I doubt it. It seems a little too obvious and you can trace it back without trouble. Our quarry is too smart to leave such a connection. But that plane was there for a purpose. My guess is that it wasn't for regular racing. So what was it doing there?"

"Maybe Klien was holding it to see?"

"Maybe. You can find out. But someone knew of it and steered Murray to it. It was the one best suited to his purpose."

"So it comes back to the circus." Markham scowled at the impassive back of the uniformed driver. "Damn the luck! Of all the close-mouthed crews circus folk are the worst. They'll cover for each other all the way. Whoever steered Murray knew what they were doing. Clever! Damned clever!"

"Not so clever," reminded Steve. "The krown didn't blow. It should have done. It gives us a lead."

"You're working on it?"

"I'm waiting for the lab report. In the meantime I'll look up Murray's wife. You know where she is?"

"Wait a minute." Markham picked up a handset, spoke into it, waited. He looked at Steve over the mouthpiece. "I'm still going to trace that plane. There's a chance that—" He broke off, listened, snapped a question, listened again. He replaced the instrument.

"I've saved you a journey. I had a check made on Murray's wife. Little Stella isn't at home. She hasn't been home all night."

three

THE MAN WAS tall, dark, blue-eyed. He had a hard, cruel mouth, a strong jaw, small ears set close to his cropped

skull. His clothes were expensive, his hands well-kept, his manner alert.

"Ransom," said Markham. "David Ransom." He watched the man on the screen. Superimposed lettering gave relevant information. "Stella Murray's boy-friend — or one of them. We found them at North Polar."

Steve nodded. He was intent on the man portrayed on the screen. He was speaking, the voice cultured and with an underlay of mockery. Markham tripped the release and the strip of videotape wound on its spool. He fed in another section of tape.

"Watch this."

It was the same man but now he was naked aside from snug briefs, his body warm with the sheen of oil. The ten-inch knife in his hand glittered like an icicle. He held it with professional competence. The blue eyes were narrowed, gleaming with a killer's light. He moved forward, poised on the balls of his feet.

"Dave Ransom," said Markham again. "He's a knife-fighter and a good one. Not that he goes into the ring personally now. He handles promotions, runs a string, arranges bouts on the Free Circuits."

"Promotions?" Steve was thoughtful.

"You get the connections?" Markham nodded. "He could get hold of a gimmicked krown. I thought of that but he checks out clean. He and Stella left the city before midnight and arrived at North Polar three hours before the crash. They stayed there until we found them. Call it thirty-six hours. They give each other a cast-iron alibi." He anticipated Steve's question. "It's genuine. I've checked the resort and there's no doubt about it. Neither could have been personally involved."

"That doesn't mean that they are innocent," said Steve. "The thing could have been fixed. What about the woman?"

"Stella?" Markham shrugged. He fitted a new tape into the machine. A woman stared at them. She was pretty in a hard, artificial way. Her voice tended to be shrill. Her body was beautiful.

Steve recognised the type.

"A girl with too much ambition and not enough of what it takes," said Markham. "She married Murray when he was working—my guess is that she wanted a regular meal-ticket. When he hit the skids she looked around."

"Why didn't he divorce her?"

"Why should he?" Markham was cynical. "He couldn't get a better looker and divorce costs money. Maybe he was content with the crumbs." He hit the release. "Forget her. She hasn't any brains outside of the bedroom. I don't know what Ransom saw in her."

"She was Murray's wife," pointed out Steve. "There's a connection."

"It could be coincidence. I told you—she played around." His voice changed. "But here's another connection. Ransom knows King."

"A knife fighter?"

"He wasn't always that. King picked Ransom out of the gutter when he was just a kid. He gave him an education, treated him almost like a son and then, for some reason, he threw him back into the gutter. That was five years ago."

Steve was interested. "What happened to him? Ransom, I mean?"

"He hit bottom. He'd been turned into a spoiled kid and had to learn fast." Markham shrugged. "I'll say this for him; he wanted to survive. Cheap fights, some fixing, you know how it is. He climbed fast. But I'll bet he thinks of King every time he sees his scars."

"Revenge?" Steve considered it. "After so long? Possible but I doubt it."

"But it's a connection," insisted Markham. "Murray's wife, access to a gimmicked krown, a motive. It's a gift."

"Yes," said Steve dryly. "Too much of a gift—but he has an alibi."

The architect who had designed the display on the Palace had boasted that it couldn't be ignored. Linda Sheldon agreed with him.

BE A KING—WEAR A KROWN!

A promise and a command repeated three and a half

times a second in a pulsating rhythm which gave the appearance of continuity but which was loaded with subliminal impact.

BE A KING—WEAR A KROWN!

She hated the very sight of it.

"Damn you to hell!" she said to the sign and covered the window with heavy curtains. They were old fashioned but they did their job. They cut out the night and the glare of the sign.

She crossed the room, a slightly-built woman in her late twenties, halting beside a wide desk. The top lifted as she touched a switch, the ranked tools and instruments lifting from beneath with a pneumatic sigh. A chair yielded beneath her weight. Adjusting goggle-magnifiers she concentrated on her work.

She was adapting a krown. It was fine, delicate work requiring both skill and concentration. The doorbell rang five times before it registered.

Steve smiled at her when she opened the door.

"Miss Sheldon?" He displayed his indentification. Beneath the smile he was alert but her reaction was negative. She betrayed none of the guilt-symptoms usually created at the sight of the credentials.

"What do you want?" Her voice was cool, assured.

"Some help and information." He looked past her into the big room. The desk looked normal; she had returned the workbench to its hiding place. "May I come in?"

"Can I refuse?"

"Certainly—but why should you?" His smile remained as he stepped into the room. "Can't we have a nice, friendly talk?"

"Under duress?" She shrugged with irritation. "You are interrupting me. I do not like to be interrupted but I suppose that I have no choice in the matter." She closed the door, walked into the room. "Well, what do you want?"

"Some coffee," he said blandly. "Hot and black and strong." He smiled at her expression. "You did ask me," he reminded. "Do you mind?"

"For taking me so literally?" The calm effrontery of his request had appealed to her sense of humour. She thawed,

returned his smile, gestured towards a chair. "No, I don't mind. Ten minutes?"

It was ready in three and Steve examined the room as he sipped the coffee. It was good coffee. It was an expensive room.

"You are probably wondering at the reason for my visit," he said as he set down the empty cup. "For that you can blame Central Registry."

"Shedding responsibility, Mr. Delmonte?"

"No, I'm stating a fact. You see we have a problem. We took all the factors which we think could help us and fed them into the computor. Your name was returned."

"The problem?"

"It has to do with a krown," he said casually. "A very special krown. It had been adapted."

He sensed the slight tension of her body. "You think that I can help you?"

"Central Registry says that you can. You are a qualified electronician specialising in micro-currents and miniaturisation. You graduated at the top of your class taking physics and metallurgy as associated subjects. You have also studied the electro-potential of the cortex with particular emphasis on the thalamus."

"So?"

"So I would like you to tell me about krowns."

"I see." She rose with a smooth, lithe movement and crossed to the window. Savagely she jerked back the curtains. Outside the sign on the Palace made the night hideous with its glare. "If you want to know about krowns," she said bitterly, "you should ask King."

"I've tried. For a man who was almost killed by one of his own products he isn't very communicative." Her face was turned from him; her expression hidden. "You know about the crash?"

"The plane which hit the Palace. Yes. They said it was an accident."

"It wasn't. The pilot was wearing an adapted krown." He rose and joined her before the window. Reaching out he drew the curtains. "Tell me about them."

"They are based on the McKee effect. A certain pattern

of micro-radiation impinging on the cortex and producing mental and physical reaction. But you must know this!"

"Yes," he admitted. "I know of the principle behind the krowns. What I want you to tell me is how they can be used for murder."

He sensed the tension of her body again, the sudden catch of her breath, then she was moving across the room towards the chairs. Sitting down she poured herself more coffee. "Want some?"

"Please." He sipped while she spoke. He admired her self-possession.

"Take sleep," she said abruptly. "McKee found that if the wave-pattern of the brain as determined by the electro-encephalograph could be artificially produced and superimposed on the cortex then the results were predictable. Sleep produces a certain wave-pattern. Reproduce it, superimpose it—and the patient would fall asleep. A quick, natural sleep which would last as long as the stimulus was applied. The application was obvious."

"Artificial sleep," he said. "For as long as the doctor considered necessary. Krowns replaced anaesthetics. A patient falls asleep and wakes healed. Intravenous feeding takes care of bodily nourishment. And?"

"It's the old story." She sounded tired, depressed, more than a little disgusted. "Sleep isn't the only reaction possible with a krown. Other wave-patterns can be copied. The entire spectrum of human emotion can be synthesised and applied. Need I stress the commercial application?"

They had replaced a host of drugs. Tranquillizers, stimulants, anti-depressives—the owner of a krown needed none of them. They could avoid depression, anger, shame. They had no need to feel inferior. They had no cause to experience fear.

A touch of a switch and a man would fall asleep—a built-in trip cutting the stimulus at any predetermined interval. Pay a little more and your krown would be fitted with extra attachments. You could feel euphoria, the titivation of the senses, pleasure, anticipation, desire . . . The limit was only what you could afford.

"Zombies!" She rose and paced the floor. "That's what krown-wearers are. They don't feel real, natural emotion at all. They merely respond like a frog's leg kicking to a jolt of current." She shuddered. "Can you imagine being made love to by a man wearing a krown?"

"No."

"A woman, then. She'd want you because of the band around her head. You or any man. She wouldn't feel love, only lust. Remove the krown and would she feel the same? You'd never know. Thanks to King!"

"You don't like him?"

"No." She met his eyes, her own oddly penetrating in their unwavering directness. "I detest him for the thief that he is."

He waited, knowing that there had to be more.

"He stole the McKee effect. His lawyers moved in and, when it was over, he owned the basic discovery and all relevant patents. He grew richer while McKee died in poverty. King!" She spat the word like an insult.

"You hate him?"

"Yes!"

"Enough to kill him?"

"Enough to wish him dead." Her eyes were defiant. "Is that what you came to find out?"

"No. You were telling me about the krowns." He rose and stood beside the desk, his fingers running over the polished surface. "Adapted krowns," he reminded. "The illegal ones."

His knuckles made a drumming sound on the desk. A hollow sound.

She sighed and moved past him and he caught the delicate scent of perfume; the clean, feminine smell of cosmetics and womanliness.

"Call the brain a receiving set and the krown a broadcasting unit," she said flatly. "Now think of them in reverse. A krown can be adapted to pick up and transmit the wave-pattern of a brain. In such a case the wearer of a tuned krown will sense, feel, experience what the wearer of the master does. Vicarious participation to the ultimate degree."

"I see." His hand left the desk as he moved closer to her. "What is a matched pair?"

"Exactly what it says. Each krown acts as both receiver and broadcaster. Each wearer experiences the other's emotions on a mounting, feed-back cycle. They are popular with lovers; especially those with transvestitismic tendencies."

"I can imagine," he said dryly. "And a master/slave control?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"No?" His voice hardened. "Then how is it that your thesis dealt with that particular subject?"

"My thesis dealt with problematical applications of the McKee effect," she said coldly. "I suggest you read it before making such broad statements."

"I have." He had surprised her. "Let me tell you about them. About the krown Murray was wearing. It was a slave control. Someone, somewhere, wore the master. He saw through the pilot's eyes, guided the plane with his hands, dived to his death. Murray's death, not the one wearing the master. He was safe. Have you ever adapted a krown?"

The question caught her off-balance as he had intended.

"I—"

"Have you?"

"Isn't that against the law?"

"Not if it is done for the purpose of legitimate research. What do you do for a living?"

"I—" Anger dusted her cheeks, sparkled in her eyes. "That is my business."

"No," he corrected sharply. "Mine. I represent Security. You are listed as a self-employed consultant. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Who are your customers?"

"Businesses, people, anyone who wants and can pay for my skill."

"Fight promoters?" His voice was a club beating at her self-control. "The sharks on the Free Circuit who can afford to pay for gimmicked krowns? Is that who you work for?"

Her anger was a shield he couldn't penetrate. Abruptly

his voice softened. "Do you know a man named Murray? Klien? Ransom?" He listed the names as she shook her head. He handed her a photograph. "Have you ever seen this man?"

"No." She was definite. "Who is he?"

"Ransom. Tell me, why do you hate King?"

"I told you."

"No. You said that you despised him for wrongs done to another in the past. That is not a strong enough reason to wish him dead. Not for an intelligent woman."

She didn't answer.

"You have another reason," he insisted. "Tell me."

She crossed the room. The curtains made a sharp, swishing sound as she drew them back. She looked towards the Palace, the sign staining her face with its garish light.

"I hate King because I'm afraid of him. Afraid of what he can do. What I know he can do. If you are as concerned about Security as you say than you should give whoever tried to kill him a medal."

She turned and looked at him, her eyes bitter.

"So don't ask me to help you to find them."

four

THE ROOM WAS a conical simulacrum of a Caribbean Paradise. From the high apex an artificial sun shone over living murals. Gaudy birds flitted among exotic vegetation. The soft susurration of a distant sea hung on the scented air.

Marcus Edward King was not impressed.

The room was a toy, the product of electronic genius coupled with the power of wealth. Once it had amused him to control his environment with the flick of a finger.

"You must relax." Fullen's fingers probed expertly at the base of Marcus's neck. "The psychic trauma of your escape is stronger than you think. It should not be ignored."

Marcus grunted his irritation. "I'm not ignoring it."

"I speak in a medical sense. You're a mass of tension. You should take a week of deep-sleep."

"Fool!"

The fingers hesitated, hardened, dug a fraction deeper. Marcus snarled like a wolf.

"Someone has tried to kill me and you tell me to go to sleep! Is that what you call good advice?"

"In your case—yes."

"Why? What makes me so special?"

"You are not alone. You can relax without fear. You have others to protect you. You—"

"Protect!" Marcus swung from the couch and glared at the doctor. "Where was that protection when I needed it most?"

Fullen remained calm.

"Elgar saved your life."

"So what? He was a guard. He was paid to do a job. He did it—just." Impatiently Marcus snatched his robe higher about his neck. "The fact remains that I was almost killed. Killed! And you tell me to go to sleep!"

Impatiently he strode the floor. The soft decor mocked his mood. He sensed it and pressed a button. The murals swirled, steadied into a new pattern. Barred and pointed windows looked onto a checkerboard countryside over which wended colourful figures. The walls became granite, hung with weapons, bright with trophies. The carpet changed to the colour of stone.

The king was in his castle, thought Fullen and wondered if Marcus guessed how easily he had betrayed himself. He was afraid and had surrounded himself with archaic defences.

"You wanted to kill me," said Marcus suddenly. "Why?" He stared at the impassive face of the doctor. "Your hands betrayed you," he snapped. "I felt their pressure. Your fingers were on the carotids. Three minutes and I would have been dead."

"No," said Fullen.

"You deny it?"

"I am your physician," said Fullen evenly. "I am also a psychiatrist. I accept your insults for what they are. The expressions of a man in fear."

"I have a right to be afraid." Marcus lifted a hand to his

throat. "So vulnerable," he whispered. "A man is so vulnerable. Do you ever think of that?"

"Consciously, no. My profession is to save life not think of ways to take it. May we end this subject of conversation?"

"It bothers you?"

"Paranoia bothers me," said Fullen quietly. "You refuse to admit the importance of psychosomatic stress. A man in perpetual fear is in a condition of continual physical tension. Such a state, unless alleviated, is dangerous. It is wearing to the young—it can kill the old."

"I see," said Marcus. He bared his teeth. "Are you saying that my mental state is abnormal?"

Fullen didn't answer.

"Get out!"

Marcus sat and stared at the walls of his make-believe castle, half-wishing that he had been born in another place, another time. Almost at once he dismissed the notion for the absurdity it was. He had no time for fancies.

Time! There wasn't enough time!

He found and pressed a button. A face appeared on a screen. Fromarch blinked as he recognised his caller.

"Why, Mr. King, sir. This is an unexpected pleasure!"

Marcus ignored the pleasantry.

"What is the finalised figure on the saturation sales index of the proposed new model?"

"Model Z?" Fromarch was uncomfortable but he managed to retain his smile. "I'm afraid that you're a little early for that, Mr. King. We don't have it yet. The data is still in the machines."

"How long?"

"Well—" The smile grew even more strained. "We should have it for you by tomorrow. Yes, sir, tomorrow for certain."

"Tomorrow is twenty-four hours away," snapped Marcus. "Twenty-four hours wasted. Why the delay?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Never mind. Transfer me to Perlew."

Perlew was Head of Personnel, Technical Division.

"Yes, Mr. King?"

"Fromarch is behind schedule. Check and find out if he's been dragging his feet. If he has fire him."

"Yes, sir, Mr. King!"

The screen blanked out. For a moment Marcus hesitated, his fingers resting on the buttons, then withdrew his hand. That wasn't the answer.

Tiredly he leaned back, looking at the pointed windows, the sun-dappled scene beyond. Life had been simple in those days when the barons ruled and science leaned towards magic. But the same human motives still held. Greed and hate and fear with the rack and dungeons below and, in the turret, the men of genius striving to unlock the secrets of the ages. No longer to make gold—he could do that easily enough. But to find things far more precious.

Life and the secrets of life, so that those who had could hold.

They could find it, too, given the time.

Time!

He rose and crossed the room. A panel slid open. He stepped into the cage of an elevator and dropped down . . . down . . . down. In this age the turrets were buried deep. A man met him as he left the cage. The air was cool, sterile, tainted with the smell of antiseptics. Marcus shivered. He had been too impatient to dress. Not that it mattered.

"Do you want to look over the labs, Mr. King?" Gilder was polite but he could not avoid displaying a little impatience. Marcus was not offended. He was impatient himself."

"Yes."

"Then if you will please shower and change—?"

It was routine. Silently he allowed the jets to drench him with antiseptics, the hot air to dry him, the dispenser to eject soft, shapeless clothing still warm from the ovens.

Dressed, clean, less irritable now that he was doing something positive, he followed the scientist into the laboratories. Men worked in silent concentration. Caged animals looked from the walls. Glass and metal shone bright in the artificial daylight.

"Progress?"

"As expected, Mr. King." Gilder led the way to where animals lived in hermetically sealed glass. "We're running the last of the tests of the present series. Fifteen hundred specimens to be exact." He tried a little humour. "It's lucky that rats are so inexpensive."

"Never mind that! Are they the best medium?"

"No, but they are the most convenient." Gilder dared to smile. "We can hardly use men."

In the old days they would have used men.

"You said that this was the last of the present series," said Marcus. "Has the new serum proved successful?"

"Yes—to a limited degree. The residual cholestrol is completely removed and with less physical shock than previous methods but there is no tremendous difference in observable life-span. We are, of course, using aged specimens."

Marcus nodded. He was not interested in extending the lives of young men.

"Mallory is investigating the effects of controlled radiation on the pineal. We still don't know what is the exact purpose of this gland but he suspects that . . ." The voice droned on, Marcus listening but not wholly understanding. It didn't worry him. He was not a scientist. He bought scientists. ". . . an ambitious programme. At a guess I'd say he'd need at least five hundred Rhesus monkeys but the expense—"

"Buy them."

"Five hundred, Mr. King?"

"A thousand if you need them."

How much was life worth?

A second laboratory led from the first. A trapped passage a barrier between them. A different laboratory with not much glass and little metal but ranked machines and hair-fine instruments. And animals. Plenty of animals.

Gilder halted behind a technician. The man was stooped over an elaborate krown.

"We're managing to get almost total master/slave control," said Gilder enthusiastically. "Not only visual and aural reception but emotional and tactile as well. Four of

the five senses, Mr. King, and a large part of the emotional spectrum!"

"What's the missing sense?"

"Taste. We're having trouble with that one. When we solve it it will be possible for a man really to live by proxy."

"And die by proxy?"

Gilder lost some of his enthusiasm.

"That's a part of the trouble, Mr. King. If we get too close an affinity then there seems to be an actual merging of the personalities. In such a case the traumatic shock of death could be transmitted with unfortunate results." He hesitated. "In fact we've had a couple of rather scaring incidents. Dogs were used as the slaves, of course, and trained operators the masters. When a close degree of affinity had been reached we killed the animals while still in circuit."

"What happened?"

"In one case catatonia of the operator. In the other amnesia. Both, fortunately, responded to treatment." Gilder pulled thoughtfully at his ear. "The trouble is obviously psychological. It will have to be solved before we can hope to experiment with the higher animals."

Marcus nodded. He had expected nothing different. They had been faced with the same problem for years.

"We're trying a new approach on the transference of wave-patterns," said Gilder. "We've had some degree of success. The trouble is that . . ."

There was always trouble. Little things which made the apparently obvious the impossible to attain. Things like the subduing of the host personality, the impossibility of recording a true pattern—the machines allowed too high a margin of error, the difficulty of finding compatible types for experiments. It was all compromise and promise.

Promise!

He could not live on promises.

Gilder halted beside a sealed compartment. A dog lay within, a mesh of wires sprouting from its skull. Tubes led into the wall of its chest. Its eyes were closed. It didn't move. An adapted krown rested on the shaven head.

"This is interesting," said Gilder. "This dog is, physically, dead. We're keeping it alive by mechanical means. Keeping

its brain alive, I should say, but that's nothing new. The use of mechanical hearts, lungs, stomachs has been known for years. We have gone a step further. This dog is in affinity with that one over there." He pointed to where a canine crouched in a cage. "Now watch."

He turned and spoke to the operator. The man nodded and rested his hands on a panel.

"Bark," he said.

The other dog barked.

"Walk to the left. The right. Squat. Scratch side of head. Sit up and beg."

Like an echo the dog followed the commands.

Marcus raised his eyebrows.

"It isn't obeying voice-commands," explaind Gilder. "The appropriate stimuli are fed into the brain of the dog in the compartment—dog A. Dog A is in krown circuit with dog B. A thinks—or is forced to do the equivalent of thinking —and dog B performs the actions."

"So?" Marcus's voice was cold.

"It is an extreme solution," admitted Gilder. "But it is a solution. A man could be kept alive as we are keeping dog A. After all, what is really important about a man? His brain. Keep that alive and the man is alive. By use of a krown we can give him a complete proxy-life—provided that we can find him a suitable host, of course."

"Of course," said Marcus. There was a peculiar ringing in his ears, a tension at his temples. "He would have to have that."

"In such a case his life could be extended almost indefinitely," continued Gilder cheerfully. "In—" he broke off. "Are you feeling unwell, Mr. King?"

"No. I'm all right."

Marcus was curt but it was a lie. The thin, ringing seemed to penetrate his skull and the band around his temples was crushing his brain. And there was something wrong with his eyes. The dog in the case was no longer a dog. It had changed, altered into something horribly familiar.

Into a grey face on a white pillow.

The grey death mask of his father.

"Mr. King!"

He smelt the stench of something acrid.

"Mr. King, sir!"

"I'm all right," he said. "I tell you that I'm all right!"

He turned away from the case and what it contained.

It was alive.

It would continue to live.

But there had to be another way.

five

AT ELEVEN IN the morning Ellen Langdy trudged down the corridor of the twenty-fifth floor of the hotel in which she had spent the past eighteen years of her life. She had been a chamber maid when she joined the staff; she was one now. She didn't let it bother her. At 52 she had other problems. Sam was one.

He was her only child and had been trouble from the day he was born. Now he was writing from the sea-farm. He'd signed on for the standard five-year term and now wanted to buy his contract. If she gave him the money she would be broke. If she didn't he was likely to make a run for it. If he did he would be caught and liable to the extreme penalty under the commercial code.

And he would be caught. She had no doubt of it.

She sighed, wishing that Joe was still around to advise her, then forced a smile as another of her problems came in sight. The supervisor glanced pointedly at her watch.

"You're late, Langdy," she snapped. "This floor should be finished by now."

"I'm sorry, madam." Experience had taught her never to argue. "It's just that—"

"I don't want any excuses. Now hurry and finish your work."

Number 2552 was holding her up. The occupant was still in his room and looked like staying there all day. That didn't matter but, if she didn't clean his room, he might complain. She decided to take a chance. He could be a good-natured one who wouldn't object. He could be a careless one. He could even be an understanding one.

He was neither. He was dead.

She called the desk and sat down to wait.

"H. S. Shiel," said the hotel detective. He was a thin, world-wise man of 43 and nothing the guests of the Hotel Excel could do had the power to surprise him. "Registered two days ago. Stayed close to his room. No obvious friends. Can you add anything to that, Ellen?"

"No, Mr. Hughes."

He nodded, looking at the body in the chair, the bottle and glass on the table, the scattered clothes and the still-burning bedside lamp. It was his first duty to summon the police but duty is a relative term. Hughes was a practical man.

"All right, Ellen," he decided. "I'll handle this. Stay close and don't talk. Off you go now."

Alone he moved quickly about the room, smelling the bottle and glass, examining the body with his eyes, searching the room. He disturbed nothing and was careful to leave no prints.

"Not a dutch," he mused. "Not unless he found a new way out."

He stooped and examined the krown the dead man was wearing. It had cost more than the detective earned in a year. The pyjamas, robe and clothing were of high quality. Number 2552 was no pauper. He touched the flesh and found it cold.

"He must have kicked it last night," Hughes decided. "Came up here, ordered a bottle or had one already in his room, changed, sat down for a final drink and—curtains!" He shrugged. "Well, let's see what he carried."

Methodically he began to search the dead man's effects. The bags held nothing unusual. In the breast pocket of a jacket he found a notebook. He opened it, frowned at the scrawl it contained, guessing that it was some kind of code or private shorthand. The wallet was more interesting. He pursed his lips at the sight of a wad of currency, then removed half of it. Half wouldn't be noticed. To take it all would be to arouse suspicion—to neglect the opportunity would be stupid.

Hughes was not a stupid man. His eyes narrowed at the sight of what else the wallet contained. It was an ornate

identification/credit card bearing a photograph of the dead man together with relevant information. It was overprinted with a lustrous crown.

The late Mr. H. S. Shiel had belonged to the King Organisation.

Hughes smiled as he looked at the dead man, feeling a hard, warm glow in the pit of his stomach.

"Hell," he said softly. "It's Christmas!"

An hour later he called the police. The autopsy took place that afternoon. The coroner sat the following morning. A report was sent as a matter of courtesy to the Palace and another to Dale Markham as Chief of Local Police in the Palace area. A third went to Security.

Steve learned of it as a matter of routine.

"One of King's boys," said Markham. He dug out his copy of the report. "Died down at Malibu sometime yesterday in the small hours. Midnight before last at the earliest. Heart."

"Let me see that." Steve read the report and felt the itching of suspicion. Shiel had been one of King's top men —the coincidence was worrying. Markham shrugged when he mentioned it.

"One way and another King employs enough people to populate a small city. The odds are in favour of something happening to one of them when it happens to the boss. It's just a matter of statistical averages."

"Maybe." Steve wasn't convinced. "I'm not satisfied. So little cash. So few effects. No apparent reason for being where he was. And the prognosis! Heart ceased to function. Damn it, why?"

"I don't know and I don't care." Markham leaned back in his chair. "I've enough to do trying to solve the big one without worrying about what happens outside of my jurisdiction."

"Yours," said Steve. "But not mine. I'm going to check this out."

A flyer took him to the airfield. A stratjet wafted him to Malibu. A helicab dropped him at the precinct of the Hotel

Excel. A bored officer conducted him into the office of the local chief.

"Always ready to help Security," he said when Steve had introduced himself. He was a plump man who radiated a cultivated bonhomie. "What can I do for you?"

Steve told him. The chief lost some of his charm.

"Well, now," he said slowly. "I can't quite see what you're after. We handled the matter to everyone's satisfaction and—"

"Not to mine," Steve interrupted. "That's why I'm here." He said what he wanted to know. The chief shrugged.

"He didn't have a lot of cash but what would he want folding money for? His credit was good. Few effects? Maybe he liked to travel light. No, I don't know what he was doing in this area but I can guess. It's vacation country, Mr. Delmonte."

"Who found him?"

"It's in the report. Ellen Langdy. She's the chamber maid. The hotel detective took over."

"Both honest?"

"Well now." The chief puffed out his cheeks. "Let's just say that I've nothing against either of them. No record—if they had one they wouldn't be working at the Excel."

The doctor was more informative. He looked at Steve from beneath bushy white eyebrows. An old man glad to be left alone.

"He died," he said. "His heart stopped beating. It happens."

"It happens all the time," said Steve coldly. "What I want to know is why did it happen? What killed Shiel?"

"He died of natural causes." The doctor shrugged at Steve's expression. "What else can I say? He had a physical condition of which he was probably unaware. A rare but potentially dangerous complaint. He could have lived without treatment for another ten years. He was unlucky, that is all there is to it."

"Not quite." Steve looked thoughtfully at the doctor. He was old but seemed competent. "Have you ever heard of a coagulator?"

"I have." The doctor smiled with faint irony. "I am the

police surgeon," he reminded. "But Shiel was not murdered with such a weapon. The clot created by a coagulator has certain unmistakable characteristics. Such a clot was not present in the region of the heart. I'll stake my reputation on it."

"You may have to," said Steve. "Is the body still here?"

"It is. We are holding it against instructions from his employer. He worked for Mr. King, you know."

"I'm not impressed. Keep it here. Hold it for Security."

"But if Mr. King—"

"Forget him. This is a Security matter. King can't have the body until we're through with it. So keep it in freeze. All of it."

Outside Steve hesitated then walked over to the Hotel Excel. The manager shook his head.

"Hughes isn't here, Mr. Delmonte. He took off right after the inquest."

"Do you know where he went?"

"No. He said he had things to do, wanted to advance his day off." The manager shrugged. "What he does in his own time is his own business."

"All right," said Steve. "Where's his room?"

The room was one of the hotel's smaller apartments. A couple of simulated leather cases rested on top of the wardrobe. Steve searched them. He ran his hands over the two suits, slipped his fingers between the piles of underwear. A dresser yielded a heap of odds and ends, books, magazines, some travel folders. A half-filled box of small calibre cartridges stood in a box with a can of gun-oil and pull-through. Two spare clips were empty. A gas pencil with a broken valve had been tossed aside.

Steve dropped to his knees, stared at the bottoms of the drawers, the underside of the bed. A passbook caught his eye. He raised his eyebrows at the amount it showed. He rose and stood looking around the room. Then he picked up the phone.

"Operator? Did Hughes make any calls today? Outside calls?"

"No, sir."

"Receive any? One? Local or long distance? I see. Thank you."

He replaced the instrument and stood looking down at the table. Faint lines in the polish caught his eyes. He stooped, looking at them at an acute angle, taking care that his breath should not disturb the almost invisible film of dust. Again he lifted the phone.

"What time was this room cleaned today? I see. Do you know if Hughes caught a cab? Please find out. Yes, you can call back here."

Again he stared at the faint marks on the table. A directory stood beneath the phone. He lifted it, riffled the pages, frowned at what he saw. The phone rang.

"Yes?" He listened to the operator's voice. "Good. Yes. That's right, the same driver. I'll be right out."

Hughes had taken a cab. He hadn't phoned for it but the driver knew him and had remembered.

"Picked me up half-way down the block," he said as he guided the vehicle. "Just flagged me down. I wouldn't have stopped but I know him." He cursed softly to himself as he dodged a truck. "Damn hogs," he commented. "They think they own the road."

"Did he talk to you?"

"Just the usual gossip. Mostly about the inquest. Fancy finding a guy all cold like that?" The driver shook his head. "Well, as I say, you never know."

"No," said Steve. "Was he riding high?"

"Now you come to mention it, he was." The driver swore again as a girl tried to commit suicide beneath his wheels. "Crazy woman!" he yelled. He shook his head as the danger passed, then snapped his fingers. "That reminds me. He gave me a tip. A fat one."

"For what?"

"For—" The driver grunted. "Never mind."

"Here." Steve leaned forward, a note in his hand. The driver whistled.

"Five birds!"

"Keep talking. Did he stop anywhere? Give you anything to mail? To mind?" He showed his badge. "It's O.K. I'm on his side."

"No." The driver's voice was flat. Steve recognised the barrier. He guessed that the man was telling the truth. Hughes wouldn't have been that careless. The cab stopped with a squeal of brakes. "Here," he said. "This is the place." Steve didn't move.

"Which way was he headed when you left him?"

"I didn't notice." The driver turned. "You want your money back?"

"No."

The area was on the fringe, beyond the polished centre, a maze of dilapidated houses scheduled for destruction. Giant machinery moved to one side in a cloud of dust. Faded shops looked like men who had long accepted defeat and now waited patiently to die.

Steve paused, remembering the address he had read traced on the polish of the table, faint in the dust. He halted, eyes narrowing at a self-serve shop, nodding as he saw a mail box. A kid looked up at him, making a brave show in patched and faded jeans. His face bore the bloated look of substandard subsistence.

"Want to earn a bird?" Steve took the coin from his pocket. The kid almost swallowed his tongue in his eagerness to accept. "You hang around here often?"

"Most days all day." The kid was maybe eleven with the bright eyes of youth and the knowing gleam of age.

"I'm looking for a man." Steve described Hughes from his record card at the Hotel. "He was headed towards the Dolman Place. Know it?"

"Sure."

"Guide me for another five emus?"

Five Interplanetary Money Units would probably provide his food for a week—the kind of food he'd been reared on.

"Sure," said the kid. "This way, mister."

The Dolman Place was just that, a place. Once it had been a square ringed with middle-income houses. There had been flowering trees and grass and maybe a pond. Now it was a broken, deserted slum. The air was thick with dust from the demolition machines, the ground shaking beneath

their treads. Within a matter of days the area would be razed, the debris ready for fusing. New apartments would be built, a warren of low-income boxes reaching towards the sky. In weeks they would be filled with the population overflow. In five years they would be another slum.

Steve halted on the edge of the ruined square. He looked at his guide.

"That one," said the kid. He pointed to one of the terraced houses.

"O.K.," said Steve. "Beat it."

The kid hesitated, dragging one foot in the dust.

"Go on," snapped Steve. He waited until the kid had vanished back down the way they had come. Then he walked towards the house.

The door was gone, the windows glassless openings. He paused in the hall, sniffing at the air.

It was stale, acrid with the odour of shattered brick but clean of cigarette smoke, the smell of soap or alcohol.

Cautiously Steve searched the lower rooms. He climbed the stairs, keeping close to the wall, and looked into the upper rooms. Nothing. He descended the stairs and stood looking thoughtfully at the hall. The dust bore recent traces. He turned and moved quietly towards the back door. A scrap of rubbish snapped beneath his foot in the backyard. He froze then moved towards the house on his left.

Something white showed in the dusty gloom of a back room.

It was Hughes. He was completely naked.

And completely dead.

(Part 2 Next Month)

A man of many parts, Charlie, and he didn't enjoy any of them . . .

THE CHANGING SHAPE OF CHARLIE SNUFF

R. W. Mackleworth

"I HATE THAT old man!"

He watched the angular, twisty figure doddering at the front gate. He saw the sparse, white hair clinging to the nearly bald pate and the one, wild eye which seemed to be searching for him. The other eye was covered with a black patch. It might have been the face of an elderly pirate instead of the last, respected remains of a once famous scientist.

Charlie raised his nose from the window sill and quietly descended to all fours. He calculated he could just make the back of the sofa before the old man reached the front door. Safely behind the sofa the bell could ring until eternity but he would ignore it.

The bell rang long and persistently.

"Wicked old man."

He could feel the intensity of emotion breaking through the molecules of the door and flowing like a red hot stream down the hallway, around the door, seeking him out. For a very ancient metabolism the scientist could work up a good head of steam. The pent up frustration was longing for an outlet, for a listener with ears like plates. A tale to tell was written all over the old man's face.

Of course, he couldn't know the consequences because no one in his right mind would believe the truth. Though—and the thought struck Charlie like a swinging sledge hammer—the rheumy brain outside might be mad enough to believe the truth. Sometimes he suspected that Fiona had half guessed and, out of sheer malice, she could have whispered in the old man's ear. It might be that which had whetted his appetite.

A last, desperate buzz on the bell was accompanied by a

devastating insight into the very eye of the storm which had propelled the scientist to his door. He wanted to tell him the story of his life. He wanted to tell him about the last ambition left in his one tracked mind.

Charlie felt the sweat running down his face. If only he had kept away from this benighted planet as his elders had so often impressed on him. It had all been such a terrible experience. If he ever managed to escape it would take him ages to wipe the memory of his long exile from his brain. Even the bad, old days, when his race had been little more than the useful tools of any intelligent, organic life that came their way, hadn't been so bad.

Someone had once said, that they were the footstool of the universe. That had been true until they had found a quiet, little world of their own, devoid of animal and vegetable, but replete with mineral resources. There, nothing could come along and wish them anything other than they were. Pity he had to go leave it all.

"Trying to hide, Charlie?"

Fiona's cuddly lisp drifted to him from the inner door and he turned his head reluctantly, to look upon her sweetly, vicious face, with its glamorous haze of imitation blonde hair. What a wonderful girl! He smiled on her like a benevolent brother and she understood the smile very well.

"Won't you let him in?"

"Not just now, thank you." Charlie licked his lips nervously. It was one of the few habits he had copied that seem to give him any satisfaction and it made him wonder just what association the action had with a similar habit in his natural body. In his original state he had no tongue, or lips for that matter. "I have a lot to do and I'd rather meet him later."

"Poor Mr. Malt. He's longing to meet you, Charlie." Her eyes performed big round circles and she looked innocent. One slim hand whirled a string of bright beads with delicate precision and one equally slim foot stirred the carpet with a pointed toe. She was limbering up for blackmail. "I ought to let him in."

"Please!"

He put a lot into one word of pleading but it had no effect. Fiona's wish was too strong. Just as her first wish had been too strong. He shrugged his broad shoulders and made his way on knees and elbows to her side. Slowly, and out of sight of the windows, he stood up stretching all six foot of his handsome frame, the frame she had wished on him outside the Rialto Cinema one wet night in May. The combination of a love story, still dewy in her thoughts, and dull frustration of damp reality had worked on him like a magnet.

One moment he had been an enduring symbol, a beautiful diamond on a freshly aristocratic finger, riding in a Rolls, and next he was an exact imitation of a screen idol. Fiona's overpowering desire had wrenched him from his security in a trice.

"Oh, but you are lovely, Charlie." Her expression of admiration turned quickly to petulance. "Why don't you like me? Everyone else does."

He felt it was dangerous to answer.

She took his silence for compliance and wobbled urgently towards the stairs. He stood stock still wondering how much she knew and whether it was worth calling her bluff, if bluff it was. Inspiration came to him.

"What about a drink?"

She looked disappointed and her gold ear-rings shook sulkily. Fiona knew a brush off when she heard one.

He winked at her cheekily.

Her sudden smile was a little more hopeful.

The drinks were in the lounge and that meant flirting with the risk of being spotted by the old man. There was no doubt about the risk. Mr. Malt was as mad as a march hare with his tail in a trap. If someone let him go he would explode all over the place.

Explode!

Charlie had a very nasty feeling. It was completely outside his experience, even in this mixed up world, but it was just possible that Mr. Malt had a bomb on his mind. After all wasn't he the scientist who had spent all his life thinking up new ways of blowing things up? Wasn't that why they gave him such a lovely benefit when he was pensioned off?

With all those tributes from grateful people—those who had survived.

It was a problem. Charlie had heard a lot of debate about the effect of retirement on an ageing man. Not that he could really understand it because, where he came from, age was something to do with the half life of radiation. Nevertheless that might be the trouble with Malt. He might still be thinking about bombs. Now, of course, he had no way of making one . . . unless he wished hard.

"Let's have a coffee instead."

Fiona had been waiting very patiently. Her eyes had become narrow slits and her generous mouth had puckered up. Coffee wasn't going to be sufficient.

"All right, I've got to face it sooner or later. Let him in." He was forceful, for the first time in his relationship with Fiona, and he enjoyed the vibrant power of the stagey voice he had acquired with the heroic body. If she had any idea of what was involved she wasn't going to let Malt in. Not if she valued him.

It was her turn to lick her lips nervously. She shuffled her dainty feet and fumbled with the string of beads. A weakly dependent, half smile filtered across her plump, peach cheeks and vanished in vague gloom. It was rather touching.

Charlie decided to risk all. He decided to come clean, to put all his cards on the table and hope that the truth did not send her insane. She might even understand his predicament and become a positive ally. Though that meant he would have to make certain concessions in return.

"My dear . . ." he rather liked the term ever since he had learned the right way to say it from the old gentleman who had wished him into a diamond, "not to put too fine a point on it you may have wondered just how I popped into your life when I did."

She looked a little coy. "I never thought, not really."

"You never thought, well never mind. I hadn't expected it of you." He placed his brawny arm lightly on her shoulder and steered her into the kitchen. "Let me explain, in simple non-technical terms, and see where that gets us."

As far as Fiona was concerned there was only one place

she wanted to get but she sank gracefully on to the freshly painted, bright red chair of extreme ugliness. The chair was Charlie's status symbol, essential decoration for a working class kitchen so the screen dramas assured him. It was all part of his plan to adapt at all costs. "Go on I'm listening. I could listen to you all day."

He gave her the brotherly smile again.

"When I first decided to come here, I mean to this particular planet, I was on fire with a thirst for knowledge and, where I come from, that's some fire." He chuckled at his own joke then noted the blank look on her face and went on swiftly. "You see, animals, with any kind of intelligence at all, got to know that we represented a kind of magic wishing well. If your urge was strong enough, if your desire was really intense all you had to do was find someone like me and wish."

"Oh, yes." Her voice sounded a little choked but she seemed to be in full control, for the time being at least. Her legs were neatly crossed and her hands were in her lap. The bare knee seemed to say that all was well.

"It's a matter of will power and cell construction." He tried to keep it matter of fact. "Nucleic acids controlled by small, electrical discharges and associated with will power in some way. It's all understood among my people. We are formless entities in our natural state but with all the necessary material to make anything—subject to the usual limitations of mass and so forth. We also possess wills with a certain weakness. Get it?"

She shook her head.

"We are a natural prey, just as many of your life forms are, and we exist for the predator's well being. The only difference is our durability. The animal wishes for a ham sandwich because it's starving but as soon as we convert, and the animal has eaten and is satisfied, then we merely return to our original state." Charlie stared at the golden ear-rings which were shaking just a little and found it hard to subdue his resentment. "You wanted a film star for your very own. The only problem is that you're still as eager as ever."

Her lips were quivering. It might have been fear but she

seemed to have trouble holding her cheeks still as if she was about to burst.

"It's been the same ever since I got here. The first little boy wanted a pet rat. He called it Charlie Snuff and hid it under his bed in a box with built in draughts. I thought he would go off pet rats but he didn't. I had to wait until his mother wanted a Sunday hat." He was waxing eloquent letting the pent up resentment flow forth like a confessional. "You all want something on this planet with enormous intensity and you won't ever let it go when you get it. It needed someone with a greater greed every time to rescue me."

"You're a caution, Charlie."

Fiona was spluttering like the last of a flickering candle.

"If just one person had allowed me to revert to my original state I could have lighted out in a moment. Did they? Did they hell! The only time I've felt safe was on that woman's finger in a nice, cosy ring, as a flawless diamond—well almost flawless." He drummed his fingers on the table fiercely trying to underline his story. "If old Malt wants his big bang more than you want your light of love I'm cooked, along with most of the western suburbs."

The girl was rolling on her chair clinging to the wooden seat with her hands, her legs wide apart and the tight skirt baring both chubby knees and some quality silk. Tears rolled down her cheeks taking the mascara with them and carving miniature river beds in her powder. She needed no words to express her feelings, no sign in bold letters to tell him what she thought.

"Is that all you can do?"

She ignored the sarcasm in his icy tone and staggered to the door which opened onto the small, back garden. Her devastated face goggled at him.

"Well, what did you think I was then?"

Fiona pulled herself together by slow stages and it was evident that the laugh had done her the world of good. If she lived to be a hundred, which all in all was unlikely, she could never get another laugh like it. "I think you're the biggest giggle since Attila, love, and I think you're a won-

derful fairy tale—right out of a magazine. And you don't look a gift horse in the mouth so that's what your saying."

"Your face is a mess." He was cruel. He wanted to make her suffer.

"Dear me." She peered into the cracked mirror which hung over the sink. The mirror only served as a place to shave—near the gas heater and its probable supply of hot water. Sink shaving was the local custom and Charlie had taken it up as a sensible economy along with sleeping in his shirt. The course he had taken in social psychology at the local institute for evening studies had stressed the value of conforming with local custom. The teacher had been very earnest about it Charlie could tell by the man's nervous tic. So he always bore it in mind. "I'll have to go home, Charlie. Repair the damage. Don't worry I'll be back."

He watched her go with some apprehension. Either she would be back like a giant refreshed or Malt . . .

. . . He was quite right. Malt took his cue from Fiona's departure. Within seconds he was coming up the garden, his one wild eye fixed on Charlie. "Mr. Snuff. Do let me introduce myself."

The quavering voice was preceded by a long, thin arm extended for a firm handshake. Charlie shuddered and engaged the claw with every sign of reluctance.

The old man was not to be insulted. For half a century he had fought both bumbledom and liberalism and there could hardly be two greater extremes. He had the endurance of a soldier who had worked his ticket in arctic snow and tropical jungle. If he had been the kind of man to be put off easily then international misunderstanding would have lost its bite.

"Staying with Fiona's mother, you know. Just lodging so to speak. Comfortable but not much conversation. Heard of your prowess as a man of intellect and I said to myself there's a fellow who would understand." The eye was rather shifty, as if Malt was considering a deceit, but frightened it might be noticed. "I was with the boffins during my service in the Civil. Miss them sorely now but I can't afford the rents in London, not the centre anyway."

Charlie was convinced he didn't know. He was guilty

all right but, only because he knew that someone of his own class might treat his intrusion as it deserved, not because Fiona had given him a hint. She didn't comprehend anyway. It was only a magazine story come true as far as she was concerned.

"I'm very glad to meet you but I am a little busy just now. If you could come back a little later." He could sense the growing passion again, the urge to tell all, to express the fatal wish and he wanted Malt out of it.

He wagged his finger at Charlie. "I know, I know. You're expecting little Fiona back aren't you. She'll be a moment, I expect, so let's get better acquainted." He sat down rather ungraciously on the wooden chair and gripped his thin knees with his hands in a way that seemed to say he would have to be lifted bodily if he was unwanted. "Have to give a little report to Fiona's mother you know, to tell her all about you."

He was smiling roguishly but Charlie recognised the light touch of blackmail and admired the care with which the old man had applied it. So much more polish than Fiona. Obviously the reward of practice in committee. Charlie resigned himself to a dangerous ten minutes.

If only Fiona would come back!

"I've never let the mind go rusty you know." The thin voice gathered strength like a storm gathering its thunder clouds. "Still got some ideas. That's the secret which keeps me going."

Charlie nodded and walked round behind him carefully, with a muttered excuse of putting the kettle on but really to dodge the terrible eye. "Like some tea, Mr. Malt?"

"Very nice. I'd love one." The eye followed him closely apparently aware of its own power over him. "Fiona told you my name then?"

Charlie remembered Malt hadn't actually given his name when he came in. Now the old man knew that Fiona had discussed him with Charlie. He would know that Fiona had told him all about his history . . . and his bombs. Charlie made a non-committal noise and lit the gas under the kettle.

"She would have told you about my work then?"

The hopeful question hovered between them like a sparrow hawk over a mouse or a pregnant accident looking for somewhere to happen.

"Nothing much. Only your reputation as a scientist." His hand trembled and the match he had forgotten burnt his fingers. "I expect you miss it all, don't you?" It was a hysterically wrong question evoking sad memories. It inflamed the sense of uselessness.

A tear, one lonely tear, bubbled out of his eye and ran its desolate way along the time worn ruts and dried up on the stubbled chin.

"It wouldn't be so bad if I was really finished."

Charlie saw the wish, like a huge enveloping balloon, swelling from the old man's soul, filling the tiny kitchen and reaching out for him with a terrible strength of will. Figures flashed through the balloon like numbers on a bingo board, colourful yet meaningful. The essence of his human shape began to lose cohesion. He held on hard, like a drowning man, working feverishly through the logics of self-preservation in the mathematical sense.

The old man's maths were perfect. He knew exactly what he wanted. From formula to theorem he had it all sewn up and neatly docketed. Of course there was no intention there that might have indicated he knew about Charlie. Only an unfulfilled wish that had to be satisfied. If he had known the truth the end would have been very different because the wish would have died a natural death. No one wipes out his own race—even if he's old and afraid to go alone.

Charlie felt the fantastic changes. He wondered at the outward, impelling force that was scattering the old body and forming a new, powerful and entirely free entity. He flowed away with it, extending his million, million particles in every direction, swallowing everything, including Malt and the old kitchen chair. And more besides.

In the last seconds before final expansion he bent his own will to channel the explosion outwards hoping in some way to save Fiona from the holocaust that had fried Mr. Malt. It seemed to work. The fire and torment flared towards the sky like a needle. It touched the empty coldness of space and began to contract.

He grew smaller and smaller.

In the bat of an eyelid he was a tiny, firefly streaking towards a distant speck light years away. He homed on it with all the longing of waves for a shore and his tenuous being, like smoke haze shot with rainbow lights, flowed onwards. Every atom clung to its partner and created a unity.

He was his old self again.

•LETTERS *from page* 127

modern trends in SF and spurring readers and authors to a more sophisticated appreciation and approach to the field. Its letter-columns give readers a chance to read the opinions of their fellow enthusiasts and give their own, forming a forum which many would otherwise never have. Its book-reviews are extensive and seem to cover the whole British field, allowing us to keep our reading up to date—and your longer reviews, in spite of their sometimes impatient tone, are broadening the potential scope of the field and help to educate readers like myself into a more constructively critical approach to SF. All these 'personal touches' have, in my opinion, contributed to the success of the new NEW WORLDS. I, and many of my friends, always turn to the features first. They are always lively, always controversial, always provide material for thought and discussion. This is just what a magazine can and should do. Only one minor carp—why not have a section of American book news? This will be useful to many readers who, as I do, buy most of their SF through dealers who can usually manage to obtain the American books we need, and useful to your American readers as well, of course.

I am not sure about the innovation of factual articles on recent scientific developments. Those of us who are interested can find material of this sort in magazines like THE NEW SCIENTIST, DISCOVERY and THE SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN. On the other hand the article on *Psychology in Space* might provide a good jumping-off point for one of your authors, I suppose.

•*continued on page* 58

O fatal change! Become in one sad day,
A senseless corse, inaminated clay.

Iliad Bk. xxii

In One Sad Day

George Collyn

THE MOUNTAINS ERODED and the seas silted up; the atmosphere thinned and the sun dwarfed away and this was the final world. It had mountains which were two inches high and it had seas which were five inches deep; it had air which had little oxygen and it had a sun which scarce burned its dull-red glow in the velvet sky. There was a darkness on the land and not hindered by atmosphere the daytime stars looked down on a world bare of feature, which held naught but flat planes of dusted rock desert and shallow drifts of water puddled on vast flats of hard-baked salt.

There was life in this world though it could not live without the artificial shelter of its race's contriving. A naked, matchstick figure with arms and legs atrophied through non-use and a cranium over-developed because it had no activity save cerebration. It bore a body as unrecognisable to us, its ancestors, as would we be to the first amoeba to creep from the sea but it had the rough configuration which branded it as human and the organs which classified him male.

He sat upon his haunches alone in the vastness that stretched from one flat horizon to another; his behind in the sand, his head in his dreams and his arms lying unused at his sides. Around him the land unbroken, forlorn save for the bright-metal box of his personal kit which fed him and washed him, created warmth and gave him air, which, moulding the atoms of the air could form an invisible couch for him to rest or as a cushion beneath him, undulating in wave-like motion could transport him place to place.

Not that he moved, he had been in this very place for . . . years? . . . centuries? . . . aeons? He himself did not know how long so who are we to care? Time is a relative thing and objectively it had ceased to exist for him. Sometimes the daylight hours seemed to last through endless vistas of his life, sometimes night succeeded day day as a hand moving up and down—one, two, one, two, one, two would switch on and off a light. So he was rooted for a meaningless length of time. In all the years of his longevity he had moved but two hundred yards; for there, easily within sight to his left, rested the personal box which marked where his mother had sat and given him birth. There the darker patch in the desert ground where her dead body had mouldered into the earth giving its aridness a temporary richness with the minerals of her body, the darker earth dusted white with the calcined remnants of her bones.

What did he do, this solitary figure in the sand? Well, he sat and he thought, and sometimes he thought about his thoughts and at yet other times he thought thoughts about his thoughts. Building abstract structures in his mind and communicating with himself. Sometimes he just sat and looked around him.

That is what he was doing at this time. For several day periods now he watched a dust-cloud which broke the monotony of the horizon and moved gently towards him. An external observer, had there been one save ourselves, would have noticed no change in his expression, noted no alteration in his body-posture but in truth he was very interested in this phenomenon and had had many interesting thoughts about what it could be.

So in time, it matters not how long, the cloud came nearer and the dot within it and the dot grew larger until even his feeble eyes buried deep beneath the jutting frontal bones of his skull could determine that this was another human, the first he had seen since his mother's death, wafted towards him by a personal box which homed on him and on the heat radiations of his body. This stranger came then and stopped before him.

Remembered from the obscure recesses of the past,

automatic action though long undone, he pressed the button on his box which expanded the force-field with the stranger's, encapsulating the two within a single sphere. Then it was they looked closely at one another.

His mother had taught him nothing but he had had education, for each personal box as it is created by the newborn's parents' boxes contains the sum corporate body of human knowledge and this the box had whispered into his mind in the numerous periods of his sleep. So some small portion of his mind told him to note the miniscule differences in their bodies and by so doing told him that the other was a female. This he knew but he had forgotten how to communicate and so it seemed had she.

Yet she it was who was the first to remember the means by which the thought patterns are congregated and coalesced and thus transmitted to a neighbouring brain. She it was the first whose stumbling words impinged upon his identity.

"It came to me," she said, "that I was lonely and I set out in search of others of my kind. I have journeyed it seems since the sun was yet orange and I have cornered every quadrant of the globe. Now my ways have brought me to you and I can tell you that we here are the last remnants of the human race."

"Yet what does it achieve?" he responded, "I am here and you are here but what function more does that serve than when I was here and you were otherwhere?"

"It seems to me," she said, "that we have added one factor to the existing state. Before we were two individuals and now we are two individuals and one group. It is a positive thing our togetherness which abolishes loneliness which is a negative thing. By coming together we fill a need which may or may not be external to our personal selves."

"But what shall we do," he asked, "now that we are together?"

"Let us exchange thoughts," she said.

And so they did.

And as they sat there in the sand exchanging thoughts

and tasting titbits from alien sums of experience there came to him strange concepts which he had never learned from his box but which had, in some wise, lain dormant in the very pattern of his humanity.

It came to him that long ago his mother, now long dead, and his father, now long dead, had sat so and exchanged thoughts thus and out of that meeting had come himself. And it came to him that this stranger's mother and father, also long dead, had met and given being to her. The instinctive force that is one of the essences of life burned a feeble spark in some oubliette of his being and lifting one wasted hand touched tenderly her cheek.

It was as if the touch burned, that fragmentary contact with flesh that was not his flesh—a sensation unknown in a lifetime of non-sensation. Both of them, both he and she felt unrecognised pangs that neither one could name but which in some way were basic to their being. Thus they began to fondle one another in an adventure of discovery, with finger-tip caresses, the gentle tracing of a cheek or the following of the shoulder slope. In this way they passed twenty-eight risings and settings of the sun.

It was as if the touch of each sparked a tumult in their minds. Who told him? Who told her? It was never taught by their parents. It was never revealed by their electronic tutors. It seems they must always have known it in an irrational fashion for slowly they became aware that in their relationship something more was needed that would be an act greater than anything they had ever done and which was an act basic to the pattern of life.

Untold ages of mutation had made the bodies of this latter-day male and female mutually inconvenient for juxtaposition but in some way under that dying sun the last man and the last woman made ready to commit the act of love.

Thoughts flowed from one to the other as they moved each into the other's arms, each experiencing their individual experience and sharing the sensations of the other so that there was a psychic pressure that was almost intolerable. Since birth and through their inconceivably long lives neither had known any excitement greater than an

original thought, had known no greater sensation than a minor anatomic contact with the ground. So it was to these sensation-starved beings that there came the battering sensual shock of the onset of orgasm and for their deprived minds it was too much.

And so it was in the midst of an act which gave life that the last of the human race perished from the face of the Earth.

•*continued from page* 53.

Summing up, I think that your fiction and editorial approach matches FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION at its best, while your features make NEW WORLDS the leading SF *magazine*, not just a monthly collection. May you double your circulation again in 1965!

Dr. Malcolm Burgess, Queens Parade, Bristol 1

You leave us a little breathless, Dr. Burgess, but it is always pleasant to see our efforts appreciated—though we aren't standing still. We feel that having an enlightened and interested publisher has contributed more than anything else to any improvements you have found. As for the U.S. scene, we have been lucky enough to persuade that astute collector of and commentator on The Years Best Fantasy and Science Fiction, *Miss Judith Merril, to send us a regular column on this aspect. The first should be appearing very soon. We hope you enjoy your copy of* The Uncensored Man *by Arthur Sellings.*

The nightmare crossed the barrier into reality on 'The Seas of Deimos' . . .

DEATH OF AN EARTHMAN

Gordon Walters

I HAD BEEN a trace assessor for nearly seven years when the nightmare fastened onto me. It was like some gigantic, night-black dog which followed me from planet to planet, its lead the police ship which hurried me from crime to crime.

It followed a pattern. The day before, I would have been working on, say, the murder of a Martian. I would be analysing the traces left by the murderer. The police would have found suspects and witnesses—my job was finished when I was able to compare the traces left by the murderer with the corresponding test traces from the suspect.

At that point, the nightmare became laden with terror. The police all drifted away, and I would be left to assess motives, alibis and pursue the hundred other lines of an investigation.

And worse—I was no longer an Earthman working on the detection of a non-human criminal, but a member of that race.

The emotional implications of the case would come rolling in, like thunder clouds. My mind and my whole being became increasingly involved with the tragedy, the greed or the lust which caused the crime. No longer is the solution a simple matter of comparing tendril-prints and making an automation-like arrest. I was surrounded by the keening cries of the suspects, the witnesses and the bereaved, all unfolding stories which touched my heart or set it on edge, causing it to jump and send me leaping into a screaming consciousness between sheets wet with cold sweat.

I knew what caused it—a fear that some day I would be forced to become more than an assessor of facts. That some day, I would have to lay aside the sane rule which

decreed that no policeman should work on a case which included members of his own race.

The nightmare crossed the barrier into reality on *The Seas of Deimos* . . .

The Seas of Deimos carried 25 passengers, two officers and a crew of six. There were no aliens on board. The passengers were all Earthmen, travelling both for business and pleasure. I was returning to Jupiter's moons from four months' home leave my contract forced me to take. I had spent the time looking forward to the end of the holiday. I day-dreamed often of *The Seas of Deimos* docking at Iapetus and the Superintendent of the Jovian sector stepping forward with urgency in his step.

An Iapetan would have been murdered. A Jovian was suspect. I would have to analyse the effects of his high temperature body as it lightly touched a plastimetal wall. From the pattern of the cracked mono-molecular film I would be able to identify the murderer.

Or perhaps a star-mine safe on the airless thirteenth moon had been robbed. A Venusian was accused. My job would be to detect the Venusian's distinctive odour which had crept through a leak in his space suit. That would be a splendid problem to crack!

Meanwhile, I was confined to *The Seas of Deimos* for two months. I made the best I could of it. The first two weeks were occupied by catching up on the literature on Trace Assessing. When I was satisfied that I was well versed in the latest techniques, I divided my time between the construction of imaginary problems like the detection of body odour on an airless world, and a little mental relaxation.

Some of the passengers had organised a poker dice school, and I joined it.

As the ship drew closer to the asteroid belt, one of the passengers began to intrigue me. From fragments of conversation I learned that Paul Gerrare had, twenty years ago, been the captain of *The Seas of Deimos*. He had lost the captaincy after an accident which had lost him both his arms. Even though we rarely saw him, the idea of the famous armless artist travelling as a passenger on his old

ship struck a chord somewhere in my make-up which made me resonant in sympathy. Possibly it was because he kept to himself.

The prologue of the nightmare was my interest in Paul Gerrare. The curtain lifted on Act One when he joined the poker dice school two or three days before we were due to enter the asteroid belt and the ship would be changed to manual control.

There were the usual half-dozen: Mrs. Jackson and her husband, John Chloral and Miss Iberol. Harold Anderson, the second officer, was off-duty, and I sat opposite him.

We were still throwing those preliminary hands which cement the unity of the game when I sensed someone ease himself into the seat next to me.

Anderson's face changed abruptly. His solid features became a hunk of uncompromising granite; I could see hate crackle in his eyes. Then the hate was covered over and the lips set into an expression a camera would record as a smile.

"Gerrare!" he said. "I'd heard you were on board. It's been a long time. Come and join us."

Paul Gerrare had been the Solar System's most fashionable painter. His talent and technique had overcome his handicaps, and his paintings were as detailed and flawless as though he still had the use of his inspired hands. He was nearly sixty, now, and his hair was thin and white, but he was still a force in the artistic world.

And, to judge by the co-pilot's reaction, he was still a force on *The Seas of Deimos*.

I wondered whether, twenty years ago, Anderson . . .

I wondered and was answered.

"*Still* a co-pilot, I see?" Gerrare said, quietly. "Well, I guess it doesn't quite have the responsibility of the captain and is almost as well paid."

Anderson had to fight hard to avoid showing his anger at the slur.

"Shall we start the game?" he said, enunciating each word carefully. We nodded, and the tension seemed to ease.

But I knew it would deepen again. I thought of those dark, bitter months in Gerrare's life after the mishap with

the power generator. Had Anderson been the man Gerrare had sued in vain for first incompetence and then attempted murder?

I shook the speculation away as I rattled the dice in their yellow cup. I had three jacks to beat with one throw. I managed a pair of aces, and passed the dice and better luck to Gerrare.

I felt his shoulder with its short, almost alien stump nudge me. "Would you? Please?"

Anderson said: "The master exponent of Terran culture has to have his dice thrown for him."

Gerrare said nothing. I threw him four nines. He smiled, slightly. Mrs. Jackson, to his left, could not improve the throw, and neither could her husband. Then it was Anderson's turn. The co-pilot let the dice flow easily into the cup like a smooth river of luck. He placed a palm over its mouth and shook it vigorously.

Gerrare leaned forward, across the table, looking for all the world as though he had his arms folded on the table. He was waiting for the throw with a concentration which was almost unearthly. The electric tension generated seemed to be drawing power from the ship. Or was it imagination which made the electric generators deepen in tone and the lights go dimmer?

When Anderson threw the dice, they smacked against the table like a thunderbolt and, instead of bouncing, stopped in the exact position in which they had struck. Then, slowly, they tumbled onto their faces.

The faces were five aces. Five gleaming aces.

"In one throw," chortled Anderson.

And, oddly, Gerrare sat back and smiled his victory smile with him. "You win," he said.

The strained atmosphere had evaporated, and I inhaled and exhaled heavily. It had been like jumping aboard a rocket as its motors warmed up, to have them cut out as you entered the airlock. Only the rocket was my nightmare. The game went round again. Once more, I threw for Gerrare, who injected more talent into my throwing hand than I did. This time, his proxy handed him an encouraging four queens.

The passengers threw badly, and again it was left to Anderson to beat the old spaceman.

Gerrare leaned forward a second time. Again, I couldn't escape the notion that he was leaning on his elbows, and the nightmare rocket started its motors. I had to force myself to think it was nothing more than the tension of conflict affecting my senses, and made myself work out the odds against Anderson beating Gerrare again.

The dice slapped the table as though they'd been placed there by a hand. Again there was that curious pause before they settled down to show us five aces.

Five aces!

"Incredible luck," murmured Gerrare.

The other players looked at each other. Some had frowns on their faces, but the deepest frown ploughed enormous gashes in the co-pilot's face. He didn't like his luck, for some reason.

It held, too. The next two rounds culminated in Anderson throwing five aces with a peculiar slap of the dice.

Mrs. Jackson proved the rocket wasn't my sole property by saying: "What a strange way of throwing the dice!"

John Chloral corrected her. "It's not the throwing but the dice."

He picked them up.

Anderson was close to panic; his hands were twitching, his teeth teasing at his lips. He blustered: "Luck! Just luck! Look—throw them away. Bring another set out. It was just luck, folks, luck. I know it looks bad, but . . ."

"The old guilty conscience coming out," grinned Gerrare; and I had the notion that he wasn't referring to the second pilot's legerdemain.

Anderson roared to his feet, his chair smashing against the wall behind him. "You! *You're* the one whose cheating! Trying to shame me! And you've been needling me ever since the game began. Why the hell don't you leave me alone!"

"I?" Gerrare spread out an innocent smile. "Why? I'm only playing a simple game of poker dice."

Anderson seized that as though it were a straw in a turbulent river. "You! You're not playing. Your friend is

throwing for you. A collaborator . . . Paul Gerrare, Genius. Paul Gerrare, fighting against impossible handicaps. Paul Gerrare, painting landscapes with your brush in your mouth, and portraits from between your toes. Paul Gerrare, fooling everybody!"

"I've claimed nothing for my techniques."

A strange remark—but I had no time to try and work out what it meant. Or the entire, kaleidoscopic affair.

"You claimed that they were painted by yourself. Your friend . . ." Anderson stabbed a glance at me, piercing my eyes. "Are *you* an artist?"

I was involved. I tried to shake some words out, to fumble a denial. But the floodtide of conflict washed past me.

"You! You're a big fraud, Paul Gerrare. And a petty-minded fraud. In your nasty little mind you're still blaming that accident on me. You're still accusing me of operating that machine which cut your arms off!"

"You've even convinced *yourself* of your snow-white innocence!"

"You were the proud space captain. I was the stupid inferior, the ridiculously inept co-pilot. And the proud space captain couldn't possibly have shorn his arms with the machine he was operating with such practised efficiency. It had to be the evil, scheming co-pilot waiting to take command of *The Seas of Deimos.*

"The court gave you your answer. I am a free man and you are no longer in the space service."

"And you're still a co-pilot," said Gerrare. "Mister Anderson!" His tongue whipped with the steel lash of an authority still not quite forgotten. "Captain Heel—Captain Heel of *The Seas of Deimos* is sickening for Venusian fever. Even under drug treatment, he still requires several days' rest in bed. He should not be on duty at this moment. You should be on the bridge, and sleeping on stand-by alert. And, Mr. Anderson, we are approaching the Asteroids. Do you expect a man in his condition to take over from the automatic controls to steer us carefully round those cosmic-born bullets? Are you forgetting that millions of rocks, from peas to pebbles to mountains lie in our path. Auto-

matics, Mister Anderson, aren't built to dodge them. The pilot and co-pilot are.

"And yet you play simple little games of chance with the passengers."

He stood, quivering with rage. Slowly, he calmed. He turned to us. "I'm sorry—I got carried away."

Anderson subsided. He was trembling, and undecided. To go to the bridge and admit guilt and take responsibility. Or to stay; an action which would suggest that he knew Gerrare was blurting lies. Later, he could sneak to the bridge.

He stayed.

John Chloral stood up, the new set of dice in his hand symbolising that as far as the passengers were concerned, it was a private quarrel. "Shall we continue?" he said.

When Anderson threw the dice, however, there was the same solid smack, and the same five aces peeking at us. One by one, saying nothing, the passengers rose from the table. At length, Anderson left. His feet dragged, one after the other, like a pair of small dogs caught at a canine sin.

"Going to the bridge?" cut in Gerrare.

Then there was only the painter and I in the lounge. I looked at him, waiting to speak. At last, he said:

"*The Seas of Deimos* was my ship. She was my whole life. She was built and named on Earth by a man whose imagination was stronger than his knowledge of other worlds. And all the time I had her, she radiated the splendid independence from the laws of the Solar System which her name implied. Even now, in other hands than mine, she is the same old *Seas of Deimos*." He laughed; a wonderful thing, his laugh. "You know, ever since I came on board, she has been casting power to the four winds in her age-old love for me. Power leakage, the mechanics shrug, puzzled." He laughed again.

"You mean when the lights went dim?"

Gerrare looked at me sharply. His mouth became firm, lost its transient fun; he seemed to have said too much. In silence, while the ship hummed a smooth lullaby to herself, we studied each other. Then I said:

"Tell me one thing. Who was telling the truth?"

"Ask each of us and he will give his own story. There were no witnesses." Then he said: "I feel sorry for Anderson. I think I'll go along and talk to him. Perhaps it will straighten us both out."

As, later, I went to sleep, my mind, troubled by the quarrel, wondered what the outcome would be.

There was no nightmare that night . . .

An hour before breakfast, I was jerked awake by a knock at the door of my bunk. Wiping the blurs of sleep away from my eyes, I yawned: "Come in."

It was Captain Heel. He was unsteady on his feet. His face was a waxy white upon which beads of sweat stood out like droplets of glycerine wrapped in gleaming silver. He looked ill, leaning heavily on the arm of my chair.

"Please sit down," I said.

There was something more than Venusian fever in his eyes, and I waited with a Gordian knot in my stomach which would not unravel.

He said: "Let me see your badge."

"My badge?"

"Yes. You're a police officer, aren't you?"

"I suppose so. But not the kind that goes round flashing a badge in the frightened face of the public. I'm just one of the back-room boys."

He stopped skating circles round the focal point of his visit. "My co-pilot, Anderson, is dead. He appears to have been strangled to death."

The nightmare had come. But I took a grip on the rising feeling of panic, flung the bedclothes aside and dressed.

"Has anything been touched?" I asked, hoping the tremble in my body didn't transmit itself through my voice.

There were signs of a struggle which seemed to scream through my senses. The small writing table had been overturned, and the two chairs lay on the floor. One was broken. There were two glasses, from which fluid had trickled onto the floor and seeped into the carpet.

I shook my head violently. A litre bottle lay nearby, and on the bed, sprawled at a ghastly angle, was Anderson's

body. His face was mottled and black and bruised and swollen, and livid bands of bruising encircled his neck. Strangulation by a pair of insane hands.

"Captain, who knows about this?"

"Only the two of us. And the murderer."

"Well, he won't spread the news. And I don't want you to, yet. I don't want to be surrounded by the morbidly curious until I've examined everything in this room."

I felt the terror returning. There was the sudden hollowness of loneliness, which changed into the feeling of insane gyrations you experience when you lay down on your pillow with too much alcohol flying about your brain. And spaced at intervals round the vortex were pictures of the detective inspector, the police surgeon, the photographer and the policeman on the beat, as well as the trace assessor with his microanalytical kit, his white box. And the final horror, who wore the face of them all, was an Earthman investigating the death of an Earthman. My face.

There was work to be done! The vortices disappeared—I hoped for good.

I had two alternatives—place the corpse in a suitable place (I hoped there was a handy refrigeration unit in the ship) and seal the bunk until we arrived at Iapetus. But that was forty-five days away, days in which the murderer would be able to gain access to the bunk in spite of my precautions and destroy any evidence. Or I could tackle the case on my own, working on the assumption that not all the evidence had been destroyed.

I said: "Get a couple of the crew to move the body, and leave me alone in here. The killer may have left some clues. Meanwhile, I want to know if Anderson had any enemies, and if anybody was seen to have entered his bunk in the past twenty-four hours."

Apart from Paul Gerrare, I thought. At least, the handless painter was innocent, and I felt glad. I locked the bunk and went to my room to fetch my white box. When I returned, two of the crew were waiting to take the body away. They looked worried. Worried about the asteroids and the sick captain?

I questioned them about Anderson. He had not been

particularly well thought of; the crew regarded him as a supernumerary who wasn't worth his position. A rather incompetent man who always referred things back to his captain. This, at least, confirmed Gerrare's opinions.

"But, sir, nobody would have killed him. He was just an officer. We hardly ever saw him. If anything, we felt a bit sorry for him."

I nodded. Much as I expected. The crew would know exactly how impossible it would be to get away with any serious crime on the tiny, limiting world of a spaceship. They would wait until they could waylay their victim in a port. But a passenger, mentally planet-bound, might not realise this.

Who had visited Anderson, after Gerrare had left him?

But who, apart from Gerrare, had the motive? Gerrare himself, the obvious suspect, was out, as the man did not use artificial limbs and, besides, Anderson had been killed by human hands. He also knew his background would tell him he could not get away with the deed on the ship.

As my mind considered the painter, I again felt glad that it wasn't him.

I supervised the removal of the body, after I'd examined it carefully, and retrieved every item of his clothing, for subsequent tests, should they be necessary.

Meanwhile, I got down to work. I started with the bottle, examining it for human traces. It proved, not unsurprisingly, difficult. I was an expert at analysing the prints left by the glowing eyes of a Venusian against a photosensitive surface. I could positively identify a Martian by photographing the unique patterns left by his flagellae in the thin, dusty snow which covers everything in the windless twilight of Mars. But my knowledge of fingerprinting descended directly from my college notebooks. However, by working with extreme care, I was able to develop the prints I found round the bottle's neck, and my technique rapidly improved.

I took Anderson's, and compared them. They were identical.

At the base of the bottle was a small, dried smear of blood, to which adhered a single, white hair.

And with this, I had a fairly clear idea of what had happened. First, somebody had called on Anderson. Amicably, they had had one, perhaps more, drinks together, seated across the little table. Then, violence. Anderson, angry, had seized the wine bottle by the neck and attacked his visitor with it. The table and chair were overturned during the struggle, in which the visitor had caught Anderson by the throat and throttled him.

And a person with a scalp wound and white hair would be the murderer.

I should have stood up then and examined the passengers and crew for any cuts, but evidence of that kind is not conclusive without extensive laboratory tests. I had no facilities for those on board ship, and the passenger could always swear that he had stumbled into something.

But the real reason I continued with my assessing work was based on something else—I knew that the only person with white hair on *The Seas of Deimos* was Paul Gerrare.

The two glasses were covered with fingerprints. One glass bore Anderson's now familiar daubs, whilst the other carried a different set, a set which came out very well.

My path was now clear. The human traces would identify the murderer without doubt. You can't fingerprint a whole city. But you can examine every person on board a spaceship. It would take half a day—but it was based on an exact science and didn't require the unravelling of motives.

Locking the bunk again, I called Captain Heel, and explained what I was about to do. He appeared to have recovered from the fever somewhat, but was still weak.

He nodded. "You're in charge. And I expect you to start with me."

Nobody objected to being fingerprinted, and in spite of the white hair, I still carefully searched their heads for signs of a cut. It was a coincidence to hope for an isolated white hair in a head of black hair to have come loose, but crimes had been solved by even more stranger coincidences.

But I came to the last passenger without having seen the cut which would have saved a lot of eye-tearing comparisons. There was, now, only Paul Gerrare, who was sitting in a chair watching the proceedings disinterestedly. He

looked very tired; last night's quarrel had taken more out of him than I had expected.

I took the last print and leaned back, flipping the series of cards idly. I caught the painter's eye, and he came over.

"How about me?"

I grinned, shook my head. "Unless your hands slipped down to your feet."

He slipped off his shoes. He wasn't wearing socks, and his feet were like anybody else's.

"I'll strip if you like. In your job, you can't take anything for granted."

I had ordered the other passengers to return to their rooms. I was about to say that there was no need to bother, when I saw something which caused my stomach to turn over. There was a small cut, above the hairline, on the right side of Gerrare's head.

Oh, God! I thought. Then I said, trying to make my voice sound normal: "If you wish."

Gerrare had had twenty years in which to learn how to dress and undress without arms, and he did it almost as quickly as a normal human being. He stood before me, a perfectly normal human being in every respect. He was no ghastly mutant with hands writhing on the ends of tentacles.

He dressed. I heard him, through a turmoil of thoughts, say:

"Just so's there'll be no doubt at all."

"I see you cut yourself this morning."

He nodded. "You saw me undress. I've got it down to an art so fine as my paintings. But it's not all roses. Flaws often appear, and I'm always collecting bumps and cuts."

I was about to ask him, for the first time—and remember that I was only a trace assessor, not an interviewer—what had happened when he went round to see Anderson, but he anticipated me.

"I chickened out on seeing him. I was feeling too shaken by the quarrel . . . Anyhow, I'm holding you back from your checking."

One by one, I compared the prints on the glass with those on the different cards. It was a long hunt, and, unfortu-

nately for my eyes, the prints I was looking for weren't on the first few cards. By the time I had come to the bottom of the pile, I was learning to distinguish important characteristics at a glance. By the time I had come to the bottom card, I stopped and held it in my hand.

For there was the murderer. There was the card of Captain Heel . . .

Surely not! He had been in no physical condition to strangle a fit man like Anderson. But none of the others were even close to matching. It *had* to be Captain Heel.

I turned it slowly, over and over. If it *were* he, then I would have to arrest him, and take command of the ship. And, with our approach to the asteroids so imminent, I would have to free him to guide the ship through the danger zones, and—he might well deliberately destroy us . . .

Oh, God, I wished I were surrounded by the bean-thin, keening Martians!

"I see you have my card."

It was Captain Heel. "I'll have to examine it," I said.

"I know."

And he stood there, watching me quietly.

I compared the now familiar prints on the glass with the captain's. At first, the vision was blurred; my eyes seemed to be deliberately keeping the pictures out of focus. I blinked, and they cleared.

And they matched about as accurately as the moon matches Earth.

I smiled even as the world suddenly leered at me with an insane expression.

"It wasn't you—and it wasn't anybody else on this ship!"

"You fingerprinted every person." Not a question. A statement.

"All those who have fingers."

I slumped into my hands, burying my face in them. At that moment, as a hot sweat of fear, of mental anguish, swept over me, I didn't want to see anybody, anything. My God, what had happened? I had fingerprinted everybody carefully—there were no blurred prints. Those on the glass were perfectly clear. There was no possibility of a mistake.

To make sure, I checked through every gleaming, jeering

card again, but nothing changed. I had not misread. I hadn't missed one out.

"Perhaps it was a ghost," said Captain Heel. But behind that facetious remark there was something deeper—as deep as the superstition which follows every ship that was built, whether it was designed to sail the bright blue oceans or the empty, flat expanse of interplanetary space.

But there was no ghost. There were a simple pair of human hands.

I went over that bunk again. I went over it with a fine-toothed comb, this time banishing any assumption that it *had* to be the work of a man. I hunted through that cabin for any trace of aliens, of anything which might conceivably take the finger of suspicion away from Earthmen. I began to think in terms of creatures previously unknown to man which might have sneaked aboard and murdered the co-pilot.

Well, that was my profession—identifying traces—and I set to work, with, I must confess, a certain excitement.

But I found only one thing that was at all unusual, but how it had any bearing on the matter I didn't know.

Each bunk had a power meter which included a recording graph. One could read how much power had gone into the bunk's circuits at any given time, and at the time of the murder, the power used in Anderson's bunk had increased enormously. It was almost as though the agency which had strangled Anderson had used the power to strangle him with.

My mind went back to that curious dice game, the odd slappings of the dice and the perpetual five aces, the dimming lights and the laboured groan of the generators.

Telekinesis?

But telekinesis, while able to throw and control dice, doesn't strangle men and leave fingerprints on glasses.

Or does it?

And Gerrare had confessed that ever since he came aboard, the old *Seas of Deimos* had been leaking power. Confessed it in an afterwards regretted moment.

But no—this was my imagination working hand in hand with my nightmare. There was an alien entity on board *The Seas of Deimos*—and I smiled my relief. Human beings

had nothing to do with the murder, and I was on my home ground.

But Gerrare might be able to give me more clues—he was so wrapped up in the personality of the ship he would sense strange things that I wouldn't.

On my way to his bunk, I passed through the lounge, and saw my dice still on the table, as I'd left them the night before. When Anderson had thrown them, it had sounded exactly like a hand slapping them onto the table—a hand which had then carefully placed them in the right positions.

On a hunch, I powdered them for prints. Fragments of mine were there, and Anderson's and Mrs. Jackson's. But the most recent, strongest set belonged to the alien pattern. Its unique curlicues and spirals were quite clear.

And Anderson had been accused of somehow manipulating the dice. He had thrown seven consecutive five-aces. He had denied it, had shown every sign of telling the truth —and every time Anderson had won the round, Gerrare, instead of being annoyed, had worn a satisfied smile.

And something Captain Heel had said, jokingly, came back to me.

I had the answer!

And I felt, then, as I felt in the prelude to the worst part of the nightmares. I went slowly, reluctantly, to the painter's room.

Nervously, I knocked on his door, trying to work out how to say what had to be said. I heard his shuffling footsteps. It opened, and he peered out. He must have seen the expression on my face, for he frowned for a second. But only for a moment, and then he was his usual smiling, imperturbable self.

He said: "You've come to accuse me? Well, my motives are the best of any. But tell me how you think I strangled Anderson?"

"May I sit down?"

"Certainly." He nodded towards a chair. I looked around, saw the power graph above the ventilation ducts. The peaks of the graph were high . . .

I said, quietly and with a deliberate touch of sentiment in my voice:

"It must be hell, life without any arms."

"It was, at first. But I had to live with it, so I learned to live with it."

"How did it happen—the accident? You mentioned a machine—what type of machine?"

"It was a power generator. Atomic power."

"Were you—irradiated?"

"I suppose I must have been. When Anderson made that turbine vane slash into me, I couldn't have avoided a small amount of radiation through the contact. But it wasn't lethal, or even dangerous."

"What was in your mind when it happened? Did you see it coming, or was it something that just happened, without any warning?"

"I could see it coming, all right. I'd known for a long time that Anderson was trying to do away with me. He wanted my command. We were on the outward half of the journey. If I had died, he would have automatically taken over the command. He would have proved himself. I was on the watch for trouble—but when it came, I wasn't ready. I was careless."

"Why didn't he finish the job?"

"He didn't need to. I was in hospital long enough for him to be placed in temporary command, to take *The Seas of Deimos* back to Earth. And if he *had* finished me off, it would have been more than an accident and they would have found it out.

"Yes, he took his command—and nearly wrote her off," he added, bitterly.

"Wasn't that punishment enough—the humiliation of being a failure?"

"You tried to catch me, then," he grinned. "That was all the punishment he got. Until now. I—I hope yesterday's card game reminded him in full!"

I got to my feet. I said: "Have you ever heard of ghost limbs?"

He nodded. "People who have a limb amputated have often felt that they still possess it. It hurts them, or it feels warm, or it feels heavy."

I moved towards him. "Have you ever felt them?"

"No." An emphatic word, followed by a tentative: "I've often wished I could . . ."

Without warning, I swung my fist at his face. He ducked the blow. I swung another, a round-arm blow which would have knocked his head off if it had connected. He ducked again, and backed across the room.

I made no further move. I was cursing, inwardly. I had found the answer—*thought* I had. But it had proved wrong.

Gerrare was chuckling with a kind of triumph. "You were trying to prove I have a ghost arm which actually becomes real." He sighed. "You detectives—what imaginations you must have! Still, I suppose when you deal with aliens you have to have imagination, so when you start dealing with human beings again you forget that they are governed by an inflexible series of laws. I could see the way your mind was working. That accident. Atomic radiation had given me a wild talent. Telekinesis—but limited to an exact reproduction—at least as far as the tactile properties are concerned—of my arms. A good theory—it would account for my murdering Anderson. Even account for the fingerprints on the glass. My old fingerprints, of course, faithfully reproduced. And you expected me to parry your blows with instinctive, invisible but solid arms."

He shook his head. "You couldn't prove it unless I wanted to, you . . ."

The door was flung open. It was one of the crew. He was almost hysterical, as he cried: "The Captain! He's dead! And the first rocks are going to fly past us any time!"

"Come on," I shouted, and rushed to the control room without even finding out how the Captain had died. I knew I would find him with strangulation marks round his fever-white neck, and the hint of something alien showing itself in the graph of the power meter.

He was slumped over the controls. I lifted him gently, felt his pulse, hoped against hope that he was still alive.

He was! His pulse was beating faintly, erratically—but it was still beating.

"Help me get him to bed," I snapped at three of the crew. I realised with a gush of relief that he hadn't been strangled, but had finally succumbed to the fever. With luck

and a lot of drugs, he would pull round. But he was a very sick man and wouldn't be able to move for several days.

As far as the ship was concerned, he might have been dead. With a shock, it sunk in that I would have to take command of the ship. But she would still have no pilot—unless one of the crew could handle the manual controls.

I must have spoken my thoughts aloud, for a voice said: "I doubt it. Piloting is a highly skilled and intricate job. We are moving at many miles a second; even a pebble can demolish us. Our radar pick-ups give us at the most five seconds of grace—even less where smaller stones are concerned. There aren't many in clear space, and the automatic controls can handle them. But in the belt, the density is sometimes so great that we frequently have to dodge two or more at once. Electronic circuits can't cope with that situation—human beings can."

It was Gerrare. He was looking at the control seat, at the single, metal control column before it, waiting to be held. He was looking at it almost with an expression of longing. "And the passengers are all planet-lubbers."

I said: "Perhaps if I were to sit here, you could tell me which way to steer."

He shook his head. "Reaction time would be too long. You have to practise for days and weeks and months to become proficient. We don't even have a day. The Captain had already switched the screen on. When a red light shows, anywhere on the screen, you have to take avoiding action within seconds. And you can't just slam the stick about haphazardly, or we'll be thrown off course and soar above the ecliptic, in regions where there are even more small meteors than in the plane of the solar system. Our course lies through the least dense volumes."

I grinned with a cheerfulness I didn't feel. "Beginner's luck! There is nothing else to do."

"Beginner's luck will save us from the first stone. We have maybe a thousand avoiding actions to take."

I said: "I have to try."

Then my thoughts went to the passengers. By now they knew that both pilots were dead, that the ship was approaching rough space. I flicked the broadcaster to the

open position. "This is Shelley Spanner speakng. I have taken command of the ship. I have had experience of piloting ships through the asteroids. Please make sure you are secure against any undue accelerations." I switched off, turned to Gerrare. "That right?" I said.

"Why . . . ?"

"The passengers can, at least, die unworried and with smiles on their faces."

Gerrare said: "I don't want to die." But it wasn't to me. It was to himself.

I shrugged my shoulders. I was feeling strange, unreal. Do all men feel this way before they die? Around me, the lights of the control panels flicked and winked. I began to resent their apparent good cheer in the face of our danger. And in the background, the generator hummed softly.

It suddenly increased in pitch slightly. The lights dimmed, then regained their usual strength.

I looked sharply at Gerrare. I saw a couple of tears steal from the corners of his eyes.

"Life is all I have," he whispered.

"My theory was right, wasn't it?"

He shook his head—continued to shake it so that I knew it wasn't just a 'no' to my question.

"*The Seas of Deimos* was your ship," I said, gently. "You loved her. Don't you want to save her?"

He was silent, sad.

I grabbed him by the coat lapels angrily. "You know why you're not commanding her today? Not your blasted 'accident'. The trouble was that you didn't want to make a fight of it. You gave in, miserably. Spaceships were your whole life before you had the accident. And the worst thing that happened to you was your taking up painting to while away the long hours in space. After the accident, did you try to return to space? Did you try and use your wild talent in that way? You were as good as when you had arms. You could have displayed the talent openly. You could have continued to pilot ships.

"But you buried yourself in your secret painting, with your petty defrauding of the public.

"Yes, I sound like Anderson, don't I? He was right! You're nothing but a fraud.

"And being a fraud is a lot, lot worse than being a man who has killed his enemy!"

In the top left-hand corner of the screen, a faint red dot appeared. It grew larger.

I flung myself at the control column. I didn't know which direction I wrenched it, I just slammed it in any direction to rid us of the little red meteor. The red spot swung across the screen and disappeared. The ship shook and shuddered. The anti-G motors whined to keep our gravity steady.

And then I was on my feet again. Amid the screaming of tortured circuits, I heard myself howl:

"Get in that damned chair."

Gerrare stood there, saying nothing, doing nothing, thinking a lot.

"Still the artist, trying to prove yourself not the fraud by keeping your sweet little secret to yourself. Sure—it's yours. My theory against your half admission and a refusal to demonstrate it in public. Yes, you've still got the perfect murder under your hat. The perfect murder. Doesn't that give your pride a tremendous boost?

"But is it as high a sensation as that of knowing you have saved your old ship from being spread round the universe in little pieces? Even if doing that—*especially* if doing that, you write your own glorious epitaph . . .

"There's another one!"

This time, I did nothing.

A second passed, like a drop of mercury let fall to the ground. Then the lights went out.

God, is this death? I thought. Then the shriek of the generator pierced my ears and the lights came on, though very dimly. I saw the hunched figure of Paul Gerrare before the control column, which moved slightly, easily.

I moved closer. I held out my right hand.

"Thank you," I said.

I felt his hand grasp mine, squeeze it gently, yet firmly. But it was neither hot nor cold. Neither black nor white. And neither all good nor all bad.

It felt like a human hand in every respect.

MID had all the answers for making sure you had a real nice marriage

THIRD PARTY

Dan Morgan

THE population explosion of the 20th century made it obvious that if allowed to continue unchecked the human race would breed itself out of existence. In the year 2010 the position was becoming so desperate that the World Council decided the only answer lay in a compulsory re-introduction of the outmoded social custom of monogamous marriage.

Organised religion having withered away, it was necessary to create a supervising body to deal with the enforcement of the marriage conventions. Thus the Marriage Integration Department—a branch of Bureau Pop—was formed. MID made no attempt to interfere in personal freedom of choice in the matter of marriage partners, but all marriages were under the strictest supervision at all stages, and only those which offered eugenically favourable environments were allowed to become fruitful.

MID introduced a number of measures to improve the viability of marriage as an institution; including compulsory sterilisation as a penalty for adultery. There was also a system of grading which was applied to all marriages at the outset, but which could be reviewed from time to time according to changing circumstances . . .

MALTHUS AND AFTER—The story of an extinct race of humanoids.

Harn Ested. (Galactic Press. Cr.50.)

THE AFTERNOON SUNSHINE was warm, but the wind still had the bite of winter. Harry Pierce moved to a more comfortable position on the park bench and glanced across at the old anti-grav slider, where Robbie was playing with a bunch of other kids. A boy needed to see his father more

than a few hours a week. It was a part of growing up, a part that Harry had always regretted missing himself.

He shifted his foot and scuffed the gravel. There were no two ways about it—he had been a fool. For the sake of a childish piece of masculine vanity he had got himself involved with that girl and jeopardised the really important thing in his life ; his marriage to Madge. It did a man good to admit sometimes that he was wrong. Maybe if his own father had been big enough to do just that a lot of things would have been different.

Of course he would *insist* on a Class A re-integration. If he was going to eat humble pie in front of the Marriage Counsellor and Madge, he had the right to that, surely? He had no intention of letting the Psyches fool around inside *his* head with that Class B business. He and Madge would be able to sort things out between them without re-conditioning. Nobody was going to mess about with *his* mind —*no sir*!

"Here we are, darling. Now rest your little leggies." A middle-aged woman with green tinted hair and an elaborate make-up job that failed to hide her lined complexion sat down at the other end of the bench. In the lap of her expensively styled coat a furry bundle of precisely the same shade as her hair changed position slightly and whimpered. Harry recognised the object with a twinge of disgust, as a Modog.

"Now *do* settle down, Fifi." The woman bent fussing over the animal. Harry looked away quickly. The very idea of Modogs was somehow unnatural to him. It seemed a perversion of biological science to take an animal and modify its brain merely in order to provide some sort of substitute child for women like this.

"Hey, dad! Look at the jet!"

Harry jerked back to awareness of his surroundings and found himself looking into the grinning face of his six-year-old son. Robbie held a rough piece of stick about a foot long in his chubby hand, swinging it through the air in arcs and loops. Brushed with the stardust of childish imagination the drab piece of stick was a shining, roaring jet.

"What happened to your game by the slider?" Harry asked.

"Aw, they're just a bunch of dumb kids, anyway," Robbie said. "It's more fun on your own." The stick jet continued its screaming passage round the bench, speed limited only by the stubby legs of its pilot.

Harry frowned. That wasn't the way Robbie usually talked. Had he changed so much during the last month? He reminded himself to check with Madge on the boy's Social Integration Index. A good SI Index was considered more important than scholastic grades these days. There was no room for solitary misfits in modern organised society . . . unless they were bright enough to assume the right protective colouring and make the right cries. Harry knew all about that. Sometimes it was rough. He didn't want Robbie to have to go through the kind of conflicts he had suffered.

"Would you mind asking your child to play more quietly? He's disturbing Fifi's afternoon nap," said the woman irritably.

"This is a public park," Harry said. "Your animal would have been better to take her nap at home."

"Well, really!" The woman glared at him indignantly.

The Modog struggled erect in her lap. It was a grossly fat, modified miniature poodle. "Want to go runs, Mama," it said, in a cute, wuffy cartoon character voice.

"No, darling. We'll have a little walk later."

Harry winced at the woman's honeyed slobbering, nauseated that an adult human being could degrade herself in such a manner.

"Say, Dad! Look at the Modog. Isn't he smashing?" Robbie had ceased his noisy game and was looking at the animal with eager eyes. "Come on, boy! Fetch it!" The stick was no longer a jet. He threw it across the neatly cropped grass.

The Modog responded to an immediate, doglike reflex. Scrambling from the woman's knees it waddled in pursuit.

"No, Fifi!" cried the woman. "Come here this minute."

The Modog ignored her call as it descended in a flurry of pale green fur on the stick.

"Good boy!" Robbie took the stick from the animal's mouth.

"Throw again!" yapped the Modog, gambolling round the boy's legs.

"No, Robbie! Bring the dog back here," shouted Harry.

"Fifi—come to mummy!" the woman screamed ineffectually. The boy and the Modog were running together towards the ornamental lake beyond the trees. Harry and the woman rose from the bench and hurried in pursuit.

"If he were my child I would give him a good old-fashioned spanking," said the woman, tottering along in her too tight, fashionable shoes. "He shows obviously anti-social tendencies."

"Robbie is a perfectly normal boy," Harry said defensively.

"Nonsense!" The woman sniffed.

They caught up with the fugitives eventually, at the edge of the lake. The Modog had been in the water up to its belly, and the pale green fur of its legs was spattered with brown mud. The woman picked the animal up and turned her sharp, angry voice on Robbie.

"You're a very badly behaved little boy—encouraging a poor Modog to get herself into a mess like this."

"I didn't, I didn't . . ." protested Robbie, his lip trembling.

"It's all right, Robbie." Harry took hold of the boy's hand. "It's time we were going."

"You should be reported," the woman screamed at Harry. the Modog clutched to her breast. "You're not fit to be a parent if you can't control your child better than that."

"And if you had a child of your own, you wouldn't be making such a fool of yourself over a wretched Modog," Harry said harshly.

Suddenly and quite horribly the woman's raddled face disintegrated in a flood of tears. Sobs racked her thin body as she held the Modog to her.

Harry flushed with embarrassment, instantly regretting his thoughtless reply. "I'm sorry . . . I lost my temper," he stammered.

The woman looked at him for a long moment, her face

twisted in a pitiful anguish, then hugging the Modog close she hurried away.

"Dad, I didn't mean to upset the lady," Robbie said. "What's she crying for?"

"It's all right, son. Forget about it," Harry said sharply. *Poor bitch!* Why hadn't he understood and had the sense to keep his mouth shut?

He grasped Robbie's hand very tightly as they walked out of the park.

At the Marriage Integration Department building they took the grav shaft to the fifteenth floor. Robbie was taken away by a smiling nurse and the receptionist showed Harry into the Counsellor's office. Madge was already there, sitting in a chair on the left of the Counsellor's big metal desk.

"Hallo, Harry." She returned his greeting pleasantly. There was a tightening in his chest as he looked at her. They must be together again soon. The last month had been unbearable.

"I've missed you, Madge," he said.

She looked up at him, the moisture in her eyes catching the light. "Harry . . ." There was a tightness of the muscles round her mouth, and her hands moved uneasily on the arm of the chair, tracing the pattern in the plastic. The month had been bad for her too.

The Counsellor cleared his throat briefly. "Please be seated, Mr. Pierce. If there is anything you wish to say before we commence the official proceedings you may speak freely."

Harry glared resentfully at the Counsellor's bloodlessly benevolent mask of a face. No one had the right to interfere between himself and Madge, even if it was the law.

The Counsellor eyed him steadily for a moment in silence, then said: "Very well, in that case we'll get down to business right away." He opened a file which lay in front of him and flipped the switch on his desk recorder. "Second hearing in case number five thousand and seventy-five, oblique PQ, dash Pierce, re-classification. Now, Mr. and Mrs. Pierce—the month Trial Separation Period is

concluded today. I trust that this has given both of you time to consider the future of your marriage?"

"More than enough," Harry said.

"And you, Mrs. Pierce?" enquired the Counsellor.

"I don't wish to go on living without my husband," Madge said softly, her eyes on Harry. "I understand now that I was over emotional and I acted hastily . . ."

"No, Madge . . . It was my fault." Harry reached across and took her hand.

"Just a moment!" the Counsellor said sharply.

Harry looked up resentfully. "It doesn't seem to me that there's any problem here that can't be sorted out between my wife and myself, Counsellor."

The Counsellor's round face was severe. "That is for me to say, Mr. Pierce. Let's not jump the gun. It's not quite as simple as that, you know."

"The hell it isn't," Harry said. "We've had a Trial Separation and now we both know what we want, don't we, Madge?"

"Quite so." The Counsellor interlaced his fingers on the desk top. "But I have to point out that by accepting the principle of a Trial Separation you have placed yourselves under the jurisdiction of my department. This entails an obligation to accept such re-integration of the status of your marriage as the department may think fit."

Harry felt a sudden chill. This interfering old buzzard was going to try and force a Class B. They loved to do that, so that the Psyches could get in there and start monkeying around with your mind. It was just an excuse, so that they could experiment. Look at Jack Browder in Maintenance—they'd given him the old re-conditioning routine and now he was nothing more than a zombie compared with his original self. *No sir*—they weren't going to do that sort of thing to Harry Pierce.

"When we saw you a month ago you were quite definite that re-integration was merely a formality," Harry said. "And that's the way it's going to be. You just give us a Class A and Madge and I will sort things out for ourselves."

"You must have misunderstood me," the Counsellor said

blandly. "The status of any marriage which has been under such a strain as yours must be reviewed by the department."

"My wife and I can settle any differences . . ."

"You forfeited that privilege when you brought the matter to the attention of the department. The law is quite clear on that point. Perhaps you would like to re-read the Separation Agreement which you signed a month ago?" The Counsellor took a sheet of paper from the file.

"Damn the agreement!"

"Harry, please!" Madge said nervously. "The Counsellor is only doing his duty."

"I'm glad that you at least understand, Mrs. Pierce." The Counsellor smiled thinly. "Now, for the record, I must re-state the three possible methods for the re-integration of a marriage. Class A is based on a mutual understanding by the partners and a genuine settlement of the disturbing factors. In most cases where this is not practical we are able to perform the necessary Psyche manipulation to make a Class B re-integration possible—that is a re-conditioning of both partners to ensure maximum compatibility. Or, should both of these methods be impossible, there remains the alternative of re-integration on a Class Y basis."

"That is absolutely out of the question," Harry said harshly. "You might as well understand right now that I am not prepared to accept anything less than a Class A."

The Counsellor's expression hardened. "The main concern of the department is not the marital bliss of yourself and your wife. There is a third person concerned in your marriage, whose mental health is far more important than that of either of you. Your child, Robbie, has been seriously affected by this estrangement already. It is my duty to ensure that the free growth of his personality is not further hampered."

"There's nothing wrong with Robbie," protested Harry. He turned to Madge, suddenly suspicious. "Is there something you haven't told me?"

"I didn't want to bother you, Harry." She avoided his questioning eyes.

"Bother me? He's my son, isn't he?"

"I have here a report from Robbie's school," said the Counsellor. "During the past two months the boy's Social Integration Index has dropped five points, and his Emotional Stability rating is seriously lowered."

"That's just a temporary setback," Harry said. "When Madge and I are back together again the boy will have a happy home environment."

"But will he, Mr. Pierce? The instability of your marriage has already been demonstrated."

"It will be different now," Harry said.

"How can we be sure of that?" The Counsellor spread his fingers, palms uppermost. "My department cannot take chances, Mr. Pierce. The future of the race is in our hands."

Madge's voice trembled on the edge of hysteria as she said: "But surely, Counsellor. You heard what my husband said. He admits his faults and he's willing to do what he can to make amends."

"Good intentions, Mrs. Pierce," the Counsellor said solemnly. "But with due reference to the Psyche records of both parties my department cannot accept a Class A re-integration of this marriage as a workable solution."

"You've no right!" shouted Harry. "Madge and I will be all right if we're left alone."

"No one is alone," the Counsellor said firmly. "That is one of the department's basic principles."

"Harry, I know how you feel," Madge said. "But we shall just have to accept a Class B. We owe it to Robbie."

Harry stared at her dully. The idea of having his brain modified by the Psyches filled his mind with crawling worms of revulsion. Re-conditioning meant a total loss of part of his personality, a mental death of part of his being. He could never submit willingly to such mutilation.

"Madge, you can't expect me to do this!"

"Think of Robbie, darling," she pleaded.

He covered his face with his hands, shuddering. Madge was prepared to make the sacrifice. How could he offer less and expect to retain her love?

"It can't be so bad, Harry," she urged. "And we can be together again, the three of us. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Yes, that was what he wanted. But the price! The probing electrodes of the Psyches would burn away part of his personality, changing him into something less than he had been before.

"All right," he said at length, choking on the words. "If that's the only way, I'll accept Psyche re-conditioning."

"Harry . . ." Madge moved from her chair and placed her arms gently about his shoulders. "I'll make it up to you, darling, I promise."

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Mr. Pierce," the Counsellor said.

"My God! What more do you want?" Harry asked. A new kind of fear twisted in him as he looked into the solemn mask.

"No suggestion of Class B re-integration has been made," said the Counsellor. "The balance of your psyche is so precarious that you are not a suitable subject for minor re-conditioning. Once opened up, a case like yours could not be satisfactorily concluded without major re-construction —and even that would be a risky procedure. You were born too soon, Mr. Pierce. During your childhood there was no department to look after the psychic welfare of the children of broken marriages. You have compensated, of course, and built up a reasonably integrated personality considering the unfavourable circumstances, but . . ."

Harry was trembling, his mouth dry. "But that only leaves Class Y!"

"I'm afraid so," the Counsellor said. "Your child will be permanently removed from your custody so that he cannot be further harmed by your unstable marital relationship."

Harry leapt to his feet. "You can't do this!" he screamed.

"Please understand, these decisions are not taken lightly," the Counsellor said. "Our concern is for the welfare of the child."

"What have you done with Robbie?" Harry smashed his fist down on the metal desk top. Blood oozed from mangled knuckles, but physical pain was unimportant beside the searing anguish of his mind.

"Your son is already on his way to the Psyche clinic. He will be well taken care of."

Taken care of . . . Harry knew what that meant. The Psyches would take him, and with their needles they would remove from his mind all memory of Madge and himself. Then the boy would be re-conditioned to accept two foster parents, highly integrated people with a permanent Class A marital status.

"Harry! We'll never see him again!" sobbed Madge.

"Please, Mrs. Pierce—don't distress yourself," the Counsellor said. "Take my word. This is the best thing for the boy."

"You swine! You interfering swine!" Harry's voice was an animal scream. Leaning forward over the desk he grabbed at the front of the Counsellor's jacket, jerking him from his seat. Blinded with rage and frustration only violence would satisfy him. He didn't even see the white-coated Psyche who rushed into the room, hypo gun in hand.

Consciousness exploded in a grinding sheet of white hot flame and he fell endlessly into oblivion.

When they brought Harry Pierce back home to the apartment three weeks later he was out of the manic stage, but still under sedation.

"You will have to be very careful with him for some time," the Psyche said to Madge. "He's out of the worst of it now, but there's always the possibility of another outbreak. Fortunately we were able to perform a full re-conditioning in your case, so you should be able to cope quite adequately."

It was early evening when Harry awoke. He lay for a while looking at the familiar ceiling of the bedroom. He was half aware of the sound of voices from the living room. One was Madge's, but the other, smaller and higher pitched, eluded him.

He struggled out of bed and staggered on rubbery legs to the door.

Madge was on her knees in the middle of the living room floor. She smiled eagerly as she said: "Come on, Baby. Try

it again. Daddy will be so proud when he sees what a clever baby you are." She threw the striped, multicoloured ball.

The pink Modog caught the ball between its forepaws and held its precarious balance on its hindquarters. "Look! I did it, Mama," it yapped proudly.

Madge turned her head and noticed Harry standing in the doorway.

"Ah! There you are, darling. I had no idea you were awake already. You shouldn't really have been watching. We've been practising and we wanted to surprise you, didn't we, Baby?"

Harry steadied himself against the wall. His head was swimming. "Robbie!" The name was a groan of anguish, deep in his throat. There had been a woman in a park once . . . how long ago? and her hair had been pale green . . . He staggered forward.

"Did you say something, Harry?" Madge picked up the Modog, cuddling it close to her vacuous, re-conditioned face. He saw that her hair had been dyed precisely the same shade of pink as the animal's fur.

"Hallo, Daddy," said the Modog, in its wuffy, cartoon character voice.

Hek Belov, the indestructible, the impossible, implausible, unforgettable, irrepressible, irreverent cyberneticist, rides again in

WHAT NEXT?

Edward Mackin

IT WAS A warm afternoon in late September, and I was sprawled on a plasteel bench on Top Level enjoying a fugitive patch of sunlight that had somehow managed to slip past the cloud-topping structures that made up this section of the district's built-in furniture. My eyes were closed, and I was busy with the old problem of where to obtain a little money, or a lot of credit. I'd just about reached the point where my brain was ready to pop when sleep threw it a line, and I caught myself snoring.

Opening my eyes I was astonished to see a face within six inches of my own. It had mild, washed-out, blue eyes, a trim, grey beard, and a moustache.

"Remarkable," the face commented. "The phenomenon is undoubtedly a vestigial pointer to some important primordial function." He sat down, and clasped his bony hands together. "It was probably intended to frighten other animals away while we slept. The resonance in a cave must have been considerable. It would sound like a much bigger, and possibly angry creature. You must forgive me," he added, with a smile. "Speculation and inquiry are meat and drink to me. I pride myself that I am a practical man as well, however. What do you think of this, for example?"

He was holding a bright blue, pea-sized object in his extended fingers. It appeared to be made of plastic.

"Marvellous," I said, snapping my teeth at him. "You've invented the bead."

"Not just a bead," he said, gently. "It's really the answer to the pophead's prayer. It provides continuous jazzola right around the clock. You could, of course, put one in each ear and enjoy two programmes at once."

I looked at him in astonishment. This, surely, was the ultimate in horror. "You devil!" I said, simply; but with great feeling.

"I don't think you understand," he said. "It can't be heard by anyone else, only by the addict." His eyes brightened. "There might be a good deal of money in it. I dare say every youngster in the country will want one."

He had something there; but it was practically blood money. The man was an utter scoundrel. He wanted

ostracizing. "What you want," I said, turning to face him, "is a sales manager."

Well, one has to live.

"Yes," he agreed, looking at the tiny, blue brain-bouncer, "I dare say you're right."

"How do you pack all that recording in?"

"I don't. It is designed to tap all the current pop programmes at the requisite times, and is actually a self-tuned all-wave miniaturized ear receiver. I call it a *Stawmer* for short. The initial letters, you know."

"And very well named, I'm sure. Is that a lab version, or are you tooled up for production?"

"Neither," he said, with a disarming smile. "It's just a plastic bead I happened to pick up a few minutes ago. The idea is the important thing. Don't you agree?"

I glared at him. What can you say to a man like that? "Quite," I said. "Do you happen to have a cigarette? I seem to be right out of them."

I'd been right out of them for a couple of days, and had had to rely on borrowing, a practice which is alien to my nature. I am, friends, as you may have gathered, a man of integrity. Consequently, it always comes as a surprise to me to find that I owe so much to so many. Most of my correspondence these days serves to remind me of this. I sometimes think that the most overworked phrase in the language is: 'Dear Sir, Unless . . . '

"Cigarettes? No, I'm afraid I haven't. I don't indulge." He looked at me, earnestly. "I don't like to pry; but are you, by any chance, short of money?"

I glanced back sharply; but there was no hint of a smile. The man was dead serious. I moved nearer. "Just a temporary embarrassment," I said, trying to keep the eagerness out of my voice. "If you could possibly . . ."

"Will a tenner help?" He pulled a well-stacked wallet from his pocket and gave me one of the new, crisp, cream-coloured bills. "I should warn you that there's a proviso."

I examined the note carefully. It looked genuine enough; but it had been all to easy. "Proviso?" I echoed, suspiciously.

"Yes. I'd like you to regard it as a retainer. There will be more to follow, of course."

"Of course," I said, huskily, as my voice almost deserted me. "How much more, and for doing what?"

He shrugged his thin shoulders. "A lot more, my dear Mr. Belov. Very likely a fortune."

I pocketed the money. "You have me at a disadvantage," I said. "How do you happen to know my name?"

"I beg your pardon," he apologised. "I should have introduced myself. My name is Jonas Pinquil. I was given your name by a man named Meerschraft. He was helping me with this little project that I have in mind. Unfortunately, he—er, suddenly lost interest. The upshot was that I had to have a good cyberneticist, and he suggested you. As a matter of fact, he pointed you out to me. My place is just across the way, three floors off this Level, in the Solar Assurance building."

So that was it. I shook my head. "No dice," I said, and retrieving the note from my pocket I looked at it, regretfully. "If Meerschraft chickened out it means trouble. I know that fat fraud. He'd hang on like a leech while you had a pound left ; but any trouble and he's over the side of the ship while the rats are still in conference."

"Oh, but I assure you he hasn't left." He stood up. "It's just that . . . Look, why don't you ask him about it yourself." He looked at the little, blue bead in his hand. "Yes, it would probably go well. I must keep it in mind. Money is such a problem these days. Don't you agree, Mr. Belov?"

"It's this damned, cheeseparing Government of ours," I said. "Their idea of a sound economy is to trim the edges right through the middle."

He smiled slightly. "Someone once said that a people always gets the government it deserves."

"The truth of the matter is," I pointed out, "that although you can't fool all of the people all of the time someone else can fool them until it's your turn again."

I heaved myself up and we walked across the Level. There was a Universal Vendor just inside the building. I borrowed a coin off Pinquil and slotted it for a packet of cigarettes. Then we took the escalator to the third floor.

Pinquil's place consisted of three dusty rooms that had once been some legal hack's office. A lot of his papers were still lying around, as well as will forms, legal aid forms, forms of conveyance, and a thin scattering of pink dog tickets from the Totemonopol, which belonged to Universal, and was part of their vending set-up.

No attempt had been made to clean the place up and, in fact, the old man had only brought one room into use. This was the biggest of the three. Against the far wall, left of the window, was a low platform made of heavy, translucent plastic. At one end of this was a huge, circular, concave structure, which appeared to be made of overlapping metal strips. It touched the ceiling and was, I discovered later, thirteen feet in diameter.

Behind this was an electronic hotch-potch of seemingly unrelated equipment. At the opposite end of the platform was a similar structure; but here the electronic equipment was different. It consisted simply of a Brock Homeostatic 12a computer. The Brock 'think-box', which cyberneticists and other interested parties view with deep suspicion, if not with actual hatred. This is the beauty behind all those self-repair jobs that threaten the livelihood of both engineers and cyberneticists.

There was a bench, too, expensively instrumented, and at the bench apparently busy checking something was Meerschraft, as fat and as foxy as ever. He was, it seemed, so engrossed in his work that he hadn't heard us enter; but I knew different.

"You can unhook that transformer, Meerschraft," I said, coming up behind him, and glancing at the meter array. I bent over and sniffed. "Burnt out. As if you didn't know."

"Belov!" he exclaimed, with a great show of delighted surprise. "Where did you spring from?" He turned to Pinquil. "This is the man I was telling you about. If anyone can sort the bugs out in our new test rig it's Belov." He put his arm round my shoulders, and we stood there as though we were about to have our picture taken.

I shook him off. "What's this," I wanted to know. "Why all the brotherly love all of a sudden? You must be in one helluva spot."

Pinquil looked at his watch. "I have to finalize some financial arrangements with Mr. Grosmith," he told us. "I'll leave you gentlemen to sort out your differences. I do hope you decide to join us, Mr. Belov. See you both later."

He left the room and closed the door after him.

"All right," I invited Meerschraft. "Put me in the picture."

His face sagged, and he looked at me in a lugubrious fashion. "I don't quite know what I've got myself into," he said; "but to put it in a nutshell I thought he was just that, or what goes into it. A genuine, old-fashioned nut with oodles of dough, and completely harmless."

"He's not, of course?"

Meerschraft sighed, and pulled open a drawer. "He's got some plans in here that he says he drew from memory. The originals were destroyed in a fire."

"That sounds reasonable," I commented.

"The Great Fire of London?"

"Is that what he says?"

Meerschraft nodded. "It may also interest you to know that he spent some centuries in a tree. You'll appreciate I'm only roughing it out for you, of course. He goes into detail. I mentioned Merlin just to humour him. He said that Merlin was a distant cousin of his, and that they both came from the same planet, which appears to be slightly to the left of Andromeda, give or take a light year. To cut a long story short he wants to get back there, and the only way is by building a transmatter." He nodded towards the platform contrivance. "His own transmatter went the same way as the plans."

"It was consumed in the Great Fire of London?"

"Yes. I wrote it all off as a kind of excessive eccentricity." He spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "What could I do? I was hard up. Humouring him seemed the sensible thing. Where was the harm in that?"

"You found out?"

Meerschraft drew a deep breath. "I found out. He got Grosmith interested in the project somehow. You know, the big speculator. He must be worth millions." He gave what can only be described as a hollow laugh, and pointed

to the contraption across the room. "That's the biggest gold brick in the world. Pinquil knows damn well it won't work. I'm sure of it. Look at these so-called plans." He pulled a wide, shallow drawer out, and produced a large square of plastic-backed paper. He threw it on the bench. "Take a look at that."

All I could see was a mass of unrelated lines and squiggles with an occasional dot here and there. It reminded me of a cold wet day in September of the previous year when I'd strolled into the National Gallery to get out of the rain.

"Very pretty," I said. "Paul Klee probably knew what it was—at the time."

"That's how it struck me," Meerschraft said. "There's a kind of key here." He took a smaller, plasticized sheet from the drawer. "See if you can make anything from that. I told him that his symbols were not the normal ones used, so he broke it down for me; but he didn't include any comparative symbols."

"A key to Klee," I said, with just a glance at it. "Yes, very good. Do you think maybe that's what poor Paul was doing all those years ago? Making plans for some strange and alien machine?"

Meerschraft shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned they're just lunatic scratchings." He indicated the platform rig. "Pinquil wanted a transmatter. That looks as though it might be a transmatter, doesn't it?. If you stand on the platform while it's in operation there's a kind of subsonic vibration, which gives you a distinct feeling that something is about to happen. I didn't stay around it long enough to find out what. I believe the vibration comes from the Brock think-box, and I don't trust that thing."

I was only half listening to him. Quite suddenly the peculiar dots and squiggles were beginning to make some sort of sense. I think quite normally in terms of solid circuitry. Give me one end of a circuit and immediately the rest jumps into place. It's a gift, of course; the by-product of my natural genius. The poet calls it inspiration, and if I hadn't been a cyberneticist I dare say I should have been a poet. The loss to literature is incalculable, I suppose, but there it is.

I dropped the drawing on the bench. "I won't need that any more," I told him. "I can see just how it should go. I'll make you a list of the necessary components."

"Thank you," said Meerschraft, stiffly; "but in case it's escaped your notice I happen to be in charge of this project. What about getting the circuit down on paper so that we can both see where we're working? If you're not bluffing, that is," he added, nastily. "I can't see how anyone in his senses could make anything out of that crazy scribbling."

I didn't like the inference, and I glared at him. "You great fat woodenheaded equipment wrecker! Just because your I.Q. would make a chimp look superhuman it doesn't mean that the whole race is on the slide."

"Oh, all right," he said, huffily. "We'll give it a whirl. I'll video Benson Electronics for the extra items. Pinquil has an account with them."

I was happily ripping out Meerschraft's hook-up when the door opened and in walked Pinquil accompanied by Zacharia Grosmith.

"What's this?" asked Zacharia. "I thought you told me that the project was almost completed?"

Pinquil touched his beard, nervously. "It was, or rather it is, my dear sir. My engineers are engaged on a slight modification of the existing circuit."

Grosmith frowned at him. "I thought I told you to engage the services of another six experts? I want this thing in operation by next week."

"Negotiations are in progress, and I expect three really top-flight men to join the team by Friday," explained Pinquil. "Certain, er—inducements were necessary, by the way, and I find myself some two thousand pounds out of pocket, and then Benson's are pressing for payment. A cheque for thirty thousand pounds would just about cover our immediate needs . . ."

Grosmith, a stocky individual with greying hair, a hard, angular face, and projecting brows, glowered at him. "You don't get another damned penny until I see results," he said. "I'm not too sure about you, Pinquil. I must have been out of my mind ever to fall for such an idea."

"Think of the advantages of such a system of transportation," Pinquil reminded him. "Instant delivery of all your products, no matter where. I know that the scientists of Earth have been working on this idea for over a century. Another ten years, perhaps, and they will have unearthed part of the answer. What do you think will happen then? The government of the day will immediately throw a smokescreen round it, and it will become merely an adjunct of war. You can anticipate them, and become a public benefactor. I assure you, sir, that on my planet this form of transportation is common. I should have had no need of your help; but unfortunately . . ."

Meerschraft had his head buried in the new theoretical circuit I had drawn for him. It was actually the waffled-up circuit of an ancient guitar amplifier that I remembered from my youth; but I wasn't allowing him more than a watching brief so it didn't matter. In any case, he wasn't reading the circuit; he was indulging his ostrich complex, and hoping he wouldn't be noticed. He was obviously scared of Grosmith, and I wondered how near the wind Pinquil had been sailing in his dealings with the speculator.

The other planet business meant nothing. Grosmith wouldn't dare mention it to any of our earthbound, single-minded cops; but if Pinquil had actually promised results, and mentioned a delivery date we were all in trouble. I had to get the strength before I took evasive action, supposing that were indicated.

"Unfortunately," Grosmith broke in, "you lost your machine and all your plans in the Great Fire of London, since when you've been living in a tree. Poppycock! You didn't think I'd fall for that, did you? It just so happens that I knew a team of scientists were working on the possibility of a transmatter. I also knew that it was at the Government research station of Bircham Newton that this was taking place. You were shrewd enough to mention the research station in the course of the conversation, and as there aren't so many people who know what's going on there I thought you might have some special information. You've had three thousand pounds out of me, Pinquil. Show me some results that I understand and I'll back your

project initially to the extent of half-a-million. I'm giving you a week. If no results are forthcoming . . . well, I am not without influence. I could have you all thrown into prison without my name being brought into it." He took the whole room in with a baleful sweep of his head.

"Tell him about the man you had to kill to get the plans, Pinquil," I said, conversationally. "We stashed the body in a packing case, and sent it collect to your office. It should be there any day now. Oh yes, we put a couple of pictures of your latest inamorata in his pockets just in case anyone should be looking for motivation. We provide everything, you see. All the results you want, and all for half-a-million."

Meerschraft, still holding the plans to his face, made for the door as though in a trance. The other two gazed at me slightly open-mouthed, and then Grosmith leapt into action.

He grabbed at Meerschraft. "No you don't!" he snarled. "You get back over there where I can see you." He stabbed a finger at me. "Who the hell is that, Pinquil?"

"An engineer I, er—engaged. He's, er . . ."

Grosmith cut the stumbling Pinquil short. "If this is some kind of fancy blackmail stunt I'll have your head for a doorstop." He waved his hands about. "It doesn't make any kind of sense. What's this business of an inamorata?"

That had him more worried than the crated stiff. With every reason, too. The trouble was that Mrs. Grosmith was unlikely to understand that a tired tycoon required the sort of relaxation that the home just couldn't provide ; not with the shattering femininity of Jonnie Avalon, that is.

She was the very popular hostess at *The Jungle Club*, whom I had once known as Freda Smith, and still knew well enough to hug closer, allowing for shape divergence, than a sheathe dress—when I was in the money, of course. The *Club* is expensive, and freeloading is actively discouraged. Naturally, I don't go there too often ; but when I do I usually have a drink with Jonnie in private. She likes to let her hair down with me, and talk . . . and talk . . . Like about Zacharia Grosmith, for example.

"Next time you go to Avalon," I said, "take Excalibur with you. You'll need it if your old woman catches on."

"So it *is* blackmail!"

Everyone started talking at once, then. I left them to it, and carried on with the wiring. The circuit seemed to me to be surprisingly simple, and the component parts standard. I went over to the bench and came back with a K-amplifier. They were still arguing, with an occasional hand wave towards me; but I ignored them, and bent the K-amp into circuit. Finally, they came over in a bunch just as I had finished the thing. They appeared to have reached some kind of decision.

"You're fired!" Zacharia told me, bluntly. "Get the hell out of here!"

"You may keep the ten pounds," Pinquil said, primly.

Meerschraft said nothing; but looked unhappy. I waited. I was expecting Grosmith to ask me a question. It came at last.

"What was all that nonsense about a body?" he wanted to know.

I grinned at him. "You shouldn't have asked," I said. "It turned out to be a family skeleton, so I had it re-routed via the City Crematorium."

"What family skeleton?" he blustered.

"A poor old alcoholic who answered to the name of Uncle Jack. He was thrown out of your office a couple of years ago, and ended his life under a truck."

It's surprising the things that people tell Jonnie. She had some surprising contacts, too. Like the Coroner . . .

"Get out of here!" he said, tight-lipped, and almost boiling over with fury.

"Not yet," I told him. "According to the *Contracts of Employment Act* I am entitled to at least a week's notice if you're dealing them from the top; but as you're dealing them from the bottom I'll take a month's pay in lieu, or a double century, whichever is the greater."

"Not a penny! Not a damned penny!" Grosmith swore. He turned to Pinquil. "Who is he? Your nephew, or something? Don't dummy up on me, man. Tell him he's fired, and get him the hell out of here! That hook-up looks like a cat's cradle."

"You wouldn't understand," I said; "but that hook-up

is a kind of poem in three dimensions, compounded almost purely of inspiration, with just a touch of Klee thrown in. You've heard of Klee, of course? He was an artist with a penchant for what I call chaotics. That's how my inspirations works, too." They looked at each other, questioningly. "That plan of yours," I said to Pinquil, "was a humdinger; but it didn't make much sense until I added a K-block, and worked out from there. That's when I noticed the tracing marks under the black ink. It really was a copy of a Klee print, wasn't it?"

Pinquil gave a sickly smile. "You are probably suffering from slight double vision, Mr. Belov. Not that it matters. Actually that was only a rough sketch in terms you couldn't possibly have grasped. The master plan is up here." He tapped his bony skull.

"It must feel awful lonely." I snapped my teeth at him. "Why don't you stick to your idea for round-the clock music for the masses? That's just about your heavy."

Grosmith scowled at Pinquil. "Are you saying that these men had no proper plan to work from? That means I've been taken, you old fraud! Of all the confounded . . ."

"You aren't much better," I pointed out. "You were prepared to countenance an outright theft . . ."

He lunged at me; but I side-stepped, and tripped him. He sprawled his length across the platform, and Pinquil waggled his arms about like a man demented. I wondered why; but not for long. I had something else to wonder about. What happened next was the most remarkable *memento mori* that anyone had ever seen. Grosmith had become a luminescent skeleton, a skeleton around which you could still see the faint outlines of a body, or rather just the clothing.

Pinquil took me by the arm. "What terrible thing has happened to him?" he asked, tremulously.

"Heaven knows," I said, backing off, and disengaging his hand. "Perhaps his sins caught up with him rather suddenly. You never know what he's been up to, a man with all that money."

"We'll end up in gaol, that's certain," moaned Meers-

chraft. "It's all your fault, Belov. I'm sorry I ever met you. You're unlucky to me."

"You're still here?" I said, incredulously. "Did your feet collapse, or have you some special knowledge?"

He looked uneasy. "Hadn't you better switch it off," he said. "After all you wired the damned thing, and you switched it on."

I shook my head. "It isn't switched on. Try a fresh hook-up. Your brain's not in circuit."

Pinquil rubbed his thin hands together. "Don't let us quarrel about it," he said. "It's really my fault. I'll just see if I can drag him clear of the platform."

"I wouldn't hear of it," I said, stoutly, shoving him firmly before me.

Grosmith lay there, unchanged in his bright, bony awfulness. Pinquil managed to pull him clear of the platform, and he stirred slightly. Then he sat up. He must have knocked himself out somehow. Now he looked around, or rather the skull did, and I thought it was perhaps time I backed off again.

Then there was a change. His glowing skeleton vanished, and he became almost his normal self except that now he glowed all over. Even his clothes were luminescent. His white collar was so white that it hurt the eyes just to look at it. His face was a round blob of pink, and his eyebrows and hair, despite their extreme blackness, glowed too. He got to his feet and stood looking at us, with eyes of fire.

"My God!" exclaimed Meerschraft, slowly moving away. "He's radioactive."

For some reason this hadn't struck me, and I inwardly cursed my stupidity; but I couldn't see how it had happened. Pinquil pulled something from an inside pocket and held it towards the unfortunate tycoon. It was a pocket geiger, which quite a lot of nervous people carry around nowadays. I looked over his shoulder at the dial, and was relieved to see that there was no movement, and only a slight clicking. This could have come from the wrist watch that Pinquil was wearing. It looked like a luminescent type.

"He's clear," Pinquil breathed. "I wonder what it can be? Have you noticed that it's getting colder?" He shiv-

ered, and we looked at each other. "He's extracting the heat from the air," he said. "That's where the energy is coming from that produces the luminescence."

I thought this over while I watched Grosmith shake his head, bemusedly. A miniature storm took place around him. Lightning cracked, and part of a dark cloud suddenly obtruded itself from a gap to his right ; a gap in space that revealed part of a landscape as well, and then vanished. A localized shower of rain blew into our faces, and I tried to think of a suitable prayer ; but couldn't. Then the temporary paralysis that seemed to have affected us lifted, and we ran from the room.

Meerschraft made it to the lift first, largely because he'd had a start and Pinquil and I managed to get jammed in the doorway for a second. "Come on!" Meerschraft shouted, excitedly. "Hurry, for heaven's sake!"

I glanced around. Grosmith was loping down the corridor with enormous gliding strides hardly touching the dark red of the plasticized floor, and glowing like a fluorescent advertisement for somebody's phoney product. What made it worse was that he appeared to be twice his normal size. We made the lift just in time, and Meerschraft slammed the gates and jabbed the button. We started down with the phenomenon that was Zacharia Grosmith glaring at us through one of the glass peepholes in the lift doors.

I shook hands with Meerschraft. "You're a great man," I said, earnestly. "I have always said so. We'd never have beaten him down the stairs."

"Thanks," returned Meerschraft, ungraciously ; "but it doesn't alter anything. You are still responsible." He frowned at me. "Don't think you are going to get away with this, Belov. The story is bound to break soon, and when it does I am going to see that the blame is laid squarely upon your shoulders."

I could hardly believe my ears. That, friends, is what you get for helping a man out. It's enough to make you despair of the human race. "I need time to think this over," I said, as we reached the street level. "About a month," I added, and belted for the nearest ped-strip, which was the fast east.

Meerschraft was a sticker. I'll say that for him. I dropped over the junction bridge onto the fast north, and my fat colleague came with me. We landed in a heap while the other travellers scattered. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a cop approaching us. Meerschraft must have spotted him at the same time. We rose like a double act, and took the slow commuter strip almost together, and off this onto the Level again. Together we reached one of the big grav lifts, and took a free fall down nine Levels, and then up three Levels on another lift before I was satisfied that we'd slipped the law.

I sat down on a bench on Sixth and Meerschraft collapsed alongside of me. "All right," I said, "you sub-human surrogate. Let's have it. What do you expect me to do?"

He was pooped. It was a couple of minutes before he was able to answer me. "That hook-up," he said at last. "What was it supposed to do, and why did it do what it did?"

"Yes," I admitted, "you've got a couple of good questions there." I thought about it for a while. "All I can tell you is what I had in mind. I was thinking in terms of a transmatter without knowing anything about the fundamentals, if there are any fundamentals. There's another angle to it as well. That Klee sketch did help, crazy as it may sound. I've a feeling that what I was looking at was something entirely different. It transferred itself to the mind without being seen by the eye. It was below the sketch. I'm only guessing now; but the mental transference could have been accomplished by a tactile triggering that operated some strange, concealed mechanism that pumps out the necessary information on a fairly wide cerebral frequency."

"How is it then that I didn't receive anything of that nature?" he wanted to know, and I thought I detected a hint of amusement in his voice.

Friends, if there is one thing I pride myself on it is the fact that I am, above all things, a gentleman, and a gentleman never insults anyone—unintentionally.

"With some people," I explained, "it is difficult to say where the bone ends and the brain begins. Possibly you have a superfluity of the former."

He scowled. "With a brain like yours," he riposted, "I'm surprised you haven't got two heads."

"I have," I told him. "I keep the other in the spares rack." I stood up. "Come on, we're getting back. I believe I know some of the answers. Unless I am very much mistaken, Pinquil isn't what he seems to be, or even what he pretends to be."

"What about Grosmith?"

"That's why we're going back. Occam, razor and all, to cut this thing down to size. There can only be one answer according to our William."

"I don't think I'm with you," he said, puzzled.

I grinned at him. "Mind you don't rupture that frontal lobe." I hefted him to his feet. "Get those flabby limbs working, Meerschraft. We've been manipulated, and I want to know why."

This time we found that the door to the suite was locked. On the glass panel was the legend: *J. S. Spender & Company, Solicitors.* The glass was cracked right across, and part of it broke away when I pressed on it. Meerschraft looked around uneasily; but it is doubtful if anyone else heard the noise of the falling glass. This floor wasn't fully occupied. Not many of the floors were. Business generally had taken a terrible hammering, largely owing to over-mechanisation and under-the-arm planning.

I put my hand through the gap and succeeded in turning the lock. We went in. That is to say, I went in. Meerschraft peered round the edge of the door. Pinquil was standing near the platform rig adjusting something that looked very like a video transmitter mixer panel, feeding through a double Lex amplifier to another Brock 'think-box'.

There was no sign of Grosmith, and I wondered how he had turned that particular trick. He glanced across at us, and then went on with his adjustments. He seemed in a hurry. I crossed quickly to the main switch, and he looked up, removing his ear-plugs.

"Get away from that!" he said, urgently. "Don't touch the switch!"

I ignored him and pulled down on it. Instantly, there was a blinding flash from the 'think-box', and the smell of

burning insulation. (Memo: The Brock Homeostatic 12a Computer should be switched off initially at the Computer itself. A protective bleeder chain has been incorporated which is inoperative if this instrument is switched off directly at the main supply, and serious damage may ensue.) The Brock had been knocked out.

I took a small extinguisher off the wall, and gave it a couple of squirts. Then I replaced the extinguisher, and nodded cheerfully to Pinquil, who looked about as dejected as it is possible for anyone to look.

"Pardon the intrusion," I said; "but there are one or two things I have to get straightened out."

He shook his head, sadly. "You shouldn't have done that," he told me, and clasped his thin hands together agitatedly. "One hundred and seventeen of our finest brains scattered like dust along the star lanes, somewhere between here and Andromeda. Mere motes in the great darkness of space." He shook his head again. "Don't you realise what you've done? No, of course not. You could have no conception." He walked slowly up and down while he talked. Meerschraft was standing just inside the door, rabbit-anchored to his curiosity, and ready to flash out of sight at the first sign of danger. "You must admit," he said, quietly, "that this world of yours, economically speaking, is in a bad way. Your own experts are quite unable to resolve their difficulties, and that is where my planet comes in. We are much further advanced than you in every respect, and I had the idea of infusing new life into your dying economy by importing some of our own top brains, for whom jobs had already been arranged in lever positions. I should point out that this is not the first time we have been able to help . . ."

"I know," I interrupted. "You probably supplied the elephants to Hannibal, besides fitting their feet with anti-grav shields so that they could practically float over the Alps. You've already admitted that Merlin was one of your number and so, I suppose, was that other Welsh Wizard, Lloyd George. Let's see, now . . . What about Karl Marx? Was he one? Don't answer that, on the grounds that it might incriminate us both. You never know who's listening.

Even the privies are bugged these days. I'm telling you, friends, there'll be no improvement until the last of the politicians has been strangled with the bowels of the last of the tape-worming snoopers. You should read *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. It's full of puce ideas and gay suggestions that must have had them in tucks four centuries ago. Are you sure Burton wasn't one of your extra-terrestrial *confrères*?"

Pinquil looked at me, strangely. "What do you know? Or what do you think you know?"

I wasn't sure, so I thought I'd play him along a bit.

"It could be that you are an alien," I said, slowly, because I was thinking on my feet; "but somehow I think you're closer than that, and yet further removed—like an anachronism." I paused, and looked at him.

He smiled; but his eyes looked weary, and defeated. "Go on," he urged. "You have a very perceptive mind, Mr. Belov."

"Merlin? Well, perhaps you were; but what were you before that? And even before whatever that was? It doesn't really matter. It seems to me that you owe us an explanation, and without promise of help—if that is what you want."

"What happened to Grosmith?" put in Meerschraft, suddenly. He had got over his nervousness to some extent, and had advanced further into the room. "Where is he?"

"Resting at his home," Pinquil said, "under the impression that he has had a severe nervous breakdown. There's nothing organically wrong with him, if that's what you mean. The luminous effect was due to superimposition. The superimposition of an almost infinity of selves. The bones show through more, that is all. The effect wore off, and now he is dispersed throughout his own time period, and the other parallel time lines. Some of these are merely partial harmonics of the *real*. They have no beginning and no end." He sighed. "Phantom universes, and ghost galaxies, and I have to decide to which I belong. Yes, I have been Merlin, and many others, as you rightly divined, before and since. Cabalists, most of them. That isn't the problem at all."

He came down from the platform, and walked over to the bench. "All this," he said, indicating the array of instruments with an expressive sweep of his hand, "to perform a little wizardry. The runes of a printed circuit are not enough. They must be bolstered with power filched from the atom. You have given the Inanimate a foot in the door. Beware of him. He won't depart so easily."

"Never mind the lecture," I said. "Just give with the explanations. You conned me into wiring that thing over there. What *were* those phoney Klee diagrams, anyway? Just phoney Klee diagrams?"

He smiled. "They were symbols. Magic symbols, if you like. Klee was just your rationalization of something that didn't fit your brain patterns. What they were intended to do was trip certain switches in your mind, so to speak. In this way it could translate the requirements of another mind not accustomed to thinking in terms of electronics. I must confess, though, that these requirements didn't include a transmatter. This smoke-screening was to enable me to lay hands on sufficient money for my needs, via Grosmith, of course.

"What you have there is a device to bring most of all the selves of any individual together." He nodded towards the outsize gimmick we'd been working on. "If a man belongs to this parallel he will look something like Grosmith looked. If he doesn't it will have no appreciable effect. It has no effect on me, and so I must try another parallel universe. You see, I'm not a refugee from another world; but from a parallel, or contiguous, universe. I can't tell you why; only that I am determined to get back."

"You're a liar," I told him. "The thing wasn't even switched on."

He shrugged. "So you say; but you are reckoning without the effect on your mind of a certain piece of symbolism, the key to the diagram. You held nothing less than pure magic in your hands when you held that. You'd be surprised, and maybe shocked, at its composition, and the circumstances of its creation."

"You should have a pointy hat to go with your pointy head," I told him, exasperated. "You phoney damned sor-

cerer, or phoney damned something! If you do belong to another batchy universe why don't you shift over, and leave room for fresh air? Take your id-press, or your dimensional slip-ship, and slide out, you slithering swamp-head!" He was beginning to worry me.

"Actually," he said, gently, "I use an older method for traversing the parallels." His lips moved slightly, mouthing a word I couldn't catch, and then he'd gone.

Meerschraft was running again. I could hear his footsteps retreating towards the lift; but I was fighting to stay there, hanging on to that life-anchor of a dictum, old Will of Occam's 'Never magnify entities beyond necessity.'

I forced myself to walk over to the so-called id-compressor, and then I gave it a very thorough going-over. I was looking for something rather more mundane, and I finally located it inside the Brock 'think-box', where there was just enough room to accommodate a tidy little gimmick about a foot square.

It was one of the new 3-D beamless picture shapers. We'd been conversing with a 'ghost', a mere simulacrum. Pinquil could have been in another room, or miles away. I could see the electro-polarmatic lens now, which had been covered with a camouflaging shutter. But why all this ingenious hoo-ha? What was the motive? The awful luminosity of Grosmith, and the apocalyptic glimpse of what seemed to be another world, storm *et al*. Had it been pure hocus? A 3-D trick? If so, Pinquil must have had projectors all along the corridor. Again, why? And where did Grosmith fit into it? As a victim, I suspected.

I hadn't been able to try the id-gimmick out. Grosmith's falling over it had put paid to that. I went over to it now and, after some consideration, placed a couple of meters on the platform, and a chair. I could have done with something living, even flowers at a pinch; but there wasn't anything suitable around; so I stood at arm's length from the switch, and closed it while I kept my eyes glued to the articles I'd set on the platform. Something had to happen. I was certain of it.

Something did. I switched off again. My gift for visualizing circuitry had been triggered by the Klee diagram into

producing what I could only think of as a paratransposer. Just at that moment the door was flung wide open and Pinquil entered followed by Meerschraft and a dozen others I hadn't seen before. These latter were lugging bits of equipment which I recognised as the component parts of a portable tridi video unit. Outside on the Level would be the powerful mobile booster. It looked as though someone was due to be hooked through to the gogglers. I had an awful feeling that I knew who, and possibly even why.

When he saw me Meerschraft came to an abrupt halt; but Pinquil was delighted. "The very fellow!" he said, gleefully. "I'm so glad you didn't leave. A personal appearance, with some relevant comments always helps. You needn't be afraid of slander or anything like that. I've tailored the programme, and soft-pedalled some of the Grosmith things. I'll give you a question list and skeleton answers. No need to worry. No need at all. You've come out very well . . ."

It seemed to me that his voice had changed. He sounded younger somehow. I suddenly took a grip on his beard. It came away easily.

"Rod McQuail," I snarled. "I thought your voice sounded a bit familiar."

He removed his grey wig with a flourish, revealing glossy black hair, parted straight down the middle. He bowed, extravagantly. "At your service, sir. Rod McQuail, the people's jester, now writing, producing and presenting the greatest little show of all, *'What Next?'* We crack it up on science. We crack it up on everything. We are the satirical machine in operation." He slapped me on the shoulder. "Sorry we had to be so mean to you, Mr. Belov; but that's what makes for entertainment. You'll be delighted when you see the finished product. We are going to have a few inserts as well. With the aid of these the whole thing should prove devastating. Really devastating. You'll make that personal appearance, won't you? Good man." He strode off, while I was thinking of a suitable caustic rejoinder.

Meerschraft was all apologies. "I know you must be mad with me," he said; "but it's really only a sort of joke, and I was more or less forced into it."

"I can imagine!" I said, snapping my teeth at him. "It must have been like forcing candy on a kid. No doubt you were well paid for your part in the charade?"

"I can't grumble," he smirked.

I followed McQuail, alias Pinquil, over to the other side of the room, wondering whether I would be legally justified in thumping him. He was waving his thin arms about, issuing orders, pleading, cajoling, and doing all the things that a producer has to do almost every day of his working life. Watching with a jaundiced eye, I saw that he had placed one camera unit on the platform of the phoney piece of equipment that had turned out to be a quite extraordinary gimmick.

It seemed to me that my chance to get back at the egregious and Pinquilian Mr. McQuail had arrived. I strolled over casually, and then flung the switch in. It was, I suppose, unfortunate that Meerschraft should choose this very moment to have a word with me. He climbed onto the low platform, and then leant towards me.

"Oh, Belov . . ." he began, with what he probably thought was an ingratiating smile; but my hand had already hit the switch. I switched off immediately, of course, and McQuail came over. He seemed upset.

"What have you done, you maniac?" he demanded. "Look at my cameras, and look at this—this man!" He pointed to a black circle and several dots and streaks in white and yellow that somehow symbolized what Meerschraft had been far better than any photograph could have done. Behind him was a scattered mass of lines in various colours with an occasional square that was almost recognisable as the camera unit. The crew stood just off the platform and gaped in disbelief, and then the exodus took place. Everyone, except McQuail, myself, and the odd, shifting lines that represented Meerschraft, raced for the door. In ten seconds flat we were the only ones left. "You've ruined my programme," McQuail told me. "I'll never get it on in time now." He stood back, the better to appraise the odd phenomenon on the platform. "What are you going to do about it?"

What could I do about it? I'd switched off; but the

tableau remained. Was this the residue of things as they seem? It seemed a philosophical question that required an answer. I pondered it while McQuail went off the deep end, calling on all the gods that be to visit their lightnings upon me. He said I should be stoned. That the psychiatric wards were full of people like me, and people like himself who had to put up with people like me. Then he asked me again what I proposed to do about it. He was completely lacking in a proper sense of awe, or even curiosity. He was, like all his kind, a man of one talent, a video specialist who had found his niche in the staging of the elaborate practical joke, although—when you came to think of it—if life itself in this day and age wasn't just that, well . . . what was it?

"Not a damn thing!" I said.

"But, your friend . . ."

"The victim of his own greed, your imagination, and my inspiration. He died of excessive complications. I don't see how he could have escaped." I stood back and took a good look at the strange set-up. "A work of art," I said. "Joan Miro couldn't have caught him better."

"You ineffable swine!" he almost wept. "What about my show?"

And that's all that was worrying him. What worried me was why the thing remained with the power off. It was as insubstantial as light and shade, because that's all it was, and yet it remained.

Had I somehow set up a self-sustaining state, or was Meerschraft still in there, dimensionally bugged; but holding on and sustaining it himself by virtue of the fact that he was alive? If so the problem now was how to release him.

Someone once accused me of being a try-anything Charlie; but it must be admitted that empiricism does bring its rewards. I swopped connections on the K-units, and reversed the polarity of the whole circuit. Then I switched on and off quickly.

The tableau vanished and Meerschraft was thrown, as it were, into our midst. The camera unit was thrown the other way, and smashed against the wall.

Meerschraft picked himself up and looked reproachfully at me. "There was no need to set upon me," he said. "I was only going to tell you about another job I had lined up."

I don't know what he thought had happened; but it wasn't going to gell with anything we'd seen. "You can go to hell!" I said.

McQuail was wailing and gnashing his teeth over his broken toys. "I'll sue you for half-a-million!" he threatened. "You see if I don't."

"Thanks for the compliment," I grinned; "but what you'd get out of me wouldn't buy you a blown fuse."

I left them there and headed for Emilio's restaurant. What I required now more than anything was a good meal as only Emilio could cook it.

To my surprise he greeted me with open arms. "Belov! I am very glad to see you. My oven is on the blink, and I want you should fix it." His huge, red face radiated real pleasure at seeing me, yet the day before he had offered to throw me out over a little matter of a bill I had been unable to meet.

"No T-bone steak?" I frowned. "No roast potatoes? No steaming veg with that exquisite brown gravy that only your own tiny hands can prepare properly?" His hands wouldn't have provided shade for more than a family of five. "No cherry pie?"

He shook his head, mournfully, and his great, white chef's hat crumpled a little, and looked mournfully at me as well. "I have only the cold stuff," he admitted.

"You can go to hell, too!" I told him. "You'll have to write for an appointment. I'm very busy at the moment."

I was, too. I was busy racing for the outer Level, and the fast east pedstrip. If he hadn't bumped into a couple of customers who were just coming through the door I might never have made it. Being pursued by a mad chef weighing about two-fifty on the hoof and armed with a carving knife is not my idea of recreation; but there are times when a man has to assert himself.

I bit into the meat pie I had snatched on the way out

and reflected that having successfully asserted myself the next thing was to apologise—by video, of course. One thing about it, I was in the happy position, in this instance, of being practically indispensable. No one else could fix his lousy oven. If anyone was foolish enough to tamper with the wiring loom they'd find soon enough that the normal colour code didn't apply. Nothing much else did either. I had seen to that the last time I'd fixed it.

One has to live.

It took years before they got the pollen back properly

THE FLOWERS OF THE VALLEY

Keith Roberts

'O THERE WAS a woman and she was a widow,
'Fair was the . . .'
Ugh!
Never mind. Forget it. It's just an old song . . .

Jorge came up to me one day with a bunch of lilies. He said, "Look at these, Ivan!" I looked. I had seen lilies before. Many times. I said so. He said, "No, honestly. These are different. Look!"

They were good. Very good indeed. I sniffed at them and the scent was excellent. Jorge laughed enthusiastically. "Now see your face!" I turned to a viewingscreen and tried to rub the red smear from my nose. It spread, turning a yellowish, uninviting colour like the after-stain of Flavene. It would not come off, and Jorge laughed again. The first lilies with real pollen!

That's how we are in the Floral Centres; always after something new. Jorge was a Chief Creator and a brilliant man. Only the year before he had shown me some bulrush heads that really burst in the spring. For obvious reasons we never marketed them. Our rushes don't come adrift and it is better that way. But the lilies were something different. Real pollen! What would we come to next?

I don't recall the name of those lilies—exotics are not my line—but you must know them. We had been producing them for years before we got the pollen back properly; or rather before Jorge did. They are big white flowers with red-spotted petals. Their stems are oddly angular and they thrust out long pods like the hands of Indian dancers. I took some of the new batch to Priscill that evening. She said, "Thank you," coldly and put them in a vase. I watched

her adding water. That had always been a funny little habit of hers.

Priscill had been behaving very strangely lately. I thought it was because Autumn was in the air, and Mother nature was laying aside all the old lines for another season. I told her that in a few short weeks the flowers would some rolling through again, as fresh and beautiful as ever; but it made no difference. No difference at all . . .

A week or so later I mentioned my problems to Jorge. I told him how I had heard her singing the old song, about the woman who was a widow and the old musical instruments and the flowers. It worried me. It was strange to the point of heresy, and she would not tell me where she had learned it. Jorge sent her some poppy seedboxes that really rattled when you shook them; teasel heads, sere and beautiful, ready for display; bulrushes, and glowing hips that would never fade; but it was no use. She wanted flowers, cowslips and dog-roses and new, blade-thin wheat. But in Autumn not even Jorge could get such things. We must preserve the Seasons!

I became seriously worried about Priscill. After all, it isn't every man who likes to admit that his Living Partner needs Adjusting, is it? In October I heard the song again, crooned softly in her sleep cubicle, and again I spoke to Jorge. The poppies were finished and the hips but he sent her more rushes, fluffy Old Man's Beard and the scarlet spikes of arum. He sent her strange things too, fruits of the Alpine autumn and things from the far-off Floor of India that only he could obtain. The house became full of displays but Priscill was no happier. I tried to tell her something of the wonderful system of modern Agricasting, of how I had seen the bales of wheat and oats, barley and Indian corn rushing in torrents down Mother Nature's chutes. I told her how Jorge had surprised us all by making the yellow dust reek in clouds away from the harvest, but all she said was, "You can't eat it." Now I ask you; who would want to EAT barley, or maize?

Something Jorge said one day gave me hope, and I applied to see the Director. He heard me sympathetically; it is a bad thing when one's own Living Partner needs Ad-

justing. He was not at all sure that he could grant the request I made, but with my long service in my favour he promised to consider the matter.

What I was asking was no ordinary thing. Even inside Mother Nature there are few people who are privileged to see what I wanted Priscill to watch. Seeing the Spring come in is one of the sights of a lifetime. I had seen it many times before but it had never lost its power to move me. Naturally I dared not mention it to Priscill in case my request was refused, but I hoped fervently that this would not happen. You may imagine my trepidation when some weeks later I was called to the Director's office; but all was well. He had considered my case, he said, and in view of the desperate circumstances had decided to allow the favour. I was overjoyed, but even then I didn't tell Priscill at once. I took her a great spray of Winter foliage, holly with its scarlet berries, dark yew and sickly mistletoe, and told her Spring was on its way. She said that with yew, men had once made mighty bows—is that what she said, bows? —and that mistletoe was the plant of the Druids, and sacred. In short, she baffled me.

Winter wore on, and although it did not closely concern me I could sense the feverish preparation for Spring. As usual at this time I saw little of Jorge, and when I did manage to speak with him his manner was preoccupied and thoughtless. He even forgot his little kindnesses to Priscill. Deep down, Mother Nature throbbed with urgency as line after line was declared ready. It seemed the great day would never come; then suddenly the Clocks had been set, and their dials were clicking away the last weeks to deadline.

I thought the time would never pass. Priscill seemed to become thinner and paler than ever. She seldom spoke at all now. Eventually the great time was only a week away, then a matter of hours; and finally the Morning arrived. I wrapped Priscill in her best laminate and bustled her into a vacuum taxi. Only in the cab itself, flying close under the Roof on our way to Mother Nature, did I spring the great surprise. She lay back silently, watching the hypnotic

flicker of the Roofstruts a few feet above our heads. She was quite unmoved!

I stressed the great honour that had been accorded to her, but Priscill would not speak. When the huge ramparts of Mother Nature came into sight, pearly walls reaching almost to the Roof, ablaze on this morning of mornings with neon roses, with forget-me-nots and delicate electric harebells, she turned her head away . . .

The Director met us in person in the huge entrance hall. Priscill, pale and strained-looking under the glimmering laminate, barely returned the conventional courtesies, but he was too excited and preoccupied to notice. We tubed rapidly to the British Floor, and stepped out. The ushers, as ever worried and subservient at the sight of our Director, cleared the way for us as we hurried into the enormous Delivery Room. Vaclifts took over, whirling us to the viewing gallery. Up there the roof was still hazy above us but we were high enough to see the whole pattern of the delivery beds, the conveyors winding up under latticed archways from the Shops below, the insect-like ranks of transports massed beside the great belts, the odd Transports still busy removing the last of the old season's produce. The Daydials hanging all round showed only a fraction of a division behind their cloaking orange segments, and the conveyors that for weeks had flowed solid winter-brown were displaying wide patches and streaks of their black rubber beds.

We waited for what seemed an age, but could only have been minutes. Then the Daydials began to boom. Under the distant lattices the conveyors showed their full width bare and the Director leaned forward, hands gripping the guardrail, as keyed up as the least of his hundred thousand subordinates.

The scent came first, growing from a faint suggestion to a rich, heady perfume that filled the great hall. We waited in silence while the emanation from the millions of blooms below became stronger and stronger; then, with dramatic suddenness, the throats of the delivery chutes were crammed with jostling masses of green flecked over with scarlet and pink, white and violet, blue, yellow and orange; peacock

Niagaras that burst from the tunnels to flow in sparkling masses down to the waiting Transports, there to spill in heaps round their wheels. Bluebells and hyacinths, roses and coltsfoot and shy, creeping vetches; early blossoms of apple and pear and plum; all the flowers of all the months ahead in one titanic, unbelievable mass!

They say that in the old times plants actually grew. Grew, with their roots in the stinking, worm-ridden ground, swelling like little green vampires on water and salt and air. And, horror of horrors, in those days before Unifood had laid their continental mains, men actually grabbed the plants, fruit, seeds, everything, and ate them! That was before we built the Roof, when the rain could still fall on a man and soak him. What savages we must have been! I remembered the old stories and was grateful while I stood and watched Mother Nature, the greatest plant factory of them all, making Spring for the homes and gardens of half the world.

Then I looked at Priscill. She stood behind the Director, staring past him wide-eyed at the spectacle below us. Her face was as white as one of Jorge's finest lily-petal plastics, and her lips were moving. I couldn't hear the words, but I knew what they would be.

"O there was a woman and she was a widow . . ."

I just don't get it.

He was about to demonstrate the impossible . . .

REACTIONARY

P. F. Woods

AS ALWAYS, the evening gathering at Quonquo's house was graced by refined entertainments. While the guests ate a sumptuous meal of the flesh of the *kraakfahn,* dredged the day before from the mile-deep floor of the Raerklash Ocean, musicians played sweet and solemn airs. Afterwards a ten-legged dancer from the antipodean continent performed, expressing in movement the equations presented to the last session of the Mathematical Society.

The dancer's technique was exquisite, and Drundu the mathematician enjoyed it immensely. He always did enjoy these affairs of Quonquo's. But he had an uneasy feeling. Quonquo was up to something, he was sure of it. He could feel it in the air, and besides he knew Quonquo. It was easy to see that the engineer was bursting with gleeful excitement throughout the whole of the evening. Quonquo was planning to give them a surprise.

Since Quonquo was an acknowledged mechanical genius, such occasions were not infrequent.

As the music, food and dancing distilled through the bodies and minds of the guests, they soon turned to talk of science. After all, that was why Quonquo invited them here. Each of them was in the forefront of scientific thought, some as specialists, some as technologists or engineers. But each possessed the ability most prized by them all: their minds were able to probe into the secrets of the universe.

In this one room was gathered all the foremost scientific minds on the planet. These were the people who directed all the scientific projects, carrying the world to new stages of scientific knowledge.

In high spirits, Quonquo expertly steered the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go. His excitement increased visibly. As the evening progressed the involun-

tary emotion-signallers on his upper carapace began to send out configurations of exultation and triumph, and his eye-panes showed an unusual transparency.

Drundu grew exasperated by his behaviour. "What are you up to, Quonquo?" he muttered during a pause when drinks were being served. "I'm not a child—you can't fool me."

Quonquo made chuckling noises. Drundu questioned him no further, for he knew that Quonquo could not be hurried.

In spite of his curiosity he became deeply engrossed during the next hour or so. They discussed interplanetary flight, a subject which occupied the labours of many of them.

The first space expedition was being worked for with great enthusiasm, and success was generally prophesied for either this generation or the next. Most experts were of the opinion that a landing would first be made on the less accessible outer moon, for the inner moon had an atmosphere containing ten per cent of the most dangerous gas known—oxygen—and also water vapour. Such an environment was as deadly and corrosive as any planet could possibly offer anywhere in the galaxy.

The problem of finding materials to withstand conditions on the inner moon was not even near a solution. Still, Drundu had no doubt that a landing would be made within a couple of centuries, paradoxically, long after the planets Wangane and Cruro would be explored.

It was near midnight when Quonquo turned the discussion to one of the basic items of physics.

"Let us consider," he said, "the law of action and reaction."

The suggestion had come right in the middle of a debate on interplanetary radiations. The scientists looked at him, puzzled but anticipating.

"The question I have in mind," Quonquo continued, his eye-panes almost luminous, "is whether it is possible for there to be action without reaction."

Strole, a dynamician, spoke up. "Quite impossible," he asserted.

"Not under any circumstance?"

"Every action is accompanied by a reaction which is opposite and equal. That is an inviolable law of motion."

"Supposing there was an exception?"

"That is inconceivable."

Quonquo looked immensely pleased. "Good," Drundu thought. "At last the idiot is going to come out with it. . . ."

"Well," said Quonquo after a pause, "we have decided that the law has no exceptions. But why is it a law? What's behind it?"

Obviously Quonquo was setting the scene for Strole to deliver a prologue before himself springing the surprise. The dynamician took his time before answering. He cleared out his voice-tubes with a *shush* of air and adopted a thoughtful attitude. "The law of action and reaction," he said slowly, "apart from its clearly and universally observable operation, is founded on an even deeper postulate, the Postulate of the Dynamic Whole.

"The Postulate of the Dynamic Whole states that the whole universe is a dynamic unity, and the books always balance. This must be so, or else the universe would not maintain its physical integrity. If there were a motion without a compensatory opposite motion—"

A gurgle of laughter came from deep within Quonquo's lower carapace.

Drundu's patience finally broke. "Come, come, Quonquo," he expostulated, "don't play with us. You've got something for us, what is it?"

"Quite right, friends! I have invented a device which moves without reaction. For once the books do not balance!"

The guests wailed derisively. "Make us believe it!" Strole said.

Quonquo laughed again.

"I assure you, you must be mistaken," Strole insisted, his emotion-tendrils jiggling madly. "The Dynamic Whole leaves absolutely no room for it!"

"Well, let us not stand here and argue the point. Come with me into the next room. There, I will demonstrate the impossible!"

He moved towards the doorway, flinging it open with a dramatic gesture. There was a concerted rustling of foot-pads on the mosaic floor as the guests followed Quonquo into the other room, crowding each other in their eagerness to see the new invention. The air became full of excited, incredulous chitterings.

Drundu managed to get to the fore, and had more time than the others to look around. The room into which Quonquo led them was a large one, serving as a reserve workshop in addition to the main workshops in a separate building half a mile away. A few benches and lathes were lined neatly against one wall. In the centre of the room, placed there for the occasion, was a small table.

Silence fell as the guests gathered round it. Quonquo had evidently prepared everything beforehand. On the table stood a large spring balance, its pan holding a bizarre-looking engine comprising a number of fat elliptical rotors and a few cams and drive belts jammed together in a very complicated arrangement. The whole contraption was surrounded by a metal framework.

There was no sign of a motor. The device was about two feet on a side, and the greater part of its mass seemed to be taken up by the rotors.

"The electric motor and batteries are inside the metal weights," Quonquo explained. "I could have told you all about this long before, but it has taken my workshop two years to produce this little gadget, and I wanted it to be a surprise. Now watch, while I prove that there can be action without reaction. Please note that the dial of the balance *does not show any downward thrust when the device takes off*."

The guests pressed forward in astonishment at these words, examining the machine with the full power of their trained intellects. "I will say a few words about the principle of its operation," Quonquo continued. "The elliptical rotors are rotated at speed so as to develop centrifugal force. They are so arranged that they rotate eccentrically, producing a lopsided thrust. The important point, however, is that *the centre of rotation constantly* changes. Each rotor's axis moves so that the limb that is swinging

up is always the heavier one. Simple in principle, isn't it? But extremely difficult to manage mechanically."

Quonquo switched on the machine. The rotors turned, rising and dipping with a peculiar skewing motion, accelerating steadily until they became a propeller-like blurr.

At first the needle of the balance trembled.

Then the device raised itself from the balance pan and climbed towards the ceiling.

As Quonquo had promised, the needle showed no thrust after the initial tremor. At the moment that the gadget took to the air it returned to zero.

"Incredible!" Strole whispered. "Quonquo—is this genuine? Are you *sure* there's no backward thrust?"

"Absolutely sure! The rotors exert a net force in one direction and don't need any leverage."

"But that means the Postulate of the Dynamic Whole is wrong!"

Quonquo gurgled in triumph and Drundu saw that he could hardly restrain himself from doing a little jig of joy. "Yes, it does, doesn't it? Well, things need shaking up a bit now and then."

"And gentlemen, this is the drive which will take us to the planets."

But neither Quonquo nor Strole knew everything. Across the galaxy, far beyond his ken, on a planet where other scientific minds similarly enquired, an almost identical device of roughly the same mass was proceeding in exactly the opposite direction. . . .

STORY RATINGS 147

1	The Power of Y (2)	*Arthur Sellings*
2	The Singular Quest of Martin Borg	*George Collyn*
3	The Mountain	*James Colvin*
4	Box	*Richard Wilson*
5	More Than a Man	*John Baxter*
	When The Skies Fall	*John Hamilton*

MICROCOSMS AND MACROCOSMS

IN RECENT YEARS one of the main evolutions of SF has been a certain change of emphasis. Science-fiction has been tending to spread outwards into super-galactic vastness, or inwards into the void of the mind.

Two stories both, dating from 1962, tend to foretell this direction which science fiction was about to take.

The first of these is *The Silent Speakers* by Arthur Sellings, now published by Panther at 3s. 6d. A man meets a woman casually at a party, and suddenly finds himself involuntarily united with her in a realm of mind. The woman hurries away, upset by the experience, but the man manages to trace her. Many times throughout the book they split apart, but always they come together again, as was inevitable. The interesting thing about the situation is that they are both artists, she a painter, he an unsuccessful writer, but are poles apart in character, and in fact, as he says, would normally have never been even friends.

It is discovered by the couple that their power can be spread to other people, and after agonised searching of their conscience, he sets out on his task to try to obtain recognition of his power. As might be expected, this leads to trouble.

I found this a fascinating story, with the reservation that the writing tended to drag in the middle. I feel that it could perhaps have been a little shorter.

A good example of the outward-directed story is *The Sundered Worlds* by Michael Moorcock, published by Compact Books, 3s. 6d. The main attraction of this story is the ideas with which it is packed. The Shifter System, eleven planets orbiting round a sun, which travels transversely through the dimensions which make up the multi-

verse, phasing into normal space-time for brief periods over many years, a refuge for criminals and others who wish to escape; Roth—the ragged planet, part of the Shifter System, sections of which orbit through the multiverse in different directions to the others; the Blood-Red game, a ritual contest of sickness and self-revulsion, played for the highest stakes between human beings and the aliens of another dimension of the multiverse.

Unfortunately the ideas tend to get slightly in the way of the story. At times the natural flow of the action is stopped completely to examine the implications of a situation. This tends to lead to over-emphasis on certain parts of the plot, which otherwise, would have been much less important. Nonetheless, this book sparkles with ideas, and makes very interesting reading. We see too that the multiverse of Moorcock has much in common with the inner world of Sellings. These books both show that in science fiction, the macrocosm ultimately turns out to be identical to the microcosm. Inner space and outer space are in reality the same.

A Stir of Echoes, by Richard Matheson (Corgi, 3s. 6d.) is a reissue of an old favourite. Not really SF, more a ghost story—but a very good one. Real people, real dialogue that at times is incredibly convincing, and a nice development. Matheson doesn't aim very high—but he produces a story that is perfect of its type. A story that is full of horror, but which leaves a final impression of nothing more than great sadness.

Langdon Jones

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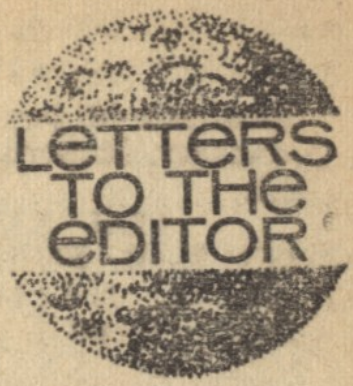

Dear Sir,

Magazine Function

Some issues ago you ran an editorial in which you stated what you believed to be the function of a magazine as opposed to a story-collection. Your intentions are excellent, and you appear to be fulfilling them to a large extent. Indeed, I would even go so far as to say that if you had not doubled your circulation it would be the duty of publishers and readers to support a magazine of this type, whether it paid or not. As has often been stated, SF, more than any other field, depends on its magazines for finding and encouraging fresh talent and publishing it so that future anthologists can have a wide selection of material from which to choose—and without the magazines we should have far, far fewer hardcover books and paperbacks—whether of short stories or of novels. The highest proportion of material finding its way into book-form had its origin in the magazines. I can think of many books we should very likely not have had if it wasn't for the magazines—*A Canticle For Leibowitz, More Than Human, The Stars My Destination, A Case of Conscience, The Drowned World* and virtually all of the early Bradbury collections. The fact that a double-market exists for SF must encourage many to write it who might otherwise have tried more lucrative fields or written nothing at all—John Wyndham, John Christopher, Arthur C. Clarke and others spring immediately to mind as writers of tremendous general appeal who made their first appearances in the SF magazines.

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