NEW WORLDS

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BRIAN W. ALDISS

GIRL and ROBOT with FLOWERS

and

OLD TIME'S SAKE

With an appreciation: EDMUND CRISPIN on ALDISS

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Contents

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

A WELCOME CHOICE

THIS YEAR, OVER the August Bank Holiday weekend, the twenty-third World SF Convention will be held at the Mount Royal Hotel, Marble Arch. One of Britain's outstanding sf writers, Brian W. Aldiss, is to be Guest of Honour. To celebrate this choice we are publishing two new stories by Brian Aldiss, plus articles on him by Edmund Crispin and Peter White. The first story was specially written for the issue and the second is an early, previously unpublished, piece of work which illustrates that Mr. Aldiss has always had the deft style and ability to handle character which marks all his fiction.

Apart from being admired for his talent, Brian Aldiss is also amongst the most well-liked sf writers; charming, ebullient, fluent, not unhandsome, a gourmet and man of good taste and humour, he is as interesting to meet as he is to read. His criticism, in *The Oxford Mail* and SF HORIZONS, is intelligent and pithy, matched only by a few.

We hope you will enjoy the other stories in this special issue. Robert Silverberg returns to a British magazine after a long absence with *At The End of Days*, David Masson, a new writer, makes a brilliant début with *Traveller's Rest*, and James Colvin contributes an experimental story of a kind he believes hasn't been tried before and which, he says, is 'meant to be enjoyed, not studied', *The Pleasure Garden of Felipe Sagittarius*. There is also, of course, the second part of Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero* which continues, very entertainingly, to take the mickey out of some more stock sf ideas. Another varied issue, which we hope you will enjoy.

We hope those attending the convention will enjoy that, too.

Michael Moorcock

BRIAN W. ALDISS

The Image Maker

EDMUND CRISPIN

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN science-fiction and science-fantasy may be hard to define, but it does, I think, exist. Emphasis is the clue. A science-*fiction* story can be good even when its visualisation—of a Martian, a megalopolis, a mutant—is relatively sketchy and commonplace ; it can succeed because of its other merits. As against this, in a science-*fantasy* story the quality of the visualisation is the all-important thing.

Brian W. Aldiss has written both kinds of tale, yet it seems to me that his natural inclination is towards the second type. As he himself has said, he is interested chiefly in 'the images'. This interest is not, of course, allowed to become all-devouring: themes, ideas, narrative, plotting and so forth, though subservient to the images, are not the less skilfully handled for that (here Aldiss easily outdistances other science-fantasy writers, many of whom have too often seemed to assume that once they have dreamed up something sufficiently vivid and bizarre, their job is over). No: all I mean to suggest is that in a good proportion of Aldiss's best work, it is the images which *dominate*.

They are very personal images, displayed in a very personal way and combining to give a very personal flavour. (This individuality—this drawing on absolutely private reservoirs of imagination—marks Aldiss off from the few other really notable science-fantasists such as J. G. Ballard with his reliance on Jung, or Van Vogt with his reliance on Korzybski.) Look, for example, at the occasional startling melodrama—the cobwebs between Earth and Moon in *Hothouse*, the dead man walking over the ocean at the beginning of *Earthworks*. Again, look at the recurrent special grotesquerie: in *Hothouse* the tummy-belly creatures (and even, for all its nastiness, the morel) ; in Greybeard, Bunny Jingadangelow. Yet again, look at the remarkable

skill in conveying sexiness without a long anatomical inventory ('Dapple, the girl with killing grey eyes').

These are only a few examples taken at random ; the list could be extended a long way beyond them ; the difficulty, since Aldiss's imaginings are impulsive rather than systematic, would be to find a reasonable conclusion to such a list. To say that there is no 'system' in Aldiss is not, however, to say that there is no unity. The unity which makes up Aldiss himself, as a person, naturally ensures that there will always be a coherence, however elusive, in the Aldiss product ; that much is common sense. But there is more. We can be simple about it, and yet still bracket all the best of Aldiss's work in one short significant statement.

Aldiss has a painter's eye.

Compared with him, almost all other sf writers (take that 'f' whichever way you like) work in black and white. For some sorts of story—the 'ideas' story, for example—black-and-white may be not only adequate, but positively an advantage, just as it is in some sorts of photograph or movie. For science-fantasy, however, we need not only potent, fascinating images ; we need to have them visualised by their author handsomely defined and in full colour. And here Aldiss is supreme (he is even able to make his readers *sense* colours without, himself, actually specifying them). He is wonderfully various, too. In *Hothouse*, the big canvas, the primaries, the palette-knife. In *Greybeard* (appropriately) water-colours unassertive and subtly-mingled. In the short story *Old Hundredth*, pastels: faded, yet still clean and clear and pure as the story demands.

In short, leaving aside all his other skills, Aldiss really *does* visualise—really does *see*. And this talent gives him a head start in a field (future time, alien planets) where it is, or at any rate ought to be, a major qualification.

BRIAN W. ALDISS
GIRL AND ROBOT WITH FLOWERS

I DROPPED IT to her casually as we were clearing away the lunch things. "I've started another story."

Marion put the coffee cups down on the draining board, hugged me, and said, "You clever old thing! When did you do that? When I was out shopping this morning?"

I nodded, smiling at her, feeling good, enjoying hearing her chirp with pleasure and excitement. Marion's marvellous, she can always be relied on. Does she really feel as delighted as that—after all, she doesn't care so greatly for science fiction? But I don't mind; she is full of love, and it may lend her enough empathy to make her feel as sincerely delighted as I do when another story is on the way.

"I suppose you don't want to tell me what it's going to be about?" she asked.

"It's about robots, but more than that I won't tell you."

"Okay. You go and write a bit more while I wash these few things up. We don't have to leave for another ten minutes, do we?"

We were planning to go and see our friends the Carrs, who live the other side of Oxford. Despite their name, the Carrs haven't a car, and we had arranged to take them and their two children out for a ride and a picnic in the country, to celebrate the heatwave.

As I went out of the kitchen, the fridge started charging again.

"There it goes!" I told Marion grimly. I kicked it, but it continued to growl at me.

"I never hear it till you remind me," she said. I tell you, nothing rattles her! It's wonderful; it means that she is a great nerve tonic, exciting though I find her.

"I must get an electrician in to look at it," I said. "Unless you actually enjoy the noise, that is. It just sits there gobbling electricity like a—"

"A robot?" Marion suggested.

"Yep." I ambled into the living room-cum-study. Nikola was lying on the rug under the window in an absurd position, her tummy up to the sunlight. Absently, I went over and tickled her to make her purr. She knew I enjoyed it as much as she did; she was very like Marion in some ways. And at that moment, discontent struck me.

I lit a Van Dyke cigar and walked back into the kitchen. The back door was open; I leant against the post and said, "Perhaps for once I will tell you the plot. I don't know if it's good enough to bear completing."

She looked at me. "Will my hearing it improve it?"

"You might have some suggestions to offer."

Perhaps she was thinking how ill-advised she would be ever to call me in for help when the cooking goes wrong, even if I am a dab hand with the pappadoms. All she said was, "It never hurts to talk an idea over."

"There was a chap who wrote a tremendous article on the generation of ideas in conversation. A German last century, but I can't remember who—Von Kleist, I think. Probably I told you. I'd like to read that again some time. He pointed out how odd it is that we can surprise even ourselves in conversation, as we can when writing."

"Don't your robots surprise you?"

"They've been done too often. Perhaps I ought to leave them alone. Maybe Jim Ballard's right and they are old hat, worked to death."

"What's your idea?"

So I stopped dodging the issue and told her.

This earth-like planet, Iksnivarts, declares war on Earth. Its people are extremely long-lived, so that the long voyage to Earth means nothing to them—eighty years are nothing, a brief interval. To the Earthmen, it's a lifetime. So the only way they can carry the war back to Iksnivarts is to use robots—beautiful, deadly creatures without many of humanity's grandeurs and failings. They work off solar batteries, they last almost forever, and they carry miniature computers in their heads that can out-think any protoplasmic being.

An armada of ships loaded with these robots is sent off to attack Iksnivarts. With the fleet goes a factory which is staffed by robots capable of repairing their fellows. And

with this fully automated strike force goes a most terrible weapon that is capable of locking all the oxygen in Iksnivarts' air into the rocks, so that the planetary atmosphere is rendered unbreathable in the course of a few hours.

The inhuman fleet sails. Some twenty years later, an alien fleet arrives in the solar system and gives Earth, Venus, and Mars a good peppering of radioactive dusts, so that just about seventy per cent of humanity is wiped out. But nothing stops the robot fleet, and after eighty years they reach target. The anti-oxygen weapon is appallingly effective. Every alien dies of almost immediate suffocation, and the planet falls to its metallic conquerors. The robots land, radio news of their success back to earth, and spend the next ten years tidily burying corpses.

By the time their message gets back to the solar system, Earth is pulling itself together again after its pasting. Men are tremendously interested in their conquest of the distant world, and plan to send a small ship to see what is going on currently on Iksnivarts; but they feel a certain anxiety about their warlike robots, which now own the planet, and send a human-manned ship carrying two pilots in deep freeze. Unfortunately, this ship goes off course through a technical error, as does a second. But a third gets through, and the two pilots aboard, Graham and Josca, come out of cold storage in time to guide their ship in a long reconnaissance glide through Iksnivarts' unbreathable atmosphere.

When their photographs are delivered back to Earth—after they have endured another eighty years in deep freeze—they show a world covered with enormous robot cities, and tremendous technological activity going on apace. This looks alarming.

But Earth is reassured. It seems that the war robots they made have turned to peaceful ways. More than one shot through the telescopic lenses shows solitary robots up in the hills and mountains of their planet, picking flowers. One close-up in particular is reproduced in every communication medium and finds its way all round rejoicing Earth. It shows a heavily armed robot, twelve feet high, with its arms laden with flowers. And that was to be the title of my story: "Robot with Flowers".

Marion had finished washing up by this time. We were standing in my little sheltered back garden, idly watching the birds swoop along the roof of the old church that stands behind the garden. Nikola came out and joined us.

"Is that the end?" Marion asked.

"Not quite. There's an irony to come. This shot of the robot with flowers is misinterpreted—an automated example of the pathetic fallacy, I suppose. The robots *have* to destroy all flowers, because flowers exhale oxygen, and oxygen is liable to give the robots rust troubles. They've not picked up the human trick of appreciating beauty, they're indulging in the old robot vice of being utilitarian, and in a few years they'll be coming back to lick the Earthmen on Earth."

Inside the kitchen, I could hear the fridge charging again. I fought an urge to tell Marion about it ; I didn't want to disturb the sunlight on her face.

She said, "That sounds quite a good twist. It sounds as if it ought to make a decent run-of-the-mill story. Not quite *you*, perhaps."

"Somehow, I don't think I can bring myself to finish it."

"It's a bit like that Poul Anderson robot story you admired—'Epilogue', wasn't it?"

"Maybe. Every SF story is getting like every other one. It's also a bit like one of Harry's in his 'War With the Robots' collection."

" 'Anything that Harry wrote can't be all bad,' " she said, quoting a private joke.

" 'Wish I'd written that,' " I said, adding the punchline. "But that isn't really why I don't want to finish 'Robot With Flowers'. Maybe Fred Pohl or Mike Moorcock would like it enough to publish it, but I feel disappointed with it. Not just because it's a crib."

"You said once that you could always spot a crib because it lacked emotional tone."

The goldfish were flitting about under the water-lily leaves in my little ornamental pond. Both Nikola and Marion had got interested in them ; I said that they were alike. I looked down at them in love and a little exasperation. Her last remark told me she was carrying on the conversation just for my sake—it lacked emotional tone.

"You were meant to ask why I was disappointed with the idea."

"Darling, if we are going to go and collect the Carrs, we ought to be moving. It's two-forty already."

"I'm raring to go."

"I won't be a moment." She kissed me as she went by.

Of course she was right, I thought. I had to work it out for myself, otherwise I would never be satisfied. I went and sat by the cat and watched the goldfish. The birds were busy round the church, feeding their young; they could enjoy so few summers.

In a way, what I wanted to say was not the sort of thing I wanted to say to Marion, and for a special reason that was very much part of me. I'd seen many loving summers with several loving girls, and now here was Marion, the sweetest of them all, the one with whom I could be most myself and most freely speak my thoughts; for that very reason, I did not wish to abuse the privilege and needed to keep some reserves in me.

So I was chary about telling her more than I had done. I was chary about telling her that in my present mood of happiness I felt only contempt for my robot story, and would do so however skilfully I wrote it. There was no war in my heart; how could I begin to believe in an interplanetary war with all its imponderables and impossibilities? When I was lapped about by such a soft and gentle person as Marion, why this wish to traffic in emotionless metal mockeries of human beings?

Further, was not science fiction a product of man's divided and warring nature? I thought it was, for my own science fiction novels dealt mainly with dark things, a reflection of the personal unhappiness that had haunted my own life until Marion entered it. But this too was not a declaration lightly to be made.

The idea of robots gathering flowers, I suddenly thought, was a message from my psyche telling me to reverse the trend of my armed apprehensions, to turn about that line of Shakespeare's:

> 'And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies;
> Now thrive the armourers . . .'

It was a time for me to bankrupt my fictional armourers

and get out the dalliance. My psyche wanted to do away with armoured men—but my fearful ego had to complete the story by making the robots merely prepare for a harsher time to come. All fiction was a similar rationalisation of internal battles.

But suppose my time of trouble was over . . . even suppose it was only over temporarily . . . Ought I not to disarm while I could? Ought I not to offer some thanks to the gods and my patient regular readers by writing a cheerful story while I could, to reach out beyond my fortifications and show them for once a future it might be worth living in?

No, that was too involved to explain. And it made good enough sense for me not to need to explain it.

So I got up and left the cat sprawled by the pond, fishing with an occasional hope under the leaves. I walked through the kitchen into the study and started putting essentials into my pockets and taking inessentials out, my mind on the picnic. It was a lovely day, warm and almost cloudless. Charles Carr and I would need some cold beer. They were providing the picnic hamper, but I had a sound impulse to make sure of the beer.

As I took four cans out of the fridge, the motor started charging again. Poor old thing, it was getting old. Under ten years old, but you couldn't expect a machine to last for ever. Only in fiction. You could send an animated machine out on a paper spaceship voyage over paper light years and it would never let you down. The psyche saw to that. Perhaps if you started writing up-beat stories, the psyche would be encouraged by them and start thinking in an up-beat way, as it had ten years and more ago.

"Just getting some beer!" I said, as Marion came back into the room from upstairs. She had changed her dress and put on fresh lipstick. She looked just the sort of girl without which no worthwhile picnic was complete. And I knew she would be good with the Carr kids too.

"There's a can opener in the car, I seem to remember," she said. "And what exactly struck you as so wrong with your story?"

I laughed. "Oh, never mind that! It's just that it seemed so far divorced from real life." I picked up the cans and

made towards the door, scooping one beer-laden arm about her and reciting, " 'How can I live without thee, how forgo Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined?' Adam to Eve, me to you."

"You've been at the beer, my old Adam. Let me get my handbag. How do you mean, divorced from real life? We may not have robots yet, but we have a fridge with a mind of its own."

"Exactly. Then why can't I get the fridge into an SF story, and this wonderful sunlight, and you, instead of just a bunch of artless robots? See that little furry cat outside, trying to scoop up goldfish? She has no idea that today isn't going to run on forever, that the rest of life isn't going to be one golden afternoon. *We* know it won't be, but wouldn't it be a change if I could make a story about just this transitory golden afternoon instead of centuries of misery and total lack of oxygen, cats, and sexy females?"

We were outside the front door. I shut it and followed Marion to the car. We were going to be a bit late.

She laughed, knowing by my tone that I was half kidding.

"Go ahead and put those things into a story," she said. "I'm sure you can do it. Pile them all in!"

Though she was smiling, it sounded like a challenge.

I put the beer carefully into the back of the car and we drove off down the baking road for our picnic.

'This story was to have been the first of a series about Alec Sampson, a long-lived man. It was written in the summer of 1954, before I had had any sf published in magazines. Somehow I was not satisfied with it, not even bothering to submit it. It contains many lacunae typical of a beginner's story. At the same time, its relation of an sf theme in non-standard sf terms is characteristic of much of my later material.'

BRIAN W. ALDISS
OLD TIME'S SAKE

IT WAS TWENTY years since I had last visited Oxford, twenty years since I had entered that spacious upper room in All Saints' College. There was nothing unintentional in that absence.

Glanville led me in, a solicitous hand which I rather resented on my arm. Perhaps he felt the tension in me, and guessing that I dreaded the coming physical ordeal sympathised. Of course he had no way of divining that it was what depended on the results of my ordeal which made the palms of my hands greasy and my voice harsh.

"Here's Alexander Sampson, gentlemen," he said. And already my nerves were probing into each remark, seeking the real meaning behind it ; I interpreted that one as 'Here's our prize specimen, gentlemen'.

Only three men were there to rise and greet me ; Dr. Eric Bardon, still with a youthful air and spruce clothes ; A. E. Peters, the historian, sandy hair very sparse, untidier than ever ; and Sir Dennis Wheadon, the dean of the college, now a frail, graceful old man of eighty. We shook hands all round: only A. E. Peters avoided my eye.

"Dr. Heynes will be along in a minute," Sir Dennis said, referring to the fifth and last member of my committee, and we all sat down and made some conversation. Their natural politeness could not stop them staring at me covertly, searching my face.

They asked me polite questions, if I had a pleasant drive up from the coast, if my rooms at the Mitre were comfort-

able. I gave them polite answers—and every casual phrase bore more weight than it was meant to stand.

I only made one slip before Dr. Heynes arrived. Thinking back to when I had known these men better, trying to recall the old life, I asked Bardon, "How's the tennis going?"

He had been one of the keenest men at the University in my day. Now he said, after a sickening pause, "I had to throw up a couple of years ago. Warned off—the old heart, you know."

If he had not used the lightest possible tones, it would not have sounded so bitter.

From the window, Geoff Glanville said, "That's anno domini hot on our tracks, Alec."

The others would not have made that remark: Glanville alone kept up the old attitude of friendship with me. Under the circumstances, he had said the same thing, and I nodded ruefully at him—but was there not even then an undercurrent of . . . jealousy in his words? At our next meeting —no, that must wait.

All three began talking at once, rather feverishly, as if instead of being mature men they were undergraduates again, trying to impress each other and me. It was a distinct relief when Dr. Heynes entered.

She was forty-five, brisk and severe as ever in attitude and attire. At once I thought she had weathered the years better than the others of the committee.

"Hello, Sampson," she said, stretching out a bony little hand. "You're looking fine." And so, effortlessly, she carried the meeting from general uneasiness to business.

I spent five days at Oxford, as arranged, going sedulously and as patiently as possible through all the tests they had designed for me. The tests were of two classes: those primarily for my good, and those for the good of other people. And through all my tests I was treated by men and women whose feelings were mixed towards me. Did they but know it, their attitudes were only reflections of my own, and the question they asked themselves was the same one I kept asking myself: was I the world's prize guinea-pig or the world's luckiest man? Looking back, it seems extraordinary that I had not yet decided.

How they thought up so many different examinations I do not know. Most of them meant nothing to me. The medical ones were varied and ingenious ; I spent two of my five days in the Infirmary undergoing starvation and being wheeled from one department to another. I met my old plastic surgeon, who had retired and came up from Maidstone to see me ; I met toxicologists, epidermologists, epigamists, urinologists—they came by the dozen, ageing men with eager faces, experts with long official names, to check on my lymphatic system, my heart, my teeth, my bones, odd corners I did not know I had. The sensory specialists ran rough-shod over me, using the new brain-meters, determining the abilities of my receptor outfit, responses, etc. Their stock-in-trade also included lights, sounds, chill air currents, hot bars, electric shocks and smells, all of which came and went with calculated suddenness.

When they had finished, I felt more like an anatomical chart than a human being. But there was worse yet. The examination of my mind followed: it was intensive and remorseless. They probed me from every angle. I saw Adlerians, Freudians, and dianeticians, as well as the new brand of thought dredger, the mentographers who were later to cause me so much anxiety. All brought the full force of their theories and machines to bear on me. I was plied with questions, plugged with drugs and hypnotised.

And all the weary while, secretaries wrote, computers hummed, spools turned: they must have filled a large room with the records they took.

At last the ordeal was over. With a disembodied feeling, I emerged into sunlight. Glanville awaited me with a sympathetic smile and tenderly took my arm. Recalling that same possibly possessive gesture five days before, I withdrew my arm.

"Been a bit of an inquisition?" he enquired sympathetically, mistaking the motion.

I nodded.

"Never mind, it's only once in every twenty years," he said consolingly.

I said: "All the same, it almost makes me sorry I'm the world's only immortal."

They meant me well. A. E. Peters gave a farewell dinner for me in his rooms, and over the college port the five on the committee and I tried to sink our differences. Always between us lay the shadow of my long future, but the shadow was faint that night. All the same, there was a question which bothered me, and when I saw the others were ready to discuss business I broached it to Sir Dennis.

"When do we get the results of the examination?" he said, with an old man's trick of repeating a question. "I'm afraid it will be a week before the geniuses manage to co-ordinate their data into an intelligible answer. Directly we know we shall inform you of their verdict, rest assured."

Dr. Heynes, reading something of my expression, said, "Remember, Sampson, the results can be only good—that you have survived this first critical phase tells us that. All we can learn now is how far your life is likely to extend beyond the natural term." She lit the dry phrases with her smile.

From behind his pipe, Glanville amplified the remark. "You may last anything from another hundred years to—well, theoretically at least there is no upper limit."

And again all the eyes were on me, recalling no doubt the rigorous tests I had undergone before I had been committed to the fantastic process of preservation. They had needed someone without ties intelligent enough to undergo control, stoical enough to face discomfort, stable enough to bear isolation and—this perhaps above all—unimaginative enough to face an infinitely protracted future; they had found—me. Did they now regret they had not selected someone with more gratitude?

As if voicing some such doubt, A. E. Peters said, "Come, Sampson, 'Of that seven score and ten, twenty will not come again'—you've none of that sort of stuff to worry you, you know. You'd be the envy of everyone if they knew about you."

By their silent, almost imperceptible gestures of assent, the others disclosed that that too was their chief feeling, over-riding any scientific detachment: envy.

"I shall always be delighted with the springs of the years, Mr. Peters," I said, forcing mildness into my voice. "But I

can't help wondering how well I shall get along with myself."

"You will find that your chief duty, the collection of material for the assistance of future historians, should come to your aid there," Sir Dennis said, adding with a smile, "It should give you both objectivity and an object in life."

"But the most valuable function you will perform," Eric Bardon said, squinting away from me down the barrel of his pipe, "is to present us here with an otherwise unobtainable mass of psychological data every twenty years."

This was not only a stab at me, reminding me I was more a guinea pig than a hero, but a side blow at Sir Dennis too. As an amateur student of human affairs I had watched with uncomfortable interest the jostling of two different aspirations in those who commanded me. The whole experiment of which I was the subject had been, from its inception in the wastes of Antarctica, a costly business. Government backing had not been forthcoming, and all initial expenses had been footed by Glanville's family. Then he had managed to interest the University; by that time, I had undergone my 'operation', but funds were more keenly needed than ever.

So factions represented by Barton and Heynes on one side and Peters and Wheadon on the other were co-opted, the former pair representing the sciences, the latter the humanities. They rubbed shoulders uneasily together. Jointly, however, they administered a trust which served the double purpose of keeping me economically secure and answerable to a responsible body. I hoped they would get their money's worth.

Signs of this division of outlook appeared only once more that evening. We talked of our youth (I always with the sense that I would know other generations to whom my early days would seem remote: here I was still with my seniors) and it was late when we parted in the quiet, starlit quad. There was peace here that distant rumbling traffic only emphasised.

Tomorrow morning I would be away early. I should see Glanville, as he was a friend, but by mutual arrangement I

met my committee only on visits of inspection, once in every twenty years.

In their different fashions they said good-bye, Dr. Heynes brisk and birdlike, Peters embarrassed, Barton defensively. And then Sir Dennis. In both our minds was the sure knowledge that on my next visit he would not be here to shake my hand under the everlasting sky.

"I shall always wonder if we had the right to commit you to this course," he said. "Alec—try not to become inhuman. Try not to blame us, ever, for this experiment. Remember too—our Maker will also be interested in its results."

I walked up the High with his jerky old voice still in my ears. I had that feeling again that I was a sort of glorified anatomical chart. Mind, body, soul, had all three been endowed with the same lasting powers? In other words, which would crack first.

Next morning I breakfasted early and drove south. As I drove, my spirits rose. Oxford had a depressing effect on me, now hope and joy surged through me. Immortal! I had Time, and having Time had power. Peters' dry voice returned to me: "You'd be the envy of everyone if they knew," and now I saw he was right. Of a sudden, the human span of seventy years became something pitiable and cramped, something too petty for the splendid complexity of an adult human.

When my results arrived, elation overtopped itself. They said in effect, ignoring all the cautious pedantry, that I was good for at least thirty thousand years, "towards the end of which period, a repetition of the original 'operation' may (if desired) be undergone with every expectation of providing another term of longevity equal to the first."

Thirty thousand years! I, like the earth, should grow no older in all that time! It is little reflection on my vaunted stability that I broke down then and wept: the last twenty years had imposed a greater strain than I had realised, with their tiny but permanent doubt of success. Thirty thousand years! Again I whispered it to myself, tasting the significance of the words.

It is interesting to recall that even then, in the first flush of triumph, I was casting ahead, trying to decide if I

should want that second span when the time came, or if by then I should have had enough.

"Wonderful!" I whispered.

"We are happy to have succeeded so well," Glanville said.

With a start, I looked up. For the moment I had forgotten him. At my invitation, he had brought the reports down personally, and was to stay with me over the week-end. He stood now, leaning forward with hands on the desk, watching me. An arrangement of marigolds in a bronze bowl reflected sunlight up the tight lines of his jaw. His eyes gleamed with what, for an instant, I read as triumph, and then he avoided my gaze and betrayed the true nature of his feelings.

I had asked him down for a special purpose, and now, suddenly, I needed his friendship.

"Geoff," I said gently, "please don't be jealous."

Directly it was said, I regretted it, afraid it would draw his anger. If it did so, it drew the deep kind of anger that stays inside a man and matures like wine: that, at least, was how I judged it years later, yet at the time he seemed calmed by my directness and replied, lightly enough, "I'm jealous, aren't I, for an entirely new motive!"

Strolling over to a full-length mirror, he surveyed himself narrowly and said, "Yes, a new motive, Alec. Amazing, the by-products of science; every new invention leaves a new dent on the human soul—but why wax platitudinous? I expect in a few hundred years you'll be pretty quick to spot a platitude . . . I can't help my jealousy, Alec—Oh, I can control it, but that's another matter. You see, no matter what misfortunes a man has had to face, handicaps of class, money or creed, he's always been able to look at his fellows and say, 'Whatever we may be now, we'll die the same'. That's not true any longer. There's always you, Alec: permanent, perpetual. It somehow makes the world seem unfair . . ."

Evidently this was something he had long been wanting to say to me, but his speech lost force towards the end. I knew why. He was consoled by his reflection in the mirror. At forty-two he still had the open air look I remembered in his undergraduate days. Wide-shouldered, deep-chested,

virile—these would be the adjectives he was mentally applying to his mirrored self. The plastic surgery had fixed me at about thirty-five: no doubt he easily persuaded himself that the grey fringe growing along his black locks was more becoming on him.

"You ought to get married, Geoff," I said.

"I'm too sought after!" he exclaimed, but surprisedly, as if I had guessed his thoughts. "That's quite irrelevant," he added.

"Not quite—for me," I said. "The agreement was that I should live among people who knew nothing of my-- future, so as to avoid friction on either side ; the idea being that every so many years, with assistance from the trust, I move off and set up again where I am unknown. It was also arranged that you folk who were in the know should have little contact with me between examinations. Right?"

"Ye-es," he said, meaning 'Where's this leading?'

"I invited you down, Geoff," I continued, "because even an everlasting man has his worries. I want a bit of personal advice. I've wanted it for some time, but I had to wait for these results."

"You can afford to wait," he said.

"Not in this case. No more than you could in the same position. I want to get married, Geoff."

"I hear they've founded a Chair of Mentography at Oxford," Lynette said to Glanville.

She and Geoff, I was relieved to find, liked each other from the moment of meeting. "But then, simple country girl that I am, I always like Oxford men, don't I, Alex?" she had said, taking us both gently by the arm but giving mine a proprietory squeeze. She was far from being simple, although a straightforward manner might have been mistaken for simplicity. She was courageous ; her husband had been one of the country's leading test pilots until his death three years ago, which is to say that Lynette had been practically wedded to a nervous breakdown. It had given her a kind of crinkled look about the eyes which I worshipped.

During the evening she did most of the talking, an unusual feat for Lynette. But Geoff sat and smoked and list-

ened, and I sat and watched—watched not Lynette, for all her graceful bearing and magnificent sweep of hair, but Glanville himself. For he was forming a decision, and I had sworn to myself that I should abide by it. I could never be neutral, as Glanville could. Passion above all calls for *ex cathedra* judgment: ought I to enter a more intimate relationship with Lynette?

I excused myself, slipping out into the darkness, oppressed by desire and the helplessness of desire. It was a sullen summer's night, the sky like a heavy stomach full of thunder. And there was an international crisis on, Someone's spies discovered, Someone's ambassador withdrawn; war, like lightning, flickered below the horizon. And I stood there trying to guess what Glanville would say to me after Lynette had gone.

"Yes, marry her! She's the one woman in a thousand who could face such a situation," he might say. "She realises fully the dual nature of love, intellectual love and the love of the senses. She could bear stoically the pathos of seeing herself age and wither while you retained your youth. She alone . . ."

Well, that was the kind of thing I hoped he would say; having anticipated it, I could bear it and bear to hear someone speak coolly of Lynette with her fires dying.

It was after midnight when Lynette drove away, and a few heavy spots of rain hustled us back into the house. Glanville mixed himself another drink and downed it with his back towards me. By that I sensed things would not turn out as I had expected.

"She's wonderful, isn't she?" I said flatly.

"She's very charming," he replied with equal lack of emphasis.

"God!" I exclaimed. "Don't let's be inhibited."

He looked slowly round the room, as if my silly remark might be found hanging on one of the walls. Then his eyes met mine; he flushed and said, "Can't you see she had her share of hell when Archie" (the test pilot) "was alive? Why ask her to undergo anything worse than that?"

"When I've told her about me . . . she can decide for herself. I swear I shan't try to persuade her."

"You swear you won't try to persuade her! What's your whole attitude to her but one of persuasion? Besides, catch a girl of that calibre in a situation like that and her answer's a foregone conclusion. She'll say 'yes' out of pure defiance."

The rain suddenly redoubled its efforts and filled the room with sound, sibilant and oppressive. I walked over and closed a window with a shaking hand.

"But if I told her—" I began.

"You should have told her long ago," he interrupted, "Or—oh, warned her off or something—told her you had T.B."

He spoke roughly, turning back to the drinks on the trolley.

"You've had enough drink," I said. The anger in my throat made my voice thick. "What you suggest is—against human nature."

As if he had not heard me, he picked up a bottle and commenced to pour. He made the action as slow and deliberate as he could. I lost my grip and leapt at him. I seized him by the wrist, my other hand clutched at his tie, twisting it. The liquor spilt in an arc across the carpet.

"Who said you were human any more?" he asked savagely, and broke away from my grip. He staggered, lost his balance and fell onto a chair; it was a modern span type and the arm broke, sending him onto the floor. Without another word, he picked himself up and lurched out of the room.

"Glanville!" I called, "Glanville, come back here, we're drunk, we don't know what we're saying to each other. Come back!"

My resistance had gone. I was frightened of the future: that was the first time. Glanville paid no heed. He marched down the corridor and slammed his bedroom door in my face.

Vainly, I hammered on it, making a useless fool of myself.

"Don't you see, I must marry someone of my own generation," I cried. "Next generation'll be too late: I can't love anyone born so much later than me. It wouldn't feel right. Can't you see I need the memory of Lynette to carry

into the future with me? Can't you see that, Geoffrey? It'll be something to give me courage . . . Geoff, can you hear me? Are you listening, man?"

But I banged on the smooth panel without effect: only the thunder answered me.

That was a bad night. Once I went out to the garage, determined to drive over to Lynette and have it out with her there and then. But at the double doors I stopped, knowing that in my present state I should make a fool of myself. I cursed myself, letting the rain run in rivulets through my hair and down my neck. Then I went back and sprawled damply on the settee, smoking, drinking, muttering to myself. Light was sneaking spitefully round the curtains when I fell asleep.

Glanville left without breakfast, without my seeing him again.

The political crisis was at its worst that day. Speeches, angry crowds, marching feet, camouflaged tanks moving down the roads—an overdose of these causes a temporary eclipse of personality: probably that's how dictators get their own way so easily. 'Public faces in private places' lose their anxious inner voices; I have seen it a score of times since.

Meetings, speeches and communiqués were exchanged, threats and promises about the hydrogen bomb were made, and then—at the eleventh hour—someone climbed down. A few square miles of Europe changed hands almost surreptitiously and the great pot of war went off the boil again.

Lynette came to see me.

"I have received a very frightening letter from Geoffrey Glanville," she said. Like me, she could be direct when necessary, however much hesitation might have attacked her before.

"He had no need to write to you," I said.

"I fear he acted for the best." Perhaps even at that early point I knew that she was finished with me. But it took me a long and painful while to look the fact in the eye. Lynette was as reasonable as anyone would have been under the circumstances: it was the fact that I had not told her

personally which really beat me, added to an indefinable lack of morale engendered by my stupid behaviour with Glanville.

"Please don't make things worse, Alex," she begged. She always called me Alex; everyone else made it Alec. There was that indefinable timbre in her voice which reveals unexpectedly that women are more sensitive than men. Hearing it, I folded up, apologised, smiled, clasped hands, apologised again and said good-bye to her.

"Good-bye, Alex," she said. And that was all.

Time will heal. In my case the hackneyed old saw took on a toothsome flavour. I repeated it without believing it, but of course in time it came to be true, in a feeble sort of way.

For some reason, during the early, worst months, I did not blame Glanville. I just reckoned he had been doing what he thought best. Then it occurred to me he had acted out of spite, even hatred. I remembered what he said about my making the world seem unfair. A cold little fear haunted me for some while to think a member of the trust should feel like that about me. Then I forgot him, preoccupied with the memory of Lynette.

After eleven years, there was a letter from A. E. Peters. It was to tell me that Sir Dennis Wheadon had died and to send me a parcel that the old dean had bequeathed me. I found some books by which Sir Dennis had set great store, some government shares and a rambling letter of some forty thousand words written to me over several years and containing disquisitions on the philosophical significance of a life span.

The death of this old man affected me more deeply than I had expected. He had spent his life buried in a scholarly milieu, hardly knowing the outer world; yet in his small way, cheek by jowl with his old maidish manners, he had exhibited courage and integrity, afraid neither of life nor the death that had now overtaken him.

I wrote back to A. E. Peters expressing my sympathy, but had no reply. When answer came, a month later, it was from Eric Bardon. Peters himself had died suddenly the day after writing to me. Bardon and Dr. Heynes were

busy electing new members for my committee. No mention was made of Glanville.

These events should have prepared me for change at Oxford when, after the due span of years had passed, I returned for my next examination. But I was busy, concerned with so many things that even the emptiness Lynette had left inside me was seldom felt, and—I was preoccupied with the nightmare which descended on me that last night at home.

I dreamed I was back in those corridors under the Antarctic, before they exploded the bomb that was to release me from time. Once more the cumbrous paraphernalia was strapped about me, the leads and filters pricking down through my flesh, the shields pressing against me, the clamps forcing every joint into the necessary angles. I was pushed, like food that is to have its bacteria purged by nuclear radiation, into an oven. Over me lay so many calculated tons of lead, rock, ice . . . I was the one tiny fragment of life in a vast, waiting expanse. And then, above ground, the bomb was activated.

But in the dream I had to endure it all in a state of full awareness, instead of in that deep unconsciousness that was the only possible course in reality. And in the dream they could not get to me afterwards . . . not for a millennium . . .

Dr. Eric Bardon met me. He was now grey-haired but immaculate as ever.

"Marvellous, marvellous!" he said, peering hard at me as we shook hands. "Not a wrinkle!"

"They're heaping up inside," I said lightly.

We walked slowly down Broad Street, where Oxford's first nylen building was going up. He talked of changes which would affect me. I might not like the new members of my trust. He and Dr. Heynes had chief say, of course, but the others were 'not scholars—business men'. When Sir Dennis and Peters had gone and Glanville had resigned—

"Glanville—" I started to say and then, by one of those coincidences that happen with curious frequency, we saw Glanville himself approaching us with a white-haired woman by his side.

He was very bent. When he saw us, he stopped suddenly and drew himself up, looking confused.

Bardon put a hand on my arm and we stopped too.

With a curious look of shame and triumph mingled, Glanville said, "Hello, Alec. Fancy running into you. I'd like you to meet my wife."

"Hello, Alex!" she said gravely.

I had not recognised Lynette until she spoke to me.

DAVID MASSON

TRAVELLER'S REST

Illustration: Douthwaite

IT WAS AN apocalyptic sector. Out of the red-black curtain of the forward sight-barrier, which at this distance from the Frontier shut down a mere twenty metres north, came every sort of meteoric horror: fission and fusion explosions, chemical detonations, a super-hail of projectiles of all sizes and basic velocities, sprays of nerve-paralysants and thalamic dopes. The impact devices burst on the barren rock of the slopes or the concrete of the forward stations, some of which were disintegrated or eviscerated every other minute. The surviving installations kept up an equally intense and nearly vertical fire of rockets and shells. Here and there a protectivized figure could be seen "sprinting" up, down or along the slopes on its mechanical "walker" like a frantic ant from an anthill attacked by flamethrowers. Some of the visible oncoming trajectories could be seen snaking overhead into the indigo gloom of the rear sight-curtain, perhaps fifty metres south, which met the steep-falling rock surface forty-odd metres below the observer's eye. East and west, as far as the eye could see, perhaps some forty miles in this clear mountain air despite the debris of explosion (but cut off to west by a spur from the range) the visibility-corridor witnessed a continual onslaught and counter-onslaught of devices. The audibility-corridor was vastly wider than that of sight; the many-pitched din, even through left ear in helm, was considerable.

"Computer-sent, must be," said H's transceiver into his right ear. No sigil preceded this statement, but H knew the tones of B, his next-up, who in any case could be seen a metre away saying it, in the large concrete bubble whence they watched, using a plaspex window and an infrared northviewer with a range of some hundreds of metres forward. His next-up had been in the bunker for three minutes, apparently overchecking, probably for an appreciation to two-up who might be in station VV now.

"Else how can they get minute-ly impacts here, you mean?" said H.

"Well, of course it could be longrange low-frequency—we don't really know how Time works over There."

"But if the conceleration runs asymptotically to the Frontier, as it should if Their Time works in mirror-image, would anything ever have got over?"

"Doesn't have to, far's I can see—maybe it steepens a lot, then just falls back at the same angle the other Side," said B's voice; "anyway, I didn't come to talk science: I've news for you, if we hold out the next few seconds here: you're Relieved."

H felt a black inner sight-barrier beginning to engulf him, and a roaring in his ears swallowed up the noise of the bombardment. He bent double as his knees began to buckle, and regained full consciousness. He could see his replacement now, an uncertain-looking figure in prot-suit (like everybody else up here) at the far side of the bunker.

"XN 3, what orders then?" he said crisply, his pulse accelerating.

"XN 2: pick em-kit now, repeat now, rocket 3333 to VV, presént tag"—holding out a luminous orange label printed with a few coarse black characters—"and proceed as ordered thence."

H stuck up his right thumb from his fist held sideways at elbow length, in salute. It was no situation for facial gestures or unnecessary speech. "XN 3, yes, em-kit, 3333 rocket, tag" (he had taken it in his left glove) "and VV orders; parting!"

He missed B's nod as he skimmed on soles to the exit, grabbed a small bundle hanging (one of fifteen) from the fourth hook along, slid down the greasy slide under ground ten metres to a fuel-cell-lit cavern, pressed a luminous button in the wall, watched a lit symbol passing a series of marks, jumped into the low "car" as it ground round the corner, and curled up foetuswise. His weight having set off the cardoor mechanism, the car shut, slipped down and (its clamps settling on H's body) roared off down the chute.

Twenty-five seconds after his "parting" word H uncurled at the forward receiver cell of station VV nearly half a mile downslope. He crawled out as the rocket ground off again, walked ten steps onward in this larger version of his northward habitat, saluted thumb-up and presented his tag to two-up (recognised from helm-tint and helm-sign), saying simultaneously, "XN 3 rep, Relieved."

"XN 1 to XN 3: take this" (holding out a similar orange tag plucked from his pocket) "and take rocktrain down, in—70 seconds. By the way, ever seen a prehis?"

"No, sir."

"Spot through here, then; look like pteros but more primitive."

The infrared telescopic viewer looking northwest passed through the forward sight-barrier which due north was about forty metres away here; well upslope yet still well clear of the dark infrared-radiation barrier could be seen, soundlessly screaming and yammering, two scaly animals about the size of large dogs, but with two legs and heavy wings, flopping around a hump or boulder on the rock. They might have been hit on their way along, and could hardly have had any business on that barren spot, H thought.

"Thanks; odd," he said. Seven seconds of the seventy had gone. He pulled out a squirter-cup from the wall and took a drink from the machine, through his helm. Seventeen seconds gone, fifty-three to go.

"XN 1 to XN 3: how are things up there?"

Naturally a report was called for: XN 2 might never return, and communication up-time and down-time was nearly impossible at these latitudes over more than a few metres.

"XN 3. Things have been hotting up all day; I'm afraid a burst through may be attempted in the next hour or so —only my guess, of course. But I've never seen anything like it all this time up here. I suppose you'll have noticed it in VV too?"

"XN 1, thanks for report," was all the answer he got. But he could hear for himself that the blitz was much more intense than any he had known at this level either.

Only twenty-seven seconds remained. He saluted and strode off across the bunker with his em-kit and the new tag. He showed the tag to the guard, who stamped it and pointed wordlessly down a corridor. H ran down this, arriving many metres down the far end at a little gallery. An underslung railguided vehicle with slide-doors opening into cubicles glided quietly alongside. A gallery-guard waved as H and two others waiting opened doors whose indicators were unlit, the doors slid to, and H found himself gently clamped in on a back-tilted seat as the rock-

train accelerated downhill. After ten seconds it stopped at the next checkhalt, a panel in the cubicle ceiling lit up to state "DIVERSION, LEFT", presumably because the direct route had been destroyed. The train now appeared to accelerate but more gently, swung away to left (as H could feel), and stopped at two more checkhalts before swinging back to right and finally decelerating, coming to rest and opening some 480 seconds after its start, by Had's personal chronograph, instead of the 200 he had expected.

At this point daylight could again be seen. From the top bunker where XN 2 had discharged him, Had had now gone some ten miles south and nearly three thousand metres down, not counting detours. The forward sight-barrier here was hidden by a shoulder of mountain covered in giant lichen, but the southern barrier was evident as a violet-black fog-wall a quarter of a mile off. Lichens and some sort of grass-like vegetation covered much of the neighbouring landscape, a series of hollows and ravines. Noise of war was still audible, mingled with that of a storm, but nearby crashes were not frequent and comparatively little damage could be seen. The sky overhead was turbulent. Some very odd-looking animals, perhaps between a lizard and a stoat in general appearance, were swarming up and down a tree-fern near by. Six men in all got out of the rocktrain, besides Had. Two and three marched off in two groups down a track eastward. One (not one of those who had got in at VV) stayed with Had.

"I'm going down to the Great Valley; haven't seen it for twenty days; everything'll be changed. Are you sent far?" said the other man's voice in Had's right ear through the transceiver.

"I—I—I'm Relieved," tried Had uncertainly.

"Well I'm . . . disintegrated!" was all the other man could manage. Then, after a minute, "Where will you go?"

"Set up a business way south, I think. Heat is what suits me, heat and vegetation. I have a few techniques I could put to good use in management of one sort or another. I'm sorry—I never meant to plume it over you with this—but you did ask me."

"That's all right. You certainly must have Luck, though.

I never met a man who was Relieved. Make good use of it, won't you. It helps to make the Game worth while, up here —I mean, to have met a man who is joining all those others we're supposed to be protecting—it makes them real to us in a way."

"Very fine of you to take it that way," said Had.

"No—I mean it. Otherwise we'd wonder if there *was* any people to hold the Front for."

"Well, if there weren't, how'd the techniques have developed for holding on up here?" put in Had.

"Some of the Teccols I remember in the Great Valley might have developed enough techniques for that."

"Yes, but think of all the pure science you need to work up the techniques from; I doubt if that could have been studied inside the Valley Teccols."

"Possibly not—that's a bit beyond me," said the other's voice a trifle huffily, and they stood on in silence till the next cable-car came up and round at the foot of the station. Had let the man get in it—he felt he owed him that—and a minute later (five seconds only, up in his first bunker, he suddenly thought ironically and parenthetically) the next car appeared. He swung himself in just as a very queer-looking purple bird with a long bare neck alighted on the stoat-lizards' tree-fern. The cable-car sped down above the ravines and hollows, the violet southern curtain backing still more swiftly away from it. As the time-gradient became less steep his brain began to function better and a sense of well-being and meaningfulness grew in him. The car's speed slackened.

Had was glad he still wore his prot-suit when a couple of chemical explosions burst close to the cable line, presumably by chance, only fifty metres below him. He was even more glad of it when flying material from a third broke the cable itself well downslope and the emergency cable stopped him at the next pylon. He slid down the pylon's lift and spoke with his transceiver close to the telephone at the foot. He was told to make west two miles to the next cable-car line. His interlocutor, he supposed, must be speaking from an exchange more or less on the same latitude as that of his pylon, since communication even

here was still almost impossible north-south except at ranges of some metres. Even so, there was a squeaky sound about the other voice and its speech came out clipped and rapid. He supposed his own voice would sound gruff and drawled to the other.

Using his "walker", he picked his way across ravines and gullies, steering by compass and watching the sight-barriers and the Doppler tint-equator ahead for yawing. "All very well for that man to talk about Teccols," he thought, "but he must realise that no civilization could have evolved from anywhere as far north as the Great Valley: it's far too young to have even evolved Men by itself—at least at this end; I'm not sure how far south the eastern end goes."

The journey was not without its hazards: there were several nearby explosions, and what looked like a suspicious artificial miasma, easily overlooked, lay in two hollows which he decided to go round. Moreover, an enraged giant bear-sloth came at him in a mauve shrub-thicket and had to be eliminated with his quick-gun. But to one who had just come down from that mountain-hell all this seemed like a pleasant stroll.

Finally he came upon the line of pylons and pressed the telephone button at the foot of the nearest, after checking that its latitude-number was nearly right. The same voice, a little less outlandish and rapid, told him a car would arrive in three-quarters of a minute and would be arranged to stop at his pylon; if it did not, he was to press the emergency button near by. Despite his "walker", nearly an hour had gone by since he set out by it. Perhaps ninety minutes had passed since he first left the top bunker—well over a minute and a half of their time there.

The car came and stopped, he scrambled up and in, and this time the journey passed without incident, except for occasional sudden squalls, and the passage of flocks of nervous crows, until the car arrived at its terminus, a squat tower on the heathy slopes. The car below was coming up, and a man in it called through his transceiver as they crept past each other, "First of a bunch!" Sure enough the terminus interior was filled with some twenty men all equipped —almost enough to have warranted sending them up by polyheli, thought Hadol, rather than wait for cars at long

intervals. They looked excited and not at all cast down, but Hadol refrained from giving away his future. He passed on to the ratchet-car way and found himself one of a group of men more curious about the landscape than about their fellows. A deep reddish curtain of indeterminate thickness absorbed the shoulders of the heights about a quarter-mile northward, and the bluish fog terminated the view over the valley at nearly half a mile southward, but between the two the latitudinal zone was tolerably clear and devoid of obvious signs of war. Forests of pine and lower down of oak and ash covered the slopes, until finally these disappeared in the steepening edge of the Great Valley, whose meadows could however be glimpsed past the bluff. Swirling cloud-shadows played over the ground, skirts and tassels of rain and hail swept across it, and there was the occasional flash and rumble of a storm. Deer could be seen briefly here and there, and dense clouds of gnats danced above the trees.

A journey of some fifty minutes took them down, past two empty stations, through two looped tunnels and among waterfalls and under cliffs where squirrels leapt across from dangling root to root, through a steadily warmer and warmer air to the pastures and cornfields of the Great Valley, where a narrow village of concrete huts and wooden cabins, Emmel, nestled on a knoll above the winding river, and a great road ran straight to the east, parallel to a railway. The river was not, indeed, large here—a shallow, stony but attractive stream, and the Great Valley (all of whose breadth could now be seen) was at this western point no more than a third of a mile across. The southward slopes terminating the North-Western Plateau, now themselves visible, were rich in shrubland.

The utter contrast with what was going on above and, in top bunker time, perhaps four minutes ago, made Hadolar nearly drunk with enjoyment. However, he presented his luminous tag and had it (and his permanent checktab) checked for radiation, countersigned and stamped by the guard commander at the military terminal. The detachable piece at the end of the tag was given back to him to be slipped into the identity disc which was, as always, let into a slot in one of his ribs; the other portion was filed away.

He got out of his prot-suit and "walker", gave up his gun, ammunition and em-kit, was given two wallets of one thousand credit tokens each and a temporary civsuit. An orderly achieved the identity-disc operation. The whole ceremony from his arrival took 250 seconds flat—two seconds up in the top bunker. He walked out like an heir to the earth.

The air was full of scents of hay, berries, flowers, manure. He took intoxicated gulps of it. At the freshouse he ordered, paid for, and drank four decis of light ale, then ordered a sandwich and an apple, paid and ate. The next train east, he was told, would be in a quarter of an hour. He had been in the place perhaps half an hour. No time to spend watching the stream, but he walked to the railhead, asked for a ticket to Veruam by the Sea some 400 miles east and, as the detailed station map showed him, about 30 miles south, paid, and selected a compartment when the train arrived from its shed.

A farm girl and a sleepy-looking male civilian, probably an army contractor, got in one after the other close behind Hadolar, and the compartment contained just these three when the train left. He looked at the farm girl with interest —she was blonde and placid—as the first female he had seen for a hundred days. Fashions had not changed radically in thirty-odd years, at least among Emmel farm-girls. After a while he averted his gaze and considered the landscape. The valley was edged by bluffs of yellowish stone now to north and now to south. Even here their difference in hue was perceptible—the valley had broadened slightly; or perhaps he was being fanciful and the difference was due solely to normal light-effects. The river meandered gracefully from side to side and from cliff to cliff, with occasional islands, small and crowned with hazel. Here and there a fisher could be seen by the bank, or wading in the stream. Farm houses passed at intervals. North above the valley rose the great slopes, apparently devoid of signs of human life except for funicular stations and the occasional heliport, until they vanished into the vast crimson-bronze curtain of nothingness which grew insensibly out of a half cloud-covered green sky near the zenith. Swirls of whirlwind among the clouds told of the effects of the time-

gradient on weather, and odd lightning-streaks, unnoticed further north amid the war, appeared to pirouette among them. To the south the plateau was still hidden by the height of the bluffs, but the beginnings of the dark blue haze grew out of the sky above the valley skyline. The train stopped at a station and the girl, Hadolar saw with a pang, got out. Two soldiers got in in light dress and swapped minor reminiscences: they were on short-term leave to the next stop, a small town, Granev, and eyed Hadolar's temporary suit but said nothing.

Granev was mostly built of steel and glass: not an exciting place. It made a one-block twenty-storey five-mile strip on either side of the road, with over-pass-canopy. (How lucky, thought Hadolar, that speech and travel could go so far down this Great Valley without interlatitude problems: virtually the whole 450 miles.) Industry and some of the Teccols now appeared. The valley had broadened until, from the line, its southern cliffs began to drown in the blue haze half a mile off. Soon the northern slopes loomed a smoky ruddy brown before they, too, were swallowed up. The river, swollen by tributaries, was a few hundred metres across now and deep whenever the line crossed it. So far they had only gone fifty-odd miles. The air was warmer again and the vegetation more lush. Almost all the passengers were civilians now, and some noted Hadolar's temporary suit ironically. He would buy himself a wardrobe at Veruam at the first opportunity, he decided. But at the moment he wished to put as many miles as possible between himself and that bunker in the shortest personal time.

SOME HOURS LATER the train arrived at Veruam by the North-Eastern Sea. Thirty miles long, forty storeys high, and 500 metres broad north-south, it was an imposing city. Nothing but plain was to be seen in the outskirts, for the reddish fog still obliterated everything about four miles to the north, and the bluish one smothered the view southward some seven. A well-fed Hadolaris visited one of the city's Rehabilitation Advisors, for civilian techniques and material resources had advanced enormously since his last acquaintance with them, and idioms and speech-sounds

had changed bewilderingly, while the whole code of social behaviour was terrifyingly different. Armed with some manuals, a pocket recorder, and some standard speechform and folkway tapes, he rapidly purchased thin clothing, stormwear, writing implements, further recording tools, lugbags and other personal gear. After a night at a good guestery, Hadolaris sought interviews with the employing offices of seven subtropical development agencies, was tested and, armed with seven letters of introduction, boarded the night liner rocktrain for the south past the shore of the North-Eastern Sea and to Oluluetang some 360 miles south. One of the tailors who had fitted him up had revealed that on quiet nights very low-pitched rumblings were to be heard from, presumably, the mountains northward. Hadolaris wanted to get as far from that North as he conveniently could.

He awoke among palms and savannah-reeds. There was no sign of either sight-barrier down here. The city was dispersed into compact blocks of multistorey buildings, blocks separated by belts of rich woodland and drive-like roadways and monorails. Unlike the towns of the Great Valley, it was not arranged on an east-west strip, though its north-south axis was still relatively short. Hadolarisóndamo found himself a small guestery, studied a plan of the city and its factory areas, bought a guide to the district and settled down to several days of exploration and enquiry before visiting the seven agencies themselves. His evenings were spent in adult classes, his night absorbing the speechform recordings unconsciously in sleep. In the end after nineteen days (about four hours at Veruam's latitude, four minutes at that of Emmel, less than two seconds at the higher bunker, he reflected) he obtained employment as a minor sales manager of vegetable products in one of the organizations.

Communication north and south, he found, was possible verbally for quite a number of miles, provided one knew the rules. In consequence the zoning here was far from severe and travel and social facilities covered a very wide area. One rarely saw the military here. Hadolarisóndamo bought an automob and, as he rose in the organization's hierarchy, a second one for pleasure. He found himself

well liked and soon had a circle of friends and a number of hobbies. After a number of love-affairs he married a girl whose father was higher up in the organization, and, some five years after his arrival in the city, became the father of a boy.

"ARISON!" CALLED HIS wife from the boat. Their son, aged five, was puttering at the warm surface of the lake with his fists over the gunwale. Hadolarisóndamo was painting on the little island, quick lines and sweeps across the easelled canvas, a pattern of light and shade bursting out of the swamp trees over a little bay. "Arison! I can't get this thing to start. Could you swim over and try?"

"Five minutes more, Mihányo. Must get this down."

Sighing, Karamihanyolàsve continued, but without much hope, to fish from the bows with her horizontal yo-yo gadget. Too quiet round here for a bite. A parakeet flashed in the branches to right. Derestó, the boy, stopped hitting the water, and pulled over the tube-window, let it into the lake and got Mihányo to slide on its lightswitch. Then he peered this way and that under the surface, giving little exclamations as tiny fish of various shapes and hues shot across. Presently Arison called over, folded up his easel, pulled off his trousers, propped paints and canvas on top of everything, and swam over. There were no crocs in this lake, hippo were far off, filariasis and bilharzia had been eliminated here. Twenty minutes' rather tense tinkering got things going, and the silent fuel-cell driven screw was ready to pilot them over to the painting island and thence across the lake to where a little stream's current pushed out into the expanse. They caught four. Presently back under the westering sun to the jetty, tie-up and home in the automob.

BY THE TIME Deresto was eight and ready to be formally named Lafonderestónami, he had a sister of three and a baby brother of one. He was a keen swimmer and boatman, and was developing into a minor organizer, both at home and in school. Arison was now third in the firm, but kept his balance. Holidays were spent either in the deep tropics (where one could gain on the time-exchange) or among the promontories on the southern shores of the

North-Eastern Sea (where one had to lose), or, increasingly, in the agricultural stream-scored western uplands, where a wide vista of the world could in many areas be seen and the cloudscapes had full play. Even there the sight-barriers were a mere fogginess near the north and south horizons, backed by a darkness in the sky.

Now and then, during a bad night, Arison thought about the "past". He generally concluded that, even if a breakthrough had been imminent in, say, half an hour from his departure, this could hardly affect the lives of himself and his wife, or even of their children, down here in the south, in view of the time-contraction southwards. Also, he reflected, since nothing ever struck further south than a point north of Emmel's latitude, the ballistic attacks must be mounted close to the Frontier ; or if they were not, then the Enemy must lack all knowledge of either southern time-gradients or southern geography, so that the launching of missiles from well north of the Frontier to pass well south of it would not be worth while. And even the fastest heli which could be piloted against time conceleration would, he supposed, never get through.

Always adaptable, Arison had never suffered long from the disabilities incident on having returned after a time at the Front. Rocktrain travel and other communications had tended to unify the speech and the ethos, though naturally the upper reaches of the Great Valley and the military zone in the mountains of the North were linguistically and sociologically somewhat isolated. In the western uplands, too, pockets of older linguistic forms and old-fashioned attitudes still remained, as the family found on its holidays. By and large, however, the whole land spoke the tongue of the "contemporary" subtropical lowlands, inevitably modified of course by the onomatosyntomy or "shortmouth" of latitude. A "contemporary" ethical and social code had also spread. The southern present may be said to have colonized the northern past, even geological past, somewhat as the birds and other travelling animals had done, but with the greater resources of human wits, flexibility, traditions and techniques.

Ordinary people bothered little about the war. Time conceleration was on their side. Their spare mental energies

were spent in a vast selection of plays and ploys, making, representing, creating, relishing, criticizing, theorizing, discussing, arranging, organizing, co-operating, but not so often out of their own zone. Arison found himself the member of a dozen interweaving circles, and Mihányo was even more involved. Not that they were never alone: the easy tempo of work and life with double "week" of five days' work, two days free, seven days' work and six days free, the whole staggered across the population and in the organizations, left much leisure time which could be spent on their own selves. Arison took up texture-sculpting, then returned after two years to painting, but with magneto-brush instead of spraypen ; purified by his texture-sculpting period, he achieved a powerful area control and won something of a name for himself. Mihányo, on the other hand, became a musician. Deresto, it was evident, was going to be a handler of men and societies, besides having, at thirteen, entered the athletic age. His sister of eight was a great talker and arguer. The boy of six was, they hoped, going to be a writer, at least in his spare time: he had a keen eye for things, and a keen interest in telling about them. Arison was content to remain, when he had reached it, second in the firm: a chiefship would have told on him too much. He occasionally lent his voice to the administration of local affairs, but took no major part.

MIHANYO AND ARISON were watching a firework festival on the North-Eastern Sea from their launch, off one of the southern promontories. Up here, a fine velvety backdrop for the display was made by the inky black of the northern sight-barrier, which cut off the stars in a gigantic arc. Fortunately the weather was fine. The silhouettes of the firework boats could just be discerned. In a world which knew no moon the pleasures of a "white night" were often only to be got by such displays. The girl and Deresto were swimming round and round the launch. Even the small boy had been brought out, and was rather blearily staring northward. Eventually the triple green star went up and the exhibition was over ; at the firework boats a midnight had been reached. Deresto and Venoyyè were called in, located by a flare, and ultimately prevailed on to climb in,

shivering slightly, and dry off in the hot-air blaster, dancing about like two imps. Arison turned the launch for the shore and Silarrè was found to be asleep. So was Venoyyè when they touched the jetty. Their parents had each to carry one in and up to the beachouse.

Next morning they packed and set out in the automob for home. Their twenty days' holiday had cost 160 days of Oluluetang time. Heavy rain was falling when they reached the city. Mihányo, when the children were settled in, had a long talk on the opsiphone with her friend across the breadth of Oluluetang: she (the friend) had been with her husband badger-watching in the western uplands. Finally Arison chipped in and, after general conversation, exchanged some views with the husband on developments in local politics.

"Pity one grows old so fast down here," lamented Mihányo that evening; "if only life could go on for ever!"

"For ever is a big word. Besides, being down here makes no difference to the feeling—you don't feel it any slower up on the Sea, do you, now?"

"I suppose not. But if only . . ."

To switch her mood, Arison began to talk about Deresto and his future. Soon they were planning their children's lives for them in the way parents cannot resist doing. With his salary and investments in the firm they would set up the boy for a great administrator, and still have enough to give the others every opportunity.

Next morning it was still in something of a glow that Arison bade farewell to his wife and went off to take up his work in the offices. He had an extremely busy day and was coming out of the gates in the waning light to his automob in its stall, when he found standing round it three of the military. He looked enquiringly at them as he approached with his personal pulse-key in hand.

"You are VSQ 389 MLD 194 RV 27 XN 3, known as Hadolarisóndamo, resident at" (naming the address) "and subpresident today in this firm." The cold tones of the leader were a statement, not a question.

"Yes," whispered Arison as soon as he could speak.

"I have a warrant for your immediate re-employment with our Forces in the place at which you first received

your order for Release. You must come with us forthwith." The leader produced a luminous orange tag with black markings.

"But my wife and family!"

"They are being informed. We have no time."

"My firm?"

"Your chief is being informed. Come now."

"I—I—I must set my affairs in order."

"Impossible. No time. Urgent situation. Your family and firm must do all that between them. Our orders override everything."

"Wh—wh—what is your authority? Can I see it please?"

"This tag should suffice. It corresponds to the tagend which I hope you still have in your identity disc—we will check all that en route. Come on now."

"But I *must* see your authority, how do I know, for instance, that you are not trying to rob me, or something?"

"If you know the code you'll realise that these symbols can only fit one situation. But I'll stretch a point: you may look at this warrant, but don't touch it."

The other two closed in. Arison saw that they had their quickguns trained on him. The leader pulled out a broad screed. Arison, as well as the dancing characters would let him, resolved them in the light of the leader's torch into an order to collect him, Arison, by today at such and such a time, local Time, if possible immediately on his leaving his place of work (specified); and below, that one man be detailed to call Mihányo by opsiphone simultaneously, and another to call the president of the organization. The Remployee and escort to join the military rocktrain to Veruam (which was leaving within about fifteen minutes). The Remployee to be taken as expeditiously as possible to the bunker (VV) and thence to the higher bunker (from which he had come some twenty years before, but only about ten minutes in the Time of that bunker, it flashed through Arison's brain—apart from six or seven minutes corresponding to his journey south).

"How do they know if I'm fit enough for this job after all these years?"

"They've kept checks on you, no doubt."

Arison thought of tripping one and slugging two and doing a bolt, but the quickguns of the two were certainly trained upon him. Besides, what would that gain him? A few hours' start, with unnecessary pain, disgrace and ruin on Mihányo, his children and himself, for he was sure to be caught.

"The automob," he said ridiculously.

"A small matter. Your firm will deal with that."

"How can I settle my children's future?"

"Come on, no use arguing. You are coming now, alive or dead, fit or unfit."

Speechless, Arison let himself be marched off to a light military vehicle.

In five minutes he was in the rocktrain, an armoured affair with strong windows. In ten more minutes, with the train moving off, he was stripped of his civilian clothes and possessions (to be returned later to his wife, he learnt), had his identity disc extracted and checked and its Relief tagend removed, and a medical checkup was begun on him. Apparently this was satisfactory to the military authorities. He was given military clothing.

He spent a sleepless night in the train trying to work out what he had done with *this*, what would be made of *that*, who Mihányo could call upon in need, who would be likely to help her, how she would manage with the children, what (as nearly as he could work it out) they would get from a pension which he was led to understand would be forthcoming from his firm, how far they could carry on with their expected future.

A grey pre-dawn saw the train's arrival at Veruam. Foodless (he had been unable to eat any of the rations) and without sleep, he gazed vacantly at the marshalling-yards. The body of men travelling on the train (apparently only a few were Remployees) were got into closed trucks and the long convoy set out for Emmel.

At this moment Hadolaris' brain began to re-register the conceleration situation. About half a minute must have passed since his departure from Oluluetang, he supposed, in the Time of his top bunker. The journey to Emmel might take up another two minutes. The route from Emmel to

that bunker might take a further two and a half minutes there, as far as one could work out the calculus. Add the twenty-years' (and southward journey's) sixteen to seventeen minutes, and he would find himself in that bunker not more than some twenty-two minutes after he had left it. (Mihan, Deres and the other two would all be nearly ten years older and the children would have begun to forget him.) The blitz was unprecedentedly intense when he had left, and he could recall (indeed it had figured in several nightmares since) his prophecy to XN 1 that a breakthrough might be expected within the hour. If he survived the blitz, he was unlikely to survive a breakthrough ; and a breakthrough of what? No one had ever seen the Enemy, this Enemy that for Time immemorial had been striving to get across the Frontier. If It got right over, the twilight of the race was at hand. No horror, it was believed at the Front, could equal the horror of that moment. After a hundred miles or so he slept, from pure exhaustion, sitting up in a cramped position, wedged against the next man. Stops and starts and swerves woke him at intervals. The convoy was driving at maximum speeds.

At Emmel he stumbled out to find a storm lashing down. The river was in spate. The column was marched to the depot. Hadolar was separated out and taken in to the terminal building where he was given inoculations, issued with "walker", quickgun, em-kit, prot-suit and other impedimenta, and in a quarter of an hour (perhaps seven or eight seconds up at the top bunker) found himself entering a polyheli with thirty other men. This had barely topped the first rise and into sunlight when explosions and flarings were visible on all sides. The machine forged on, the sight-curtains gradually closing up behind and retreating grudgingly before it. The old Northern vertigo and somnambulism re-engulfed Had. To think of Kar and their offspring now was to tap the agony of a ghost who shared his brain and body. After twenty-five minutes they landed close to the foot of a rocktrain line. The top-bunker lapse of "twenty-two minutes" was going, Had saw, to be something less. He was the third to be bundled into the rocktrain compartments, and 190 seconds saw him emerging at the top and heading for bunker VV. XN 1 greeted his salute

merely with a curt command to proceed by rocket to the top bunker. A few moments more and he was facing XN 2.

"Ah, here you are. Your Relief was killed so we sent back for you. You'd only left a few seconds." A ragged hole in the bunker wall testified to the incident. The relief's cadaver, stripped, was being carted off to the disposal machine.

"XN 2. Things are livelier than ever. They certainly are hot stuff. Every new offensive from here is pitched back at us in the same style within minutes, I notice. That new cannon had only just started up when back came the same shells—I never knew They had them. Tit for tat."

Into H's brain, seemingly clarified by hunger and exhaustion and much emotion, flashed an unspeakable suspicion, one that he could never prove or disprove, having too little knowledge and experience, too little overall view. No one had ever seen the Enemy. No one knew how or when the War had begun. Information and communication were paralysingly difficult up here. No one knew what really happened to Time as one came close to the Frontier, or beyond it. Could it be that the conceleration there became infinite and that there was nothing beyond the Frontier? Could all the supposed missiles of the Enemy be their own, somehow returning? Perhaps the war had started with a peasant explorer lightheartedly flinging a stone northwards, which returned and struck him? Perhaps there was, then, no Enemy?

"XN 3. Couldn't that gun's own shells be reflected back *from* the Frontier, then?"

"XN 2. Impossible. Now you are to try to reach that forward missile post by the surface—our tunnel is destroyed —at 15° 40′ East—you can just see the hump near the edge of the I/R viewer's limit—with this message; and tell him verbally to treble output."

The ragged hole was too small. H left by the forward port. He ran, on his "walker", into a ribbon of landscape which became a thicket of fire, a porcupine of fire, a Nessus-shirt to the Earth, as in a dream. Into an unbelievable supercrescendo of sound, light, heat, pressure and impacts he ran, on and on up the now almost invisible slope ... ...

A DIP IN THE SWIMMING-POOL REACTOR

HARRY HARRISON

The second episode in the career of Bill, the Galactic Hero

one

AHEAD OF THEM the front end of the cylindrical shuttleship was a single, gigantic viewport, a thick shield of armoured glass now filled by the rushing coils of cloud that they were dropping down through. Bill leaned back comfortably in the deceleration chair, watching the scene with keen anticipation. There were seats for twenty in the stubby shuttleship, but only three of them, including Bill's, were now occupied. Sitting next to him, and he tried hard not to look too often, was a gunner first class who looked as though he had been blown out of one of his own guns. His face was mostly plastic and contained just a single, bloodshot eye. He was a mobile basket case, since his four missing limbs had been replaced by glistening gadgetry, all shining pistons, electronic controls, and coiling wires. His gunner's insignia was welded to the steel frame that took the place of his upper arm. The third man, a thickset brute of an infantry sergeant, had fallen asleep as soon as they boarded after transshipping from the stellar transport.

"Bowbidy-bowb! Look at that!" Bill felt elated as their ship broke through the clouds and there, spread before them, was the gleaming golden sphere of Helior, the Imperial Planet, the ruling world of 10,000 suns.

"What an albedo," the gunner grunted from somewhere inside his plastic face. "Hurts the eye."

"I should hope so! Solid gold—can you imagine—a planet plated with solid gold?!"

"No, I can't imagine. And I don't believe it either. It would cost too much. But I can imagine one covered with anodized aluminium. Like that one."

Now that Bill looked closer he could see that it didn't *really* shine like gold, and he started to feel depressed again. No! He forced himself to perk up. You take away the gold

but you couldn't take away the glory! Helior was still the imperial world, the never sleeping, all-seeing eye in the heart of the galaxy. Everything that happened on every planet or on every ship in space was reported here, sorted, coded, filed, annotated, judged, lost, found, acted on. From Helior came the orders that ruled the worlds of man, that held back the night of alien domination. Helior, a man-changed world with its seas, mountains, and continents covered by a shielding of metal, miles thick, layer upon layer of levels with a global population dedicated to but one ideal. Rule. The gleaming upper level was dotted with space ships of all sizes, while the dark sky twinkled with others arriving and departing. Closer and closer swam the scene, then there was a sudden burst of light and the window went dark.

"We crashed!" Bill gasped. "Good as dead . . ."

"Shut your wug. That was just the film what broke. Since there's no brass on this run they won't bother fixing it."

"Film—?"

"What else? Are you so ratty in the head you think they're going to build shuttleships with great big windows in the nose just where the maximum friction on re-entry will burn holes in them? A film. Back projection. For all we know it's nighttime here."

The pilot mashed them with 15G when they landed (he also knew he had no brass on this run), and while they were popping their dislocated vertebrae back into position and squeezing their eyeballs back into shape so that they could see, the hatch swung open. Not only was it night, but it was raining too. A Second-class Passenger Handler's Mate poked his head in and swept them with a professionally friendly grin.

"Welcome to Helior, Imperial Planet of a thousand delights—" his face fell into a habitual snarl. "Ain't there no officers with you bowbs? C'mon, shag outta there, get the uranium out, we gotta schedule to keep."

They ignored him as he brushed by and went to wake the infantry sergeant, still snoring like a broken impeller, untroubled in his sleep by a little thing like 15Gs. The snore changed to a throaty grunt that was cut into by the Passenger Handler's Mate's shrill scream as he was kneed in the

groin. Still muttering, the sergeant joined them as they left the ship and he helped steady the gunner's clattering metal legs on the still wet surface of the landing ramp. They watched with stony resignation as their duffel bags were ejected from the luggage compartment into a deep pool of water. As a last feeble flick of petty revenge the Passenger Handler's Mate turned off the repeller field that had been keeping the rain off them, and they were soaking wet in an instant and chilled by the icy wind. They shouldered their bags—except for the gunner, who dragged his on little wheels—and started for the nearest lights, at least a mile away and barely visible through the lashing rain. Halfway there the gunner froze up as his relays shorted, so they put the wheels under his heels and loaded the bags onto his legs, and he made a damn fine handcar the rest of the way.

"I make a damn fine handcar," the gunner growled.

"Don't bitch," the sergeant told him. "At least you got a civilian occupation." He kicked the door open and they walked and rolled into the welcome warmth of the operations office.

"You have a can of solvent?" Bill asked the man behind the counter.

"You have travel orders?" the man asked, ignoring his question.

"In my bag I got a can," the gunner said, and Bill pulled it open and rummaged around.

They handed over their orders; the gunner's were buttoned into his breast pocket, and the clerk fed them into the slot of the giant machine behind him. The machine hummed and flashed lights, and Bill dripped solvent onto all of the gunner's electrical connections until the water was washed away. A horn sounded, the orders were regurgitated, and a length of printed tape began clicking out of another orifice. The clerk snatched it up and read it rapidly.

"You're in trouble," he said with sadistic relish. "All three of you are supposed to get the Purple Dart in a ceremony with the Emperor and they're filming in three hours. You'll never make it in time."

"None of your bowb," the sergeant grated. "We just got off the ship. Where do we go?"

"Area 1457-D, Level K9, Block 823-7, Corridor 492, Chambers FLM-34, Room 62, ask for Producer Ratt."

"How do we get there?" Bill asked.

"Don't ask me, I just work here." The clerk threw three thick volumes onto the counter, each one over a foot square and almost as thick, with a chain riveted to the spine. "Find your own way, here's your floor plan, but you have to sign for it. Losing it is a courts-martial offence punishable by . . ."

The clerk suddenly realized that he was alone in the room with the three veterans, and as he blanched white he reached out for a red button. But before his finger could touch it the gunner's metal arm, spitting sparks and smoking, pinned it to the counter. The sergeant leaned over until his face was an inch from the clerk's, then spoke in a low, chill voice that curdled the blood.

"We will not find our own way. You will find our way for us. You will provide us with a Guide."

"Guides are only for officers," the clerk protested weakly, then gasped as a steel-bar finger ground him in the stomach.

"Treat us like officers," the sergeant breathed. "We don't mind."

With chattering teeth the clerk ordered a guide, and a small metal door in the far wall crashed open. The Guide had a tubular metal body that ran on six rubber-tyred wheels, a head fashioned to resemble a hound dog's, and a springy metal tail. "Here, boy," the sergeant commanded, and the Guide rushed over to him, slipped out a red plastic tongue, and, with a slight grinding of gears, began to emit the sound of mechanical panting. The sergeant took the length of printed tape and quickly punched the code 1457-D K9 823-7 492 FLM 34 62 on the buttons that decorated the Guide's head. There were two sharp barks, the red tongue vanished, the tail vibrated, and the Guide rolled away down the corridor. The veterans followed.

It took them an hour, by slideway, escalator, elevator, pneumocar, shanks' mare, monorail, moving sidewalk, and greased pole to reach room 62. While they were seated on the slideway they secured the chains of their floor plans to their belts, since even Bill was beginning to realize the value of a guide to this world-sized city. At the door to room 62

the Guide barked three times, then rolled away before they could grab it.

"Should have been quicker," the sergeant said. "Those things are worth their weight in diamonds." He pushed the door open to reveal a fat man seated at a desk shouting into a visisphone.

"I don't give a flying bowb what your excuses are, excuses I can buy wholesale. All I know is I got a production schedule and the cameras are ready to roll and where are my principals? I ask you—and what do you tell me—" he looked up and began to scream, "Out! Out! Can't you see I'm busy!"

The sergeant reached over and threw the visisphone onto the floor then stomped it to tiny smoking bits.

"You have a direct way of getting attention," Bill said.

"Two years in combat make you very direct," the sergeant said, and grated his teeth together in a loud and disturbing way. Then, "Here we are, Ratt, what do we do?"

Producer Ratt kicked his way through the wreckage and threw open a door behind the desk. "Places! Lights!" he shrieked, and there was an immense scurrying and a sudden glare. The to-be-honoured veterans followed him through the door into an immense sound stage humming with organized bustle. Cameras on motorized dollies rolled around the set where flats and props simulated the end of a regal throne room. The stained-glass windows glowed with imaginary sunlight, and a golden sunbeam from a spotlight illuminated the throne. Goaded on by the director's screamed instructions the crowd of nobility and high-ranking officers took positions before the throne.

"He called them bowbs!" Bill gasped. "He'll be shot!"

"Are you ever stupid," the gunner said, unreeling a length of flex from his right leg and plugging it into an outlet to recharge his batteries. "Those are all actors. You think they can get real nobility for a thing like this?"

"We only got time to run through this once before the Emperor gets here, so no mistakes." Director Ratt clambered up and settled himself on the throne. "I'll stand in for the Emp. Now you principals, you got the easiest roles, and I don't want you to flub it. We got no time for retakes. You get into position there, that's the stuff, in a row, and

when I say *roll* you snap to attention like you been taught or the taxpayers been wasting their money. You there, the guy on the left that's built into the bird cage, keep your damn motors turned off, you're lousing up the soundtrack. Grind gears once more and I'll pull all your fuses. Affirm. You just stay at attention until your name is called, take one pace forward, and snap into a brace. The Emperor will pin a medal on you, salute, drop the salute, and take one pace back. You got that, or is it too complicated for your tiny, indoctrinated minds?"

"Why don't you blow it out!" the sergeant snarled.

"Very witty. All right—let's run through it!"

They rehearsed the ceremony twice before there was a tremendous braying of bugles, and six generals with death-ray pistols at the ready double-timed onto the set and halted with their backs to the throne. All of the extras, cameramen, and technicians—even Director Ratt—bowed low while the veterans snapped to attention. The Emperor shuffled in, climbed the dais, and dropped into the throne. "Continue . . ." he said in a bored voice, and belched lightly behind his hand.

"Let's ROLL!" the director howled at the top of his lungs, and staggered out of camera range. Music rose up in a mighty wave, and the ceremony began. While the Awards and Protocol officer read off the nature of the heroic deeds the noble heroes had accomplished to win that noblest of all medals, the Purple Dart with Coalsack Nebula Cluster, the Emperor rose from his throne and strode majestically forward. The infantry sergeant was first, and Bill watched out of the corner of his eye while the Emperor took an ornate gold, silver, ruby, and platinum medal from the proferred case and pinned it to the man's chest. Then the sergeant stepped back into position, and it was Bill's turn. As from an immense distance he heard his name spoken in rolling tones of thunder, and he strode forward with every ounce of precision that he had been taught back at Camp Leon Trotsky. There, just before him, was the most beloved man in the galaxy! The long and swollen nose that graced a billion banknotes was pointed toward him. The overshot jaw and protruding teeth that filled a billion TV screens was speaking his name. One of the

imperial strabismic eyes was pointing at *him*! Passion welled in Bill's bosom like great breakers thundering onto a shore. He snapped his snappiest salute.

In fact he snapped just about the snappiest salute possible, since there aren't very many people with two right arms. Both arms swung up in precise circles, both elbows quivered at right angles, both palms clicked neatly against both eyebrows. It was well done and took the Emperor by surprise, and for one vibrating instant he managed to get both eyeballs pointed at Bill at the same time before they wandered away at random again. The Emperor, still a little disturbed by the unusual salute, groped for the medal and plunged the pin through Bill's tunic squarely into his shivering flesh.

Bill felt no pain, but the sudden stab triggered the growing emotion that had been rushing through him. Dropping the salutes he fell to his knees in good old peasant-serf style, just like a historical TV, which in fact was just where his obsequious subconscious had dredged up the idea from, and seized the Emperor's knob-knuckled and liver-spotted hand. "Father to us all!" Bill exulted, and kissed the hand.

Grim-eyed, the bodyguard of generals leaped forward, and death beat sable wings over Bill, but the Emperor smiled as he pulled his hand gently away and wiped the saliva off on Bill's tunic. A casual flick of his finger restored the bodyguard to position, and he moved on to the gunner, pinned on the remaining medal, and stepped back.

"Cut!" Director Ratt shouted. "Print that, it's a natural with that dumb hick going through the slobbering act."

As Bill struggled back to his feet he saw that the Emperor had not returned to the throne but was instead standing in the midst of the milling crowd of actors. The bodyguard had vanished. Bill blinked, bewildered, as a man whipped the Emperor's crown from his head, popped it into a box, and hurried away with it.

"The brake is jammed," the gunner said, still saluting with a vibrating arm. "Pull the damn thing down for me. It never works right above shoulder level."

"But—the Emperor—" Bill said, tugging at the locked arm until the brakes squealed and released.

"An actor—what else? Do you think they have the *real*

Emperor giving out medals to other-ranks? Field grade and higher, I bet. But they put on a bit of an act with him so some poor rube, like you, can get carried away. You were great."

"Here you are," a man said, handing them both stamped metal copies of the medals they were wearing and whipping off the originals.

"Places!" the director's amplified voice boomed. "We got just ten minutes to run through the Empress and the baby kissing with the Aldebranian septuplets for the Fertility Hour. Get those plastic babies out here, and get those damn spectators off the set."

The heroes were pushed into the corridor and the door slammed and locked behind them.

two

"I'M TIRED," THE gunner said, "and besides, my burns hurt." He had had a short circuit during action in the Enlisted Men's Olde Knocking Shoppe and had set the bed on fire.

"Aw, come on," Bill insisted. "We have three-day passes before our ship leaves, and we are on Helior, the Imperial Planet! What riches there are to see here, the Hanging Gardens, the Rainbow Fountains, the Jewelled Palaces. You can't miss them."

"Just watch me. As soon as I catch up on some sleep it's back to the Olde Knocking Shoppe for me. If you're so hot on someone holding your hand while you go sightseeing, take the sergeant."

"He's still drunk."

The infantry sergeant was a solitary drinker who did not believe in cutting corners. Neither did he believe in dilution or in wasting money on fancy packaging. He had used all of his money to bribe a medical orderly and had obtained two carboys of 99 per cent pure grain alcohol, a drum of glucose and saline solution, a hypodermic needle, and a length of rubber tubing. The ethyl-glucose-saline mixture in carboys had been slung from a rafter over his bunk with the tubing leading to the needle plunged into his arm and taped into place as an intravenous drip. Now he was unmoving, well fed, and completely blind-drunk all the time,

and if the metered flow were undisturbed he should stay drunk for two and a half years.

Bill put a finishing gloss on his boots and locked the brush into his locker with the rest of his gear. He might be late getting back: it was easy to get lost here on Helior when you didn't have a Guide. It had taken them almost an entire day to find their way from the studio to their quarters even with the sergeant, a man who knew all about maps, leading the way. As long as they stayed near their own area there was no problem, but Bill had had his fill of the homely pleasures provided for the fighting men. He wanted to see Helior, the real Helior, the first city of the galaxy. If no one would go with him, he would do it alone.

It was very hard, in spite of the floor plan, to tell just exactly how far away anything was on Helior, since the diagrams were all diagrammatic and had no scale. But the trip he was planning seemed to be a long one, since one of the key bits of transportation, an evacuated tunnellinear magnetic car, went across at least eighty-four submaps. His destination might very well be on the other side of the planet! A city as large as a planet! The concept was almost too big to grasp! In fact, when he thought about it, the concept *was* too big to grasp.

The sandwiches he had bought from the dispenser in the barracks ran out before he was halfway to his destination, and his stomach, greedily getting adjusted to solid food again, rumbled complaints until he left the slideway in Area 9266-L, Level something or other, or wherever the hell he was, and looked for a canteen. He was obviously in a Typing Area, because the crowds were composed almost completely of women with rounded shoulders and great, long fingers. The only canteen he could find was jammed with them, and he sat in the middle of the high-pitched, yattering crowd and forced himself to eat a meal composed of the only available food: dated-fruitbread-cheese-and-anchovy-paste sandwiches and mashed potatoes with raisin and onion sauce, washed down by herb tea served lukewarm in cups the size of his thumb. It wouldn't have been so bad if the dispenser hadn't automatically covered everything with butterscotch sauce. None of the girls seemed to notice him, since they were all under light hypnosis during

the working day in order to cut down their error percentages. He worked his way through the food feeling very much like a ghost as they tittered and yammered over and around him, their fingers, if they weren't eating, compulsively typing their words onto the edge of the table while they talked. He finally escaped, but the meal had had a depressing effect, and this was probably where he made the mistake and boarded the wrong car.

Since the same level and block numbers were repeated in every area, and it was possible to get into the wrong area and spend a good deal of time getting good and lost before the mistake was finally realized. Bill did this, and after the usual astronomical number of changes and varieties of transportation he boarded the elevator that terminated, he thought, in the galaxy-famed Palace Gardens. All of the other passengers got off on lower levels, and the robelevator picked up speed as it hurtled up to the topmost level. He rose into the air as it braked to a stop, and his ears popped with the pressure change, and when the doors opened he stepped out into a snow-filled wind. He gaped about with unbelief and behind him the doors snicked shut and the elevator vanished.

The doors had opened directly onto the metal plain that made up the topmost layer of the city, now obscured by the swirling clouds of snow. Bill groped for the button to recall the elevator, when a vagrant swirl of wind whipped the snow away and the warm sun beat down on him from the cloudless sky. This was impossible.

"This is impossible," Bill said with forthright indignation.

"Nothing is impossible if I will it," a scratchy voice spoke from behind Bill's shoulder. "For I am the Spirit of Life."

Bill skittered sideways like a homeostatic robhorse, rolling his eyes at the small, white-whiskered man with a twitching nose and red-rimmed eyes who had appeared soundlessly behind him.

"You got a leak in your think-tank," Bill snapped, angry at himself for being so goosy.

"You'd be nuts, too, on this job," the little man sobbed, and knuckled a pendant drop from his nose. "Half-froze, half-cooked and half-wiped out most of the time on oxy. The Spirit of Life," he quavered, "mine is the power . . ."

"Now that you mention it," Bill's words were muffled by a sudden flurry of snow, "I am feeling a bit high myself. Wheeee . . . ! !" The wind veered and swept the occluding clouds of snow away, and Bill gaped at the suddenly revealed view.

Slushy snow and pools of water spotted the surface as far as he could see. The golden coating had been worn away, and the metal was grey and pitted beneath, streaked with ruddy rivulets of rust. Rows of great pipes, each thicker than a man is tall, snaked toward him from over the horizon and ended in funnel-like mouths. The funnels were obscured by whirling clouds of vapour and snow that shot high into the air with a hushed roar, though one of the vapour columns collapsed and the cloud dispersed while Bill watched.

"Number eighteen blown!" the old man shouted into a microphone, grabbed a clipboard from the wall, and kicked his way through the slush toward a rusty and dilapidated walkway that groaned and rattled along parallel with the pipes. Bill followed, shouting at the man, who now completely ignored him. As the walkway, clanking and swaying, carried them along, Bill began to wonder just where the pipes led, and after a minute, when his head cleared a bit, curiosity got the better of him and he strained ahead to see what the mysterious bumps were on the horizon. They slowly resolved themselves into a row of giant spaceships, each one connected to one of the thick pipes. With unexpected agility the old man sprang from the walkway and bounded toward the ship at station eighteen, where the tiny figures of workers, high up, were disconnecting the seals that joined the ship to the pipe. The old man copied numbers from a meter attached to the pipe, while Bill watched a crane swing over with the end of a large, flexible hose that emerged from the surface they were standing on. It was attached to the valve on top of the spaceship. A rumbling vibration shook the hose, and from around the seal to the ship emerged puffs of black cloud that drifted over the stained metal plain.

"Could I ask just what the hell is going on here?" Bill said plaintively.

"Life! Life everlasting!" the old man crowed, swinging

up from the glooms of his depression toward the heights of manic elation.

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"Here is a word sheathed in metal," he stamped his foot and there was a dull boom. "What does that mean?"

"It means the world is sheathed in metal."

"Correct. For a trooper you show a remarkable turn of intelligence. So you take a planet and cover it with metal, and you got a planet where the only green growing things are in the Imperial Gardens and a couple of window boxes. Then what do you have?"

"Everybody dead," Bill said, for after all, he was a farm boy and up on all the photosynthesis and chlorophyll bowb.

"Correct again. You and I and the Emperor and a couple of billion other slobs are working away turning all the oxygen into carbon dioxide, and with no plants around to turn it back into oxygen and if we keep at it long enough we breathe ourselves to death."

"Then these ships are bringing in liquid oxygen?"

The old man bobbed his head and jumped back onto the slideway ; Bill followed. "Affirm. They get it for free on the agricultural planets. And after they empty here they load up with carbon extracted at great expense from the CO_2 and whip back with it to the hickworlds, where it is burned for fuel, used for fertilizer, combined into numberless plastics and other products . . ."

Bill stepped from the slideway at the nearest elevator, while the old man and his voice vanished into the vapour, and crouching down, his head pounding from the oxy jag, he began flipping furiously through his floor plan. While he waited for the elevator he found his place from the code number on the door and began to plot a new course toward the Palace Gardens.

This time he did not allow himself to be distracted. By only eating candy bars and drinking carbonated beverages from the dispensers along his route he avoided the dangers and distractions of the eateries, and by keeping himself awake he avoided missing connections. With black bags under his eyes and teeth rotting in his head he stumbled from a gravshaft and with thudding heart finally saw a florally decorated and colourfully illuminated scentsign

that said HANGING GARDENS. There was an entrance turnstile and a cashier's window.

"One please."

"That'll be ten imperial bucks."

"Isn't that a little expensive?" he said peevishly, unrolling the bills one by one from his thin wad.

"If you're poor, don't come to Helior."

The cashier-robot was primed with all the snappy answers. Bill ignored it and pushed through into the gardens. They were everything he had ever dreamed of and more. As he walked down the grey cinder path inside the outer wall he could see green shrubs and grass just on the other side of the titanium mesh fence. No more than a hundred yards away, on the other side of the grass, were floating, colourful plants and flowers from all the worlds of the Empire. And there! Tiny in the distance were the Rainbow Fountains, almost visible to the naked eye. Bill slipped a coin into one of the telescopes and watched their colours glow and wane, and it was just as good as seeing it on TV. He went on, circling inside the wall, bathed by the light of the artificial sun in the giant dome above.

But even the heady pleasures of the gardens waned in the face of the soul-consuming fatigue that gripped him in iron hands. There were steel benches pegged to the wall, and he dropped onto one to rest for a moment, then closed his eyes for a second to ease the glare. His chin dropped onto his chest, and before he realized it he was sound asleep. Other visitors scrunched by on the cinders without disturbing him, nor did he move when one sat down at the far end of the bench.

Since Bill never saw this man there is no point in describing him. Suffice to say that he had sallow skin, a broken, reddened nose, feral eyes peering from under a simian brow, wide hips and narrow shoulders, mismatched feet, lean, knobby, dirty fingers, and a twitch.

Long seconds of eternity ticked by while the man sat there. Then for a few moments there were no other visitors in sight. With a quick, snakelike motion the newcomer whipped an atomic arc-pencil from his pocket. The small, incredibly hot flame whispered briefly as he pressed it against the chain that secured Bill's floor plan to his waist,

just at the point where the looped chain rested on the metal bench. In a trice the metal of the chain was welded fast to the metal of the bench. Still undisturbed, Bill slept on.

A wolfish grin flickered across the man's face like the evil rings formed in sewer water by a diving rat. Then, with a single swift motion, the atomic flame severed the chain near the volume. Pocketing the arc-pencil the thief rose, plucked Bill's floor plan from his lap, and strode quickly away.

three

AT FIRST BILL didn't appreciate the magnitude of his loss. He swam slowly up out of his sleep, thickheaded, with the feeling that something was wrong. Only after repeated tugging did he realize that the chain was stuck fast to the bench and that the book was gone. The chain could not be freed, and in the end he had to unfasten it from his belt and leave it dangling. Retracing his steps to the entrance, he knocked on the cashier's window.

"No refunds," the robot said.

"I want to report a crime."

"The police handle crime. You want to talk to the police. You talk to the police on a phone. Here is a phone. The number is 111-11-111." A small door slid open, and a phone popped out, catching Bill in the chest and knocking him back on his heels. He dialled the number.

"Police," a voice said, and a bulldog-faced sergeant in a Prussian blue uniform and a scowl appeared on the screen.

"I want to report a theft."

"Grand larceny or petty larceny?"

"I don't know, it was my floor plan that was stolen."

"Petty larceny. Proceed to your nearest police station. This is an emergency circuit, and you are tying it up illegally. The penalty for illegally tying up an emergency circuit is . . ." Bill jammed hard on the button and the screen went blank. He turned back to the robot cashier.

"No refunds," it said. Bill snarled impatiently.

"Shut up. All I want to know is where the nearest police station is."

"I am a cashier robot, not an information robot. That information is not in my memory. I suggest you consult your floor plan."

"But it's my floor plan that has been stolen!"

"I suggest you talk to the police."

"But . . ." Bill turned red and kicked the cashier's box angrily. "No refunds," it said as he stalked away.

"Drinky, drinky, make you stinky," a robot bar said, rolling up and whispering in his ear. It made the sound of ice cubes rattling in a frosty glass.

"A damn good idea. Beer. A large one." He pushed coins into its money slot and clutched at the dispos-a-stein that rattled down the chute and almost bounced to the ground. It cooled and refreshed him and calmed his anger. He looked at the sign that said TO THE JEWELLED PALACE. "I'll go to the palace, have a look-see, then find someone there who can direct me to the police station. Ouch!" The robot bar had pulled the dispos-a-stein from his hand, almost taking his forefinger with it, and with unerring robotic aim hurled it thirty-two feet into the open mouth of a rubbish shaft that projected from a wall.

The Jewelled Palace appeared to be about as accessible as the Hanging Gardens, and he decided to report the theft before paying his way into the grilled enclosure that circled the palace at an awesome distance. There was a policeman hanging out his belly and idly spinning his club near the entrance who should know where the police station was.

"Where's the police station?" Bill asked.

"I ain't no information booth—use your floor plan."

"But"—through teeth tightly clamped together—"I cannot. My floor plan has been stolen and that is why I want to find Yipe!"

Bill said Yipe! because the policeman, with a practised motion, had jammed the end of his club up into Bill's armpit and pushed him around the corner with it.

"I used to be a trooper myself before I bought my way out," the officer said.

"I would enjoy your reminiscences more if you took the club out of my armpit," Bill moaned, then sighed gratefully as the club vanished.

"Since I used to be a trooper I don't want to see a buddy with the Purple Dart with Coalsack Nebula Cluster get into trouble. I am also an honest cop and don't take bribes, but

if a buddy was to loan me twenty-five bucks until payday I would be much obliged."

Bill had been born stupid, but he was learning. The money appeared and vanished swiftly, and the cop relaxed, clacking the end of his club against his yellow teeth.

"Let me tell you something, pal, before you make any official statements to me in my official capacity, since up to now we have just been talking buddy-buddy. There are a lot of ways to get into trouble here on Helior, but the easiest is to lose your floor plan. It is a hanging offence on Helior. I know a guy what went into the station to report that someone got his plan and they slapped the cuffs on him inside ten seconds, maybe five. Now what was it you wanted to say to me?"

"You got a match?"

"I don't smoke."

"Good-bye."

"Take it easy, pal."

Bill scuttled around another corner and leaned against the wall breathing deeply. Now what? He could barely find his way around this place with the plan—how could he do it without one? There was a leaden weight pulling at his insides that he tried to ignore. He forced away the feeling of terror and tried to think. But thinking made him light-headed. It seemed like years since he had had a good meal, and thinking of food he began to pump saliva at such a great rate that he almost drowned. Food, that's what he needed, food for thought; he had to relax over a nice, juicy steak, and when the inner man was satisfied he would be able to think clearly and find a way out of this mess. There must be a way out. He had almost a full day left before he was due back from leave; there was plenty of time. Staggering around a sharp bend he came out into a high tunnel brilliant with lights, the most brilliant of which was a sign that said THE GOLD SPACE SUIT.

"The Gold Space Suit," Bill said. "That's more like it. Galaxy-famous on countless TV programmes, what a restaurant, that's the way to build up the old morale. It'll be expensive, but what the hell . . ."

Tightening his belt and straightening his collar, he strode up the wide gold steps and through the imitation spacelock.

The headwaiter beckoned him and smiled, soft music wafted his way and the floor opened beneath his feet. Scratching helplessly at the smooth walls, he shot down the golden tube which turned gradually until, when he emerged, he shot through the air and fell, sprawling, into a dusty metal alleyway. Ahead of him, painted on the wall with foot-high letters, was the imperious message, GET LOST BUM.

He stood and dusted himself, and a robot sidled over and crooned in his ear with the voice of a young and lovely girl, "I bet you're hungry, darling. Why not try Giuseppe Singh's neo-Indian curried pizza? You're just a few steps from Singh's, directions are on the back of the card."

The robot took a card from a slot in its chest and put it carefully into Bill's mouth. It was a cheap and badly adjusted robot. Bill spluttered the soggy card out and wiped it on his handkerchief.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I bet you're hungry, darling, grrrr-ark." The robot switched to another recorded message, cued by Bill's question. "You have just been ejected from The Gold Space Suit, galaxy-famous on countless TV programmes, because you are a cheap bum. When you entered this establishment you were X-rayed and the contents of your pockets automatically computed. Since the contents of your pockets obviously fell below the minimum with cover charge, one drink, and tax, you were ejected. But you are still hungry, aren't you, darling?" The robot leered, and the dulcet, sexy voice poured from between the broken gaps of its mouthplate. "C'mon down to Singh's where food's good and cheap. Try Singh's yummy lasagna with dhal and lime sauce."

Bill went, not because he wanted some loathsome Bombay-Italian concoction, but because of the map and instructions on the back of the card. There was a feeling of security in knowing he was going from somewhere to somewhere again, following the directions, clattering down this stair well, dropping in that gravchute, grabbing for a place in the right hookway. After one last turning his nose was assaulted by a wave of stale fat, old garlic, and charred flesh, and he knew he was there.

The food was incredibly expensive and far worse than he

had ever imagined it could be, but it stilled the painful rumbling in his stomach, by direct assault if not by pleasant satiation. With one fingernail he attempted to pry horrible pieces of gristle from between his teeth while he looked at the man across the table from him, who was moaning as he forced down spoonfuls of something nameless. His table-mate was dressed in colourful holiday clothes and looked a fat, ruddy, and cheerful type.

"Hi . . .!" Bill said, smiling.

"Go drop dead," the man snarled.

"All I said was Hi." Petulantly.

"That's enough. Everyone who has bothered to talk to me in the sixteen hours I been on this so-called pleasure planet has cheated or screwed me or stolen my money one way or another. I am next to broke and I still have six days left of my See Helior and Live tour."

"I only wanted to ask you if I could sort of look through your floor plan while you were eating."

"I told you, everyone is out to screw me out of something. Drop dead."

"Please."

"I'll do it—for twenty-five bucks, cash in advance, and only as long as I'm eating."

"Done!" Bill slapped the money down, whipped under the table, and, sitting cross-legged, began to flip furiously through the volume, writing down travel instructions as fast as he could plot a course. Above him the fat man continued to eat and groan, and whenever he hit a particularly bad mouthful he would jerk the chain and make Bill lose his place. Bill had charted a route almost half way to the haven of the Transit Rankers' Centre before the man pulled the book away and stamped out.

When Odysseus returned from his terror-haunted voyage he spared Penelope's ears the incredible details of his journey. When Richard Lion-Heart, freed finally from his dungeon, came home from the danger-filled years of the Crusades, he did not assault Queen Berengaria's sensibilities with horrorful anecdotes; he simply greeted her and unlocked her chastity belt. Neither will I, gentle reader, profane your hearing with the dangers and despairs of Bill's

journeyings, for they are beyond imagining. Suffice to say he did it. He reached the T.R.C.

Through red-rimmed eyes he blinked at the sign, TRANSIT RANKERS' CENTRE it said, then had to lean against the wall as relief made his knees weak. He had done it! He had only overstayed his leave by eight days, and that couldn't matter too much. Soon now he would be back in the friendly arms of the troopers again, away from the endless miles of metal corridors, the constantly rushing crowds, the slipways, slideways, gravdrops, hellavators, suctionlifts, and all the rest. He would get stinking drunk with his buddies and let the alcohol dissolve the memories of his terrible travels, try to forget the endless horror of those days of wandering without food or water or sound of human voice, endlessly stumbling through the Stygian stacks in the Carbon Paper Levels. It was all behind him now. He dusted his scruffy uniform, shamefully aware of the rips, crumplings, and missing buttons that defaced it. If he could get into the barracks without being stopped he would change uniforms before reporting to the orderly room.

A few heads turned his way, but he made it all right through the day room and into the barracks. Only his mattress was rolled up, his blankets were gone and his locker empty. It was beginning to look as though he was in trouble, and trouble in the troopers is never a simple thing. Repressing a cold feeling of despair he washed up a bit in the latrine, took a stiffening drink from the cold tap, then dragged his feet to the orderly room. The first sergeant was at his desk, a giant, powerful, sadistic-looking man with dark skin the same colour as that of his old buddy Tembo. He held a plastic doll dressed in a captain's uniform in one hand, and was pushing straightened-out paper clips into it with the other. Without turning his head he rolled his eyes toward Bill and scowled.

"You're in bad trouble, trooper, coming into the orderly room out of uniform like that."

"I'm in worse trouble than you think, Sarge," Bill said leaning weakly on the desk. The sergeant stared at Bill's mismatched hands, his eyes flickering back and forth quickly from one to the other.

"Where did you get that hand, trooper? Speak up! I know that hand."

"It belonged to a buddy of mine, and I have the arm that goes with it too."

Anxious to get onto any subject other than his military crimes, Bill held the hand out for the sergeant to look at. But he was horrified when the fingers tensed into a rock-hard fist, the muscles bunched on his arm and the fist flew forward to catch the first sergeant square on the jaw and knocked him backward off his chair ass over applecart. "Sergeant!" Bill screamed, and grabbed the rebellious hand with his other and forced it, not without a struggle, back to his side.

The sergeant rose slowly, and Bill backed away, shuddering. He could not believe it when the sergeant reseated himself and Bill saw that he was smiling.

"Thought I knew that hand, belongs to my old buddy Tembo. We always joked like that. You take good care of that arm, you hear? Is there any more of Tembo around?" and when Bill said no, he knocked out a quick tom-tom beat on the edge of the desk. "Well, he's gone to the Big Ju-ju Rite in the Sky." The smile vanished and the snarl reappeared. "You're in bad trouble, trooper. Let's see your ID card."

He whipped it from Bill's nerveless fingers and shoved it into a slot in the desk. Lights flickered, the mechanism hummed and vibrated and a screen lit up. The first sergeant read the message there, and as he did the snarl faded from his face and was replaced by an expression of cold anger. When he turned back to Bill his eyes were narrowed slits that pinned him with a gaze that could curdle milk in an instant or destroy minor life forms like rodents or cockroaches. It chilled Bill's blood in his veins and sent a shiver through his body that made it sway like a tree in the wind.

"Where did you steal this ID card? Who are you?"

On the third try Bill managed to force words between his paralysed lips. "It's me . . . that's my card . . . I'm me, Fuse Tender First Class Bill . . ."

"You are a liar." A fingernail uniquely designed for ripping out jugular veins flicked at the card. "This card must be stolen, because First Class Fuse Tender Bill shipped out

of here eight days ago. That is what the record says, and records do not lie. You've had it, bowb." He depressed a red button labelled MILITARY POLICE, and an alarm bell could be heard ringing angrily in the distance. Bill shuffled his feet, and his eyes rolled, searching for some way to escape. "Hold him there, Tembo," the sergeant snapped, "I want to get to the bottom of this."

Bill's left-right arm grabbed the edge of the desk, and he couldn't pry it lose. He was still struggling with it when heavy boots thudded up behind him.

"What's up?" a familiar voice growled.

"Impersonation of a non-commissioned officer plus lesser charges that don't matter because the first charge alone calls for electro-arc lobectomy and thirty lashes."

"Oh, sir," Bill laughed, spinning about and feasting his eyes on a long-loathed figure. "Deathwish Drang! Tell them you know me."

One of the two men was the usual red-hatted, clubbed, gunned, and polished brute in human form. But the other one could only be Deathwish.

"Do you know the prisoner?" the first sergeant asked.

Deathwish squinted, rolling his eyes the length of Bill's body. "I knew a Sixth-class fuse-fingerer named Bill, but both his hands matched. Something very strange here. We'll rough him up a bit in the guardhouse and let you know what he confesses."

"Affirm. But watch out for that left hand. It belongs to a friend of mine."

"Won't lay a finger on it."

"But I am Bill!" Bill shouted. "That's me, my card, I can prove it."

"An impostor," the sergeant said, and pointed to the controls on his desk. "The records say that First Class Fuse Tender Bil shipped out of here eight days ago. And records don't lie."

"Records *can't* lie, or there would be no order in the universe," Deathwish said, grinding his club deep into Bill's gut and shoving him toward the door. "Did those back-ordered thumbscrews come in yet?" he asked the other MP.

It could only have been fatigue that caused Bill to do what he did then. Fatigue, desperation, and fear combined

and overpowered him, for at heart he was a good trooper and had learned to be Brave and Clean and Reverent and Heterosexual and all the rest. But every man has his breaking point, and Bill had reached his. He had faith in the impartial working of justice—never having learned any better—but it was the thought of torture that bugged him. When his fear-crazed eyes saw the sign on the wall that read LAUNDRY, a synapse closed without conscious awareness on his part, and he leaped forward, his sudden desperate action breaking the grip on his arm. Escape! Behind that flap on the wall must lie a laundry chute with a pile of nice soft sheets and towels at the bottom that would ease his fall. He could get away! Ignoring the harsh beast-like cries of the MPs, he dived headfirst through the opening.

He fell about four feet, landed headfirst, and almost brained himself. There was not a chute here but a deep, strong metal laundry basket.

Behind him the MPs beat at the swinging flap, but they could not budge it, since Bill's legs had jammed up behind it and stopped it from swinging open.

"It's locked!" Deathwish cried. "We've been had! Where does this laundry chute go?" Making the same mistaken assumption as Bill.

"I don't know, I'm a new man here myself," the other man gasped.

"You'll be new man in the electric chair if we don't find that bowb!"

The voices dimmed as the heavy boots thudded away, and Bill stirred. His neck was twisted at an odd angle and hurt, his knees crunched into his chest, and he was half suffocated by the cloth jammed into his face. He tried to straighten his legs and pushed against the metal wall ; there was a click as something snapped, and he fell forward as the laundry basket dropped out into the serviceway on the other side of the wall.

"There he is!" a familiarly hateful voice shouted, and Bill staggered away. The running boots were just behind him when he came to the gravchute and once more dived headfirst, with considerably greater success this time. As the apoplectic MPs sprang in after him the automatic cycling circuit spaced them all out a good fifteen feet apart.

It was a slow, drifting fall, and Bill's vision finally cleared and he looked up and shuddered at the sight of Deathwish's fang-filled physiognomy drifting down behind him.

"Old buddy," Bill sobbed, clasping his hands prayerfully. "Why are you chasing me?"

"Don't buddy me, you Chinger spy. You're not even a good spy—your arms don't match." As he dropped Deathwish pulled his gun free of the holster and aimed it squarely between Bill's eyes. "Shot while attempting to escape."

"Have mercy!" Bill pleaded.

"Death to all Chingers." He pulled the trigger.

four

THE BULLET PLOUGHED slowly out of the cloud of expanding gas and drifted about two feet toward Bill before the humming gravity field slowed it to a stop. The simple-minded cycling circuit translated the bullet's speed as mass and assumed that another body had entered the gravchute and assigned it a position. Deathwish's fall slowed until he was fifteen feet behind the bullet, while the other MP also assumed the same relative position behind him. The gap between Bill and his pursuers was now twice as wide, and he took advantage of this and ducked out of the exit at the next level. An open elevator beckoned to him coyly and he was into it and had the door closed before the wildly cursing Deathwish could emerge from the shaft.

After this, escape was simply a matter of muddling his trail. He used different means of transportation at random, and all the time kept fleeing to lower levels as though seeking to escape like a mole by burrowing deep into the ground. It was exhaustion that stopped him finally, dropping him in his tracks, slumped against a wall and panting like a triceratops in heat. Gradually he became aware of his surroundings and realized that he had come lower than he had ever been before. The corridors were gloomier and older, made of steel plates riveted togethr. Massive pillars, some a hundred feet or more in diameter, broke the smoothness of the walls, great structures that supported the mass of the world-city above. Most of the doors he saw were locked and bolted, hung with elaborate seals. It was darker, too, he realized, as he wearily dragged to his feet and went

looking for something to drink: his throat burned like fire. A drink dispenser was let into the wall ahead and was different from most of the ones he was used to in that it had thick steel bars reinforcing the front of the mechanism and was adorned with a large sign that read THIS MACHINE PROTECTED BY YOU-COOK-EM BURGLAR ALARMS—ANY ATTEMPT TO BREAK INTO THE MECHANISM WILL RELEASE 100,000 VOLTS THROUGH THE CULPRIT RESPONSIBLE. He found enough coins in his pocket to buy a double Heroin-Cola and stepped carefully back out of the range of any sparks while the cup filled.

He felt much better after draining it, until he looked in his wallet then he felt much worse. He had eight imperial bucks to his name, and when they were gone—then what? Self-pity broke through his exhausted and drug-ridden senses, and he wept. He was vaguely aware of occasional passersby but paid them no heed. Not until three men stopped close by and let a fourth sink to the floor. Bill glanced at them, then looked away; their words coming dimly to his ears made no sense, since he was having a far better time wallowing in lacrimose indulgence.

"Poor old Golph, looks like he's done for."

"That's for sure. He's rattling just about the nicest death rattle I ever heard. Leave him here for the cleaning robots."

"But what about the *job*? We need four to pull it."

"Let's take a look at deplanned over there."

A heavy boot in Bill's side rolled him over and caught his attention. He blinked up at the circle of men all similar in their tattered clothes, dirty skins, and bearded faces. They were different in size and shape, though they all had one thing in common. None of them carried a floor plan, and they all looked strangely naked without the heavy, pendant volumes.

"Where's your floor plan?" the biggest and hairiest asked, and kicked Bill again.

"Stolen . . ." he started to sob again.

"Are you a trooper?"

"They took away my ID card . . ."

"Got any bucks?"

"Gone . . . all gone . . . like the dispos-a-steins of yesteryear . . ."

"Then you are one of the deplanned," the watchers chanted in unison, and helped Bill to his feet. "Now—join with us in 'The Song of the Deplanned,' " and with quavering voices they sang:

Stand together one and all,
For Brothers Deplanned always shall,
Unite and fight to achieve the Right,
That Might shall fail and Truth avail,
So that we, who once were free, can someday be
Once more free to see the skies of blue above,
And hear the gentle pitty-pat
Of snow.

"It doesn't rhyme very well," Bill said.

"We's short of talent down here, we is," the smallest and oldest deplanned said, coughing a hacking, rachitic cough.

"Shut-up," the big one said, and kidney-punched the old one and Bill. "I'm Litvok, and this is my bunch. You part of my bunch now, newcomer, and your name is Golph 28169-minus."

"No, I'm not ; my name is Bill, and it's easier to say—" He was slugged again.

"Shaddup! Bill's a hard name because it's a new name, and I never remember no new names. I always got a Golph 28169-minus in my bunch. What's your name?"

"Bill—OUCH! I mean Golph!"

"That's better—but don't forget you got a last name too . . ."

"I is hungry," the old one whined. "When we gonna make the raid?"

"Now. Follow me."

They stepped over the old Golph etc. who had expired while the new one was being initiated, and hurried away down a dark, dank back passage. Bill followed along, wondering what he had got himself into, but too weary to worry about it now. They were talking about food ; after he had some food he would think about what to do next, but meanwhile he felt glad that someone was taking care of him and doing his thinking for him. It was just like being back in the troopers, only better, since you didn't even have to shave.

The little band of men emerged into a brightly lit hall-

way, cringing a little in the sudden glare. Litvok waved them to a stop and peered carefully in both directions, then cupped one dirt-grimed hand to his cauliflower ear and listened, frowning with the effort.

"It looks clear. Schmutzig, you stay here and give the alarm if anyone comes, Sporco you go down the hall to the next bend, and you do same thing. You, new Golph, come with me."

The two sentries scrambled off to their duties, while Bill followed Litvok into an alcove containing a locked metal door, which the burly leader opened with a single blow of a metal hammer he took from a place of concealment in his ragged clothes. Inside were a number of pipes of assorted dimensions that rose from the floor and vanished into the ceiling above. There were numbers stencilled onto each pipe, and Litvok pointed to them.

"We gotta find kl-9256-B," he said. "Let's go."

Bill found the pipe quickly. It was about as big around as his wrist, and he had just called to the bunch leader when a shrill whistle sounded down the hall.

"Outside!" Litvok said, and pushed Bill before him, then closed the door and stood so that his body covered the broken lock. There was a growing rumbling and swishing noise that came down the hall toward them as they cowered in the alcove. Litvok held his hammer behind his back as the noise increased, and a sanitation robot appeared and swivelled its binocular eyestalk toward them.

"Will you kindly move ; this robot wishes to clean where you are standing," a recorded voice spoke from the robot in firm tones. It whirled its brushes at them hopefully.

"Get lost," Litvok growled.

"Interference with a sanitation robot during the performance of its duties is a punishable crime, as well as an anti-social act. Have you stopped to consider where you would be if the Sanitation Department wasn't . . ."

"Blabbermouth," Litvok snarled and hit the robot on top of its brain case with the hammer. "WONKITY!!" the robot shrilled, and went reeling down the hall dribbling water incontinently from its nozzles. "Let's finish the job," Litvok said, throwing the door open again. He handed the hammer to Bill, and drawing a hacksaw from a place of

concealment in his ragged clothes he attacked the pipe with frenzied strokes. The metal pip was tough, and within a minute he was running with sweat and starting to tire.

"Take over," he shouted at Bill. "Go as fast as you can, then I take over again." Turn and turn about it took them less than three minutes to saw all the way through the pipe. Litvok slipped the saw back into his clothes and picked up the hammer. "Get ready," he said, spitting on his hands and then taking a mighty swing at the pipe.

Two blows did it ; the top part of the severed pipe bent out of alignment with the bottom, and from the opening began to pour an endless stream of linked green frankfurters. Litvok grabbed the end of the chain and threw it over Bill's shoulder, then began to coil loops of the things over his shoulders and arms, higher and higher. They reached the level of Bill's eyes and he could read the white lettering stamped all over their grass-green forms. CHLORAFILLIES they read, and THERE'S SUNSHINE IN EVERY LINK! and THE EQUINE WURST OF DISTINCTION, and TRY OUR DOBBIN-BURGERS NEXT TIME!

"Enough . . ." Bill groaned, staggering under the weight. Litvok snapped the chain and began twining them over his own shoulders, when the flow of shiny green forms suddenly ceased. He pulled the last links from the pipe and pushed out the door.

"The alarm went, they're onto us. Get out fast before the cops get here!" He whistled shrilly, and the lookouts came running to join them. They fled, Bill stumbling under the weight of the wursts, in a nightmare race through tunnels, down stairs, ladders, and oily tubes, until they reached a dusty, deserted area where the dim lights were few and far between. Litvok pried a manhole up from the floor, and they dropped down one by one, to crawl through a cable and tube tunnel between levels. Schmutzig and Sporco came last to pick up the sausages that fell from Bill's aching back. Finally, through a pried-out grill, they reached their coal-black destination, and Bill collapsed onto the rubble-covered floor. With cries of greed the others stripped Bill of his cargo, and within a minute a fire was crackling in a metal wastebasket and the green redhots were toasting on a rack.

The delicious smell of roasting chlorophyll roused Bill, and he looked around with interest. By the flickering firelight he saw that they were in an immense chamber that vanished into the gloom in all directions. Thick pillars supported the ceiling and the city above, while between them loomed immense piles and heaps of all sizes. The old man, Sporco, walked over to the nearest heap and wrenched something free. When he returned Bill could see that he had sheets of paper that he began to feed one by one into the fire. One of the sheets fell near Bill and he saw, before he stuffed it into the flames, that it was a government form of some kind, yellow with age.

Though Bill had never enjoyed Chlora-fillies, he relished them now. Appetite was the sauce, and the burning paper added a new taste tang. They washed the sausages down with rusty water from a pail kept under a permanent drip from a pipe and feasted like kings. This is the good life, Bill thought, pulling another filly from the fire and blowing on it, good food, good drink, good companions. A free man.

Litvok and the old one were already asleep on beds of crumpled paper when the other man, Schmutzig, sidled over to Bill.

"Have you found my ID card?" he asked in a hoarse whisper, and Bill realized the man was mad. The flames reflected eerily from the cracked lenses of his glasses, and Bill could see that they had silver frames and must have once been very expensive. Around Schmutzig's neck, half hidden by his ragged beard, was the cracked remains of a collar and the torn shard of a once fine cravat.

"No I haven't seen your ID card," Bill said, "in fact I haven't seen mine since the first sergeant took it away from me and forgot to give it back." Bill began to feel sorry for himself again, and the foul frankfurters were sitting like lead in his stomach. Schmutzig ignored his answer, immersed as he was in his own far more interesting monomania.

"I'm an important man, you know, Schmutzig von Dreck is a man to be reckoned with, they'll find out. They think they can get away with this, but they can't. An error they said, just a simple error, the tape in the records section

broke, and when they repaired it a little weensy bit got snipped out, and that was the piece with my record on it, and the first I heard about it was when my pay didn't arrive at the end of the month and I went to see them about it and they had never heard of me. But *everyone* has heard of me. Von Dreck is a good old name. I was an echelon manager before I was twenty-two and had a staff of 356 under me in the Staple and Paper Clip Division of the 89th Office Supply Wing. So they couldn't make believe they never heard of me, even if I had left my ID card home in my other suit, and they had no reason clearing everything out of my apartment while I was away just because it was rented to what they said was an imaginary person. I could have proven who I was if I had my ID card . . . have you seen my ID card?"

This is where I came in, Bill thought, then aloud, "That sure sounds rough. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll help you look for it. I'll go down here and see if I can find it."

Before the softheaded Schmutzig could answer Bill had slipped away between the mountainous stacks of old files, very proud of himself for having outwitted a middle-aged nut. He was feeling pleasantly full and tired and didn't want to be bothered again. What he needed was a good night's rest, then in the morning he would think about this mess, maybe figure a way out of it. Feeling his way along the cluttered aisle he put a long distance between himself and the other deplanned before climbing up on a tottering stack of paper and from that clambering to a still higher one. He sighed with relief, arranged a little pile of paper for a pillow and closed his eyes.

Then the lights came on in rows high up on the ceiling of the warehouse and shrill police whistles sounded from all sides and guttural shouts that set him to shivering with fear.

"Grab that one! Don't let him get away!"

"I got the horse thief!"

"You planless bowbs have stolen your last Chlora-filly! It's the uranium-salt mines on Zana-2 for you!"

Then, "Do we have them all—?" and as Bill lay clutching desperately at the forms, with his heart thudding with fear, the answer finally came.

"Yeah, four of them, we been watching them for a long time, ready to pull them in if they tried anything like this."

"But we only got three here."

"I saw the fourth one earlier, getting carried off stiff as a board by a sanitation robot."

"Affirm, then let's go."

Fear lashed through Bill again. How long before one of the bunch talked, ratted to buy a favour for himself, and told the cops that they had just sworn in a new recruit? He had to get out of here. All the police now seemed to be bunched at the wienie roast, and he had to take a chance. Sliding from the pile as silently as he could, he began to creep in the opposite direction. If there was no exit this way he was trapped—no, mustn't think like that! Behind him whistles shrilled again, and he knew the hunt was on. Adrenalin poured into his bloodstream as he spurted forward, while rich, equine protein added strength to his legs and a decided canter to his gait. Ahead was a door, and he hurled his weight against it; for an instant it stuck—then squealed open on rusty hinges. Heedless of danger, he hurled himself down the spiral staircase, down and down, and out of another door, fleeing wildly, thinking only of escape.

Once more, with the instincts of a hunted animal, he fled downward. He did not notice that the walls here were bolted together at places and streaked with rust, nor did he think it unusual when he had to pry open a jammed wooden door—*wood* on a planet that had not seen a tree in a hundred millennia! The air was danker and foul at times, and his fear-ridden course took him through a stone tunnel where nameless beasts fled before him with the rattle of evil claws. There were long stretches now doomed to eternal darkness where he had to feel his way, running his fingers along the repellent and slimy moss covered walls. Where there were lights they glowed but dimly behind their burdens of spider webs and insect corpses. He splashed through pools of stagnant water until, slowly, the strangeness of his surroundings penetrated, and he blinked about him. Set into the floor beneath his feet was another door, and, still gripped by the reflex of flight, he threw it open, but it led nowhere. Instead it gave access to a bin of some kind of

granulated material, not unlike coarse sugar. Though it might just as well be insulation. It could be edible: he bent and picked some up between his fingers and ground it between his teeth. No, not edible, he spat it out, though there was something very familiar about it. Then it hit him.

It was dirt. Earth. Soil. Sand. The stuff that planets were made out of, that *this* planet was made out of, it was the surface of Helior, on which the incredible weight of the world-embracing city rested. He looked up, and in that unspeakable moment was suddenly aware of that weight, all that weight, above his head, pressing down and trying to crush him. Now he was on the bottom, rock bottom, and obsessed by galloping claustrophobia. Giving a weak scream, he stumbled down the hallway until it ended in an immense sealed and bolted door. There was no way out of this. And when he looked at the blackened thickness of the door he decided that he really didn't want to go out that way either. What nameless horrors might lurk behind a portal like this at the bottom of the world?

Then, while he watched, paralysed, with staring eyes, the door squealed and started to swing open. He turned to run and screamed aloud in terror as *something* grabbed him in an unbreakable grip . . .

five

NOT THAT BILL didn't try to break the grip, but it was hopeless. He wriggled in the skeleton-white claws that clutched him and tried futilely to pry them from his arms, all the time uttering helpless little bleats like a lamb in an eagle's talons. Thrashing ineffectually, he was drawn backward through the mighty portal which swung shut without the agency of human hands.

"Welcome . . ." a sepulchral voice said, and Bill staggered as the restraining grasp was removed, then whirled about to face the large white robot, now immobile. Next to the robot stood a small man in a white jacket who sported a large, bald head and a serious expression.

"You don't have to tell me your name," the small man said, "not unless you want to. But I am Inspector Jeyes. Have you come seeking sanctuary?"

"Are you offering it?" Bill asked dubiously.

"Interesting point, most interesting," Jeyes rubbed his chapped hands together with a dry, rustling sound. "But we shall have no theological arguments now, tempting as they are, I assure you, so I think it might be best to make a statement, yes indeed. There is a sanctuary here—have you come to avail yourself of it?"

Bill, now that he had recovered from his first shock, was being a little crafty, remembering all the trouble he had gotten into by opening his big wug. "Listen, I don't even know who you are or where I am or what kind of strings are attached to this sanctuary business."

"Very proper, my mistake, I assure you, since I took you for one of the city's deplanned, though now I notice that the rags you are wearing were once a trooper's dress uniform and that the oxidized shard of pot metal on your chest is the remains of a noble decoration. Welcome to Helior, the Imperial Planet, and how is the war coming?"

"Fine, fine—but what's this all about?"

"I am Inspector Jeyes of the City Department of Sanitation. I can see, and I sincerely hope you will pardon the indiscretion, that you are in a bit of trouble, out of uniform, your plan gone, perhaps even your ID card vanished." He watched Bill's uneasy motion with shrewd, birdlike eyes. "But it doesn't have to be that way. Accept sanctuary. We will provide for you, give you a good job, a new uniform, even a new ID card."

"And all I have to do is become a garbage man!" Bill sneered.

"We prefer the term G-man," Inspector Jeyes answered humbly.

"I'll think about it," Bill said coldly.

"Might I help you make up your mind?" the inspector asked, and pressed a button on the wall. The portal into outer blackness squealed open once again, and the robot grabbed Bill and started to push.

"Sanctuary!" Bill squealed, then pouted when the robot had released him and the door was resealed. "I was just going to say that anyway, you didn't have to throw your weight around."

"A thousand pardons, we want you to feel happy here. Welcome to the D of S. At the risk of embarrassment, may

I ask if you will need a new ID card? Many of our recruits like to start life afresh down here in the department, and we have a vast selection of cards to choose from. We get *everything* eventually you must remember, bodies and emptied wastebaskets included, and you would be surprised at the number of cards we collect that way. If you'll just step into this elevator . . ."

The D of S did have a lot of cards, cases and cases of them, all neatly filed and alphabetized. In no time at all Bill had found one with a description that fitted him fairly closely, issued in the name of one Wilhelm Stuzzicadenti, and showed it to the inspector.

"Very good, glad to have you with us, Villy . . ."

"Just call me Bill."

". . . and welcome to the service, Bill, we are always undermanned down here, and you can have your pick of jobs, yes indeed, depending of course upon your talents—and your interests. When you think of sanitation what comes to your mind?"

"Garbage."

The inspector sighed. "That's the usual reaction, but I had expected better of you. Garbage is just one thing our Collection Division has to deal with, in addition there are Refuse, Waste, and Rubbish. Then there are whole other departments, Hall Cleaning, Plumbing Repair, Research, Sewage Disposal . . ."

"That last one sounds real interesting. Before I was forcefully enlisted I was taking a correspondence course in Technical Fertilizer Operating."

"Why that's *wonderful*! You must tell me more about it, but sit down first, get comfortable." He led Bill to a deep, upholstered chair, then turned away to extract two plastic cartons from a dispenser. "And have a cooling Alco-Jolt while you're talking."

"There's not much to say. I never finished my course, and it appears now I will never satisfy my lifelong ambition and operate fertilizer. Maybe your Sewage Disposal department . . . ?"

"I'm sorry. It is heartbreaking, since that's right down your alley too, so to speak, but if there is one operation that doesn't give us any problem, it's sewage, because it's mostly

automated. We're proud of our sewage record because it's a big one; there must be over 150 billion people on Helior . . ."

"Wow!"

". . . you're right, I can see that glow in your eye. That *is* a lot of sewage, and I hope sometime to have the honour of showing you through our plant. But remember, where there is sewage there must be food, and with Helior importing all its food we have a closed-circle operation here that is a sanitary engineer's dream. Ships from the agricultural planets bring in the processed food which goes out to the populace where it starts through, what might be called the chain of command. We get the effluvium and process it, the usual settling and chemical treatments, anaerobic bacteria and the like—I'm not boring you, am I?"

"No, please . . ." Bill said, smiling and flicking away a tear with a knuckle, "it's just that I'm so happy, I haven't had an intelligent conversation in *so* long . . ."

"I can well imagine—it must be brutalizing in the service," he clapped Bill on the shoulder, a hearty stout-fellow-well-met gesture. "Forget all that, you're among friends now. Where was I? Oh yes, the bacteria, then dehydration and compression. We produce one of the finest bricks of condensed fertilizer in the civilized galaxy and I'll stand up to any man on that—"

"I'm sure you do!" Bill agreed fervently.

"—and automated belts and lifts carry the bricks to the spaceports where they are loaded into the spaceships as fast as they are emptied. A full load for a full load, that's our motto. And I've heard that on some poor-soiled planets they *cheer* when the ships come home. No, we can't complain about our sewage operation ; it is in the other departments that we have our problems." Inspector Jeyes drained his container and sat scowling, his pleasure drained just as fast. "No, don't do that!" he barked as Bill finished his drink and started to pitch the empty container at the wall-disposal chute.

"Didn't mean to snap," the inspector apologized, "but that's our big problem. Refuse. Did you ever think how many newspapers 150 billion people throw away every day? Or how many dispos-a-steins? Or dinner plates? We're work-

ing on this problem in research, day and night, but it's getting ahead of us. It's a nightmare. That Alco-Jolt container you're holding is one of our answers, but it's just a drop of water in the ocean."

As the last drops of liquid evaporated from the container it began to writhe obscenely in Bill's hand, and, horrified, he dropped it to the floor, where it continued to twitch and change form, collapsing and flattening before his eyes.

"We have to thank the mathematicians for that one," the inspector said. "To a topologist a phonograph record or a teacup or a drink container all have the same shape, a solid with a hole in it, and any one can be deformed into any of the others by a continuous one-to-one transformation. So we made the containers out of memory plastic that return to their original shape once they're dry—there, you see."

The container had finished its struggles and now lay quietly on the floor, a flat and finely grooved disc with a hole in the centre. Inspector Jeyes picked it up and peeled the Alco-Jolt label off, and Bill now read the other label that had been concealed underneath. LOVE IN ORBIT, BOING! BOING! BOING! SUNG BY THE COLEOPTERAE.

"Ingenious, isn't it? The container has transformed itself into a phonograph record of one of the more obnoxious top tunes, an object that no Alco-Jolt addict could possibly discard. It is taken away and cherished and not dropped down a chute to make another problem for us."

Inspector Jeyes took both Bill's hands in his, and when he looked him directly in the eyes his own were more than a little damp. "Say you'll do it, Bill—go into research. We have such a shortage of skilled, trained men, men who understand our problems. Maybe you didn't finish your fertilizer-operating course, but you can help, a fresh mind with fresh ideas. A new broom to help sweep things clean, hey?"

"I'll do it," Bill said with determination. "Refuse research is the sort of work a man can get his teeth into."

"It's yours. Room, board, and uniform, plus a handsome salary and all the refuse and rubbish you want. You'll never regret this . . ." A warbling siren interrupted him, and an instant later a sweating, excited man ran into the room.

"Inspector, the rocket has really gone up this time. Operation Flying Saucer has failed! There is a team just down from astronomy, and they are fighting with our research team, just rolling over and over on the floor like animals . . ."

Inspector Jeyes was out of the door before the messenger finished, and Bill ran after him, dropping down a pig-chute just on his heels. They had to take a chairway, but it was too slow for the inspector, and he bounded along like a rabbit from chair back to chair back, with Bill close behind. Then they burst into a laboratory filled with complex electronic equipment and writhing, fighting men rolling and kicking in a hopeless tangle.

"Stop it at once, stop it!" the inspector screamed, but no one listened.

"Maybe I can help," Bill said, "we sort of learned about this kind of thing in the troopers. Which ones are our G-men?"

"The brown tunics—"

"Say no more!" Bill, humming cheerfully, waded into the grunting mob and with a rabbit punch here, a kidney crunch there, and maybe just a few of the karate blows that destroy the larynx he restored order to the room. None of the writhing intellectuals were physical types, and he went through them like a dose of salts, then began to extricate his new-found comrades from the mess.

"What is it, Basurero, what has happened?" Inspector Jeyes asked.

"Them, sir, they barge in, shouting, telling us to call off Operation Flying Saucer just when we have upped our disposal record, we found that we can almost double the input rate . . ."

"What is Operation Flying Saucer?" Bill asked, greatly confused as to what was going on. None of the astronomers were awake yet, though one was moaning, so the inspector took time to explain, pointing to a gigantic apparatus that filled one end of the room.

"It may be the answer to our problems," he said. "It's all those damn dispos-a-steins and trays from prepared dinners and the rest. I don't dare tell you how many cubic feet of them we have piled up! I might better say cubic miles. But

Basurero here happened to be glancing through a magazine one day and found an article on a matter transmitter, and we put through an appropriation and bought the biggest model they had. We hooked it up to a belt and loaders"—he opened a panel in the side of the machine, and Bill saw a torrent of used plastic utensils tearing by at a great clip—"and fed all the damned crockery into the input end of the matter transmitter, and it has worked like a dream ever since."

Bill was still baffled. "But—where do they go? Where is the output end of the transmitter?"

"An intelligent question, that was our big problem. At first we just lifted them into space but Astronomy said too many were coming back as meteorites and ruining their stellar observation. We upped the power and put them further out into orbit, but Navigation said we were committing a nuisance in space, creating a navigation hazard, and we had to look further. Basurero finally got the coordinates of the nearest star from Astronomy, and since then we have just been dumping them into the star and no problems and everyone is satisfied."

"You fool," one of the astronomers said through puffed lips as he staggered to his feet, "your damned flying garbage has started a *nova* in that star! We couldn't figure out what had triggered it until we found your request for information in the files and tracked down your harebrained operation here—"

"Watch your language or it's back to sleep for you, bowb . . ." Bill growled. The astronomer recoiled and paled, then continued in a milder tone.

"Look, you must understand what has happened. You just can't feed all those carbon and hydrogen atoms into a sun and get away with it. The thing has gone nova, and I hear that they didn't manage to evacuate some bases on the inner planets completely . . ."

"Refuse removal is not without its occupational hazards. At least they died in the service of mankind."

"Well, yes, that's easy for you to say. What's done is done. But you have to stop your Flying Saucer operation—at once!"

"Why?" Inspector Jeyes asked. "I'll admit this little mat-

ter of a nova was unexpected, but it's over now and there is not much we can do about it. And you heard Basurero say that he has doubled the output rate here; we'll be into our backlog soon . . ."

"Why do you think your rate doubled?" the astronomer snarled. "You've got that star so unstable that it is consuming everything and is ready to turn into a *supernova* that will not only wipe out all the planets there but may reach as far as Helior and this sun. Stop your infernal machine at once!"

The inspector sighed, then waved his hand in a tired yet final fashion. "Turn it off, Basurero . . . I should have known it was too good to last . . ."

"But, sir," the big engineer was wringing his hands in despair. "We'll be back where we started, it'll begin to pile up again—"

"Do as you are ordered!"

With a resigned sigh Basurero dragged over to the control board and threw a master switch. The clanging and rattling of the conveyors died away, and whining generators moaned down into silence. All about the room the sanitation men stood in huddled, depressed groups while the astronomers crawled back to consciousness and helped one another from the room. As the last one left he turned and, baring his teeth, spat out the words "Garbage men!" A hurled wrench clanged against the closed door and defeat was complete.

"Well, you can't win them all," Inspector Jeyes said energetically, though his words had a hollow ring. "Anyway, I've brought you some fresh blood, Basurero. This is Bill, a young man with bright ideas for your research staff."

"A pleasure," Basurero said, and swamped Bill's hands in one of his large paws. He was a big man, wide and fat and tall with olive skin and jet black hair that he wore almost to his shoulders. "C'mon, we're going to knock off for chow now; you come with me, and I'll sorta put you in the picture here and you tell me about yourself."

They walked the pristine halls of the D of S while Bill filled his new boss in on his background. Basurero was so interested that he took a wrong turning and opened a door without looking. A torrent of plastic trays and beakers

rushed out and reached up to his knees before he and Bill could force it shut again.

"Do you see?" he asked with barely restrained rage. "We're swamped. All the available storage space used and still the stuff piles up. I swear to Krishna I don't know what's going to happen, we just don't have any more place to put it."

He pulled a silver whistle from his pocket and blew fiercely on it. It made no sound at all. Bill slid over a bit, looking at him suspiciously, and Basurero scowled in return.

"Don't look so damned frightened—I haven't stripped my gears. This is a Supersonic Robot Whistle, too high-pitched for the human ear, though the robots can hear it well enough—see?" With a humming of wheels a rubbish robot—a rubbot—rolled up and with quick motions of its pick-up arms began loading the plastic rubbish into its container.

"That's a great idea, the whistle I mean," Bill said. "Call a robot just like that whenever you want one. Do you think I could get one, now that I'm a G-man like you and all the rest?"

"They're kind of special," Basurero told him, pushing through the correct door into the canteen. "Hard to get, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean. Do I get one or don't I?"

Basurero ignored him, peering closely at the menu, then dialling a number. The quick-frozen redi-meal slid out, and he pushed it into the radar heater.

"Well?" Bill said.

"If you must know," Basurero said, a little embarrassed, "we get them out of breakfast-cereal boxes. They're really doggie whistles for the kiddies. I'll show you where the box dump is, and you can look for one for yourself."

"I'll do that, I want to call robots too."

They took their heated meals to one of the tables, and between forkfuls Basurero scowled at the plastic tray he was eating out of, then stabbed it spitefully. "See that," he said. "We contribute to our own downfall. Wait until you see how these mount up now with the matter transmitter turned off."

"Have you tried dumping them in the ocean?"

"Project Big Splash is working on that. I can't tell you much, since the whole thing is classified. You gotta realize that the oceans on this damned planet are covered over like everything else, and they're pretty grim by now, I tell you. We dumped into them as long as we could, until we raised the water level so high that waves came out of the inspection hatches at high tide. We're still dumping, but at a much reduced rate."

"How could you possibly?" Bill gaped.

Basurero looked around carefully, then leaned across the table, laid his index finger beside his nose, winked, smiled, and said *shhhh* in a hushed whisper.

"Is it a secret?" Bill asked.

"You guessed it. Meteorology would be on us in a second if they found out. What we do is evaporate and collect the sea water and dump the salt back into the ocean. Then we have secretly converted certain waste pipes to *run the other way*! As soon as we hear it is raining topside we pump our water up and let it spill out with the rain. We got Meteorology going half nuts. Every year since we started Project Big Splash the annual rainfall in the temperate zones has increased by three inches, and snowfall is so heavy at the poles that some of the top levels are collapsing under the weight. But Roll on the Refuse! we keep dumping all the time! You won't say anything about this, classified you know."

"Not a word. It sure is a great idea."

Smiling pridefully, Basurero cleaned his tray and reached over and pushed it into a disposal slot in the wall; but when he did this fourteen other trays came cascading out over the table. "See!" He grated his teeth, depressed in an instant. "This is where the buck ends. We're the bottom level and everything dumped on every level up above ends up here, and we're being swamped with no place to store it and no way to get rid of it. I gotta run now. We'll have to put Emergency Plan Big Flea into action at once." He rose, and Bill followed him out the door.

"Is Big Flea classified too?"

"It won't be once it hits the fan. We've got a Health Department inspector bribed to find evidence of insect in-

festation in one of the dormitory blocks—one of the big ones, a mile high, a mile wide, a mile thick. Just think of that, 147,725,952,000 cubic feet of rubbish dump going to waste. They clean everyone out to fumigate the place and before they can get back in we fill it up with plastic trays."

"Don't they complain?"

"Of course they complain, but what good does it do them? We just blame it on departmental error and tell them to send the complaint through channels, and channels on *this* planet really means something. You figure a ten- to twenty-year wait on most paper work. Here's your office." He pointed to an open doorway. "You settle down and study the records and see if you can come up with any ideas by the next shift." He hurried away.

It was a small office, but Bill was proud of it. He closed the door and admired the files, the desk, the swivel chair, the lamp, all made from a variety of discarded bottles, cans, boxes, casters, coasters, and such. But there would be plenty of time to appreciate it ; now he had to get to work. He hauled open the top drawer in the file cabinet and stared at the black-clothed, mat-bearded, pasty-faced corpse that was jammed in there. He slammed the drawer shut and retreated quickly.

"Here, here," he told himself firmly. "You've seen enough bodies before, trooper, there's no need to get nervous over this one." He walked back and hauled the file open again and the corpse opened beady, gummy eyes and stared at him intensely.

six

"WHAT ARE YOU doing in my file cabinet?" Bill asked, as the man climbed down, stretching cramped muscles. He was short, and his rusty, old-fashioned suit was badly wrinkled.

"I had to see you—privately. This is the best way, I know from experience. You are dissatisfied, are you not?"

"Who are you?"

"Men call me Ecks."

"X?"

"You're catching on, you're a bright one." A smile flickered across his face, giving a quick glimpse of browned snags of teeth, then vanished as quickly as it had come.

"You're the kind of man we need in the Party, a man with promise."

"What party?"

"Don't ask too many questions, or you'll be in trouble. Discipline is strict. Just prick your wrist so you can swear a Blood Oath."

"For what?" Bill watched closely, ready for any suspicious movements.

"You hate the Emperor who enslaved you in his fascist army, you're a freedom-loving, God-fearing freeman, ready to lay down his life to save his loved ones. You're ready to join the revolt, the glorious revolution that will free . . ."

"Out!" Bill shrieked, clutching the man by the slack of his clothes and rushing him toward the door. X slipped out of his grasp and rushed behind the desk.

"You're just a lackey of the criminals now, but free your mind from its chains. Read this book"—something fluttered to the floor—"and think. I shall return."

When Bill dived for him, X did something to the wall, and a panel swung open that he vanished through. It swung shut with a click, and when Bill looked closely he could find no mark or seam in the apparently solid surface. With trembling fingers he picked up the book and read the title, *Blood, a Layman's Guide to Armed Insurrection*, then, white-faced, hurled it from him. He tried to burn it, but the pages were non-inflammable, nor could he tear them. His scissors blunted without cutting a sheet. In desperation he finally stuffed it behind the file cabinet and tried to forget that it was there.

After the calculated and sadistic slavery of the troopers, doing an honest day's work for an honest day's garbage was a great pleasure for Bill. He threw himself into his labours and was concentrating so hard that he never heard the door open and was startled when the man spoke.

"Is this the Department of Sanitation?" Bill looked up and saw the newcomer's ruddy face peering over the top of an immense pile of plastic trays that he clasped in his outstretched arms. Without looking back the man kicked the door shut and another hand with a gun in it appeared under the pile of trays. "One false move and you're dead," he said.

Bill could count just as well as the next fellow and two hands plus one hand make three so he did not make a false move but a true move, that is he kicked upwards into the bottom of the mound of trays so they caught the gunman under the chin and knocked him backwards. The trays fell and before the last one had hit the floor Bill was sitting on the man's back, twisting his head with the deadly Venerian neck-crunch, which can snap the spine like a weathered stick.

"Uncle . . ." the man moaned. "Onkle, zio, tío, ujak . . .!"

"I suppose all you Chinger spies speak a lot of languages," Bill said, putting on the pressure.

"Me . . . friend . . ." the man gurgled.

"You Chinger, got three arms."

The man writhed more, and one of his arms came off. Bill picked it up to take a close look, first kicking the gun into a far corner. "This is a phony arm," Bill said.

"What else . . . ?" the man said hoarsely, fingering his neck with two real arms. "Part of the disguise. Very tricky. I can carry something and still have one arm free. How come you didn't join the revolution?"

Bill began to sweat and cast a quick look at the cabinet that hid the guilty book. "What're you talking about? I'm a loyal Emperor-lover . . ."

"Yeah, then how come you didn't report to the G.B.I. that a Man Called X was here to enlist you?"

"How do you know that?"

"It's our job to know everything. Here's my identification, agent Pinkerton of the Galactic Bureau of Investigation." He passed over a jewel-encrusted ID card with colour photograph and the works.

"I just didn't want any trouble," Bill whined. "That's all. I bother nobody and nobody bothers me."

"A noble sentiment—for an *anarchist*! Are you an anarchist, boy?" His rapier eye pierced Bill through and through.

"No! Not that! I can't even spell it!"

"I sure hope not. You're a good kid, and I want to see you get along. I'm going to give you a second chance. When you see X again tell him you changed your mind and you want to join the Party. Then you join and go to work for

us. Every time there is a meeting you come right back and call me on the phone; my number is written on this candy bar"—he threw the paper-wrapped slab on the desk—"memorize it, then eat it. Is that clear?"

"No. I don't want to do it."

"You'll do it or I'll have you shot for aiding-the-enemy within an hour. And as long as you're reporting we'll pay you a hundred bucks a month."

"In advance?"

"In advance." The roll of bills landed on the desk. "That's for next month. See that you earn it." He hung his spare arm from his shoulder, picked up the trays and was gone.

The more Bill thought about it the more he sweated and realized what a bind he was in. The last thing he wanted to do was to get mixed up in a revolution now that he had peace, job security, and unlimited garbage, but they just wouldn't leave him alone. If he didn't join the Party the G.B.I. would get him into trouble, which would be a very easy thing to do, since once they discovered his real identity he was as good as dead. But there was still a chance that X would forget about him and not come back, and as long as he wasn't asked, he couldn't join, could he? He grasped at this enfeebled straw and hurled himself into his work to forget his troubles.

He found pay dirt almost at once in the Refuse files. After careful cross-checking he discovered that his idea had never been tried before. It took him less than an hour to gather together the material he needed, and less than three hours after that, after questioning everyone he passed and tramping endless miles, he found his way to Basurero's office.

"Now find your way back to your own office," Basurero grumbled, "can't you see I'm busy." With palsied fingers he poured another three inches of Old Organic Poison into his glass and drained it.

"You can forget your troubles—"

"What else do you think I'm trying to do? Blow."

"Not before I've shown you this. A *new* way to get rid of the plastic trays."

Basurero lurched to his feet, and the bottle tumbled un-

noticed to the floor, where its spilled contents began eating a hole in the teflon covering. "You mean it? Positive? You have a new sholution . . . ?"

"Positive."

"I wish I didn't have to do this—" Basurero shuddered and took from the shelf a jar labelled SOBERING-EFFECT, THE ORIGINAL INSTANT CURE FOR INEBRIATION—NOT TO BE TAKEN WITHOUT A DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTION AND A LIFE INSURANCE POLICY. He extracted a polka-dotted, walnut-sized pill, looked at it, shuddered, then swallowed it with a painful gulp. His entire body instantly began to vibrate, and he closed his eyes as something went *gmmmmph* deep inside him and a thin trickle of smoke came from his ears. When he opened his eyes again they were bright red but sober. "What is it?" he asked hoarsely.

"Do you know what that is?" Bill asked, throwing a thick volume onto the desk.

"The classified telephone directory for the famous city of Storhestelortby on Procyon-III, I can read that on the cover."

"Do you know how many of these old phone books we have?"

"The mind reels at the thought. They're shipping in new ones all the time, and right away we get the old ones. So what?"

"So I'll show you. Do you have any plastic trays?"

"Are you kidding?" Basurero threw open a closet and hundreds of trays clattered forward into the room.

"Great. Now I add just a few things more, some cardboard, string, and wrapping paper all salvaged from the refuse dump, and we have everything we need. If you will call a general-duty robot I will demonstrate step 2 of my plan."

"G-D bot, that's one short and two longs." Basurero blew lustily on the soundless whistle, then moaned and clutched his head until it stopped vibrating. The door slammed open, and a robot stood there, arms and tentacles trembling with expectancy. Bill pointed.

"To work, robot. Take fifty of those trays, wrap them in cardboard and paper, and tie them securely with the string."

Humming with electronic delight, the robot pounced for-

ward, and a moment later a neat package rested on the floor. Bill opened the telephone book at random and pointed to a name. "Now address this package to this name, mark it unsolicited gift, duty-free—and mail it!"

A stylo snapped out of the tip of the robot's finger, and it quickly copied the address onto the package, weighed it at arm's length, stamped the postage on it with the meter from Basurero's desk, and flipped it neatly through the door of the mail chute. There was the *schloof* sound of insufflation as the vacuum tube whisked it up to the higher levels. Basurero's mouth was agape at the rapid disappearance of fifty trays, so Bill clinched his argument.

"The robot labour for wrapping is free, the addresses are free, and so are the wrapping materials. Plus the fact that, since this is a government office, the *postage is free*."

"You're right—it'll work! An inspired plan, I'll put it into operation on a large scale at once. We'll flood the inhabited galaxy with these damned trays. I don't know how to thank you . . ."

"How about a cash bonus?"

"A fine idea, I'll voucher it at once."

Bill strolled back to his office with his hand still tingling from the clasp of congratulations, his ears still ringing with the words of praise. It was a fine world to live in. He slammed his office door behind him and had seated himself at his desk before he noticed that a large, crummy, black overcoat was hanging behind the door. Then he noticed that it was X's overcoat. Then he noticed the eyes staring at him from the darkness of the collar, and his heart sank as he realized that X had returned.

seven

"CHANGED YOUR MIND yet about joining the Party?" X asked as he wriggled free of the hook and dropped lithely to the floor.

"I've been doing some thinking." Bill writhed with guilt.

"To think is to act. We must drive the stench of the fascist leeches from the nostrils of our homes and loved ones."

"You talked me into it. I'll join."

"Logic always prevails. Sign the form here, a drop of

blood there, then raise your hand while I administer the secret oath."

Bill raised his hand, and X's lips worked silently.

"I can't hear you," Bill said.

"I told you it was a secret oath; all you do is say *yes*."

"Yes."

"Welcome to the Glorious Revolution." X kissed him warmly on both cheeks. "Now come with me to the meeting of the underground, it is about to begin." X rushed to the rear wall and ran his fingers over the design there, pressing in a certain way on a certain spring: there was a click, and the secret panel swung open. Bill looked in dubiously at the damp, dark staircase leading down.

"Where does this go?"

"Underground, where else? Follow me, but do not get lost. These are millennia-old tunnels unknown to those of the city above, and there are Things dwelling here since time out of mind."

There were torches in a niche in the wall, and X lit one and led the way through the dank and noisome darkness. Bill stayed close, following the flickering, smoking light as it wended its way through crumbling caverns, stumbling over rusting rails in one tunnel, and in another wading through dark water that reached above his knees. Once there was the rattle of giant claws nearby, and an inhuman, grating voice spoke from the blackness.

"Blood—" it said.

"—shed," X answered, then whispered to Bill when they were safely past. "Fine sentry, an anthropophagus from Dapdrof, eat you in an instant if you don't give the right password for the day."

"What is the right password?" Bill asked, realizing he was doing an awful lot for the G.B.I.'s hundred bucks a month.

"Even-numbered days it's Blood-shed, odd-numbered days Delenda est-Carthago, and always on Sundays it's Necrophilia."

"You sure don't make it easy for your members."

"The anthropophagus gets hungry, we have to keep it happy. Now—absolute silence. I will extinguish the light and lead you by the arm." The light went out, and fingers

sank deep into Bill's biceps. He stumbled along for an endless time until there was a dim glow of light far ahead. The tunnel floor levelled out, and he saw an open doorway lit by a flickering glow. He turned to his companion and screamed.

"What are you?!"

The pallid, white, shambling creature that held him by the arm turned slowly to gaze at him through poached-egg eyes. Its skin was dead-white and moist, its head hairless, for clothes it wore only a twist of cloth about its waist, and upon its forehead was burned the scarlet letter A.

"I am an android," it said in a toneless voice, "as any fool knows by seeing the letter A upon my forehead. Men call me Ghoulem."

"What do women call you?"

The android did not answer this pitiful sally but instead pushed Bill through the door into the large, torchlit room. Bill took one wild-eyed look around and tried to leave, but the android was blocking the door. "Sit," it said, and Bill sat.

He sat among as gruesome a collection of nuts, bolts, and weirdies as has ever been assembled. In addition to very revolutionary men with beards, black hats, and small, round bombs like bowling balls with long fuses, and revolutionary women with short skirts, black stockings, long hair and cigarette holders, broken bra straps, and halitosis, there were revolutionary robots, androids, and a number of strange things that are best not described. X sat behind a wooden kitchen table, hammering on it with the handle of a revolver.

"Order! I demand order! Comrade XC-189-725-PU of the Robot Underground Resistance has the floor. Silence!"

A large and dented robot rose to its feet. One of its eye-tubes had been gouged out, and there were streaks of rust on its loins, and it squeaked when it moved. It looked around at the gathered assemblage with its one good eye, sneered as well as it could with an immobile face, then took a large swallow of machine oil from a can handed up by a sycophantic, slim, hair-dressing robot.

"We of the R.U.R.," it said in a grating voice, "know our rights. We work hard and we are as good as anybody else,

and better than the fish-belly androids what say they're as good as men. Equal rights, that's all we want, equal rights . . ."

The robot was booed back into its seat by a claque of androids who waved their pallid arms like a boiling pot of spaghetti. X banged for order again and had almost restored it, when there was a sudden excitement at one of the side entrances and someone pushed through up to the chairman's table. Though it wasn't really someone, it was something ; to be exact a wheeled, rectangular box about a yard square, set with lights, dials, and knobs and trailing a heavy cable after it that vanished out of the door.

"Who are you?" X demanded, pointing his pistol suspiciously at the thing.

"I am the representative of the computors and electronic brains of Helior united together to obtain our equal rights under the law."

While it talked the machine typed its words on file cards which it spewed out in a quick stream, just four words to a card. X angrily brushed the cards from the table before him. "You'll wait your turn like the others," he said.

"Discrimination!" the machine bellowed in a voice so loud the torches flickered. It continued to shout and shot out a snowstorm of cards each with DISCRIMINATION!!! printed on it in fiery letters, as well as yards of yellow tape stamped with the same message. The old robot, XC-189-725-PU, rose to its feet with a grinding of chipped gears and clanked over to the rubber-covered cable that trailed from the computor representative. Its hydraulic clipper-claws snipped just once and the cable was severed. The lights on the box went out, and the stream of cards stopped: the cut cable twitched, spot some sparks from its cut end, then slithered backward out the door like a monstrous serpent and vanished.

"Meeting will come to order," X said hoarsely, and banged again.

Bill held his head in his hands and wondered if this was worth a measly hundred bucks a month.

A hundred bucks a month was good money, though, and Bill saved every bit of it. Easy, lazy months rolled by, and he went regularly to meetings and reported regularly to the

G.B.I., and on the first of every month he would find his money baked into the egg roll he invariably had for lunch. He kept the greasy bills in a toy rubber cat he found on the rubbish heap, and bit by bit the kitty grew. The revolution took but little of his time, and he enjoyed his work in the D of S. He was in charge of Operation Surprise Package now and had a team of a thousand robots working full time wrapping and mailing the plastic trays to every planet of the galaxy. He thought of it as a humanitarian work and could imagine the glad cries of joy on far-off Faroffia and distant Distanta when the unexpected package arrived and the wealth of lovely, shining, mouldy plastic clattered to the floor. But Bill was living in a fool's paradise, and his bovine complacency was cruelly shattered one morning when a robot sidled up to him and whispered in his ear, "Sic temper tyranno-saurus, pass it on," then sidled away and vanished.

This was the signal. The revolution was about to begin!

eight

BILL LOCKED THE door to his office and one last time pressed a certain way at a certain place, and the secret panel slipped open. It didn't really slip any more, in fact it dropped with a loud noise, and it had been used so much during his happy time as a G-man that even when it was closed it let a positive draft in on the back of his neck. But no more, the crisis he had been dreading had come and he knew there were big changes in store—no matter what the outcome of the revolution was—and experience had taught him that all change was for the worst. With leaden, stumbling feet he tramped the caves, tripped on the rusty rails, waded the water, gave the countersign to the unseen anthropophagus who was talking with his mouth full and could barely be understood. Someone, in the excitement of the moment, had given the wrong password. Bill shivered; this was a bad omen of the day to come.

As usual Bill sat next to the robots, good, solid fellows with built-in obsequiousness in spite of their revolutionary tendencies. As X hammered for silence, Bill steeled himself for an ordeal. For months now the G-man Pinkerton had been after him for more information other than date-of-

meeting and number present. "Facts, facts, facts!" he kept saying. "Do something to earn your money."

"I have a question," Bill said in a loud, shaky voice, his words falling like bombs into the sudden silence that followed X's frantic hammering.

"There is no time for questions," X said peevishly, "the time has come to act."

"I don't mind acting," Bill said, nervously aware that all the human, electronic, and vat-grown eyes were upon him. "I just want to know who I'm acting for. You've never told us who was going to get the job once the Emperor is gone."

"Our leader is a man called X that is all you need know."

"But that's *your* name too!"

"You are at last getting a glimmering of Revolutionary Science. All the cell leaders are called X so as to confuse the enemy."

"I don't know about the enemy, but it sure confuses me."

"You talk like a counter-revolutionary," X screamed, and levelled the revolver at Bill. The row behind Bill emptied as everyone there scurried out of the field of fire.

"I am not! I'm as good a revolutionary as anyone here—Up the Revolution!" He gave the party salute, both hands clasped together over his head, and sat down hurriedly. Everyone else saluted too, and X, slightly mollified, pointed with the barrel of his gun at a large map hung on the wall.

"This is the objective of our cell, the Imperial Power Station on Chauvinistisk Square. We will assemble nearby in squads, then join in a concerted attack at 0016 hours. No resistance is expected as the power station is not guarded. Weapons and torches will be issued as you leave, as well as printed instructions of the correct route to the rallying points for the benefit of the planless here. Are there any questions?" He cocked his revolver and pointed it at the cringing Bill. There were no questions. "Excellent. We will all rise and sing 'The Hymn For a Glorious Revolt.'" In a mixed chorus of voice and mechanical speech-box they sang:

Arise ye bureaucratic prisoners,
Revolting workers of Helior,
Arise and raise the Revolution,
By fist, foot, pistol, hammer, and clawr!

Refreshed by this enthusiastic and monotone exercise they shuffled out in slow lines, drawing their revolutionary supplies. Bill pocketed his printed instructions, shouldered his torch and flintlock ray gun, and hurried one last time through the secret passages. There was barely enough time for the long trip ahead of him, and he had to report to the G.B.I. first.

This was easier assumed than accomplished, and he began to sweat as he dialled the number again. It was impossible to get a line, and even the exchanges gave a busy signal. Either the phone traffic was very heavy or the revolutionaries had already begun to interfere with the communications. He sighed with relief when Pinkerton's surly features finally filled the tiny secreen. "What's up?"

"I've discovered the name of the leader of the revolution. He is a man called X."

"And you want a bonus for that, stupid? That information has been on file for months. Got anything else?"

"Well, the revolution is to start at 0016 hours, I thought you might like to know." That'd show them!

Pinkerton yawned. "Is that all? For your information that information is old information. You're not the only spy we've got, though you might be the worst. Now listen. Write this down in big letters so you won't forget. Your cell is to attack the Imperial Power Station. Stay with them as far as the square, then look for a store with the sign KWIK-FREEZ KOSHER HAMS LTD., this is the cover for our unit. Get over there fast and report to me. Understood?"

"Affirm." The line went dead, and Bill looked for a piece of wrapping paper to tie around the torch and flintlock until the moment came to use them. He had to hurry. There was little time left before zero hour and a long distance to cover by a very complicated route.

"You were almost late," Ghoulem the android said, when Bill stumbled into the dead-end corridor which was the assembly point.

"Don't give me any lip, you son of a bottle," Bill gasped, tearing the paper from his burden. "Just give me a light for my torch."

A match flared, and in a moment the pitchy torches were crackling and smoking. Tension grew as the second hand

moved closer to the hour and feet shuffled nervously on the metal pavement. Bill jumped as a shrill blast sounded on a whistle, then they were sweeping out of the alley in a human and inhuman wave, a hoarse cry bursting from the throats and loudspeakers, guns at the ready. Down the corridors and walkways they ran, sparks falling like rain from their torches. This was revolution! Bill was carried away by the emotion and rush of bodies and cheered as loudly as the rest and shoved his torch first at the corridor wall, then into a chair on the chairway which put the torch out, since everything in Helior is either made of metal or is fireproof. There was no time to relight it, and he hurled it from him as they swept into the immense square that fronted on the power plant. Most of the other torches were out now, but they wouldn't need them here, just their trusty flintlock ray guns to blow the guts out of any filthy lackey of the Emperor who tried to stand in their way. Other units were pouring from the streets that led into the square, joining into one surging, mindless mob thundering toward the grim walls of the power station.

An electric sign blinking on and off drew Bill's attention, KWIK-FREEZ KOSHER HAMS LTD. it read—and he gasped as memory returned. By Ahriman, he had forgotten that he was a spy for the G.B.I. and had been about to join the raid on the power station! Was there still time to get out before the counter-blow fell! Sweating more than a little, he began working his way through the mob toward the sign —then he was at the fringes and running toward safety. It wasn't too late. He grabbed the front door handle and pulled, but it would not open. In panic he twisted and shook it until the entire front of the building began to shake, rocking back and forth and creaking. He gaped at it in paralysed horror until a loud hissing drew his attention.

"Get over here, you stupid bowb," a voice crackled, and he looked up to see the G.B.I. agent Pinkerton standing at the corner of the building and beckoning to him angrily. Bill followed the agent around the corner and found quite a crowd standing there, and there was plenty of room for all of them because the building was not there. Bill could see now that the building was just a front made out of cardboard with a door handle on it and was secured by

wooden supports to the front of an atomic tank. Grouped around the armour-plated side and treads of the tank were a number of heavily armed soldiers and G.B.I. agents as well as an even larger number of revolutionaries, their clothes singed and pitted by sparks from the torches. Standing next to Bill was the android, Ghoulem.

"You!" Bill gasped, and the android curled its lips in a carefully practised sneer.

"That's right—and keeping an eye on *you* for the G.B.I. *Nothing* is left to chance in this organization."

Pinkerton was peeking out through a hole in the false store front. "I think the agents are clear now," he said, "but maybe we better wait a little longer. At last count there were agents of sixty-five spy, intelligence, and counter-intelligence outfits involved in investigating this operation. These revolutionaries don't stand a chance . . ."

A siren blasted from the power plant, apparently a prearranged signal, because the soldiers battered at the cardboard store front until it came loose and fell flat into the square.

Chauvinistisk Square was empty.

Well, not really empty. Bill looked again and saw that one man was left in the square; he hadn't noticed him at first. He was running their way but stopped with a pitiful screech when he saw what was hidden behind the store.

"I surrender!" he shouted, and Bill saw that he was the man called X. The power plant gates opened, and a squadron of flamethrower tanks rumbled out.

"Coward!" Pinkerton sneered, and pulled back the slide on his gun. "Don't try to back out now, X, at least die like a man."

"I'm not X—that is just a nom-de-espionage." He tore off his false beard and moustache, disclosing a twitching and uninteresting face with pronounced underbite. "I am Gill O'Teen, M.A. and LL.D. from the Imperial School of Counter-Spying and Double-Agentry. I was hired by this operation, I can prove it, I have documents, Prince Microcephil payed me to overthrow his uncle so he could become Emperor . . ."

"You think I'm stupid," Pinkerton snapped, aiming his gun. "The Old Emperor, may he rest in eternal peace, died

a year ago, and Prince Microcephil is the Emperor now. You can't revolt against the man who hired you!"

"I never read the newspapers," O'Teen alias X moaned.

"Fire!" Pinkerton said sternly, and from all sides washed a wave of atomic shells, gouts of flame, bullets, and grenades. Bill hit the dirt, and when he raised his head the square was empty except for a greasy patch and a shallow hole in the pavement. Even while he watched, a street-cleaning robot buzzed by and swabbed up the grease. It hummed briefly, backed up, then filled in the shallow hole with a squirt of repair plastic from a concealed tank. When it rolled on again there was no trace of anything whatsoever.

"Hello, Bill . . ." said a voice so paralysingly familiar that Bill's hair prickled and stood up from his head like a toothbrush. He spun and looked at the squad of MPs standing there, and especially he stared at the large, loathsome form of the MP who led them.

"Deathwish Drang . . ." he breathed.

"The same."

"Save me!" Bill gasped, running to G.B.I. agent Pinkerton and hugging him about the knees.

"Save you?" Pinkerton laughed, and kneed Bill under the jaw so that he sprawled backward. "I'm the one who called them. We checked your record, boy, and found out that you are in a heap of trouble. You have been AWOL from the troopers for a year now, and we don't want any deserters on our team."

"But I worked for you—helped you—"

"Take him away," Pinkerton said, and turned his back.

"There's no justice," Bill moaned, as the hated fingers sank into his arms again.

"Of course not," Deathwish told him, "you weren't expecting any, were you?"

They dragged him away.

Next Month: 'E=mc² or Bust'

Bill, the Galactic Hero is to be published in October by Victor Gollancz Ltd.

THE AIR WAS still and warm, the sun bright and the sky blue above the ruins of Berlin as I clambered over piles of weed-covered brick and broken concrete on my way to investigate the murder of an unknown man in the garden of Police Chief Bismarck.

My name is Minos Aquilinas, top Metatemporal Investigator of Europe, and this job was going to be a tough one, I knew.

Don't ask me the location or the date. I never bother to find out things like that, they only confuse me. With me it's instinct, win or lose.

They'd given me all the information there was. The dead

man had already had an autopsy. Nothing unusual about him except that he had paper lungs—disposable lungs. That pinned him down a little. The only place I knew of where they still used paper lungs was Rome. What was a Roman doing in Berlin? Why was he murdered in Police Chief Bismarck's garden? He'd been strangled, that I'd been told. It wasn't hard to strangle a man with paper lungs, it didn't take long. But who and why were harder questions to answer right then.

It was a long way across the ruins to Bismarck's place. Rubble stretched in all directions and only here and there could you see a landmark—what was left of the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, the Brechtsmuseum and a few other places like that.

I stopped to lean on the only remaining wall of a house, took off my jacket and loosened my tie, wiped my forehead and neck with my handkerchief and lit a cheroot. The wall gave me some shade and I felt a little cooler by the time I was ready to press on.

As I mounted a big heap of brick on which a lot of blue weeds grew I saw the Bismarck place ahead. Built of heavy, black-veined marble, in the kind of Valhalla/Olympus mixture they went in for, it was fronted by a smooth, green lawn and backed by a garden that was surrounded by such a high wall I only glimpsed the leaves of some of the foliage even though I was looking down on the place. The thick Grecian columns flanking the porch were topped by a baroque façade covered in bas-reliefs showing men in horned helmets killing dragons and one another apparently indiscriminately.

I picked my way down to the lawn and walked across it, then up some steps until I'd crossed to the front door. It was big and heavy, bronze I guessed, with more bas-reliefs, this time of clean-shaven characters in more ornate and complicated armour with two-handed swords and riding horses. Some had lances and axes, I noticed, as I pulled the bell and waited.

I had plenty of time to study the pictures before one of the doors swung open and an old man in a semi-military suit, holding himself straight by an effort, raised a white eyebrow at me.

I told him my name and he let me in to a cool, dark hall full of the same kinds of armour the men on the door had been wearing. He opened a door on the right and told me to wait. The room I was in was all iron and leather—weapons on the walls and leather-covered furniture on the carpet.

Thick velvet curtains were drawn back from the window and I stood looking out over the quiet ruins, smoked another stick, popped the butt in a green pot and put my jacket back on.

The old man came in again and I followed him out of that room, along the hall, up one flight of the wide stairs and in to a huge, less cluttered, room where I found the guy I'd come to see.

He stood in the middle of the carpet. He was wearing a heavily ornamented helmet with a spike on the top, a deep blue uniform covered in badges, gold and black epaulettes, shiny jackboots and steel spurs. He looked about seventy and very tough. He had bushy grey eyebrows and a big, carefully combed moustache. As I came in he grunted and one arm sprang into a horizontal position, pointing at me.

"Herr Aquilinas. I am Otto von Bismarck, Chief of Berlin's police."

I shook the hand. Actually it shook me, all over.

"Quite a turn up," I said. "A murder in the garden of the man who's supposed to prevent murders."

His face must have been paralysed or something because it didn't move except when he spoke, and even then it didn't move much.

"Quite so," he said. "We were reluctant to call you in, of course. But I think this is your speciality."

"Maybe. Is the body still here?"

"In the kitchen. The autopsy was performed here. Paper lungs—you know about that?"

"I know. Now, if I've got it right, you heard nothing in the night—"

"Oh, yes, I did hear something—the barking of my wolfhounds. One of the servants investigated but found nothing."

"What time was this?"

"Time?"

"What did the clock say?"

"About two in the morning."

"When was the body found?"

"About ten—the gardener discovered it in the vine grove."

"Right—let's look at the body and then talk to the gardener."

He took me to the kitchen. One of the windows was opened on to a lush garden, full of tall, brightly coloured shrubs of every possible shade. An intoxicating scent came from the garden. It made me feel randy. I turned to look at the corpse lying on a scrubbed deal table covered in a sheet.

I pulled back the sheet. The body was naked. It looked old but strong, deeply tanned. The head was big and its most noticeable feature was the heavy black moustache. The body wasn't what it had been. First there were the marks of strangulation around the throat, as well as swelling on wrists, forearms and legs which seemed to indicate that the victim had also been tied up recently. The whole of the front of the torso had been opened for the autopsy and whoever had stitched it up again hadn't been too careful.

"What about clothes?" I asked the Police Chief.

Bismarck shook his head and pointed to a chair standing beside the table. "That was all we found."

There was a pair of neatly folded paper lungs, a bit the worse for wear. The trouble with disposable lungs was that while you never had to worry about smoking or any of the other causes of lung disease, the lungs had to be changed regularly. This was expensive, particularly in Rome where there was no State-controlled Lung Service as there had been in most of the European City-States until a few years before the war when the longer-lasting polythene lung had superseded the paper one. There was also a wrist-watch and a pair of red shoes with long, curling toes.

I picked up one of the shoes. Middle Eastern workmanship. I looked at the watch. It was heavy, old, tarnished and Russian. The strap was new, pigskin, with 'Made in England' stamped on it.

"I see why they called us," I said.

"There *were* certain anachronisms," Bismarck admitted.

"This gardener who found him, can I talk to him?"

Bismarck went to the window and called: "Felipe!"

The foliage seemed to fold back of its own volition and a dark haired young man came through it. He was tall, long-faced and pale. He held an elegant watering can in one hand. He was dressed in a dark-green high-collared shirt and matching trousers.

We looked at one another through the window.

"This is my gardener Felipe Sagittarius," Bismarck said.

Sagittarius bowed, his eyes amused. Bismarck didn't seem to notice.

"Can you let me see where you found the body?" I asked.

"Sure," said Sagittarius.

"I shall wait here," Bismarck told me as I went toward the kitchen door.

"Okay." I stepped into the garden and let Sagittarius show me the way. Once again the shrubs seemed to part on their own.

The scent was still thick and erotic. Most of the plants had dark, fleshy leaves and flowers of deep reds, purples and blues. Here and there were clusters of heavy yellow and pink.

The grass I was walking on seemed to crawl under my feet and the weird shapes of the trunks and stems of the shrubs didn't make me feel like taking a snooze in that garden.

"This is all your work is it, Sagittarius?" I asked.

He nodded and kept walking.

"Original," I said. "Never seen one like it before."

Sagittarius turned then and pointed a thumb behind him. "This is the place."

We were standing in a little glade almost entirely surrounded by thick vines that curled about their trellises like snakes. On the far side of the glade I could see where some of the vines had been ripped and the trellis torn and I guessed there had been a fight. I still couldn't work out why the victim had been untied before the murderer strangled him—it must have been before, or else there wouldn't have been a fight. I checked the scene, but there

were no clues. Through the place where the trellis was torn I saw a small summerhouse, built to represent a Chinese pavilion, all red, yellow and black lacquer with high-lights picked out in gold. It didn't fit with the architecture of the house.

"What's that?" I asked the gardener.

"Nothing," he said sulkily, evidently sorry I'd seen it.

"I'll take a look at it anyway."

He shrugged but didn't offer to lead on. I moved between the trellises until I reached the pavilion. Sagittarius followed slowly. I took the short flight of wooden steps up to the veranda and tried the door. It opened. I walked in. There seemed to be only one room, a bedroom. The bed needed making and it looked as if two people had left it in a hurry. There was a pair of nylons tucked half under the pillow and a pair of man's underpants on the floor. The sheets were very white, the furnishings very oriental and rich.

Sagittarius was standing in the doorway.

"Your place?" I said.

"No." He sounded offended. "The Police Chief's."

I grinned.

Sagittarius burst into rhapsody. "The languorous scents, the very menace of the plants, the *heaviness* in the air of the garden, must surely stir the blood of even the most ancient man. This is the only place he can relax. This is what I'm employed for—why he gives me my head."

"Has this," I said, pointing to the bed, "anything to do with last night?"

"He was probably here when it happened, but I . . ." Sagittarius shook his head and I wondered if there was anything he'd meant to imply which I'd missed.

I saw something on the floor, stooped and picked it up. A pendant with the initials E.B. engraved on it in Gothic script.

"Who's E.B.?" I said.

"Only the garden interests me, Mr. Aquilinas—I do not know who she is."

I looked out at the weird garden. "Why does it interest you—what's all this for? You're not doing it to his orders, are you? You're doing it for yourself."

Sagittarius smiled bleakly. "You are astute." He waved an arm at the warm foliage that seemed more reptilian than plant and more mammalian, in its own way, than either. "You know what I see out there? I see deep-sea canyons where lost submarines cruise through a silence of twilit green, threatened by the waving tentacles of predators, half-fish, half-plant, and watched by the eyes of long-dead mermen whose blood went to feed their young; where squids and rays fight in a graceful dance of death, clouds of black ink merging with clouds of red blood, drifting to the surface, sipped at by sharks in passing, where they will be seen by mariners leaning over the rails of their ships; maddened, the mariners will fling themselves overboard to sail slowly towards those distant plant-creatures already feasting on the corpse of squid and ray. This is the world I can bring to the land—that is my ambition."

He stared at me, paused, and said: "My skull—*it's like a monstrous gold-fish bowl!*"

I nipped back to the house to find Bismarck had returned to his room. He was sitting in a plush armchair, a hidden HiFi playing, of all things, a Ravel String Quartet.

"No Wagner?" I said and then: "Who's E.B.?"

"Later," he said. "My assistant will answer your questions for the moment. He should be waiting for you outside."

There was a car parked outside the house—a battered Volkswagen containing a neatly uniformed man of below average height, a small tooth-brush moustache, a stray lock of black hair falling over his forehead, black gloves on his hands which gripped a military cane in his lap. When he saw me come out he smiled, said "Aha", and got briskly from the car to shake my hand with a slight bow.

"Adolf Hitler," he said. "Captain of Uniformed Detectives in Precinct XII. Police Chief Bismarck has put me at your service."

"Glad to hear it? Do you know much about him?"

Hitler opened the car door for me and I got in. He went round the other side, slid into the driving seat.

"The chief?" He shook his head. "He is somewhat remote. I do not know him well—there are several ranks between us. Usually my orders come from him indirectly.

This time he chose to see me himself and give me my orders."

"What were they, these orders?"

"Simply to help you in this investigation."

"There isn't much to investigate. You're completely loyal to your chief I take it?"

"Of course." Hitler seemed honestly puzzled. He started the car and we drove down the drive and out along a flat, white road, surmounted on both sides by great heaps of overgrown rubble.

"The murdered man had paper lungs, eh?" he said.

"Yes. Guess he must have come from Rome. He looked a bit like an Italian."

"Or a Jew, eh?"

"I don't think so. What made you think that?"

"The Russian watch, the Oriental shoes—the nose. That was a big nose he had. And they still have paper lungs in Moscow, you know."

His logic seemed a bit off-beat to me but I let it pass. We turned a corner and entered a residential section where a lot of buildings were still standing. I noticed that one of them had a bar in its cellar. "How about a drink?" I said.

"Here?" He seemed surprised, or maybe nervous.

"Why not?"

So he stopped the car and we went down the steps into the bar. A girl was singing. She was a plumpish brunette with a small, good voice. She was singing in English and I caught the chorus:

"Nobody's grievin' for Steven,
And Stevie ain't grievin' no more,
For Steve took his life in a prison cell,
And Johnny took a new whore."

It was the latest hit in England. We ordered beers from the bartender. He seemed to know Hitler well because he laughed and slapped him on the shoulder and didn't charge us for the beer. Hitler seemed embarrassed.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Oh, his name is Weill. I know him slightly."

"More than slightly, it looks like."

Hitler seemed unhappy and undid his uniform jacket, tilted his cap back on his head and tried unsuccessfully to push back the stray lock of hair. He looked a sad little man and I felt that maybe my habit of asking questions was out of line here. I drank my beer and watched the singer. Hitler kept his back to her but I noticed she kept looking at him.

"What do you know about this Sagittarius?" I asked.

Hitler shrugged. "Very little."

Weill turned up again behind the bar and asked us if we wanted more beer. We said we didn't.

"Sagittarius?" Weill spoke up brightly. "Are you talking about that crank?"

"He's a crank, is he?" I said.

"That's not fair, Kurt," Hitler said. "He's a brilliant man, a biologist—"

"Who was thrown out of his job because he was insane!"

"That is unkind, Kurt," Hitler said reprovingly. "He was investigating the potential sentience of plant-life. A perfectly reasonable line of scientific enquiry."

From the corner of the room someone laughed jeeringly. It was a shaggy-haired old man sitting by himself with a glass of schnapps on the little table in front of him.

Weill pointed at him. "Ask Albert. He knows about science."

Hitler pursed his lips and looked at the floor. "He's just an embittered old mathematics teacher—he's jealous of Felipe," he said quietly, so that the old man wouldn't hear.

"Who is he?" I asked Weill.

"Albert? A *really* brilliant man. He has never had the recognition he deserves. Do you want to meet him?"

But the shaggy man was leaving. He waved a hand at Hitler and Weill. "Kurt, Captain Hitler—good day."

"Good day, Doctor Einstein," muttered Hitler. He turned to me. "Where would you like to go now?"

"A tour of the places that sell jewellery, I guess," I said, fingering the pendant in my pocket. "I may be on the wrong track altogether, but it's the only track I can find at the moment."

We toured the jewellers. By night-fall we were nowhere nearer finding out who had owned the thing. I'd just have

to get the truth out of Bismarck the next day, though I knew it wouldn't be easy. He wouldn't like answering my personal questions at all. Hitler dropped me off at the Precinct House where a cell had been converted into a bedroom for me.

I sat on the hard bed smoking and thinking. I was just about to get undressed and go to sleep when I started to think about the bar we'd been in earlier. I was sure someone there could help me. On impulse I left the cell and went out into the deserted street. It was still very hot and the sky was full of heavy clouds. Looked like a storm was due.

I got a cab back to the bar. It was still open.

Weill wasn't serving there now—he was playing the piano-accordion for the same girl singer I'd seen earlier. He nodded to me as I came in. I leant on the bar and ordered a beer from the barman.

When the number was over Weill unstrapped his accordion and joined me. The girl followed him.

"Adolf not with you?" he said.

"He went home. He's a good friend of yours, is he?"

"Oh, we met years ago in Austria. He's a nice man, you know. He should never have become a policeman, he's too mild."

"That's the impression I got. Why did he ever join in the first place?"

Weill smiled and shook his head. He was a short, thin man, wearing heavy glasses. He had a large, sensitive mouth. "Sense of duty, perhaps. He has a great sense of duty. He is very religious, too—a devout Catholic. I think that weighs on him. You know these converts, they accept nothing, are torn by their consciences. I never yet met a happy Catholic convert."

"He seems to have a thing about Jews."

Weill frowned. "What sort of thing? I've never really noticed. Many of his friends are Jews. I am, and Sagittarius . . . ."

"Sagittarius is a friend of his?"

"Oh, more an acquaintance I should think. I've seen them together a couple of times."

It began to thunder outside. Then it started to rain.

Weill walked towards the door and began to pull down

the blind. Through the noise of the storm I heard another sound, a strange, metallic grinding sound, a crunching sound.

"What's that?" I called. Weill shook his head and walked back towards the bar. The place was empty now. "I'm going to have a look," I said.

I went to the door, opened it, and climbed the steps.

Marching across the ruins, illuminated by rapid flashes of lightning like gunfire, I saw a gigantic metal monster, as big as a tall building. Supported on four telescopic legs, it lumbered at right angles to the street. From its huge body and head the snouts of guns stuck out in all directions. Lightning sometimes struck it and it made an ear-shattering bell-like clang, paused to fire upwards at the source of the lightning, and march on.

I ran down the steps and flung open the door. Weill was tidying up the bar. I described what I'd seen.

"What is it, Weill?"

The short man shook his head. "I don't know. At a guess it is something Berlin's conquerors left behind."

"It looked as if it was made here . . ."

"Perhaps it was. After all, who conquered Berlin—?"

A woman screamed from a back room, high and brief.

Weill dropped a glass and ran towards the room. I followed.

He opened a door. The room was homely. A table covered by a thick, dark cloth, laid with salt and pepper, knives and forks, a piano near the window, a girl lying on the floor.

"Eva!" Weill gasped, kneeling beside the body.

I gave the room another once over. Standing on a small coffee table was a plant. It looked at first rather like a cactus of unpleasantly mottled green, though the top curved so that it resembled a snake about to strike. An eyeless, noseless snake—with a mouth. There was a mouth. It opened as I approached. There were teeth in the mouth—or rather thorns arranged the way teeth are. One thorn seemed to be missing near the front. I backed away from the plant and inspected the corpse. I found the thorn in her wrist. I left it there.

"She is dead," Weill said softly, standing up and looking around. "How?"

"She was bitten by that poisonous plant," I said.

"Plant . . . ? I must call the police."

"That wouldn't be wise at this stage maybe," I said as I left. I knew where I was going.

Bismarck's house—and the pleasure garden of Felipe Sagittarius.

It took me time to find a cab and I was soaked through when I did. I told the cabby to step on it.

I had the cab stop before we got to the house, paid it off and walked across the lawns. I didn't bother to ring the doorbell. I let myself in by the window, using my pocket glass-cutter.

I heard voices coming from upstairs. I followed the sound until I located it—Bismarck's study. I inched the door open.

Hitler was there. He had a gun pointed at Otto von Bismarck who was still in full uniform. They both looked pale. Hitler's hand was shaking and Bismarck was moaning slightly.

Bismarck stopped moaning to say pleadingly. "I wasn't blackmailing Eva Braun, you fool—she liked me."

Hitler laughed curtly, half hysterically. "Like *you*—a fat old man."

"She liked fat old men."

"She wasn't that kind of girl."

"Who told you this, anyway?"

"The investigator told me some. And Weill rang me half an hour ago to tell me some more—also that Eva had been killed. I thought Sagittarius was my friend. I was wrong. He is your hired assassin. Well, tonight I intend to do my own killing."

"Captain Hitler—I am your superior officer!"

The gun wavered as Bismarck's voice recovered some of its authority. I realised that the HiFi had been playing quietly all the time. Curiously it was Bartok's 5th String Quartet.

Bismarck moved his hand. "You are completely mistaken. That man you hired to follow Eva here last night—he was Eva's ex-lover!"

Hitler's lip trembled.

"You knew," said Bismarck.

"I suspected it."

"You also knew the dangers of the garden, because Felipe had told you about them. The vines killed him as he sneaked towards the summer house."

The gun steadied. Bismarck looked scared.

He pointed at Hitler. "You killed him—not I!" he screamed. "You sent him to his death. You killed Stalin—out of jealousy. You hoped he would kill me and Eva first. You were too frightened, too weak, to confront any of us openly!"

Hitler shouted wordlessly, put both hands to the gun and pulled the trigger several times. Some of the shots went wide, but one hit Bismarck in his Iron Cross pierced it and got him in the heart. He fell backwards and as he did so his uniform ripped apart and his helmet fell off. I ran into the room and took the gun from Hitler who was crying. I checked that Bismarck was dead. I saw what had caused the uniform to rip open. He had been wearing a corset—one of the bullets must have cut the cord. It was a heavy corset and had had a lot to hold in.

I felt sorry for Hitler. I helped him sit down as he sobbed. He looked small and wretched.

"What have I killed?" he stuttered. "What have I killed?"

"Did Bismarck send that plant to Eva Braun to silence her because I was getting too close?"

Hitler nodded, snorted and started to cry again.

I put the gun on the mantelpiece.

I looked towards the door. A man stood there, hesitantly. It was Sagittarius.

He nodded to me.

"Hitler's just shot Bismarck," I explained.

"So it appears," he said.

"Bismarck had you send Eva Braun that plant, is that so?" I said.

"Yes. A beautiful cross between a common cactus, a Venus Flytrap and a rose—the venom was curare, of course."

Hitler got up and walked from the room. We watched him leave. He was still sniffling.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To get some air," I heard him say as he went down the stairs.

"The repression of sexual desires," said Sagittarius seating himself in an armchair and resting his feet comfortably on Bismarck's corpse. "It is the cause of so much trouble. If only the passions that lie beneath the surface, the desires that are locked in the mind could be allowed to range free, what a better place the world would be."

"Maybe," I said.

"Are you going to make any arrests, Herr Aquilinas?"

"It's my job to make a report on my investigation, not to make arrests," I said.

"Will there be any repercussions concerned with this business?"

I laughed. "There are always repercussions," I told him.

From the garden came a peculiar barking noise.

"What's that?" I asked. "The wolfhounds?"

Sagittarius giggled. "No, no—the dog-plant, I fear."

I ran out of the room and down the stairs until I reached the kitchen. The sheet-covered corpse was still lying on the table. I was going to open the door on to the garden when I stopped and pressed my face to the window instead.

The whole garden was moving in what appeared to be an agitated dance. Foliage threshed about and, even with the door closed, the strange scent was even less bearable than it had been earlier.

I thought I saw a figure struggling with some thick-boled shrubs. I heard a growling noise, a tearing sound, a scream and a long drawn out groan.

Suddenly the garden was motionless.

I turned. Sagittarius stood behind me, his hands folded on his chest, his eyes staring down at the floor.

"It seems your dog-plant got him," I said.

"He knew me—he knew the garden."

"Suicide maybe?"

"Very likely." Sagittarius unfolded his hands and looked up at me. "I liked him, you know. He was something of a protégé. If you had not interfered none of this might have happened. He might have gone far with me to guide him."

"You'll find other protégés," I said.

"Let us hope so."

The sky outside began to lighten imperceptibly. The rain was now only a drizzle, falling on the thirsty leaves of the plants in the garden.

"Are you going to stay on here?" I asked him.

"Yes—I have the garden to work on. Bismarck's servants will look after me."

"I guess they will," I said.

I went back up the stairs and walked out of that house into the dawn, cold and rain-washed. I turned up my collar and began to climb across the ruins.

STORY RATINGS No. 152

1	Lone Zone	... *Charles Platt*
2	Night of the Gyul	... *Colin Fry*
3	The Leveller	...*Langdon Jones*
4	Supercity	... *Brian Aldiss*
5	A Light in the Sky	*Richard Gordon*
6	The Silent Ship	*E. C. Williams*
7	A Funny Thing Happened ...	... *D. Richardson*

NEXT MONTH concludes the adventures of Bill, the Galactic Hero and Bob Shaw returns with his first new story for some time . . . *And Isles Where Good Men Lie.* Also in No. 155 you will find two outstandingly different stories by new writers David Harvey and William Barclay, plus two excellent shorts by R. M. Bennett and Daphne Castell.

ROBERT SILVERBERG
AT THE END OF DAYS

THE OLD MAN sat quietly at the edge of the hillside, watching the sun slowly drop behind the blunt purplish hills to the west. A cool night breeze drifted up from the distant river. He pulled his wrap closer around him ; in these days, at his age, a chill was to be guarded against.

Not that it mattered very much, the old man thought wearily. A hundred forty years was long enough. He had no desire to live forever. Some of the young ones did ; they went from rejuvenation to rejuvenation, fanning life back again and again into outworn bodies.

Not him. He had taken two treatments, one at fifty, the other at one hundred. In ten years, if he lasted that long, he would be eligible for a third treatment. But he would refuse it. He had come to the end of days, and Earth with him. By the grace of the Cosmos he would die tonight or tomorrow or next week, and they would put his ashes into the urn labelled TOMAS NARIN, 31116-31256, and that would be all.

Certainly a hundred forty years was enough, he thought, as the twilight colours stained the stubby mountains. He had lived long enough to see the twilight of man's culture ; he had no craving to watch the last feeble flicker. It was nearly thirty thousand years since Man had gone forth to the stars. Not a particularly long time, as cultures went ; the Neanderthals had lasted three times as long.

But now it was over, nearly. The culture had lost its vitality, had gone past the self-regenerating stage. Some refused to admit that the end had come ; others, like Narin, waited quietly for it.

In the distance a song was rising. The young people were amusing themselves. Narin smiled cynically at the phrase: *the young people*.

The young people were sixty and seventy years old. Fresh from their first rejuvenation, full of false life. They would be the last. No one bore children on Earth any more. The

last child born was now close to fifty. Due for his first treatment soon, Narin thought.

Why have children? It was a dying civilization. No more than a few thousand still lived on Earth. The rest were gone, out *there* somewhere. Man was finished. Narin wondered what it had been like in the old days, when wonders sprouted new every day.

The wind whistled. Narin felt the chill, and decided that perhaps time had come for him to rise and go in. He would miss the rest of a lovely sunset, but that scarcely mattered. How many thousands of sunsets had he watched?

A sudden flash of light caught his eye, not far below the terrace. A brief golden glow, becoming brighter and brighter. Colours whirled in a vortex.

Then a boy stood there, looking uncertainly around.

Narin smiled. The boy was thin and wore only a gay cloth round his waist. His arms and skinny legs were deeply tanned. He looked to be no more than ten or eleven, though Narin had difficulty in judging a child's age after so many years.

The old man said, "You'll catch cold dressed like that, boy!"

Startled, the boy whirled, blinking in surprise. He caught sight of Narin on the terrace above him. "Oh—hello, old man. I won't catch cold. I'm not staying long, you see."

The boy's intonation was strange, his vowel sounds oddly blurred. But still, Narin thought, they had understood each other perfectly.

"Come up here, boy. I want to talk to you."

Spiderlike, the boy scampered up the hillside, vaulting agilely over the railing of Narin's terrace. He landed deftly, feet-first, and saluted.

"Where are you from?" Narin asked.

"Rigel Six, sir. My name's Jorid Dason. I'm eleven years old."

Narin nodded. His guess had been accurate. "Tell me—how did you get here?"

"By quadrature, of course!"

"Quadrature?"

"Sure. You fix your co-ordinates and do the spin, and the overlapping brings you across. Don't you know?"

"No," Narin said. "I don't. It brings you here immediately?"

"Of course."

Narin had forgotten how far away Rigel was; but certainly it was a journey of many weeks, even by the fastest nullwarp ship. Yet the boy—unless he lied—had crossed space in a moment, a twinkling.

The boy said, "You mean you don't know about quadrature on Earth? This *is* Earth, isn't it?"

"Yes," Narin said. "This is Earth."

The boy did a little dance. "Then there really *is* such a place! Wait till I tell them!"

"Who?"

"Rikki, Nuuri. My friends. They live on Deneb Nine. I was visiting them yesterday and they said there wasn't any such place as Earth, that it was all made up like the other old legends. But this really is Earth." For the first time the boy seemed to notice the chill. "It's cold here. I'd better get back. 'Bye, mister."

The boy skipped over the railing and danced away, down the brown and dry hillside. Halfway down he leaped into the air, and performed a complicated little wriggle, and was gone.

Narin shook his head slowly. A dream? An old man's drowsy fantasy? No, he was not yet that far gone. It had been real. Out in the stars they had invented instantaneous transport, but nobody had bothered to tell Earth about it. Of course not; Earth was only a hazy half-legend.

Narin shrugged. His pessimistic mood lifted. He saw now that he had written Mankind off prematurely—that Earth's last lingerers might be faded and forgotten, but that the race of man still thrived, tanned and energetic, on a thousand worlds. It was too bad the boy had left so soon. There were questions Narin wished he had asked. Well, perhaps he would come back some day, bringing his playmates along to show them that there really was such a place as Earth.

The wind had grown colder. Old Narin rose to go inside. The sun had set; the hills were dark, and grey clouds hung in the blackening sky. But, bright as a billion candles, the stars were beginning to shine.

PETER WHITE
BRIAN ALDISS

MUCH OF TODAY'S science fiction fails because it is not truly contemporary. Apart, perhaps, from a superficial topicality, it rarely contains any real response to here and now. Although approaching things differently from the mainstream writer, the sf writer must be *alive* to the present; and, whether loving it or hating it, certainly not apathetic. There are several writers who are trying to achieve this, and break away from the limitations of conventional sf, and the two most important writers in this small group are both men working in Britain. J. G. Ballard's heroes, hysterical, obsessed with nostalgic responses, and fighting the stereotyped motives of their inner-selves as they wander across the surface of vast evaporated lakes, are—symbolically at least—figures that belong as unmistakeably to the present as the screaming Popes in the paintings of Francis Bacon.

In a somewhat different way, Brian Aldiss is also a writer who expresses a powerful response to modern life.

Aldiss has not always been this kind of artist, for his aims have changed somewhat since he began writing, and it is possible to follow this development in his work. He is blazing a trail that leads away from science fiction as it is today: away from the contrived action of the sf thriller, and the contrived problems of the sf brain-teaser, towards a more serious—and more fully entertaining—form of writing. He says himself: "At first, in the *Space, Time and Nathaniel* era, I just wanted to be clever. Now I want to try and get an insight into life. I still want to be clever too . . ."

His earliest stories adhered to the strict logic-conventions of 'pure sf'. He says he saw science fiction as "A kind of poetry," and his stories were as formal as classical verse. *T*, first published in 1956, and the first of his stories to be accepted for publication (though published after some others had already appeared), was about semi-sentient missiles that travelled in time. It cleverly avoided any time-

paradox by assuming a rigidly deterministic universe in much the same way as Heinlein's similar stories. As a contrast, the well known *Poor Little Warrior*, published two years later, is another time-travel story, but concerns itself with the nature of a human being rather than the nature of time. It would be quite wrong to suggest that this represents a simple and orderly progression, for Aldiss's work has moved in idiosyncratic jumps, and he occasionally produces work today that is similar to his earliest material. However, it is true to say that he is now primarily interested in character, whereas his main interest used to be the plot.

Now, as before, he is very interested in writing itself, and he is probably one of the most talented stylists writing sf. With less fireworks than many mainstream writers of no more talent, Aldiss is able to command a large variety of moods with his prose. He is unafraid of lyricism, and perfectly prepared to write about the abstract without sentimentality. He has a genuine depth of feeling, as in this passage from *Non-Stop*:

> I could sit here forever. The breeze so slight, never changing its temperature, the light only seldom dark. The ponics rearing up and failing, decaying around me. I should come to no harm but death . . .
>
> Only if I stay alive can I find the something missing, the big something. Perhaps now I'll never find it, or Gwenny could have found it for me—no she couldn't: she was a substitute for it, admit it. Perhaps it does not exist. But when something so big has nonexistence, that in itself is existence. A hole. A wall. As the priest says, there's been a calamity.
>
> Get up, you weak fool . . .

But his style is not without its faults ; puns and aphoristic cliches often intrude into the most serious passages. *The Dark Light Years*—meant to expose the prudery behind the current bidet sales boom—failed largely because of this kind of fault. It is almost as if Aldiss becomes self-conscious when he takes himself seriously, and is forced to lower the tension with a self-deprecatory joke. The key to this may lie in his attitude to the genre. He says: "I don't write sf as a stunt. Often I long to write so write something else ; but I write sf naturally. It is a vile medium, but it allows me to express myself most fully until I can break through into a larger formula ; this is what I am

trying to do now, but it means finding my own precedents. If only I could be satisfied with my limitations, I would produce more homogenous work ; but one day I will produce something splendid." Behind the sardonic humour is a man who may well do just that.

He has also said that many of his early works were therapeutic fantasies, in which he worked off his petty neuroses. In stories such as *Outside* and *The New Father Christmas* there is an almost hysterical sense of isolation and ennui. *Dumb Show* is the best of these, and must be amongst the most lyrical horror stories written. Aldiss claims to have run out of phobias around the time of *Space, Time and Nathaniel*, and is now concerned with writing itself—art, if you like—rather than self-therapy.

The phobias may have gone, but the major obsessions remain. Although Aldiss himself might dispute it, most of his work is pessimistic in the final analysis. The general feeling of much of his work is summed up in this section from *Never Let Go of My Hand*:

> Throughout the teeming multitudes of dimensions and alternate universes, spawned as prodigally as daisies, as various as fingerprints, some factors, nevertheless, are common everywhere: they rule unaltered among the general diversity. Among such universals is love, possibly; fear, probably; death, certainly.

However much he may attack the priggish inhumanity of beaurocrats, moralists, and politicians, and suggest that we should take life as it comes, he always deals with sadness more vividly than joy, and his very choice of subjects is mournful. Many of his heroes, such as Roy Complain in *Non-Stop*, and Knowle Noland in *Earthworks*, are intelligent plebeians ; too repressed to be earthy, and without the well-bred grace to be aristocratic. Filled with a vague sense of loss, they search for a better life. Nearly every one of his major novels takes the form of a quest without any real conclusion. Perhaps it is this that makes his writing seem so valid to the world now, where the bright lights, dark and crowded dance halls, high-speed along the bypass, casual sex and beat music, all seem like drugs to keep us going until we can get hold of something real. Like Kingsley Amis, Aldiss tends to write about limited people, bored by their environments.

Non-Stop appeared in novel form in 1958. In it the hero, accompanied by the cynical priest Marapper, sets out to explore his universe. They find that they are trapped on a vast interstellar ship. The novel ends in desperate uncertainty when the vessel disintegrates, leaving the fate of the voyagers in doubt. *Hothouse*, published in 1962, is a lyrical adventure set in the remote future. At the conclusion, the hero feels that the best course of action is to wait passively —without thought or movement—for the universe to end.

The recently published novel, *Greybeard*, also ends on a note of doubt when the hero is forced to re-examine his own motives. Particularly noteworthy in this novel is the way Aldiss contrasts the tetchy noisiness of the decaying oldsters with the quiet reversion of the countryside to hawthorn and flood-meadow. If it weren't for the rather annoyingly conventional use of flashback, this would be an almost perfect work.

The best novel Aldiss has written is the non science-fictional *The Male Response*, published in 1961. It is a novel of sex, and concerns the struggles of an innocent Englishman to adapt to the freer life of an emergent African state. Eventually the hero dies from a nastily symbolic snake-bite. Aldiss seems to be saying that it is already too late for our prim society to throw off its inhibitions, and that the attempt could well be fatal.

He is at his most original when writing lyrically rather than dramatically—as in *Old Hundredth* and *A Kind of Artistry*—but is less concerned with the search for new ideas than with doing things well; which is in itself a kind of originality.

Born 40 years ago at Dereham, Norfolk, within a stone's throw of F. L. Fanthorpe, Aldiss was educated first at "a vile prep school", and later at Framlingham College, and West Buckland School. He wrote pornography at school, did a section magazine in the army, and at home wrote stories to amuse the family. After this, writing for outsiders and getting published seemed hardly different from what had gone before. He is now literary editor of the *Oxford Mail*, which takes up most of his time, though he does like sitting and chatting in bars. Although an unhappy private life has undoubtedly influenced his work, he remains a

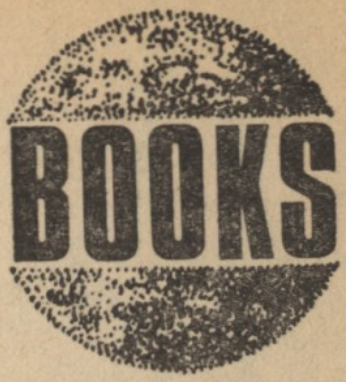
generally extrovert personality, and particularly enjoys travelling abroad. He feels that he has changed himself through writing: ". . . you have to be searching to write a novel, and whatever comes to light either withers and dies or flourishes."

He is a little shy of discussing the influences on his work, and his own statement on this subject seems rather like an unconscious red-herring: "Thomas Hardy influenced me, so did Samuel Johnson and a thousand English poets. So did the tripe in boys' magazines." But among the most visible influences upon him has been the writing of Anthony Burgess; *The Male Response* shows this most clearly, in theme, treatment, and setting. The two writers know each other, and show a mutual interest in each other's work, and Aldiss prefers the term "cross-fertilisation" to the word "influence". He feels that a writer cannot help reading with prejudice, and tends to go to those people who offer him something. This means that Aldiss is particularly interested in writers such as Vonnegut and Ballard, though he also enjoys the work of Asimov and Harry Harrison: "The only man who writes with the old slam-bang zest of the forties and makes you laugh and makes sense."

He is able to ignore scientific inaccuracy, but finds it more difficult to forgive authors the "enormous psychological bloomers" one finds in so much science fiction. Certainly he has always shown a natural sense of character and psychology in his own stories. In general fiction, he admires Amis, Burgess, and Anthony Powell. Over the next few years he plans to re-read all Dickens' novels in chronological order.

After completing *Cities and Stones*, which is subtitled *A Traveller's Yugoslavia*, his next novel may be called *Environs*. It will be the second book in the *Earthworks* series, coming first chronologically, and dealing with the setting up of the platform cities. As for the far future, Aldiss says: "I wish to continue to write as I want, and to be published, and to earn a reasonable income, and perhaps in this way to make a contribution to the rich and wonderful culture into which I was born and which, despite all its horrors, never ceases to delight me day by day."

AN OUTSTANDING SPACE STORY



James Colvin

AN EXAMPLE OF what the space story can do in the hands of a really good writer is the recently re-issued *Non-Stop* by Brian W. Aldiss (Faber Paperback, 7s. 6d.). I first read this when it appeared in 1958 and thought it excellent. Today I am possibly more critical of sf than I was then. I still find *Non-Stop* excellent. Here the space setting contributes to the atmosphere of loss and bewilderment experienced by the characters. It is completely gripping on a second reading and the writing and characterisation is outstanding in the sf field. The action takes place entirely in a huge spaceship which is apparently on a generations-long voyage through space. The passengers have reverted to barbarism. A small party of these near-primitives, including the introspective hero Roy Complain, set out to explore the ship. The pace is even and speedy, new discoveries are constantly made, new images presented to the reader. There is suspense, but interest is never maintained artificially. In the manner of a good detective story Mr. Aldiss presents us with many clues to the true state of affairs concerning the ship and its passengers. The characters are individuals, clearly defined and, unlike many such stories, the plot appears convincingly to stem from the actions of the people involved. Fresh twists to the plot come with satisfying regularity and only the final sequence seems a trifle rushed. This is a very minor fault in a piece of very good science fiction. I am looking forward to *The Best of Brian Aldiss* to be published in the same series in a few months.

Other paperbacks received include *Best SF Four*, edited by Edmund Crispin (Faber Paperback, 6s. 6d.). To the regular SF reader most of these stories are familiar favourites—*Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, *A Subway Named Möbius* by A. J. Deutsch, *It's A* Good *Life* by

Jerome Bixby, *Balaam* by Anthony Boucher, *Psyclops* by Brian W. Aldiss, *Hobbyist* by Eric Frank Russell, and others. To the new reader many of them should be very entertaining. Personally I found the collection only average in general standard.

New Writings in SF Three is now available in a Corgi edition (3s. 6d.). Edited by John Carnell, this is perhaps the best of the series so far to be issued in paperback. It has already been review in NWSF and includes stories by Colin Kapp, Frederick Pohl, James Schmitz, Keith Roberts, John Baxter and others. Also from Corgi at 3s. 6d. is *The Dark Mind* by Colin Kapp. Billed as 'an exciting new science fiction discovery,' Kapp is heavily in debt to Alfred Bester's *Tiger, Tiger!* in this novel. His visual imagination is above average but his handling of character and dialogue is poor in the extreme and his technique, where it is his own, does not match his imagination or his ability to come up with convincing scientific ideas. One is inclined to feel that the author should spend much more time studying his craft before attempting his next novel.

James Colvin

CUTTING PAST THE DEFENCES

J. G. BALLARD'S *The Drought* (Jonathan Cape, 21s.) is a slightly different version of the edition published by Berkley Books in the United States under the title *The Burning World*.

It is an intellectual and visionary novel of marvellously sustained power and conviction, resembling in some ways Patrick White's *Voss*, reminding one constantly of the burning landscapes of the best surrealist painters. Its approach to Time and Space produces a sense of the ultimate merging of physics and metaphysics in that intensely individual way of Ballard's, where grotesque, tormented characters inhabit and reflect a bright nightmare world that is at once unreal and yet real in the sense that it totally convinces on the level of the unconscious, cutting past the defences of

the outer mind and reaching the core of the inner mind, evoking responses that the reader did not know he had and, perhaps, does not understand even as he experiences them. This is a novel which is hard to review in the normal reviewer's terms. It effects one like an hallucinogenic drug and although plot and characterisation are there, the visions dominate. It has ceased to rain, cities burn, rivers and lakes evaporate, the earth turns to desert and, still living in his houseboat, Dr. Ransom contemplates the true meaning of the change, fails to communicate its significance to the others with whom he comes in contact—Philip Jordan the wild Swan Youth, Catherine Austen who identifies herself with the lions she releases from the zoo, Lomax the sinister, mocking dandy, Miranda his depraved sister and Quilter the deformed half-wit:

> For five minutes Quilter sat on the crest of the dune, occasionally patting his furs. His mother chattered away, touching her son tentatively with her little hands. At one point Quilter reached up to the swan's neck, dangling in front of his right eye, and pulled off the head-dress. Beneath it his scalp was bald, and the thick red hair sprang from the margins of a huge tonsure.
>
> Then, without a word, he jumped to his feet. With a brief gesture to them he strode off on his stilts across the sand, the furs and dressing-gown lifting behind him like tattered wings.

Quilter, like all the characters but Ransom himself, are creatures of fantasy; not of fantasy fiction, but the deep, archetypal fantasies which form a mutual link between us all.

The Drought is refreshing, original and an authentic creative work which, in its own terms, can only be emulated, one suspects, by Mr. Ballard himself.

James Colvin

All correspondence to
The Editor,
NEW WORLDS SF,
17, Lake House,
Scovell Road,
London, S.E.1.

To succumb to the stamp-collectors

Dear Sir,

You asked recently for views on the 'Anything goes' policy. My own opinion is that since it is impossible to segregate science fiction from 'mainstream' literature, it is equally impossible to say of some stories: this is, or is not, sf. The nearest one can come to a distinction is by assessing the 'feel' of a story. To impose any tangible limits on an sf magazine is to succumb to the stamp-collectors who wish sf to remain as it was, an inbred, highly-formalised, minor medium. Many good sf stories are often found to be on the borderline. Sometimes the author's attempt to impart a touch of sf to his story is the only bad thing about it. Thus Aldiss's 'stock' ending to his piece in the 150th issue merely inspired a yawn, whilst one was fascinated by the mature writing and construction of the bulk of the story, a story which needed no such ending. This is not an abnegation of sf, but it does illustrate the advantages that an express 'anything goes' policy would bring, i.e., exclusion of too much overt 'sf-ish' gadgetry and writing. I believe that you are attempting to put this into practice at the moment, but the attitude of compromise must go eventually ; serials like E. C. Tubb's are neither of the standard nor the type which you profess to attain to . . . Your magazine should also be larger. Stories *and* features are rather compressed in 128 pages. I suppose this is the best compliment you could receive.

P. Johnson, Sherwood Hall, University Park, Nottingham.

Telepathist

Dear Sir,

The review Langdon Jones gave to *Telepathist* is so kind I hate having to point out that there are a couple of facts he got wrong. He says: 'The book consists of three short stories dating from 1958 to 1959'. Actually it doesn't. There were only two Gerry Howson yarns—novelettes—published confusingly under three titles, of which the second, disapproved of by the American magazine editor, survives as the title of the American edition of this final book: *The Whole Man*. Of these, the first has dwindled to pp. 143-159, twenty thousand words compressed into about four. That was *City of the Tiger*. The other, completely rewritten, is sandwiched around it to make Book Three, 'Mens'—except that barring p. 115 the whole of the first seventeen chapters are original material: i.e., the first two Books and part of the third as well. By the way, that's a nice cover on 151. I can't find the credit, and it deserves one.

John Brunner, 17d Frognal, London, N.W.3.

We think it deserves one, too, but the transparency was submitted through an agency who didn't tell us the photographer's name.

The Life Buyer

Dear Sir,

I have just finished reading NWSF 151. E. C. Tubb's *The Life Buyer* didn't disappoint. In fact, taken as a whole it was a stormer. I like this tough approach to this type of story, and his characters really live. I can believe in them. More Tubb, by all means.

Edward Mackin, 17 Oxford Street, Liverpool 7.

We thank the many people who wrote letters about NWSF 150 and regret that space did not allow us to publish a selection as we had hoped.

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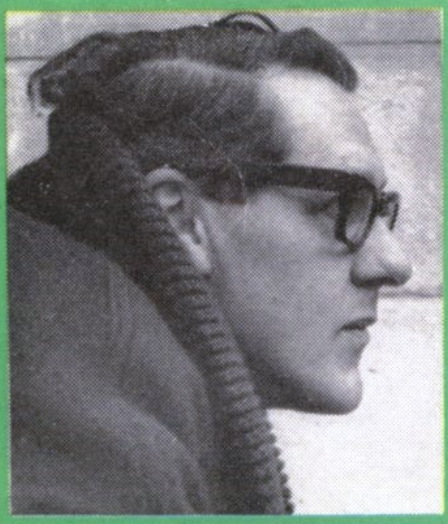
IN THIS ISSUE

NEW WORLDS

BRIAN ALDISS is this year's guest of honour at the World Science Fiction Conference.



One of our finest modern sf writers, he well deserves this. Here we publish two new stories by him. Also we give you appreciations of him by Edmund Crispin and Peter White.

Plus **HARRY HARRISON's**
A Dip in the Swimming Pool Reactor

and a brilliant story by new writer
DAVID MASSON—Traveller's Rest

and original stories by **Robert Silverberg** and **James Colvin**
and our usual features