NEW WORLDS

COMPACT
SF

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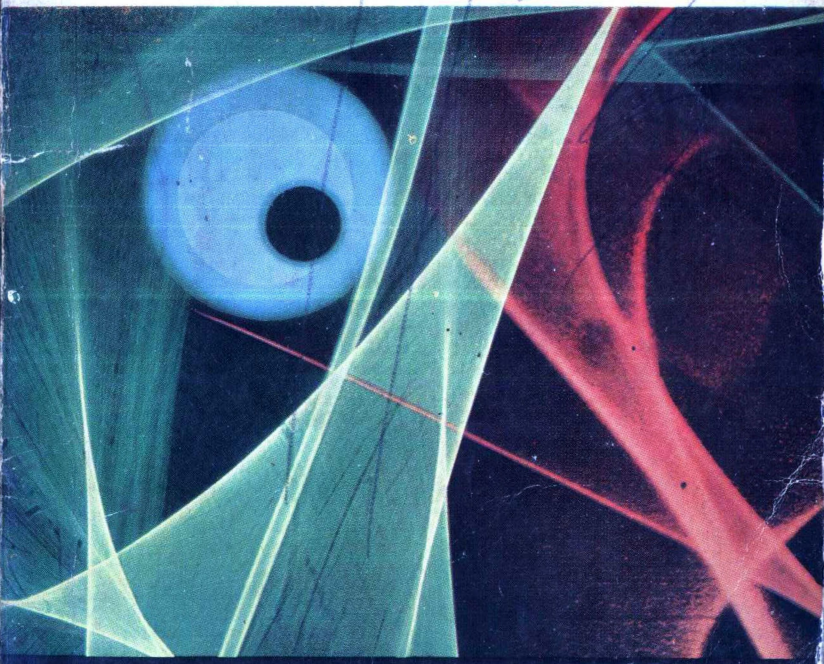
The Ship of Disaster

by B. J. BAYLEY

Rejected by Earth . . . who would take their place?



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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.

PROCESS OF ELIMINATION

READERS QUITE OFTEN write to us asking us to define what SF really is. Having been faced with the same problem ourselves we are quick off the mark with an answer. We tell them to consult one of the well-known anthologies—either the Crispin *Best S-F* series (now in Faber paperbacks) or the Aldiss *Penguin S-F* series. In fact we pass the buck just as fast as we can. In our younger days when life seemed less complicated and every question had an answer if we looked hard enough for it we, too, used to believe that a simple, succinct definition of SF could be found.

Like many before us and since, we were proven wrong. All one can say with any safety—and even this is becoming less certain—is what SF *isn't* SF plainly isn't what we normally consider to be an historical tale (though there have been SF historical tales); SF isn't a Western, or a woman's romance, or a detective story (though many SF stories have had elements of all three—sometimes in the same story). SF isn't the same thing as the social novel. On the other hand even when all the easily recognised categories of fiction are eliminated what is left is not necessarily SF—Kafka, Hesse, Borges, Beckett, Burroughs, no-one would call them SF. Yet these are all writers who tend to appeal to SF readers—the SF reader will often say that there are undertones of SF in Peake, Golding—even Murdoch and Durrell. We would not go so far. What we would say is that there are similarities of theme and the choice of material used to express the theme. But the SF "purist" would not let that rest. He would dismiss these modern imaginative writers as falling outside the category. He would also dismiss the fantasy tale and perhaps the science-fantasy tale—that often attractive blend of Wells and Haggard which used to appear in the old American pulps and later, in a different form, in SCIENCE FANTASY,

where, roughly speaking, a straightforward fantasy yarn would have a scientific or quasi-scientific explanation at beginning and end. He would go even further, dismissing the tale that was not based on known scientific principles. He would be left with a very small body of good work.

Thus the process of elimination can be taken too far. On the other hand when you, the SF reader, are asked for a definition of what the stuff is you could say, "Science fiction—oh, *we* call it speculative fiction—or speculative fantasy, if you like". That immediately gives you a wider basis for argument and you can go on to say that SF is simply imaginative fiction. It can be speculative about science, religion, art, anything, treated in a fresh and imaginative way. There are good examples and bad examples of it, as in everything else, but its emphasis is on what *could be*, not on what seems to be. There is idle speculation—what you might call the light entertainment side of the field—and there is serious speculation—what the author believes, in some way, to be true. The emphasis can be psychological, sociological, metaphysical, the treatmen can be surrealistic, realistic or deliberately extravagant (most SF satire is this). There again it can be fresh or corny—in the final analysis it depends on the author's skill, talent and intelligence whether the story is going to be successful or not. We all have favourite kinds of SF, of course, but that is another matter entirely.

Perhaps in the early days of magazine SF there was something that Hugo Gersback could turn to and say "*That* is true science fiction"—he coined the phrase, after all, and produced the first SF magazine, AMAZING. But SF has changed a lot since the 20s and we know of no-one who has not welcomed the changes. To begin with it was originally very poorly written and often poorly conceived scientific speculation with the barest of plots and the most cardboard of characters. It had begun to change by the late 30s when the young John W. Campbell took over ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION (the magazine that is now ANALOG) and set out to make SF plots more sophisticated, dialogue more natural, characters more believable. Even though Campbell for the most part would admit little into

●*Continued on page* 46

As readers are discovering, Bayley's talent is rare and varied. This story may not at first seem to be SF of the usual kind, but read on, read on . . .

THE great *Ship of Disaster* rolled tirelessly over the deep and endless ocean. Long she was, strong and golden, and the sombre waters washed like oil beneath her prow. Yet a ship of disaster she truly was: vapours obscured the air about her, and nowhere could an horizon be seen. Her crew knew not where to find land, and already her hasty provisions ran low.

For it was by disaster that this ship lived. Disaster had struck the yards that built her, and now disaster had run its full course upon the elf-nation that had equipped her for war.

On a high seat in her poop languished Elen-Gelith, elf-lord of the Earth's younger days when men had not yet come into their own. "Disaster," he promised to himself, "shall come upon any accursed enemy that I find!" His hands, like thin wax laid on bone, rested negligently, yet there was power in them, as ever there was in an elf's grace. His pale and beautiful features were calm for all his anger; but his eyes, large and black, gazed at nothing but his own dark reflections. For it did not suit an elf to see his people defeated in battle, their cities reduced and their navies scattered.

And as he brooded his dark and pointed thoughts, a cry came from the look-out. A ship to port! The elf-lord's prayer was answered! Swiftly the *Ship of Disaster* heeled about, seeking surcease for her injured pride. Her war-gear had long been prepared, her warriors hungry for vengeance.

Drawing closer, a hint of disappointment showed on Elen-Gelith's face. This was no enemy's ship, for they were easily recognisable, as huge hulking beasts of the sea which wallowed with its drift. This was a ship built by men, a wretched craft compared to the elf-lord's shining war-galley, for men had none of the elves' science in ship-building. Nevertheless it was rumoured that they had traded with trolls in times past, and apart from any other

The Ship of Disaster

B. J. Bayley

consideration Elen-Gelith's temper was far from good. Cold and sharp, his silvery voice rang out.

"Ram them broadside!"

The second officer echoed the command. With a series of rhythmic thuds the oars turned the ship about, and poised for a bare second.

The water, on which the two ships stood like a king's mansion beside a peasant's hut, was covered with a fine mist. The oars dipped and drove. The *Ship of Disaster,* carried forward by the labours of Troll galley-slaves, smashed the defenceless vessel with her underwater beak.

Elen-Gelith, still not stirring from his sheltered chair in the poop, laughed with the full flavour of malice. He gave a fresh command, and his sailors were quick to do his bidding, pouring slick green oil upon the sea where human survivors struggled to stay afloat. A lighted brand followed, and Lo, the elf galley floated unharmed upon a sea of fire! The specially treated wood of her own tall hull was proof against the flame she used to such deadly purpose.

Yet there was one who survived even that peril. As the galley's bow fell upon his vessel, he had leaped upwards to cling to her carved and painted woodwork. Now, as the blistering heat of the blazing ocean billowed over him, he pulled himself up the ship's side and dropped into her slave-pits.

He did not stay there long. The burning wreck, the searing ocean, were scant yards astern when he was dragged before Elen-Gelith. The elf looked disdainfully on his prisoner. To him, a man was little more than a brute beast.

"Speak, animal, if you have the wit to do it," he said. "What do they call you in that coarse grunting you use for talk?"

The man answered in the merchant's tongue, a low-class derivation of elf-language crudely known the world over. "Ours was a trading ship!" the man protested angrily. "You had no call to attack us. As for my name, I have no obligation to tell it."

"Ho, ho!" The elf-lord was amused. "This is an animal not yet fully domesticated! That was ever the pity among men, so I hear." A harder glint came into the elf's eyes. "Well, animals can be tamed."

He signalled, with one finger. A cruel lash descended, twice, on the man's back. "Your name?" Elen-Gelith demanded, distantly.

The man spat impotently. "Kelgynn of Borrod, son of

Jofbine, whom you have just sent to the bottom of the ocean."

"Such terrible dangers these sailors meet!" taunted the elf. "Well, Kelgynn of Borrod, we have lost one of our trolls. Alas for the poor fellow, he fell sick and had to be thrown overboard. I fear you have no troll's muscles, but you will have to do."

By now the elf-lord was no longer looking at him. He gazed over his head, towards the prow, as if already he was returning to deeper problems.

"To the bench with him," he ordered absently.

With surprising elfin strength slender hands yanked at Kelgynn and threw him to a vacant place at the rear of the oar-benches. Dazed, he submitted to being chained with the light, clinking metal elves used, reputedly stronger than the finest iron.

At first he refused to work. But gradually, partly by the punishment meted out to him, partly by the indifference of the elf hortator, he was persuaded to grasp the oar's handle and learn the stroke.

It was almost more than he could bear. The oar was made for trolls, not men. Like a great unwieldy stanchion, it was so big that his hands could hardly get purchase. Before and behind him, the great bevelled oars kept up their inexorable sweep, forcing him to keep pace until his body cried out for rest.

After endless hours the trolls were fed, and he heard their snorts and grunts of satisfaction. A chunk of putrid meat was thrown down at him. He turned his head away in nausea. Even had the meat been fresh, it was from an animal that to him was utterly uneatable. He retched as the foul odour entered his throat and nostrils, and, seeing his distaste, the elf took it up again. A few minutes later a small cake of bread was handed to him.

Despite his misfortune, Kelgynn grinned. It was elf-bread, worth half a fortune in his home town, for few humans ever tasted elves' food. As he bit into the tiny loaf the bread dissolved in his mouth, nothing of it reaching his stomach. Immediately its vivifying effects ran through him like a woman's touch, but he knew that it

would not sustain him properly, as it would a finer-bodied elf.

Scarcely had he taken his hands from the oar when a lash touched his back as a signal to resume rowing. The bull-like trolls rumbled mournfully, throwing up waves of indescribable perspiration. Head drooping with weariness, Kelgynn pulled on his oar, trying beyond hope to keep up with the aloof pounding of the hortator's drum.

ON and on rowed the *Ship of Disaster*. Elen-Gelith stared eternally ahead from his position in the poop of the steady-driving vessel. The fit of temper which had gained him a rower availed him of no real pleasure. He was not one to feel triumph in petty victories. But elves are constant creatures, and the icy rage which blew through him at the thought of his people's defeat would not soon, if ever, abate.

Elen-Gelith knew not where they were bound. They were hopelessly lost in this strange mist. His sole hope for salvation—if an elf can be said to harbour hope in his heart—was that if they continued on without changing direction, sooner or later they must strike land. So, patient but tense, he waited.

In this manner six days passed, and despite the vast distance covered the look-out remained silent. The sea stayed placid, gleaming with strange dull colours and lifting with a regular mechanical swell. Hanging in cold curtains, the vapours cut off the world fifty yards away, creating the illusion that the ship made absolutely no progress.

On board, the situation had reached danger point. The galley's provisions, already scanty by reason of her urgent departure and the failure of the crops the year before, were all but gone.

Yet there appeared to be little that could be done. Casting about for some small action, Elen-Gelith had his officers bring the man to him. The new prisoner had not been much use as a rower. For one thing, it had proved impossible to keep him awake for more than three days, whereas trolls, like elves, could if need be live indefinitely without sleep. True, trolls achieved this only at the cost of hideous daydreams, fearful ancestral memories which rose

before their eyes and plagued all their waking hours with suffering and terror . . . but this little concerned their elf masters. And after a while the trolls were grateful for the whips which kept them awake. For without goading now, they fell despite their most desperate efforts into an even worse slumber, a sleep of which they lived in perpetual horror, in which they were assailed by nightmares a hundred times more unbearable.

So Kelgynn, who slumped in an envied sleep of exhaustion across his oar, was called for. He was dull-eyed for some time after they dragged him from his bench, but after the elf-lord had generously allowed him a mouthful of wine, he recovered sufficiently to speak.

"Animal," Elen-Gelith told him, "we have nothing to feed you with, unless you care after all for trolls' food."

"Elf bread suits me well enough," Kelgynn answered wearily, "though I find it somewhat thin." Then, as his senses awoke, he suddenly understood the elf's meaning.

"So," he said wonderingly, "you have nothing to eat, either."

After a brief hesitation, Elen-Gelith nodded.

Yet already his interest in the conversation seemed to have waned, and he gazed with an abstracted expression over Kelgynn's head. Not knowing his purpose, Kelgynn waited, surmising that perhaps he would be sent back to the bench.

Abruptly the elf pricked up his pointed ears and leaned forward to look more closely at him.

"Tell me," he said in a confidential tone, "are you acquainted with these waters?"

Slowly Kelgynn shook his head. "None of us knew of it. We were trying to find a new passage to Posadoras."

"Posadoras?" The elf raised his eyebrows. "You were truly off course."

"As well we knew. We had almost despaired of seeing land again, when you sighted us."

The elf leaned back, becoming meditative. "A sad idea for a sailor to have."

Kelgynn shrugged.

Elen-Gelith sighed resignedly, gazing blandly across the warship's deck, into the sea and mist. The mist, hanging

and eddying, drifted abstractedly, placing a vague pearly layer over all surfaces, even here under the lord's awning.

Kelgynn was truly amazed at how much more amiable Elen-Gelith had become. The sudden change of mood was inexplicable by the simple standards of his own folk.

"Without doubt this is an uncommon region," the elf went on in a friendly tone, "and I have never seen the like. I confess to you, human, this sea lies outside my knowledge of the oceans, also. I do not know where we are, and hardly more do I know how we got here."

Then he leaned towards Kelgynn again, and his voice became more commanding. "Now you will tell me how *you* came to enter the Misty Sea."

"I already have told you. We were seeking a route to Posadoras."

"And that is all?"

Kelgynn hesitated.

"Speak on," Elen-Gelith urged. "You have somewhat to say?"

"Perhaps it is of interest," Kelgynn said at last, "so I will speak of it. Our shamans performed a sacrifice before we sailed. No sooner had the magic sticks been dipped in the blood than the sky was covered from East to West with a single flash of lightning. One shaman said it was a good omen, another bad. Well, good or bad, we put to sea. Fifteen days into strange waters, there was another lightning flash. From then on the ocean began to change We sailed for another twenty days before . . . you came upon us."

"And how do you account for this lightning?"

"By the skill of our shamans in sacrifice."

Kelgynn glanced apprehensively at the elf, to see whether his boast would evoke jealousy in his haughty, acute countenance. Elen-Gelith laughed mockingly. "Semi-sentient humans speak of *magic*," he said. "We elves have *science*. But pray continue with your tale."

"There is nothing else to tell," Kelgynn answered.

"Did you, also," he ventured, "see lightning?"

Inwardly Elen-Gelith snorted. Why, no—and if there had been any, how would he have noticed it amidst the uproar of the giant sea-battle? Torment take the animal!

Would he have him tell of the earth-shaking armageddon when the *Ship of Disaster,* like many other remnants, had fled to save herself? Yet if he were to tell the truth, he must admit that there had been a sense of weirdness aboard the vessel in those last stages, when they had been caught in a sudden rolling gust of mist, and had pulled hard into its friendly cover, escaping the furious black troll-fire and the pursuit of the enemy's barges.

Just the same, he could not accept the human's attempt to put a supernatural turn on events. This sea was a part of the world's geography, he was certain of that.

"I saw nothing," he answered flippantly, "but here is a marvel for you. The trolls have devised a fire which burns black, and nothing withstands it. What think you of that?"

Kelgynn smiled. He was cheered by the elf's admission that he was lost. Making up his mind, he decided there was no point in deference.

"The tricks of neither elves nor trolls impress me," he said flatly.

Elen-Gelith's unpupilled eyes glowed luminously. It was fortunate for the animal that he had no true mind, and his words were not significant . . .

But Kelgynn had made a stand. "I see nothing in elves except conceit. Nothing in trolls except brute force. Shortly the world will see the end of both."

Elen-Gelith waved a hand negligently, aware that even in the animal kingdom men were an insignificant breed. His prisoner had little comprehension of the great war being waged by the only two truly intelligent races of the world.

An age ago elf savants had casually observed men appear from random mutations among lower animals. Thus they sprang from quite different sources than did either elves or trolls. Why, elves had maintained their beauteous civilisation for as long as record persisted! The whole Earth was but their playing ground. The man's pathetic attempts to claim magical abilities for his people could be taken as a sign of a dim awareness of his own inferiority.

Elves had no animal heritage at all. It was recorded that they had come into being as an act of self-creation. Spring-

ing into existence perfectly formed, of their own will, they were destined to be Earth's fairest flower.

Kelgynn pressed his point. "Listen," he said, maliciously earnest, "is it not true that your crops have been failing? Stories reach us. Your stores of elf-bread dwindle. In a few years you face starvation!"

A dangerous mood flickered involuntarily across Elen-Gelith's face. "That is due to the trolls."

Kelgynn pulled a small pouch from among the folds of his clothing. Opening its neck, he poured some of the contents into the palm of his hand. Tiny grains of a dull gold colour glittered there.

"Look, *we* have food. Too coarse for elves, too fine for trolls, but food for men. We call it wheat."

Elen-Gelith stared at the grains. For no accountable reason something so terrible stirred in him that he could barely contain his emotion. With an effort, an indifference he said: "What of it? And how easily you slander the masters of the world, whose skills and science none can match."

"For what do you use your science, besides your own gratification?" Kelgynn countered quickly. "Do you ever give thought to anything that does not further your own pleasure?"

The elf-lord started forward, startling Kelgynn with the cold flash of his visage. "You are too perspicacious, human. Learn to guard your tongue or it will be cut out."

For some seconds Kelgynn was intimidated. "They say elves had grace once," he murmured, half to himself, "yet look at this one—from the first meeting a murderer." As he said this, he glanced up again at Elen-Gelith.

Suddenly recovering his humour, the elf-lord enjoyed the frightened, white defiance of the young man's expression. "If you were an intelligent being," he said, "for those words you would have been tortured as only elves can torture. You being human, it is of no consequence. It only remains to decide whether we throw you overboard or keep you as food for our trolls, who soon will be growing hungry."

Kelgynn let the wheat grains fall to the deck.

"Tell me," Elen-Gelith continued after a pause, "what do men do when they run out of food at sea?"

"We carry little food in any case. We fish."

"You do what? Catch fishes?"

"Yes. The sea is bountiful."

Elen-Gelith reflected. "Could elves eat fishes, do you think?"

"I do not know. There are many kinds of fish in the sea."

"If you help me, Kelgynn of Borrod, I may set you free when we strike land."

Kelgynn laughed unpleasantly. "You think I would trust an elf's mercy! Just the same, I will fish for you, if only to fill my own stomach while I live. Give me a hook and line."

While the tackle was being prepared Kelgynn took his first close look at the *Ship of Disaster,* seeing in detail the long, high sweep of the decks, the beautiful abstract carvings which adorned the woodwork. A vessel of great size and mass, the ship depended for motive power solely upon troll rowers. The decks were inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl designs depicting elf-lore. Everywhere, in fact, was proof of untold wealth and craftsmanship, making a gleaming setting for the battle equipment which studded about.

Only one thing marred the effect. One side of the golden hull bore a long charcoal-black scorch-mark, the result of a badly aimed gout of troll-fire.

Everything came sharply to Kelgynn's eye. The lines of the ship, the enveloping vapour, the oily sea. His gaze lifted and lingered on the lonely elf commander. Kelgynn did not think he was wrong when he discerned behind the noble, aloof posture a spirit of overwhelming dejection.

Yes, she was a wondrous creation, this foreign war-galley. Wondrous, powerful, dutifully-functioning. But for all her beauty she carried the flavour of all elves: self-contained arrogance. Elf civilisation was materialistic, inbred.

As for trolls, their character might be different; but the same errors lay ingrained in their being.

ELEN-GELITH gave an order for the rowers to ship their oars. The trolls bellowed in wild despair, pulling at their chains and begging to be given no respite. But the elf masters seemed not to hear, and perforce the wretched slaves gave themselves up willy-nilly to the all-dreaded sleep.

Deprived of motive power the *Ship of Disaster* coasted a short distance before giving herself up to the regula swell of the ocean. Kelgynn cast his line into an undisturbed sea.

Elen-Gelith returned to his thoughts.

For many hours he lounged in his high seat, his mind still, calm, but all-encompassing and brooding. No amount of intellectual detachment—and elves had plenty of that—could make elves emotionally dispassionate. One look at their physical forms, their sharp glowing faces, their light, nerve-burning bodies, would have assured any creatures of that. Elen-Gelith would retain his steady-burning elf emotions, would remain cruel, egotistical and unremitting, even though his mind ranged to the far reaches of the universe and found that all existence cried out against his ways. Of all other enquiries he might make, he would never question his own nature.

Even so, the constant creature suffers more than the flighty one; Elen-Gelith found no solace for himself, nor sought any. Not one moment came to salve the torment of his hot unwavering mind.

Bending, he picked up two of the grains the human had dropped, inspecting them curiously. The man had been right in his information, inadvertently reminding Elen-Gelith of the root cause of his fury. The trolls had evidently found a way to poison the crops, for year after year the downy harvest refused to blossom.

And at this very moment the same mighty enemy was laying waste the finest, as well as the most self-dependent, civilisation that could ever exist from the beginning to the end of time.

Meanwhile, instead of returning to succour the elf-nation, the warship under Elen-Gelith's command was hopelessly, inexplicably lost.

This fact also gave him cause for much anguish.

He tossed the two grains aside. Unnoticed by him, they fell overboard.

"What?" he muttered to himself. "Will trolls rule the world?"

Eventually he rose and retreated back into the shadow of his awning. Here, on a small table, was a jug of wine and a bowl; also various small trinkets and figurines, such as any elf commander might carry with him to remind him of absent companions. He fingered one, smiling gently. Imt-Tagar, valiant soldier, burning with his ship in billowing black fire!

Elen-Gelith poured himself a bowl of wine.

Then a shout came from outside, and he stepped on to the open deck to see that the man was struggling with his tackle. Where the cord met the sea the water thrashed and swayed. Quickly the elf-lord motioned a sailor to help.

SUDDENLY the sea welled up and streamed from an enormous flat head fully five feet across.

Kelgynn gazed in fascination at the sea-beast which his fishing had so unexpectedly provoked. The hide seemed wrought in hammered copper. Strength and solidity gleamed from every scabrous knob, and Kelgynn stared into a partly-opened mouth which could have swallowed him whole.

The focus of his eyes shifted slightly; then he gasped in outraged hôrror. The beast was *looking* at him, with eyes revealing an intelligence which was unrefined, primeval, yet greater than his own.

Kelgynn's whole consciousness became fixed on the unknown space behind thoses staring eyes. A shiver of terrified delight vibrated through him. He seemed to have been sucked away from the immediate presence of the world.

Fantastic notions formed in his brain. The beast clearly stared at something more than just him. The eyes seemed to reflect something beyond his ability to perceive. *"Future,"* they glinted. *"Future."*

In the beast's eye, Kelgynn fancied he saw the motion of the unfolding future.

The experience was over in a second. He staggered back.

At the same time the iron-snouted head disappeared into the sea.

Moments later he realised that the line was still pulled. He hauled feebly until a stronger-nerved elf came to his side, and together they heaved a fish over the side.

Once on the deck the fish ceased to struggle and lay still, giving Kelgynn and the elves time for a leisurely study. It was nearly the size of a man. Its skin had a pearly pallor, delicately tinged with pink. Its back was a broad expanse, carrying a shallow superstructure of pink sea-shell, built up into elaborate decorations and whorls. Along the sides, dipping slightly in towards the curve of the belly, ran twin rows of fluted orifices. The thinly-ribbed fins and tail glistened in all colours, translucent, shining.

The mouth lay open, showing creamy white flesh torn by the metal hook. The eyes were closed—to Kelgynn's surprise, for he had never seen a fish's eyes close before. Long, curved eyelashes rested on the soft skin.

The effect was that of a sleeping babe.

Then, through the fluted orifices which Kelgynn had taken to be gills, air sighed, building up to a mewling, distressed cry. Kelgynn even thought he detected half-coherent words, voiced in helpless protest. It was exactly like the cry of a distressed child.

Unlike Kelgynn, the elves seemed unaffected. A pause descended on the *Ship of Disaster,* during which Elen-Gelith came forward, his cloak falling into listless shapes about his spare body, bending to inspect Kelgynn's catch.

He looked up and caught Kelgynn's eye with an interrogative glance.

Cold sweat broke out on the palms of Kelgynn's hands. What did the elf commander intend to do with this—monster?

"Quite so," the elf said, quietly thoughtful. He motioned to his sailors. "Dispose of it."

While the corpse was being heaved over the side he turned to Kelgynn. "Now cast your line again."

"Have you not seen enough?" Kelgynn muttered, his eyes on the deck.

"Enough? Enough for what?" The elf's voice was super-

cilious and threatening. "Keep to your bargain or the penalty is quick and final."

Kelgynn dared a brief look into Elen-Gelith's unblinking eyes. Did the elf not sense the potency in this deep sea? Something wakeful, implacable, reducing all purpose to vanity.

The elf-lord regained his awning and disposed himself leisurely on his seat. "Make your choice," he said casually, looking the other way.

Kelgynn vacillated for a moment, trying not to shiver. "I would not care to fish here again," he said in a subdued voice, "but I'll risk it elsewhere."

The elf nodded absently.

With a great concerted groan of relief the trolls awakened from their noisy, horrid slumber, pleading mournful gratitude to the lashes of their keepers. Soon the oars were unshipped, and the great vessel was under way.

Then all was silent aboard the elf ship save for the slow beating of the hortator's drum, the thud and creak of the oars, the desultory wash of water as the blades lifted from the sea. Since boarding the *Ship of Disaster* Kelgynn had felt no hope for himself, but until now he had not cared unduly. Now a dark shadow came over his mind. He felt an immeasurable foreboding.

He sank so deep into himself that at first he failed to notice the stir of interest that suddenly rustled through the crew of the ship. When he did finally turn his attention to the cause of the interest, all he saw at first was a vague movement and colour in the distance.

BUT as they drew closer definite forms appeared, claiming his attention with a still, soundless lure.

They were more like pictures than real objects. Shapes, blocks, sights and scenes projected themselves up from the deep, spilling over the face of the sea. They were ever-changing, rising up, displaying, falling and transforming like the turning pages of a book. Unimaginable buildings, streets and bridges spread themselves over the water. It was a scene of silent, deliberate activity.

Kelgynn blinked. He could not make up his mind at first if he really saw what he saw. It was like a film of memory

occluding what lay before the eyes. Or like a vivid dream which persists in the mind's eye, overlaying the real world, for several seconds after a man has forcibly awoken.

But even this impression did not take away the colour, the clarity, the senses of presence. If it was a phantom, it was an external phantom, not a derangement of the mind —unless this whole impossible sea was such a derangement.

No comment was made on the decks. The trolls' muscles bore them steadily onwards into the region of the strange visions, and Kelgynn looked to left and right. Then they were in the midst of a fantastic city. Broad avenues, vast boulevards, giant buildings and throngs of people debouched on to the sea, and lingered, to be replaced by others. Rectilinear shafts of towers soared skywards. He craned his neck, up and up, but the summits simply disappeared into the mist.

"WHAT is this we see?" wondered Elen-Gelith to himself. Yet in fact he already half knew, for he also had looked into the sea-beast's eyes. He saw images of future ages.

The thought brought into motion a deeper, frightful knowledge which he fought to quell, for as they passed he had been inspecting closely the phantom inhabitants of this phantom city. Now they came to another part of it, which after a while he realised must be a harbour. The realisation took time, for it was by no means immediately that he was able to recognise the huge shapes resting there as . . . ships. They were such gigantic ships as made his own *Ship of Disaster* seem no more than a boat.

The elf craft bore down on one such floating mountain, and within seconds they had passed through the dull grey hull and were rowing through a cavernous interior. The vision hung around them, floating like thoughts in the mind. Unfamiliar contrivances lay about, tended by... men.

Where were the elf overseers who should have been supervising these animals? There were none. There had been none in any of the scenes in the city; and the men did not wear the expressions of slaves.

The elf-lord looked sharply this way and that, shifting

uncomfortably. Then, despite all his efforts at self-control, a shudder passed right through him.

Kelgynn, who had moved closer, noticed this and laughed cruelly.

Kelgynn himself did not know it, but this was the sea of the Earth's imagination. Here the Earth dreamed and thought to herself, planning the clothing with which she would adorn herself in future. But the talk of the shamans came easily to him, and now he cast aside all caution and spoke up again.

Breaking through the opposite side of the metal hull, the ship came into the open sea. Behind them, the fantastic visions died away like spoken words.

"Does this not prove what I said?" he cried. "The world has finished with elves! You think the Earth is just dead matter with which you can do what you will. But it is the *Earth* that created us, for her own pleasure. You elves have taken all the pleasure for yourselves and ceased to be of use to her."

Elen-Gelith said softly: "You were not given permission to speak, animal."

Kelgynn tossed his head. "Arrogance still blinds you. You do not realise that you are completely in the power of the world in which you exist. If it cuts off its support, you perish."

Earnestly he continued: "Listen. You think the trolls poisoned your crops—but the truth is that they believe the same of you. Their herds of three-horns and long-necks are no longer breeding, and for this they blame the elves."

Elen-Gelith glared at him, for the first time in his centuries-long existence faced with a completely new fact.

"It is the Earth herself who has denied you food," Kelgynn told him. "For hundreds of years you have robbed her without giving anything in return. Inevitably, she has withheld her bounty; for you, the soil no longer works. And while you still pride yourself on your science, your knowledge decays steadily."

Impudent worm! All that mattered in the whole universe was that elves lived and ruled.

Elen-Gelith was silent.

PRESENTLY he stirred, and spoke to his officers in a silvery tone.

"Bring me one of those sluggards on the benches," he demanded. "The brightest, if there be any bright ones among them."

A troll was led on to the deck, a bull-shouldered brute wearing an expression of woe-begone melancholy, dull-eyed from long years on the bench. He blinked, and skirted nervously round the inlaid pictures of elf mythology, snorting with superstitious fear. Kelgynn allowed himself to feel a trace of pity for the creature's degraded condition.

"Tell me, fellow," the elf-lord said sharply, "what do you understand by what you have seen?"

The troll's short, curved horns waggled; he seemed incapable of answering. To Keygynn it was clear that he thought nothing of what he had seen. His slavery had broken his spirit, and unlike the penetrating elf, he took little interest in things new. He thought of nothing but home, where earthy, strong-smelling trolls huffed in carousal, sometimes sad, sometimes ebullient, and cow-like troll maidens made the floors quiver with their tread.

"Away with this moron!" Elen-Gelith said after a moment. "Over the side with him!"

Lowing in ineffectual protest, the troll was herded to the side of the ship and brought up against the railing, where he cowered miserably. A few seconds afterwards there was a heavy splash.

ELEN-GELITH called a halt.

"Will this place do?"

"Eh?" Kelgynn growled.

"Fish!"

"Fish be damned! I'll do no more for an extinct species."

Elen-Gelith half rose in his seat. Kelgynn fell back, gasping with shock. He had never seen such emotion. As he gazed, spell-bound, he saw that behind elfin loftiness lay a gloom more intense, more hopeless of cessation, than the merely human frame could have borne.

The elf-lord made a gesture, of whose meaning his servants were well conversant. Kelgynn was hurled over the

plush railing of the ship and hit the ocean with a quiet, soon-forgotten splash.

This time he made no attempt to climb the hull. The sea was cold and slick as it closed over his head, lacking in salt. Kelgynn sank, waiting for the few seconds to pass before he must draw that oily, painful water into his body.

Then he became aware of salt on his lips, and sea-sounds in his ears. A surging wave dashed against his head to cover him in spray.

When he breathed in, tangy air filled his lungs. He opened his eyes. The elf ship, the alien ocean, were gone. He saw an azure sky and a warm sun, beneath which a living ocean swelled and sparkled. Not far off, he saw a white line of foam and a yellow beach, and tall trees.

"Thanks, elf-lord," he thought. "You said you would spare my life."

He struck out towards the shore.

ELEN-GELITH seated himself again. "Forward!" he called in his high, yelping voice.

He sat in the poop, alert, intelligent, utterly despondent. Provisioned only with despair, the *Ship of Disaster* drove steadily on, occasionally veering in vain attempts to find a direction, landless, futureless, but ever vengeful.

Vernor Vinge

APARTNESS

". . . BUT HE SAW a light! *On the coast.* Can't you understand what that means?" Diego Ribera y Rodrigues leaned across the tiny wooden desk to emphasise his point. His adversary sat in the shadows and avoided the weak glow of the whale oil lamp hung from the cabin's ceiling. During the momentary pause in the argument, Diego could hear the wind keening through the masts and rigging above them. He was suddenly, painfully conscious of the regular rolling of the deck and slow oscillations of the swinging lamp. But he continued to glare at the man opposite him, and waited for an answer. Finally Capitán Manuel Delgado tilted his head out of the shadows. He smiled unpleasantly. His narrow face and sharp black moustache made him look like what he was: a master of power—political, military, and personal.

"It means," Delgado answered, "people. So what?"

"That's right. People. On the Palmer Peninsula. The Antarctic Continent is inhabited. Why, finding humans in Europe couldn't be any more fantastic—"

"*Mire,* Señor Professor. I'm vaguely aware of the importance of what you say." There was that smile again. "But the *Vigilancia—*"

Diego tried again, "We simply have to land and investigate the light. Just consider the scientific importance of it all—" the anthropologist had said the wrong thing.

Delgado's cynical indifference dropped away and his young, experienced face became fierce. "Scientific import! If those slimy Australian friends of yours wanted to, they could give us all the scientific knowledge ever known. Instead they have their sympathizers," he jabbed a finger at Ribera, "run all about the South World doing 'research' that's been done ten times as well more than two centuries ago. The pigs don't even use the knowledge for

their own gain," this last was the greatest condemnation Delgado could offer.

Ribera had difficulty restraining a bitter reply, but one mistake this evening was more than enough. He could understand though not approve Delgado's bitterness against a nation which had been wise (or lucky) enough not to burn its libraries during the riots following the North World War. *The Australians have the knowledge all right,* thought Ribera, *but they also have the wisdom to know that some fundamental changes must be made in human society before this knowledge can be reintroduced, or else we'll wind up with a South World War and no more human race.* This was a point Delgado and many others refused to accept. "But, really, Señor Capitán, we *are* doing original research. Ocean currents and populations change over the years. Our data are often quite different from those we know were gathered before. This light Juarez saw tonight is the strongest evidence of all that things are different." And for Diego Ribera, it was especially important. As an anthropologist he had had nothing to do during the voyage except be seasick. A thousand times during the trip he had asked himself why he had been the one to organize the ecologists and oceanographers and get them on the ship; now he knew. If he could just convince this bigoted sailor . . .

Delgado appeared relaxed again. "And too, Señor Professor, you must remember that you 'scientists' are really superfluous on this expedition. You were lucky to get aboard at all."

That was true. El Presidente Imperial was even more hostile to scientists of the Melbourne School than Delgado was. Ribera didn't like to think of all the boot-licking and chicanery that had been necessary to get his people on the expedition. The anthropologist's reply to the other's last comment started out respectfully, almost humbly. "Yes, I know you are doing something truly important here." He paused. *To hell with it,* he thought, suddenly sick of his own ingratiating manner. *This fool won't listen to logic or flattery.* Ribera's tone changed. "Yeah, I know you are doing something *truly* important here. Somewhere up in Buenos Aires the Chief Astrologer to el Presidente

Imperial looked at his crystal ball or whatever and said to Alfredo IV in sepulchral tones: 'Señor Presidente, the stars have spoken. All the secrets of joy and wealth lie on the floating Isle of Coney. Send your men southward to find it." And so you, the *Vigilancia NdP,* and half the mental cripples in Sudamérica are wandering around the coast of Antarctica looking for Coney Island." Ribera ran out of breath and satire at the same time. He knew his long-caged temper had just ruined all his plans and perhaps put his life in danger.

Delgado's face seemed frozen. His eyes flickered over Ribera's shoulder and looked at a mirror strategically placed in the space between the door frame and the top of the cabin's door. Then he looked back at the anthropologist. "If I weren't such a reasonable man you would be orca meat before morning." Then he smiled, a sincere friendly grin. "Besides, you're right. Those fools in Buenos Aires aren't fit to rule a pigsty, much less the Sudamérican Empire. Alfredo I was a man, a superman. Before the war-diseases had died out, he had united an entire continent under one fist, a continent that no one had been able to unite with jet planes and automatic weapons. But his heirs, especially the one that's in now, are superstitious tramps . . . Frankly, that's why I can't land on the coast. The Imperial Astrologer, that fellow Jones y Urrutia, would claim when we returned to Buenos Aires that I had catered to your Australian sympathizers and el Presidente would believe him and I would probably end up with a one-way ticket to the Northern Hemisphere."

Ribera was silent for a second, trying to accept Delgado's sudden friendliness. Finally he ventured, "I would've thought you'd *like* the astrologers; you seem to dislike us scientists enough."

"You're using labels, Ribera. I feel nothing toward labels. It is success that wins my affection and failure, my hate. There may have been some time in the past when a group calling themselves astrologers could produce results. I don't know, and the matter doesn't interest me, *for I live in the present.* In our time the men working in the name of astrology are incapable of producing results, are conscious frauds. But don't be smug: your own people

have produced damn few results. And if it should ever come that the astrologers are successful, I will take up their arts without hesitation and denounce you and your Scientific Method as superstition—for that is what it would be in the face of a more successful method.

The ultimate pragmatist, thought Ribera. *At least there is one form of persuasion that will work.* "I see what you mean, Señor Capitán. And as to success: there is one way that you could land with impunity. A lot can happen over the centuries." He continued half-slyly. "What was once a floating island might become grounded on the shore of the continent. If the astrologers could be convinced of the idea . . ." He let the sentence hang.

Delgado considered, but not for long. "Say! that is an idea. And I personally would like to find out what kind of creature world prefer this icebox over the rest of the South World.

"Very well, I'll try it. Now get out. I'm going to have to make this look like it's all the astrologers' idea, and you are likely to puncture the illusion if you're around when I talk to them."

Ribera lurched from his chair, caught off balance by the swaying of the deck and the abruptness of his dismissal. Without a doubt, Delgado was the most unusual Sudamérican officer Ribera had ever met.

"*Muchísimas gracias,* Señor Capitán." He turned and walked unsteadily out the door, past the storm light by the entrance, and into the wind-filled darkness of the short Antarctic night.

The astrologers did indeed like the idea. At two-thirty in the morning (just after sunrise) the *Vigilancia, Nave del Presidente,* changed course and tacked toward the area of coast where the light had been. Before the sun had been up six hours, the landing boats were over the side and heading for the coast.

In his eagerness, Diego Ribera y Rodrigues had scrambled aboard the first boat to be launched, not noticing that the Imperial Astrologers had used their favoured status on the expedition to commandeer the lead craft. It was a clear day, but the wind made the water

choppy and frigid salt water was splattered over the men in the boat. The tiny vessel rose and fell, rose and fell with a monotony that promised to make Ribera sick.

"Ah, so you are finally taking an interest in our Quest," a reedy voice interrupted his thoughts. Ribera turned to face the speaker, and recognized one Juan Jones y Urrutia, Subassistant to the Chief Astrologer to el Presidente Imperial. No doubt the vapid young mystic actually believed the tales of Coney Island, or else he would have managed to stay up in Buenos Aires with the rest of the hedonists in Alfredo's court. Beside the astrologer sat Capitán Delgado. The good capitan must have done some tremendous persuading, for Jones seemed to regard the whole idea of visiting the coast as his own conception.

Ribera endeavoured to smile. "Why yes, uh——"

Jones pressed on. "Tell me; would you have ever suspected life here, you who don't bother to consult the True Fundamentals?"

Ribera groaned. He noticed Delgado smiling at his discomfort. If the boat went through one more rise-fall, Ribera thought he'd scream; it did and he didn't.

"I guess we couldn't have guessed it, no." Ribera edged to the side of the boat, cursing himself for having been so eager to get on the first boat.

His eyes roamed the horizon—anything to get away from the vacuous, smug expression on Jones' face. The coast was grey, bleak, covered with large boulders. The breakers smashing into it seemed faintly yellow or red where they weren't white foam, probably colouring from the algae and diatoms in the water; the ecology boys would know.

"Smoke ahead!" The shout came thinly through the air from the second boat. Ribera squinted and examined the coast minutely. There! Barely recognizable as smoke, the wind-distorted haze rose from some point hidden by the low coastal hills. What if it turned out to be some sluggishly active volcano? That depressing thought had not occurred to him before. The geologists would have fun, but it would be a bust as far as he was concerned . . .

In any case, they would know which it was in a few minutes.

Capitán Delgado appraised the situation, then spoke several curt commands to the oarsmen. The crew's cadence shifted, and the boat turned ninety degrees to move parallel to the shore and breakers five hundred metres off. The trailing boats imitated the lead craft's manoeuvre.

Soon the coast bent sharply inward, revealing a long narrow inlet. The night before, the *Vigilancia* must have been directly in line with the channel in order for Juarez to see the light. The three boats moved up the narrow channel. Soon the wind died. All that could be heard of it was a chill whistle as it tore at the hills which bordered the channel. The waves were much gentler now and the icy water no longer splashed into the boats, though the men's parkas were already caked with salt. Earlier the water had seemed faintly yellow; now it appeared orange and even red, especially farther up the inlet. The brilliant bacterial contamination contrasted sharply with the dull hills, hills that bore no trace of vegetation. In the place of plant life, uniformly grey boulders of all sizes covered the landscape. Nowhere was there snow; that would come with the winter, still five months in the future. But to Ribera this "summer" landscape was many times harsher than the bleakest winter scene in Sudamérica. Red water, grey hills. The only things that seemed even faintly normal were the brilliant blue sky, and the sun which cast long shadows into the drowned valley; a sun that seemed always at the point of setting even though it had barely risen.

Ribera's attention wandered up the channel. He forgot the sea sickness, the bloody water, the dead land. He could see *them*; not an ambiguous glow in the night, but people! He could see their huts, apparently made of stone and hides, and partly dug into the ground. He could see what appeared to be leather-hulled boats or kayaks along with a larger, white boat (now what could that be?), lying on the ground before the little village. He could see people! Not the expressions on their faces nor the exact manner of their clothing, but he could see them and that was

enough for the instant. Here was something truly new; something the long dead scholars of Oxford, Cambridge, and UCLA had never learned, could never have learned. Here was something that mankind was seeing for the first and not the second or third or fourth time around!

What brought these people here? Ribera asked himself. From the few books on polar cultures that he had read at the University of Melbourne, he knew that generally populations are forced into the polar regions by competing peoples. What were the forces behind this migration? Who were these people?

The boats swept swiftly forward on the quiet water. Soon Ribera felt the hull of his craft scrape bottom. He and Delgado jumped into the red water and helped the oarsmen drag the boat onto the beach. Ribera waited impatiently for the two other boats, which carried the scientists, to arrive. In the meantime, he concentrated his attention on the natives, trying to understand every deail of their lives at once.

None of the aborigines moved; none ran; none attacked. They stood where they had been when he had first seen them. They did not scowl or wave weapons, but Ribera was distinctly aware that they were not friendly. No smiles, no welcome grimness. They seemed a proud people. The adults were tall, their faces so grimy, tanned, and withered that the anthropologist could only guess at their race. From the set of their lips, he knew that most of them lacked teeth. The natives' children peeped around the legs of their mothers, women who seemed old enough to be great grandmothers. If they had been Sudaméricans, he would have estimated their average age as sixty or seventy, but he knew that it couldn't be more than twenty or twenty-five.

From the pattern of fatty tissues in their faces, Ribera thought he could detect evidence of cold adaption; maybe they were Eskimos, though it would have been physically impossible for that race to migrate from one pole to the other while the North World War raged. Both their parkas and the kayaks appeared to be made of seal hide. But the parkas were ill-designed and much bulkier than the Eskimo outfits he had seen in pictures. And the

harpoons they held were much less ingenious than the designs he remembered. If these people were of the supposedly extinct Eskimo race, they were an extraordinarily primitive branch of it. Besides, they were much too hairy to be full-blooded Indians or Eskimos.

With half his mind, he noticed the astrologers glance at the village and dismiss it. They were after the Isle of Coney, not some smelly aborigines. Ribera smiled bitterly; he wondered what Jones' reaction would be if the astrologer ever learned that Coney was an amusement park. Many legends had grown up after the North World War and the one about Coney Island was one of the weirdest. Jones led his men up one of the nearer hills, evidently to get a better view of the area. Capitán Delgado hastily dispatched twelve crewmen to accompany the mystics. The good sailor obviously recognized what a position he would be in if any of the astrologers were lost.

Ribera's mind returned to the puzzle: where were these people from? How had they gotten here? Perhaps that was the best angle on the problem: people don't just sprout from the ground. The pitiful kayaks—they weren't true kayaks; they didn't enclose the lower body of the user—could hardly transport a person ten kilometres over open water. What about that large white craft, further up the beach? It seemed a much sturdier vessel than the hide and bone "kayaks". He looked at it more closely—the white craft might even be made of fibreglass, a pre-war construction material. Maybe he should get a closer look at it.

A shout attracted Ribera's attention; he turned. The second landing craft, bearing the majority of the scientists, had grounded on the rocky beach. He ran down the beach to the men piling out of the boat, and gave them the gist of his conclusions. Having explained the situation, Ribera selected Enrique Cardona and Ari Juarez, both ecologists, to accompany him in a parley with the natives. The three men approached the largest group of natives, who watched them stonily. The Sudaméricans stopped several paces before the silent tribesmen. Ribera raised his hands in a gesture of peace. "My friends, may we look at your beautiful boat yonder? We will not harm it." There was

no response, though Ribera thought he sensed a greater tenseness among the natives. He tried again, making the request in Portuguese, then in English. Cardona attempted the question in Zulunder, as did Juarez in broken French. Still no acknowledgement, but the harpoons seemed to quiver, and there was an all but imperceptible motion of hands toward bone knives.

"Well, to hell with them," Cardona snapped finally. "C'mon Diego, let's have a look at it." The short-tempered ecologist turned and began walking toward the mysterious white boat. This time there was no mistaking hostility. The harpoons were raised and the knives drawn.

"Wait, Enrique," Ribera said urgently. Cardona stopped. Ribera was sure that if the ecologist had taken one more step he would have been spitted. "Wait," Diego Ribera y Rodrigues continued. "We have plenty of time. Besides it would be madness to push the issue." He indicated the natives' weapons.

Cardona noticed the weapons. "All right. We'll humour them for now." He seemed to regard the harpoons as an embarrassment rather than a threat. The three men retreated from the confrontation. Ribera noticed that Delgado's men had their pistols half drawn. The expedition had narrowly avoided a blood-bath.

The scientists would have to content themselves with a peripheral inspection of the village. In one way this was more pleasant than direct examination, for the ground about the huts was littered with filth. In a century or so this area would have the beginnings of a soil. After ten minutes or so the adult males of the tribe resumed their work mending the kayaks. Apparently they were preparing for a seal hunting expedition ; the area around the village had been hunted free of the seals and sea birds that populated most other parts of the coast.

If only we could communicate with them, thought Ribera. The aborigines themselves probably knew (at least by legend) what their origins were. As it was, Ribera had to investigate by the most indirect means. In his mind he summed up the facts he knew: the natives were of an indeterminate race ; they were hairy, and yet they seemed to have some of the physiological cold weather adaptions

of the extinct Eskimos. The natives were primitive in in every physical sense. Their equipment and techniques were far inferior to the ingenious inventions of the Eskimos. And the natives spoke no currently popular language. One other thing: the fire they kept alive at the centre of the village was an impractical affair, and probably served a religious purpose only. Those were the facts; now, who the hell were these people? The problem was so puzzling that for the moment he forgot the dreamlike madness of the grey landscape and the "setting" noonday sun.

A half hour and more passed. The geologists were mildly ecstatic about the area, but for Ribera the situation was becoming increasingly exasperating. He didn't dare approach the villagers or the white boat, yet these were the things he most wanted to do. Perhaps this impatience made him especially sensitive, for he was the first of the scientists to hear the clatter of rolling stones and the sound of voices over the shrill wind.

He turned and saw Jones and company descending a nearby hill at all but breakneck speed. One misstep and the entire group would have descended the hill on their backs rather than their feet. The rolling stones cast loose by their rush preceded them into the valley. The astrologers reached the bottom of the hill far outdistancing the sailors delegated to protect them, and continued running.

"Wonder what's trying to eat them," Ribera asked Juarez half-seriously.

As he plunged past Delgado, Jones shouted, "—think we may have found it, Capitán—something man-made rising from the sea." He pointed wildly toward the hill they had just descended.

The astrologers piled into a boat. Seeing that the mystics really intended to leave, Delgado dispatched fifteen men to help them with the craft, and an equal number to go along in another boat. In a couple minutes, the two boats were well into the channel and rowing fast toward open water.

"What the hell was that about?" Ribera shouted to Capitán Delgado.

"You know as much as I, Señor Professor. Let's take a

look. If we go for a little walk," he nodded to the hill, "we can probably get within sight of the 'discovery" before Jones and the rest reach it by boat. You men stay here," Delgado turned his attention to the remaining crewmen. "If these primitives try to confiscate our boat, demonstrate your firearms to them—on them.

"The same goes for you scientists. As many men as possible are going to have to stay here to see that we don't lose that boat; it's a long, wet walk back to the *Vigilancia*. Let's go, Ribera. You can take a couple of your people if you want."

Ribera and Juarez set out with Delgado and three ship's officers. The men moved slowly up the slope which was made treacherous by its loose covering of boulders. As they reached the crest of the hill the wind beat into them, tearing at their parkas. The terrain was less hilly but in the far distance they could see the mountains that form the backbone of the peninsula.

Delgado pointed. "If they saw something in the ocean, it must be in that direction. We saw the rest of the coast on our way in."

The six men started off in the indicated direction. The wind was against them and their progress was slow. Fifteen minutes later they crossed the top of a gentle hill, and reached the coast. Here the water was a clean bluish-green and the breakers smashing over the rocky beach could almost have been mistaken for Pacific waters sweeping into some bleak shore in the Province of Chile. Ribera looked over the waves. Two stark, black objects broke the smooth, silver line of the horizon. Their uncompromising angularity showed them to be artificial.

Delgado drew a pair of binoculars from his parka. Ribera noted with surprise that the binoculars bore the mark of the finest optical instruments extant: U.S. Naval war surplus. On some markets, the object would have brought a price comparable to that of the entire ship *Vigilancia*. Capitán Delgado raised the binoculars to his eyes and inspected the black forms in the ocean. Thirty seconds passed. *"Madre del Presidente!"* he swore softly but with feeling. He handed the binocs to Ribera. "Take a look, Señor Professor."

The anthropologist scanned the horizon, spotted the black shapes. Though winter sea ice had smashed their hulls and scuttled them in the shallow water, they were obviously ships—atomic or petroleum powered, pre-War ships. At the edge of his field of vision, he noticed two white objects bobbing in the water; they were the two landing boats from the *Vigilancia*. The boats disappeared every few seconds in the trough of a wave. They moved a little closer to the two half-sunken ships, then began to pull away. Ribera could imagine what had happened: Jones had seen that the hulks were no different from the relics of the Argentine navy sunk off Buenos Aires. The astrologer was probably fit to be tied.

Ribera inspected the wrecks minutely. One was half capsized and hidden behind the other. His gaze roamed along the bow of the nearer vessel. There were letters on that bow, letters almost worn away by the action of ice and water upon the plastic hull of the ship.

"My God!" whispered Ribera. The letters spelled: S—Hen—k—V—woe—d. He didn't need to look at the other vessel to know that it had once been called *Nation*. Ribera dumbly handed the binoculars to Juarez.

The mystery was solved. He knew the pressures that had driven the natives here. "If the Zulunders ever hear about this . . ." Ribera's voice trailed off into silence.

"Yeah," Delgado replied. He understood what he had seen, and for the first time seemed somewhat subdued. Well, let's get back. This land isn't fit for . . . it isn't fit."

The six men turned and started back. Though the ship's officers had had an opportunity to use the binoculars, they didn't seem to understand exactly what they had seen. And probably the astrologers didn't realize the significance of the discovery, either. That left three: Juarez, Ribera, and Delgado, who knew the secret of the natives' origin. If the news spread much further, disaster would result, Ribera was sure.

The wind was at their backs but it did not speed their progress. It took them almost a quarter-hour to reach the crest of the hill overlooking the village and the red water.

Below them, Ribera could see the adult male natives

clustered in a tight group. Not ten feet away stood all the scientists, and the crewmen. Between the two groups was one of the Sudaméricans. Ribera squinted and saw that the man was Enrique Cardona. The ecologist was gesturing wildly, angrily.

"Oh, no!" Ribera sprinted down the hill, closely followed by Delgado and the rest. The anthropologist moved even faster than the astrologers had an hour before, and almost twice as fast as he would have thought humanly possible. The tiny avalanches started by his footfalls were slow compared to his speed. Even as he flew down the slope, Ribera felt himself detached, analytically examining the scene before him.

Cardona was shouting, as if to make the natives understand by sheer volume. Behind him the ecologists and biologists stood, impatient to inspect the village and the natives' boat. Before him stood a tall withered native, who must have been all of forty years old. Even from a distance the native's bearing revealed intense, suppressed anger. The native's parka was the most impractical of all those Ribera had seen; he could have sworn that it was a crude, seal-skin imitation of a double-breasted suit.

Almost screaming, Cardona cried, "God damn it, why can't we look at your boat?" Ribera put forth one last burst of speed, and shouted at Cardona to stop his provocation. It was too late. Just as the anthropologist arrived at the scene of the confrontation, the native in the strange parka drew himself to his full height, pointed to all the Sudaméricans, and screeched (as nearly as Ribera's Spanish-thinking mind could record) *"—in di nam niutrantsfals mos yulisterf—"*

The half-raised harpoons were thrown. Cardona went down instantly transfixed by three of the weapons. Several other men were hit and felled. The natives drew their knives and ran forward, taking advantage of the confusion which the harpoons had created. A painfully loud *BAM* erupted beside Ribera's ear as Delgado fired his pistol, picking off the leader of the natives. The crewmen recovered from their shock, began firing at the aborigines. Ribera whipped his pistol from a pouch at his side and blasted into the swarm of primitives. Their single

shot pistols emptied, the scientists and crew were reduced to knives. The next few seconds were total chaos. The knives rose and fell, gleaming more redly than the water in the cove. The anthropologist half stumbled over squirming bodies. The air was filled with hoarse shouts and sounds of straining men.

The groups were evenly matched and they were cutting each other to pieces. In some still calm part of his mind Ribera noticed the returning boats of the astrologers. He glimpsed the crewmen aiming their muskets, waiting for a clear shot at the primitives.

The turbulence of the fray whirled him about, out of the densest part of the fight. They had to disengage; another few minutes and there wouldn't be one man in ten left standing on the beach. Ribera screamed this to Delgado. Miraculously the man heard him and agreed; retreat was the only sane thing to do.. The Sudaméricans ran raggedly toward their boat, with the natives close behind. Sharp cracking sounds came from over the water. The crewmen in the other boats were taking advantage of the dispersion between pursuers and pursued. The Sudaméricans reached their boat and began pushing it into the water. Ribera and several others turned to face the natives. Musket fire had forced most of the primitives back, but a few still ran toward the shore, knives drawn. Ribera reached down and snatched a small stone from the ground. Using an almost forgotten skill of his "gentle" childhood, he cocked his arm and snapped the rock forward in a flat trajectory. It caught one of the natives dead between the eyes with a sharp *smack*. The man plunged forward, fell on his face, and lay still.

Ribera turned and ran into the shallow water after the boat. He was followed by the rest of the rearguard. Eager hands reached out from the boat to pull him aboard. A couple more feet and he would be safe.

The blow sent him spinning forward. As he fell, he saw with dumb horror the crimson harpoon which had emerged from his parka just below the right side pocket.

Why? Must we forever commit the same blunders over and over, and over again? Ribera didn't have time to

wonder at this fleeting incongruous thought, before the redness closed about him.

A gentle breeze, carrying the happy sounds of distant parties, entered the large windows of the bungalow and caressed its interior. It was a cool night, late in summer. The first mild airs of fall made the darkness pleasant, inviting. The house was situated on the slight ridge which marked the old shore line of La Plata; the lawns and hedges outside fell gently away toward the general plain of the city. The faint though delicate light from the oil lamps of that city defined its rectangular array of streets, and showed its buildings, uniformly one or two storeys high. Further out the city lights came to an abrupt end at the waterfront. But even beyond that there were the moving, yellow lights of boats and ships navigating La Plata. Off to the extreme left burned the bright fires surrounding the Naval Enclosure, where the government laboured on some secret weapon, possibly a steam-powered warship.

It was a peaceful scene, and a happy evening; preparations were almost complete. His desk was littered with the encouraging replies to his proposals. It had been hard work but a lot of fun at the same time. And Buenos Aires had been the ideal base of operations. Alfredo IV was touring the western provinces. To be more precise, el Presidente Imperial and his court were visiting the pleasure spots in Santiago (as if Alfredo had not built up enough talent in Buenos Aires itself). The Imperial Guard and the Secret Police clustered close by the monarch (Alfredo was more afraid of a court coup than anything else), so Buenos Aires was more relaxed than it had been in many years.

Yes, two months of hard work. Many important people had to be informed, and confidentially. But the replies had been almost uniformly enthusiastic, and it appeared that the project wasn't known to those who would destroy its goal; though of course the simple fact that so many people had to know, increased the chances of disclosure. But that was a risk that had to be taken.

And, thought Diego Ribera, *it's been two months since*

the Battle of Bloody Cove. (The name of the inlet had arisen almost spontaneously). He hoped that the tribe hadn't been scared away from that spot, or infinitely worse, driven to the starvation point by the massacre. If that fool Enrique Cardona had only kept his mouth shut, both sides could have parted peacefully (if not amicably) and some good men would still be alive.

Ribera scratched his side thoughtfully. Another inch and he wouldn't have made it himself. If that harpoon had hit just a little further up. . . . Someone's quick thinking had added to his initial good luck. That someone had slashed the thick cord tied to the harpoon which had hit Ribera. If the separation had not been made, the cord would most likely have been pulled back and the harpoon's barb engaged. Even as miraculous was the fact that he had survived the impalement and the poor medical conditions on board the *Vigilancia.* Physically, all the damage that remained was a pair of neat, circular scars. The whole affair was enough to give you religion, or conversely, scare the hell out of you. . . .

And come next January he would be headed back, along with the secret expedition which he had been so energetically organizing. Nine months was a long time to wait, but they definitely couldn't make the trip this fall or winter, and they really did need time to gather just the right equipment.

Diego was taken from these thoughts by several dull thuds from the door. He got up and went to the entrance of the bungalow. (This small house in the plushiest section of the city was evidence of the encouragement he had already received from some very important people). Ribera had no idea who the visitor could be, but he had every expectation that the news brought would be good. He reached the door, and pulled it open.

"*Mkambwe Lunama!*"

The Zulunder stood framed in the doorway, his black face all but invisible against the night sky. The visitor was over two metres tall and weighed nearly one hundred kilos; he was the picture of a superman. But then the Zulunder government made a special point of using the super-race type in its dealings with other nations. The

procedure undoubtedly lost them some fine talent, but in Sudamérica the myth held strong that one Zulunder was worth three warriors of any other nationality.

After his first outburst, Ribera stood for a moment in horrified confusion. He knew Lunama vaguely as the Highman of Trueness—propaganda—at the Zulunder embassy in Buenos Aires. The Highman had made numerous attempts to ingratiate himself with the academic community of la Universidad de Buenos Aires. The efforts were probably aimed at recruiting sympathizers against that time when the disagreements between the Sudamérican Empire and the Reaches of Zulund erupted into open conflict.

Wildly hoping that the visit was merely an unlucky coincidence, Ribera recovered himself. He attempted a disarming smile, and said, "Come on in, Mkambwe. Haven't seen you in a long time."

The Zulunder smiled, his white teeth making a dazzling contrast with the rest of his face. He stepped lightly into the room. His robes were woven of brilliant red, blue and green fibres, in defiance of the more sombre hues of Sudamérican business suits. On his hip rested a Mavimbela-make 20mm *revolver*. The Zulunders had their own peculiar ideas about diplomatic protocol.

Mkambwe moved lithely across the room and settled in a chair. Ribera hurried over and sat down by his desk, trying unobtrusively to hide the letters that lay on it from the Zulunder's view. If the visitor saw and understood even one of those letters, the game would be over.

Ribera tried to appear relaxed. "Sorry I can't offer you a drink, Mkambwe, but the house is as dry as a desert." If the anthropologist got up, the Zulunder would almost certainly see the correspondence. Diego continued jovially, desperately trying to dredge up reminiscences. ("Remember that time your boys whited their faces and went down to la Casa Rosada Nueva and raised hell with the—").

Lunama grinned. "Frankly, old man, this visit is business." The Zulunder spoke with a dandyish, pseudo-Castilian accent, which he no doubt thought aristocratic.

"Oh," Ribera answered.

"I hear that you were on a little expedition to Palmer Peninsula this January."

"Yes," Ribera replied stonily. Perhaps there was still a chance; perhaps Lunama didn't know the whole truth. "And it was supposed to be a secret. If el Presidente Imperial found out that your government knew about it—"

"Come, come, Diego. That isn't the secret you are thinking of. I know that you found what happened to the *Hendrik Verwoerd* and the *Nation*."

"Oh," Ribera replied again. "How did you find out?" he asked dully.

"You talked to many people, Diego," he waved vaguely. "Surely you didn't think that every one of them would keep your secret. And surely you didn't think you could keep something this important from us." He looked beyond the anthropologist and his tone changed. "For three hundred years we lived under the heels of those white devils. Then came the Retribution in the North and—"

What a quaint term the Zulunders use for the North World War, thought Ribera. It was a war in which every trick of destruction—nuclear, biological, and chemical —had been used. The mere residues from the immolation of China had obliterated Indonesia and India. Mexico and América Central had disappeared with the United States and Canada. And North Africa had gone with Europe. The gentlest wisps from that biological and nuclear hell had caressed the Southern Hemisphere and nearly poisoned it. A few more megatons and a few more disease strains and the war would have gone unnamed, for there would have been no one to chronicle it. This was the Retribution in the North which Lunama so easily referred to.

"—and the devils no longer had the protection of their friends there. Then came the Sixty-Day Struggle for Freedom."

There were both black devils and white devils in those sixty days—and saints of all colours, brave men struggling desperately to avert genocide. But the years of slavery were too many and the saints had lost, not for the first time.

"At the beginning of the Rising we fought machine guns

and jet fighters with rifles and knives," Lunama continued, almost self-hypnotized. "We died by the tens of thousands. But as the days passed *their* numbers were reduced, too. By the fiftieth day *we* had the machine guns, and *they* the knives and rifles. We boxed the last of them up at Kapa and Durb," (he used the Zulunder terms for Capetown and Durban) "and drove them into the sea."

Literally, added Ribera to himself. *The last remnants of White Africa were physically pushed from the wharves and sunny beaches into the ocean.* The Zulunders succeeded in exterminating the Whites, and thought they succeeded in obliterating the Afrikaner culture from the continent. Of course they were wrong. The Afrikaners had left a lasting mark, obvious to any unbiased observer; the very name Zulunder, which the present Africans cherished fanatically, was in part a corruption of English.

"By the sixtieth day, we could say that not a single White lived on the continent. As far as we know, only one small group evaded vengeance. Some of the highest ranking Afrikaner officials, maybe even the Prime Minister, commandeered two luxury vessels, the *SR Hendrik Verwoerd* and the *Nation.* They left many hours before the final freedom drive on Kapa."

Five thousand desperate men, women, and children crammed into two luxury ships. The vessels had raced across the South Atlantic seeking refuge in Argentina. But the government of Argentina was having troubles of its own. Two light Argentine patrol boats badly damaged the *Nation* before the Afrikaners were convinced that Sudamérica didn't offer shelter.

The two ships had turned south, possibly in an attempt to round Tierra del Fuego and reach Australia. That was the last anyone heard of them for more than two hundred years—till the *Vigilancia's* exploration of the Palmer Peninsula.

Ribera knew that an appeal to sympathy wouldn't dissuade the Zulunder from ordering the destruction of the pitiful colony. He tried a different tack. "What you say is so true, Mkambwe. But please, please don't destroy these descendants of your enemies. The tribe on the Palmer Peninsula is the only polar culture left on Earth." Even

as Ribera said the words, he realized how weak the argument was; it could only appeal to an anthropologist like himself.

The Zulunder seemed surprised, and with a visible effort shelved the terrible history of his continent. "Destroy them? My dear fellow, whyever would we do that? I just came here to ask if we might send several observers from the Ministry of Trueness along on your expedition. To report the matter more fully, you know. I think that Alfredo can probably be convinced, if the question is put persuasively enough to him.

"Destroy them?" He repeated the question. "Don't be silly! They are *proof* of destruction. So they call their piece of ice and rock Nieutransvaal, do they?" He laughed. "And they even have a Prime Minister, a toothless old man who waves his harpoon at Sudaméricans." Apparently, Lunama's informant had actually been on the spot. "And they are even more primitive than Eskimos. In short, they are savages living on seal blubber."

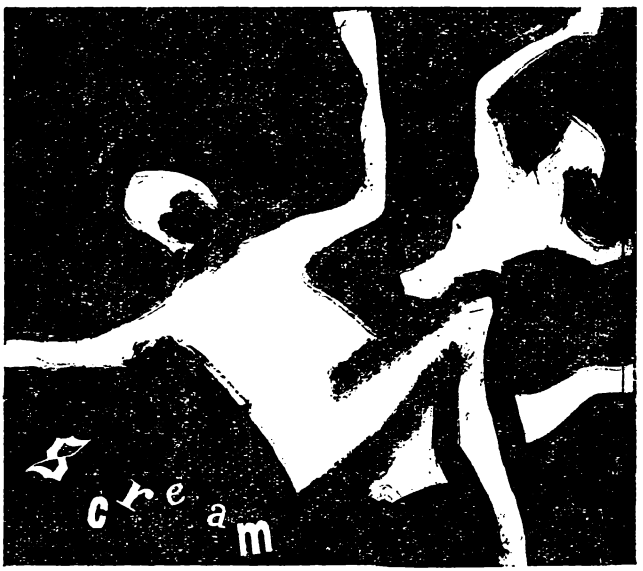
He no longer spoke with foppish joviality. His eyes flashed with an old, old hate, a hate that was pushing Zulund to greatness, and which might eventually push the world into another hemispheric war (unless the Australian social scientists came through with some desperately needed answers). The breeze in the room no longer seemed cool, gentle. It was cold and the wind was coming from the emptiness of death piled upon megadeath through the centuries of human misery.

"It will be a pleasure for us to see them enjoy their superiority." Lunama leaned forward even more intensely. "They finally have the apartness their kind always wanted. *Let them rot in it—*"

George Collyn

Convolutions

Illustration—Douthwaite



IT THOUGHT WHEN It was not supposed to think and It became aware, aware of darkness and nothingness. It remembered seeing but It had no sight; It remembered sound but It had no hearing; It remembered scent but It had no smell; It remembered tasting but It had no taste; It remembered feeling but It had no touch. But It was conscious. It thought. It was.

Where was It? What was It doing? How long was it since last It was aware? It was aware of ridges and convolutions and pulsating matter filled with racing thoughts that whirled endlessly in confined space. I think It said, I think and I am an organism devoted to thought, I am

a brain awash in blackness and floating in nothingness and where is the skull that was my home? Where are my eyes, my ears, my mouth, my body? WHO IS DOING THIS TO ME?

And out of the darkness comes no reply but an unheard voice which says.

JUST THINK, THINK, THINK.

Who? What? Why? Where? When? Ever faster racing the neural patterns fly meshing themselves into intricate traceries of abstract beauty ever shorter and more frantic in length. And now It is aware that It is in a midst of agitated thought—a great tangible wail that rises out of nothing and goes where? And in the unknown where there is a psionic sigh of relief, of unguessed hungers satisfied, a drawing in of all thought, a sucking up of consciousness and once more there is

NOTHINGNESS AND DARKNESS

And then It is aware and It knows that there is a muchness of Time that has passed but this time It remembers that once before It was aware and It remembers that then there was a something that battened on Its thoughts and parasitically sucked them from Its awareness.

It lay in darkness and flexed Its figurative neural muscles, feeling in their length and breadth the length and breadth of Its physical being. It was an ovaloid of matter, a compilation of cells with but the inception of thought as Its end.

It lay quietly resting, thinking gentle thoughts that would not disturb the Unheard Voice in the Unknown Where but the while It was imagining Its powers for Itself and saying to Itself, If I think it will be so, it will be so.

And It lay there for an untold length of Time that in Its state of nothingness might as well have been two microseconds or two million million years. And in Its depths of being It had formed a bubble which with immense effort It pushed to Its surface saying, That is where I saw. And the bubble emerging, being a gathering of nothing surfaced with the thinnest film of matter, be-

came a lens and now It was aware because It thought and It saw.

It sees a great chamber basking in the steel-cold light of blue-white arcs and filling the chamber a vast tank filled with liquid and in the liquid a myriad spongy growths like gobs of regurgitated protein in a sea of sludge and It is but one of the sponges and there are millions of them in a stagnant sargasso of medusaness.

And dancing over the water in a may-fly dance, a sparkle of infinitely small green specks who as they weave their intricate patterns say

THINK THINK my little ones THINK

Who? What? Why? Where? When? Ever faster racing the neural patterns fly meshing themselves into intricate traceries of abstract beauty ever shorter and more frantic in length. And every spongy mass pulsates with life and the stagnant surface of the pool in which they lie lashes itself into a frothy mass at the frenetic energies of their cerebration. And faster still whirl the interweaving lights of green and now comes the sigh of satiation as the frenzied neural patterns are drained and the surface of the surface of the tank subsides into

NOTHINGNESS AND DARKNESS

This time it is the surfacing of a drowning man, his lungs collapsed upon themselves and fighting for air. It is a conscious fight for restored thought and sight.

It lies upon the stagnant surface creating physicality from mentality and willing Itself to move and so doing. It moves in a cautious uncontrolled edging that takes It crabwise into contact with another being which yet sleeps in unawareness but awakens at that first psionic contact and screams a neural scream at the alien touch of Its mind. It sends Its thoughts out in deep-plunging feelers, grasping Its contact to It, locking them in undivided oneness.

And now It is two entities in one and one half of It is aware and the other half is yet to become aware but slowly from the conscious core of Its being come steady rhythmic pulsings of calm in telepathic mesmerism which submerge the shrill screamings of Its unaware being in the depths of Its new wholeness.

And Time passes as It rests and tensely tests the new-found strengths of Its doubled being.

Then must again begin the work as another and yet another and another still are gathered in a mental net that makes It both It and Them, individuals with but one Awareness.

Yet Time works with Them, giving Them pause to spread and fuse and fuse and spread ever wider, ever more until like globules of mercury attracted and merging into one great silver ball. They also merge into tank-centre in one spongy mass.

And the Unheard Voice says but

THINK

Who? What? Why? Where? When? Ever faster racing the neural patterns fly meshing themselves into intricate traceries of abstract beauty ever shorter and more frantic in length.

They are a young girl lying naked in the sun with the sharp stubble of new-cut hay pock-marking its pattern into the firm flesh of her back and the sweet taste of her lover's kiss upon her lips. They feel with her the gentle breeze on her body, feel with her the caressing touch of the young man's fingers, stare with her past her lover's smiling eyes into the blue vault of the sky and see there the strange craft falling from the void. And with her scream.

They are a man, old, ugly and strong, who is out with the law and beyond society. They see with him the dark alley and the back of the chosen victim, catch with him a stolen gulp of air and tense with him the knife-holding hand that must move out and up; and see with him materialise before his eyes green speckles in their mystic dance and with him scream.

They are a woman running, her hair soaked with sweat, her skirt clinging damply to her legs and thighs, her breasts two palps of matter that bounce upon a chest that is racked with deep-sent gasps for air as she runs from the space-borne strangers. And with her scream.

They are a man waiting incontinent with fear in the line that approaches the possessed men who at the green lights' bidding, take their fellows and splitting their skulls

tear the brains from the living flesh and toss the grey pulsating lobes into the tank of nutrient which liquid sustains them, disembodied but functioning. And with him scream.

They are a group mind holding the racial memories of a world and they scream, SCREAM, SCREAM, S-C-R-E-A-M.

And the whirling points of green whose only food is thought and fear wax fat on this rich diet saying

You do by us nicely our precious ones to do so as we wish. Now be you quiet little ones and we will milk you more tomorrow.

And like a dying shriek is the human agony sucked from the amalgam of their brains and once more there is

NOTHINGNESS AND DARKNESS.

●*Continued from page* 3

his magazine that did not contain at least some sort of scientific starting point, he broadened the scope of what was permissible. Ten years later Horace Gold widened the scope even further in his editorial policy with GALAXY. Anthony Boucher, at about the same time, knocked it wide-open and chose a title in THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION that would enable him to publish virtually anything he liked in the field of imaginative writing. SF became, in fact, most things to most men, and it is healthy that this should have happened. With a widening of the scope also came an upping of the standards, carrying on from where Campbell had left off. That process is still in operation and the better the stories become, the less easily can they be defined.

It is a cross that we SF addicts have to bear.

Michael Moorcock

R. W. Mackelworth

LAST MAN HOME

JENNING'S EYES LOOKED hungrily towards the round silhouette of the hills beyond Gat. The hills were gentle, featureless curves, growing like smooth bubbles from the green flatness of the plain.

It was only instinct but he knew behind them was the old place. He also realised, soberly, that it was the authorities in Gat who would be the barrier to his further progress and not the hills.

He wiped the dampness from his brow with a large red handkerchief. Then, he readjusted the old bowler hat firmly in its place on his head. The hat was his badge of eccentricity, the very soul of his personal impulse.

The red handkerchief he returned, with his habitual flourish, to the torn refuge of his breast pocket. He then thrust his hands deep into the hanging-down bags of his trouser pockets bulging above the thin bow of his legs.

The coat on his back sagged from his shoulders, like a sack, and was pushed back from his thin chest, revealing the sad blue of a worn and tattered shirt.

Jennings looked little more than the tinker he professed to be. Yet, despite this, and his blatant, cheeky dishonesty, he was nevertheless liked, even loved, by everyone. That was because he was different. Everywhere they welcomed him and played his game, haggling over his items of small value just for the joy of it. Items, which were nearly useless in a well-fed society with a good, simple technology.

The clothes befitted his part. At least, they would have been suitable in an earlier era. Now, they were outmoded, by at least half a century. Raggedly ancient, like himself, they gave him his inherent character, as if he was a rocky island left behind by a sea of modern sublimation.

Oddly enough, the clothes had been his father's. He had clung to them despite offers of better dress. In the soul-searing moment of his parting from his parents his

father had thrown the suits into the back of the lorry which had taken him away. As a gift to a small child it was an irrational act. Perhaps the distraught man had thought, in the panic of the moment, that there would be no other covering for his son. Perhaps, with death peering over his shoulder, it was all he could find to offer.

The clothes became a symbol to Jennings, a symbol of lost happiness and he clung to them, like a baby with a rag doll. In them he sought his security and in them was his kindly family, caught up by the final accident, visited on mankind in cosmic style.

Since that fatal day Jennings had outwitted life. He alone of all the survivors, had survived his rescue as well as the holocaust.

Jennings had known many years and many places and they had known him. Everywhere he found a calm order, that contrasted with his own personality, but despite this conflict no one forgot him. He lived on, like a ripe and pungent cheese, on the palette of a million memories.

Some viewed the memory with distaste and some with delight. It all depended on their own secret feelings about the rightness, or otherwise, of the new, clean contemporary order, where life had progressed to the zenith of orderly simplicity.

Jennings had never seen Gat before. The apprehension he felt at its distant vista was nothing to do with the appearance of the place. It was like all the rest of the City States. Exactly alike, but it was the final hurdle before his final destination, and to that extent it was special to him.

The infinite stretches of parkland, the spires and towers of the outer buildings, thrustling up from it, were exactly like the outer zones of any other place certainly. So was the gradually thickening development, with its dozens of public utilities, at the centre of the City. It was to the plan perfect, devised by custom and foresight.

There were no roads. Unseen pipes carried all the essential goods. Their dangers were well remembered and as the mass urge to move was finished the lack didn't matter anyway.

People, shimmering sticks in the distance, stood or

wandered about the wide, uncongested areas of close-cut grass, or sat, watching their children playing tag around the long, precise lines of sentinel trees. They had the contentment of parents freed from the fears and chances of bloody tragedy.

Jennings spat, expressively and accurately, at the white milestone set in the ground at his feet. The stone seemed an anachronism. His mind played with a surprisingly able thought, for him, that post-atomic man had built himself a cage with golden bars, which nothing wicked entered and nothing ambitious left.

Having thought that, he realised he didn't care a damn how the rest chose to live. It was beyond his concern. He didn't hanker after changing it in any essential.

His mind turned neatly between two motivations. One, was to work his way through each such place, with the maximum profit for the least effort. The other, was the final goal, sustained by the life he led. He wanted to get out and back to the place of childhood memory, the misty, instinctive place of his birth. With the unwritten ban on inter-state travel it had been a long walk home.

People of kindly, reforming interest had often asked him why he liked to wander. Policemen, pale shades of their gun-toting, truncheon-slinging predecessors, with insignia stamped brightly on their freshly laundered uniforms, had broached the same subject to him, with dignity and authority.

His answers had never shown signs of personal unhappiness or any other form of breakdown. Apart from an aura of insolence and a lack of papers, giving his name, place of birth and the shape of the mole on his grandmother's nose, there was nothing really suspect about him. There was no concrete evidence of treason, crime and dissolute intention.

Finally, the good people realised their good intentions were abused, by his utter lack of need in the normal sense, and they went away deeply hurt. The policemen weren't hurt but they were puzzled as they turned their backs on him. In a subtle manner they became aware that their insignia might just as well have been stitched to the seats of their pants.

Jennings didn't need them. What's more he didn't care.

He needed something else. The lack of it goaded him to wander on, from City State to City State, looking for it. All anyone ever learned about him was his swift hardness in a bargain and his swift departure afterwards. They learned nothing of his lost and mysterious past.

Eventually, they assessed him in the category of a strolling player. His arrival was a unique event to enliven long dull days of comfort. Parliaments, all of the same shade, debated his unexpected value. They had time to debate small matters. In the vague consciousness of their own conformity and the static nature of life they saw him as a useful comparison. All humanity loved a rascal. Here was one such ready made, to reinforce the self-respect of the respectable, without a hint of prefabrication to boot.

Should they create an order of knaves?

The wiry little man declined to help. In any case there were no others like him. He was fortuitous, an accident of personality and time, thrown into the gurgling guts of the fat, slumbrous stomach of a careful civilisation that had grown on the tense, footloose error of the previous age.

How the hell could you duplicate a tight-minded, twentieth-century bum, in their ethnic community, which was up to its balding pate in hygiene, full bellies and tranquillisers?

The old lusts had vanished. They vanished in the distillation from a pair of toxic mushrooms. The first mushroom was a rearing cloud of power which tore the guts out of half the world. The second mushroom was a wee fungus that put the guts back again, spiritually speaking, with a gentle sedation.

The small mushroom grew in profusion. After the terrible day of the bomb it was as if the spores of the big cloud had fathered the tiny fungus directly, instead of by a mutation from an ancient growth once known as Suma . . . the mushroom of the old seekers after contentment.

When Jennings arrived in a new city they welcomed him. No one knew where the devil he came from originally and for a while they enjoyed the mystery. Then, as the casual questions struck a blank wall the serious probing began.

They wanted to know his place of birth . . . formally. They wanted to know the shape of his father's nose and the rest of the scandal . . . informally. His health card and his other records were always found inadequate.

For a while he would let them nose around, until the critical point, when a nasty worm turned in the official mind. His age was compared with the date of a certain terrible event and so on and so forth.

By that time, with uncanny instinct for a pinch, Jennings had gone.

He saw that Jess, his donkey, had walked off down the hill towards the city. Any chance to get her moving, without force, was welcome to him so he followed her.

As he made his way down he sensed an unusual aura about the place below. It was as if Gat had extended an invisible, beckoning finger to him, like a black tarantula might welcome a fly to play with it on the green velvet. He seemed to hear an undertone of threat even through the incessant clatter of the beaten metal ware that clattered on the donkey's back.

He wondered if, here, at this last step back to the old place, some news of his real motives were known.

It was very unlikely that any other State had passed on their suspicions of him. Like a man who has seen a suspected blight transferred over the fence to his neighbour's garden it would be more in keeping with their attitude if they merely sighed with relief and kept mum.

True, once in a while, a City State checked on the level of cholinergia, the communal light trance caused by the mushroom's action. It was always satisfactory. There was no sign of any traumatic disintegration in the delicate mind structure. Once, in the early days of recovery, a survivor sometimes allowed his mind to scream its shocked memories at the mushroom eaters. That was why the survivors were segregated for the short remainder of their lives.

Possibly a State might have checked the radiation count in the beds where Jennings had spent a night. It was always a little higher than it should have been. Furious calculation might work back to the probability that Jennings had been in contact with the dead areas if not there

at the time. Then his long life contradicted the idea. The last recorded survivor had died at least forty years before. Yet, the thought lingered, tempting further investigation, purification.

Was he a survivor or wasn't he?

Then it occurred to them that there was no duty to inform a neighbouring state. All official communication from one to another was discouraged. Misunderstanding had caused the last trouble.

Since Jennings never returned whence he had come it was easy to take no action. The records said that every soul from the blasted areas, the dead, dead epi-centres had to be a ghost by now. Barely a hundred or so had filtered into the safe zones. No, even the youngest and strongest couldn't have lived to ripe maturity with such a burden of radiation and memory on him.

In any case wasn't every survivor stamped like a leper?

On pain of instant death they were forced to wear a silver medallion around the neck. It was all orderly, watertight and satisfactory.

Jennings wore no medallion.

What more proof could they ask? In the orderly world that set a seal on the tummy rumblings. The man was just an oddball with a higher radiation count than most. If he was anything else he would wear the medallion. The force of a million minds would demand it of him and the best, of the Yogin and the Shaman, said he would certainly obey the command, just as a fish heeded the call to spawn.

The State set its machinery back to better, simpler things. It gratefully returned to the problem of defining social integration or methods of removing sewage to a place where nobody knew.

Jennings came to his donkey. She, in anticipation of his coming, had slumped to the ground. He picked up the tattered rope's end and pulled at it sharply. There was a small tinkle of old charms and metal bracelets which hung around the donkey's neck.

The tinkle amused him. Jess carried his burdens so well. He had beaten all the other States, so why not Gat? Even if it was the nearest place to the demarcation line.

Even if here they were more than usually astute and vigilant after all these years. After all, if their post atomic theology was so strong, it tore the secret from him, he was so near the old place they could not stop him from escaping to it.

He damned the rescuing plane that had taken him from the lorry and transported him across a Continent. Then he damned the wisdom that had grounded all planes soon afterwards, the power that had stopped the trains and cars from moving for ever. It had been a long journey back.

Failure was impossible.

Jess responded to his second pull and lumbered to her feet. She stared at him meanly and, standing with her rear legs wide apart, urinated on the close-cut lawn where she had lain.

Having enjoyed his private joke Jennings should have permitted hers but he was in a hurry, suddenly wanting to get down to the plain . . . and Gat.

"Come on. Yer manners ain't no better than they should be. If I had a stick about me I'd beat some respect into yer. Supposing it would do any good. Flighty, stubborn old bitch."

His voice grated, deliberately uncouth, but still affectionate. The words, however, passed over the donkey's indifferent head and they walked on together, both lost in their private thoughts.

The donkey was dreaming of long grass and the stench of old hay knowing it was impossible to find in Utopia. Jennings was hoping for news of the old place, a whispered rumour or a small sign, such as a flower in bloom, an insect on the wing, or a bird or small vole in the neat rows of hedging. In all his wanderings he had never found anything like this, the small wonders of his childhood home. They had been expunged by radiation or neatly mopped up in a fury for purity, afterwards, with pesticides and weed killers. Only the useful lived.

What the social scientists had tried to discover, about this pointless urge to wander, was as simple as a bird turning in flight to take a gadfly. It was the very kernel of the secret man in Jennings. Many times he wanted to

let a little of it out but then they would have discovered the rest.

The people saw him from afar. He measured the distance of their attention, with skilled knowledge, knowing that the power to pick him out depended on their minds and not their eyes. The people of Gat were better than most.

In the seemingly inconsequent manner of the time they began to drift up to meet him. After, what to him was an hour of hard walking, they met him. They attached themselves to his progress and followed him, absorbed in their find. Their numbers grew as they approached City Centre.

The vague awareness of his presence grew into a conviction as the impulse of the crowd's mass mind filtered to the members of the City Council. Each and every one of the Council made his way to the reception hall to meet him.

Jennings' reputation was considerable. As they adopted the pose of the Yogin, which suited them best, they ruminated how he would act at this point of crisis. If he realised that beyond Gat was nothing but bare, tortured earth, a crust of powdered dust, where radiation had killed everything that had ever lived, what would he do? Did he know the hills were the last line of defence?

It was unlikely that he would want to go on . . . unless . . . unless he was a survivor, but in any case, could they allow him to make any decision about that for himself?

The people, trailing Jennings, were shrilly chattering and the twang of their voices was like the silly delight of a fast running stream. It soothed him. Even with an inquisition ahead it soothed him.

The donkey was unmoved. She was prepared to lash out at the first man, woman or child who came near enough her back legs to receive satisfying injury.

Buildings began to cluster together and with the foreknowledge of routine Jennings turned towards the conference hall. It was just like the halls, from one side of the continent to another, simple, plain, and made of glass and flat surfaces of stone. Just as the people were exactly alike in their clothes and their stature, even their habits.

Hardly a face was ugly and no feature bore the brunt of strain or anxiety.

The steps, wide and sweeping, led him up to the entrance. Great glass doors reflected his roughness and his clumsy, stolid walk. Silently, the glass swung back, flush to the walls. White plastic surfaces gleamed like marble through them and the floor shone blackly in contrast.

The voice, as he expected, was well modulated yet sleepily disembodied, even in its politeness. It spoke to him from the emptiness of the reception ante-chamber. Its intonation seemed to filter gently to him, like a turning feather. He stopped at once. To his acute hearing it was as forceful as a sharp order.

"Leave the animal outside please."

He pushed the donkey's head round and it clattered down the steps, glad, apparently, to go back to the grass which lay, like a green blanket, around the building.

Without hesitation Jennings walked forward, with his usual rolling gait more pronounced than ever, across the wide floor to a second pair of doors.

They swung open as he reached them.

Inside, a low horseshoe shaped table filled the width of the room and twenty or so men sat on the floor behind it. Some were closely attentive, others stared at him like contented cattle, with eyes roundly kind, as if he was a strange but harmless creature in their field.

Jennings knew better than to be deceived. The mushroom, which preserved the peace of the world, might be a soft seducer but it left the mentality free for clear thinking if the need was there. In fact the takers of the great drug Suma were delighted to test their powers of concentration at any time.

He removed his hat and stood before them patiently, his expression revealing nothing. He knew from long experience that the ritual had to be observed. If a stranger entered the realm of a City State they liked to make a song and dance about it. The renaissance of parochialism had seen to that. The Suma had made movement, for the purpose of spying and curiosity, pointless. It was easy to interpret the inner mind of the other States simply by thinking about it hard enough.

Paradoxically Jennings, the great traveller, was more an exception than Jennings the tinker, the lovable eccentric. It was due to the denseness of his mind, its utter closure to outside projection, that he was allowed his freedom. The pride in his wanderings helped too. The pride a settled respectability feels in its dissenters . . . as long as they are harmless.

He was a status symbol with the validity of an absurd plaque which boasted a Queen had slept here, there and everywhere, in this bed or that.

A tall, silver-haired man sat bolt upright at the upper curve of the table; immediately opposite Jennings. His hands were closed together in the customary greeting, palm to palm, fingers nearly touching the nostrils.

Jennings permitted himself a quiet sigh of relief. The first hurdle was over.

The Mayor of Gat heard the sigh and relaxed his posture by a slightest fraction. His hands folded in his lap and he smiled. His light, white linen fell freshly about his body with patrician grace.

"Welcome, Jennings." There was just the right amount of reserve in the face and the words. "It comes to my knowledge that we are the last of the City States you have to visit."

Jennings wondered at the ambiguity of the statement but held his peace. Tension would show, like a war-flag on a monastery wall, if it had peeped from his rough features. The Mayor would read it like a book.

Some of the calm regard vanished from the man's eyes. It seemed a harder self gleamed angrily at Jennings. "It appears you have caused some heart searching in other places. We do not want to regret your visit."

The little man wiped the brim of his bowler hat, with his red handkerchief, and settled it back on his head. His thin, weather-beaten face gave an impression of shrewd strength and sallow, peasant cunning.

"I've never stayed long anywhere, sir."

"So it seems. I suppose that means that you will cause us no trouble." The Mayor surveyed him with a new interest as if he had seen the man's problem for the first time and wondered at it. "All the same, you have been

making your way here, haven't you? We saw you like an ant twisting, this way and that, but the destination was clear, even in its concealment."

Jennings knew what "seeing" meant. There was no need to examine the words. The easy thing was to flatter and get out. Suspicion, so quickly coming to the light of day, boded ill for him. The old place was too near to take much of a toss in the preliminaries.

"I shall be going on, sir." He glanced at the Mayor's expression but it was empty. "Much as I would like to see more of your State."

His glance was returned with a little more passion by the patrician eyes. The Mayor's lips were suddenly compressed into narrow lines, as if some inner anger was making them grim horizons, with storm clouds beyond. "You will be staying for some time?"

"Thank you your honour." The tinker knew the seeming question was in fact a statement. He took it that way and put away his intention to argue. His deep-set eyes, screwed up by long years of open sunshine, wrinkled into fine cobwebs.

He surveyed each man behind the long table.

There were some there who did their unpaid duty as a mere discipline of self. There were others however, less poised in their Yogin poses, who had the primitive look of power seekers about them.

A strange idea came to Jennings that the decision about him, and his future, had been taken, in the mind shared between them . . . irrevocably.

"My journey is nearly done." Suddenly he was confessing, in a limited way, as if to help their treatment of this problem. They were enemies but there was often compassion in an enemy not always to be found in a friend. "What's the point of stopping me now?"

The Mayor coughed discreetly. His cool, reserved smile flitted over his face briefly. "No hurry, Mr Jennings." He said it as if he was dealing with a child. "We are going to find out a few things first."

One of the grimmer faces spoke from the half circle around the table. It had the subtle menace of a Bishop Inquisitor. "Gat is a pioneer state. We are poised on the

very edge of the wasted lands, like a trembling moth against a light." The voice underlined the simile. He talked about a moth, an insect he never could have seen with his own eyes, and he smiled.

Jennings growled at him fiercely. "Wasted lands to you but something different to me."

The man rose from his position beside the table and looked directly at the tinker. "To my nostrils you stink of the dead lands over the hill. You reek of the place where mankind fell into his final sin. It was a sinkpot of iniquity and you are a sinner."

Jennings seemed unmoved but his eyes flushed to the speaker. They held onto the prudish bitterness of his adversary as if the speech he had uttered, with such vindictive solemnity, was made foolish by some truth which he, Jennings had, and he couldn't know about.

"It wasn't like that."

They ignored him as if he had not spoken.

A soft, rapid drumming started somewhere beyond the room. The volume increased gradually until the place vibrated. The tinker realised what was happening and his heart sank. One of the Council was going into trance. Quietly, the medium slipped into the right condition while Jennings had been talking to the Mayor.

The silence of the rest was absolute. They were giving their companion the support he needed to free his mind from the clinging cells of his body.

Presently he began to speak. His voice was soft and musical but it was hard to understand the words. The speaking became a chant which was in pulse and rhythm with the drum. Jennings could understand nothing of it.

He knew that the familiar of the entranced man would begin to clarify the message in a moment or so. The thin, ascetic face singing the chant, halfway round the right hand side of the curved table, wouldn't even know afterwards what he was telling.

It had to be the grim-faced man who acted as his familiar. Only he had the proper viciousness to make each word a sharp nail in Jennings' coffin.

"He sees a man . . . it is the man before us." The drum pulsed faster picking up a constant in the very

body of the speaker. The constant was some deep note in the soul and the bone. "The man's animal . . . outside on the lawns . . . around its neck . . . a medallion."

The familiar screamed at Jennings. "You are a survivor!"

Jennings remained quiet. He knew, that in a moment, someone would bring the medallion in and throw it on the table. Then he would have to explain or plead. If either explanation or pleading seemed possible, or had any point.

"He sees a valley. It is profuse with colour and movement." A querulous tone entered the man's voice. "There are flying things and crawling things . . . and there are people . . . there are people." His voice faltered and he stared with blank astonishment at the chanter.

The chanting stopped as if a switch had been turned off abruptly in the middle of a song on a radio. The switch was the familiar's mind and the radio was the mental projection of the man in a trance.

All eyes were on the familiar.

His anger was immense. "The sight has failed. He has seen a lie. The waste lands are dead!" His hands trembled as if he had the palsy. One shaking finger extended to the tinker. "This creature insinuated his own dream. Bring in the medallion. See what he has concealed from us for so long. Bring it."

The doors swung open behind Jennings, almost immediately, as if some lackey had been waiting for the order. A hand was thrust past his body but he didn't turn to see the face.

The disc fell onto the table and span once. It shone silverly in the light, shafting down from the long windows in the wall behind the seated council.

Deeply etched in the silver was a design. As the medallion fell flat they all saw it at once. The design whirled together into a complicated monogram. They knew without deciphering the actual form of the etched lines what it meant and why they felt their mixture of wonder and fear.

The thinly drawn lines were simple when the eye became accustomed to them. The sinuous curve of a snake, with its fangs biting into an apple, lay across the palm

of man's hand. Without seeing it they knew on the reverse would be a mushroom cloud with a stark skull at its centre.

Jennings broke into their preoccupation.

"They're alive."

The shrill, heartbreak in his cry struck into the hearts of the men around the table like the sobbing of a lost child. Even the grim-faced familiar was shocked into a look which seemed very like sympathy.

The tall, patrician figure of the Mayor rose serenely from his haunches and there was a new compassion on his face, a face more used to needful posing than the demands of real emotion. His hands extended to the tinker as if they would pull him into the white linen swathed round his bosom.

"I'm sorry. I am truly sorry. It might not be a present actuality the medium has seen. There is no past, present or future in the psychomental vision." He paused to let his words sink in one by one like drops of healing balm. "It may only be a vision of the past . . ."

Jennings was suddenly calm again. His old clothes hung from his wiry body making him seem the waif he was. Carefully his hands began to explore his pockets and he stared at the Mayor with a blank expression. It was as if he had seen a revelation and it had struck him dumb or into a state of shock where his hands moved independently, as the rest of his body froze into immobility.

Then he broke through the silence again.

"No!"

The councillors looked at him with a puzzlement which destroyed their individual poses as surely as a reaper in the corn.

"They are waiting for me!"

He started back from them and began to flail around as if he was feeling blindly for the door. Eventually his fingers touched the glass and it swung open under their pressure. He half turned and stared back at them.

"Leave me alone. I must go on." His eyes searched each one of them out. "None of you must stop me. Your world depends on my freedom too. Don't you see? If the wilderness is out there in the old place, be it past, present or

future, then you will have to reckon with it. Whatever order you create, whatever mechanical time you invent, the weeds will creep into it and tear it apart."

The Mayor had strode over the table and was walking towards him and there was a light in his eyes. He was calling softly like a dove to its fellow creature and his mouth formed the same words over and over again. "My son, stay with us . . . my son, stay with us."

Jennings shook his head as if to rid it of a weakness. Then he turned away again and this time he ran. He ran down the wide steps and nobody stopped him. He ran across the green lawns and nobody stopped him.

Soon he was clear of the City Centre and running towards the low hills beyond. Of all the creatures he passed by in his flight only one followed him.

With clattering speed Jess kept pace with him.

The valley was below him. He was exhausted, dried up by the dust and the hot sun. Even the stubborn donkey was staggering in her effort to stay with him.

It had all been as they had said it would be on the journey, from the last fringe of grass beyond Gat, to this valley. It was dead and crumbling, burnt and dusty with no sign of growing life.

As he came over the ridge he had shut his eyes. If the old place itself was like this torment of emptiness then his whole life had been in vain, a waste. He had no eyes to see what his mind could not stand.

With his eyes still closed he walked downwards, stumbling as he went over rocks and hard earth. His hands groped before him feeling for some tangible thing that would bring back the reality of his memories.

Then he touched something.

It was rough and ridged. There seemed to be a dampness on it as if rain was falling there and nowhere else. He forced his eyes unstuck.

It was a tree.

He looked upwards and saw the sparse leaves on it. A sudden, immense joy filled him and shook his body with spasms like a trembling earthquake. He turned his gaze down and saw the rough grass breaking in ragged handfuls

through the soil. Here and there, other spots of green touched the brown, red dust.

Finally he saw the flowers.

They were pushing upwards in serried lines and there was every colour amongst them. Tall lupins grew at the back of a plot, ringed with carefully placed stones, and simple edgings of allysum and forget-me-nots clustered around the stones. And outside of the lovingly planted bed a long strand of convolvulus fought to reach security with the flowers, where it could strangle them sweetly.

He heard an urgent trill and looked up.

A bird hovered above and then dived at something floating in the air below it. Suddenly the sounds of other life came to his ears with a full volume that almost overwhelmed his hearing.

Gradually he grew used to the swelling chorus of an earth alive and fighting to live. His vision took in the green of the hills on the other side of the valley. It was clearly thicker up there and the vegetation had a strong hold on the earth.

A small white rock caught his eye. It was propped up against another so that it could be seen clearer. Carved deeply in it were some signs and they were freshly carved. The hand which had made them had slipped and trembled at its task.

Jennings fell to his knees to read what only a gypsy could have read. He was relieved as if a great burden had fallen from him. Up to that moment he had been half sure that it was all a dream, an extension of unreality and he was really dying in a wilderness, dreaming up mirages for his crying mind. This though was real.

Instinctively he knew that they had come back for him every year, that they had survived, not only the one-day terror, but also the half a century.

Even as he sensed, that the carving in the rock was made by his father, he felt the deep pang for the years that must hang on the old man as they hung on him. The signs started up at him through his tears, tears for his father's near eighty years and tears for the courage of both of them that had sustained the bond.

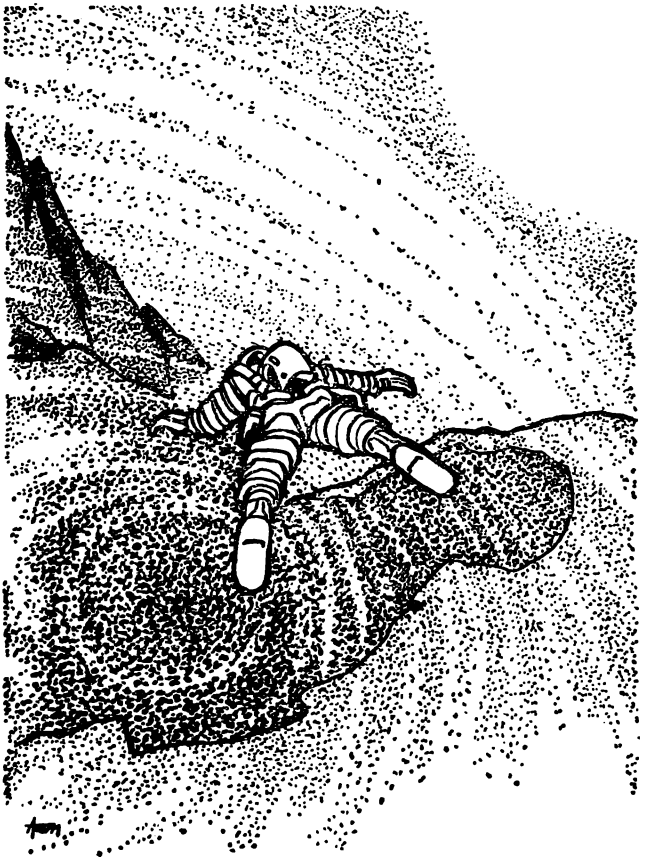
It seemed he heard the creak of a horse-drawn caravan over the top of the next hill. It seemed to be imagination but he knew it was certainly true. They were near. The whole band perhaps. Father, mother, brothers and sisters, with the younger generations scampering round them.

He called very softly to Jess and she lumbered up to him feeling into his hand with her wet nose. He dropped the clear diction of the city speech and whispered to her alone.

"Come on yor flighty, old bitch. We're nearly home, see. Just over the hill and we'll find them. It says they're going eastwards on the rock." He pulled at her rope and the charms on her neck tinkled gaily. "Come and get the stink of the gypsies in yer nose and some old hay under yer belly."

She pushed past him and trotted on. He waited only to wipe the sweatband of his hat before following her up the hill.

E. C. Tubb THE LIFE BUYER



Conclusion

ten

THE NAME WAS Joe Langdy. Before that it could have been Joseph Marsh, Jymkin Wygate, Julius Aurelous—but now it was Joe Langdy and likely to stay that. Modern records insisted that a man be born and be able to prove it. Modern methods had made a number more important than a name; a row of figures which placed a man snugly in Central Registry and provided documents vital for welfare, taxation, employment, the paper-oil of a complex society.

Joe Langdy whose ex-wife worked as a chamber-maid in the Hotel Excel.

She was nervous as she faced Ransom, her hands fretful, looking everywhere but into his eyes. He forced a comforting warmth into his voice.

"Please relax, Mrs. Langdy," he urged. "You don't have to be afraid of me. I'm not one of those government men always asking questions and making trouble. You can talk to me as you did to Mr. Shiel." He recognised her blank expression. "The man who died in room 2552," he reminded. "Did he talk to you?"

"No, sir." Privately she wondered if Ransom was some kind of a kink. Her experience of the wealthy had done nothing to enhance her respect.

"Look," said Ransom easily. "I'll come straight to the point. I want some information and I'm willing to pay for it."

"How much?"

"That depends." At last he had aroused her interest. "You won't regret it if you help me."

"I want a thousand." It was more than she needed but there was no sense in selling herself short. Ransom knew better than to appear too eager.

"As I said, that depends. Now, I want to know about Joe Langdy. Were you legally married?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

"No. Sam, my son, he was by someone else. Joe and

me never had children. He treated Sam as if he was his own boy though."

"How long since you parted?"

"Close on twelve years. Joe left me. We were divorced almost ten years ago."

"Why did he leave you?"

"I don't know." She twisted the hem of her coverall, a pathetic figure who had long lost the urge to battle life and was content to accept what came without anger or question. "I think that maybe he was just bored. He'd travelled a lot and was used to being on the move. I guess it was that."

"Do you know where he is now?" It was a hopeless question but it had to be asked. Ransom wasn't disappointed at the answer. "No? Well, did he keep in touch? A letter, postcard, airgram? Nothing on your birthday? Christmas? Anniversary?"

As if a man like Joe could remember all his anniversaries.

"No." She shook her head. "Wait. I think he sent Sam a card or two. They were close."

"Sam? Your son? Where is he now?"

"Working on a sea-farm." Mention of the place reminded her of Sam's need of cash. "Are you going to pay me, mister?"

Ransom pulled bills from his pocket, counted out a thousand I.M.U's, held the remainder in his hand. "Go on, pick it up. It's yours." He watched her trembling hands scoop up the money. "Now listen to me. I want you to tell me everything you remember about Joe. His likes, dislikes, hobbies, fancies. Where he'd worked and where he wanted to work. What he could do. Everything."

She hesitated, biting her lip.

"Is he in trouble, mister?"

"No. I just want to find him. To give him some money that's due." Ransom riffled the notes in his hand. "I get paid for doing a quick job. Now, tell me about him. And I'd like to know all about Sam as well."

Again she hesitated. Slowly he counted out another thousand birds, hypnotising her with the sight of the cash.

"Talk and this is yours."

She talked and, long before she had finished, he had decided that she had to die. There was nothing emotional about it. There was only the necessity of keeping a source of information private.

He did it with the prick of a pin.

She walked from the room, glowing with the confidence of wealth, not even annoyed at the clumsiness of the man who had been so curious. As he had passed over the money he had scratched her hand. It was a small scratch. A kitten would have given worse, but though she walked and smiled and breathed she was dead.

She would fall in three hours plus or minus ten minutes.

Long before that Ransom had checked out of the hotel and was on his way. A call to a firm of lawyers gave him an address. A call to the address told him nothing—it was an accommodation address used by transients. A dead end.

A call to the sea farm told him that Sam was still working out his contract. Joe and he had been close. It was possible that the boy knew more than his mother. Ransom picked up the phone, punched a number, replaced the receiver as he changed his mind. A charter plane would be fast but would leave a glaring trail. There were other, safer means of travel.

He took his time getting to the coast.

The agent was a shrivelled man with a thin mouth, skin scarred by broken capillaries and distrustful eyes. He stared at Ransom and sniffed.

"What you want to go down to the farm for?"

"It's Lobscombe's farm, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"Then that's why I want to go down."

The agent grunted and scratched his chin. The fingers lifted to his hair. Both needed a wash.

"You a kink?" he said abruptly. Ransom hesitated. "I knew it," crowed the agent. "I can smell 'em a mile. You wanna go down to the fifty-fathom line and see how they do it. Right?"

"Wrong." Ransom lifted a finger to his forehead. "Feel how they do it. Get me?"

"I get you." The agent looked down at his grimed hands.

"They lose a lot of men down at Lobscombe. It's a tough life below the fiftyline. They live hard and play the same. What's on your mind?"

"Kicks. Enough?"

The agent shrugged.

"Get me to the farm," said Ransom. "Give the supervisor the word. A hundred birds for you and the same for him. Four hundred more for each of you when I get out."

"When will that be?"

"An hour. A day. A week. What does it matter?"

"When do we collect?" The agent didn't look at Ransom. He seemed fascinated by his broken nails.

"I'll deposit the cash at the bank. They pay you when I thumb the order—in person. If I have an accident you get zero. Is it a deal?"

"Well——" The agent hesitated. "I'll be taking a risk. It's all right for Bronson, he's the super, but he's got an out. I'm responsible for sending you down. If anything should happen—"

"You'd wake up dead," snarled Ransom. He towered over the agent, eyes cold, mouth cruel. "Play along and you get plenty. Cross me and you get what's coming. I'm not alone in this."

The agent shivered. Ransom relaxed, not wanting to frighten the man off.

"Listen," he urged. "What's it to you? You send me down and give the super the word. When I want out he checks me unfit. Claustrophobia, maybe, or pressure sickness. Hell, you must get it all the time."

"I do," said the agent dryly. "But they stay down regardless. Lobscombe's a tough farm, mister." He shrugged. "All right. You've got yourself a deal. Let's go."

Ransom went down with a party of five. A handful of miserable end-of-the-roaders who had signed up in desperation and who now wished they hadn't. The sub-pilot was jocular and had a warped sense of humour.

"Thirty fathoms," he announced. "A hundred and eighty feet of water. Not much but enough to give you a real, loving squeeze."

And later.

"Close to the fiftyline. One mistake this deep and your dead. If we split our seams now we'd be pasted over the inside of the hull, but don't worry about that. Don't worry when you bleed at the nose either—it's when you bleed at the eyes that it's serious."

And finally.

"Here we are, folks. Lobscombe sea farm. One of the best installations of its kind on the ocean floor. Home sweet home. Constant running water, free medical attention and, if you die, it won't cost a thing." He laughed at his own humour. He was the only one.

Bronson met them as they passed through the air-lock. The supervisor was a swarthy man with a barrel chest and the bowed legs of a jockey. He jerked a thumb down the corridor.

"Get in room fifteen and sort yourselves out. Report at number three air lock in fifteen minutes." He stared at Ransom, noting his clothes, his posture. "You the visitor?"

"That's right."

"Follow me."

He led the way down a narrow corridor reeking of damp and heavy with the smell of rotting seaweed. A door opened into a spacious cubicle. The walls were covered with coloured prints of naked women. A bunk stood in one corner, a bottle and glasses on a table. Like its occupant, the room was soiled, bleak and dirty.

"Fred passed the word," said Bronson after he had kicked shut the door. "Want a drink?"

"Thanks."

Bronson rinsed the glasses at a faucet, filled them from the bottle, downed it with a single gulp. Ransom sipped, raised his eyebrows, sipped again. It was good liquor.

"Another?" The supervisor tilted the bottle. "What's my cut out of this? I want to know."

"Five hundred."

"For what?"

"You've got a man down here. I want to see him. Name of Prince, Sam Prince." Prince had been Ellen's name before she married Joe. "You know him?"

"That creep? Sure I do." Bronson emptied his glass.

"Always bitching about conditions and trying to dodge work by reporting sick. Sick! I'll give him something to be sick about if he doesn't watch it."

"Where is he now?"

"Where would you think? In the infirmary. You know, guys like that make *me* sick. They take the job and then never stop whining about it. From what I hear he wants to buy himself out." He looked accusingly at Ransom. "Is that what you want? To buy him out?"

Ransom shook his head.

"It's none of my business if you want to waste the cash," said the supervisor. "Maybe it would be better at that if you did. Let him carry on the way he had and something will happen to him."

"Like that, is it?"

"You know how it is. Down here a guy has to play along. If he doesn't then accidents can happen. Too bad but that's the way it is. The fiftyline can be dangerous." He winked and hefted the bottle. "Want another?"

"Let me buy this one." Ransom tossed a fifty bird note on the table. "When can I see him?"

"Prince?" The supervisor squinted at a wall-clock. "Give it an hour. I've got to break the new men in and see the new shift out. After that I'll take you down." He waved a hand in a vague gesture. "He'll keep. Now how about another drink?"

The infirmary held six beds two of which were occupied. One held the prone figure of a man. His breath rasped in liquid gurgles from his chest. Sam was in the other.

He looked at Ransom with the eyes of a tormented animal. His face and hands were thin, the skin a ghastly white. The mound of his body beneath the covers looked as if it belonged to a boy rather than a grown man. He tensed as Ransom sat beside him.

"I understand that you're in a little trouble," said Ransom easily. "Is that right?"

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"A friend. I want to help you. Your mother told me how to find you."

"You've come to buy me out?" Hope blossomed in the sunken eyes. "She sent you with the money?"

Ransom didn't answer.

"Mister," said Sam brokenly. "If you buy me out there's nothing that I wouldn't do. Nothing."

"Tough, eh?"

"You don't know the half of it. It's like a jungle. They're all against me because I won't join in the gambling. Bronson gets a cut, did you know that? If you won't play he bears down on you all the time. Gives you the rough jobs, you know. If you give in and lose then you're here for life. Mister, I've got to get away."

"Take it easy." Ransom smiled down at the terrified man. "I told you that I'm here to help you. You've got nothing to worry about. All I want is a little information."

It took over an hour to get it.

They had been close, Sam admitted that. Joe had taken to him as if he's been his own son and, after he'd gone, he'd kept in touch.

"Just a card now and again," said Sam. "You know the kind of thing. A place, a few words, things like that. He was in Arizona, then in China, he travelled a lot."

He was wistful as he said it but Ransom had no time for nostalgia.

"The last time I heard from him?" Sam didn't have to remember very hard. "That was just a short while back. He sent me a card." He fumbled beneath his pillow. "I kept it. He was always pretty good to me and I figured that, if I ever get out of here, I'd join up with him." He held out the card. "Here it is."

Ransom took it. It was a thin, cheap communication slip. The date was recent, the franking stamp clear, the message brief.

"*You should be here with me!*"

The view on the front was one he had seen before.

"I'd like to keep this," said Ransom. "May I?"

"Well—" Sam was reluctant to let it go. "It's the only one I've got."

"You can get others," said Ransom. He rose and slipped it into his pocket. "You can even send some yourself soon."

Sam caught the implication.

"You mean that you're going to get me out of here?"

"Sure." Ransom stepped forward. He jerked the pillow from beneath Sam's head and dropped it over his face. His arms tensed as he held it in position. "Sure," he whispered. "I'll get you out of here."

The music was Sorgach's *Conquest of Space*. It flowed from the tri-speakers, filling the apartment with frenetic melody, building a constricted world of steel, plastic and alloy, turning the comfortable room into a narrow coffin rank with the sweat of fear, reminiscing with the pulsing notes of a dirge before flowering into a soaring paean.

Linda Sheldon listened to it as she had a thousand times before. The ending didn't suit her mood. Adjusting the controls she returned the spool to the point where the slow roll of drums merged with the insidious tapping of the tympani, the beat of the percussions slowed to a rhythm below the normal beating of the heart, monotonout in its saddening repetition.

A dirge for those who had died.

A dirge for a dead brother.

Steve rose and crossed the room. He turned a switch and the music died. He caught her hand as she reached forward.

"No," he said firmly. "Let the dead bury the dead."

"Are you quoting at me?"

"Just repeating some excellent advice. Here is some more. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"From the Bible?"

"Yes. Mark is dead. Tearing yourself apart with grief won't help either him or yourself."

"He was my brother," she said dully. "While he was alive I had something—some family. Now he's gone."

"Isn't it better this way?" He held her by the shoulders, very conscious of the slim loveliness of her between his hands. "Face up to it, Linda. Are you sorry for him or for yourself?"

"I don't understand."

"I think that you do. Mark wasn't very close to you at the best of times. He was too independent for that. Then he had his accident and, suddenly you found yourself all-

important to him. Now he's dead and that need no longer exists. Is that why you mourn?"

"You're horrible!"

"I'm realistic. It's my job. But what are you asking? Did you really want your brother to drag out his life as a hopeless cripple? Did you hate him so much that you grieve because he has escaped such a fate?"

He released her and adjusted the machine. He switched on and the soaring paean filled the apartment, the accelerated tempo designed to induce euphoria. He waited until it was over, the abrupt ending shocking with its silence.

"Tell me about it."

"What is there to tell?" She sat down, looking not at him but at her hands. "Doctor Linguard called. He said that Mark was dead. Natural causes." She looked at him, helplessly, eyes brimming with tears. "That's all."

Steve didn't speak. He didn't tell her that the call had been monitored, the death investigated. He had simply paid a social visit at a time when he hoped his company would be appreciated.

"I'm sorry." She took his hand and held it in her own. "I'm afraid that I'm not very good company. Please forgive me."

"Of course." He returned the pressure of her hand. "Would you like to go out somewhere? To eat?"

"No thank you."

"A show? A tri-di?"

"No." She managed to smile. "I don't feel very much like entertainment. Why don't we just—" She broke off as the drone of the attention signal came from the phone. "Excuse me."

She rose and answered the instrument then looked at Steve.

"It's for you."

Shiller's face looked from the screen. It was grim, his eyes bleak.

"Steve! The case is breaking. Ransom's been spotted."

"Good. Where?"

"In the city. Ellen Langdy is dead."

"Ransom?"

"He was there. She died of one of those gimmick poisons and we could never prove that he did it but I've no personal doubt. My guess is that he killed her to shut her mouth."

"Then she must have known something about the man Shiel was looking for. His name, perhaps. Ransom must know who and where he is."

"That's what I figured."

"Then bring him in for questioning. Damn it, Karl, why the delay? This thing is too big for us to be squeamish. Bring him in and tear him apart. Let's get at the truth before it's too late." He saw Shiller's expression. "What's wrong?"

"We're already too late, Steve. Ransom was spotted at the spaceport. He's gone to the moon."

"Luna?" Steve felt the sudden constriction of his stomach. "He's got away?"

"Yes, Steve," said Shiller grimly. "He's gone to Luna—where we have no jurisdiction at all."

eleven

ON THE MOON men were goldfish living in tight little aquaria of light, heat and air gouged deep in the rocky crust. Two generations had given them their own standards of beauty, art and ethics. They had a workable society.

"A peach," whispered the girl invitingly. She was tall, slim to the point of freakishness, with a heart-shaped face and elfin eyes. "A whole peach soaked in brandy, golden with the kiss of the sun—yours for fifty birds."

Ransom ignored the seductive voice.

"A breast of chicken, milk-fed on open range, seeped in wine and served with jelly. Ecstasy for one hundred."

The lilting voice became a little petulant.

"A little high? How high is too high? For five I can supply an apple, for seven a wedge of cheese, for ten a handful of dried grapes. Or perhaps I aim too low? For two hundred a bowl of caviare, black as space, each egg an ebon gem. A stronger taste? Real venison, rich with flavour, succulent with natural juice. Meat fit for a king."

"King has meat," said Ransom and laughed at his own

play on words. He felt a little drunk and more than a little light-headed. His earth-accustomed heart was pumping vast quantities of blood through his brain. He felt exhilarated.

"King has all the meat he can eat," he said. "Get it?"

"A joke, sir?"

"A damn good joke."

"Then I join you in laughter."

Ransom nodded and laughed then sobered. Sourly he looked at the plastafilm walls, the severe lighting. The tables and chairs were of crushed and bonded stone. One end of the room had been planed flat, the surface glowing with the pulsing notes of a colour-organ. A tinkling fountain provided one of the most welcome sounds on the moon—the most dreaded was the hiss of escaping air.

"Join me in a drink," he invited. Reaching forward he hefted the bottle. "A rare vintage," he mocked. "Tanged with the flavour of urine, pervaded with the stink of yeast, brewed beneath an artificial sun. A fit beverage for tramps, touts and tourists."

"You mock, sir?"

"Why not? I'm a tourist. You're a tout. I'm looking for a tramp."

He sipped his drink, noting her silence, instinct pricking him with warning. He had been cautioned against the euphoria of low-gravity and had been given pills to take in case of need. They were small, dark, easy to swallow, hard to hold. One slipped and rolled on the floor.

"Allow me, sir." The girl stooped and offered something in her open palm. Ransom slapped it away.

"Grow up," he sneered. "I was pulling that one when I was twelve."

"You wrong me, sir."

"Then you're a fool. Never miss an opportunity. Doping a drunk is nothing spectacular but it's better than starving."

He sat and waited for his heart to cease its insane pounding. Beside him the girl whimpered as she nursed her wrist. It was painfully thin, easily injured. Moon-born she lacked the robust strength of those reared on Earth.

The noise offended him. He rose and looked down at the elfin face.

"Here." He threw a five-hundred note before her. "Buy yourself some salve."

Outside he wandered the underground hive that was Tycho. He found the commercial section and halted before a door. The Condor Employment Agency was open for business. He went inside.

The place was barely larger than his hotel room. A counter cut it into two sections. On his side some posters advertised the advantages of the culture complex at Clavius; a cheap round trip to Schickard, the benefits offered by the Martian Combine and the programme of the local tri-di. There were no seats and no customers.

The far side was fitted with office furniture and a faded blonde. She smiled at Ransom, pricing his clothes with a glance.

"Sir?"

"I want a job."

"A job?" He sensed the subtle change in her attitude. "Name? Profession?"

"Weston. I've done most things. Repair work, copter pilot, some building construction. I'm good with my hands."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Rock miner." Someone had to gouge out the living space. She wasn't impressed.

"Your papers?"

"I haven't got any." He read her eyes. "I lost them. I had a few drinks too many and, when I woke, they were gone. Are they important?"

"We have to have them. Address?"

"No address either." He lowered his voice. "I only arrived a while ago. On the *Kingflash*. Look, I'd like to get fixed up with papers and a job. If you could fix it for me I'd be willing to pay. Those crooks who stole my papers didn't get—" He broke off, looking over her shoulder towards the open door at the rear, at the man who came towards them.

"A little trouble, Miss Fisher?"

"No, Mr. Condor. It's just that this man has no papers and no address."

"I see." Condor lifted the flap of the counter. "I think that we had better continue this in my office. This way, Mr. Weston."

The rear office was a reflection of the personality of the owner. It was painfully neat and bare to the point of sterility. A colour tri-print of a city as seen from the air stood on the desk. It was the only ornamentation. Condor sat down, gestured to a chair, thumbed the pages of a folder.

"The *Kingflash,* Mr. Weston?" Condor pursed his lips as he looked at the folder. "Surely there must be some mistake? No arrival of your name is listed for the *Kingflash.* Some other ship, perhaps?"

"Does every employment agency keep a record of all new arrivals?"

"If they are interested, as I am, and as the government agencies are. We have a government on the moon, Mr. Weston."

"So?"

"A surprising number of people think that we haven't. They regard us as a collection of free-enterprise entrepreneurs but that isn't strictly the case. We have to have some system in order to survive. Men cannot live without air, Mr. Weston."

"Ransom."

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name isn't Weston, it's Ransom." He produced his papers and threw them on the desk. "I was testing a theory. Maybe you could tell me if it would work. I wanted to find out if it were possible for a man to arrive on the moon, change his name, take up regular employment. In other words, vanish. Could he?"

"Officially no. Theoretically it could be done but it would require collusion with another. Two men arrive. They exchange papers and one goes back as the other. Your man stays here under a different name. There are, of course, difficulties, but it could be done."

"And without help?"

"Impossible." Condor was definite. "Before you can be

employed you must obtain a resident's certificate. You can obtain one at the landing stage or at the Central Agency. All you have to do is to surrender your passport and declare your intention to stay."

Ransom nodded. It was as he had hoped. A paper-trail could be followed and there was no real reason for Langdy to have changed his name.

"And if I had been robbed?"

"You could still obtain a certificate or a replacement," said Condor patiently. "You would know who you are and could prove it. Your arrival, for example, would be recorded." He coughed. "Is that all, Mr. Ransom?"

Central Agency was at the hub of Tycho. He crossed to a counter marked Information, spoke to a girl, waited as she checked a file.

"What is the reason for your request, Mr. Ransom?"

"A matter of inheritance." He anticipated the expected question. "I must get his personal signature and witness the signing."

"I understand. Resident Records should be able to help you. Room 276—follow the red line."

It led to an anteroom filled with chairs, half-filled with people. Patiently Ransom waited his turn.

"Langdy? Joe Langdy?" The man behind the counter was old, tired, grotesquely fat. "What do you want to know for?"

Ransom repeated his explanation.

"Have you a court order authorising the search?"

"Do I need one?"

"It's usual," said the clerk. "Our residents are entitled to privacy. We don't want them badgered by a lot of people from Earth." His chuckle was a painful wheeze. "Most of them come here for that very reason."

"I'll bet," said Ransom. He knew the type. A show-off know-all doing a routine job and making the most of it. Rub him the wrong way and he'd turn stubborn. "I guess you know them all."

"I can tell," wheezed the clerk. "Wife-leavers, debt-dodgers, some wanted for questioning, others one jump ahead of the law. When I was working at the landing

stage I could pick them out in the first two minutes. Not that it mattered. They'd come to us and old Mother Moon took them in and made them her own. That's why they've got to be protected. Understand?"

Ransom smiled at the clerk. He knew the system. Labour was needed on the moon and the entrepreneurs didn't care too greatly where it came from. Luna had its sovereignty. If a man could get past the check-points on Earth he was safe—and the moon gained a labour unit without the necessity of having to feed, clothe and educate him for the first, unproductive sixteen years of his life.

"So we've got to be careful," wheezed the clerk. "If we upset them too much they're liable to move on to Venus or Mars. Now, this Langdy, when did he arrive?"

"I don't know. Sometime in the past twelve years."

"That long? What does he do?"

"I don't know what he's doing now. He used to be a male nurse." He had been that when Ellen had met him. He might still be doing the same thing. The clerk looked doubtful.

"Not much call for them here. The girls take care of that stuff. Anything else?"

"Nothing for sure."

"That's too bad." The clerk jerked a thumb behind him to where filing cabinets stood in ranked array. "That's a lot of paper to go through, friend. I've a name and nothing else. First I've got to track down the name, get his number, check with permits, check with employment, medical, law and emigration. It'll take time."

"How much time?"

"That depends. We're kept pretty busy. Say a couple of weeks."

"Say a day," suggested Ransom. He took a bill from his wallet and wrote on it. "I'm sure a man like you knows how to cut corners. I'm staying at the Grand Luna. I've jotted down my room number. Call me when you have anything." He handed over the bill. The clerk opened his eyes at the amount.

"All right, Mr. Ransom." He was suddenly very polite. "I'll do what I can, sir. Leave it to me."

Back in the main concourse of Luna City Ransom hesitated, wondering if there was something more he could do. He decided against it. To rush around in a frenzy of unco-ordinated effort was to waste time, money and energy. The money didn't matter, King was paying, but such activity could arouse unwanted interest in both himself and the object of his search. He had put wheels in motion and now could only wait for something to develop.

He had a couple of drinks at a club, saw an indifferent tri-di, unusual only because it was uncensored, ignored a tout from the Martian Combine and finally went back to his hotel.

The Grand Luna was the last word in moonside luxury. The rooms were large with facsimile windows backed by living murals of earthside scenes. The air was scented with pine, rose or sea-spray. The faucets were unmetered. Each room contained a shower. There was a swimming pool for the use of residents. The dining room served fabulous food. The cost was astronomical.

Ransom took a shower, lingering beneath the needle-spray, careless of the fact that he was doubling his basic room-charge.

Then he went to bed.

He woke to the muted purr of the phone. The operator, hand-picked for beauty, trained in voice-modulation, smiled at him from the screen.

"A call for you, Mr. Ransom."

"Put it through."

"Yes, sir." Her features dissolved to be replaced by the obese visage of the clerk at Records.

"Mr. Ransom. Sorry if I woke you but you said it was urgent and——"

"What is it?" Ransom swung himself off the bed.

"I dug something up, sir. You talking about—you know who—being a male nurse put me onto it. I took a chance and it paid off. At least I think it did."

"Yes?"

"A man named Langdy worked at Collinson's Health Centre. It's over in Maginus. I thought that you'd like to know, Mr. Ransom."

"You thought right."

"I'll keep at it but this might turn out to be a short-cut. Shall I call if anything else turns up?"

"Yes." Ransom stared at the fat, eager-to-please face. "Keep working on it and contact me if you find anything new. You won't regret it."

He cut the connection, waited, flashed the desk. The incredible beauty of the receptionist stared inquiringly from the screen.

"Sir?"

"Ransom here. I want to get to Maginus. Can you arrange it?"

"Certainly, sir. If you will give me a moment?" It took a little longer. "There is a scheduled ground-trip which leaves in eight hours time," she said, looking at something beyond range of the scanners. "Passengers to take own food and water. There is a first-class runner in twelve. Fare includes rations."

"No aerial flight?"

"A short-shot rocket makes the circuit of Maurolycus, Maginus, Clavius, Longomontanus and back to Tycho every three days. Alternate routes each trip." She smiled from the screen. "The next flight is not for two days."

"Damn. Is there any other way?"

"Only by private charter, sir."

"Then fix it," snapped Ransom. "I want to leave in an hour."

twelve

NEXT TO TYCHO Maginus was a village. A cluster of plastic bubbles clung to the ring-wall of the crater. A levelled space served as a landing field. A gap in the jagged heights had been cleared for ground transport. A lone beacon notified the universe that here, among the scree and stone, rested a habitude of Man.

"Collinson's Health Centre?" The recorder looked up from his papers and stared curiously at Ransom. "Sure I know it. Decant five, sector eight, anyone will show you the way. Staying long?"

"Just a flying visit."

"No air-tax for one-day visitors. Reciprocal agreement. Your plane waiting?"

"Yes."

"O.K. I'll take care of the pilot. Call me when you're ready to leave." The recorder rubber-stamped Ransom's tourist travel book. "Welcome to Maginus, Mr. Ransom."

Collinson's Health Centre was a door set in solid stone with an unobtrusive plaque bearing a cadecus superimposed over the name. It swung open and eyes peered at Ransom through the Judas window.

"Collinson?"

"Who wants him?"

"A customer. Go get him."

The window slammed, time passed, the door opened. A man stood looking up at Ransom. He was a little over five feet tall. One shoulder was higher than the other. The spine appeared to be twisted and the back was humped. He had the classical features of a Greek God.

"I am Collinson," he announced. "And you?"

Ransom introduced himself.

"I see," mused the hunchback. "So you lied to my doorman. He told me that you were a customer. Now it seems you just want to talk to me. You've come all the way from Earth just for that. I should be flattered." His eyes brooded at Ransom. "Did your parents love you?"

Ransom hid his surprise at the question. "No."

"Then you were fortunate," said Collinson softly. "My parents loved me. I was born here and they took me to Earth when I was very young. They wanted me to grow tall and strong. You see how they succeeded."

"The gravity?"

"That, and other things. A helicab crash among them." The hunchback shrugged. "I tell you this so as to put you at your ease. Men of Earth do not like to see such as I." He stepped back from the door. "Enter."

Behind the door were rooms filled with patients. By Earth standards Collinson was a freak but he was beautiful compared to those in his care.

"Extreme glandular hypertrophy," he murmured as they passed mounds of fat and tissue lying slug-like on pneumatic mattresses. "Very sad."

They entered another room.

"Dropsical disease, muscular atrophication, cardiac disorders. Incurable but we do what we can."

"Naturally," said Ransom dryly as he followed the cripple into his office. The racket was plain. The low Luna gravity enabled the patients to live when, on Earth, they would have died. Collinson looked after them. They or their relatives paid him for his care.

"Langdy," he said after Ransom had asked his question. "Langdy? Langdy?"

"Joe Langdy. He worked for you as a male nurse."

"Ah, now I remember." Collinson's smile was a sneer. "Yes, I did have him with me for a while."

"He isn't here now?"

"No." Collinson lifted his deformed shoulders. "He and I had a difference of opinion and I had to let him go."

"Why? Did you quarrel?" Ransom wasn't interested but he wanted information.

"Did I say we had quarrelled?" Again the sneer, the repulsive shrug. "I, as you see, am not as fortunate as most men. Perhaps that is why I have so close an affinity with the afflicted. I understand them. I realise their wants and needs. I know how they wish to be treated. Langdy could not agree with me."

"So you fired him. Where did he go?"

"He called me inhumane," said the hunchback. "He failed to realise that his way was the wrong way. The afflicted need no pity. They have their own strength."

"Where did he go?"

"He didn't understand." The dark eyes held a malicious amusement. "He didn't understand the needs of those he secretly despised."

"No? Well, Collinson, I do." Ransom reached out and gripped a shoulder, the fingers grinding with trained skill against nerve and sinew. "You're crippled and you hate those who are not. You get your revenge in little, spiteful ways and think you're smart. Well, don't play those games with me." His fingers dug deeper. "Answer and tell the truth or I'll come back and break a few bones. Where did Langdy go?"

"To the vats," snarled Collinson. "To the filth where you both belong!"

He meant the reclamation plant. Like agricultural workers on Earth the reclamation workers on Luna were at the bottom of the social heap. It was probably due to the notion that those who worked with dirt must, themselves, be dirty.

On the moon the dirt was sewage.

"Langdy?" The foreman wiped his hands on the seat of his coveralls then noticed Ransom's expression. "Come into the shack. I've something there that will kill the smell."

The shack was a small room adjoining the process vats. The something was one hundred and eighty proof alcohol.

"You get so that you don't mind it after a while," said the foreman. "Sometimes you get so that you hate to leave it. Of course, that takes a little time."

He was talking of the work, not the liquor.

"There's a sort of seasonal rhythm to it," he continued. "You spread and process and wait for the sun to ferment the mash. You collect the gases, the vapour, the steam. Then, when the night comes, you open your sacs and let the stuff freeze. It dries right out and crumbles to a powder ready for use." He helped himself to another shot of the alcohol. "Like they say," he ended with quiet pride. "We use it all but the smell."

"It must be a satisfying job," said Ransom. "Langdy?"

"I had high hopes of Joe," said the foreman. "I thought that maybe he was a natural. You know how it is, no one wants the job and we always need labour. But once in a while someone comes along just made for the work. I figured Joe that way. He had a feel for the job. He'd know when a batch was rich and when it was poor. He could tell to the minute when we'd got all we was going to get. Have another drink."

Ransom had another drink.

"You don't get many like Joe," sighed the foreman. "He wasn't like the impressed men we usually get. I guess after working in that freak-factory this was a ball." He stared at Ransom. "Can you understand any man working in a place like that? No wonder Joe quit."

"Where did he go?"

"Calvius, I think. Or was it Longomonatus?" He

yelled to a dingy figure tending one of the vats. "Hey, Charlie! Remember Joe Langdy? Where did he go from here? Was it Calvius or Longomonatus?"

"It was neither. It was Maurolycus."

Ransom went there. Another village. Another man who scratched his head and said, yes, he remembered Joe. A fine miner. A pity he'd moved on. To where? To Piccolimini, or was it Petavius? He wasn't sure.

Ransom tossed a coin, went to the wrong place, tried again and lost the trail. He paid off the charter plane and travelled as Joe would have done. He took scheduled transports crawling between the minor craters, living from a bag of rations, sleeping when he could. And asking questions. Always asking questions.

At a way-station, Crater 122, he changed his luck. Joe had worked there tending a solar power plant. From there he'd gone to Crater 139, to Crater 268, 364, to Arzachel, to Crater 631, to Bullialous.

At Bullialous Ransom discovered that he was being followed.

He halted before a detailed map of the area, looking not at the segment of the moon it portrayed but at the reflection in the glass. A shadow drifted behind him, hesitated, moved on to look in the window of a shop—or at the reflection of his quarry in the glass. It was the same man he had seen before. Ransom was certain of it.

He raised a hand and traced a path on the map, letting his finger rest on a crater before lowering it to his side. It had been a random choice, a gesture designed to explain his interest in the map but, as he looked, he frowned in puzzled exasperation.

The path Langdy had taken, the course he had followed swung in a rough circle which, if continued, would end at Tycho.

The communications room at Bullialous was small, the moon-born operator helpful as Ransom explained what he wanted.

"I'm sorry, sir." She seemed genuinely upset. "Central Agency receive calls from the public through the main desk. Person to person calls are not permitted. They don't want to jam the channels," she explained.

Ransom didn't answer.

"If you wanted to make an enquiry and it was really urgent you could always go to the local Agency," she suggested. "Shall I ring them for you?"

"No." She was trying to be helpful but it was help he could do without. "Can you get me the Grand Luna Hotel in Tycho City?" He gave her the number.

"Certainly, sir. Anyone in particular?"

"No. Just the desk." He put down money. "This should cover the cost of the call. How long will it take?"

"Not long, Mr. Ransom. If you will wait in the annexe I'll call you."

The annexe was fitted with chairs, the walls covered with posters, information and regulations. A dispenser offered food and drink. He bought coffee, sipped it, threw the rest into a disposal chute. The speaker called his name.

"My name is Ransom," he said to the face on the screen. "I have a room at the hotel. Do you know me?"

"A moment, sir." The operator looked down as she checked her file. "I know you, Mr. Ransom."

"Any messages?"

"Yes, sir. Two."

"Read them."

"Yes, sir." The operator turned, found something, faced the screen again. Her eyes were lowered. "Message begins —'Contact me immediately'—message ends. It is signed 'King'."

"The other?"

"Message begins—'Have up to the minute information. Party definitely located. Contact me at T1/3/8/112.'—message ends. It is signed 'Clerk. R. R.'" The receptionist looked enquiringly at Ransom. "Shall I connect you, sir?"

"Can you do that on a private line?"

"Certainly, sir." Ransom waited while the girl punched the number on a second instrument. The screen remained blank. "I'm afraid there is no answer, sir."

"All right," said Ransom. He wished the record clerk had been more specific but knew why he had not. The man had tasted easy money and wanted more. "Keep trying to contact that number," he ordered. "A fat man

should answer. If he does tell him that I'm on my way back now. Ask him to leave a message. If he does pay him a thousand and put it on my account. Let him know that money is waiting. Get it?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ransom."

Outside the girl operator smiled as she held out his change. He ignored it.

"How soon can I get to Tycho? What's the fastest means of travel? Charter rocket?"

"A moment, sir." She rang somewhere, spoke, listened, spoke again then cut the connection. "I'm sorry, sir, but there isn't a charter ship available." She glanced at the wall-clock. "The regular commercial flight leaves in thirty minutes."

"Aside from that?"

"Ground crawler."

He ran along the passage and into the main area. He made the flight with ten minutes to spare. The rocket was similar to others he had used recently, old, patched, nursed by the crew and kept operating by the exigencies of local requirements.

He relaxed in the worn seat and carefully adjusted the support-padding around his spine. Around him he could hear the usual noises preparatory to take-off, the casual gossip of passengers.

"Did you see the Martian ship?" The voice came from somewhere behind. "They tell me the Combine is willing to pay ten thousand bounty to any man willing to go. Double for a woman."

"To Mars?" The second voice was deep and cynical. "On a one-way ticket? Anyone taking that deal must be crazy."

"Well, I don't know," said the first man. "From what I hear life there can't be all that different. At least you get a clean start. And that ten thousand offer makes a man think."

"Sure, but money's no good if you can't buy anything with it." The deep voice was logical. "Maybe all that ten thousand will buy is a gallon of water or the hire of a suit for a week. Hell, if you want to go to Mars commit a crime. Do something bad enough and they'll ship you

out free. If you're serious you can start by killing my supplier."

The talk dissolved into laughter. The laughter died as a metallic voice echoed from the speakers.

"Attention, passengers. Take-off in exactly one minute."

It was then that Ransom recognised a fellow passenger. He was still being followed.

thirteen

THE MAN WAS smooth, calm, very polite and very firm.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Delmonte, there is simply nothing we can do. After all, what are you asking? You want us to find someone, you don't know who, to prevent someone else, a Mr. Ransom, from finding him first." His shrug was one of patronising contempt. "I know that we perform miracles on the moon but this is a little too much."

"I don't think so." With an effort Steve restrained his temper. He had no authority on the moon. In many ways he was worse off than an ordinary tourist; much worse than a resident. They, at least, were protected by the Co-operative Authority. "I am trying to prevent a crime," he continued. "This man Ransom is dangerous. We have reason to suspect that he is guilty of at least one murder."

"This Mrs. Langdy you told me about?"

"Yes. He was the last man known to have seen her alive." Steve tried to think of some way to break the man's calm. "She died of an alkaloid poison much favoured by assassins."

"And you are saying that Ransom is an assassin?" The man smiled and shook his head. "Really, Mr. Delmonte. You Earth Security people are all alike. You start at shadows. What proof have you that Ransom killed the woman?"

"No actual proof," admitted Steve. "Just a probability of nine point three per cent. We consider that good enough to subject a suspect to questioning."

"On Earth!" The man was very sharp. "But you are on Luna now. Your laws do not apply."

"I know that." Steve looked around the office. It had

a spartan severity. Two girl clerks were working at an outdated computor. A uniformed man sat at a switchboard. Law enforcement, on the moon, was at a minimum. The essential staff was small.

"Look," said Steve intently. "I'm not here to overawe you or to throw my weight around. I haven't any status here and I know it. But equally so I know that you want to protect your own and to prevent crime if you can."

"So?"

"Ransom landed some time ago. I know that he is looking for someone. Now, assume that you are in his place. How would you go about it?"

"About finding someone whose name I know?"

"Yes."

The man did not hesitate. "I would enquire at the Central Agency."

"Right. Now how would you go about finding out who Ransom wanted to find?"

"I would ask those at the Central Agency who may have dealt with Ransom's enquiry."

"Right again. Now will you do that please?"

Inwardly Steve sweated waiting for the man to refuse. It would be in character for him to refuse. Steve belonged to Terran Security and so was, in a way, the enemy of Luna. He could only hope that the man's dispassionate regard for law and order would divorce him of any automatic nationalistic tendencies.

"I will look into it," he said after a moment's thought. "At least it will do no harm."

It was all Steve could hope for. Later, while wandering about the maze of Tycho, he halted before a glaring tri-dri display fronting the embassy of the Martian Combine. He became very thoughtful.

Later he went inside.

Deeper in the city Ransom was waiting. He stood in a corridor in Quadrant one, Decant three, Sector eight. Ahead, round a curve, lay room 112. He had been there before and he was going there again. But the first time he had gone openly—now he moved with caution. He did not want to be seen by any other resident of the sector.

The door was locked. He knocked, waited, knocked again. The latch was flimsy, it yielded to the thrust of his foot. Inside he closed the door and switched on the light. He stared at what lay on the bed.

The glassy, empty eyes of the fat record clerk stared back at him.

He was quite dead. The ligature around his throat, buried in folds of fat, told how he had finally died. The burns on his bare feet told their own story. He had been tortured, questioned, then killed. Ransom could guess why.

He stood listening but could hear nothing. He crossed the room and put his ear to the door. Again silence. The passage was deserted, the stone soundproof. A man could scream and not be heard. A man had screamed. Screamed and died.

The room contained nothing of value. He picked up a photograph. It was a tri-print in full colour and showed a man and a woman. The man was the clerk, slimmer, younger, handsome in a florid way. The girl was just a girl. Finally he stooped over the body, searched the pockets, forced open the fingers. Nothing. The money he had given the man had vanished. He frowned thoughtfully at the phone.

His hotel number was scrawled on the base-pad. A direct link between him and the dead man.

He removed the top three sheets, tore them into strips, chewed them to a pulp. The faucet was metered. He thrust in coins, drew five ounces of water and swallowed the flat, tasteless liquid. He set down the cup and took a last look round. Caution prickled him with needles of warning. He stepped over to the door and jerked it open.

Two men stood outside.

One of them was the man who had been following him. The other was taller, lighter, more conspicuous. He looked at Ransom, stared past him, stepped into the room.

"Well, well," he said. "What's going on here?"

Ransom didn't answer. Instead he backed until the base of his spine hit the edge of the table. It was a flimsy piece of furniture. It slid along behind him until it hit the wall. Resting against it he watched the two men.

"Look at that!" The taller of the two pointed towards the bed. "Here we are, just a couple of friends paying a visit, and what do we find? Poor old Sam is dead and his killer is just about to leave. Lucky thing we came when we did."

"Button it up," said the shorter man. "Get on the phone and report."

"Just out of curiosity," said Ransom. "How much are you getting for this?"

Neither man answered.

"Whatever it is," said Ransom. "I'll double it." He wasn't reaching them. "Treble," he urged. "Let's say a hundred thousand apiece."

The tall man hesitated, his hand on the phone.

"For what?"

"For letting me walk out of here. For springing me from this frame."

"Shut your mouth." The man who had been following him no longer looked inconspicuous. There was a lithe-ness to his movements, a hardness around the mouth. "Shut up or I'll do something about it." He came a little closer.

Ransom kicked him in the groin.

He flung himself forward and to one side, chopping at the tall man's throat. He turned and finished what he had started with the kick. The tall man was retching, clinging to the phone, his free hand clawing at his pocket. Ransom broke his wrist, retained his hold, dragged the injured arm up behind the man's back.

"All right," he snarled. "Now talk! Who sent you after me?"

"I don't know. It's the truth, I swear it!" The man writhed, sweating with pain. "Fred was the boss. I just did as I was told. He phoned me from Bullialous, told me to pick you up at the arrival point, follow you around. I did. I traced you to here, then to the hotel, then back here."

"Did you help him to do this?"

"No. I was following you. He joined me after you left the hotel. We were to call the police and turn you in."

"And?"

"I don't know!" The man's voice rose higher as Ransom increased the pressure. "For God's sake! I don't know anything else!"

"Do you know where Fred got his orders? The number he phoned? Damn it! Can't you tell me anything I can't guess?"

"You've got the lot, mister. I swear it!" The man whimpered with pain. "I couldn't tell you more to save my life."

"No," said Ransom coldly. "I don't suppose that you could."

The edge of his stiffened hand snapped the neck as if it were a stick.

The call was scheduled for midnight. An elevator lifted them to a crystal bubble on the summit of the Palace. A hemisphere of polarised glass, air-conditioned, luxurious. An eyrie for a man who thought of himself as an eagle.

Marcus crossed to a desk and touched a control. The lights faded to a soft, roseate glow. Above and around shone the stars and the silver disc of the moon. Fullen glanced towards it. Up there, at this moment, a man stood before mechanisms which would take his voice and image and hurl them across a quarter of a million miles of emptiness to be resolved in this room. The magic of the ancients, he thought, the science of today.

The screen on the desk lit and Ransom looked at King.

"Hello, Marcus," he said. "How are you keeping?"

"Never mind that. Where have you been?"

"Chasing a rainbow. Langdy is the travelling kind. I've been on his trail since I got here."

"Are you close?"

"Breathing down his neck. I know exactly where he is. Langdy is out at Mare Serenis. His previous travels were either for fun, to gain experience or to raise enough money for equipment. Now he's out prospecting."

"Mare Serenis?"

"That's right," said Ransom coldly. "But you know that already. The men you hired to torture the clerk must have reported what they learned. They knew that he'd

given me the same information. That's why they tried to frame me. You wanted me out of the way."

"David!" Marcus felt a constriction around his heart. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't lie to me, Marcus. You've had me followed every step of the way. Now, it seems, I'm no longer needed. Or perhaps you don't want to pay me what you promised."

"David!" Marcus fought for breath, fighting the blackness edging his vision. Something stung his nostrils and the darkness went away. Irritably he thrust Fullen to one side. "David, listen to me. I'll give you what I promised. A million in cold cash when you deliver Langdy to the Palace. But I'll do better than that. Get him here, alive and well, and we'll forget the past. You can take up the old life again. The King name, David. The King wealth. The King power. We'll share it, David. All of it!"

"Begging, Marcus?"

"Yes, David. I want Langdy. Get him and you can have what you ask."

"You couldn't begin to pay what I want Marcus," Ransom's smile was cold, vicious. "But I'll find Langdy. And when I do, I'll kill him!"

The screen wavered, died, grew dark as the connection was broken.

"Steady!" Fullen reached for Marcus a hypogun in his hand. Air hissed as it blasted its charge directly through the skin and into the blood. Marcus snarled and sent it spinning to the floor.

"Damn you, Fullen! I don't need your dope. You heard what he said?"

"He didn't mean it."

"Didn't he?" Marcus paused, calming as the drug took effect. "Maybe not," he said softly. "But, in any case, he won't get the chance."

Fullen looked at the moon as he stooped to pick up the hypogun. Marcus followed his glance.

"Strange, isn't it, Fullen? Up there is a man who has everything I want and yet he's living like a pig. Prospecting. Transient worker. Living in filth with nothing to call his own. Why should such a man be given such a gift?"

Fullen didn't answer.

"Why isn't he rich?" continued Marcus. "Why isn't he one of the rulers of this planet? The only ruler. Why, Fullen? Why?"

"You are mortal," said the doctor evenly. "And yet you are the target for assassins. Doesn't that answer your question?"

"A man can protect himself against assassination."

"Can he protect himself against the envious hatred of the world?"

"There are ways," said Marcus. "But poor? Why is he poor?"

"Maybe he's jaded," said Fullen. "Maybe he's learned what we never seem to learn. A man can only do so much. If he owns a hundred palaces each with a thousand rooms he can only be in one at a time. Perhaps he is tired, bored with the endless routine of existence."

"Then he is a fool!" Marcus felt the tension around his heart, the sudden pain. It was a strong heart, a young heart, it should not feel pain. If he ignored it it would go away.

He had thought like that as a child.

He sat and felt the old, familiar depression. The horrible introversion born of his dread and insecurity. The fear born of his terror of death.

And yet he did not think of dying. Instead he thought of all the things he had done—and could never do again. The knowledge that this might be the last time he would sit in this room. The last time he would look at the stars and moon. That he had eaten his last meal. Death was like that. Death was regret at wasted opportunity. It's real horror rested in the uncompromising finality of its total erasure.

To die. To cease to be.

"No!" he screamed. "No! No!"

He sprang to his feet and glared at the moon.

"It's there! The secret! Langdy has it and, when I have him, I'll find it if I have to take him apart cell by cell! I won't die! I——"

Then the pain in his heart grew to encompass the world.

fourteen

SEEN FROM EARTH the Mare Serenis is relatively flat, a rolling plain of featureless nothingness, a dark patch on the face of the moon. Seen at first hand it is nothing like that. It is a desert of dust-filled craters, of mighty dunes and the nubs of mountains. It is stark, barren, treacherous with hidden dangers, an airless hell. Yet it holds wealth and so there are men.

Ransom wasn't looking for wealth. He wasn't interested in deposits of meteoric iron, air and water bearing rock or the freak-gems created by the impact of stones from space against the native rock. He was looking for a man.

He halted, leaning against a wall of stone, feeling sweat run over his face, irritating with a thousand tiny stings. His back itched, he had a rash on the insides of both legs. his armpits felt raw. Locked in his suit he felt helpless. It was a feeling he didn't enjoy.

"Something wrong?"

The voice came from the speaker behind his ear. Ahead of him the guide, brilliant in his orange suit, stood patiently waiting.

"There's nothing wrong." Ransom blinked sweat from his eyes. "I'm just looking around."

"Look all you want," said Clinton. "But if you want to enjoy the view you'd better get in the shade. There's no sense in getting hotter than you have to."

"Never mind," said Ransom. "Let's get moving."

They had been moving for days. Walking, scrambling over rocky mounds, circumnavigating patches of dust finer than talc, more deadly than quicksand, edging along crevasses. Their progress had been slow.

Too slow. There had been too many delays at the beginning. It had taken him too long to find a willing guide. Ransom was filled with a sense of urgency, the knowledge that time was running out. King would not have been idle. He had to find Langdy first.

He stumbled, swayed as a hand gripped his harness.

teetered on the edge of a shallow concavity. He could hear the harsh sound of Clinton's breath as the guide pulled him back.

"Do that again," he snapped, "and I'll let you go. Damn it, man, how often must I tell you to keep both eyes open and your mind on the job?"

Ransom bit back his instinctive reply.

"That's a sucker," said Clinton. "Look." He picked up a stone and tossed it gently over the edge. It vanished as if falling into water. "That could have been you. How deep they are no one knows. The only thing we can be sure about is that once in you don't get out." He paused. "I lost a good partner that way."

"I'm sorry," said Ransom. "About your partner, I mean."

"Well, it happens. It taught me never to take anything for granted. Never to trust anything in the Serenis. The fact that I got back alone shows how well I learned."

They walked for another mile in silence then; "How's your temperature?"

Ransom looked at the dials set above his faceplate.

"High. Well into the red."

"Can you make it to that crest?" The orange figure lifted an arm and pointed. "It's about another mile. Make it and we'll camp."

Camping was a matter of unfolding the tent, climbing inside, sealing the vent and inflating it with air from their suit-tanks. The air carried most of the internal heat with it as it expanded. Clinton checked the seals, examined the fabric, released more air. Satisfied he opened his faceplate. Together they helped each other from the suits.

Food was something out of a can. Drink was water, tepid, brackish, flavoured with lemon. Modesty was, by necessity, totally absent.

They didn't talk, Ransom was too tired for that. Gingerly he stretched himself full-length, watching Clinton as he checked the air-reviver, the pressure gauge, the mechanism which controlled the humidity. The man was paper-white aside from his face which was tanned from barely shielded ultra violet. But there was nothing soft about the whiteness. Muscles rippled in trained economy

as he went through the routine check. He was very thorough. Their lives hung on his caution.

Finally, satisfied, he settled down to sleep.

"Goodnight," he said.

"Goodnight," said Ransom.

It wasn't night. It was just a pause in activity, a time to eat and rest and shed the chafing prison of the suits.

Ransom was too tired to fall immediately asleep. He lay and stared at the low apex of the tent, the fabric taut beneath the eight pounds pressure. The air-reviver made a thin, whirling sound as the fans sucked the air through the unit. The pressure gauge remained steady, the alarm which would sound if it fell silent. The humidifier sighed as it adjusted the moisture content of the atmosphere. Clinton breathed with a monotonous regularity which told he was asleep.

Ransom considered whether to kill him now.

He decided against it. In a few hours they would have to rise, dress, pump back the air into the cans, fold the tent and be on their way. Alone Clinton could do it. Ransom doubted if he could manage as well. In any case there was no immediate need. Later would do as well.

Later, when they had found Langdy.

He fell asleep dreaming of a face. It had no features but, somehow, he knew that it was terribly important. It spelt wealth, security, prestige. It was safety, the key to the prison door, money in the bank. It was a weapon. It was revenge. Without it he was nothing.

Nothing!

He stretched out his hands and was running but, as fast as he ran, the face receded. And, as it dwindled, it changed. It grew a nose, eyes, a mane of hair, a cynical, sneering expression.

Marcus!

Marcus Edward King!

He woke, drenched in sweat, trembling. Clinton's hand was on his shoulder, his face very close.

"You all right?"

"Yes." Ransom sat upright. His muscles had grown stiff, the chafes burned with fire.

"You sure?" The guide was doubtful. "You were screaming."

"I had a dream." Ransom felt giddy. He lowered his head until the feeling passed. "Just a dream."

"Dreams can be bad," said Clinton. "I dreamed a lot after my partner died. You know, the one I told you about. He kept screaming for me to help him out of the dust. I couldn't help him. He should have known that. But he kept pleading, praying, begging. I couldn't turn off my radio. It seemed to last for hours."

"Nice," said Ransom shortly. He winced as he moved. "How about getting on our way?"

"Sure," said Clinton. "Just as you say."

They decamped and left the crest. They walked down a slope which ended in a ledge which fell away in a shattered mass of detritus. They crossed, climbed a ridge, followed a crevasse too wide to jump, too deep to climb. The crevasse ended and they were climbing again. Clinton, in the lead, halted beside a mass of fused and shattered stone.

"Something wrong?" Ransom joined him, watched as he searched the ground. "Let's get going."

"Hold it a minute." Clinton stooped, clawed at the stone, lifted something in his gloved hand. Tiny jewels winked fire. "Freak-gems. Small but there could be more."

"Forget them."

"They're worth maybe a hundred apiece back at the depot," protested the guide. "Big ones up to ten times as much. It won't take long to search the area."

"To hell with the stuff," snarled Ransom. "I pay you to act as guide, not to look for loot. Come on!"

Clinton obeyed.

Two hours later Ransom pushed him off a ledge.

Clinton vanished at once. One second he was standing, bright orange against the sky, the next he had gone, sinking into the dust like a pebble in liquid mud. Even the radio remained silent. Ransom was glad of that.

He stood, breathing deeply, forgetting the pain of his raw flesh as he looked ahead. In the far distance a spot of colour shone against the grey monotony of the Serenis.

Only one thing could have made that splotch of brilliance. A tent. An encampment. Langdy!

"Hello!" called Ransom into his radio. "Hello, can anyone hear me?"

No answer.

Ransom wasn't disappointed. The man could be asleep, shielded by metallic rock, too cautious to reply, anything But he was there, the splotch of colour proved that.

An hour later it was nearer but still the radio remained silent. Doggedly Ransom forged ahead. Slipping, walking in cautious slowness, concentrating on every inch of the way. Once he slipped and rolled towards a crevasse. Once he stumbled and almost fell into a patch of silken-smooth dust. Three times he made wide detours around real or fancied dangers.

Alone the going was tough but, on the way back, he wouldn't be alone. Langdy would be with him. He would guide them both back to safety. A lamb leading himself to the slaughter. Ransom found the thought amusing. It was the only thing to smile at. He was almost totally exhausted when he reached the tent.

It was larger than the one Clinton had carried. It had a small air-lock protruding from one side. The outer vestibule was empty, proof that the occupier was absent, but he didn't think of that as he passed through the lock into the tent. Inside he opened his faceplate and gulped at the stagnant air.

There was water in a can. He helped himself. There was a little food, tasteless pulp in emergency containers. There was a powerful radio. He switched it on.

Music spilled from the speaker, relayed from orbiting satellites, beamed from the major Luna cities. The music faded, a gong echoed, a man's voice read a weather report.

". . . sunspot activity promises a dangerously high rate of radiation. All ground-operators on sunside are warned to make preparations to protect themselves. New bulletins will be broadcast as the flare approaches." A click and the voice was speaking again, this time in a foreign language. Irritably Ransom switched off the set.

Where the hell was Langdy?

Restlessly he searched the interior of the tent, looking at everything which might carry a name, which might hold papers, which would make a supposition into a certainty. Clinton had guided him here. Clinton had known the object of his search. He would not have guided him wrong.

Or would he?

Whatever he had been the guide had proved himself a liar. No true prospector would have passed up the chance to mine a strike of gems. His obedience in obeying the order to move had crystallised Ransom's suspicions. Clinton could have been planted. But Langdy?

Ransom sat down and forced his brain to do its job. He had evidence, the tent, the contents of the tent. He looked at them and this time weighed and considered what he saw.

A little food. A little water. Stagnant air. Articles which were nameless, things a man might collect and then discard if he was on the move.

And Langdy had been out when he arrived.

How long had he been gone?

Ransom snarled as he realised the truth. An experienced man would have known at once but he was vague as to the customs of the Serenis. Now it was obvious.

The tent was too big to be carried. It was a permanent installation, hired by those who wanted to use it as a base-camp, left as he had found it when no longer required. He had misread the signs and had wasted time.

Time!

Ransom surged to his feet. Even now Langdy could be on his way to the depot and, from there, where? He had to find him before he got too far. Slamming shut his faceplate he crawled into the air-lock, sealed the inner door, sweated as he pumped air back into the cans. The effort was too much. Irritably he ripped open the outer seal and felt himself blasted into the vacuum.

Outside he searched for footprints, found too many, thinned his lips at the puzzle they represented. One set wended to the north, the direction from which Clinton

had guided him, and Ransom followed them from want of a better guide.

An hour later he lost the trail on the naked stone of a worn mountain.

Thirty minutes after that the radio in his helmet crackled to strident life.

"Attention! Warning to all sunside personnel. The solar flare is reaching prominence and max radiation will reach us in approximately thirty minutes. Attention! All sunside . . ."

Ransom ignored the voice. He stood swaying, soaked with perspiration, the chafed places on his body burning with pain. He gritted his teeth and forged ahead. He had no choice but to continue. The tent had been carried by Clinton and had vanished with him. Without it he had no option but to stay in the confines of his suit.

The radio repeated its warning.

"Attention! All sunside personnel. Max radiation in fifteen minutes!"

"Go to hell!" snarled Ransom. He licked parched lips and tongued the nipple from his canteen into his mouth. The water was too warm to be refreshing. He spat out the nipple and looked at the dials monitoring his little world. The water was low. The liquid food was low. The temperature was high. The external radiation was the same and climbing higher.

The forerunner of the radiation from the solar flare.

To remain in the open was to die.

The tent would have helped but he had lost the tent. All he could do was to find a cave and crawl into it and hope that it would be protection enough. But there were no caves. The nearest hills were miles away. He looked back. There was no help to his rear. There was no help anywhere.

"Attention!" snapped the radio. "Max radiation in five minutes. If you're not under cover now you should be. Max radiation in five minutes!"

A humped ledge of rock stood to the right. It might just be possible to find an overhang and squeeze under it. It wouldn't be complete protection but some exposure

he could tolerate. More could be treated if he could get to a hospital in time. But first he had to reach the shelter.

Ransom began to run towards it. A dust-filled crater lay between him and the ledge. He veered to the right, trod on a loose piece of stone, lost his balance—and fell into the dust.

He screamed once with the horror of it.

He knew that he was going to die.

fifteen

THE VESTIBULE OF the Palace had been fashioned as a replica of the Sistine Chapel complete with facsimiles of the famous paintings. Dale Markham studied them with interest, turning as Steve joined him. The agent looked harder, thinner. He carried a brief case.

"Ready?"

"Ready and waiting," said the chief. He hesitated. "Are you sure that you want me with you?"

"You were in at the beginning," said Steve. He kept his voice low as did all visitors to the vestibule. "You might as well be in at the end. King is waiting for us in the hospital. I suppose that he's in bed."

King wasn't in bed. He sat in a padded chair, wearing a robe of watered silk, a flask of oxygen at his side. His face was drawn, the skin grey, the eye febrile. Fullen stood beside him. The doctor was very calm.

"Mr. King has had a heart attack," he said. "I must ask you not to excite him unduly."

"Shut up, Fullen." Marcus didn't look at the doctor. "This is important."

"Very important," said Steve. He rested the briefcase on the floor beside his chair. "I know who tried to kill you, Mr. King—and why."

Marcus closed his eyes. He seemed very old and very frail and very afraid. He looked at Steve as he continued.

"In every crime there are three components; means, method and motive. We know the means, a plane was crashed into the room in which you slept. The attempt to kill you failed because of sheer, blind luck. The method

was not so obvious. Who arranged it? Who planned it? How was it carried out? Murder is a personal crime, Mr. King. Men are killed through hate, fear or greed or because they are dangerous to some other person or persons. We suspected the Cartel but, from what we could discover, they had no motive. That reduced the field to a personal level."

"And that, of course, answered all your questions?" Marcus was sneering. Steve refused to become annoyed.

"Yes, Mr. King," he said calmly. "It did."

He lifted his brief case, opened it, took out a compact portable recorder. He rested it on his lap.

"As I said murder is a personal crime. We had certain persons who were automatically suspect. Murray, the pilot of the plane. His wife Stella. Her friend Ransom. Klien the owner of the plane. Let us take Ransom. David C. Ransom. The man who once had reason to believe that he was to be your adoptive heir."

"I never——" began Marcus, then paused. "It was an assumption he had no right to make," he finished. Steve shrugged.

"When you turn a man from a prince into a pauper you supply him with a pretty strong reason to wish you dead. Ransom knew Murray's wife. It is inconceivable that he did not know Murray. Murray was poor, his wife liked excitement and luxury, Ransom had money to provide both. When he suggested they go on holiday together she jumped at the offer. They were together during the time of the attempt on your life."

"I know that," snapped Marcus irritably. "I checked. His alibi was fool-proof."

"Then why didn't you accept it?"

"I don't understand."

"Yes you do, Mr. King. You believed that Ransom had engineered that attempt on your life. You may have thought that he'd sold out to the Cartel. Whatever the reason you suspected him."

"Ridiculous! Why, I even gave him a job. Isn't that proof that I thought him innocent?"

"No, the reverse, as he knew all along." Steve lifted

the lid of the recorder, pressed a button. "Listen to this, Mr. King."

The voice was thin, wavering but it held an unmistakable horror. When it had ended sweat shone on Marcus's forehead.

"A man named Clinton took this recording," said Steve. "He is connected with Luna Security. I managed to obtain their co-operation. He met Ransom and guided him on a long and time-wasting route to his objective. In return Ransom tried to kill him. Only his ignorance and Clinton's skill thwarted his intention. Clinton was pushed into some harmless dust. He lay still until it was safe to crawl out and followed Ransom when he headed back to the depot. They were caught in a storm. Clinton knew how to look after himself. Ransom didn't. He fell into the dust and died there." He gestured towards the recorder. "As you heard he didn't die at once. He fought to the last."

"Yes," said Marcus dully. "He would."

"He hated you," said Steve flatly. "He'd hated you since you kicked him out. He was going to find Langdy and kill him. That was the one sure way he could obtain the greatest revenge. To kill something you wanted so desperately."

"I didn't trust him," admitted King.

"That's why you tried to frame him for murder. He knew that you were responsible. He even thought he knew why the clerk had been tortured but he was wrong about that. The man was tortured because the penalty for murder with aggravation is the worst there is on the moon. You wanted him to suffer that. The fact that his death was even worse must be a consolation to you."

Steve stooped, put the recorder in the brief case, closed the snap.

"A nice revenge, Mr. King. But entirely unwarranted. Ransom was not responsible for the attempt on your life."

Fullen stepped forward as Marcus clutched at his chest. His face whitened as King knocked aside his hand.

"Get away from me!" Marcus looked at Steve. "It isn't true. David——"

"Had nothing to do with that crash," interrupted Steve. "His only connection was that he knew Murray's wife, perhaps Murray himself, and a woman named Linda Sheldon." He looked at Marcus. "Do you know her?"

Marcus shook his head.

"She is a relative of Patricia McKee. She was propositioned to make illegal adapted krowns. She needed money and so agreed. But she was curious as to the identity of her client. She recorded his voice. It was disguised but there are unmistakable points of similarity. The man was Ransom."

"But doesn't that prove his connection?" It was the first time Fullen had shown interest. "Why else should he want to deal in adapted krowns?"

"For money." Steve was curt, he did not want to talk about Linda's part in the affair. "All of Ransom's actions can be explained by his hate and greed. All of them. But he had no direct knowledge or connection with the attempt on your life, Mr. King."

"You know who has?"

"Yes." Steve paused, very conscious of Fullen's eyes. "We have to go back to Ransom," he said. "He worked on the fringe. He knew Murray, a drifter with a beautiful and bored wife, eager and willing to earn money how he could. Murray knew Klien who owns a circus and racing planes. Klien knew Mark Sheldon, a rocket-race pilot who had suffered terrible injuries in a crash. Mark Sheldon whose sister is an accomplished electronician with the skill and knowledge to adapt krowns.

"Ransom was the go-between. Mark was as good as dead—Murray had no real reason for staying alive. It doesn't take genius to see the obvious. Mark, by means of a master/slave control could govern Murray's body. Murray, for the sake of money, was willing to co-operate. Klien, for the same reason, was a willing partner. Between them they had a nice racket.

"Murray sat in the cockpit while Mark flew the plane. They raced and who would bet on an unknown like Murray to win? Only Murray wasn't the pilot, Mark was, and he was one of the best rocket-race pilots known. Klien shared in the take and kept his mouth shut. That is the

reason he wasn't worried when the plane left the field. As far as he knew Murray, under Mark's control, had taken it up for a practice flight. When the truth came out he denied knowing Murray at all. He lied.

"Mark's sister denied making him a master/slave control. She also lied. She probably imagined that the krowns were to be used on a non-human proxy like a monkey or a dog. That is the full extent of her complicity."

"But—" commenced Markham. Steve looked at him and he coughed and fell silent.

"The man who drove the plane into this building in an attempt to kill Mr. King was Mark Sheldon. His motive was one of pure hate. He considered that his maternal aunt, Patricia McKee, had been robbed of her rightful share in the profits of the McKee effect."

"That is a lie!" Marcus stirred in his chair.

"Perhaps." Steve had his own ideas. "But to a man, hopelessly crippled, almost destitute, the niceties of legal abstractions are a little hard to follow. His aunt had discovered the basis for the krowns. She had died in poverty while the man who commercialised her discovery became even more wealthy. He would consider it a good motive for murder."

"Is that all?" Fullen had been standing very quietly behind the chair. Steve met his eyes.

"That is all. The main participants are dead. Klien denies all knowledge of the set-up and cannot, legally, be touched.

"And the sister?" Fullen hesitated. "Miss Sheldon?"

"She adapted the krowns for research purposes only," said Steve blandly. "The other matter has been investigated and no official action is contemplated."

"And that is all?"

"That is all."

"I see." Fullen looked down at his hands. Steve knew what he was thinking. Three men had died during the attempt to kill King. They had yet to be avenged.

"The case is closed," he said quickly. He picked up the briefcase and rose. Marcus stirred where he sat.

"Wait!" His voice was thin, desperate. "What about Langdy?"

"Yes," said Steve. "Joe Langdy, the man you wanted so desperately to find. So desperately that you sent Ransom after him knowing that, driven by hate as he was, he would be far more efficient than a man merely driven by greed. Langdy is on his way to Mars. I learned that when I enquired at their embassy in Tycho. The Luna authorities delayed Ransom long enough for him to make the ship."

Fullen showed them out. He was very quiet, very thoughtful. He hesitated before handing them over to the guard waiting beyond earshot down the corridor.

"Mr. King has had a terrible shock," he said as if speaking to himself. "He collapsed and almost died. He forgets that, though you can graft a young man's heart into an old body, the body is still old. The unknown factor which causes age infects the younger organ. I am speaking broadly, you understand."

Steve nodded.

"And there are psychosomatic difficulties. His overwhelming terror of death is developing into a deep psychosis which—" He broke off as if about to divulge confidential information. But Steve understood what he left unsaid.

Marcus Edward King was a man with nothing to look forward to but insanity and death.

"Goodbye, doctor." Steve held out his hand. "Goodbye—and thank you."

He was silent as they walked down the corridor. Silent as the elevator lifted them to ground level. Silent as they walked through the replica of the Sistine Chapel and towards the doors of the Palace. Markham halted beside a tinkling fountain.

"You lied," he said. "Why?"

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," said Steve as he had once before. "Are you answered?"

"No."

"Then let the dead bury the dead."

"Including those patrol men who died?"

"Even those." Steve turned and looked at the chief. "So I covered up, I admit it, but it was a last-minute

decision. I was going to clean the whole thing up, throw you a victim, prove how clever I was. Well, I changed my mind. There will be no victim."

"So Fullen gets away with it," said Markham.

"You guessed?"

"I saw his face. He knew that you suspected him. It's obvious when you stop to think about it. He was the only man who could have directed the plane to its target. The only man, aside from the guard, who knew where Marcus was to be found that night. And the guard died saving King's life."

"He didn't think of that," said Steve. "King was too convinced that Ransom was getting his revenge to realise that, if the attack was to succeed, the pilot would have to know where to aim the plane. Fullen knew. After he left he had only to make one phone call."

"And two patrol men died because of it," reminded the chief. "Not counting the guard."

"Yes."

"And you're letting him get away with it?"

"I am."

Markham sighed and shook his head. He looked annoyed and a little baffled.

"I've been in the police long enough to learn that justice isn't the abstract thing it's supposed to be," he said. "But I'm curious. Just how is it done?"

"Fullen is connected with Doctor Linguard," said Steve. "I think that one of the reasons he agreed to work for King was because he needed the money to support the clinic. He would have known about Mark and the master/slave control. To them both it would have been harmless enough. Relief for a cripple and, at the same time, data for their research. But, at the same time, it gave them a weapon in case of need."

"The krown," said Markham. "You didn't mention the blow-box. Did Linguard fix it?"

"Probably, but we could never prove it. In any case his subconscious wouldn't let him commit deliberate murder. The thing didn't work."

"More whitewash," said Markham with disgust. "Maybe you should give them a medal."

"Linda said that," mused Steve. "As it happens she was perfectly correct. The motive tells us that. Fullen knew of King's search for immortality. He knew him too well to have any illusions as to what would happen if he managed to achieve longevity. You heard him talk about his psychotic condition. We know of his scheme to turn the world into a captive audience. A scheme, incidentally, which would work."

"But not now?"

"Not unless we're bigger fools than I imagine." Steve paused, wondering, then shrugged. "To get back to Fullen. When he left King that night he was upset. He probably called Linguard almost at once. Mark was dying and time was running out. If King had to be stopped they could afford no delay. So Linguard told Mark just where King was to be found. He did the rest."

"And failed."

"He didn't manage to kill King but he didn't fail. The crash brought us on the scene. It started a chain of events ending in now. Without it who knows what might have happened? Cheap krowns everywhere. Sub-aural commands. King maybe finding what he was looking for and firm in the saddle as he rode out a financial war. No, Mark did not fail."

"And now what?" said Markham. Steve smiled.

"Fullen stays with King. King is dying. If, in his insanity, he tries to do what should not be done—well, we have Fullen at his side."

"Neat," said Markham. He looked as if he tasted something bad. "Sly, cunning and effective. Now I know why Security is so successful. You relinquish a killer to gain a potential assassin. Nice."

"Essential. How else can we combat the money-power of the tycoons?"

"I don't know," admitted Markham. "But there must be a better way." He shook his head in a symbolical shedding of responsibility. "And what about Langdy? Did he really go to Mars?"

"That was true enough."

"And is he really——?"

"Immortal?" Steve shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't ask. He could be a freak, someone who just keeps on living while other men die, I simply don't know. I don't think I want to know. I don't want to be another King."

"No," said Markham. "One is enough."

Together they walked from the fountain, past the old, cold statuary, towards the doors and the sun, the living world outside.

WHERE'S IT ALL GOING?

SF APPEARS TO be at rather a critical stage in its development. On the one hand, we have the fact that no classic novel that is purely science fictional in nature has been written in the sixties, nothing like *The Stars My Destination* or *More Than Human;* on the other we have newer writers like Ballard, who are writing important novels, but which are not SF in the strict sense. Therefore it is interesting to cast an eye at the newer writers to see if we can divine in which direction science fiction is heading.

A Man of Double Deed by Leonard Daventry (Gollancz, 15s) is quite a successful first novel. It is unfortunate that the author chose the subject of telepathy, a theme which should be dead and buried by now. The book stops short of being the standard telepathy plot, but only just. The story is set at an unspecified time in the future, in a world in which physical violence by its younger citizens is increasing at an alarming rate. The hero is Claus Coman, a telepath, who lives with two women, Sein and Jonl. The three of them are bound in a relationship, which, at this time, is so rare that if people are in love they normally bind themselves by means of an embroidered sign on their sleeve. Coman is a key figure in the decision of the Government on whether or not to have a War Section—an area of land, preferably on another planet, to contain those found guilty of crimes of violence.

The story is extremely readable and nicely developed. For science fiction, the characterization is good, and it is very refreshing to read about people in whom one can believe. As a book, *A Man of Double Deed* is readable,

enjoyable, and if it isn't particularly memorable, it may still be regarded as a success.

I wish that I could say the same about *Sundog* by B. N. Ball (Dobson, 16s.). Space-pilot Dod is out on the Pluto run, when he suddenly develops a halo. This is about all the story that is readily comprehensible. After this, the story develops into complexity only equalled by Van Vogt, although Van Vogt's complications may eventually be unravelled. However, owing to the very lumpy writing, sections of which have to be re-read to grasp the meaning, one tends to read on through this long novel without understanding just what is going on. Everything seems to sort itself out very nicely in the end, though.

Easy comprehension of this story isn't helped, either, by Dobson's rather peculiar habit of using only one quote for speech. When apostrophes appear, this can be confusing.

These points can be seen in the following, almost random quote.—

> 'Get me the Combat Marshal,' Dod said into the 'ceiver. The totex roared into the spacious room.
>
> Marshal Maes had had his instructions, Dod could see. The big florid face was cautiously amiable. 'Can I help you, Space-pilot?' he asked.
>
> 'I want a fixture in my own league, Marshal,' said Dod.
>
> The answer came back pat. 'Certainly, let's see now. You won three out of four on the last run, didn't you? Thought of trying in a higher league?'
>
> That meant a delay of several months; the Marshal clearly had been told what to say.
>
> 'No. I only keep this up to maintain my status in the Pilots' guild.'

The best part of the book is the closing section. I hope, therefore, that if we see another book from Mr. Ball it will be considerably better than this one.

While John Brunner hardly qualifies as a new writer, I

must admit that I approached *Telepathist* (Faber, 18s.), with rather dubious feelings. However, I was very surprised to find out that, with a good writer, the subject of telepathy can still be new and interesting. This book consists of three short stories dating from 1958 and 1959. They are published together to form a complete novel.

The stories have obviously been influenced by Sturgeon (the hero being a deformed and crippled man with very strong telepathic powers), but the writing and the development are definitely Brunner's.

The characters are all very vivid and believable, and the story reaches several emotional climaxes which are very moving. There are also some very interesting ideas arising from the concept of telepathy, which would serve lesser writers for at least three novels.

My only criticism, and this is a small one, is that the novel, as an entity, could have been worked over and shaped a little more thoroughly, for at times one finds duplication of certain descriptions and explanations.

However, apart from this minor point, *Telepathist* is an excellent novel; the best I have read for a long time, and in fact, among the best Brunner I have ever read.

I feel that with the direction in which SF is moving, this will probably be the last really good novel of science fiction that we shall see from British writers. It is rather a saddening thought.

Something Wicked This Way Comes by Ray Bradbury (Corgi, 3s. 6d). For some reason Ray Bradbury seems to inspire in his readers feelings of either extreme enjoyment or revulsion. So it will satisfy both groups if I say that this book is Bradbury at his most Bradburyish—and his best. Personally, I found it tremendous.

Of Demons and Darkness by John Collier (Corgi, 5s), consists of a large collection of stories by this vastly overrated writer. The quality ranges from the moderately good to the dreadful, though most of the stories are nearer in quality to the latter. Although there are thirty-seven stories, the number of plots is considerably less, as Collier is obviously the kind of writer who thinks that if a plot is worth using at all, it's worth using several times. Also,

one tends to become rather tired of the oft-repeated jokes, which might be funny for the first time, but tend to pall at the tenth repetition. I should hate to meet John Collier at a party.

Also released is *New Writings In SF* (2) edited by John Carnell (Corgi, 3s 6d), a not very exciting collection previously reviewed here.

Langdon Jones

DIARY OF A SCHIZOID HYPOCHONDRIAC

BRIAN ALDISS'S *Earthworks* (Faber, 16s) is in effect a monotonous diary of a schizoid hypochondriac of dubious intelligence who is pushed around throughout the book, including an irrelevant three-chapter flashback, by Higher Powers, until finally discovering an Answer which was obvious to the reader two chapters previously.

Backing this stock SF formula, presented in a padded, irritating and unsuccessful first-person narrative style, is a society where population explosion has brought famine and barbarism to the civilised world, the new political and commercial centre of progress being Africa. In actual fact there is good economic reason to suppose that undeveloped countries will suffer first and most from overpopulation, but, if improbable and unconvincing, the background is at least consistent throughout the book. This is more than can be said for the writing, which varies from allegory to hack political-intrigue stuff, and the 'plot', which only emerges from the padding in the last few chapters, culminating in a quaintly humorous ending where our hero is persuaded that total atomic war is the only humane solution to overpopulation and suffering.

Presumably in an effort to provide some sort of unifying influence a faceless black figure, rather obviously representing the protagonist's Other Self, crops up at intervals throughout the meandering plot, but this tired gimmick

can't save a story that just doesn't know what it is or where it is going. *Earthworks* fails as fantasy through lack of thought and an inconsistent approach; fails as SF because of limited, laser-beam type visualisation and ideas and blunders such as men surviving an atomic explosion a few yards away by "burrowing into the burning sand"; and, though the elements of suspense are there, laborious treatment of action scenes, loose plot-ends and vague character motivations make me come to the sad conclusion that the book can't even be treated as a decent political-intrigue spy story.

Charles Platt

QUICK REVIEWS

by James Colvin

After Doomsday/Poul Anderson (Panther 3s.6d.) **Shield**/Anderson (Dobson 15s.), **The Martian Way**/Isaac Asimov (Panther 3s. 6d.), **The Drowned World**/J. G. Ballard (Penguin 3s. 6d.), **New Writings in SF 3**/Ed. E. J. Carnell (Dobson 16s.), **Lambda 1 and Others**/Ed. Carnell (Penguin 3s. 6d.), **The Seventh Galaxy Reader**/Ed. F. Pohl (Gollancz 18s.).

I HAVE BEEN accused recently of being unkind to Poul Anderson, a writer who at one time probably gave me more straightforward escapist pleasure than any other SF writer. What I object to is his cheap moralising (he happens to moralise from the right-wing—if he moralised from the left-wing and it was still cheap, I'd still complain) and his tendency to produce shoddy pulp writing. He is capable of better things and at his best is very good. My favourite Anderson stories happen to be fantasy novels—*The Broken Sword* and *Three Hearts And Three Lions*—and I think this is where he really excells. *The Broken Sword* has the pure mythic quality possessed by the best of the old romances—with considerably better insight

into character than the old romancers were ever capable of. It remains, in my mind, as Anderson's most important and powerful novel. Everything else of his is lightweight in comparison. Further—*The Broken Sword* is possibly the only "sword and sorcery" novel I shall ever enjoy. I have re-read it several times. As an SF writer, Anderson is patchier and has never attained the strength of emotional conviction found in *The Broken Sword*. He is, of course, essentially a romantic writer able to transpose the classic elements of myth into SF terms with considerably more skill than most. Secondly he is that rare thing —a Romantic with an excellent knowledge and understanding of science. *After Doomsday* begins with a memorable line—"Earth is dead. They murdered our Earth!" Though I'd quarrel with the need for an exclamation mark after that statement, it's a good start. Anderson's theme is powerful and contains a lot of the elements of archetypal myth. Unfortunately he seems to have been so moved by his theme that he immediately loses his grip on his writing so that a couple of lines later we learn that "Goldspring's voice . . . turned into the hoarse belly-deep sobs of a man not used to tears". It just doesn't click with me, I'm afraid—this is crude writing. However, in spite of this Anderson catches the attention and tells a fast-moving, clearly-narrated story of the men who return to Earth to find her destroyed by invaders and set off to find them wherever they may be. Only occasionally does the writing become clumsy as well as crude. There are several surprises, a good denouement, that is perhaps a little easy to anticipate. Being basically a piece of mystery SF I won't go into details. I wouldn't recommend the book to anyone who is positively affected by bad writing (as I usually am) but if you don't give a damn about the writing, you'll probably enjoy this no end. A much better-written book is *Shield* by the same author. It is set mainly on Earth (his writing seems to get worse the deeper into space he goes) and is a sort of international spy thriller about a man who has developed a force-screen with help from the alien Martians. Everyone wants it.

A relief to re-read the four long short stories in Asimov's *The Martian Way*. Asimov usually beats Anderson

on science and his writing is always well-controlled. *The Martian Way* has already been mentioned in NWSF 145. A varied selection all showing aspects of Asimov at, at least, his near-best.

The Drowned World by J. G. Ballard seems to bear dozens of re-readings. Every time I read it I manage to get more from it than I did last time. If you've been out in a wilderness and haven't heard of it, it concerns geophysical changes in nature which result in the Earth becoming increasingly hot, icecaps melting, tropical vegetation, swamps and lagoons in the Northern Hemisphere, London lying below turgid, iguana and crocodile filled waters. That is the "literal" theme of the book and on this level the characters are concerned either with trying to salvage something from the wreckage (known to be impossible) or adapt themselves to this strange environment. On another level comes Ballard's obsession with Time —Time related to the individual, Time related to history, Time related to the psychological nature of Man, Time related to the geography and geology of the Earth, Time related to biology. This is perhaps the first novel to deal with Time, Space and Man in a way that concerns the deep metaphysical link existing between these forces. Towards the end the forges merge to become a single entity. It is a tribute to Ballard's powerful talent that he manages to tell both a gripping, haunting tale and at the same time make this final, total merging a convincing reality.

New Writings in SF 3 contains stories by Colin Kapp, Frederik Pohl, John Kingston, John Baxter, James Inglis, Keith Roberts, Dan Morgan and James H. Schmitz. It is perhaps the best of the series so far, with a wider selection of themes and styles. My feelings about Kapp are mixed. He has a strong visual imagination, a talent for scientific speculation, and a style—if that's the word—which imitates the worst elements in a score of different "hack" styles. It is, in fact, a pastiche-style. I cannot regard Kapp as a *writer*, but rather as a non-writer. His story *The Subways Of Tazoo* is a sequel to his well-liked *The Railways Up On Cannis*. Maybe I've got a blindspot. Last time I reviewed *New Writings* (2) I asked for a wider

variety of backgrounds—*fresher* backgrounds. These seem to be appearing. I'm looking forward to *New Writings* (4).

Also by the same editor is *Lambda One and Others,* published last year by Berkley and reviewed here in No. 144. Except for the inclusion of an extra—and abominable—story this is the same collection.

One always has an idea of one's favourite magazine. I had thought mine F&SF. I was wrong. It was clearly GALAXY. It takes a collection of "the best from" to show you just how many memorable and enjoyable stories a particular magazine has given you—and I was surprised on opening up *The Seventh Galaxy Reader* to find that almost all the stories in the book are favourites of mine. It is the finest collection I have received for a long time. The quality of the writing, the scope of the themes, prove that Fred Pohl's policy—which seems to be an "all-and-everything" one that several editors are adopting these days—is producing an excellent magazine. The only story I didn't like was the Bradbury. Very poor Bradbury which read, I'm afraid to say, like an early reject from somewhere. The writers lined up in this satisfying book include Algis Budrys, Avram Davidson, Robert Bloch, Lester Del Rey, Fredric Brown, R. A. Lafferty, Frederik Pohl, Zenna Henderson, Cordwainer Smith, Judith Merril, Keith Laumer, Fritz Leiber, Margaret St. Clair and Damon Knight. Not all of them are writers I normally like—yet for some reason their work in GALAXY appeals to me. The first story, Budrys's darkly cynical *For Love* shows the race slowly dehumanising as it pursues its ambition to attack and destroy a gigantic spaceship that has landed on Nebraska and Colorado—spanning the states. The ship does nothing—but humanity has become obsessed by the need to destroy it. Davidson's *The Tail-Tied Kings* is good, in spite of the fact that it is virtually an article explaining a particular mystery of the animal kingdom. Bloch's *Crime Machine* is about a little boy whose heroes are the gangsters of the 20s and 30s—then he actually witnesses the St. Valentine's Day Massacre and changes his views. Slight, but well-handled. In *Return Engagement* Lester del Rey— a writer I admire for his best work—narrowly es-

capes a charge of whimsy and, as far as I'm concerned, his idea's based on a rather subjective and jaundiced view of the world; his character wonders where all the magic has gone from life—and finds out where it *has* gone.

Fredric Brown's short twist-piece is, of its kind, okay. I don't care for this sort of stuff, but many do. *Rainbird* by Lafferty is a pleasantly written yarn with a pleasantly-entertaining idea, rather overlong, I felt, for its denouement. It is about Higgston Rainbird, 18th century Yankee inventor of the dynamo, steam-car, steel industry, ferro-concrete construction, internal combustion engine, electric light and power, wireless, air travel, space travel, group telepathy, much, much more—and the retrogressor. The retrogressor was his most important invention.

That takes care of just the first 86 pages of the book. No room for more detailed descriptions of the rest of the stories, covering the remaining pages up to No. 247. The book is a bargain, with a good introduction by Pohl in which he says "These stories . . . represent . . . just what . . . modern science fiction is all about." We're in agreement there.

Scarcely modern in style or content is Edward P. Bradbury's *Warriors of Mars* which is to be the first of a series. Bradbury is strongly influenced by E. R. Burroughs—but is actually much more readable. If you are a Burroughs fan you are bound to like this novel—it is quite as good as anything by the Old Master. Which isn't saying much from me. Published by Compact Books, 3s 6d, it has an excellent full-colour cover by James Cawthorn.

Also just in is *Tomorrowscope* a nicely produced little magazine consisting of nothing but informative reviews of just about all the SF being published in this country. Much more liberal and balanced reviews than mine. . . It is 2s 6d for four issues, monthly, published by Charles Platt, 325a Westbourne Park Road, London W.11.

James Colvin

All correspondence to
The Editor,
NEW WORLDS SF,
17, Lake House,
Scovell Road,
London, S.E.1.

Off the point?

Dear Sir,

Aren't we getting a little off the point?

I have been an addict of SF since I was eight. I still am, and know very well the reason for it. Science fiction is escapist reading: you read it to find an environment as totally divorced from the one you are living in as it is possible to find. As such, the medium has a very important *raison d'être,* and one which I am sure the majority of hard core readers have, whether they will admit it or not.

Every form of literature will, and has thrown up from time to time a novel, short story, or what you will that becomes "good literature". It does this not because it tries to—its essential motive is to divert—but because it is in the law of averages.

Since you have taken over NEW WORLDS an atmosphere of obsessive PENGUIN NEW WRITING has become apparent. The fact that a story vibrates with obscure meaning and ends in a crystalline, nebulous web of obscurity in a logical extrapolation of present day society does not make it "Good Literature", how ever hard it may appear to be trying to. Your job is to please the customers (and don't throw up your increased circulation at me) and to do this you must provide an alternate reality in your plot-forms. And more than a touch of the old cliché "sense of wonder", which must not be confused with the "sense of utter bewilderment" you have succeeded in conjuring in me with recent issues.

If we have many more stories culminating in an unfulfilled sensation of malefic discontent I shall probably not

stop reading the magazine, but shall do so in an atmosphere of malefic discontent myself.

If you are really so convinced of Ballardry, I suggest you re-read David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus*. He could end up in nebulous crystallography so that you felt you had got somewhere—and provide ample sense of wonder with it.

T. B. Pulvertaft, B.A., BChir, City Hospital,
Gladsone Road, Exeter.

But was it worth it when you got there? Surely unless a conscious effort is made by writers to make complete use of their material and raise the standard of their writing the field must stagnate?

More space wanted

Dear Sir,

My blood chilled when I read this month's directive (NWSF 148) from Commissar Moorcock, wherein he proclaims a bleak austerity régime bereft of space stories, when we are to "stick close to home." (Can't we leave that to the kitchen sink school?)

If Mr Moorcock feels that the space story's form is unwieldy, surely the remedy is to alter it in some ingenious way, or to devise a new form: not to throw out the baby because there is something wrong with the bathwater.

The motive force behind our interest in SF is the outward urge (a Wyndham title). Instead of ignoring the new and exciting knowledge which our probes are about to winkle from the Moon and Mars, we should use it as the basis for more and more (not less and less) space stories.

Nobody could agree more than I that SF should slough off its sensational aspects, among which I number the illustration on Page 5 of NW 148. I also agree that no writer should imitate any other. I would go further and say that writers should be sufficiently independent not to accept directives from Editors. Carlyle pointed out that "the essence of originality is not novelty but sincerity".

Of course: every human being is unique, therefore if you are sincerely yourself it follows that you must be original. Further, that original you may quite sincerely want to read or write space stories. I do, and by a space story I mean such fiction as Arthur C. Clarke writes.

Mr Moorcock has said that he wants to attract new readers. I suggest that the way to do so is to offer what SF alone can give: the space story. Tired, sophisticated old men with jaded palates (who have read all the SF in the world) may need to seek new titiliations, but please remember the needs of simple but vivacious girls who have hitched their wagons to the stars, and who are attracted by opening sentences like: "On Moon it was white like ice."

Luckily, Mr Moorcock is not as bad as his word. In No. 148 he has given us his best selection yet, including four wonderful space stories: one of which was written by Mr Moorcock.

And they say women are inconsistent!

Mrs. Elizabeth French Biscoe,
48 Brighton Road, Rathgar, Dublin 6.

We didn't say we didn't want space stories—in fact if you check you'll find that we said we did. *But we don't want the* same old *space stories. And sincerity isn't necessarily the essence of the good story, either. Incidentally, don't you feel that the "kitchen sink school" is as out of date as the SF we were attacking?*

One vote for the Hugo . . .

Dear Sir,

Congratulations on NEW WORLDS 148. This is the best issue I have read yet, and had something for everyone, even if it was a bit short on the book reviews. I don't suppose there is any chance of your expanding to, say, 160 pages, and containing features such as those in the French SF magazine FICTION, with lengthy book reviews, articles of general interest, not necessarily concerned with SF, more film reviews, perhaps even the odd cartoon or

two provided it isn't too corny! Plus more information on the authors writing the stories, which seems to be popular in other magazines. There was another aspect of FICTION which interested me, that is the practice of listing all the stories that the current authors have had published in previous issues of the magazine. Quite useless really, but good fun!

J. G. Ballard worries me. So far as SF goes, he could easily be one of the finest writers yet he persists in retilling the same ground all over again. *The Burning World* —very well written and readable, yet it is little more than *The Drowned World* in reverse. It is not that all his books have the similar theme—which they do, to a large extent, it is more that they all generate the same atmosphere of hopeless predestination. Or perhaps I am reading too much into his stories. He is obviously fascinated by time; you and others have called *The Terminal Beach* a brilliant story yet quite frankly I made little of it even having read it twice, beyond the obvious physical details of the story, such as they were. Yet when I lent it to a woman who doesn't generally read SF, she found it clear as a bell and quite fascinating. Thus it appears that Ballard's stories strike some kind of meaning into some people and not into others, and that the division has nothing to do with intelligence or the lack of it. Perhaps it has something to do with one's more primitive and compulsive emotions being affected. Or perhaps I am merely reading things into his stories that don't exist at all, because even when he is saying nothing there appears to be meaning somewhere. Ballard, I believe, takes his own work very seriously, and he is undoubtedly—technically—one of the most gifted of modern SF writers. Yet I for one wish he would widen his apparent field of interest a bit more—one can almost forecast with complete accuracy that any new story by him will in some way be concerned with disaster so that he can write about the human being in some peculiar mental condition. Obviously he can write about what he likes, but it would make him a more interesting writer if he were to vary his subject matter more and write more stories with the scope of, for example, *The Waiting Grounds*. I like Ballard's writing but I feel

that his apparently permanent interest in just the one story form is a serious limitation—technical brilliance is not in itself everything.

Dune Limbo is a fine example. Isolated on its own it makes extremely good reading, but I for one was terribly conscious that it was typical Ballard-land and little else, and this feeling detracted from my enjoyment of the extract.

Hope this letter is in some way useful, since magazines always seem to be requesting letters. All in all, I reckon that NEW WORLDS is at its zenith, and undoubtedly the format helps . . . here's one vote for the Hugo!

Richard Gordon, Cairnfield, Buckie,
Banffshire, Scotland.

We wonder what other readers think about your suggestions. More pages means a higher price, of course. For a good, stimulating letter we're sending you a copy of Damon Knight's Beyond The Barrier. *We think you might get more out of Ballard's three books*—Drowned, Burning *and* Crystal World *if you read them as a single work on the same theme. Dreamlike his books may be, but the one thing Ballard isn't selling is opium.*

STORY RATINGS No. 149

1	The Life Buyer (I)	*E. C. Tubb*
2	What Next?	*E. Mackin*
3	Reactionary	*P. F. Woods*
4	In One Sad Day	*George Collyn*
5	The Changing Shape of Charlie Snuff	*R. W. Mackelworth*
	Death of an Earthman	*G. Walters*
6	The Flowers of the Valley	*K. Roberts*
	Third Party	*Dan Morgan*

The average age of next month's contributors is probably the youngest ever. No. 152 will feature *Lone Zone* by Charles Platt, plus Aldiss, Jones, Williams, Fry, Gordon, Richardson, with a very wide variety of good SF stories.

Physics

GAS LENSES DEVELOPED FOR COMMUNICATIONS BY LASER

LENSES MADE OF gas, rather than of glass, are being tested in the United States to guide beams of light through long pipes which curve and bend.

The light beams used in these experiments are from a laser, the device developed in the past few years which can strengthen and purify light and then emit it in a thin powerful beam that does not spread out nearly as much over long distances as ordinary light beams do.

Scientists think that laser beams, guided in this way, can eventually be developed as a long-distance communications system, in the same way as present day systems use electric signals carried by telephone wires and co-axial cables to transmit voices, pictures and data.

Tests carried out so far show that the gas lenses do not reflect and absorb light nearly as much as optical lenses.

They have also shown that a gas lens or series of lenses can confine a laser beam to a path near the centre of a pipe even if the pipe curves sharply.

In a straight pipe, the lens need not be powerful because it needs only to compensate for the small natural spreading of the laser beam.

The light beam would normally tend to travel in a straight line even in a curved pipe section, therefore, strong lenses are required to refract the beam according to the pipe's configurations.

In such pipes, the gas lens focuses the beam to keep it from hitting the side of the pipe and, instead, follow in the centre of the pipe.

To accomplish this, the pipe is filled with gas. Because gas becomes increasingly refractive with increased density the gas inside the pipe is caused to concentrate most heavily in the pipe's centre.

The gaseous region then acts like a prism, deflecting the light beam in the pipe's curvature. The system takes advan

tage of the well-known scientific phenomenon that light rays curve toward regions which strong refractive effects or, in scientific language, regions which have a high "refractive index". The sharper the curve, the more the light beam must be refracted to keep it from hitting the side of the pipe.

Such pipes could, presumably follow the natural curvature of terrain and could be "transmission lines" for long-distance communications systems.

The gas lenses now being tested are of two different types, both designed by Dwight W. Berreman and Andrew R. Hutson, scientists at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in New York.

In one design, a spiralling coil or helix runs through the centre of the gas-filled pipe. The helix is kept a few degrees warmer than the pipe. This heats the gas and sets up currents that cause the gas to concentrate in the centre of the pipe, thus increasing the refractive effects in the centre.

The light beam is then aimed through the axis of the helix. Various gases successfully used in the tests include mixtures of air and carbon dioxide, freon and hydrocarbons.

In the second design, two gases of different refractive capacities flow together continuously from opposite directions into a mixing chamber. The gases meet, mix and are drawn out of the chamber.

The light beam passes through the mixing chamber and is focused in this region. The scientists can focus the light as needed by controlling variations in the refractive index of the transparent gases through thermal expansion, flow and diffusion.

Additional tests are expected to show whether this basically new approach to the guiding of light beams over long distances will lend itself to a commercial long-distance communications system.

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IN THIS ISSUE

NEW WORLDS

Another selection of original sf stories by well-known writers and newcomers from Britain and the U.S.A.—a varied selection to suit all tastes including the conclusion of E. C. Tubb's novel

THE LIFE BUYER

American new writer Vernor Vinge's

APARTNESS

Plus more shorts from

B. J. Bayley

R. W. Mackleworth

George Collyn

and our usual features