NEW WORLDS

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LONE ZONE

by Charles Platt

In Linear City 7 the amoral Loners lived amongst the ghosts of the unborn

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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.

DOES SPACE STILL COME NATURALLY?

IN OUR EDITORIAL in NWSF 148 we mentioned the possibility that the space story was declining. Many readers took this as a statement that NEW WORLDS was not going to contain space stories in future; others thought that we said that good space stories couldn't be written. We are rarely so dogmatic, as a careful look at that particular editorial will show. What we did say was that there weren't many good ones being written.

It is quite possible, however, that the *naturalistic* treatment of the space-story is on the decline. As J. G. Ballard has said "Once it gets off the ground into space all science fiction is fantasy, and the more serious it tries to be, the more naturalistic, the greater its failure, since it completely lacks the moral authority and conviction of a literature won from experience."

Whether you agree with Mr Ballard or not rather depends on how you like your SF, but he has a point in that it seems to be the case—and now we speak, perhaps, more as a writer than an editor—that writing realistic space stories tends to run you up against a series of blank walls. You can do just so much within this framework and no more—frustrating limits are set on your imagination. If there is a realistic writer who can overcome these limits—if there are several—we should welcome him with flags waving and a fanfare of trumpets, but we're inclined to think he would have to be a genius.

Cordwainer Smith is one writer who has managed to bring surrealism to space. Recently his stories may have been a bit too strong for some—his ever-present tendency towards whimsy sometimes seems to get out of control—but he is certainly one of those writers for whom, as Mr

Ballard wrote in a recent GUARDIAN piece—"science serves much the same role as did psychoanalysis for the surrealists—a standpoint rather than a subject matter." Smith still packs in the ideas, but he makes them complement his imaginative writing, rather than dominate it. It is not just SF which has wrung the last possible permutation from Realism—it is the whole body of fiction. Witness the new resurgence of some of the old heroes of the popular romance—Doc Savage, Sexton Blake—even Buffalo Bill in the U.S.—and their modern counterparts, James Bond and Company. Witness the popularity of books like *Catch 22*—indeed the surprising (to the long-standing SF enthusiast) popularity of science fiction and fantasy nowadays. All this indicates writers and readers alike tired—if only for a few years—of realism in their entertainment. This trend exists also in the films, theatre and television. As the sciences reveal increasingly the ambiguity of our nature, so the essential subjectivity of "realism" becomes apparent. To look at it another way—if you assume that only so many things are "real" sooner or later you run out of possibilities. That has happened, it appears, to the naturalistic space story.

Unless a magazine is to become nothing more than a collection of popular engineering articles thinly disguised as fiction—as has happened to at least one magazine in recent years—then it must look around for something fresh, must encourage something fresh.

Fresh to NEW WORLDS this month are three new, young writers whose average age is eighteen. A lot of hard work has been put in by the editorial staff of this magazine in its attempt to find, encourage and—at last—publish new writers. A year ago we were beginning to wonder if these writers actually existed in any quantity. Now—almost overnight—a lot of the writers we had recognised as potentially worth publishing have come up with stories well-worth publishing. We feel sure that Charles Platt, Richard Gordon, Dikk Richardson and Colin Fry—not to forget Langdon Jones—will be producing a rich variety of stories in the near future. That all the stories published in this issue vary in choice of treatment and subject matter should indi-

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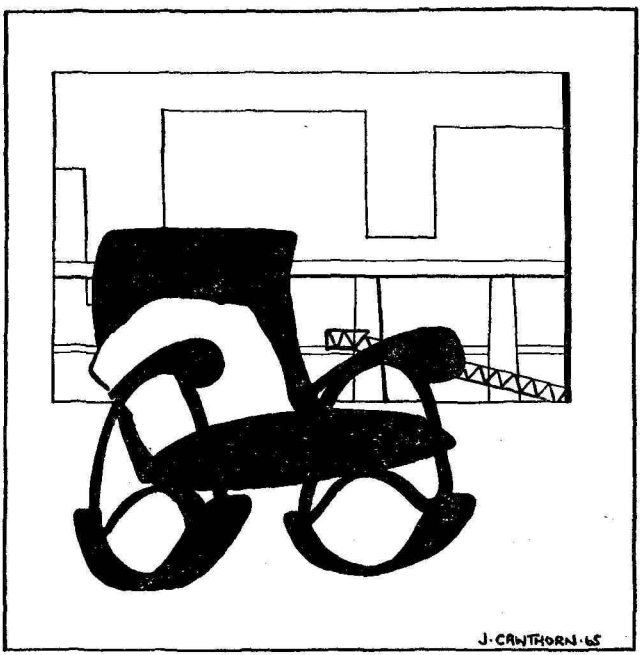
LONE ZONE

Charles Platt



THE ROOM WAS very small. It contained two single beds. It savoured of a musty, dusty deadness: an insidious lethargy that settled on every surface and was absorbed and assimilated. Like every other room in every apartment, in Block Seventy and all the other Blocks in Linear City 7, it was a

container of settling, drifting time dust, a terminal cancellation of dying energy differentials. Depopulated, in a Lone Zone, officially non-habitated.

But for a short while in the room lived four people, their life instilling momentary faint warmth to the clinically lifeless, mass-produced prefabricated wall and floor sections.

In the Dinette adjoining the bedroom Clement split open looted irradipaks and poured the plankton paste and simulated pastry into four heat plates. He dropped the filmy plastic wrappers on the floor, stood impassively watching the food cook itself. When it was ready he carried the plates unhurriedly into the adjoining bedroom.

He paused for a moment in the doorway. Dying winter sunlight, filtered by the dusty window, lit the girl's tired face where she lay intimately with Vincent under the durafelt blankets. Then the smell of hot food awakened her; she rolled over and sat up in the bed, revealing her compact, brown, naked body, and rubbed sleep out of her eyes.

Clement remained in the doorway a moment, his eyes resting on her. Her hair hung untidily down to her breasts, but the untidiness was somehow contrived. She had packaged, instant sex-appeal; but it was sprayed-on, and the sad and tired reality lying underneath showed through. Under her merchandised soft complexion was a hard face—paradise lost, innocence corrupted—one holding on to the present, afraid of the ageing body, dying beauty, drab inside, painted outside, futureless future.

Then she opened her eyes and smiled, reaching forward for the steaming food, and the momentary glimpse of reality ended. Her features shifted, and the illusion was once more complete.

Clement sat down on the edge of the other bed in the room, occupied by Franklin, still asleep. He shook him awake and gave him a plate of food, and the two of them and the girl ate in silence. When she had nearly finished, she gently shook Vincent's shoulder where he lay beside her. She completed her meal as he muttered and yawned, then pushed her empty heat plate to one side. Vincent opened his eyes. He reached out and stroked his finger

down her naked back ; she smiled, and lay down half over him, kissing him. But the moment of brief passion ended abruptly ; he pushed her to one side and reached for his food.

Vincent was tall and efficiently muscular. His features were strong and hard and his air of bored competence and sophisticated, though unassuming, self confidence classed him at once as leader of the group of Loners. He was a functional human being.

They dropped their heat plates on the floor when the meal was over and dressed themselves in one-piece brown, fibrous garments that were warm while allowing free movement. The girl found a hair brush in the apartment and ran it through her hair idly. When they were ready, they walked out of the place, leaving the door open behind them.

The corridor, too, was a stagnant backwater of accumulated time. An estuary off the slowing, thickening time stream where, until the entry of the Loners, all action, all life, all movement, had died.

Their feet stirred up a thin layer of dust covering the floor ; where the layer had been disturbed the floor covering sparkled glossy and new, in the same state as when it had been laid.

They walked unhurriedly down the echoing emergency stairs, since the elevators were out of order, and a hidden automatic mechanism that was still functioning in the deserted building opened the doors in the hall as they approached.

Outside the building it was bright and clear, but cold. They pushed their way through an overgrown square of vegetation that had once been a precisely calculated area of grass in between the towering apartment blocks. In the space of fifty years all kinds of plants had proliferated.

They walked down the boulevard, the empty buildings at either side of them standing precise and vertical in regular array like vast white featureless tombstones.

They made a left turn, footsteps echoing between the two-hundred-feet concrete slabs, stretching up to a roof of blue sky, and headed for what the planners had designated so many years ago the Social Centre of Linear City Seven. Walking with their backs to the morning winter sun their

shadows stretched in front of them over the deserted six lanes of asphalt, littered with abandoned automobiles and rubbish of various kinds that had fallen from the Blocks. Before them the top of each building caught the sun, the concrete and glass blazing gold and crimson in the slightly shimmering air.

The Loners reached the centre square, a vast concourse of powerpaths avenue intersections and walkways. Permapainted signs in dayglowing fluorescent paint filtered nonexistent traffic to shopping areas, amusements, car parks; yellow arrows guided the absent pedestrians to eating houses, fallout shelters, public lavatories; peeling hoardings blazed out messages once vital but rendered meaningless by the passage of time.

The square was a quarter of a mile wide. In the centre the planners had built a landscaped mound to obstruct the view of the monotonous façade of buildings along the opposite side. It had become overgrown with bushes and weeds, but the earth they grew in lacked essential minerals and was not topsoil, so that now they were turning brown and dying. A smell of vegetable decay filled the air, as the overcrowded vegetation strangled itself to death.

The Loners walked along the broad white line in the centre of the road, oblivious to the meaningless scenes around them. Two cars lay to one side, bumpers entangled, in the same spot as where they had collided twenty years ago, rusting and decomposing a little more every winter, sinking down on to the road surface which was cracked and broken by frost. The window of a supermart was stocked high with flashing, twentieth century symbols of affluence and want and pleasure, impulse-buying images there for the taking, though their glamour and status had wilted into tattiness.

All was empty, all was deserted. They walked down a pedestrian side-alley, the interleaved steel powerpath reverberating with every footstep, and along under a monorail bridge, where intermittent trains still ran between the few remaining Civic centres, though never stopping at the intermediate stations. Vincent led the way as they broke into single file down a narrower alley, then down some

steps to a basement which had once been used as a wine cellar by the off-licence above.

Vincent pushed open the door, and they walked in.

Mixed impressions—of music: talk: darkness: people: sweat: scent: smoke.

Then, as senses were sorted and classified, the dissonances in the music became clearer, the darkness resolved into shifting light patterns from the glowing ceiling, and groups of living, breathing Loners could be made out as shadowy figures on flexilex couches and chairs at tables filling half of the large room, lining two walls of it.

They found their usual niche in the corner and sat down. This room was the centre for the outcasts living in the Lone Zone; the Loners' meeting place, information exchange, security symbol. Those feeling the need to create, created here: they produced the murals of grey desolation, designed the shifting formless red patterns of light projected on the translucent ceiling panels like dying embers in a fire, composed and played the music that at first appeared formless and incoherent, but then resolved, when the themes coincided briefly, into fleeting cadences of infinite meaning and suggestion.

Here also could one find the diseased, the neurotic, the perverted and the physically or mentally spastic outcasts from the Civic centres; men peddling drink and drugs and women and themselves, not for money, obsolete and unused in the face of untapped material wealth lying all around, but to satisfy more desperate, more personal, social and psychological needs.

A low dais on which the musicians sat extended along one wall, adjacent to a bar faced in white plastic. From behind it, Benedict, the old bartender, walked laboriously across the small dance floor to Vincent's table. He leant on the edge to catch his breath, and spoke in a low, wheezing voice.

"Some civic's been seen following you. Know anything about it?"

Vincent registered surprise. He shook his head slowly.

"A monocar stopped at the regional station this morning."

"You mean the one near here? The station for this region?"

"That's what I said. You can imagine, it didn't go unnoticed. You know Philpot's group? They been trailing this civic, who got off the monocar, for a half hour, till he saw your crowd."

"Does he know he's been followed?" asked Vincent.

The bartender shook his head.

"And you mean he's coming here, after us."

"Any minute."

A half smile touched the corners of Vincent's mouth. "Then why not let him come right in to see us?" Their eyes met for a moment. The old bartender nodded and turned away, his wrinkled face expressionless. He shuffled back to the bar, picked up a glass and began to polish it, glancing at the door now and then.

"What could one of those bastards be doing here, tracking us?" murmured Clement. "It smells rotten."

"Yeah, it stinks," said Vincent. "If they were trying to infiltrate, it'd be more subtle, you'd think. Stopping a monocar at a station that's not been used for maybe twenty, thirty years doesn't reckon, not at all."

As he finished speaking, the door across the room opened, and a man walked in. He was between twenty and twenty-five and his bearing, his clothes, his manner, face and build branded him as a civic, from one of the tight-knit civic-centre strongholds of dying twentieth century civilisation.

He stood by the door, blinking in the smoke and darkness, and one by one the heads turned towards him, expressionless eyes sweeping across to cover him. The music faltered and stopped. The murmur of talk died.

The man let go the door, and it shut with a bang that reverberated in the room. His eyes alighted upon Vincent and, without looking to either side of him at the lines of impassively hostile faces following his every movement, he walked, slowly, across the room to the table where Vincent and his group sat, every footstep of his leather-soled civic shoes echoing loud in the sudden silence.

He stood in front of them, and they saw the sweat on his forehead and the slight trembling of his fingers. His face

twitched, once, and Vincent and Franklin and Clement and the girl, Kitt, stared up at him in the absolute quiet.

The man cleared his throat.

"Good morning," he said, formally. He extended his right hand, but Vincent ignored it; his eyes rested uncomfortably on the civic's face. The man held his ground, his left hand closed into a fist by his side, staring back into Vincent's eyes. The silence stretched and stretched in the heavy air until at suffocating breaking point. Still the civic stood there, under the eyes of the people in the room, motionless, rigid, right hand still extended.

Finally, when the impasse could be drawn out no further, after a century of seconds, Vincent let a ghost of a smile touch his lips. He slowly inclined his head to the other man in the barest possible form of a nod of recognition.

The civic's eyes dropped from Vincent's face. His right arm fell to his side. Franklin rose quietly from his seat and dragged a chair over from an adjacent table; the civic took it from him and sat down, slowly, carefully.

Someone in the silent room shuffled uneasily. A brief murmur and a high-pitched laugh broke the silence. One of the musicians strummed his instrument nervously, and the others began to play, trying to recapture their previous melody. Conversations started, haltingly, and Benedict, behind the bar, coughed asthmatically and began to dry glasses again, mechanically. The room was superficially back to its normal state, though underneath there remained a tension and watchfulness that had not been there before.

The civic cleared his throat.

"You must wonder why I've come here," he said.

Vincent snorted in contempt. "That's a bloody stupid thing to say," he replied evenly. "The last civic who came here we hanged publicly after an hour of his insipid preaching. That was two years ago."

The man paused, uncertainly. "I, uh, heard about that," he said.

Vincent leaned forward, elbows on the table.

"Then what are you doing here, Mister Civic?"

"Johnson, my name's Johnson."

Vincent continued to stare at him.

"Look, I'll tell you straight why I'm here. It's because I can't stand the civic centres any longer. I've come to find freedom, find a freer life, get out of Cenlon into the open. You were born here, you can't visualise it; but it's hell in the civic centres and getting worse, the birth rate down and the administration . . ."

The four of them continued to stare at him impassively.

"I hope you don't object, that it's not violating any of your codes, I saw you and followed you here. I thought I might find someone . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You really want to throw off your city life and live in the Lone Zones," said Vincent. He sniggered. "Did you get that one, people?" The four loners smiled knowing, predatory smiles at Johnson where he sat across the table from them.

"It's true, I swear it's true!" Johnson pleaded.

"And no doubt," Vincent continued as if the other man had not interrupted, "You'll be wanting to join one of the groups, get in with them, ask them to help you and guide you round, right?"

"I want actually to live here, absorb your way of life, live it myself . . ."

"You want to join up with us?"

Their eyes met suddenly. Johnson looked away. He groped for words.

"I have nothing to offer you in exchange, but . . ."

"Listen, Mister Civic," said Vincent. His manner was tense. "All of us grew up together. We've been living together since about five or six years old. We're a unit, and we don't like civics. We value them less than dung. Just about everyone you'll meet here will tell you the same. Why don't you just clear out?"

Vincent's eyes bored into Johnson, as if they could see his soul, and for a moment he panicked, thinking, does he suspect?

"Look, I wouldn't be any trouble," he said desperately, "I just want to stick round here . . ."

Vincent grinned. He exchanged looks with the others, and relaxed back in his chair.

"What do you think?" he said.

Clement shrugged. "Marginal amusement value," he said.

Vincent turned back to face Johnson. "He speaks for the rest of them," he said, and laughed suddenly, a short, sharp bark of a laugh. He stood up, and the rest of them did also. Johnson rose uncertainly to his feet. Vincent walked round the table to him and slapped him on the back. "Let's go get some lunch," he said.

A room full of eyes followed them as they walked out.

THE BRIGHT OUTSIDE made them blink after the dimness of the room they had been in. Vincent led the way up the steps and back along the alley. He stood for a moment, looking first left and then right, then, circling his arm round Kitt's waist, he walked deeper into the shopping area behind the façade lining the square. Johnson walked uncertainly beside him.

"It's . . . all right if I stick around for a while?" he said.

"Who's stopping you?" said Vincent. He squinted up at the noonday sun, hanging low in the cold winter sky.

"That . . . it was some sort of a test, back there?" persisted Johnson. Vincent looked at him and he had the idea that behind the impassive face the Loner was laughing.

"It could have been," he said. "Yes, it certainly could."

"I must seem naïve," Johnson began, but Vincent cut him short.

"In here," he said, gesturing to a deserted supermart. "I'll tell you after lunch, man, just don't be so impatient."

They pushed open the plastiglass doors and stepped inside the deserted store. The heating was still operating. They walked down the aisles of shelves, and Johnson followed the Loners in selecting what he wanted for his lunch. Glittering foil, living lettering, perspective packages screamed at him from all sides: irradiated food that would stay edible for another fifty years at least, food that had been packaged and delivered and displayed ready for a population that had never been, when the city had been built for all the people who had never arrived.

Clement turned on all the lighting from a hidden switch in the store room and the supermart burst into brilliant life, fluorescent tinsel glory, an eternally gay season of synthetic cheer.

"It stinks," said Kitt. "Turn it off, Clem, so we can eat."

The lighting off, the merchandise lying partly obscured in shadow, they sat round on the floor and ate their meal.

After lunch the group of Loners stretched out on the floor.

"Siesta," Vincent explained, lying back against a display of bath sponges filling one of the shelves, his arm around Kitt. "It's a good system. You ought to try it." He pulled the girl closer to him.

Johnson explained he disliked sleeping in the afternoon. He loitered while they settled down to rest, then crept away from them to the building's exit.

He found his way back to the central square. The featureless slabs of concrete all around made him feel a microscopic creature wandering in a model of a city where only the larger details could be reproduced. It was all so devoid of ornamentation or detail; everything was so large and so empty, planned for the hordes of the human race that the trend curves had predicted would come to be. But the trend curves could not take into account birth control, and its long-term tragically permanent effects, or, perhaps the major factor governing birth rates through all history, the unknown human factor that without logic or reason altered customs and habits and wants and desires so quickly that in one decade it was fashionable to have five children, in another decade, none at all.

He walked on, musing, staring at the pavement. Who knew what governed population? The factors had never been established, it wasn't the kind of thing on which one could conduct controlled experiments. There had been over-population experiments with laboratory rats in a closed environment, he remembered; unsettling experiments as a result of which the rat population died out or lost sanity and normal social customs, simply as a result of population increase within a restricted environment.

In human society, the known population variations stretching back through history to the eighteenth century couldn't be accounted for with an absolute degree of certainty. There was always the unpredictable human factor in operation behind the birth rate.

Johnson could remember, also, his father telling him about the panic building of the seventies when population explosion had for the first time begun to affect personal, daily life, had begun to mean something tangible to the individual. The undeveloped countries, strangled to death by overpopulation, and wiped out within two decades; the industrialised countries building frantically to meet the expected increase that would occur in the next generation. But the increase had never occurred; almost overnight the atmosphere changed, women stopped having children, in some cases because the birth control tablets had, after protracted use, rendered them incapable, but in more instances because couples simply didn't want children any more. The meaning of overpopulation and the fear of it; the propaganda in favour of small families; the depression that had set in as population growth ceased to be an inflationary aid to the economy and became a burden—all these factors must have contributed. But the simple, cold fact was that procreation was no longer desired or wanted.

And this, thought Johnson, was the ironical result: almost the entire material resources of the earth plundered in a panic-stricken rush to build for a generation that never arrived.

He stopped outside a sensie theatre, walked up to the entrance and pushed open the doors leading into the foyer. It had probably never been used; under the dust that had settled the red carpet was sparkling new, the glow panels untapped, the walls shimmering brushed stainless steel. The change-giving machine was stocked high with credit tokens minted thirty or forty years ago.

The city was waiting; it had been waiting for human beings for forty years, and it would go on waiting for centuries, possibly forever. (For the birth rate continued to decline, as if man, once so over-prolific, now no longer cared about his future). Johnson walked out of the theatre. He stood on the bottom step of a sidewalk escalator and pressed the start button; the machinery whined into life immediately. All over the city, servo mechanisms, machines, houses . . . all empty, waiting, ready to fulfil their purpose.

He reached the third walkway level and stepped off the escalator. He entered a Fun Palace, ten stories high,

dominating the street below. A compulsive, magnetic atmosphere still surrounded it, even after its years of desolation.

He pushed open the door, climbed over the barrier leading to the ten turnstiles, walked along a passage and pushed open a pair of double doors. Inside, it was almost dark. He let the door shut and his eyes slowly accustomed themselves to the dim light from a silvery crescent suspended in the darkness of the roof; and he suddenly saw that the room, of unguessable dimensions, was in fact a real-life replica of an idealised country landscape on a warm summer night. Light breezes whispered around him; tiny rustling sounds came from the tufts of grass. But the illusion was soured, not by the plastic grass which even contained wet sap, nor by the moonlight, which was of a spectrum identical to the genuine article, but by the landscaping. Everywhere were little secluded niches, artificial grassy hollows. One vast love-making arena, Johnson realised, with a trace of revulsion. A replica of the open spaces that had largely been swallowed up by the slab-like buildings.

Johnson turned to walk back to the exit, but as he did so the moon and stars went out.

He froze where he stood, casting about in the darkness for some small light source, but there was thick, black darkness everywhere he looked. Slowly and carefully, trying not to panic, he moved towards where he thought the door had been. The mechanical wind still rustled past him, warm and intimate, so the power failure couldn't have been total.

He sidled forwards, slowly, hands outstretched.

Was that a noise, over to his left? He stopped and listened. Of course, he was imagining things. He moved forwards again, then stopped. That time, he was certain there had been a shuffling noise. He stared over to one side, trying to penetrate the blackness; suddenly he was blinded by brilliant light shining straight at him.

Without understanding the reflex action, he dived flat on the ground, and there was a loud explosion as he did so. Something tore into the grass beside him, then the light went out.

He lay still, stunned, brilliant after-images, left by the blinding light, swimming round in his eyes. Then he made a sudden dash forward across the uneven grass, until he hit

the wall, hard. He started searching, feeling with the palms of his hands for the door, heart thudding in panic. He found it, and pushed, running headlong into the bright light outside. From behind him came another gunshot.

But the exit he had found was not to the outside ; he was in another part of the fun palace, a vast auditorium. Seats spread out in front of him in endless lines. He ran along the back row, mind spinning, wondering, with no time to reason coherently, who could be trying to kill him.

He ran out of another exit door, imagining he heard pounding footsteps behind him. He found himself in a long, narrow corridor. Several doors led off it. He opened the first one. There was darkness in front of him ; but hearing the footsteps of his pursuer coming nearer Johnson rushed in.

He took three steps and then plunged downwards, falling, a scream stuck in his throat, a sinking sensation in his stomach. He dropped cleanly through the air, terrified, then landed with a jolt on a resilient pile of some kind of foam rubber. It must have been ten or twelve feet thick, and every movement he tried to make left him floundering in the soft, unmanageable stuff, sinking deep into it. From somewhere up above him there was a yellow flash and simultaneously a bullet tore into the foam near him. The loud report rang in his ears ; but the flash had illuminated the way out of the spongy stuff. He rolled over and on to a solid floor, stood up and burst through a door . . . into a three dimensional mirror maze.

The glass surfaces extended all around him, above and below, flights of glass stairs connecting one level to the next. From the mirrors his frightened face stared back at him, bewildered. He took a step forward and collided with a glass screen. He felt round it, walking unsteadily, feeling his way between the panels, trying to see a way out of the maze. But the glittering reflections were all around him. He descended a flight of stairs, then decided that the designers of the maze would have been more likely to place the exit at the top than the bottom. He climbed up several storeys, until there was only a flat mirror surface above his head, and blindly searched through the glittering corridors for a way out.

From down below and behind him, a shot rang out; there was the sound of smashing glass, splintering fragments tinkling to the floor. Another shot, and another; in panic, Johnson kicked out at the glass panels around him, sending them splintering. Suddenly he saw the exit door in front of him and ran through it.

Abruptly, he was outside the building; the cold air whipped into his clothes and he blinked in the watery sunlight. He ran down a flight of steps, found himself in a side alley, and ran along it, glancing over his shoulder now and then. The metal thrummed under his feet, the bewildering vertical faces of concrete all around, stretching up above him and over him. He ran faster, as scared of the overwhelming city as of his pursuer, blindly bumping into walls and hard surfaces, until suddenly two hands seized him from behind and pulled him into a doorway.

He fought wildly until he looked round and saw that it was Vincent, his cold blue eyes looking down at him in amused contempt.

Johnson nearly collapsed, gasping for breath. He went on into the shop whose doorway they were standing in, and inside was the rest of the group.

He leant against the counter and managed to describe what had happened.

They listened in cold silence.

When he had finished telling them about his pursuit, he sat down in a chair at one side of the shop, which sold shoes, still breathing unsteadily.

Vincent stood in the centre of the place, snapping the fingers of one hand.

"What do, where go?" said Franklin. Vincent didn't answer immediately; he walked over to the window and looked outside. In the street it was as deserted as ever, silence hanging heavy in the sunlight. The empty scene was somehow hostile, waiting. He turned round.

"Better cut out," he said. He looked at Johnson. "We need you like a rope round our necks," he said, "or a bullet in our backs, which might be the more probable form of death, I'm thinking." He laughed. It was an unpleasant noise.

"Why?" said Johnson, "why should I be such a liability?"

"Because you're a filthy damn civic!" shouted Vincent.

"And that makes you filthy civic-lovers?" said Johnson quietly. Vincent laughed again and turned away.

"If we hadn't spoken to you when you came in that bar room you'd have been pulled to pieces."

"Why did you bother?"

Vincent paused, about to say something. Then he seemed to think better of it.

"Maybe because we felt like it. Now, mister, you have a choice: stay here, take your chances on your own, or come with us, and do what I say like anyone else in the group. No guarantees, no nothing. We won't go out of our way to protect you, you understand. Or if you think you can make it, you can split away from us, try to make it back to a civic centre. The chances for that are bad, but you might manage it. Which is it going to be?"

"I'll come with you," Johnson replied, with no apparent hesitation. "I've got free from civic life and I want to stay free. I'm not going back now." Vincent stared at him a moment, eyes piercing clear inside the man, and once again Johnson wondered: did he suspect, had he seen through to what he was really here for? But then the Loner turned away and in their slow and efficient way the group moved out of the shop into the alley and started up a stairway to the higher levels, following Vincent without a word spoken.

"Why don't you activate the powerpaths and escalators?" Johnson asked, when they had nearly reached the top level.

"Attracts too much attention," Vincent replied. "No Loner ever does. That's probably what attracted attention to you."

They walked on, for three or four hours, along the pedestrian way that had been designed to carry several thousand citizens day and night near roof-level of the city. The sun reddened as it sank into the horizon in front of them, glittering on the surface of the walkway. They entered a more residential section of the city, and Vincent led the way to where they could drop down on to a monorail, one of a set of parallel tracks leading into the suburbs. The track was four feet wide, supported by pylons at intervals and at first the drop worried Johnson ; but as the sunlight became dimmer and dimmer and shadows deeper it was almost as if the space below was a nonexistent illusion.

When darkness eventually came, Vincent led the way off the track down an iron ladder set into one of the pylons and they sought out a food store. They sat in one corner and ate irradiated foods heated in the packs they were to have been sold in, the only light being provided by a small torch. They broke open some plastic soft-drink packs, drank their chemical contents, and then lay down where they were on the floor. Kitt approached Vincent but he expressed uninterest with some small gesture or remark, so she turned away and without visible emotion settled down with the surly, reticent Clement. Vincent stood up and walked around restlessly for a while, finally disappearing towards the exit of the supermart, and Johnson on impulse stood up and followed him.

The Loner was standing by a dust-covered neon sign, staring out through the window at the unrelieved darkness. He seemed to have been expecting Johnson to come, which irritated him, and started speaking as the civic approached.

"You've landed us in a pretty stupid situation," he said. "You realise that?"

"Wouldn't you say you landed yourselves in it?" Johnson replied.

"Maybe, to some extent. Anyhow, what does it matter." He paused for a moment, yawned silently. "How do you like our life, civic?"

"I'll be able to answer that when I understand it."

Vincent laughed.

"How bloody typical, of your type. Always trying to understand something, as if everything is a challenge. Never able to accept anything and live with it. Look man, outside that window," he gestured through the glass, "could be ten, maybe more Loners from back in the centre, following us up here. Several weapons each, ready to shoot us down as filthy civic-lovers. I tell you, it's quite possible." He grunted, in amusement. "Now, doesn't that worry you, man?"

"Doesn't it worry you?" Johnson replied.

Vincent shook his head. "It doesn't touch me emotionally, like it disturbs you. I may care about our group—in spite of the tag, Loners don't make out so well when they're on their own, you need a unit to get along, and you get to like

it—but it makes no difference to me, personally, if there's men plotting to gun me down tonight."

"You mean you don't care if you live or die? That seems pretty defeatist. Perhaps it's people like you behind the population drop; perhaps that sort of mentality . . ."

"You get me wrong," Vincent interrupted. "I take precautions, I fight for my survival any way I can. But beyond that . . . why should I worry? If something's going to happen and I can't stop it, why not relax and live with the fact?"

"That's easy to say," said Johnson.

"Yeah, and near impossible for a civic to put into practice," Vincent replied. "You're clinging to the past, your type: hanging on to a world where everyone had a right to security and paid for it by losing his identity. Times have changed, man, and you got to adapt, find yourself, then look out at everything round you and live. Don't you see?"

"But your way of life, it sounds a cliché to say so, but it seems a step back from civilisation, so barbaric . . ."

"Yeah?" said Vincent. "Then you're more stupid than I thought. Like I told you, we four grew up together, as a group, in one of the Blocks. All abandoned by loving parents ashamed of their children, see? We got our education the hard way, Mr. Johnson, unlike those civics who are spoon fed. We're self-taught and we've made out alone and we have our own code of life, even though it may not look it to you."

"A code that incorporates polygamy?"

"Uh-uh, you mean polyandry. Where's your education, civic?" He laughed briefly. "Sure, we believe in sharing a girl. You tell me how anything else can work in a crazy world where there are three times as many males as females. You don't seem to realise that it's a case either of forgetting so-called moral principles, accepting circumstances and living within their confines, or of getting tied up in so many conscience-knots you just haven't a chance any more."

"I can hardly accept that . . ."

Vincent turned away from the window and yawned again.

"You have to, Mister Civic, if you're going to make out. You have to accept it like we all accept the human race is dying, going for good, like we accept that pretty damn soon there won't be a birth rate at all. You got to adapt, man; that's the secret."

The moon emerged from behind a cloud and softly illuminated the supermart they were in with cold, pale light.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mr Johnson," said Vincent. He walked slowly off into the maze of shelved merchandise and disappeared from view.

Johnson turned back, looking out of the window again for a moment, slight indecision troubling his mind. Then he saw the empty, decaying buildings more clearly, and the true nature of the few surviving dregs of humanity that roamed nomadically from one deserted supermart to the next sharpened in his mind. Once again he knew his purpose and the determination to carry it out. He saw Vincent, and the rest of the group, as fellow-men not too much unlike himself, and returned to where they had settled on the floor with hope for better progress the next day.

He crept near the rest of them, and stretched out on the floor, closing his eyes. The building was still heated during the night, and the slightly spongy floor didn't make too hard a bed. Johnson turned over on his side and tried to go to sleep. From the corner there came the restless, fervent whispers and movements of slow love-making; but soon he found he could shut everything out of his mind and the weariness crept over him and he sank into sleep.

THE NEXT DAY dawned with overcast skies, and thin rain whipped along in the wind. They woke and stretched the stiffness out of their bones and found glossy plastic colour-coded packages of pre-digested breakfast half way along one of the displays of impulse-buying designs and free offers. The mushy food was intended to be gulped down by ulcerous executives climbing the promotion ladder and manual workers whose job depended on being on time every day for the same monotonous job (pro-

tected from automation by Welfare State Control and Job Insurance Limited); it tasted foul, its main constituents being plankton and revitalised seaweed with added protein. But it was hot and filled the stomach. They left the dust-shrouded supermart, moved on through the credit register bays that still spoke of Final Reckoning as they had so often for so many in the past, and left the plastichrome palace to moulder on through the centuries of time.

Vincent located a clothing store, and they activated the fotofitter, styling a raincoat for each of them. The clothes they had ordered appeared in the reposit but the plastiglass wouldn't open until the correct credit tokens had been deposited. Vincent smashed the apparatus with a certain degree of satisfaction, his face flushed with the exertion, and they left with the polyethylene garments to protect them from the weather.

They climbed up to the monorail, but it was too slippery to be safe, so they dragged on at street level through the rain, along the endless roads that served only to separate one Block from the next: roads that were gutters running with dirty water. All around the world was grey and dull, depressing and demoralising. The claustrophobic nature of the giant vertical concrete surfaces was stronger in the dim light that made them dark silhouettes against the cloudy sky. These were the graves of human beings unborn, the men and women and children who had never entered the world to fill their space allocation with a few meagre possessions, who never knew life, never ate a TV breakfast or an instant lunch or a pre-packed supper, never experienced the communal life led when you were within twelve feet of another human being every night and day of your existence, never enjoyed the share-air schemes, the waste-water-is-quite-all-right, CO_2-smells-good advertising campaigns, the public transport problem, the rising food prices and exhausted resources, the wonderful blossoming affluence of galloping inflation...

In such a demoralised, disenchanted world was it surprising that men found nothing for the next generation or themselves to live for? That human society lost initiative, lost interest, and just gave up?

Johnson hunched his shoulders, walking into the biting wind, and wiped the rain from his face. Which was the lesser of the two evils, an overcrowded, sourly affluent society, or free and undisciplined life in the dregs of what once had been?

Vincent, walking in front of him, stopped abruptly and motioned the others to a halt. He stood still, eyes travelling over the scene ahead.

"What is it?" said Johnson.

"Life up ahead," Vincent replied, without turning round. "Little signs . . . cigarette packet, clean curtains in the last-but-one window on the top floor of that Block . . . you just get to feel it when there's life in the area." He turned and walked around the Block lying ahead and to their right, and the others followed him round to the back entrance.

"You saw which window. We take up the two elevators, cover the staircases, leave no escape route they can get down while we're heading up. Approach from opposite ends of the corridor, you know the scheme. Rendezvous ten minutes. Right?" Franklin and Clement and Kitt were accustomed to the routine; they diverged in the wide entrance hall. Vincent's suspicions had been correct: there were tracks in the dust on the floor, regular footprints forming a habitual path. "Careless," Vincent muttered to himself, and started climbing the emergency stairs.

"But why do you have to . . . to attack them?" Johnson asked, "why can't you leave them alone?"

"Until you find out to the contrary," Vincent replied, "Any Loner you meet is an enemy, when you're out of your home area. And you might live longer if you learned that. You fancy walking on past, not knowing whether whoever-it-is we saw in this building is going to follow us till nightfall?"

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Take a look inside, see who's here."

They went on climbing the stairs, up to the fifteenth floor, at the top of the building. Vincent, familiar with the layout of the Blocks, located the correct corridor without trouble. From the other end of it came a small sound as the three other Loners arrived. Together they converged

slowly, tensely, upon the door to which tracks in the dust unmistakably led. Vincent stood to one side, and motioned Clement forward. The man knocked lightly on the door.

"We're from subcentre three," he shouted, "seeking no violence. Do we find none?" Apparently, Johnson realised, this was a ritual phrase spoken out of tradition.

There was no reply from within the room. Clement paused, then knocked again. Still there was no response of any kind. He looked questioningly at Vincent, who nodded.

Without hesitation the other stood back, drew his gun, and in one quick movement kicked the door open.

What happened next was too fast for Johnson to follow. There was a double explosion that sent his ears singing, and a sudden rush of movement as the group hurried into the room. Clement lay on the floor, clutching his side, groaning. Across the room, in an old rocking chair filched from God knew where, an old lady, yellow skinned and skeletal, slumped back, grinning, shot through the heart. A rifle lay in her lap, smoking slightly.

Vincent stood by the door, warily watching the corridor outside, while from the other of the two rooms in the little apartment came the noise of systematic searching.

Johnson bent down and examined Clement where he lay on his back on the floor, felled by the shot the old lady had fired before he had killed her. The bullet had entered his left side, just below the heart, and had gone straight through the body. Already he had lost a lot of blood, and would lose more unless attended to. He appeared to be unconscious.

Kitt and Franklin reappeared from the other room, the slim figure of a girl between them. She was pretty, in a sad, vacant way. Her face was white, looking untouched by the sun, and more bewildered than afraid. She was perhaps eighteen, but had the innocent air of a girl of five.

Vincent turned round and saw the girl. The tableau lasted for some seconds, motionless, silent. No one showed any expression or emotion whatsoever. Finally Vincent asked, "Can you speak?"

"Y . . . yes," the girl said hesitantly. He motioned for them to let go of her arms.

"What's your name?"

"My name's Jane."

"Your grandmother's dead, Jane."

"She was my great-aunt. Yes, I know—you killed her."

It was a statement of fact; but whether the absence of emotion was due to the shock of the event or not Johnson couldn't tell.

"And she hit one of us," Vincent replied, half to himself. "Yeah. Well, things happen that way. Do you know your way around this neighbourhood?"

The girl shook her head. She indicated the crumpled figure in the rocking chair.

"She didn't like me going out."

"I see. Well, I guess we better hole up here for a while. Looks like you live alone here, but we can't take chances on friends of yours following us if we move on. You," he said to Johnson, crouching over Clement, "can you take care of Clem?"

"Not without bandages, pain-killers, antibiotics, the rest . . . I have a Civic emergency first aid kit, but there's not much I can do with that."

"Give me a list and we'll get what you need," said Vincent, "as well as food for a week." He walked over to the window and drew the curtain to one side, looking down into the deserted street. "Good vantage point here. If we take the next room along as well, we can cover both faces of this Block." He stepped back to the middle of the room. "Frank, you can come with me now to fetch the supplies. Jane, you're coming with us too, less chance of us getting shot down if you're with us."

"I don't believe there's anyone else round here for miles . . ." she began.

"Maybe," said Vincent. "But you can come with us just in case. Kitt, you stay here and keep an eye on things, right?" He turned to open the door without waiting for her reply, and watched the slim girl whose name was Jane walk past him, eyes openly hungry and desiring. Franklin followed her out and shut the door behind them.

Silence fell in the room. Kitt found a sheet in the adjoin-

ing room and threw it over the old lady in the rocking chair, then sat down by the window, looking idly out into the street.

"How long do you think they'll be gone?" Johnson said, uncomfortably wanting to break the silence. He dabbed at the wound with single-minded concentration.

"Not long," she replied.

Silence fell in the small room.

Johnson cleared his throat. He stood up, walked to the window, avoiding looking at the corpse of the old woman thinly disguised by the sheet. From the corner of his eye he could see Kitt sitting motionless in one of the chairs, staring idly at her hands clasped in her lap.

Why does she sit there, like that, Johnson wondered. Doesn't she feel anything, sense what has happened, what's going to happen?

He turned round, facing back into the room.

"Aren't you . . . haven't you been . . . affected, at all?" he said.

"What?"

"The butchery of an old woman, the abduction of a young girl . . ."

Kitt shrugged.

"You don't take chances under these circumstances," she replied. "Even that kind old lady would have been likely to eliminate two, perhaps three of us; you saw the way she was ready with the rifle and able to handle it. Some of the old people are the most dangerous; they won't move out of their homes, even though the rest of the people who were to have occupied the other apartments never arrived. They hole up alone, develop an almost paranoid fear and hatred of strangers. That's why it's dog eat dog when you're out of your own area, you never know what you're going to run up against. It's life, it's logic; things are that way and they have to be lived with." She looked up at him suddenly with hard eyes. "You don't find accepting circumstances easy, do you?"

"All right, I agree to some extent with what you say," said Johnson. "From a dispassionate viewpoint, what we did was cold bloodedly logical. But how can you show no

emotion? And why do you let Vincent treat you like he does? How can you accept everything so philosophically?"

She seemed to be examining his face.

"You really don't understand, do you," she said slowly. "You expect me to fight to keep Vince, or burst into tears, or act like any of your delicately emotional civic women would. Don't you see, if Vince has found another girl and wants to leave, it's his decision?"

"So much for the equality of men and women," Johnson cynically.

"Equality doesn't come into it. Sex doesn't come into it. I don't think I have a right to try to influence another person in the making of a personal decision, that's all. It's his private affair."

"Then don't you care at all?"

She laughed abruptly.

"You think I don't care? You think I haven't been fighting to hold on to him for the past three months? Of course I care. But it's better that it should happen this way; better this than a parting that would have lasted three months more, a gradual separation that no one could stop."

Johnson stood up and paced back and forth across the room. Finally he stopped in front of Kitt where she still sat impassively in the chair.

"But you're being used! Don't you care? Haven't you ever wondered what will have happened to you in ten years' time? It can't last forever, whatever your relationship. Why don't you get away from this while you can, escape back to civilisation? Get back to where there's still some decency, some morals, a cultured way of life. You have a chance, now; why not take it?"

She smiled, obviously uncomprehending.

"Because I belong here, it's my life; I couldn't exist in your society . . ."

"Yet you live here, a whore who, like all whores, is one day discarded. Don't you ever want to find a husband, settle down, fall in love?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'whore'. I'm happy here, now. Why should I disturb myself and spoil my happiness, by speculating on what may happen? And why should I tie myself down and stagnate, forfeit my own free

will? Why should I find just one man to love, when I have three, here?"

"You have crude sex with them, you don't love them . . ."

"Have you grown up in intimate contact within a small group of people, devoid of contact with a populated outside world? What you know about our relationships?" She stared at him with cold blue eyes.

"You don't understand," said Johnson.

"No," she said, "it's you who doesn't understand . . ." But before she could continue, she was interrupted by a burst of rapid gunfire from the street below.

WHEN VINCENT AND Franklin had gone with the girl down to the nearest shopping area to get supplies, there had been an oppressive, ominous silence. The wind had dropped completely, the misty rain droplets falling straight down out of the dull sky. No one had spoken, except for the occasional terse instruction from Vincent, and they had hurried from shop to shop, collecting goods nervously, almost as if expecting impending attack.

They had luckily come across a large shop selling sports goods of all kinds, including repeating rifles and ammunition. They had gone from there to get medical and food supplies, and were on their way back to the Block when several shots cracked out from the top of the monorail track.

The three of them broke into a run immediately, Vincent glancing hastily over his shoulder, trying to locate the source of the gunfire, to separate it from the echoes rebounding between the apartment buildings and streets. He saw three figures on the monorail, silhouetted black against the sky, hurrying to clamber down the ladder to the ground. Evidently they had hoped to pick the two Loners and the girl off from the high vantage point; luckily their aim had either been at fault, or a sudden breath of wind had made a vital difference.

Then Vincent and the others were inside the block, shooting up to the fifteenth floor in the elevator.

Vincent left Franklin to guard the approach to the corridor, and holding tight to the girl's hand ran towards

the room where they had left Kitt, Johnson and wounded Clement. The door opened as they approached.

"Out, out!" shouted Vincent, gasping for breath. "Bastards were on the monorail, must have trailed us right the way from back at the centre. Frank's holding them off now."

"What about Clement?" said Johnson. Vincent looked at the unconscious figure on the floor.

"Have to leave him. If one of us tried to carry him, it'd be two dead men instead of one."

"But . . ."

"He's right," cut in Kitt. "We'll have to leave him. He'd never survive a trip now, anyway."

"You're just saying that to save your consciences," said Johnson, angrily. "I suppose if you won't do it, then, I will." He bent down and hoisted the unconscious man on to his back.

"You're crazy," said Vincent, with a quick glance behind him along the corridor. "But there's no time to argue. If you get killed it's your own stupid fault."

A burst of gunfire from elsewhere in the building reinforced his words.

Vincent sighed and rubbed his eyes wearily. "We have to move fast," he said, as if trying to dispel his own tiredness. "Follow me." He grabbed the hand of the girl, Jane, and hurried her off down the corridor towards a flight of stairs leading to the roof. Kitt went after them, and Johnson, staggering under the weight of Clement, his face flushed red and the thumping of his heart loud in his ears, broke into a stumbling run.

They paused at the foot of the stairs. Vincent gave two shrill whistles; there was another burst of gunfire and then Franklin was running down the corridor towards them, his rifle in one hand. They hurried up to the roof, banging the access door shut behind them. Vincent used his knife to carve two wooden wedges, from the stock of his rifle, and banged them home at the top and bottom of the door. Then he ran to the edge of the building, grasping the iron railing. The next block stood twenty feet away, unreachable. Vincent prowled round the roof like a caged animal, staring down at the ground a hundred or

more feet below. He walked back to the group of people standing watching him, hopefully, waiting.

"You got us here," muttered Johnson, "and now you don't know what to do."

"Shut your mouth," snapped Franklin.

Vincent stood, clenching and unclenching his fists. From behind the door leading up to the roof they could hear pounding feet, coming nearer.

"Only one thing to do," Vincent said suddenly. "Strip your clothes off, quick." He snapped his fingers. "Knot them together. Move!"

The door handle rattled. There was a thump as someone barged it from within.

Johnson, without knowing why, suddenly found himself obeying the man, removing his clothes and tying them together. The rope they made was not more than ten feet long. The thumps against the door were becoming more and more pronounced.

Vincent grabbed the chain of clothing and tied it hurriedly around the railing at the edge of the flat roof. He climbed over the side and unhesitatingly disappeared out of sight, dangling over the gaping drop below, climbing down hand over hand. They heard the sound of breaking glass as he kicked in a window of the floor immediately beneath. Hanging from one hand, he reached through the hole he had made and worked the catch of the window. It swung open and he leapt into the corridor.

"Frank, throw me my gun, and follow!" he yelled back to the people above. Franklin threw the gun down to him, then climbed down the rope. Kitt went after him, then Jane, looking silently terrified of the drop below. Johnson stood looking over the edge, still holding the unconscious Clement in his arms.

"For Christ's sake," Vincent shouted up. "Every second counts."

As he spoke, Johnson heard the first ominous splintering of the door behind him as the panels and the frame started to give away. He stepped to the railing, trembling with the clammy chill of the mist and rain on his naked body and, trying to avoid contemplation of the drop below him, he leaned over the railing and inch by inch lowered

Clement's body over the edge. Hands from the window below reached out and caught the unconscious man's ankles; somehow he was pulled inside. Droplets of blood from his wound spattered down and fell with the rain to the wet pavement below.

Trembling almost uncontrollably, Johnson stepped over the railing, clutching on to the loosely knotted clothing. He slid down the rope slowly, eyes shut, until he felt his toes touch the sill of the window. He let go and half fell into the corridor.

Immediately they were running down it, away from him. He dragged Clement on to his back and stumbled after them, gasping for breath. They piled into one of the elevators.

"If that bloody corpse overloads us, I'll kill you," hissed Vincent. Then the doors rumbled shut and they dropped cleanly down the shaft to ground level.

The doors opened on to the deserted hallway of the block. "Remain where you are a moment," Vincent said, walking warily out of the elevator. "I saw three of them on the monorail, and there were only two that followed us up to the top floor." He peered through one of the dusty windows and saw the third man outside the main door of the building, standing guard. Taking careful aim through the glass, he shot him in the back.

Vincent hurried back to the elevator. "Press the emergency stop buttons in this one and the others," he said. "Using the stairs will slow them up." Franklin immobilised the other two elevators, and then followed as Vincent led the way outside. They ran across the street in the shadow of the giant buildings. Early winter dusk was falling, the clouds were thicker and greyer than ever, and the rain was heavier. Soaked and shivering, they zigzagged between the blocks. Johnson steeled himself, trying desperately to keep up with the rest of them, but with Clement on his back he couldn't hope to. His breath came in aching, rasping gasps that cut into his chest, and his vision was blurring at the edges with the effort. Up ahead the rest of them had stopped, waiting for him. Johnson reached them and stood, legs spread apart to

keep his balance, breathing geat plumes of white mist into the cold air.

"It's no good," he gasped. "I'm not even used to physical exertion like you people. Living as a civic . . ."

"Yes, tough," cut in Vincent. "You decided to carry him, it's your responsibility. I made that clear, didn't I?" He paused. Johnson said nothing. "Right. I reckon we improve our position further if we have any sense. The best escape route is under the city, along the drainage system. We've got no light, only a few matches maybe, and there'll be a certain amount of water with the rain falling, but I'm assuming anyone who feels like backing out will do so." He shot a glance at Johnson as he made the last remark, then quickly bent down to a manhole cover he had been standing over and, using the blade of his knife, levered it open. Dirt crumbled at the edges, sprinkling the darkness below.

One by one they climbed down iron rungs set into the vertical shaft leading to the sewer below. Vincent took the body of Clement from Johnson while the civic climbed down into the blackness; then they carried the unconscious man between them, splashing through the icy river of water running down the sewer.

The darkness was absolute, their only guide being the slightly slimy wet walls which they followed with outstretched fingers. Splashing footsteps reverberated in the blackness of the enclosed space. Like the rest of the city, the sewer had never really been used; it was virtually sterile, carrying only rainwater, and, being well ventilated, the air was quite fresh.

They stumbled on for hours, exhausted but walking fast to keep warm, calling to one another now and then to avoid separation in the dark. After a long while the flow of water lessened; evidently it was no longer raining up above. The sewer discharged into a larger one, which they clambered down into. Vincent struck one of the few matches and the light was almost blinding after the unrelieved darkness. The walls of the sewer they found themselves in stretched up and over their heads to a height of about ten or twelve feet; down the bottom of the vast pipe trickled about three or four inches of muddy water.

Then the match went out. Green after images dancing inside their eyes they linked hands and continued down the pipe. After another half hour without warning they suddenly found themselves at its mouth, fresh open air around them, under a night sky sprinkled with stars.

Johnson looked around him, and realised suddenly that they were on the bed of the Thames. Squelching knee deep into mud wettened by the recent rain, they made their way with difficulty to the base of the embankment wall, walking along it until coming to a flight of steps.

At the top of the steps they paused for a moment, looking down the deserted Thames. Where once a great river had flowed, now there was only an insignificant stream meandering over the mud overgrown with weeds and the occasional shrub. The river bed, once murky grey, had turned green.

Across on the opposite bank, Battersea New Power Station stood squat and black, silhouetted against the starlit background. Its automatically controlled functions and processes were still in operation, though Johnson wondered how long it would be before its radioactive heart suffered sufficient of the inevitable decay to render it unreactive and useless. He visualised the day, centuries ahead, when life had died on earth, when the fissionable materials housed in the generating station would be reduced to inert lead.

Then they turned and, arms around each other in shivering defence against the cold, walked hurriedly away from the dying river, between the luxury embankment apartment blocks, until they found a clothing shop. Here they wrapped coats and sweaters around themselves and, too exhausted to find a better place to rest, lay down on the floor to sleep.

WHEN THEY AWOKE, the next day, Clement was dead.

They stood round his body, stretched out on the floor, in silence. He had died as he had lived: expressionless, his face showing no visible emotion. Kitt's eyes were moist and her face was lined with sadness, but she didn't turn for comfort to any of the men. Vincent sighed, and then shook off whatever depression he had felt. Together with

Franklin he carried the dead man to one of the small ornamental, overgrown flowerbeds abutting the apartment blocks. They dug a shallow grave with tools from a hardware store and lowered the body into it, shovelling back the earth and stamping it down without a word. They stood in silence a moment, contemplating the small mound of fresh earth; then Vincent turned and walked away and the others followed.

They entered a small shopping area.

"I'm hungry," Vincent said. "So let's eat."

They selected food in what had once been a small delicatessen. Much of its supplies had been looted by previous visitors, but there was enough for a decent meal. Johnson, seeing Franklin walk outside the shop to eat his meal, took the opportunity to talk to the Loner in relative privacy.

"You don't seem to take Clement's death very seriously," he said.

Franklin chewed some food reflectively, and swallowed.

"Are you trying to bait me?" he answered.

"Well, yes, I suppose so, to some extent, else I wouldn't have phrased my question like that. But I'd still like an answer, all the same."

"It's difficult to give you an answer. I'm not sure what I feel about Clem. This is the first time we've lost a member of our group, you see. Hell, I know what I'm meant to feel, I know what your traditions would have me feel. I've read enough books to know that. But I don't feel particularly sad, is that the answer you wanted?"

"It's the answer I expected."

"Then you're getting to understand our way of life a little better?"

"I'm learning more about it, but that doesn't go with understanding, necessarily. Come to that, do you understand the civic way of life any better?"

Franklin laughed. "Who can understand a civic, except other civics? Who knows what it's like to be a leper except other lepers?"

"You mean who knows what it's like to see except those who aren't blind," Johnson cut in. The Loner looked at him abruptly, in uncomprehending surprise.

"You don't really mean that, do you?" he said slowly.

"I . . . no, no, I suppose I don't," Johnson replied, looking away.

"Once a civic, always a bloody civic," Franklin muttered to himself. Then, to Johnson: "Why did you take the risk of carrying Clem like that, when we were back in the City, anyway?"

"I saw no point in wasting a life. God knows there are few enough people in the world today without our irresponsibly leaving them to die."

"But it was bloody obvious one of you wouldn't survive the journey," Franklin said. "If you'd taken more care over him, so he'd lived, you'd have not managed to get away yourself."

"But this is irrelevant. The point is, there was a chance of saving Clement. And none of you would take it."

"Was there ever a chance?"

"Yes, I think there was."

"He's dead now, isn't he?"

"How does that affect the decision I made yesterday?"

Franklin sighed. "It's a fact, see? A fact, not a possibility. Why can't you people accept facts? It was a fact that the chances were against you when you decided to try to save Clem. Heavily against you, nearly one hundred per cent. You call that a policy for survival? And then you act injured when we tell you what a stupid waste of time lugging him all this way was. What do you expect us to do, tender an official note of thanks?"

"I'd expected you to be grateful in some way . . ."

"Look, civic," the Loner cut in, "you're no use here, you're no different from when you arrived. I don't know why you came here, but it certainly wasn't for the purpose of becoming one of us, like you said it was. Even you must see that that's just a plain impossibility. So why don't you go home? The amusement value's beginning to wear a bit thin. Clem was right, you were never more than marginally amusing."

He turned as if to go back into the shop, but Johnson restrained him, placing his hand on the Loner's shoulder.

"Just one thing, I forgot to ask you. . . . did you know Clement very well?"

Franklin paused a moment, smiling faintly at a personal joke.

"Yes, I did," he said. "He was my brother."

A little later, they all stood outside the little shop, in intermittent sunlight that occasionally penetrated a sky of fast-moving white cumulus.

"How far are we from the civic centre?" Vincent asked Johnson.

"Quite near it, maybe half a mile distant," the civic replied. "The part we call Cenlon is over to the north-east, centred around what used to be called Trafalgar Square . . . do you know it?"

"None of us have ever been this far out from the Linear City before," Vincent replied. "But not being totally illiterate, we have read about other places in books."

"I wasn't suggesting that . . ." Johnson began.

"Forget it," said Vincent, boredly.

"Where now, Vince?" Franklin asked.

"We can head further out, into the country . . ." Vincent speculated. "See more of it maybe . . ." He saw the doubtful faces of Kitt and Franklin, the homesick expression of Jane, standing beside him. "But I suppose you're right," he said. "We'd be better off where we came from."

"Won't I be an embarrassment?" Johnson asked.

"You worried about getting us killed, like almost happened before?" Vincent replied. He laughed. "Don't worry, man. Something will turn up." He smiled, and if there was something behind the smile, Johnson couldn't see it. "OK, then, we head home. You still going to tag along, Mr Johnson?"

"Of course," the civic replied. Again Vincent smiled, but said nothing.

They set off northwards, keeping their backs to the sun. The old residential area of Chelsea had been rebuilt almost entirely since the nineteen eighties, but the new architects had followed the old style of the buildings to a large extent. Elaborate traffic control and pedestrian channelling had never been introduced.

They found themselves in Exhibition Road, but did not

enter the buildings that were so plainly museums. They were too poignant a reminder of time, of history; too uncomfortable a record of cumulative human endeavour.

They lunched briefly, in the early afternoon, and entered Hyde Park as the sun was beginning to sink noticeably in the west.

The expanse of parkland was virtually a new experience for Johnson; he had visited the park early in his childhood, but the memory was vague. The Loners, too found such an expanse of untouched land a new experience.

"Why didn't anyone ever build over it?" Vincent asked.

"Perhaps because the Cenlon planners felt that if there wasn't a piece of green landscape left somewhere, people would just go crazy," Johnson said quietly.

"But it could have been used for agriculture, if nothing else . . ."

"You don't think that it's a good idea, a piece of sanity in the middle of all the building programmes, to preserve at least one small piece of green landscape amongst the mass of pre-stressed concrete?"

"I don't understand what you mean," Vincent said. "Why should unused land have greater value—emotionally or physically—than land which has been used? What's so sacred about green grass? When the sun rises over it in the mornings, does it turn it shimmering white and featureless black? Does it glitter on it in dazzling reds and oranges? Or are you so prejudiced that you can't appreciate the accidental beauty of a man-made concrete landscape?"

"Are you serious?" Johnson said.

"No," Vincent sighed. "Just arguing in your terms, is all. I tell you, civic, the only intrinsically useful feature of an open field is you can urinate on it without leaving a messy puddle."

"But it must mean more . . ."

"Why? Because it has some mystical significance in your limited mind? Shut your mouth, civic, you bore me."

Johnson felt a sinking feeling inside him, that told him he would never be able to communicate with these people. It was almost as if they were no longer rational human beings, he thought to himself; or was it, could it be, that they were in part right, that a new way of life was called

for, was in fact a vital necessity in the face of an environment radically different from that of the twentieth century?

They entered the broken shell of what had once been a luxurious restaurant. The passage of time and the invasion of previous intruders had left it a near-ruin; the walls stood at odd angles, rain had come through the roof in several places, the plastic was cracked and the chrome was tarnished. In the main dining area there was a hole in the roof over a pile of ashes in the centre of the floor. Franklin gathered some dead wood from outside and piled it in the makeshift fire-place. Soon the fire was burning brightly and they were sitting round it on cushioned red chairs, eating food taken from the store remaining in the restaurant's kitchen.

And this is a taste of the future, Johnson realised: the inevitable end-point of the rapid decline back to savagery. The power will fail, the water supplies will cease, and we'll be back living like savages again, inside the decaying shells of products of a former civilisation. If there are any people left to live such a life, that is how it will be.

The Loners did not share his depression, however; they talked happily enough. The girl, Jane, sat a little back from the fire, listening silently, and it was partly to bring her into the conversation that Vincent asked her about her past life.

"There's nothing much to tell . . ." she said, timidly.

"No, you've heard about us, let's hear about you," Kitt said. She had, Johnson realised, undergone a strange transition from sex kitten to mother figure, in the past few days, adapting in a way he would not have thought possible.

Jane's eyes were wide and brown, somehow nervous.

"I can't remember much of my childhood," she said, "except that, like you, I think I was left by my parents very early on. My aunt was the only one to turn to for support. I owe her quite a lot in some ways, I suppose; she taught me a lot, and I don't just mean about how to live in the City. I had instruction on just about all the traditional school subjects—she had a large library, and was an educated woman. But God, how she changed. Or perhaps the change was in me; I don't know. Anyway, the end result was that we grew apart. She resented my

maturing, I think; she wanted always to regard me as a little girl, with her as my protective foster-mother. It became an obsession, she wouldn't let me go anywhere, used to guard me with that gun of hers. For a while, about two years ago, I used to sneak out at night to see another girl like myself who lived about two miles away; there was a group of Loners living near there and we used to visit them together. But then my aunt found out about it, and kept me from ever going out alone again, and anyway I think the Loners moved on somewhere else." She paused.

"Go on," said Vincent.

"That's about all there is to tell," Jane said. "I'd been living alone with my aunt, until you arrived, found us there."

'And killed the old lady,' Johnson added mentally.

"I'm sorry, about what happened . . ." Vincent said.

"You don't have to be," the girl replied. "It was her own fault, you killed her in self-defence. If she'd had a chance she'd have murdered the lot of you."

Abruptly, the conversation died, and in the same way that one can feel the presence of a personality, somehow the absence of Clement made itself felt, as something missing, a vacancy in the group.

Abruptly, Vincent stood up.

"I'm going out to gather some more wood for the fire, before we settle for the night," he said. "Can you come and help me carry it, Jane?"

The girl stood up; her eyes met Vincent's. She nodded. They walked out of the door, and before it had closed fully Johnson saw the Loner's arm circle about her waist.

Johnson didn't try to analyse his feelings. He spread his coat out on the floor and lay down with his back to the fire, facing away also from Kitt and Franklin, sitting together at the opposite side of the room. Sleep was long in coming, but when eventually he did slide under the surface of unconsciousness Vincent and the girl still had not returned.

THE NEXT DAY they moved out of Hyde Park, and cut through back streets up towards Paddington, avoiding the Marble Arch Flyover, uncomfortably near the outskirts of the civilised sector. They hit the Edgware Road, deserted

and broken up by the passage of many winters, and walked up it, following the same route as Roman centurions and, before them, the barbaric tribes that had roamed across the country. As they passed through the area that had once been known as Kilburn and entered New Cricklewood, the architecture of the Linear City began, apartment blocks towering over them.

Time was running out, Johnson knew. Three or four days had passed, since he had stepped off the monocar at sub-centre three, and he had achieved virtually nothing. He had little longer to complete his plans.

In dying hope, he turned to Jane that evening, while the three Loners were looking round the neighbourhood they were in for a safe place to sleep. Here at least was a person who had been brought up in relative seclusion, out of the hard, fundamental life of the Loners.

"Do you enjoy the life you're leading?" he asked her, sitting together in a small grocery store.

"What a strange question," she replied. "It implies I have an alternative, that I can influence my way of life to make it happier for me."

"Don't you believe in free will?"

"Certainly; but how can that influence my environment?"

"The Loner life isn't the only life, you know. The life in the civic centres is completely different."

"That's where you come from, isn't it? Tell me about it."

Johnson wondered where to start.

"It . . . well, it's a more limited life, in some ways. But in exchange you get security, an ordered way of things. We try to preserve the civilised way of life of the twentieth century; people still go to school, grow up there, leave and get married. Men still work for the community, in fact there's a lot of corporate community spirit. The birth rate is still going down, of course, but not as much as in the Lone Zones. We're trying to hold out, to fight back. Hoping that one day the trend will reverse and that not all of civilisation will have sunk to the low ebb where nothing can be salvaged."

The girl was silent for a while.

"I don't quite see the point of it," she said, eventually. "You seem to be fighting for something, without knowing what it is, planning for something that you hope will happen, but that probably won't, trying to preserve something that doesn't exist any more and doesn't belong in this world." She paused again. "It's very strange."

"Only because you're not used to the idea," he said. "I'm sure it's something you could adjust to, a way of life that's better than this, less harsh, more . . . more natural, more human."

"I don't think . . ."

"Why don't you visit one of the civic centres?" Johnson continued hurriedly. "It could be arranged, and you might find you liked it a lot. Think of it, a permanent place of your own to live, clothes of your own, one day a man to settle down with and marry . . ."

"It sounds so dull," she said. "I've only just escaped from an apartment all-of-my-own, and now, you're telling me I should tie myself down again."

"No, you don't understand, it needn't be like that . . ."

"But anyway, I'm happy here. It feels right, somehow. I don't want to live in the past, I want to live in the present."

Johnson suddenly found he'd lost his temper.

"You want to go on living here, do you? You're happy with gangs of thugs murdering your aunt, who brought you up and told you all you knew? You're happy never knowing where you'll be sleeping next, or who you'll be sleeping with, never knowing when you'll be jumped on by some other gang of thugs? Happy, living off the fruits of the labour of a previous generation, helping the human race to stagnate? You're happy, are you, to be captured and . . . and raped, damn it, by a soulless delinquent . . ."

She slapped his face, and he fell back on one elbow, flushed and breathing heavily.

She held the hand that had slapped him, looking at it as if in puzzlement.

"I believe that that's the traditional thing to do in such circumstances," she said slowly. "Certainly, it felt right to do so . . . I'm sorry if I hurt you . . ."

"No, no," he said, unable to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry, I don't know what . . ."

"Don't apologise," she said, "because that implies you didn't mean what you said. And you did mean it, didn't you?"

"Perhaps . . ." he said. "But can tell me why, why do you let yourself be used by Vincent, someone you don't know, who you only met a day or two previously . . ."

"Used? You mean last night, when I went outside with him in the park?"

Johnson nodded, still holding the side of his face where she had slapped him.

"I don't know whether to feel sorry for you, or spit in your face," she said slowly. "You talk of civilisation, but your mind is so warped, so . . . unclean. Is it unusual for a girl and a boy who want to get to know each other better to seek relative solitude, so they can talk in private?"

"Talk!" Johnson spat. "Are you trying to convince me that all you did . . ."

"I'm not trying to convince you of anything," the girl replied. "Whether you believe what I say is a matter for you to judge. You see Kitt having relations with three men—yes, I've been told all about that—and at once you think, perversion, sex maniacs, unclean lust. You use your own terms to judge people living in a different framework of moral codes. You never consider for a moment that the people you judge may have different values, a different type of love and unity from the limited version you know, in your society. And then, seeing free love, you mindlessly assume that it will apply to any girl that the group may come across in the Lone Zones." She paused.

"I don't feel angry, I don't feel hurt, I just feel sorry for you, Mister Johnson. You obviously don't understand Vince. He kissed me, once, last night, if that's the sort of information you want to know. He's not the sort of person who'd want to force someone else into anything, if he cared about them, or thought them worthy of being cared for. He took trouble over you, didn't he? He protected you, and lost the man called Clement by doing so. And all you can do is try to ascribe the worst motives and ideas to him."

"I don't believe you," Johnson said. "I don't believe any of it. You're a barbarian like the rest of them, you've been corrupted. Christ, isn't there any goodness left in the

world? Are there only soulless savages to perpetuate the human race?"

Three figures rose out of the darkness behind the girl.

"I think you've said enough, civic," said one of them. It was Vincent's voice. With a sinking sensation, Johnson realised just how much he had said. Now, everything was lost, if there had been anything left to lose.

"I suppose you've been eavesdropping, listening to every word?" he said.

"You were shouting so loudly, we couldn't have avoided hearing it," Vincent replied.

"That's a thin excuse," Johnson said. "The sort of thing that you Loners . . ."

"For Christ's sake, be quiet, man." Another voice. This time, it was that of Kitt. Johnson stopped talking, abruptly, his pride somehow stung.

"Thank God for that," said Vincent. "Now, we've found somewhere to spend the night. If you want to come with us, civic, and stay till it's daylight tomorrow, you can. But I'm damned if I'll share the same apartment with you."

"Don't bother," said Johnson. "I'm no use here, I'll head back to the civic centre tonight, I've failed. I don't want to stay here any longer, I . . ."

"Do you know where the civic centre is, Mr Johnson?" Franklin asked, slowly, cynically. Johnson didn't reply. "Of course you don't. Now stick with us till the morning so we can show you which way to go to get there. The last thing we want is for you to arrive in our sector by mistake. That really would be unpleasant, for us and for you."

He followed them to one of the apartment blocks, and lay down to sleep on a bed in a room next to the one used by the rest of the group. Thoughts pursued each other endlessly round his brain; self-doubt, suspicion, worry. He had arrived in the Lone Zone with such clear-cut aims, and had seemingly destroyed them all by himself. Had his reaction to the life of the Loners been the right one, or had it been that of a thoughtlessly biased mind?

He sighed. Words like right and wrong, moral and immoral, death and life, no longer seemed to have any meaning. He questioned his outburst of that night, an outburst that had cost him anything he might otherwise have

achieved. What had Vincent said, back when they had first met? 'I don't want to hear what you say you've come for, I'll judge you on your actions, not on your claims'. It had been something like that.

But here he was, indulging in the pastime of a civic, worrying at a problem already solved. He would have to return to the civic centre the next day, that was clear. Somehow he suppressed the turbulent thoughts and fell asleep.

The next day they woke him up, wordlessly, and, after they had dressed and breakfasted, walked with him to a pedestrian powerpath that led back in the direction of the Cenlon civic centre. He stood uncertainly facing the Loners, his back to the railing overlooking a short drop to some monorail tracks below, running through what was in effect a man-made chasm between the vertical faces of the apartment blocks.

"I'd like to thank you," said Johnson, "and apologise for my outburst last night. I'm confused, I admit that, but even more I'm disillusioned."

"It's not been a total waste of our time," said Vincent. "Let's say, a broadening experience. I hate your guts, I admit that," he smiled in amusement at the accidental parodying of Johnson's words, "but even more I'm disillusioned, too. At finding out just how limited the mind of the civic is, and how few worthwhile human beings there are left in the world."

"I'm not going to argue with you," said Johnson. "But I'll give you a warning . . ."

"There is something I have to tell you. Not out of love for my fellow men—I find it difficult to think of you as fellow men—but out of obligation. The civic centres are getting desperate, they're going to take desperate measures. Not only is the birth rate going down, and infertility rising, but the male-female ratio is rising all the time. The monogamous system we have just won't take it."

"So?" said Vincent.

"So they're going to send armed groups out into the Lone Zones. They're going to kill the men, capture the women. If they won't co-operate, they have some sort of . . . of prefrontal lobotomy planned, something equally foul. I couldn't let it happen, I had to do something, that's why I

came out and found you. I thought if I could prove that a Loner could become civilised, could adapt to the civic way of life, then the bloodshed would be avoided. the inhumanity . . ." He broke off, looking at the expressionless faces staring at him.

"You mean," said Vincent, "that these civics, these civilised men, are going to indulge in wholesale butchery to protect their outmoded way of life? Righteous bastards! And you came out here, not to warn us, no, but to see if we, the brainless animals, could be converted into human beings." He spat on the ground. "You stink!" he said, viciously, "you stink. Why did you bother to come? We can do without your type, we can do without you and not notice you've gone."

"But I had to stop the bloodshed, any way I could . . ."

"You stinking, lying civic! Don't try to make out you're a martyr, now; that I couldn't stand."

"I had to lie to you, I thought that if I revealed why I'd come, you'd class me like the rest of the civics . . ." They started advancing towards him. Johnson backed away. "I was *right*, wasn't *I*? *I shouldn't have bothered to tell you*, you're reacting like animals, don't you understand the sacrifice I made?"

"Analyse your motives," Vincent said, still walking forward towards the retreating civic. "You wanted to feel good inside, that's all. If you were the big humanitarian you claim to be, our way of life wouldn't have influenced your judgement."

Johnson backed up against the railing at the edge of the powerpath.

"No," he said, "you've got it all wrong! It's not like that . . ."

Suddenly the railing gave way behind him, and he was falling in a shower of flakes of rust. For a brief moment he saw the wide monorail below rising up to meet him, then there came the painful impact. He sprawled half over it, winded, unable to breathe. Ten or fifteen feet above him, standing on the powerpath, Vincent looked down and laughed.

"What are you doing down there, Mr Johnson? Waiting

for a train? You ought to be careful, you could get run over."

"I was trying to help you, to save you!" Johnson shouted. Vincent kicked at the rusty railing, sending pieces of it flying down to hit Johnson painfully on the legs.

"We don't need your help, civic!" he shouted.

Suddenly, Johnson felt the concrete rail vibrating under him. He looked down at the surface; the concrete was faced with steel plating, and, unlike the other rails running between the tall faces of the buildings, the steel was polished and free from rust.

He looked up at the Loners with panic in his eyes.

"You've got to help me," he shouted. "There's a train coming, I can feel the rail vibrating!"

Vincent's laughter echoed and re-echoed between the buildings.

"We don't owe you anything, civic. Even if we did, you don't deserve to live."

"He's right," said Franklin. "If you'd got the best motives in the world, I wouldn't lift a finger to save you."

Johnson scrambled to his feet, avoiding looking over the edge of the three-feet-wide rail. He was stranded between two widely spaced pylons; both had access ladders, but he didn't know which way the train was coming. He doubted if he could reach them in time, anyway. He looked up to where he had fallen from, but that was out of reach . . . unless the Loners helped him.

"Where's the goodness and kindness in your boyfriend Vincent now, Jane?" he shouted up. "The one who is so kind he leaves a fellow human being to die?"

"He could kill himself, trying to help you," the girl's voice floated down to him. "Why should he meddle in your affairs? You've brought this upon yourself. And isn't death what your kind wants to inflict upon us?"

"I'm not like the rest of them!" Johnson shouted.

"Oh, but you are," Franklin shouted back. "You live their life, and you refuse to consider any other."

The vibration in the rail was increasing in intensity.

"Kitt!" Johnson cried. "Won't you help me?"

"No," she replied slowly, "I don't think so . . . there are some people who aren't worth saving."

"But I tried to save one of you! I risked my life for Clement!"

"Do you think that makes us owe you anything?"

"Look," said Johnson desperately. "I'll help you. If you save me, I'll put in a good word for you. I'll report that the Loners are amenable to reason, there's no need for bloodshed!" The vibration of the rail had become an audible rumble. Johnson looked up the rail. Round the corner, up ahead, the train appeared.

"You make me sick, sick to my stomach," Vincent shouted back. "Unlike you, Mister Johnson, we're not so afraid of death that we grasp at anything, accept the help of those whom we hate and who hate us. No, civic, you deserve all you get."

Johnson started running along the rail, away from the advancing train. The driver had seen him, but obviously couldn't stop in time. Johnson's vision clouded over; he missed his footing; suddenly he was falling.

"I tried!" he told himself, whirling round in the icy air, "I tried to help them!" But at the back of his mind he knew, as the ground loomed nearer and nearer, that his motive had not been to help the Loners, but to help himself.

Then he hit the ground and knew nothing more.

Above him, the monocar accelerated again, away from the incident, wary of a possible trap sprung by one of the Loner gangs. Vincent and Franklin, and the girls Kitt and Jane, turned away from the scene below and, unhurriedly, made their way back between the white concrete walls, along the metal ramps and bridges gleaming in the morning sunlight, back into the area they knew, while the world died with them.

THE LEVELLER

Langdon Jones

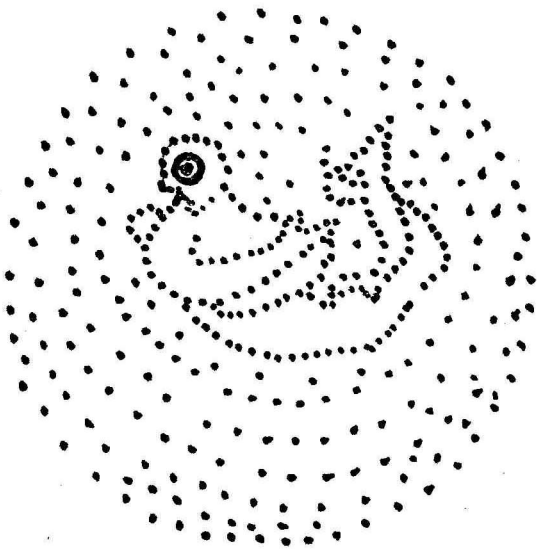


Illustration: Gilmore

THE PAIN HAD stopped now. As soon as the pain had stopped, he knew that he was dying. In agony he had watched the darkness of the room give way to the pale blueness of the early light. And then he remembered little; he had been dazed, almost asleep. And he had returned from his sleep into this little shadowed room, the drawn curtains yellow with the afternoon sun, and the inexorable wooden ticking of the tall grandfather clock, that, with its sound, told how silent was the little room. His wife was there, as always, looking at him with large and grief-filled eyes. Little afternoon sounds had filtered into this death-room; someone moving downstairs, the flush of a distant

toilet, the dissonant, brazen chimes of a tuneless ice-cream van. And he didn't want to die. He wanted to stay and carry on in this little play with all the others. He wanted to be down there now, on the sunny pavements watching the children playing, and the people going about their tasks that had now been rendered meaningless. This was what made him most sad. Nothing meant anything any more. The world had been rendered useless by the fact that he was to be removed from it. He wanted it to have meaning again. He *wanted* to join in. What would happen to him? What would happen? He had felt a desperate tear begin to roll down his cheek, and his wife had leaned over and wiped it away. His wife. She was his wife no longer. She was part of the world that didn't matter to him any more. In his dying eyes, she was just a woman, just a stranger.

And now here he was with the doctor fussing, doing things to his outstretched useless body that wasn't part of him any more. He wished that he could have lifted his head from the pillow to tell the doctor to save himself the trouble. "Doctor," he would like to say, "that little wasted scrap of flesh isn't me any longer. I am here—here in this gaunt head. Can't you see the flicker of me behind the eyes? Why won't you look, doctor? Are you scared of the light that glows in these eyes? Are you afraid to look? Are you frightened of what they would tell you? But it was too much effort, and he only lowered his eyes so that he might get a fuzzy picture of his own body. When he saw it he was shocked. Its thin and ravaged form was nothing to do with him. It was completely alien, and he looked on it with a tired and dispassionate gaze.

His death was so inevitable; that was what he couldn't accept. Even if he had survived his illness, he would have had to face it sooner or later. This was what he was born for.

"All right, doctor," he said, waggling his bony finger, "you've got yours coming!" But the doctor didn't say anything, and continued to face away from him. He felt the doctor's fingers on his body, and he marvelled at this. He felt so apart from his body that it was a surprise to realise that he could still sense what happened to it, even though the hands of the doctor belonged to another age, another

dimension. Still nerves passed their sizzling electric messages through his scrawny neck ; still his spine hummed with the life within, even though, due to the thinness of his body, it was covered only by a thin layer of parchment skin. He fancied that when he had been buried, and that when his flesh had rotted away, peeling back from the slick bones, he would still be able to smell the musky decay of the coffin stench, and feel the damp loam as it pressed down on him.

"The coffin is coming," he called, "for you and for me!"

The doctor didn't look round or say anything, and his wife wiped his lips with the towel. He realised that he hadn't really said anything ; he had just moaned.

The doctor straightened, and his wife pulled the covers of the bed over him again. The doctor ushered her towards the door. He lay there listening to the loud ticking of the grandfather clock. "How many more of those shall I hear?" he wondered to himself. Each tick was a square, wooden block, not like the hurried little barbs that came from his wrist-watch. He turned his head a little to look at the table by his bed. There was just a jug of water and a glass. The sides of the jug were clear, and he could see a distorted reflection of the curtained windows. The jug was caught in an errant beam of sunlight that had somehow managed to slip past the curtains, and had spread itself over the wall, the head of the bed and the water-jug. The water was greyly illumined, and he could see the tiny particles of dust as they slowly moved round, following the slow and mysterious currents of the liquid. It was so clear and so beautiful that it was like one of his memories of childhood. He was extraordinarily comfortable, and he felt that he could lie here in the warmth, and watch that jug for the rest of time.

He heard mumbled voices outside, and he realised that it was his wife and the doctor talking.

"I'm afraid," the doctor was saying, "that he hasn't got very long."

"Neither have you, friend," he called, "neither have you!"

"It may be a matter of hours, perhaps only minutes," the doctor's voice continued, as if he hadn't interrupted.

"I wasn't supposed to hear that, was I?" he said to himself, still watching the jug, "but I know, you fool! I can hear the tiredness of the heart, the sluggishness of the blood as it courses unwillingly, slower and slower. I can feel the creaking of my bones, I can sense the twitching reflexes of my organs. I can feel my body packing up, ready to leave! I can feel the little valves shutting off, the taps turning, the cutting off of supplies, the drying up, the atrophying. I realise better than you do!"

He felt peaceful as he watched the jug. And he suddenly had a memory, terrible in its clearness and its heavy nostalgia. He was standing in his bedroom, in his parent's home. He was a small boy. He had just taken up his mud-caked football boots, and he was going to clean them off, scraping them with his sturdy pen-knife. But now he was looking out of the window. It was late afternoon, heavy with summer, and the yellowness shone through the window to cover the whole room with its colour. The trees moved gently against the sky, and down below on the field near his house, some more small boys were playing football, their jerseys making little splashes of red, blue and white against the greenness of the field. And his throat ached with the joy and the sadness of being alive, feelings that were almost too much to bear. But he was dying; why should he feel this? And as he stared at the cool glass of the water-jug, he wished that he could cry, that he might express the regret within him.

He turned his head back, away from the jug, and he found that he was looking up at his wife's face. He hated the living sparkle of her eyes, the living bloom of her cheeks. Suddenly he felt that he wanted to help her.

"Why don't you join me here?" he asked her. "It's comfortable to be in a state of not-being. I feel that I am one with the wallpaper, the chairs. I am even further gone than the grandfather clock, for at least there is life in his ticking organs. Why not join me? I am one with the bed here, we are one entity. I have become the bed. Although my body is now polluting the clean sheets with its living substances, for I can feel it doing so, this will not last for long. Soon we shall be together in our deadness, the bed and I. Why not join us? It is happy in this strange

world. We are detached from everything. I can see the tears in your living eyes, but they mean nothing to me. What has meaning is this water-jug, that fleck of light on the wallpaper, that scratch on the leg of the chair."

"There, there," said his wife, as she wiped his mouth again.

He felt as though he wanted to weep with frustration at her misunderstanding.

"Water," croaked a voice, a new voice. He felt fear. Who had spoken? It was a strange voice, a weak voice. But then, as he saw his wife moving back and lifting the jug, he realised that it had been the voice of his body that had spoken. '*I* don't want any water,' he thought, as he heard the sound of the jug being poured. His wife leaned over, and he watched with no interest as she pressed a glass against his lips. He vaguely felt water splashing onto his chest.

"I told you so," he said. "I said I didn't want any."

Something snapped within him as his wife put back the jug, and began to apply the towel to his wet chin and chest. Something snapped, like a violin string, internally, and never to be repaired, and he felt himself sinking, sinking. There was a toad on the end of his bed, a big, red toad.

"Toad!" he heard his body shrieking hoarsely, "Toad! Toad! Toad!"

"He's delirious," said the toad, sitting there in its wart-covered obscenity.

"Hear that?" he said to the toad. "You're delirious."

"Not *me*," said the toad. "You."

"I'm not delirious," he answered reasonably, "my mind is quite clear."

"Clear as a bell," said the toad. "Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong bell. Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell."

The toad changed into the doctor, and in his ears he heard the sound of his body mumbling.

"Dong!" it was saying, "dong, dong, dong."

He felt the soft hand of his wife on his forehead. It felt like the touch of a shroud, and he was grateful. Now that the water-jug had been moved, it brought into visibility a silver tea-spoon which had previously been

hidden behind it. The sun shone silver up its length, and as he watched, the spoon sat up on the table and laughed at him. He felt a tremendous anger at the spoon; he hated being mocked. He felt the surges of anger like waves within him, and he felt his body arching as the rage filled him through. He reached out his hand, and he viciously strangled the spoon. He threw the corpse on the floor, and he turned back from the murder. The red toad was watching him again.

"Hello, dead man," it said, conversationally. He hated the toad too, as it sat there in this great dripping cavern of darkness. He hated it so much that he felt his body twisting and flopping with hatred. What had happened to the room? It had gone. He was alone in this great vaulted dripping cavern with this monstrous toad. It was cold, and he shivered in the vastness of this cave. There was silence, save for the last echoes of the toad's voice, and the regular drip, drip, drip of the water. He looked about him at the green scum that lined the cavern walls; the monstrous stalagmites that reached up to the irregular arched ceiling.

"It won't be much longer," said the toad.

"I don't want to know," he flashed back at the creature, his voice echoing in the chamber.

"I don't like you," said the toad.

He felt too tired to answer as he looked at the wrinkled red skin of the creature's face.

"I think I'll leave you," said the toad. "I'll leave you here to die alone."

"I'm not going to die!" he called after the toad as it began to hop grotesquely away from him into the dimness of the cavern. As it disappeared he was sure that he could hear laughter echoing round and round the cave. Soon all the sound died, except for his own breathing, and the ticking of the water as it dripped into a nearby pool. Suddenly he heard a drum beating in the distance. Ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom. The drum came closer and closer, until he could hear that it was just round the corner. Then it came no closer, although the regular rhythm kept up.

"Why don't you stop?" he called out to the drum.

"You've been going all my life and I'm getting fed up with you!"

There was laughter behind him, and he whirled.

Behind him was a man. He was dressed in finery and lace, brightly coloured; a strong scent of sweet perfume came from him. He had a moustache and was wearing a wide-brimmed hat.

"Hello, toad," he said, with a look in his eyes that belied the smile on his face.

"I'm not the toad," he answered. "He's just gone."

The man laughed and drew his sword.

He stepped back in amazement, and instinctively felt for his own sword. He drew it.

"I don't want to kill you," he said to the man.

The man laughed again, grimly, then stepped forward and lunged with his sword. He parried the stroke easily, and made a quick attack himself, which touched the man's hat-brim with the tip of his sword. The man recovered and moved forward again. The two swords hovered together, each with pin-point readiness for an opening, a mistake. Back he jumped, then, as the man followed, quickly drove forward his blade in unexpected attack. The sword touched the man's cheek, and a little blood began to trickle down his face. The man furiously parried his blade, fighting now for his life. The man's attack was so fierce he had to retreat a little.

Then it happened.

His foot caught on a small irregularity on the floor of the cavern, and he fell backwards. As he fell, the man drove his blade forwards with a scream of triumph. He felt the blade slide into his chest as if it were burning hot. Scraping against bone, on its journey through his body, slicing flesh. He shut his eyes and called out in agony. When he opened his eyes again, the man and the sword had gone. But still there was the pain in his chest, and he felt the warmth of the blood as it seeped out.

Suddenly there was an alteration in the rhythm of the drum, that was shocking in view of its regularity before. As he lay in agony, his head resting against the cavern wall, he listened to the faltering of the drum. The light began to dim in the cavern.

Suddenly the face of a young woman was before him. It was the face of a girl with whom he had had an affair, before he was married. He heard his body calling out his wife's name; but this was wrong, she was not his wife. And she was mocking him. There was laughter in her eyes, and her voice was harsh.

"Make love to me," she said. "Make love to me."

And then the drum faltered for the last time, and stopped.

He looked up from the bed as the doctor came over. The doctor flashed a glance at his wife that seemed to mean something, but he couldn't understand it any longer. He knew that now he would be completely incapable of comprehending the simplest human, living communications.

He leaped up on the bed.

"Look at me," he cried, "not at him!" As he shouted at them, he pranced on the bed.

"You can't understand me any more, and I can't understand you. That's the barrier between life and death that you were always wondering about. That's all it is. You are things of flesh and blood, life, movement, action, meaning. I belong to the grave, the funeral. I am a mummy, a corpse, a ghoul. Your world is the peace of the home, the life, the smell of cooking, and all the interrelated needs and meanings of life. I have those needs and meanings no longer. My world is the world of the inanimate, the graveyard, the crypt. I am one with my gravestone. My smells are the smells of the grave, the smell of decay, the smell of non-life. That is our difference. That is why we shall never understand each other!"

"He's gone," said the doctor.

He was quiet then, as the words shocked him. He looked down, and with horror, saw his own body lying on the bed. The doctor put out a hand, and drew the eyelids down to cover the staring, dead eyes. With numbness, he saw his wife as she burst into tears and put her arms round the corpse, and put her head onto the pillow, holding it to her.

He could still hear the grandfather clock as it ticked quietly in the corner, but now, from his vantage point he could see down onto it. He could see the dusty top, and

the cardboard packet that had got up there somehow. 'So this is what it's like to die!' he thought wonderingly to himself. He knew that his delirium was over; he knew that this was reality. He looked down at the bed, with the little table beside it, with the water-jug and the silver teaspoon. 'What happens now?' he wondered to himself.

Even as he thought it, he felt a sudden wrench—a feeling of parting, like toffee that has been pulled out as far as it will go. As he felt it, so he began to be drawn upwards. Higher and higher he went, until he was near the ceiling of the room. As he began to pass through the ceiling he watched the little tableau—wife, doctor, corpse, pass away with no regret at all. The room disappeared as he passed through the ceiling. As he went still higher, he saw a beam in front of him, and he realised that he was in the loft. As he rose, more and more of the loft began to be visible. The beams, the struts, the lathes, joists, all covered thickly with dust and cobwebs. Old trunks, dusty books, pieces of wood. There was the water tank, hissing and bubbling, and as he got higher, he saw the water trickling into it.

And then he passed through the roof of the house.

Now he was moving faster, the higher he got. He was looking down on the red tiles of the roof which were receding rapidly. The sun was beating down strongly, although he couldn't feel its heat. Soon he could see the entire roof of the house, and some of the surrounding ground. Higher and higher. Little boys were playing cricket in the street outside the house, completely oblivious of the tragedy that had just taken place in that little upstairs room. More and more streets were visible, and he lost track of his own house among all the others. The sounds of the ice-cream van—little more than a tinkle at this height—came to him again. He could just see the little white van, a long way below, with several tiny figures standing beside it. He was travelling faster and faster now. The ground below was more and more like a map. He wondered how long it would take him to reach the clouds. He remembered that, as a boy, he had wanted so much to be able to go up to the clouds. Down below, everything had lost its colour. It was all a drab grey, save

for the small patches of green here and there. He could just make out individual streets. After a while he was unable to see even that, everything was grey and featureless. Suddenly he could see nothing but swirling mist, and he realised that at last he had achieved his boyhood ambition. Even though he could not see any evidence of his rise, he realised that all the time he was travelling faster and faster. Soon he was out of the cloud level, and he watched the yellow vapours drop like a stone behind him.

There were not many clouds below, and it was easy to see the ground beneath him. Everything was covered by a blue haze, and he could see the outline of the coast. Higher, higher.

Soon he could see the curvature of the earth's surface, against the dark blue—almost black—of the sky. As the earth dropped away, so the curve got more and more pronounced, until he could see almost the whole globe. He looked about him. Everywhere was blackness, studded by multicoloured points of light. He felt himself drawn on faster and faster, realising that he must be travelling at almost unimaginable velocities.

The Earth was now a small globe, catching the light of the sun. Smaller and smaller the globe became, and soon he saw a still smaller globe, a vast distance away, and so small that it was almost invisible. The Moon. Soon the globes faded into invisibility, and all that was left was the white flare of the sun. He watched the sun as it gradually became smaller and dimmer with distance, and he felt a flare of exultation within him. Space was his—he was one with the universe! He could not feel time; time did not matter to him any more, but somehow he could sense the passing of incredible aeons. The sun was now a star, like the other stars, and, like his house he lost it among all the others. But he had no sense of regret; the universe was his home; infinity his dwelling.

The stars moved as he sped on his way. And as he watched, so they grouped themselves closer and closer, into one half of the sky. They began to come together, to coalesce, until their core was a white mist, almost like a star itself. The grouping of stars came closer and closer,

until they hung like a giant disc in the sky. Time passed. Time passed.

The disc receded, and he became aware of other discs, other groupings. This universe was just like the last, except that the stars were now little patches and discs.

Suddenly he became aware that there were more patches on one side of him than on the other. That meant that this vast universe of galaxies was going to coalesce into one shape. And as more time passed, he began to see that this was indeed going to take place. As he got further and further away from the coagulation of discs and patches, he began to realise how vast it was in extent. As they came together, so far away that each galaxy was invisible, and just their mass could be seen, more and more became apparent on each side of his vision.

Soon he was so far away that the irregularities in the grouping of the discs was not discernible. It was as if he were looking down on some solid surface. In fact if he looked along the surface, he could see an edge, far, far away.

As he got still further away, he could see that the surface was losing its silver colour, and as he watched, so it became a deep brown in shade. He began to see little irregularities in the surface.

Soon he realised that the brownish colour was becoming lighter and lighter. Great chasms could be seen below, large lumps and prominences. Lighter and lighter it became, until it was a lightish pink. 'So this is the universe,' he thought, filled with wonder. He could see now that the shape had definite limits and an irregular form, although he was too near to see what its shape was. Further and further away he sped. The colour stayed at this lightish pink, and the great pits became smaller and smaller, until the surface was almost smooth.

His acceleration still continued, and the surface seemed to rush away from him. And the further it became, the clearer it was. At last he began to see the pattern.

And then, with a shock, he realised what the pattern was. Still further and further away he went, until he could clearly see the shape of the universe before him. He looked at its pinkness with horror.

Then suddenly he sensed that all his movement, all his speed had vanished. He had stopped. He saw the shape for what it really was. He stayed, looking in numb incomprehension.

It was a face.

It was his own face.

THE SILENT SHIP

E. C. Williams

IT IS OBLIGATORY under Interplanetary Law for all vessels intending to land on Earth to radio full particulars of themselves no later than intersection with the Moon's orbit. This gives Space port authorities, Customs, Medical units, Mechanics and the Law about one hour to get their reception parties ready. The ship lands, the parties go aboard, and the police stand at the airlock until the parties emerge and give the all clear sign. Then the Captain and crew can come out.

Grasp never gave the signal as he returned from Ceres, but by good fortune he was detected by the Moon Station which was able to turn the optical telescope on to him and read the number painted on the hull of his ship. This information was passed to Earth, and in a moment the identity of the occupant of the silent ship was known. A special medical team was flown to the field, and we, Mellary Bros. Ltd., as his employers, were asked to be on hand. I was sent because I had worked with Grasp on one or two metallurgical laboratory problems, and because everybody else was too scared to go.

A silent ship is almost certainly a stricken ship. Such ships are generally bursting at the seams with infection, and everybody far gone in the disfigurement of some fantastic disease. It's a chance traders and scientists have to take, and I suppose on the whole the chance of death is no larger than at any time of exploration in history. But the Press makes sure that their readers see the most horrifying cases of any silent ships, and in consequence most people wouldn't go within a mile of a space port expecting such a ship. I was sent.

The ship came down with a crash about two miles out

on the field. Our cars converged on it. As we drove up the airlock opened and Grasp came out shouting and waving his arms about. The medical team rushed in and caught him and dragged him off to their mobile decontamination chamber. He shouted, "Forward! Charge! Kill them all! Kill, kill!" Then the door shut on him.

The medical men went into the ship with antibiotic sprays and radiation guns and cleaned it out. The law went in to impound the Log book and anything else that would have a bearing on the business. Then I accompanied the Customs Officer to see what Grasp had brought back for us.

All we found in the hold were a few hundredweights of rock which the Customs spectro analyser identified as rock, nothing but rock. We fingered the stuff, wondering why Grasp had troubled to bring it back.

"You say he was prospecting the asteroids?" mused the officer. "You can pick up stuff like this in my back garden! It's as common as dirt." He shrugged almost regretfully. "You can only call it silica and that's duty-free."

We walked from the ship, only too pleased to leave its antiseptic smell.

"Funny, though!" said the officer. "He must have been mad to have loaded ordinary rock, and yet he was sane enough to set up the computer for the home trip. Ah, well."

The mobile hospital had gone with Grasp, the police were a small cloud of dust scooting towards the perimeter road. All that were left were two engineers looking with chagrin at the dented reactor tubes underneath the ship, and a haulier waiting to transfer the cargo back to the clearance sheds.

The Customs man and I got into my car.

"Sad," he said, without really expressing much feeling. He was quiet until I had put the car into hover and moved off. "Will you bother to clear the stuff?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I suppose so," I replied casually.

"Why?" he asked, "what do you want a pile of rocks for? Do you reckon he had something?" I shrugged. "It's not up to me," I answered. "All I know is I was told to bring back whatever was aboard. Anyway, you know it's nothing but silica."

"Um," he assented. "But if you find anything else, you'll let us know, won't you."

I stopped the car by the side door of the Administrative buildings, and let him out.

"My advice to you," he said holding the door half open, "is to dispose of the lot quickly. These undeclared cargoes always cause trouble. Nobody's going to believe my ruling on the cargo. Nobody's going to believe a man brought plain unadulterated rock all the way from Ceres—even if he *was* mad on arrival."

He shut the door, then opened it again for a final word. "Pulverise it or burn it—anyway get rid of it!" He really meant it. He nodded and went into the building.

I continued on to the works where I arranged for a lorry to pick up the load, then went in and reported to Karswain, the technical director. I finished my description of the day's events with a few words on the Customs man's advice.

"What d'you think he was getting at?" asked Karswain. "Why trouble?"

"I suppose a cargo which has arrived without a description is suspect in the eyes of the Customs. They slap the biggest Duty on it possible to ensure they aren't robbing themselves. Well, this load Grasp has brought back is too ordinary to be believable. Even though one of their own men has analysed the stuff, there'll be senior men who'll think he must have missed something, and they'll order the stuff impounded. Probably from then on, it's nothing but filling in forms and everlasting interviews."

Karswain said "Ugh" with distaste, then told me to run an analysis on the stuff as soon as it came in from the Field, and if it was valueless, have the lot dumped into the nearest furnace. After that I was to go and live at the hospital until Grasp was able to tell me what it was all about.

I carried out the analysis which confirmed exactly the Customs man's on the spot test; I ordered the load to be shot into the nearest free furnace; then I put on my coat and went back to the Field and found the hospital. It was dark by now, and the night staff were on. The first few I questioned hadn't heard of Grasp. I began to get excited

and eventually a tall woman came out of a door and told me to be quiet. I went over it again. "Oh," she said. "He's in psychiatric." One of the others took me.

Grasp was twisting under straps holding him to a bed. A tape recorder was taking down his shouting.

"Bring 'B' Battalion round to the flank! Charge! Quick, into that gap! Look out! They mustn't break through. Kill! No one must escape."

And so on. It was like listening to a frantic commentary on a skirmish, or I should say, like listening to a dozen aspects of a battle. From time to time Grasp would even give lifelike imitations of a death cry.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked one of the three watching doctors. He was so absorbed listening to Grasp that he didn't hear me. I looked at the others and met the same fascinated concentration. "Respiration, keeping up," remarked one. "And pulse." Another shook his head silently in bewilderment.

"Shall we try plasma again?" said the third, but his voice had an obvious negative in it and the others did not reply.

"I just don't understand it," burst out the doctor who had hitherto sat silently staring at Grasp's face. "If I hadn't seen that slide myself——" He looked up and saw me. "How did you get in? Are you a relative?"

"No. I represent his employers," I said. "He went out to Ceres for us."

The three doctors faced me, and for a moment I thought they would bundle me out of the room. Then one said:

"Oh, I see. I thought you might be from the newspapers."

"Well, what's wrong with him?" I asked again.

"He's dying of an infection he picked up out there. Something we know absolutely nothing about. He'll most certainly die before morning. He hasn't a white corpuscle left in him. What was he doing out in the Asteroids?"

"Looking for tin," I answered. "Irradiated tin."

"He found it!" said the doctor grimly.

"No, he didn't!" I ejaculated.

He hesitated, then grasped my wrist. "Come with me."

We left the room where Grasp still shouted commands

and howled war cries, and passed through several neighbouring rooms.

"This is my room," said my guide, opening a door.

There was a table with a microscope and image multiplier upon it. He switched on a lamp connected to the instrument, and looked briefly into the hooded screen. "Look at that," he ordered. Curiously, I looked into the tube.

In the softly lit field of view lay the undeniable shape of a sword. I heard the doctor click on another switch and top lighting revealed the splendid engraving along the length of the blade, and the carving of the grip.

"What has this got to do with . . . ?" I began.

"We found it in his blood test," said the doctor evenly. "Move the slide a little."

I did as he said.

A veritable tangled arsenal of spears and swords came into the field of view, and mixed in with the hard geometrical shapes, several inert organic shapes.

"What on earth!"

The doctor pulled me from my frozen stare into that microscopic battlefield.

"Now come back and listen to him. You know as much as we do."

Grasp began to fade out about three in the morning. With the three doctors I sat for four hours listening to his delirium until at last the babble began to peter out and minutes of quiet or simple moaning showed that his strength was ebbing. The doctors began replacing large quantities of his blood with bottled blood. They injected stimulants and antibiotics. They muttered at one another so that I could not hear their baffled proposals. They counted Grasp's pulse as if this would stay his decline. Then suddenly he opened his eyes and saw me. He recognised me instantly, even in the dim lighting around the bed, and he called my name.

"Danny! I'm falling Danny! Oh God! where am I? Help me, Danny!"

I pushed my way between the doctors and put my arm round his shoulders.

"There, man, there," I said to him, "what have you been up to? You're all right now. Don't worry, I've got you now."

He relaxed against my arm and was silent for about a minute.

"I haven't got long, Danny, have I?" he asked.

"You're O.K. now," I assured him. Once again he was quiet, as if he was checking my words, then he said: "No, it's nearly over. This is what happened. Don't interrupt me; I must tell what happened."

The doctors moved the recorder microphone nearer to catch his fading voice.

Ceres is a barren, airless, crinkled, globe of rock 432 miles in diameter. It is notoriously difficult to land upon owing to its high axial velocity and fissured surface, and Grasp being only average as a manual pilot, put a new furrow into the landscape and smashed in the hull protecting the middle hold of his ship. A large amount of air was lost, but the greatest danger was the amount of time Grasp had to spend outside effecting temporary repairs with rolls of chicken wire and polythene. On the airless surface of Ceres at perihelion he absorbed a great deal of radiation from the Sun, so much so, that he was forced to remain inside the ship for several weeks to allow the effects to diminish. He occupied this time examining specimens of rock he had picked up in the neighbourhood of the ship. He examined the pieces spectromatically and as sections under a microscope. He found nothing but silica with insignificant traces of iron. The tin he had come to find was definitely not within the torn up line he had made upon landing. Finding nothing of interest internally, his eyes for the first time took note of the surface of the lump he was holding. It showed minute etch marks, and several small geometric patches of what appeared to be a mineral deposit. A casual gaze would not have seen the marks. He scratched the patches with his finger nail and examined the light coloured paste that came off. He spread it upon a slide, not bothering to cover the specimen, and sat down with a huff of boredom to examine the screen of the image multiplier. He saw a

confusion of broken angular shapes, mostly out of focus, some exhibiting a cellular structure, large pieces being composed of smaller, partitioned, boxes, almost as if they were of vegetable origin. The structure, however, was too regular for vegetable cells, and resembled more the repetition one gets with crystal formation. And yet, where he could see it, the cells were too defined and regular even for crystals. Grasp moved the slide about, and focused at different levels. He became convinced he was looking at brickwork.

He looked up from the microscope, smote his head comically, and said: "Brickwork, you great big looney!" and laughed uproariously.

A minute later, however, he was back to the examination, now with the original piece of rock upon the platform and with intense top lighting applied. He discovered he was looking down upon the roofs of a metropolis. Grasp's powers of reasoning disappeared for a time. He observed in a vacuum, free of speculation. He saw flea shaped things pressing to and fro along the ruined causeways of their streets. He saw mechanical vehicles laden with boxes and creatures hurrying between the buildings. A troop of creatures advanced in another place pushing their fellows before them, clearing a space for a carriage drawn by harnessed creatures. Everywhere was congestion and swarming among the ruins. The creatures were garbed in chitinous pieces that flashed iridescent in the powerful light directed from above, and most appeared to carry a sword strapped along the curved ridge of their spine.

The enormity of what he was seeing gradually seeped into Grasp's mind. He clapped a hand to his eyes and rubbed them trying to bring sense to his brain. He spoke blindly to the metal walls of the room: "It's mad! Wake up, you looney! You've had too much sun."

He took the piece of rock from under the microscope and gained assurance from its dark inertness. How could he have seen such things in a peculiar stain? He drew in a sharp breath and placed the rock into position again moving across a lower power objective. This time it was as if he hung suspended high above the buildings and was able to see the pattern of streets, radiating from several

points widely separated from each other. By moving the rock a little and refocusing, he brought into view the edge of the town bound by thick walls with a thin coloured line striking in from beyond indicating a road entering beneath a strong-point.

There was no doubt but that he had discovered a microscopic civilisation, its inhabitants no larger than bacteria, and probably at a medieval stage of development. He had not only discovered it, but almost destroyed it. What immense cataclysms must have smote this town as his ship smashed the adjacent rock and hurled the fragment to one side. And then after a short quietus, his vast, gloved hand picking the fragment up and dropping it into a bucket, probably upside down. Then, from the near vacuum outside to the 14 lbs. sq. in. inside the ship. They had survived all this, that was obvious, but how had they interpreted these vast events?

Grasp tried to imagine a comparable series of events happening to a Terrestrial town, and found he could not. Of course, the minute size of the town would be its own protection to some extent, as most vibration would be too coarse to be more than a stately rise and fall of the ground. Air pressure would probably be a sudden mysterious syrup like ether around them slowing them down. But they were a tough race, for all that, warriors by the look of it, every man armed as once man used to be on Earth.

He examined other specimens of rock and found fragments of other towns and villages, all seething with marching columns of citizens. The area in which he had landed, at least, must have been very densely populated. The mile long furrow he had made must have appeared to them as a slash across the face of Europe would do to us—a manifestation of colossal forces capable of instantly destroying the whole of civilisation. Yet they appeared to be rallying to defend their isolated fragments even though plunged into an unimaginable dimension. Grasp minutely examined every one of the fragments he had brought into the ship. As soon as he could, he brought in more rocks from outside, until, in the end, he had to stop owing to a headache and sickness caused by over exposure. Also, as every footstep possibly destroyed as much as his salvage

work preserved, he decided he should not leave the ship unless absolutely vital.

The creatures, which he christened 'fleas' were quite aware of his existence, although, because he was as huge to them as, for example, the Moon is to us, their eyes could not encompass him when near. It was as if the Moon hung above our heads only four or five miles up—one glance would not embrace its limits and its furthest extent would vanish into mists. But the fleas reacted to Grasp's presence and he several times observed under the microscope troops drawn up and arrows shot in his direction. Of course, they never rose more than 1,000th of an inch from the surface of the rock.

His sickness and dizziness proved to be obstinate and he dosed himself heavily with those specifics designed to allay UV fever. After three days of this he took a blood test. In the smear were three fleas slaying all moving things in sight.

Grasp looked in incomprehension at first, then vomited as he realised that the creatures were inside him, battling their way round his blood stream, killing every germ and every phagocyte they encountered. For a warrior race, it was paradise. Thousands of ferocious monsters massed against them. The warriors must fight every inch of the vast labyrinth they had penetrated. Fresh troops poured in to swell the original raiding party. They spread out over the mountainous landscape, then hurled themselves, sword foremost, into any one of the billion pits that studded the titanic creature. Within, they swept forward along low tunnels that debouched into caverns holding ponds of sticky liquids. Foul things hung from the roofs and struggled in the liquid. All were killed with terrible abandon. Onwards into larger tunnels growing more complex, creatures oozing through the tunnel walls to attack them. Huge jelly things, aware, yet completely insensitive. Sometimes the raiding parties were overwhelmed by the massed, onward pressure of the defenders, and then they were absorbed to a terrible death within the jelly creatures. But other parties managed to link up with their fellows, and were able to direct reinforcements to their area. The raiders became troops, and very soon, armies. After battling

for many days, the resistance suddenly began to melt. Men of Science, who had been following the fighting fronts, now took over control and directed parties of workers into the vital organs of their giant host, there to carry on a thousand and one duties necessary to the life of the giant now that its own forces were destroyed.

Their own HQ they established within Grasp's brain, and patiently began the task of understanding and re-activating the fever-wracked man. In a short time they had discovered which cells needed stimulation in order to effect movement of his limbs. Then they were able to improve his general internal condition, so that, at their prompting, Grasp was able to walk about inside the ship, exploring everywhere yet not knowing why he did it.

The council of scientists in Grasp's brain now met to consider the future.

"This creature," said one, "who came from the infinite reaches of the upper air to destroy our civilisation is now under our complete control. He goes only where we wish him to go, and he lives only by our desire. I now propose that we use this immense thing to transport our Race to a more distant part of the world where we can build again our warrior society."

"One step of this creature," agreed another, "covers over 5,000,000 uls. at the prodigious speed of nine thousand million uls. per tand. A journey which would take our Race many generations to complete would certainly be accomplished in a single rotation of the world if we use this creature as a vehicle."

A young scientist spoke: "I have a bolder plan which if adopted would bring everlasting joy and glory to our warriors. This creature, as we have seen, is a veritable moving world of sword fodder. Since the subjugation of our World in the distant Past, when all enemies were slain in glorious battle, our warriors have never fought except against each other in the annual competitions. What joy has been theirs to storm this fortress and to annihilate its million inhabitants! What I suggest is that we direct our host to take us to his upper world and there we shall encounter hundreds more of these giants; thousands, perhaps. Think of the everlasting battle before our people!

One by one we shall defeat these fortresses, and I see a vision of the far distant future, when we reach the ultimate and set fortress to fight fortress, immense armies clashing in the contest for ultimate supremacy!"

The other members rose to their feet in tremendous enthusiasm. In one splendid vision their young member had solved the age long problem of their Society; how to preserve the fighting spirit of the Race when all opposition had been long swept away. Here, he offered them an almost endless perspective of fighting. In this upper world where the giants dwelt were incredible storehouses of raving monsters awaiting the taste of the sword blade. Their arms itched to wield the swords upon their backs.

"To the upper world!" they shouted in unison. In wild excitement, one scientist rushed to the jelly-like wall of the chamber in which they had met, and thrust his sword deep into the heart of a nucleus he saw there. Grasp blinked.

Shortly after this, Grasp awoke from his lethargy and began preparing for the voyage back to Earth. He took sightings on the stars and Sun and fed the results into the computer. Then he operated the jacks which set the craft upright upon its base, closed everything tight, strapped himself in his seat, and waited.

The journey back took two months. Grasp did not remember much of it. The fleas kept an irregular control on him and sometimes he became wide awake and felt his reason going as the hideous nature of his sickness began to dawn on him. Then there were long dream-like periods when he seemed to be inside himself, moving through the dim light of his own cell structure. Some sort of communication was struck up, but it was not truly rational on his side. He got the impression that his invaders were bewildered by the journey they were making; that several generations had past; that there was dissension within the Race. They dearly wanted to know how much further their journey was to be, but there was no way for them to understand the vague impressions they received from him.

The migrating Race within him almost forgot the

impulse that had set them travelling. In his dreams, Grasp saw the growth of cities within himself built of his own bone material; saw foundries develop furnace by furnace and new swords and sledge-like vehicles issuing from them; saw spider-web-like bridges built over the awful chasms of his body; all manner of artifacts littering his inner flesh for the convenience of the 'fleas'. But a small kernel of the Race handed down the message of the original council of scientists, and when at last, Grasp began carrying out those actions necessary for final deceleration down to Earth, this message went out again to the masses, and the old warrior spirit rose up again in them and they marched and countermarched, and when the ship landed they were ready.

Grasp came out with his arms waving, and shouting "Forward! Charge! Kill them all!"

Poor fleas! They had no conception of the vastness of our world and the fantastic density of our microbe population. Their walking fortress emerged into our atmosphere alive with its assortment of airborne germs and they fought joyfully at first on Grasp's skin, then in the portals of his pores, then deeper and deeper into the billion channels of his body, fighting against unbelievable odds. And their insensate enemies came on dying and squirming over their dead, always more and more, swamping the drawn-up squares, trapping the defenders in narrow tunnels between slow closing presses of corpses.

The Generals rallied their scattered troops into pockets of resistance, and one by one the warriors died and their swords drifted away in the erratic surge of Grasp's bloodstream.

It was hopeless. To a man, the Cereans were wiped out. The blood transfusions washed out their corpses. Our indigenous bacteria swarmed through Grasp's body in full, natural possession.

Grasp raised his eyes in agony to mine.

"The whole race exterminated, Danny! What a terrible loss! We shall never know their like again."

He lay breathing heavily in my arms, his face dripping with the perspiration of a rising fever.

"But the rock," he said harshly. "We've got that. Their wonderful building. We've got that."

He saw my face.

"We have, haven't we?" he asked weakly.

My answer killed him, I do believe.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED . . .
Dikk Richardson

DJELLAN GAVE A huge yawn.

"Well?" he sighed. "Anything happened while I've been napping, Ffrefellat?"

"What do you expect to happen in six eons, you burk?" his friend replied. "Of course nothing has happened."

They said nothing for a while, and pondered.

"Wait a minute, though," said Ffrefellat suddenly. "There was a story I had to tell you."

"A story?" said Djellan, incredulously.

"Yes. A funny one."

"A joke?"

"Precisely."

They were interrupted by a second loud yawn, and, turning, they saw Mgethlu had awakened, and was looking interested.

"A dirty one?" he asked, with something of a gleam in his eye.

"No," said Ffrefellat simply.

"Umm," muttered Mgethlu and went back to sleep.

"Well?" said Djellan.

"This is true," stated Ffrefellat in a warning tone of voice, as though this would be sufficient excuse if Djellan did not find his story funny. "Actually, you hadn't been asleep very long when it happened." He hesitated.

"Go on, then," prompted Djellan, with a tinge of impatience.

"Well, it wasn't much," Ffrefellat continued, apologetically. "A couple of tiny boats came across the sea from over that way," he said, nodding towards the setting sun. "They were full of dwarfs."

"Dwarfs!!" It took Djellan some time to stop laughing.

"Well," Ffrefellat went on. "They didn't stop long. They messed about digging and one thing and another, but just before they went, one of them marched up to me. He looked up to me, serious as you please, and said—keeping a straight face all the time, mind—he said 'Great statues of Easter Island,' he said, 'who *did* build you?'"

Djellan roared with laughter.

THE RED EARTH, the dry Earth, the old Earth . . .

From the salt seas far beyond the mountains to the west, to the eternal city of Durven, a gleaming jewel set in the middle of everlasting desert, came the slow travelling caravan of Tastar; a long line of men and women wending their way across the unchanging and stoic red desert, wearily plodding their way through the sands to keep a regular ten year rendezvous.

At the head of the long procession was the prince Serlis; heir apparent to the throne of Tastar when his father should perish; among other things he was journeying to Durven to seek his wife among the nobility of that city, as was decreed by custom as ancient as the deserts. By the standards of his pleasure-loving times he was tall and well-graced with physical beauty; his glinting blue eyes in the midst of the darker olive of his face showing an eager intelligence unusual in one of his race. He strode out

through the sands eagerly also, as though he was waiting for the moment when they arrived at the portals of Durven and were admitted to the lush interior and to the ten week session of music and dancing and other sport.

But behind him the other hundred travellers and their pack animals seemed to exude an aura of depression and hopelessness. They were travelling to the city of Durven because it was so decreed by custom and by their king, now too old to travel. They did not look forward to the moment when the exotic gates of Durven would clang shut behind their weary backs. For they were but simple folk, and used to a simple life, and the idea of exoticism and the glamour—possessed Durven was both foreign and strange to them. They were simple folk, they adhered to the Laws rigidly, they enquired not the why and the wherefores of life, they endured the outrageous slings and arrows of malevolent fortune stoically, they turned their minds away from thought and its dire consequences. For was not thought forbidden by the Laws?

Characteristically, Serlis did think, and was not afraid of the dire consequences. He trudged through the desert sands at the head of the long procession with his guardian at his side and sword at his belt, thinking, thinking. Beyond him, on the Eastern horizon, the huge moon was climbing into prominence. It shone with a reddish hue, and from one of the eyes came a continuous series of flashes, white, silver, beckoning. As though, he thought, the old man were trying to blink at us to attract our attention.

To his chief minister, the old and venerable Jarl, the prince Serlis said, in a casual voice:

"Have you ever wondered at the meaning of those flashes from the moon? For they surely cannot be natural."

But Jarl, to his disappointment, though not to his surprise, merely looked very shocked at the temerity of such a question and grunted a monosyllabic reply which meant nothing.

At length, after months of patient travel through a deserted and inhospitable world where only the hardiest plant life could still survive, after months of travel through

the crisp seas of salt, across the high freezing mountains, through the dry cold desert, the caravan neared the city of Durven.

They were sighted from afar. A delegation from the city came to meet them, soliciting amazed sighs from the simple people of Tastar, for they were rich and exotic in their dress and bearing and manner of speech. They held themselves everyone like the king of Tastar, they dressed in shimmering gold and silk brocade which swept to the sandy ground in loops and sworls and complicated curlicues. Yet Serlis, who was of noble and ancient blood himself, and was not overcome by their physical appearance, held his ground and regarded them calmly. They drew to a halt before him.

"Greetings, O leader of Tastar. Is your father, the King, dead, for we do not see him among the ranks of your people, and you were but a stripling when last you came?"

Serlis replied evenly to the formal question.

"My father, the King, is yet alive, but unable to make this journey for reasons of his health. For this he apologises to the citizens of Durven, and hopes that his son Serlis will be worthy to stand in his stead. He also hopes that his son Serlis will be able and willing to find a bride among the people of Durven, for it is decreed by eternal custom and by the Laws that the heir apparent to the throne of Tastar should find his bride among the people of Durven, that amity should be maintained among the races, and that the royal blood be kept fresh and strong."

The leader of the small delegation bowed his head low, and replied:

"It is good that the prince Serlis should seek his bride among our people, for thus will a fresh bond be formed between our people and thus will custom and the Laws be adhered to. We shall do what we can to provide you with your bride."

Serlis, tiring of the elaborate and ordained procedure, stepped forward impulsively. "Do you think that we might waive the ceremonies until after my people have bathed and rested, for we have come far, and would better be able to enjoy them after rest."

The tall leader seemed slightly shocked by this breach of ceremony, but his politeness quickly re-asserted itself. "Certainly," he said, extending a hand toward the city on the horizon. "If such you desire, then who are we to tell you otherwise. If you will follow us . . ."

The delegation began to trek back towards the city. It was late in the afternoon, and the first stars of evening were beginning to combat the sinking, blood-red, sun for attention. The men of Tastar grimly plodded on through the slowly drifting sands as night fell and as the city drew ever nearer . . .

Eventually, they attained the huge golden gates, and wearily they entered within, too tired to appreciate or be amazed at the enormous crowd awaiting their long-expected arrival or the immense complexity of the city in which they found themselves. Marched through the wide white streets along the Moving Ways, they at length came to the gleaming white palace of gold and plastic and alabaster and steel, of towering minarets and spires and pillars and towers; the work of long forgotten craftsmen far in the distant past who could construct buildings of both beauty and strength which were able to withstand the ravages of millennia and geological era. For although the material, gleaming white and red and blue and other colours of the spectrum and some beyond it, was chipped and frayed here and there, the wear was not noticeable enough for the unobservant eyes of the present-day humanity to remark upon and worry about. Their glorious city still stood, and would continue to do so for millennia yet. When eventually it fell and came to ruin they would be long dead. So they worried about little except for the petty squabbles over which humanity is always occupied, and passed their time in eating and drinking and making love. There was little else to do, and nothing to look forward to other than the regular visit from the citizens of Tastar every ten years which provided a welcome diversion in the monotony of their lives, and a chance for the young men and maidens of the city to sport off their many charms, for there were many among the ranks of Tastar that were marriageable. And for the most part, the Tastarians that were thus married remained in Durven to seek the easy

life and diminish the numbers of Tastar, which was in retrospect both barbaric and unsophisticated. Thus Durven grew but stagnated, while Tastar diminished and stagnated. And they were the last remaining settlements of the human race on Earth—static, forbidden to think, and pleasure-loving.

The people of Tastar were shown into the enormous palace, into the huge chambers of tapestry and intricately carved mural, into the incredible ivory and ruby and glass complexities that were to be their dwelling places for the coming ten weeks. They wearily stripped off their travel-soiled robes and slipped into intricate machinery which they took for granted and which removed the dust from their bodies and the heaviness from their hearts and the weariness from their brains. And they emerged after varying lengths of time, and pressed buttons set into the intricate and strange walls and received exotic foods and fiery drinks which coursed through their bodies and yet which left no evil after-effects of depression or headache. These they took for granted. After which they depressed further buttons and received intricately tailored robing and costume which fitted every line and crease of their bodies in a grip that protected and comforted, and they received finally an exotic golden-and-purple robe of some rich stuff which hung from their shoulders and flared from the waist and swirled around their golden-shod feet.

And then, refreshed in mind and body, with well-being and a sense of expectancy coursing through every particle of their persons, they surged from their chambers behind the lead of the noble prince Serlis. For all these things they possessed in Tastar, but their results were neither so effective nor so pleasing. And already they were beginning to compare the riches of this place with the poverties of their own realm.

The prince Serlis led his people toward the great Council Hall of Durven, where they were to be received and the preliminary festivities conducted. He in his turn was led by a squadron of palace guards, although their title and rank was purely nominal, since there had been nothing to guard these thousand and more years. The guards in their turn were led by a phalanx of richly clad trumpeters,

men who bore strange instruments of shining metal which raised a man's heart and made him think of stirring deeds which had not been performed by any man for many millennia. But the spirit and the dream was there, and man is always a great dreamer, and can elude himself into many ways of thought far from the truth, and there were many in that Hall that night who temporarily dreamed of themselves in the far-off past of the Earth when there were great adventures and men fought evil and sorcery and even the remote stars themselves for their rights.

Through elaborate and colourful and gem-laden passages and corridors they marched to the Hall, all with a sense of expectancy in their hearts, and none more so than the prince Serlis, for he knew that soon he was to meet his bride-to-be, and he knew that only the most beautiful and most regal of the maidens of the city would have been chosen for his pleasure—and all the maidens of this time were both beautiful and regal through millenia of careful breeding and through contrivances the complexity of which would have made women of earlier times gasp with amazement and jealousy.

Through these corridors they marched and through a great portal at length they turned and into the Hall they came.

And those who had not been to Durven before and had not tasted its beauty were overcome with awe and not a little fear. For before them they saw an empty circle into which they were marching, and round this circle was the huge amphitheatre of the Hall, where the entire population of the city could attend if need be. Such an amphitheatre had never before been built and never again would be, but the fact of its existence at all was powerful and all but terrifying. For thousands upon thousands of wondrously clad citizens stared down upon them in silence, since the trumpeters had momentarily ceased their instruments from stirring the hearts of these latter-day men. But still they marched forward, and those of Tastar followed behind, again with heavy heart, for they felt once more that they were in the presence of men and women compared with whom they were but insects. But Serlis yet

marched with his head high, for he knew that soon he would meet his future bride, and he could never be seen to be in fear or in trembling. Not that he was, for Serlis was truly the son of a king, and as such he considered himself the equal of any man or woman present in the vast Hall. He felt himself afflicted with a feeling he could not explain, for his heart was beating hard and he was no longer worrying about the whys and the wherefores of the universe as he was wont to do.

And so he led his people up the length of the Hall, all of two hundred metres in length, and so he came to the dais at the far end, and so he met the Council of the city. His people halted behind him, and the guard and the trumpeters opened their ranks so that he could pass them through, and the trumpeters sounded a fanfare on their instruments that set his blood tingling with expectation. He strode boldly through their ranks and gravely mounted the sweeping flight of steps that led to the platform on which attended the Council of Ten and behind them a veiled and mysterious shape that set his heart to pounding the more.

In ten short steps he attained the top of the steps, and stood before the Council, who regarded him for a moment without saying anything. The entire Hall was silent. Then one of the Council, the same proud man who had led the delegation beyond the gates of Durven to meet them, stepped forward and spoke to him.

"In the name of our people, O Serlis, we greet you. You and yours have travelled far and experienced much so that you could attend on us as decreed by custom and the Laws. I am Teris, and I speak on behalf of the Council and people of Durven. Soon shall the festivities begin, and soon shall we make merry. But first we have a more serious duty to perform, though it be one which gladdens our hearts and strengthens the bond between our people."

His voice rang stridently over the Hall.

"It has been decreed from time immemorial that the royalty of your race shall here be wedded to she who is adjudged the most beautiful and the most worthy to be called queen. Today you have come to our city seeking a bride as is decreed, and as is decreed we have chosen

you one. We consider that she will please you, for she is beauty itself in every aspect of human and natural accomplishment."

Teris paused, swung his proud head round, and beckoned with his finger to the veiled figure who stood in silent wait behind the other members of the Council. On seeing the signal, the figure glided through the Council ranks, a beautiful apparition in scintillating diamond white which set the blood pounding in the head of Serlis, for all his assurance. The veiled figure stood in front of him, beside Teris.

Teris spoke. "She is called Lill-yel, which in our ancient language means "sunflower", for such is her disposition. She is the daughter of Councillor Kern, so her ancestry is also long and noble. You will surely find that she is fit for the throne of Tastar, for indeed she is queenly."

Teris now motioned for the girl to remove her veil, as custom decreed, and Serlis held his breath in his throat. The veil came off, and, gossamer-light, fluttered down to the cream-white floor.

Teris had not exaggerated in his estimation of her appearance. For Lill-yel was every whit as beautiful and as regal as he had intimated. Tall, her hair blonde as was the hair of every other woman of the race, for yellow and gold are surely the most evocative colours known to the human race, being the colours of the sun's rays at even and the colour of the wheat-crop and thus of birth and rebirth and of a hundred and one other things; her hair flowed smoothly, unhemmed, to her waist, framing a delicately-boned and clear-skinned face of great beauty and a figure equally so, and less substantial, a poise that was regal and confident and knowing, which expressed queenship in every inch of graceful stance and every inch of slender height.

But Serlis noticed none of these things immediately, or he noticed them only in passing. For what he noticed about the girl, and what he knew that she knew he noticed, were her eyes. Large, wistful, grey eyes. Enquiring eyes. The eyes of a person, who, like Serlis himself, found the answers and decrees of the Laws unsatisfactory and displeasing. They were eyes which glinted as brightly and

suddenly as the so mysterious flashes which he so often saw appearing on the strange surface of the moon ; eyes which no doubt wondered as he did about this and similar mysteries forbidden to the human race by the Laws of a dim and forgotten past. And he realised that she saw the same things in his eyes, for she smiled secretly, knowingly, a little warmly. And when he stepped forward to deliver the ritual and decreed kiss to open the Lawful three-week period of engagement, the great eyes still smiled knowingly at him.

The kiss delivered, he stepped back, still tingling with the memory of it. And the Hall broke into a great roar of tumultuous approval, for it was seldom that so great a happening occurred and was solemnised in this very Hall. It was, perhaps, a sign that the human race still lived on, that it was not entirely dead so long as such an occasion could be consummated and the torch of life seen to be carried on into a new generation. Because, for all of their gaiety, everyone knew that the human race was in the twilight of its existence, not because of its age, which was not relatively great as the ages of comets and planets and stars are measured, but great for a simple chemical organism hemmed to the planet of its birth and with little to do other than make merry through the weary and long centuries.

The brief ceremony over, Serlis took his place with the Council with his bride-to-be at his side. The preparations for merry-making were begun, and a picked company of important persons descended from the amphitheatre audience to indulge in them. Serlis saw that his people had lost some of their fear and indeed were beginning to enjoy the glamour of festivity and celebration, and he was glad for them. Huge meals were consumed, tales were told, and songs of the far past were sung, and the night was banished by the all-pervading glow which lit up the huge Hall as though it were day, although none had ever dared to enquire what it was, for it was decreed in the Laws that none should enquire.

About the time of the passing of the old day and the coming of the new, Serlis felt a light touch on his arm, and turned to hear and see Lill-yel looking at him with her great

eyes and whispering in his ears: "My Lord, let us go outside, for there are things I would discuss with you."

Serlis saw that there were still some of the Council on the dais before them, and that they were watching the festivities and were no longer concerned with what the prince and his bride were doing.

"Surely," he said. "But how can we leave the Hall? They would see us, and say that since it was not decreed, we were breaking the Laws."

She tugged daintily at his arm.

"There is a way out of the back," she said. "Where the dais meets with the seating of the amphitheatre there is a tunnel that leads to the open air. Those in the seats will not be able to see us go, for there is a high screen erected for the privacy of those of the Council."

He squeezed her arm and saw the awareness in her eyes. They smiled. "Let us go now, then," he murmured, "before anyone should see us."

They stood up silently and tiptoed to the rear part of the dais. From thence they disappeared from the Hall into the tunnel without any person seeing them, for they were all too much concerned with the merry-making. They walked down the unlighted and undecorated tunnel, their footsteps loud in the dark even with the soft shoes they wore. And at length they emerged on a balcony which was high above the ground, open to the sky, and deserted. Many other dark tunnels radiated from the small stone balcony, like unto the web which the spider wove, although there were hardly many such insects still in existence.

The balcony was surrounded by the dark castle walls on three sides, but was open to the sky on the fourth, the west. There, hanging low above the western horizon was the mysterious half-moon, red and ominous, mysterious. Serlis saw its baleful light glinting in Lill-yel's wide eyes, and he knew that the same wonder and fascination of the unknown gripped her as well as he. And in her eyes he saw reflected not only the image of the moon but also the intermittent images of the mysterious and meaningless flashes which so worried him, for they surely could not be natural, yet he had never before known anyone who had been concerned with such a worthless phenomenon. He had early learnt

not to be too open with his regard for the mysterious and forbidden, for it led to strange tales about his sanity and his right to kingship. Yet here he knew he had a kindred spirit.

Lill-yel gripped his hand firmly, and as though he had told her what he was thinking of, she said after a long silence, in her low, soft voice: "My Lord, I see from your eyes that you too have often thought on those mysterious lights on the moon-planet?"

Without speaking, he nodded, still obsessed by the continual flashing, which seemed to have a pattern to it over a very long period, though it was not a pattern which he had ever before discerned.

"My Lord," rejoined Lill-yel softly, "what would you say were I to state that I had learnt the secret of those strange lights, and indeed the secret of our past? Would you think me gone insane through over much watching of the moon?"

Serlis, as demanded by gallantry, put an arm around her and kissed her. "Of course I would not think you mad," he declared gently. "But tell me how you know." Secretly he considered that perhaps she had been touched by the maleficient influence of the moon, for one could wonder the reasons for this and that and many other things in this strange world, but how could one ever know the reasons? They were hidden under such an enormous weight of time that any reason must have been lost eons in the past.

She realised what he thought, in spite of his automatic gallantry, and smiled again.

"Have you not seen the pattern in those lights, my Lord?" she asked.

Surprised, he turned to her. He had thought that it had been nothing but his imagination which had provided the pattern.

"Yes . . . I have," he muttered, awaiting further elucidation.

"After I had been chosen as your bride," she said, "some three months in the past, I had to pass all my time in the Council palace here, as decreed by custom and the Laws," —and here she gave a tiny and delicate sniff, as though she despised both—"and I had the opportunity to spend many

a night on this balcony alone, with naught but the moon and the stars for company. And after time had passed, I began to notice the pattern in those flashes, and for the first time I considered that it were possible that these flashes are not at all natural, but rather the work of some unnatural being, like unto man himself."

She ceased to see whether Serlis was treating her narrative with derision or no, but he was silent and grave in the moonlight. For his part, he realised that her story, be it fact or fancy, needed to be told, and that she was of great and searching intelligence similar to his, and that here he might find what it was that he sought so assiduously through life.

"At the same time," she continued in her low voice, "I began to wonder about these other passages"—she indicated the other passages which radiated from the balcony with a sweep of her slender hand—"and why they were never used. For all of them are deep with dust save for the one we employed. I enquired of Teris as circumspectly as I could of the reason for this, although I did not directly mention the balcony, for he might have become suspicious and investigated into my affairs. He told me that custom had decreed that no man should enter certain environs of the building, because no man had seen fit to do so for many a century. So I determined to investigate, once I had assured myself that he was not suspicious. I was safe enough, for custom has decreed that man should not visit these places, and why should we have reason to defy custom?" Again she sniffed daintily.

"So," she continued, "I began to explore these passages, to see where they might lead. The first five led to little but empty and sacked rooms, of neither import nor interest. And then"—she pointed to another dark passage, indicating that he should follow. "Then I went down this one." He followed, heart pounding, now certain that he would discover the secret behind the flashes, and indeed, much more.

As they walked cautiously down the narrow and dark passage, she talked.

"I came to a chamber," she said, "and this one lighted itself immediately I had pushed open the portal. Inside was much strange equipment, the like of which I had never

before seen. But most important was the device I discovered which told me all that I know—and ashamed it has made me of my brave race!" She spoke the last phrase of the sentence with a kind of ironic scorn, which only made Serlis all the more curious.

"I discovered a device kin to what we term book-reels," she said, pushing her way through the darkness. "And this device taught me all I wanted to know, and persuaded me that it would be better not to tell others, for it would serve little purpose. But I could see that you were like me, and would never be satisfied until you did know."

She stopped, and pushed something in the darkness before her. Immediately light flooded into the narrow tunnel, and Serlis saw Lill-yel framed in the suddenly dazzling golden light, standing in the doorway to a room, which he could see was crowded with equipment. She led him in, and picked up a small portable device off a metal table in the centre of the crowded and dingy little room. "This will tell you all you want to know," she said. "There is little enough of it, but you will not desire to learn more after you have finished it and after I have satisfied your curiosity. The device works simply enough, much like an ordinary book-reel with which you no doubt pass many an hour."

Serlis sat himself down on a hard wooden chair, grimly aware that now he was going to learn—what? He settled the device on his knees, and pressed the button that animated the small screen which he was watching.

The story was simple enough and short enough . . .

Thousands of years, or perhaps now it was tens of thousands, or even more, in the past, man had been young and eager, and had developed various methods of crossing the airless infinity of space. He had planted colonies on some of the nearer planets, and among them was the moon. He had tried to discover a method to reach the stars, and had failed. As was inevitable, war broke out, for there was little else to do since expansion had ceased. Two of the colonies, "Mars", and "Venus", the two nearest planets, had been annihilated, and much of the home planet had been rendered completely uninhabitable for millennia to come. Fertile areas had turned into desert and seas had

boiled off into the atmosphere, most of the population vanished.

When it was all over, the remainder, a huddled and pathetic remnant of the whole, banned all scientific knowledge as unwholesome and dangerous, except for that required to build the city of Durven. Tastar had been the other survivor, and she was far away. Thus the human race returned to its own planet, and there it stayed, afraid to venture forth and equally afraid to remember its ignominious past. They had known of the stranded moon colony, but it was soon deliberately forgotten . . .

Serlis set the book-reel down on the floor grimly. Lill-yel put an arm round his shoulder and spoke softly. "And now you want to know what happened to the moon. I deduced their fate from another book-reel. It seems that they possessed a device called 'radio', which is now unknown and forbidden to us. This was used for signalling purposes. For some reason their radios must have become inoperable and impossible to work, so that they were forced to use an alternative system of communication. This I discovered also, and it explains the flashes which we have both been so puzzled about. It was a device called 'laser', some device which could concentrate light in such a manner that a powerful beam can be sent from the moon and not have dispersed by the time it attains the Earth. This laser beam was set to automatically flashing a message, and still is. The dots and dashes which seem so random to our eyes actually represent words and messages, they are based on a system which the book-reel calls morse code. I learned this code, and then I was able to decipher the meaning of the flashes from the moon." She stopped with a grim expression on her beautiful face. "I took down the content of the message on a piece of paper, since I have also taught myself to read and write with the help of these book-reels. There are many of them." She took a piece of parchment paper from some hidden pocket in her lovely diaphanous robes, incongruous in the extreme. She held it in front of her eyes, concentrating on the crudely scrawled notation.

"It says this: 'Moon calling Earth, Moon calling Earth. For God's sake come and help us. We know you can still

save us, we have seen your ships. Our generating plant has broken down and we can no longer generate our own air. The reserve supply is nearly finished. We fought with you. We trust you. Save us before it's too late. We cannot last more than five days longer'."

She threw down the piece of paper on the floor and looked at Serlis, who stared at the floor. She sighed deeply.

"And thus our ancestors damned both themselves and us. For their cowardice still shines in the sky, and it will until the Moon itself dies. Every time I look up at the moon I cannot help but think of that colony, which must have been dead more then ten thousand years . . ."

She suddenly changed her manner to one of briskness, as though what she had just recounted was something to be forgotten.

"Now you know the truth of the flashes which come from the moon, my Lord, and you will know there is nothing any of us can do. For we damned ourselves by this pretence of life long ago. When we hid our faces in the scorched sand of the planet and rejected people in need. Now we hide from science and reject progress. It is as well that we return to the Hall and make merry with the others of our race, for the knowledge can do us no good. We can do nothing now, you and I, but live out our lives. There is nothing else to do."

"Yes," said Serlis, suddenly rising to his feet from his silent reverie. "Yes," he repeated, placing an arm round her shapely shoulder. "All we can do now is live out our lives." He smiled suddenly and then the evil mood which surrounded the place departed forever. For at last he knew the meaning of the flashes, and though they were accusing, he and she both realised that there was nothing more to be done but busy themselves in the trivia of their own lives.

But as he kissed her in that silent chamber, he suddenly realised that from now on he would be extremely satisfied with trivia, so long as she was part of it. For there was nothing that he, or anyone else could do, but eat, drink, and be merry, and await the morrow with a staunch heart . . .

For, he realised, as he led her silently past the flashing eye of the moon and back towards the Hall and towards

light and gaiety, there was little point in doing other than make the best of his life, for no happiness ever lay either in worry or philosophy. Perhaps the human race was better off for not having attained the stars after all.

But as he caught her great beautiful eyes with his own, he promptly consigned the whole affair to the back of his mind as they re-entered the Hall unobserved and joined in the celebrations for their future.

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1	Time Trap	*Charles Harness*
2	The Life Buyer (2)	*E. C. Tubb*
3	Nobody Axed You	*John Brunner*
4	Prisoner of the Coral Deep	*J. G. Ballard*
5	Alfred's Ark	*Jack Vance*
6	The Small Betraying Detail ...	*Brian W. Aldiss*

Next issue will begin Harry Harrison's great new novel *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, plus original stories by Brian Aldiss, Mack Reynolds, Michael Moorcock, W. T. Webb and George Collyn. We think you will agree that it is an outstanding issue. Don't miss it.

SUPERCITY

Brian W. Aldiss

FEAR NOT, NATHANIEL, that you are about to hear a far-flung fantasy extolling the gigantic, the terrific or the tremendous. This is no fable about one of the monstrous cities of our universe, a megapolis covering an entire planet. No, if that is what my heading led you to expect, you were mistaken, Nathaniel.

Supercity (emphasis on the second syllable: su*per*city) is a word coined by Alastair Mott, the greatest supercitist of them all, to denote the art of becoming indispensable through being thoroughly useless: or, as he phrased it himself, more gracefully, 'the easiest way to the highest point'. From the ancient Latin, *super*, above, and *cito*, easily.

Alastair was born to power, although, as we shall see, he was later ousted from it. At twenty-one he was created Protagon of the Territory of Sconn of the planet Earth, a state about the size of North and South Dakota put together; in fact, it was North and South Dakota put together; and was later to become Division III of the United Parastates.

Alastair's life was a carefree one. His health was good, his face handsome, his wealth unlimited. Also he owned a little love nest on Ganymede and (because this last remained a deep secret) was at present wooing, with every omen of future success, the Virgin Rosalynd Staffordshire III. Also—this above all, Nathaniel—he had no social conscience so that the hardships of his underlings at no time affected his sleep or cooled his natural ebullience.

Away from the frequent parties and carnivals which the loot of a thousand odd planets provided for his social set, Alastair studied fitfully. He became a dilettante philologist, partly because of a certain genuine interest in language, partly in an attempt to provide himself with a little character, which he knew he lacked.

Philology is a nice, safe pastime, party-going is not. (Indeed, how gratifying to scholars it must be to reflect that in Alastair's case party-going brought his downfall and philology his regeneration. But we preceed ourselves). Foolishly, Alastair, on the fourth night of a particularly gay and wicked party, became involved in a small triangle, the other two angles of which were occupied by the Virgin Vera Manchester IXA and the Court Procreator.

As soon as the party was over, Alastair realised his mistake; he awoke and found the dawn was grey, for the Virgin Vera, by forfeiting her title, had placed his own status in jeopardy. The Court Procreator was not a man to be trifled with: it lay within his power to elect one to the August Order of Eunuchs at a moment's notice. Alastair blenched at the very thought and ended the affair forthwith. He ended it, unfortunately, with more precipitance than tact. Quite justifiably, the Virgin Vera Manchester IXA was offended, reading in his sudden withdrawal a mute criticism of her charms; for ladies, in those days as now, prefer to be taken to bed than to task.

The Virgin Vera nursed her spite in secret while Alastair returned to wooing the Virgin Rosalynd. All might have been well had there not occurred at Court—as have occurred at Courts from time immemorial—several fortunate deaths among the highest in the hierarchy. At the drop of a hat, the Virgin Vera had been acclaimed Ultimate Lady, a title which to the ears of that century held a sinister ring in it, and so the Territory of Sconn and its Protagon came under her jurisdiction.

Almost at once, Alastair was promoted.

He received the news in his afternoon bath.

"I have been elected Resident Governor of the planet Acrostic I!" he said with some astonishment, scanning the telecoder above the bath taps. "What does that mean? And where in Jake's universe is Acrostic I?"

His robot attendant made a sound like heavy breathing for five seconds, and then pronounced Acrostic I to be one of the two planets circling a yellow sun on the periphery of Smith's Burst, which is a small intragalactic nebula many light years from any form of civilisation.

Alastair's eye fell sadly on the word 'Resident', which so

neatly knocked away the props from under his pleasant life as Protagon of Sconn. All relish fled immediately from his existence. He stood up dripping.

"It's been an honour to know you, Protagon," the robot said as it blew hot, dry air over him.

Space travel in those days was definitely not what it is now: then, it might take you sixteen weeks to do as many light years. Their ships, mere tubs which seldom could carry more than one hundred souls, had correspondingly to take more food, fuel, facilities and equipment for the long voyage. Even a planetary governor was allowed no excess baggage. Alastair stepped aboard the S.S. *Garfinkle* with two trunks (supplied by the company) and no secretaries; all that he loved he had to leave behind.

On the long and tedious voyage into exile, most of which he passed with Obliveen pills, Alastair outgrew his home-sickness. True, he still recalled with regret Sconn Territory, and, it must be admitted, the little spicery on Ganymede; he still thought with affection of his friends; he still dwelt lovingly, although without much faith, on the farewell words of the Virgin Rosalynd, "Adieu, sweet Alastair, I will be true"; but he resolved to make the very best of Acrostic I. It may be that The Plan was already forming in his mind: aware of his own uselessness, he knew it would only be by exerting that talent to the utmost that he would make anything of his banishment. Perhaps it was during these vacant hours he coined the word 'supercity'.

At last they entered the regions of Smith's Burst, and the *Garfinkle* put Alastair down on his planet before hurrying off to more magnificent and exploited areas.

Acrostic I was not the best of all possible worlds. Its atmosphere was thin, and sickening to breathe until one became acclimatised. Although it was larger than Earth, it possessed almost no metals or heavier elements, so that its gravity was just enough below normal to produce a light-headed effect. Its orbit held it too close for comfort to Acrostic, the sun, and the days were very hot; but because its axial revolution was slow and the atmospheric blanket was thin, the nights were very cold.

Storms, snow, frost, heatwaves, drought and floods

moved with monotonous irregularity across the battered face of Acrostic I. Small wonder that the native Acrosticians, primitive, elephantine beings, numbered themselves (for nobody else cared to do it for them) in hundreds merely.

The Earth colonists, when Alastair arrived to govern them, were a mere twenty thousand strong, all of them living within about eighty miles of Acrostic's only town, All Saints. This hopefully named shanty town was to be Alastair's home! He groaned as a *quaff*, the local variety of packhorse, bore him through the dusty streets to his residence. Vultures and tiny monkeys peered down from the roof tops at his lugubrious progress. The lack of metal showed itself all too plainly in a diversity of ways, from the lame architecture to the long beards; the lack of proper sanitation also made itself felt in the usual way. Large numbers of the colonists, literally under the weather, had given up their lands and drifted to town, where no occupation but immorality was open to them. Posters picturing makes of gun, displaying gigantic whisky bottles, advertising leg shows or inquiring whether the passer-by possessed Breath Appeal gave All Saints the air of a libellous parody on civilisation. The Ultimate Lady had certainly settled her debts: Smith's Burst hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Alastair never despaired, nor took to drink. Instead, he took to *quaff*, and travelled among the people, learning the true nature of the planetary situation; the people, suspicious at first, came to trust him as they realised he was not researching on their account. It took Alastair only a short while to find the truth about Acrostic I: it was a dead end: nobody left and nobody came.

Acrostic I was virtually unheard of on Earth. Nothing of its dull history or existence had seeped back home—except *one word*. Words get where goods cannot; they are frequently a planet's first exports.

To you, Nathaniel, the verb 'to scutterbuck' is a staid and familiar old word meaning 'to kill time pleasantly'. In Alastair's time, however, the expression was for Earth something new, exotic, slangy. It had seeped back over the space routes, like a thousand other extra-terrestial words, to become a temporary or integral part of our ever-expand-

ing vocabulary. To Earth's masses, scutterbucking sounded something enjoyably exciting; as not infrequently happens, Earth's masses had the wrong end of the stick.

Alastair, being an amateur philologist, was intrigued by this single thin connection between home and the ball to which he had been politely exiled. He *quaffed* out with a human interpreter to the nearest native settlement to investigate the strict meaning of the word and found that scutterbucking (or, more correctly, skutterbucking), is an Acrostician form of hibernation, undergone when the weather is particularly foul. Voluntary rather than seasonal, the condition of scutterbucking is accompanied by grotesque withering of the grey Acrostician flesh and blissful indifference to externals, a considerable asset on a place like Acrostic I.

Very shortly, *Galactic Life*, Earth's leading telemag, produced a feature called "Come Where Scutterbucking Comes From!" It was illustrated with flashes of the dwarf, three-breasted Acrostic Monkeys, which apart from their one outstanding peculiarity are all but human in appearance; careful choice of background concealed the true height of these creatures (nine inches in the largest specimen, Nathaniel). As the telefeature, while failing to mention Acrostic's odd climate, let slip that the monkeys were the planet's highest form of life, it was only a matter of time before a thin trickle of male tourists began to plod anxiously round the streets of All Saints, seeking what everyone means by 'local colour'.

As a frontier planet, Acrostic I had been 'wide open'; anyone who wished might come and go on it. Alastair proceeded to change all that. Customs sheds were erected by the space port, an elaborate tariffs system was introduced, a barn-like hotel-hospital was built, wherein newcomers could spend an enforced and expensive period of isolation and acclimatisation. The lucrative business of currency regulation was established, together with passport, visa and identification systems, all of which cost money—all of which went to the Resident Governor.

But the tourist trade was not the only nor the strongest string to Alastair's bow, although it brought him enough money to carry out the rest of his ideas.

He began making official reports home. New York, which was at that time the hub of World Administration, was gratified. Generally, it was an impossible task to induce reports (which also mean returns) from anywhere but the major worlds; since all communications travelled via ship, the smaller galactic fry could always claim 'Lost in Transit' to any unpleasant referendums, a claim which might take years to refute conclusively.

New York responded with true bureaucratic fervour to Alastair's tentative advances. Department upon department despatched sheafs of every imaginable type of form and questionnaire, and filed with glee the mocked-up statistics or nil returns which Alastair sent back.

What percentages of female colonist underwent marriage at the following age groups.....? What was the average yield per acre of the following types of wheat.....? What species of Earth cattle flourished best under Acrostic conditions.....? What *were* conditions on Acrostic in terms of annual rainfall, monthly rainfall, annual sunshine, monthly sunshine, isobars, isotherms.....? Etc.

It seemed as if the vast ledgers of Earth would absorb for ever the flow of information.

The space ships, which had never called more than twice in a decade, began to make monthly visits to All Saints. They brought with them, besides paper, wealth; they took back with them, besides paper, rumour of a growing city. All Saints was taking on a faint tinge of sophistication: there were less adverts for makes of guns and more for breath appeal.

Tourists returning to Earth soon revealed the disillusioning truth about the poverty of the local fauna, and said something about the climate of Acrostic. But the flow of visitors, rather than dwindling, redoubled. This is strange merely if we know nothing of human nature; no tourist ever admits to having been taken in, and so—while admitting the monkeys and the weather—they made great play with the scenery and local customs. Very soon, it was not fashionable to admit you had never visited that little paradise in Smith's Burst.

Meanwhile, New York continued to absorb Alastair's reports.

But suddenly the flow of statistics homewards stopped. The outward flow of questions immediately doubled. What had happened to the Acrostic Administration? Had rebellion broken out? Had there been a plague?—And if so, what percentages of the following age groups (male and female) had perished?

The Acrostic Administration lay back comfortably in his wicker chair and enjoyed a rest. It was his first day of scutterbucking since he had arrived, many moons ago. I neglected to tell you, my Nathaniel, that Acrostic I had a moon, a useless little thing called Rose which only shone in the daytime. Alastair was reading something which gave him more pleasure than anything he had read since his arrival. It was written by one of All Saints' first tourists, who had been fleeced of every cent he possessed on his first day down, flung into gaol for debt until his return ship had left, and was now a respected member of the community. He had just sent Alastair a poem, 'Daylight, Rose Bright'. It was not a brilliant poem, but it was the first one ever written on Acrostic I. They were going up in the universe.

After a suitably long interval had elapsed, and Earthly agitation had reached maximum, Alastair sent World Government a brief note. His entire administration had collapsed from overwork: they must send him an XIVIC Master Computer. Upon receipt of a guarantee that one would be installed in full working order as soon as possible, he would do his best to resume routine.

The guarantee duly arrived. Now he had them!

Even on the surface, his was a great victory. Think for yourself, Nathaniel, if possible. These Fourteen-One-Hundreds, as the computers were called, were gigantic machines even by our standards. They were so complex and important that it was possible to use them as instruments of colonial policy: for they remained always possessions of Earth, serviced by Earth men, so that once a colony world grew big enough to require one (i.e. also big enough to be a potential threat) it would have installed upon it a small, autonomous unit of Earth. Never before had a Fourteen-One-Hundred been installed on a planet with less than a billion voters, yet here was Acrostic I with

no more than fifty thousand population all told. Additional relish was added to Alastair's jubilation by the facsimile signature at the bottom of the guarantee: Ultimate Lady Vera Manchester IXA. He predicted a fall right down the matriarchy for that lady very soon.

A pair of government ships came and stood nose upwards outside All Saints. Machinery and men were disgorged. Night and day, storm and fine, the work of erecting the Master Computer went on. When the ships were emptied they hurried off home to fetch the next instalment of Fourteen-One-Hundred parts. Money began to flow freely in the town, as it will anywhere with government capital in the vicinity. For the first time, the colonist farmers were almost content with the prices their produce fetched. Alastair, a kindly fellow at heart, was happy to see his self-salvation scheme also benefitting others.

Earth was well and irredeemably committed on the project before the sad news filtered back to them. Fourteen-One-Hundreds would never work: there was no hydro-electric power on Acrostic I!

To the indignant messages that asked why Alastair's Administration had not informed World Government of this, he made the truthful answer that (a) they had not asked him and, (b) the situation could have been deduced from given information. Such small electric plants as there were in All Saints were powered by wooden windmills; an uncertain business, of course—but what was one to do on a planet like Acrostic I, without metal?

A host of brooding experts was unleashed by the next space ship; they brooded because they had been ordered to discover what one was to do for power on a planet like Acrostic I, or else—

They soon found that, as Alastair had long been aware, the elements ruled the planet. Sun, wind, frost and rain had eroded and erased any mountains that Acrostic might once have possessed, leaving only a sandy surfaced billiard ball of a world. Such few streams as there were ran lazily and shallowly. The fringes of the sea offered hundreds of miles of stagnant swamp land. There could be no hydro-electric power.

The brooding experts divided into two camps. One in-

dented to Earth for mining and drilling equipment and then disappeared into the wilds to survey for coal or oil; the other submitted to Earth a plan for a submarine plant to draw power from the tides, and then disappeared into the taverns and stews of All Saints. In being strictly accurate, I should add that there was a small third faction, who washed their hands of the whole affair and returned home in disgust.

It happened that the ship which arrived to take them back brought a letter from the Virgin Rosalynd. I hope you have not forgotten the Virgin Rosalynd, Nathaniel, for Alastair had not forgotten her; she had proved to be a model of devotion our modern women might well copy.

Her personal news was that she was well, still in love with her clever, clever governor and had just been appointed a Pen-Ultimate Lady. Her general news was that Acrostic was well in the public eye: its miniature monkeys were now Earth's favourite pets, it formed the subject of a popular song, "If I was As Powerless As Little Acrostic" ('I'd still toss Dick, Tom and Harry aside to make you my bride'), and was also the subject of a Public Enquiry.

It was the Public Enquiry rather than the popular song or the monkeys which set the seal on Alastair's success. The population doubled almost overnight as Independent Body after Independent Body moved in to Look Into Things. They were followed by press reporters, tele and film men and other such adjuncts of the comfortable life which had not previous been seen on Acrostic. A more frivolous element, who found it *fun* to live in such a place, also appeared. They were followed by exploiters and confidence men, the 'You live Illness-free on a Metal-free world' type. Then came the legislators. Then the entertainers.

It was quite a crowd!

Two years passed before the Public Enquiry published its results. Before they appeared, World Government—in a bid for popularity—decided that the nice thing to do was to plunge into the matter baldheaded and give Acrostic I an atomic plant. The machinery started rolling again. So Fourteen-one-hundred was finally put to work, by which time there was plenty for it to work on. Acrostic was a

thoroughly going concern, thanks to Alastair's supercitations.

But that came later. First came the Report. It convicted World Government of squandering so many million poundsquareds of public monies without properly and conscientiously entering into due investigation of the existing circumstances and of moreover as hereinafter and heretofore stated within the meaning of so on and so on. It meant, in brief, that Someone had Blundered.

Alastair took his triumph modestly; he had grown up since arriving at All Saints. Indeed, it was almost in him to feel regret when he learned that the Ultimate Lady Vera had been summarily deposed, for she was the Someone who had blundered. And when the long-awaited invitation to return to Sconn Territory actually arrived, he debated endlessly about accepting it. He wrote to the Pen-Ultimate Lady Rosalynd: would she join him on Acrostic?

She replied that as she had just been elected Ultimate Lady herself, she was unable to leave Earth: would he not join her there?

So—he did. A man of more character would have stayed with his success, one feels. People are very odd, Nathaniel, present company not entirely excepted.

A LOT OF GOOD THINGS . . .

. . . will be found in next month's special issue. There's the start of Harry Harrison's best novel yet—*Bill, the Galactic Hero,* a stimulating new short story by Brian Aldiss—*The Source,* a new short story by Mack Reynolds —*By the Same Door,* the first of a mystery series about Jerry Cornelius, *Preliminary Data,* by Michael Moorcock, a light piece about an art-form of the future by George Collyn, plus more short fiction and the debut of Dr Peristyle answering readers' queries about SF.

THE NIGHT OF THE GYUL

Colin R. Fry

IT RAINS A lot and it is hot rain, rain that will spit and hiss as it hits the ground and the choppy, yellow-streaked waves. The far shore will vanish in a mist of grey-white steam. We don't go outside much in the rain. We just stay in our hole in the ground. There are many things that we can do, and I think we have done most of them. Soon we will start over.

Sometimes we hold singsongs and there was one memorable rainy spell when the thin grey Singer was in the home. He entertained us for days and nights on end with his gtah and his beautiful, deep resonant voice, singing all the old songs and all the new ones and making some up specially for us as he went along. We were sorry when he went away again. My wife Tawnie stood at the entrance for a long time, watching him wriggle along the highway. Nostalgia. My other wives weren't bothered about him at all, but Tawnie always was impressionable. And she is always longing for a better world, hoping that one day, I think, she may find the secret way to the place the Ancients called Paradise, where everybody was supposed to live in harmony with everybody else and no one had the sores or the skinflake, and everybody was whole and pink and beautiful. I tell her time and time again that she has to get used to the imperfect world we live in, but she has never seemed able to make the adjustment.

It was a bad hot rain and a hot wet grey fog the night the Gyul came. At least, I say night, but it is hard to be certain because with the running, drumming, hissing rain we had lost count of time and our waterclock was broken. Ria broke it trying to dance on her hindlimbs. She is the one with the black patch over her left eye; at least, I say black, but it is more a grey discoloration of the facial skin.

"Before long I'll be able to do it," she said as she thumped down on her haunches, panting. She looks very sweet when her shoulders heave like that so I affectionately bit a flea out of her hair. Her hair is short white hair running all the way from her head down her back, very fluffy, and very pretty it is too. She takes great care of it. I bit a flea. The fleas are getting bigger and juicier. We must try Cooking them. I have heard of Cooking from the Singer. He knows a lot, that one. Well, he is a humute. It runs in his blood. To Cook, one uses heat. I think we might Boil dead fleas by leaving them out in the rain, in some kind of container. Perhaps we should skin them first. That is how the Ancients used to Cook their animals—skinned.

Mammah is the maternal one. I love to watch our little children clustering round her teats. I am a sentimentalist and very fond of home life, although I am ferocious when I am out hunting. I hunt when it isn't raining. Then the sun is crimson in the mauve sky and the kangarabbits bounce away before me. But I use my footbow, stringing it with my strong white teeth, and I kill them! Ha!

Well, that is most of us, though there are others here as well. I do not often entertain other males. Nor do they entertain me. But the Singer is different. We were waiting for him one night of hot rain when we became aware of thumping at the entrance. I threw away the kangarabbit I was eating and went to answer. But it was not the Singer. It was two strange beings, bigger than me. At first I bared my teeth at them.

"There boi, there boi," said one of the beings, holding up its hands in a sign of peace. "We are frens. We are poor wayfarers. We need shelter and food and, as soon as may be, a safe passage across the water."

I was suspicious, but then I thought: They are strange; but there are many strange things in the world. Is not the Singer strange? And there are many opportunities to gain knowledge. Who knows but these beings may teach me something I might not have learned otherwise?

So I said, "We do not have much food and this home is rather small for you, but if you need shelter, we will give it you."

"Thank you," said the taller one, and they stooped and came inside, dripping hot puddles onto the floor.

At first I thought their faces were made of the flat, smooth stuff with which they covered them. Why not? Who knows what the world holds? But inside the home they put their upper limbs to their necks and unfastened their headcoverings. Then I saw that they were different from each other.

The taller one had black hair bitten short all over its head and ending at the top of its neck, and black hair on its face (around the mouth and above the eyes) as well, when it took off the flat smooth thing. The smaller one had brown hair that came almost down to its shoulders and no hair on the face at all except a little above each eye. (They both had two eyes, set in the front of the head, looking the same way, horizontally beside each other and separated by a nasal prominence in between).

The smaller one looked at the taller one with an expression of unhappiness and said: "The smell . . ."

"Ssh," said the taller one. "You must expect a difference in living standards."

I held up a kangarabbit from our small store and said to them: "You may share this if you hunger."

The smaller being was putting its upper limbs to its neck and wrinkling its face. The taller put its hand on its breast and made strange barking noises with its mouth. They covered their faces with the flat smooth stuff again. Then the taller one said sadly to me: "The atmosphere is not good for us. We must keep our masks on, after all, and we cannot eat while we are wearing them."

I said: "I hope you will not die for lack of food. My hospitality would be bad."

The taller one heaved its shoulders and said: "Not your fault. It's the way the world is made."

The smaller one widened its mouth behind the smooth "mask" and said: "Gudboi. Don't worry yourself about us. What we badly need is a passage across the water."

The rain drummed and hissed and gurgled outside and we stood in silence for quite a while. Mammah knocked my smallest child into quietness ; Tawnie widened her round brown eyes and Ria put her head on one side and was still.

"The water?" I said, thinking of the steamy mist and the bubbling, yellow-streaked waves.

The taller being said: "We would cross to the far shore —the place called Frahnts. The Gyul with me has an appointment with a Boi there."

I did not know some of the words. They were strange to me, though Gyul and Boi I knew from the Singer's songs.

I reflected that their voices sounded more muffled behind the masks than when they had taken them off.

I said, "I have swum out sometimes, even past the rocks, but the water tugs strongly and it is a long swim right across to the other shore. I have only swum short distances in dry weather. You would get the skinflake in this rain."

The taller being said wonderingly: "Have you not got a Bote?"

"Bote?" I repeated. The word had not occurred in the Singer's songs, or if it had, I could not recall it.

"A Bote—a Vessul—a Ship."

I considered. The words were new to me.

"I do not think so," I said.

The Gyul sank down on its haunches beside the taller being, put its upper limbs to its covered face and said in a choking voice: "What can we do?"

The taller being looked at the Gyul and stood listening to the running rain. Mammah was licking one of the children.

"We cannot swim across," the tall being said. "There may be all manner of things: and the water is poisnus now."

"Not for them," the Gyul said.

"They aren't human," said the taller being, and I knew then that it must be a Man. Man is male, Gyul is female.

"Nothing's human any more," said the Gyul wildly. "Everything's—everything's—"

"Hush," said the Man, putting his upper limb, which in humans is called an Arm, like the Singer has, round her shoulders.

"I am sorry that I cannot help you more," I said, and then there was another thump at the entrance. The two humans looked round.

"What's that?" said the Gyul.

"If it's him—" said the Man, and stopped.

"Don't do anything rash," the Gyul said.

I went to the entrance and let the Singer in. He bared his teeth in greeting (he means nothing, it is just his way) and dragged himself into the home with strong pulls of his muscular limbs or Arms, digging his claws firmly into the ground.

The Gyul saw him and made a loud, high-pitched noise.

"Quiet!" the Man said to her. "There is no need to be alarmed." He came towards the Singer. "My name is Focks," he said. "I'm from the aresji across the hill. The Gyul with me has to get to Frahnts. Do you know how to help us?"

The Singer looked up at him and stopped baring his teeth. He looked up at me and said, "You've got visitors, then."

I said: "They're a Man and a Gyul."

The Singer said: "I see that." He looked at the Man and the Gyul and then he said to the Man: "Why do you cover your face?"

The Man said: "Because the air is poisnus to us."

The Singer nodded slowly, shaking the hot dampness out of his thick lank hair. His body glistened. He is always uncovered, but the hot rain does not seem to hurt him. His body is tough and grey, not soft and sallow like ours.

He said: "Yes. It is not your world any longer. It is theirs." He indicated us with his head.

"Yours too, friend, it would seem," the Man said.

"Mine?" said the Singer. "Well, I suppose you might say that. Though not my descendants'."

"Why not?" the Gyul said.

The Singer said: "It's just one of those things." He bared his teeth in that wry expression of his that means no harm, and said: "Why do you want to go across the water? You'll never make it. You're fools. But then all humans are fools. I'm a fool. I have pure human blood in me—I'm descended from humans on both sides. My ancestors were Opra Singers." (It is his proudest boast).

"Oh, yes," the Gyul said. "I'm sure you sing very nicely."

The Singer bared his teeth again and said: "I'm not going to sing for you."

He folded his limbs in front of him, rested his head on them, and seemed to sleep.

The Gyul said: "What can we do?"

The Man said: "It's hopeless. You'll have to go back and try your fatha's way. If Thorkil wants you, he'll have to come for you. Crossing in this weather is death, even if we could do it."

"I won't do it his way!" the Gyul said. "It's inhuman!"

The Man said: "It's an inhuman world."

"You don't care!" the Gyul said. "It doesn't matter to you. Just because—"

"If I were otherwise," the Man said, "your fatha would not have to inseminate. Look, it's wiser, isn't it, to stay here and inseminate and stay alive than to try crossing to Thorkil? Especially when—well, you know what your fatha thinks of him."

"He's threequarters human," the Gyul said. "Our children would stand a better chance in this hellish world than pure-blooded ones. Those would end up like . . ." and she indicated the Singer.

The Man made a noise like wind in the branches and his chest heaved as he made the sound.

"I wership the ground you walk on," he said. He made the soft blowing sound again. "Perhaps a cuppl of trees would float; though what the wood is like, I don't know."

He turned to me and said: "Thanks, fella. We'll see if we can find some other way. If any other humans come asking, you haven't seen us, understand?"

I said: "I do not understand."

"We don't want them to find us," he said. "Will you pretend you don't know anything about us?"

I said: "If you go quickly, perhaps they will not come."

He stretched his mouth and said: "Perhaps." I let them both out into the hot rain. Then inside there was only the trail of pools of steamy wet where the rain had dripped off their coverings to show that they had ever been within our home at all.

When they had gone, the Singer lifted his head from his

Arms. He had not been sleeping. He had been pretending to sleep. "Do you know what they are?" he said.

I said: "Humans."

"Worse than that. Devils."

"Pardon?" I said.

"Humans—devils—what's the difference? They're the ones to blame for this miserable world, the skinflake, all of it. They're the ones whose sinful folly brought it on."

"They seemed harmless," I said. "But their face-coverings were odd." I scratched my right ear thoughtfully.

"Those ones came from Hell itself," the Singer said. "I have been past it—I have shown it to you, remember? That place beyond the hill."

I remembered then. The Singer had been on the hill once on a dry day when I was out hunting kangarabbits, and he had led me to a clump of blackferns and yellowtrees and, leaning himself flat on the dark grass, pointed down into a little deep round valley with sheer black sides. At the bottom of the valley, seemingly a very long way below us, were some strange things that he said were humans' homes.

"This place is Hell Pit," he said. "Never venture inside. The humans here are devils, and they have devices to loose all manner of plagues on us all."

I listened and smelt very hard, and a strange faint scent came wafting up to me from the pit, and I heard a faint wailing sound. When I told the Singer of it, he said: "Your ears are good. That's the wailing of tormented souls."

It came back to me now. I said: "I would never have let them in if I had known."

The Singer said: "Ah, you meant well. The world's safe in your hands."

He sang us a song then, about the bad Devils and the good beings called Angels, and Right and Wrong, and we were much the better for hearing it.

The rain drummed on for what seemed an age and then, after many songs, there came a thumping on the entrance and a shouting of devils' voices.

"Shall I answer?" I asked the Singer.

He said: "I will. I can conjure them away," and he bared his teeth.

He wriggled into the passage and up to the entrance. The

rain does not blow in when the entrance is opened because of the shelter I have made of dead yellowtree branches to keep the blackrock slab dry. I stayed in the home with my wives, who clustered close to me, afraid of the devils.

Their voices were not very clear. I heard the Singer say: "They went to the water's edge. I'll show you." And he must have wriggled out of the opening because I heard the blackrock slab thump shut.

Mammah, Tawnie and Ria looked at me anxiously and I said, to reassure them, "The Singer is wise. He knows what to do." But we were all afraid he would not return.

He did, though, after a long time, when the rain was stopping and there was only a trickle of it and the hissing was dying down. I was peering out of the opening to look at the sky and see if it was a fine mauve again—and it was mauvening well—when I saw three figures in the grey coverings of the humans going up the hill, far away. They were walking slowly on their hindlimbs, humanwise. Then the Singer wriggled round the corner. He was baring his teeth and growling softly to himself. When he saw me he barked.

"Ha!" he barked. "There's two less humans in the world!"

"Tell us," I said, and called for my wives to come and enjoy the open air.

The Singer said: "I showed them the way to the shore. Those other two had cut down some yellowtrees and lashed them together with creepers. We could just see them floating out on the water when the mist began to lift nearer the land. The three devils looked at each other. One of them said, 'They'll never make it.' Another said, 'If they do, they deserve to.' Then there was a sudden big burst of rain out over the water and the waves hissed and boiled and I saw the two humans on that roughly made Bote covered in a big splash. Then the mist came down, steaming everything up. The humans on the shore bumped into each other: their masks were steamed up and they couldn't see through them. When the mist cleared the two on the floating trees had gone."

"Did they get to the other side?" asked Ria.

"They're dead," the Singer said. "You take my word. They were fools to try."

I trotted down to the shore and stared out over the streaky waves to the low line of land that you can see when it's fine if you look hard.

There was a pattering of footsteps behind me. I looked round. It was Tawnie. She stood there with the water lapping round her forefeet, staring across the waves.

"I think they got there," she said.

I said: "The Singer says they didn't."

"The Singer is wise, but he doesn't know quite everything," Tawnie said. "He doesn't know about that place they called Frahnts being Paradise."

"Paradise?" I said. "Really, Tawnie, what are you talking about? You have an obsession about that mythical place. You really must come to terms with the world as it is." But she took no notice.

"You just won't realise and take notice of anything that doesn't lie within seeing and smelling distance!" she yapped at me. "If Hell is behind that hill over there, obviously Paradise must be the place across the water! Any fool can work that out! If you were half the husband you ought to be, you'd be building a Bote-thing and floating across to find out!" And she turned round and trotted off.

Paradise across the water! What nonsense! But wives are like that. Of course, Tawnie is wrong. But, I don't know, the more I think about that low line of coast that I can see on dry, mauve days, the more I have been wondering lately what kind of beings inhabit it. Are there more humans over there, or devils or whatever they are called? The Man and the Gyul spoke to each other as if there were.

And eventually we shall have exhausted all the things to do on this side of the water. I think I might be able to build a Bote, if I tried.

Roger Corman and Edgar Allen Poe Al Good

THE LATEST FILM to be made from a story by Edgar Allen Poe is *The Tomb of Ligeia*, which has recently been on general release. Although this film was not shown to the press, it is not difficult to find instances in the glossy, high-brow film magazines or the large Sunday papers where the professional critics have praised it, and in particular, its director, Roger Corman.

Corman is a young director, not yet forty, whose ability to make films had only been significant as far as quantity is concerned (he must now be reaching the fifty mark). His early reputation was soundly based on the shock double X programmes of the late 1950's; such films as *Attack of the Crab Monsters*, which is the only one I can clearly remember. It wasn't very good. Since he has been making films based on the stories of Edgar Allen Poe, his skill has increased a thousandfold and he deserves the praise that he is receiving.

The Tomb of Ligeia may not be the best film that Corman has made but it is typical of the whole genre of films with which his name is now associated. For the sake of simplicity they come under the heading of 'horror films', but they are probably the most stylish horror films ever made.

These films are made by developing the in-born horror of Poe's short stories in such a way that they are transposed to a form of Gothic necrolatry. This transformation has been more or less dictated by the choice of Vincent Price to play the leading part in most of the films. Price is no personification of Poe; he cannot speak of catalepsy and convey the horror of appearing to be dead yet still being alive. Price's success in these films may be due to the fact that few other actors have had a chance to replace him. Ray Milland tried, to disastrous effect, in *The Premature Burial*; the ending being even more premature than the burial. The fact is that audiences have got used to seeing

Vincent Price in these films, and automatically associate him with Poe.

If Corman does not depend on his actors, he certainly owes a debt to his script writers, notable amongst whom is Richard Matheson. Rewriting a short story like *Pit and the Pendulum* into a film lasting one and a half hours, with the only similarity being the knife-edged pendulum, cannot be called an 'adaptation'. Yet the film is not completely devoid of Poe's atmosphere, and the horrific twist that does not come until the last frame of film is masterly.

The art direction in these films is excellent. The sets are often lavish and the costumes colourful. It is not unusual for all the sets, together with Vincent Price, to be destroyed in a grand conflagration. *The Tomb of Ligeia* is no exception. Yet one has a sensation that this was inevitable from the beginning, and the film takes on a form of beauty, a quality that was very much lacking in the horror films from Hammer.

Indeed, what distinguishes Corman films from those of the Hammer productions of *The Mummy*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, etc., is that he tries to make the audience understand Poe's strange world. In *Fall of the House of Usher* we can sympathise with a man who is doomed to die, and prevents his sister from marrying, so that the line will die out. We even believe that his ancestors, whose portraits make them look quite evil, were mad like him, and we do not find this revolting. In the modern *Frankenstein* films horror comes from the sight of Frankenstein's mangled features. There are a few thrills, achieved by quick camera movements, and some cheap laughs are put in for comic relief, but they contain nothing that can be called style or beauty. The horror of these films is derived from repulsion of the physically abnormal. In Corman films the abnormal is acceptable because it is not due to physical deformity, but more to a pervading atmosphere of evil and death. This can be illustrated by a sequence where the coffin of Vincent Price's late wife is opened. On the underside of the lid are the bloodstained marks where the 'corpse' had been clawing in an effort to escape. The horror comes from the fact that her husband has such sensitive hearing that he had been able to hear her struggles from every room of the house.

Corman has made intentionally humorous horror films. *The Cat*, one of the three stories from *Tales of Terror* and *The Raven*, both teamed up Peter Lorre and Vincent Price with great success. The talent of both these actors is at its best in their droll wine-tasting duel in *The Cat*. Lorre plays the part of a drunkard, and tastes his wine by drinking half a bottleful, whilst Price is the recognised master and takes just a sip. Price is highly amused to be challenged by the alcoholic, but needless to say Lorre comes off best, only to lose his wife to Price. For revenge he walls them up in his cellar. The humour of both these films is genuine because it never leaves the context of the film like, say, the infantile *Abbott and Costello Meet the Monsters*. Corman-type humour has been sadly lacking from horror films, yet it would appear to be obvious that films which are so often hilariously funny when intended to be deadly serious, indicate that comic-horror would be a success. Cinemas may now become flooded with this type of film, but few, I fear, will be as good as *The Raven* or *The Cat*.

When Corman makes non-Poe pictures he rarely rises to the same heights of success. *The Secret Invasion* has recently been secretly released. In this he treats war in the same style as a horror picture, which is perhaps the best way to treat war. It is a good film, and certainly deserves more attention than it has received. The poorest film he has recently made, *The Man With X-Ray Eyes* was shown together with *The Masque of the Red Death*. In this programme it was possible to judge Corman's ability to make a film with both bad and excellent material. *The Man With X-Ray Eyes* is a film that could easily have been made five years ago when American horror films were at their worst. Even so, Corman does his best and the film is watchable.

Roger Corman is now a 'respectable' film director, and if he lives up to his reputation that he has worked so hard to achieve, he will make many more good films. Whether he continues to film Edgar Allen Poe or finds another source of stories is now of little consequence. He has the ability to make good films, given the right scripts, and it would be a sad thing if he slipped back to making films like his early catch-penny shockers.

TOMORROW IN RETROSPECT

George Collyn

LOOKING BACK AT the now remote stretches of 1964 and the progress or otherwise of SF—that now ubiquitous umbrella-term—during the year, I feel myself bound to agree with editor Moorcock in his opinion that generally speaking it was a better than average year for the genre. This despite the fact that on several points I beg leave to differ with him.

For example, I do not believe that *Greybeard* was the milestone it has been acclaimed. I believe it was a very good book ; I think it was one of the best that Brian Aldiss has written—though not the best; I agree with Kyril Bonfiglioli when he says it is a pity that Faber saw fit to proclaim it science fiction on the dust jacket so that the book has been quarantined by the literary columns. Nevertheless, thematically the book is a reversion to that happy hunting-ground of British SF writers—the cataclysmic novel. It is a field one would have thought had been worked dry by John Wyndham ten years ago. *Greybeard* may have played a part in enhancing the literary stature of SF but it did not extend the scope of the genre.

J. G. Ballard also has been widely praised for *The Terminal Beach* and one has to admit that the book contains much that is brilliant. One must also state that it contains the warning signs that Ballard is in danger of becoming obsessed with his own obscurity. In his earlier work he was strikingly original and provided us with a fine tour around his skull. Unfortunately that imagination on which he is now drawing is so personal that he has retreated into a part of his mind so far distant that lest we be telepaths we cannot follow him. He is still the most powerful talent in British SF but he must avoid that self-conscious commitment to his own technique that has made

virtual self-parodies out of the work of Ray Bradbury and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.*

Nevertheless the example of these two writers and the resurgence of the British magazines under their new flag has shown that the British branch of the family is to the forefront in beating a path out of the marshes of stagnation. The new so-called British school which can be typified as being concerned with human motivation and psychological reaction to extraordinary stimuli, is one of the main hopes that SF will not remain rooted in a haze of nostalgia for 'the great days of Astounding'; an attitude of mind which seems to stifle any will to progress on the part of certain American editors.

However, to come at last to the point of what I am trying to say: the current American attitude and the British renaissance between them have combined to obscure a very minor event but one which I personally regard as being particularly significant. That is the publication in this country of *Journey Beyond Tomorrow* by Robert Sheckley (Victor Gollancz). This little book—so unheralded that I have looked in vain for its recognition by the review columns—is alone not greatly important. Its importance lies in the trend it signifies.

As I have suggested above, the main fault with American SF today is the failure of the Americans over the past ten years to produce a steady growth of new and original writers or any attempt on the part of established writers to attempt anything new. It is ironic that the most noteworthy newcomers to the American magazines in that time were British—Aldiss, Ballard, Brunner. There have been a very few exceptions to the rule—Galouye (for *Dark Universe*), Cordwainer Smith and (outstandingly) Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Otherwise the great names of American SF today tend to be the same great names of 1954. As proof see Damon Knight's anthology *First Flight* which supposedly contains the first published stories of today's leading writers. If you consult the acknowledgements page you will see that of the ten writers represented only one—Brian Aldiss again—copyrighted his first story after 1952 and the previous newcomer was Algis Budrys whom one can hardly call a brilliantly original writer. In fact the latest crop of new

American writers tend to follow too glibly the lines laid down in the forties.

Smith and Vonnegut have been like lone voices calling in the wilderness. The latter's novels *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, apart from being brilliant works of art by any criteria, have sketched out a possible line along which American SF could conceivably develop. Just as Ballard has devoted himself to the exploration of 'inner space' so Vonnegut has developed the satirical novel beloved of SF writers along paths new to those writers and in a way more closely allied to fantasy than science fiction proper. Unlike the utopian satire which projects today into tomorrow Vonnegut has exaggerated today into a space/time relationship which has not, does not and never can exist. He utilises a disregard for the laws of science and possibility that is shared by mainstream writers like Joseph Heller or Richard Condon. Vonnegut's work is so far outside the generality of American SF that one could hope to see in him the leader of a new school which could, like the British school, seek out new paths along which the genre could progress. Up to this last year one could only hope because Vonnegut appeared to be a leader without disciples.

Now Sheckley has written *Journey Beyond Tomorrow* which, although I do not expect for one moment that the author is aware of the similarity, is nevertheless an extension of the same technique. Probably the book owes more to Voltaire than Vonnegut but the parallel is present. The story, such as it is, deals with a Candide-like figure called Joenes who, having been raised in pristine innocence in Polynesia, journeys through the perils and temptations of North America with drastic and entertaining results, finally returning to his Pacific home sickened by civilised society and having in all innocence started World War III. As in *Candide* the world described is the world of the writer even though it is supposed to be the 21st century. It is however a world with its faults magnified a hundred times by exaggeration, the easier to explore them. Joenes thus in turn battles with the pitfalls of Senate investigations, computers, universities, warfare, the army, the penal system, etc., etc., etc.

The whole is related in the same deadpan style and with

the same calm acceptance of disaster that made *Candide* one of the three funniest books ever written and is bound about by a sort of Joycean use of mythical parallels and allusions.

If this book were the product of a writer new to this field one would greet it as a stepping-stone in the progress of SF. It is probably even more significant that it has been written by someone who has previously written orthodox science fiction, especially since Sheckley has frequently disappointed me in the past as a writer with extremely good ideas which do not quite come off. There are faults in this book of course. One could have done without the device by which the story is supposedly told in the words of a team of Polynesian bards. Neither was it necessary for Joenes' 'Pangloss'—a beatnik called Lum—to tell the two chapters relating to him in a form of hep slang which contrasts badly with the economy of Sheckley's prose elsewhere.

Despite these faults I repeat that I find this book the most unnoticed important event of 1964 as far as SF is concerned. That an established SF writer in America should experiment in this way and along lines already suggested by another SF writer gives me added hope that the day which will see SF comfortably established within the general literary corpus is not too far distant.

IS BLISH OVER-RATED?

James Colvin reviews the latest James Blish collection (*Best SF Stories of James Blish*, Faber, 18s.)

THE FIRST BLISH novel I read was *A Case of Conscience* (available in Penguin Books, 3s. 6d.). It was an excellent book and one of the handful of SF novels which stands out over the rest. Based solely on reading this novel I was among the first to join in when the praises of James Blish were being sung.

Then I read *Earthman, Come Home*. Well, I tried (I think I even finished it) but I couldn't believe that these

two novels were by the same author. In the latter novel, which involves 'spindizzies' (cities which fly through space looking for planets able to pay for their special services) the characterisation is on the level of boys' adventure fiction (or, if you like, on the level of most science fiction) and the writing, like the plots, very thin indeed. So I tried *The Night Shapes* and gave up half-way through feeling that it was a hard-enough struggle getting through Haggard or Edgar Rice Burroughs without having to read in a modern novel a story about a cardboard character who seemed plainly derived from Allan Quatermain, Sanders of the River and Tarzan of the Apes. If there were psychological undertones to this book they never struck a chord in me. Intention is one thing—success in carrying it out something else altogether.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, I had a bash at *Titan's Daughter* and *The Star Dwellers*. Nobody told me—least of all the American paperback firm who put it out—that *The Star Dwellers* was a juvenile. There are those who say that the juvenile novels of Blish and Heinlein are quite as good as their adult novels. Well, I'd agree, I'd agree. *Titan's Daughter* wasn't too bad (about giant super-people bred by a biologist) though expanded way beyond its natural length.

Judging by my above comments you might feel that my faith in the author of *A Case of Conscience* was shattered. You would be wrong—such is the power of other people's opinions that I was still convinced that Blish was a giant among SF writers. When *Best SF Stories of James Blish* turned up on my desk I decided that this was bound to be good and I would make a point of giving it a long review to do it justice.

It should prove how much I admire *A Case of Conscience* in that I am still not moved to my usual fury having read this collection of seven short stories. The fact is that all these stories are decent, craftsmanlike jobs and therefore stand out from a great many of the collections being produced today, but they are little more than that. Plainly Mr. Blish has been over-rated—not least by Mr. Blish himself, judging by his own introductions to his stories—and his reputation rests on the publication of one excellent novel that deserves all the praise it has received. Without *Case of*

Conscience would Mr. Blish's reputation be so high? I very much doubt it. It would still be good in SF circles—on the whole his craftsmanship is not in question—on the strength of some very reasonable stuff contributed to magazines and anthologies over the years, but the large proportion of his work is certainly no better than that of other good craftsmen in the field—Kuttner, Kornbluth, Heinlein, Simak, etc. —and does not give him a place beside Aldiss, Bester, Ballard—or even Asimov, in my opinion.

The first story in this collection *There Shall Be No Darkness* is fantasy-with-logic of the kind usually associated with ASTOUNDING'S long-dead companion magazine UNKNOWN, a sort of sophisticated version of the Gothic yarn which consisted of a series of seemingly supernatural events having a 'rational' explanation at the end. In the new kind the rationalisation comes at the beginning. This, like Matheson's *I Am Legend*, assumes that the legends of werewolves and vampires have some scientific foundation. In Matheson it was vampires, in *There Shall Be No Darkness* it is werewolves. A house-party in an isolated part of Scotland, one of the guests turns out to be a werewolf, another, it emerges later, is a witch; the werewolf terrorises the other guests and is eventually defeated by the witch, who loves him, to her own cost. Not a bad story, well-written and presented—it struck me all along that Hitchcock could make a tremendously entertaining film out of it—but it scarcely merits the pretentious introduction given it by John Ciardi, part of which Mr. Blish quotes with evident relish and approval in his own preamble to the story. I can take as much metaphysics as the next man, but to me this story is a good piece of commercial writing and does not begin to do anything like what Mr. Blish indirectly claims for it. I'm inclined to wonder if, when the story was originally published in 1950, Mr. Blish himself wouldn't have taken any such comments with at least a faint and ironical sneer.

But I suppose that SF, like modern jazz, suffers more than it gains from the exaggerated claims made for it by its intellectual supporters. A good craftsman can become so fazed by such claims that he can easily become totally disorientated and his work will suffer rather than improve.

Even if this does not happen he will begin to make these claims himself for his work—and if the work does not come up to the author's own descriptions, then it gets knocked harder than if the writer had kept quiet. One is inclined to feel that Mr. Blish should have kept quiet.

Surface Tension is next. This is one of Mr. Blish's best-known stories. Again pretty good, well-developed, but it has been over-anthologised one feels. It is about tiny people who live in a pool of water and to whom the air above represents roughly the equivalent of outer space, their efforts to break out into 'space', their adventures in their natural environment, the general mood and biological idea behind the story all makes this good, average SF. Mr. Blish says this is his most popular story and wonders why it should be. As he suggests, there is something in a great many people that responds to a story about little people—not necessarily leprechauns—as witness the children's series about *The Borrowers*, and all those films and stories about incredible shrinking human beings. It's almost a sure-fire winner—a boys' comic paper has been running a series for years called *The Shrinker*, the most popular series in the paper. Is there something in us which makes us enjoy such fantasies which smack strongly of persecution fantasies? I'm afraid of finding out. Or is it just that we're reminded, nostalgically, of childhood? If so—what are the children reminded of?

Testament of Andros is one of the few in this collection which needs an introduction from Mr. Blish. Here he tells us that the story 'observes successive stages in the disintegration of a paranoid schizophrenic' and that any reader who wants to read it as an end-of-the-world yarn told from the points of view of several narrators should do so at his peril. Here Mr. Blish comes very close to fulfilling his intention. He does succeed in putting over the sense of mental disintegration and, of course, by the end of the story it is, so far as the individual involved is concerned, the end of the world.

Common Time isn't a bad story, though one feels it could have been shorter and more explicit. It has some good descriptions of odd time-effects in space, of aliens in Alpha Centauri, and is a trifle reminiscent of *The Star Dwellers*,

if that's the one I'm thinking of. The story *A Work of Art*, says Mr. Blish, 'so satisfies me that I regard it as a testament; and, also, as a work of art.' Mr. Blish is more easily satisfied than most of us. It tells how Richard Strauss is apparently brought back to life in the future and finds himself in a world in which composing is done primarily by machines and is, in Mr. Blish's terms, therefore decadent. Strauss, who in the latter stage of his career produced works that compared unfavourably with his earlier excellent works, composes an opera which is received with great acclaim by the audience whereas he knows it is, if anything, worse than the later stuff he produced in his 'previous' life. There is a twist ending. Mr. Blish knows a lot about music and the choice of Strauss is a good one, but his taste and understanding is, as far as I'm concerned, in question. Towards the end of this story he refers to 'art works.' This was too much for me. I can't see the phrase without immediately thinking of a factory churning out endless Tretcheikov prints. Anyone who can prefer the machine-turned rubbish of Johann Strauss to the inventiveness of the Beatles is, in my mind, not the best qualified person to write about music—or 'art works' for that matter.

Tomb Tapper isn't bad though a good half of the story seems to consist of padded information that could have been put over in a couple of paragraphs. As a piece of mystery SF it succeeds very well. Don't look at the end of this one first. *The Oath* is a story that might—in its basic theme—easily fit into the *Doctor Kildare* series on TV. To me this is no more a good story than the Kildare stories—the 'psychology' and 'moral points' are, like beauty, only skin deep. It involves a post-Bomb world, a doctor and his conscience . . . or maybe I missed the point.

If the public enjoys Blish, well and good, he is entertaining them and deserves to be published—but one can't help feeling that there are a number of writers who are just as good, if not better, who also deserve to be published so frequently. Faber, who have published so much Blish and only one Kornbluth, might at least give us some more Kornbluth, too.

The stories in *No Future In It* by John Brunner also have

short introductions by the author. These are considerably more informative, entertaining and less pretentious than Mr. Blish's.

Good selection of craftsmanlike SF from an author who deserves a far higher reputation and list of published novels in this country than he has so far received. The publication of his recent *Telepathist* (Faber, 18s.) should help establish that reputation at long last, as should this paperback collection from Panther, 3s. 6d. Brunner can always be relied upon to come up with a fresh idea, nicely told. His style is consistently good and often his stories are well above average. This book gives a good sample of Brunner at his most versatile.

James Colvin

HOLES IN THE SKY

Spectrum IV edited by Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest (Gollancz, 21s.) is another interesting addition to this series. The collection is curious in that it manages to hit such high and low levels in 320 pages.

The whole thing begins with the Aldiss-Amis-Lewis discussion that first appeared in SF HORIZONS. This discussion is very interesting, if not earth-shaking, but I think it has now been reprinted enough, and I hope that I don't come across it any more. However, it is still an interesting introduction to the volume.

The Marching Morons by C. M. Kornbluth makes an excellent start to the book. For those who do not know the basic idea, a man is put into suspended animation by accident, and wakes in a far future world in which intelligence has bred itself out of humanity, and the average I.Q. is 45. A fast-moving and interesting story.

Gadget vs Trend by Christopher Anvil is an entertaining, if slight story, told in newspaper reports, of the social effects of a stasis device that has the apparently innocent ability to freeze into complete stasis, whatever object it is fixed to. Very amusing and readable.

Such Stuff by John Brunner is probably the most disappointing story. During experiments in which dreaming is

prevented in volunteers, a man is discovered in whom this has absolutely no effect. For six months he sleeps on, completely placid and untroubled. The story is beautifully written and developed, and is ruined by the arbitrary and unsatisfyingly handled conclusion. A story that could have been an SF classic.

The Sellers of the Dream by John Jakes is quite well done, but I am getting a little tired of reading this type of story over and over again.

When a 'mainstream' writer tackles SF, the result is likely to be either a failure, as far as the SF reader is concerned, or less often, a story in which an SF idea is tackled from a completely different angle. *The Large Ant* by Howard Fast falls into the second category, and may be regarded as a complete success. There are not the usual ingredients of the horror story, but this qualifies as one of the most terrifying stories I have ever read.

Barrier by Anthony Boucher, a story about time travel into a future world, a society that worships stasis, and therefore outlaws time travel, goes on much too long. My only feeling on finishing this was one of profound relief.

The Great Nebraska Sea by Allan Danzig is an account of the submerging of a large portion of America. This is not a story, and I fail to see how it got into this book ; it is an idea, and ideas do not stand on their own. Those readers who, like me, know nothing of Geography, and would not be surprised to be told that New York was in Texas, would be advised to give this one a miss.

Compassion Circuit by John Wyndham is another of those robots-innocently-hurting-humans stories. Not bad, of its type.

A Planet Named Shayol by Cordwainer Smith is an excellent, weird and horrible story. It demonstrates to perfection Smith's powerful imagination, and has the grotesque atmosphere of the paintings of Bosch.

Next comes a very poor effort by Ron Goulart: *Into the Shop*. A robotic police car—a lawagon—goes wrong and starts executing innocent people. Very uninspiring stuff.

The Secret Songs by Fritz Leiber is a nicely written story of a married couple who, every night, indulge in their drug-taking rituals. Although this is an original idea, I can't

help feeling that more could have been done with it. The story is very interesting to read, but not very memorable.

Stranger Station is a very good and very sensitive story by Damon Knight. A specially constructed station in space is visited regularly by a mysterious alien, who fills the human resident with an illogical dread. At regular intervals a man is sent out to live in the station with the alien, who enters a large chamber above him. The alien exudes liquid which arrests ageing in humans. Why does the alien come? The realisation of the answer comes just too late.

Hot Planet by Hal Clement is an SF adventure which takes place on 'a planet which has at least one quake in each fifty-mile-square area every five minutes.' A moderately interesting story.

The whole is nicely rounded off by *The Choice* by Wayland Young, a very amusing short-short that first appeared in PUNCH.

If you haven't read many of these stories, then *Spectrum IV* will probably be a good buy.

Trader To The Stars by Poul Anderson (Gollancz) consists of three stories based around one central character, Nicholas van Rijn. The first and last stories belong to the SF detective field—in the first the earthmen have to find the aliens who have hidden themselves in their own zoo, in the last, van Rijn has to puzzle out the reasons for the peculiar behaviour of some aliens on a previous expedition. The central story could have been called *Death Gulch*, and with a few changes of name, Anderson could have sold it to *Wild West Weekly*. The book contains all the points that prevented SF from being accepted by the general public until fairly recently—hackneyed plots, uninspired writing and lack of characterisation. Mind you, van Rijn has plenty of character. He must have, when he says things like "What in the name of ten times ten to the tenth damned souls on a logarithmic spiral to hell is going on here for fumbly-diddles?"

I take it that *Tunnel in the Sky* by Robert Heinlein (Gollancz, 15s.) is a juvenile, although no indication is given anywhere that this is so. The story is a cross between *Lord of the Flies* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and contains plenty of action. An excellent story for the middle-

teens, but adults will find it, although very readable, rather slight. However, I found it worth reading, if just for the memorable line, "My father always said that if the Almighty had intended us to use those gate things instead of rocket ships He would have provided His own holes in the sky."

Langdon Jones

MERVYN PEAKE

AVAILABLE THROUGH THE London bookshop Better Books are copies of a privately printed limited edition (150 copies) of previously uncollected poems and drawings of Mervyn Peake, author of the well-known 'Titus Groan' trilogy and the fantasy *Mr. Pye*. Nicely produced, the collection offers a varied glimpse of Mr. Peake's great talent. *Poems and Drawings by Mervyn Peake* has a foreword by Maurice Collis and is published by the Keepsake Press.

● *continued from page 3.*

cate that our main ambition, to present the widest variety of ideas and treatments possible, is also being realised.

In this issue we also begin a series of critical articles by outside contributors—both on books and films. These will appear from time to time and readers' comments, as always, will be appreciated.

It was suggested in a recent letter-column that we expand the number of pages in NEW WORLDS. There would be advantages in this—but we should have to charge 3s. 6d. for the magazine. This would still be the best value offered in the SF magazine field. What do you think about it? Most of our "counterparts" are already 3s. 6d. or more for the same amount of reading matter found in NWSF for 2s. 6d. At 3s. 6d. we should be giving much more reading matter with the opportunity of printing short novels complete and still having plenty of room for some short stories. So—opinions please.

Michael Moorcock

All correspondence to
The Editor,
NEW WORLDS SF,
17, Lake House,
Scovell Road,
London, S.E.1.

Time we grew up?

Dear Sir,

With reference to your editorial in NWSF 149, I think that it is about time we grew up and stopped trying to fit various forms of art and literature into neat pigeonholes. There is far too much categorisation of art forms. In the field of music, for example, there is classical, pop, jazz and other categories, and an attitude of 'never should they meet' seems to prevail. Many arguments have raged as to which is superior, when none are, as they are different forms of one thing: music.

Such is the situation in literature. I can't stand the 'but this isn't SF, so what's it doing in an SF magazine?' attitude. I think that NEW WORLDS, which is trying to be progressive, should drop the 'SF' title. The magazine, then, should, as its title suggests, explore new worlds of expression, style, and stories, with the accent on originality. The space story, for example, still has its place, therefore, provided that themes and/or treatment are fresh and original. Unfortunately, the space story can often be lacking in imagination.

The accent should also be on variety. Every form of literature, provided that it is entertaining and/or stimulating is valid, and has its place in the overall framework.

To sum up, then, the magazine should specialise in originality, not SF for SF's sake.

C. S. Jenks, 22 Parnell Square, Congleton, Cheshire.

Question of Idiom

Dear Sir,

I've been mulling over the subject of your editorial in NWSF 148 and have come to the conclusion that I agree with you subject to two important reservations. These are:

(1) If somebody has a genuine feeling for the idiom of a bygone era, he has a perfect right to attempt to express himself therein. If he feels more at home in such an idiom than in a strictly contemporary one, it's absurd to expect otherwise of him. And such a work is perfectly valid artistically.

(2) The question of duration for any idiom remains to be more precisely defined. A work (literary or otherwise) created during, say, Anglo-Saxon times, might still be entirely valid according to contemporary idiom two centuries later. More recently, changes have tended to take place at a steadily increasing rate of acceleration, so that now you are seriously suggesting that *last* year's idiom is out of date, let alone that of ten years ago. Extrapolating this trend a bit, it shouldn't be long before contemporary literature degenerates into a frantic rat-race to keep ahead idiom-wise, with other qualities (notably readability) taking very much a secondary position. The result of *that* would seem to be a sharp decline in sales, a general literary slump, and ultimately a stabilisation with less idiom-conscious authors dominating what's left of the field.

What this amounts to is that any idiom needs time to become established before it can usefully progress. One year is ridiculously short for this. Ten years is certainly not too long—in fact, a good rule-of-thumb length is probably that of the average person's creative lifetime.

Archie Mercer, 70 Worrall Road, Bristol 8.

We were talking, perhaps, on a rather more general level in that editorial. Our main point—that too many SF writers are writing in a pre-war idiom and have an old-fashioned view of the sciences—still applies, we feel.

Broadening the Scope

Dear Sir,

I believe that if you print stories whose range is strictly limited to standard SF themes and/or methods of putting across their stories, that you will find yourselves far too limited in choice of authors. Thus you would be limiting yourselves in two ways, and both would be deplored, I

feel, by the majority of your readers, whose numbers would rapidly decrease! The 'old school' in SF have produced some fine work, much of it has a sense of wonder, and a spirit of adventure, that I miss in the modern forms of SF. Nevertheless the time has surely come for the genre to extend its scope, not only in subject matter, but, far more so in its methods. The traditional SF story is usually woefully low in literary merit, frequently either trashily written or very childishly written. Also the same old, tired, basic themes are presented again and again, with scarcely an attempt at disguising such lack of originality. Is it any wonder then that SF appeals generally only to a select few? The genre will only widen its audience by itself broadening its presentation. Ultimately it must produce works of a high literary quality if it is ever to become accepted as something more important than westerns, thrillers and other such specialised branches of the novel and short story. Such an achievement will only come about by editors and writers together broadening their outlook. Just take a look at SF's past—what stands out as being of enduring value? Some of Wells' work, Huxley's *Brave New World* perhaps, Orwell's *1984* certainly. What else? The answer is, if we are being honest with ourselves, practically nothing. It is not enough to quote *A Canticle for Leibowitz, More Than Human,* etc., etc. These are labelled 'classics' but they only appear so in the genre itself, due to the generally deplorable literary ineptitude in the field. Compared with the mainstream of literature they are at best capable, at worst poor. They are by no means classics in the loosest sense. I, too, read and cherished them, but I am a fan. I think we fans tend to overlook too much the faults of presentation, because we like so much the contents. Outsiders are not so undiscerning!

I support, wholeheartedly, your motto 'Almost Anything Goes'. I shall look forward to reading Miss Judith Merril's reviews of the U.S. scene. Meanwhile congratulations on a fine SF magazine. The best, I believe, in the field, *notwithstanding F&SF.*

J. R. Hale, 365 Kennington Road, London, S.E.11.

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IN THIS ISSUE

NEW WORLDS

COMPACT SF

The great Linear Cities were filled with the ghosts of the unborn. Built to cater for all the needs of a multitude, they had never fulfilled their function. Now a handful of amoral 'loners' frequented these 'Lone Zones', their lives meaningless in a world without meaning.
This is the first long story by a brilliant newcomer to the sf scene.

Read CHARLES PLATT'S

LONE ZONE

New writers dominate the rest of the issue, with Langdon Jones, Colin Fry, Richard Gordon, E. C. Williams and Dikk Richardson contributing a wide variety of ideas and treatments. Also in this issue you will find

BRIAN W. ALDISS'

SUPERCITY

Plus all our usual features and an article on

ROGER CORMAN and
EDGAR ALLEN POE