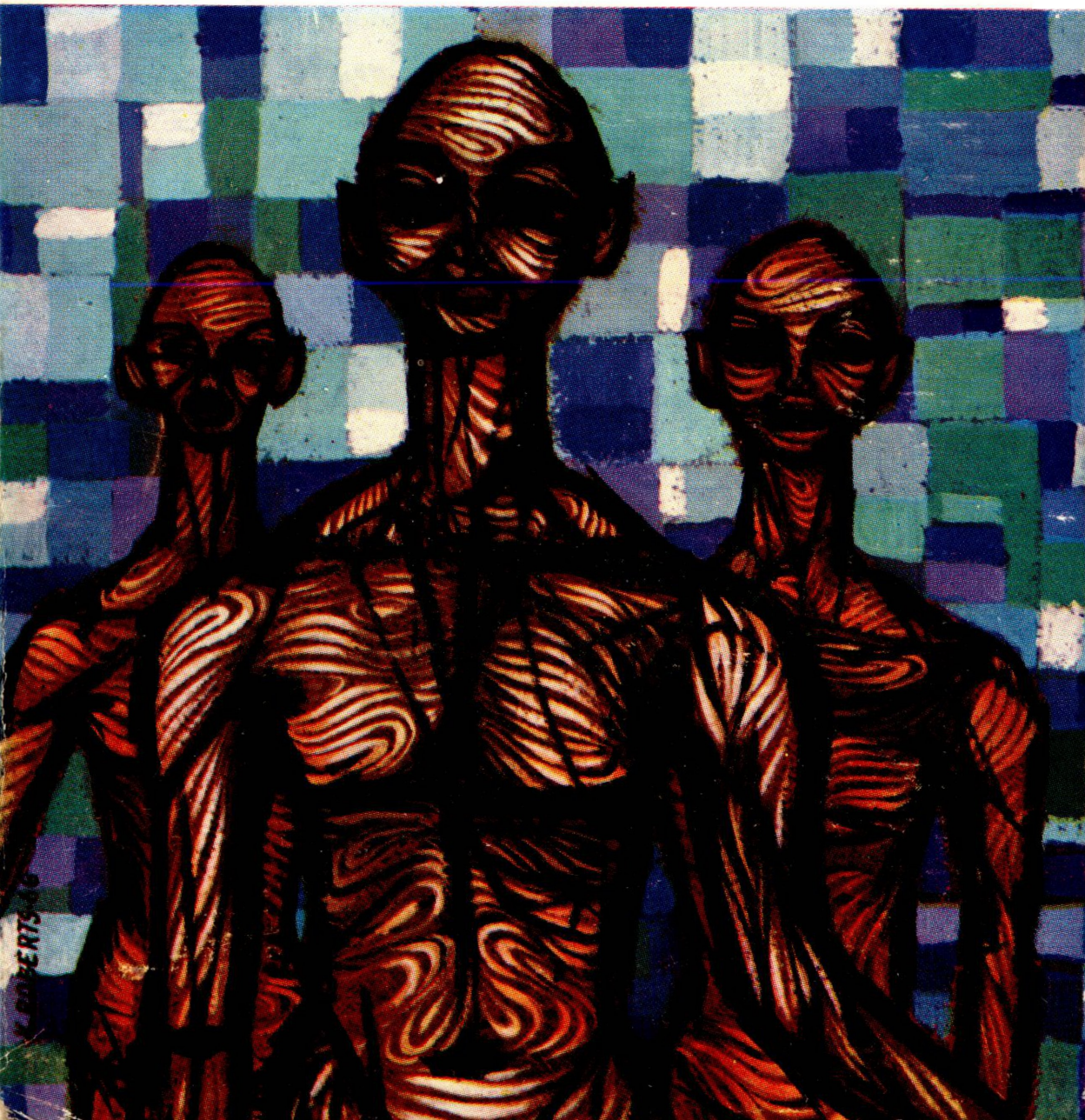
COMPACT SF

NEW WORLDS 3/6

BRIAN W. ALDISS

AMEN AND OUT

Irreverent, thought-provoking stuff that only Aldiss can do well



NEW WORLDS SF

Vol. 49 No. 165 AUGUST 1966

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Guest Editorial

THE ALPHAVILLAINS

John Brunner

LET'S GET ONE thing straight to start with. *Alphaville* is a disgracefully bad film, reflecting no credit to anybody —especially not on those critics who have puffed it as a major artistic achievement.

Showing precisely why it's so bad would be beyond the compass of a review like this one. All I have space for is to describe the most glaring of its shortcomings: inconsistency amounting to downright sloppiness.

I'm at a loss to tell why it should have turned out this way. Its central conception, while in no way original, is one which has yielded major works of art in other hands than Godard's. Its theme is dehumanization, an obsession of the French intellectual. Its setting is contemporary Paris from the most with-it modern buildings to the sleaziest back-alley hotels, called for the purposes of the film "Alphaville", a city in which the latest of a succession of giant computers devised by the evil Dr. von Braun so far dominates the lives of the inhabitants that when it is disabled they become blind. Superficially this looks like a powerful parable of our subservience to the technological environment we have created. One would expect a director with a reputation like Godard's to interpret it in memorable characters, compelling events and vivid images.

We get a few of these last. The rest is hokum.

What is one to call this picture? It certainly is not science fiction even in the loosest sense of that term. A narrative founded on so thin an argument and developed with such minimal regard for observable human nature would have guaranteed a rejection slip from any competent editor since about 1930. (On the other hand Chris

Marker's *La Jetée*, sharing the bill with it at the Academy, is inarguably sf: an ingenious attempt to convey the feeling of time-travel. Despite being far shorter and much less pretentious—it's composed of still photographs—it overshadows *Alphaville* completely).

I have seen it described as "the first successful incursion of pop art into the cinema". This is rubbish—it's not in the same league as, for example, *Help!* It is, perhaps, sub-Cocteau with pop overtones, but this is the kindest term I can apply.

Without the taut inner logic which transcends the literal and makes symbols so evocative that they speak direct to us, moral fantasy is no more than random association. The picture is crawling with symbols, but they are scattered as if from a saltcellar, unrelatedly.

Let me tackle the nonsensical proposition upon which Godard rests his main thesis: that his hero is "free and whole" while the people of Alphaville are being reduced to cogs.

The governments of the "Outer Countries"—or galaxies: they are interchangeable to Godard—have sent a string of secret agents including Flash Gordon (!) to Alphaville under orders either to argue von Braun into a change of heart or to destroy the computer. Latest of these is Lemmy Caution (Peter Cheyney fans will kindly leave the cinema), played by Eddie Constantine, whose craggy, wooden face makes him seem far more robotic than any of the local citizenry including von Braun himself.

We are invited to identify with him as our champion of art and humanity versus the authoritarianism of Alphaville. He makes much play with Paul Eluard's *La Capitale de la Douleur*, reading the poems from it with every appearance of acute indigestion, and confuses the giant computer by offering it high-sounding phrases reminiscent of the radio messages in Cocteau's *Orphée*, supposed to be "poetic" and hence beyond the capacity of a logical machine to cope with.

Yet his first action upon arrival is to shoot a man who intrudes into his hotel suite, and thereafter his behaviour exactly parallels Goering's. The *Reichsmarschall's* dictum was, "When I hear the word culture I reach for my gun." When Lemmy Caution meets an argument he cannot re-

but, he shoots the arguer. No kidding. He has neither sensitivity—his seduction of von Braun's daughter is as arbitrary as a snap of the fingers—nor, which is far worse, compassion. The teeming millions of Alphaville under the régime of their computer exhibit no such slavish, heartless obedience as does the hero when, in compliance with orders from his government, he blinds the entire population to facilitate his escape.

I think this is an evil film. The one consolation is that its impact is largely undermined by its sloppiness. Let me give a single example. The dialogue is crowded with references to galaxies and lightyears (which Godard thinks are a measure of time); accordingly when Caution is asked by the giant computer what sort of car he drives, he answers, "A Ford Galaxie." Yet he has been shown driving up to his hotel in a Ford Mustang.

This comparatively trivial instance is representative of the total approach of Godard to his film. If it is true that he intended an exercise in pop, then he fell into the simplest trap awaiting anybody who tackles it; he decided there was nothing to choose between one bit of rubbish and another and shovelled in everything he could find without worrying whether the result fitted together. He appears to be contemptuous of the images he employs, of the symbols he invokes, and above all of people, including his audience.

Miss this film. There are so many better things to see.

John Brunner

amen and out

brian w. aldiss

THE DAY HAD BEGUN mightily, showering sunshine over the city, when Jaybert Darkling rose from his bed. He tucked his feet into slippers and went over to the shrine by the window.

As he approached, the curtains that normally concealed the shrine slid back, the altar began to glow. Darkling bowed his head once and said, "Almighty Gods, I come before you at the start of another day dedicated to your purposes. Grant that I may in every way fulfil myself by acting according to your law and walking in your ways. Amen."

From the altar came an answering voice, thin, high, remote.

"Grant that you may indeed. But try to remember how you offered the same prayer yesterday, and then spent your day pleasing yourself."

"I will do differently today, Almighty Gods. I will spend the day working at the project, which is surely dedicated to your ends."

"Excellent, son, especially as that is what the governors employ you for. And while you work, reflect in your inner heart on your hypocrisy, which is great."

"Your will be done."

The light died, the curtains drew together.

Darkling stood there for a moment, licking his lips. There was no doubt in his mind that the Gods had him taped; he was a hypocrite.

He shuffled across to the window and peered out. Although, as a human, he played a not unimportant role in the city, it was primarily a city of machines. It stretched to the horizon, and most of it moved. The machines willed it that way. Most of the giant building structures had never been entered by man, and they moved because it was convenient they moved.

The walls of the project gleamed brightly. Inside there, Darkling's immortals were imprisoned. Thank Gods that building did not move!

Hypocrite, eh? Well, he had faced the terror and glory of the idea since he was a lad. The Gods had seen to that.

Undressing, he walked towards the shower, and looked at his watch as he went. In seventy minutes, he could be

at the project; today he surely would try to be a better man and live a better life. There was no doubt it paid.

He cursed himself for his double thoughts, but they were the only kind he knew.

Zee Stone was also late in getting up. He did not approach the shrine in his small room. Instead, as he staggered across to the bathroom, he called, "I suppose I'm due for my usual bawling out!"

The voice of the Gods came from the unlit shrine, deep, paternal, but on the chilly side. "You wenched and fornicated yesterday night: in consequence, you will be late on the project today. You do not need us to tell you you were in sin."

"You know everything—you know why it was. I'm trying to write a story. I want to be a writer. But whenever I begin, even if I have it all planned out, it turns into a different story. You're doing it, aren't you?"

"All that happens within you, you try to blame on things outside. That way, you will never prosper."

"To hell with that!" He turned the shower on. He was young, independent. He was going to make good at the project and with his writing—and with that brunette with yellow eyes. All the same, there was a lot in what the Gods said; inside, outside, he hardly knew the difference. His hated boss, Darkling; maybe much of Darkling's nastiness existed only in Stone's imagination.

His thoughts drifted. As he splashed under the warm water, his mind returned to his current story. The Gods had more control over him than he had over his characters.

Dean Cusak got up early enough. What delayed him was the quarrel with his wife. The morning was fresh and sweet; the quarrel was foul and stale.

"We're never going to make that little farm," Edith Cusak grumbled as she dressed. "You were going to save and we were going to go to the country. How many years ago was that? I notice you've still got your mouldy ill-paid job as doorman at the project!"

"It's a very responsible job," Dean squeaked.

"How come it's so ill-paid then?"

"Promotion just didn't come my way." He got his voice a tone lower and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He hated Edith's discontent because he still cared for her; her complaints were justified. He had held out the vision of a little farm when they got married. But he'd always—admit it, he'd always been so subservient that the powers-that-be at the project found it easy to ignore his existence.

She followed him into the bathroom and took up the argument precisely at the point to which his thoughts had delivered it.

"What are you, for the Gods' sake? Are you going to be a yes-man all your life? Stand up for yourself! Don't be a mere order-taker! Throw your weight about down there, then maybe they'll notice you."

"That's your philosophy, I know," he muttered.

When she had gone into the kitchen to dial breakfast, Cusak hurried back into the bedroom and knelt before the bedside shrine. As the light came on behind the altar, he clasped his hands and said, "Almighty Gods, help me. I'm a terrible worm, she's right, a terrible worm! You know me, you know what I am. Help me—it's not that I haven't struggled, you know I've struggled, but things are going from bad to worse. I've always served you, try to do your will, Gods, don't let me down!"

A fatherly voice filled the air, saying, "Reforms are sometimes best performed piecemeal, Cusak. You must build your own self-confidence bit by bit."

"Yes, Gods, thanks, I will, I will, I'll do exactly as you say—but . . . how?"

"Resolve to use your own judgement at least once today, Cusak."

He begged humbly for further instructions, but the Gods cut off; they were notoriously untalkative. At last, the doorman rose to his feet, struggled into his brown uniform jacket, brushed his hair, and slouched towards the kitchen.

"Even the Gods call me by my surname," he mumbled.

Unlike Dean Cusak, who had a wife to keep him in check, unlike Jaybert Darkling and Zee Stone, whose lives were secure, who showered most mornings, who enjoyed

the fruits and blondes of late twenty-second century civilization. Otto Jack Pommy was an itinerant. He possessed practically nothing but the shrine on his back.

It had been a bad night for Otto, wandering the automated city, and only when dawn had broken did he find a comfortable deserted house in which to doss. He roused to find the sun shining through a dirty pane on to the stained mattress on which he lay, and remained for a long time angrily entranced—he was an acid head and had taken his last ration of LSD only a week ago—by the conjunction of stains, stripes, and fly specks there, which seemed to epitomise so much of the universe.

At length, Otto rolled over and snapped open his portable shrine. The light failed to glow behind the altar.

"What's matter? You lot feeling dim too? Expecting me to pray when you can't even light up like you used to? Gods?! I spit 'em!"

"Son, you know you sold your good shrine for this poor cheap one that has never worked properly. But as we come to you through an imperfect instrument, so you are the imperfect instrument for the performance of our will."

"Hell, I know. I sinned! Look, you know me, Gods, not the best of men but not the worst either. Leave me alone, can't you? Did I ever exploit anyone? Remember what it used to say in the pre-Gods book: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth'. How about that, then?"

The Gods made a noise not unlike a human snort. "Meek! Otto Pommy, you are the most conceited old man that ever inflicted prayer upon us! Try and behave a little less arrogantly today."

"Okay, okay, but all I want is to go and see Father at the project. Amen."

"And buy a new battery for this altar. Have you no reverence?"

"Amen, I said; Amen and out."

The Immortality Investigation Project occupied a few acres in the centre of the city. This contrast with the spacestations, which were always situated outside the cities, was one on which Jaybert Darkling had dilated at length to some of the governors on the project.

"It's symbolic, isn't it?" he had said pleasantly. "Man forges outward, ever outward—at least, our machines do—but the important things lie inward. As one of the sages of the twentieth century put it, we need to explore inner space. It's a sign of that need that although our precious spacestations lie on the outskirts of town, we find room for this great, this metaphysical project, right at the centre of things."

Right or not, he said it often enough to silence most of the governors.

Before getting down to his paper work on this fine morning, Darkling went briskly on a tour of inspection. Robots and machines had care over most things here, but the housing and guarding of the immortals was his responsibility. As he walked through into the first Wethouse, he saw with some disapproval that young Zee Stone was on duty and flirting with a slight blonde secretary.

"Stone!"

"Sir!"

They walked together into the ante-chamber of the Wethouse, pulling on boots and oilskins.

In the Wethouse itself basked the immortals. The project housed thousands of them. This first hall contained perhaps twenty, most of them unmoving.

The temperature was maintained at a rigid seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit. From the high ceiling, showers spouted. Round the walls, taps gushed, their waters running across the tiles into a pool that occupied half of the floor space. In the centre of the pool, fountains played. Cool jets of air, hurtling in at ceiling level, made tiny localized clouds and random cloudbursts that played hydropic variations in the chamber.

Statuesquely, the immortals stood or lay in the water torrents. Many slumped half-submerged on the sloping edges of the pool, their eyes unblinkingly looking at some distant scene. The waters, beaten to a broth by the downpour, lapped round their limbs.

Yet they themselves conveyed an impression of drought. Not a man or woman here was less than one hundred and eighty years old. They resembled planed wood planks with the grain standing out strongly, so covered were their skins

with the strange whorls and markings that represented hallmarks of immortality. From the time when they first took the series of three ROA5 injections, they had been plunged into the extreme throes of old age; their skin had wrinkled and dried, their hair thinned, their marrows shrivelled. They developed the appearance and postures of extreme old age.

That phase had passed. Gradually, they penetrated the senility barrier. Their skin flattened again, smoothed curiously, became as patterned and strange as oak planking.

These were external signs only. Inside, the changes were infinitely greater.

"What are you thinking about this morning, Palmer?" Darkling asked of one reclining figure that lay wallowing at the pool's edge. He squatted in his oilskins, putting his face down to Palmer's, with its great brown and black whorls as if time had set a thumbprint over it.

It took a brief while for Palmer to begin to answer, rather as if the message had to travel to Mars and back before reaching his brain.

"I am pursuing a line of thought that preoccupied me some sixty or so years ago. Not so much a line as a nexus of thought."

Since he then fell silent, Darkling had to prompt. "And the thought is . . .?"

"I couldn't say in words. It is less a thought than . . . than a shade. Some us here discussed the idea of a language of colour. If we had a language of colour, I could tell you precisely about what I was thinking."

"The idea of a colour language was aired and dismissed long before I took over here," Darkling said firmly. "The consensus of opinion was—and you immortals agreed—that colours were far more limiting than words: fewer in number, for that matter."

Palmer thrust his face into a jet of water and let it play gently on his nose. Between gasps, he said, "Many more colours exist than you know of. It is simply a matter of registering them. And my idea is of a supplementary rather than a substitute language. If this other business the group was talking about, a way in which an eye could project as well as absorb light, comes to anything, the colour language may have a future."

"Well, let me know if you think of anything."

"Okay, director."

As they padded away through the rain, Stone said, "Does that sound like a fruitful idea to you?"

Darkling said: "There I must keep my own council, my boy. To the untrained mind, even their fuzziest ideas can be dangerous—like slow depth-charges, you know. It takes an expert to evaluate their real worth." He remembered what the Gods had said that very morning and added, with an effort, "Still, off the cuff, I'd say it sounded like an unfruitful idea."

The two men walked among the wallowing bodies, exchanging a word here and there. One or two of the immortals had something fresh to offer, which Darkling noted on a waterproof slate for one of the trained interrogators to follow up later. Most of the ideas they gleaned here were not practicable in terms of man's society; just a few had revolutionized it.

The immortality project was a failure in its origins: this protraction of life proved too eccentric for anyone to volunteer to become an Immy. Nevertheless, by preserving these strange old failures, the project was skimming off a useful by-product: ideas, and rearrangements of old ideas. The Immies now represented a great capital-investment—as the governors were aware.

At last the morning round was finished and Darkling and Stone made their way to less humid quarters, where they removed their boots and oilskins.

"Don't seem to be earning their keep much, these days, do they?" Stone commented. "We ought to ginger them up a bit, cut off their water supply or something."

"What an immoral idea! Useless too, because it was tried many many years ago. No, we have to face it, Stone, they are different from us, very different."

He towelled his face vigorously and continued: "The immortals have been cut off from man's root drives. For obvious reasons, the only drives we can inherit are those that manifest themselves before reproduction. It was argued in times past, quite dogmatically, that there were no other drives. Well, we see differently now. We see that once through the senility barrier, man is no longer a doing

creature but a thinking creature. Vice versa, we see that we on the green side of the senility barrier are doing rather than thinking creatures—another idea that would have upset our ancestors. Our thinking is just embryo thinking. These immortals are our brains. Frankly, in this star-going age, we can't afford to be without them."

Stone had switched off several sentences ago. Hearing his boss's voice die, he said, in a vague tone of agreement, "Yeh, well, we ought to ginger them up or something."

He was thinking of his story. What he needed was new characters—young ones, who wouldn't have to think at all.

"We cannot ginger them up!" Darkling's voice was a sudden rasp that shook Stone to full attention. His superior had swung on to him, his little moustache twitching, as if with a malevolent life of its own.

"Your trouble is, Stone, you don't listen to what's being said. The immortals are merely given care here, you know —this isn't a prison, it's a refuge from the complex world outside."

He had never liked Darkling; that went for his moustache too. Putting on a calm and insulting drawl, he said: "Oh come now, sir, let's not pretend they aren't prisoners. That's a bit hypocritical, isn't it?"

Perhaps it was the word 'hypocritical'. Darkling's face went very red. "You watch your step, Stone! Don't think I don't know of your activities with Miss Roberts when you should be on duty. If one of the immortals wished to leave us—which never has happened and never could happen, because they live here in ideal conditions—they would be free to go. And I'd back their decision against the governors."

They looked at each other in helpless antagonism.

"I still think it would be a miracle if one got away," Stone said.

As he left the room, Darkling reached for his pocket shrine. There was something about Zee Stone that put him in need of spiritual comfort.

When Otto Jack Pommy arrived at the project, he was in a fine ecstatic mood of resignation. Resignation filled him, and he executed every gesture with pugnacious resignation.

While he completed the questionnaires it was vital he fill in before speaking to an Immy, while he was undergoing a medical examination, while he was having his retinal pattern checked, he concentrated on a number of absorbing arrangements in space-time that served to keep his mood one of substantial mellowness. In particular, he dug a number of universals out of the toecap of his left boot or, more particularly, the hinge between the toecap and the rest of the boot. By the time he was allowed in to see his relation in the Wethouse, Otto had decided that for one skilled in the art, it would be possible to read from the creases in the hinge a complete history of all the journeys he had undertaken in this particular pair of boots. The right boot seemed somehow altogether more evasive about its history.

"Hullo, Father Palmer! Old Acid Head come to see you again. Remember me? It's been two years!"

The generations were a little mixed. Otto, in fact, was nothing less than great-great-great-great-grandson to Palmer Pommy's long dead brother, and the title 'Father' he used was therefore part honorary, part derisory. Despite his two hundred years and his zebra-striped senility effect, Palmer looked younger than the shaggy, whiskery Otto. Only in his voice was there a suggestion that he basked on considerably remoter shores than Otto would ever attain.

"You are my closest living relation, descended by six generations from my brother. Your name is Otto Jack Pommy. You have shaved since I saw you last."

Otto broke into affectionate laughter. "Only you'd be able to detect it!" He stretched forth a hand and gripped Palmer's; it had a blubbery feel and was cold, but Otto did not flinch. "I love you damned old Immies—you're so funny!—I wonder why the hell I don't come to see you more often."

"You're more faithful to the principle of inconsistency than to any individual, that's why. Also, you don't like the climate of the Wethouse."

"Yeah, that's a consideration—though it's not one I had considered." He stopped talking, absorbed in meditation on Palmer's face. It was a cartographic face, he came to the conclusion. Once the marks of senility, the wrinkles and pits and folds, had been as real as irregularities in hilly

ground; now they were abstracts merely, like contours. "You got a cartographic face," he said.

"It is not a map of me; I don't wear my heart on my face."

"Of time, then? Marked out in isobars or secobars or something?" His attention was wandering. He knew why everyone hated the immortals, why nobody wanted to become immortals, although their great contributions to life were so obvious. The Immies were too different, strange to look at, strange to talk to—except that *he* did not find them so. He loved them; or he loved Palmer.

It was the Wethouse he could not bear, with its continual gouts of water. Otto was an anti-water man. He and Palmer were talking now—or staring at each other in a dream, as was their custom—in one of the guest rooms, where no water was in evidence. Palmer was garbed in a wrap-round towelling robe from which his ancient tattooed head and striped legs protruded like afterthoughts. He was smiling; over the last hundred years, he had smiled as widely perhaps once every six years; he liked Otto because Otto amused him. It made him proud of his long-dead brother to look at his great-great-great-great-grandson.

"Are you managing this session pretty painlessly without water?" Otto asked.

"It doesn't hurt for a while. The hurt doesn't hurt for a while."

"I've never understood your whole water-orientation—or for that matter whether you Immies yourselves understood it."

Palmer had momentarily lost contact. "Difference between hurt and harm. A term should be inserted between them meaning 'benevolent pain stimulus'."

"Water-orientation, Father."

"No, that doesn't. . . . Oh, water-orientation. . . . Well, it depends what you mean by understanding, Otto. Life renews itself in wetness and slime. The central facts of existence—at least until my kind arrived—were bathed in moisture. The vagina, semen, womb—goodness me, I've almost forgotten the realities those terms represent. . . . Mankind comes from the sea, is conceived and born amid salty liquid, dissolves not into dust and ashes but slimes and salts. Except, that is, for us immortals. We're up past

our bed-times and it seems to give us a terrible neurosis for water and the irreplaceable liquids that once belonged to our natural state."

"Up past bed-time? Never thought of the grace as satisfying any particular craving of mine. . . ."

"Longevity is a nodal zone where thirsts partly metaphysical supplant most other desires." He closed his ancient eyes, the better to survey the desert of non-death across which his kind journeyed.

"You talk as if you were dried up inside. Your blood still circulates as surely as the oceans of the world, doesn't it?"

"The blood still circulates, Otto. . . . It's below that level that the dryness starts. We need something we haven't got. It may not be extinction but it reveals itself as ever-rushing waters."

"Water, that's all you see! You need a change of scenery."

"I've forgotten your world, Otto, with its crowds and change and speed."

Otto grew excited. He began to snap his fingers and a curious twitch developed in the region of his left cheek.

"Palmer, Palmer, you idiot, that's not my godamned world any more than it's yours. I've opted out from the machine culture just as thoroughly as you. I'm an acid head—I know that rush of dark waters you mention pretty well myself. I love you, Palmer, I want to get you out of here. This place is like a damned prison."

Palmer screwed up his eyes and looked slowly round the room, beginning to shudder, as if an ancient engine had started within his frame.

"I'm a captive," he whispered.

"Only because you think there's nowhere to go. I've got a place for you, Father! Perfect place, no more than twenty miles away. Some friends of mine—bangers, every one of them, hopped high but gentle, I swear—we got hold of an old swimming pool. Indoor. Works fine. We doss in the cubicles. You could be in the shallow end. You'd be at home. Real home! People to talk to'd understand you. New faces, new ideas. Whole set-up built for you. I'll take you. Go right now!"

"Otto, you're mad! I'm a captive here!"

"But would you? Would you like to?"

His eyes were sometimes all surface and meaningless, like a patterned carpet; now they looked out and lived. "Even if only for a little while. . . . To be away. . . ."

"Let's go then! You need nothing else!"

Palmer caught his hand pitifully. "I keep telling you, I'm a captive. They'd never let us go."

"The bosses? It's in the constitution! You free to walk out whenever you want. The government pays. You don't owe anyone a damned thing."

"In a century and a half, no Immortal ever walked out of the project. It would be a miracle."

"We'll pray for a miracle!"

Shaking his head to show he would listen to not one more word of protest, Otto unstrapped his old secondhand shrine from his back and set it up before him on the table. He opened it, struck it when the altar light refused to glow, shrugged and assumed what Palmer took for a gesture of reverence. He began to pray.

"O Gods, sorry to bother you twice in one day! This is your old friend and trouble-maker Otto Jack Pommy in a proper fit of reverence. You'll recollect that when I was on to you first thing this morning, you were saying how arrogant I was. Remember?"

No answer came. Otto nodded in understanding. "They have no small talk in heaven. Very proper. Of course you remember. Well, I'm never going to be arrogant again, and in exchange I beg of you, Almighty Gods, just one small miracle."

From the darkness behind the altar, a level voice said: "The Gods do not bargain."

Otto cleared his throat and pointed an eyebrow at Palmer to indicate that this might be difficult. "Quite right. Understandable in your position, O Gods. O Gods, I therefore pray you do me one small miracle without strings attached—wait, let me tell you—"

"There are no miracles, only favourable conjunctions of circumstances."

"Very well put, O great Gods, in which case I pray you for one small favourable conjunction of circumstances, to wit, letting me get my dear old Father here out of this lousy project. That's all! That's all! And in return, I swear

I will remain humble all the days of my life. Hear my prayer, O Gods, for thine is the power and the glory and we are in a genuine fix, for ever and ever. Amen."

The Gods said: "If you wish to remove the Immortal, then the time to go is now."

"Ah!" Otto grabbed his shrine in both hands and fervently kissed the altar. "You're lovely people to treat an old acid head so, and I swear I'll declare the miracle abroad and walk in truth and righteousness all the days of my life and get a new battery for the altar light. Amen in the highest, amen and out!"

Turning to Palmer with his eyes gleaming, he strapped the shrine back over his shoulder.

"There! What do you think of that? When the Gods work in our favour, there's nothing twenty-second century civilization can do to stop us! Come on, daddy-o, and I'll look after you like a child."

He pulled the immortal to his feet and led him from the room. In confused excitement, Palmer in turn protested that he could not go and longed to leave. One arguing, one encouraging, they made their way down the extensive corridors of the project. Nobody stopped them, although several officials stared and looked hard after their eccentric progress.

It was when they got to the main door that their way was blocked. Dean Cusak, imposing in his brown uniform, popped forward like a dummy and asked for their passes.

Otto showed his visitors' pass and said: "As you'll probably recognize, this is one of the immortals, Mr. Palmer Pommy. He is leaving with me. He has no pass. He has lived here for the past one hundred and fifty years."

This was Cusak's big moment, and he painfully recognized it as such. Never having been face to face with an immortal before, he felt, as many another man had done, the stunning impact of that encounter, which was invariably followed by a shock wave of envy, fear and other emotions; for here was a being already four times as old as himself, and due to go on living long after all the present generation was subsumed into ashes.

Cusak's voice came reedily. "I can't let nobody through here without a pass, sir. It's the rules."

"For the Gods' sake, man, what are you? Are you going

to be someone else's yes man all your life?—A mere taker-of-orders? Look on this Immortal and then ask yourself if you have any right to offend his wishes!"

Cusak's eyes met Palmer's, and then dropped. It could have been that he was not even thinking of this present moment at all, or of these persons, but of some other time when someone else held the stage and a shriller voice made the same demands of him.

When he looked up, he said: "You're quite right, sir. I pleases myself who I lets through here. I don't exist just to carry out Mr. Darkling's orders. I'm my own man, and one day I'm going to run my own little farm. Carry on, gentlemen!"

He saluted as they went by.

Directly the two men were gone, Cusak began to suffer qualms. He dialled his superior, Zee Stone, and told him that one of the Immortals had left the project.

"I'll deal with it, Cusak," Stone said, snapping off the doorman's flow of apology. He sat for a moment staring into vacancy, wondering what to do with this interesting piece of news. It was his only for a while; by evening, if he let the Immy go, it would be all over the planet. The news value was colossal; no immortal had ever dared leave the project before. Certainly the news would bring the project under close investigation and no doubt a number of secrets would come to light.

In particular, it would bring Jaybert Darkling under investigation. He would probably get the sack. So, for that matter, might Zee Stone.

"I don't care!" he said. "I'd be free to write, to suffer as a writer should. . . ."

The old vision was back with renewed strength. Only he could not quite get it in focus. It wasn't exactly fiction he wanted to write—the characters were too difficult in fiction. It was . . . it was. . . .

Well, he could settle that later. Meanwhile, he could settle the hash of his beloved boss, Darkling, if he played his cards right.

Darkling's moustache twitched as Stone entered.

"I won't detain you a minute, sir. A little matter has just arisen that I'm sure you can deal with."

His tone was so unusually pleasant that Darkling knew something horrible was about to emerge.

"I'm expecting a call from the Extrapolation Board at any second, so you'd better be brief."

"Oh, I will be brief. You were telling me this morning, sir—I was very interested in what you said—about how you disapproved of the policy of the board of governors of this project."

"I hardly think I am likely to make such a comment to my subordinates, Stone."

"Oh, but you did, sir. I mean, we all know how the project exists to milk the Immortals of their strange ideas and turn them into practical applications for the benefit of mankind. Only it also happens to benefit the governors as well, and so although the Immortals began as free men here, the project merely providing an ideal environment, they've come to be no more than prisoners."

"I said—"

"And you said that if one of them escaped, you'd back him against the governors."

"Well, yes, maybe I did say something like that."

"Sir, I wish to report that one of the Immortals has just escaped."

Darkling was on his feet in an instant, his fingers on the nearest buzzer.

"You fool, Stone, why shilly shally? We must get him back at once! Think of the publicity. . . ." His face was white. He faltered to a stop.

"But, sir, you just said—"

Darkling cut him off. "Circumstances alter cases."

"Then this *is* a prison, sir."

Darkling rushed at him, arms waving. "You crafty little bastard, Stone, get out of my office! You're trying to trick me, aren't you? I know your kind—"

"It was just what we were saying about hypocrisy—"

"Get out! Get out at once and never come in here again!"

He slammed the door after Stone's retreating back. Then he leant on the door, trembling, and rubbed the palm of his hand over his forehead. He knew the Gods were looking down on him; he knew that they, in their infinite cun-

ning, had sent Stone to him for a scourge. This was his time of testing. For once he would have to stand by what he had represented to be his own true feelings, or else be forever damned in his own eyes.

If he let the Immy go, the governors would surely have his blood. If he hauled the Immy back—and the matter was urgent, or he would be lost in the city—Stone would see he was morally discredited, perhaps even with the governors. Either way, he was in trouble; his only policy was to stand by what he had said—said more than once, he recalled faintly.

From somewhere came an unwonted memory of someone jokingly defending hypocrisy in his presence by saying: "Hypocrites may be scoundrels, but by their nature they sometimes have to live up to the fine feelings to which they pretend." Darkling had wanted to tell the idiot that he failed to understand the essential thing about a hypocrite: that their nature was genuinely mixed, that the fine feelings were there all right, that it was the will that was weak . . . well, now the will was trapped by circumstance.

He would have to let the Immy go.

"You win, Gods!" he cried. "I've been a better man today, and it'll probably ruin me!"

Shakily, he went round to his desk. As he sat down, a bright idea came to him. A smile that Stone might have recognized as sly and dangerous played on his face. There was, after all, a way in which he could defend himself from the wrath of the governors—by enlisting the big battalions on his side.

His eyes went momentarily upwards, in silent thanks for the hope of release.

Pressing the secretarial button on his desk, he said crisply: "Get me World Press on the line. I wish to tell them why I have seen fit to release an immortal from this institution."

He occupied the time pleasantly, while waiting for the call to come through, in summoning the doorman, Cusak, to make financial arrangements with him for his co-operation, and in dropping Stone a note demanding his resignation.

By the side of the old swimming pool, a crowd gathered.

A few women sprawled among the men, their hair as lank and uncombed as their mates'. Such garments as were worn were nondescript; some of the younger men went naked. Everyone moved in a gentle, bemused manner.

Palmer Pommy did not move. He lay on a couch erected in the shallow end of the pool so that his striped body was awash. Some of the shower equipment had been re-assembled so that he was perpetually sprayed with warm water. He was laughing as he had not done for many decades.

"You bangers are on my wave-length," he said. "We Immies can't take the thoughts of ordinary short-span people—they're too banal. But you lot think as daft as me."

"We take a shot of immortality occasionally," one of the crowd said. "But you're as good as a dose, Palmer—the impact of meeting you loops me double, like a miracle."

"Gods sure sent him," another said.

"Hey, what do you mean, Gods sent him? *I* brought him," Otto said. He was lounging by the poolside in an old chair while one of the more repellent girls stroked his neck. Besides, Palmer don't believe in Gods, do you, Father?"

"I invented them."

They all laughed. A blonde girl said: "I invented sex." They turned it into a game.

"I invented feet."

"I invented knee-caps."

"I invented Pommy Palmer."

"I invented inventions."

"I invented me."

"I invented dreams."

"I invented you all—now I disinvent you!"

"I invented the Gods," Palmer repeated. He was smiling but serious now. "Before any of you were alive, or your parents. That's what we Immies are for, thinking up crazy ideas because our minds aren't lumbering with ordinary thoughts, else they'd kill us off because the immortality project didn't turn out as they hoped—it wasn't fit for all and sundry.

"The Gods were more or less in existence. Vast com-

puters were running everything, comsats supplied instantaneous communication, beamed power was possible, psychology was a strict science. Mankind had always regarded computers half-prayerfully, right from their inception. All I did was think of hooking them all up, giving everyone a free communicator or shrine, and there was a new power in the world: the Gods. It worked at once, thanks to the ancient human needs for gods—which never died even in scientific societies like ours."

"Not mine, dad-o!" one of the men cried. "I'm no robot-bugger! And say, if you invented the Gods, who invented the theology to go with them? Did you serve that too?"

"No. That came naturally. When the computers spoke, each of the old religions fell into step and adapted their forms. They had to survive: like none of them ever could stand up against personalised answer to prayers. Cranky notion . . . but war's died since the Gods ruled."

"Who's Waugh?" someone asked.

"That was a miracle. There've been others. Ask Otto. He claims that getting me out of the project was a miracle."

Otto wriggled and removed his nose from the repellent girl's navel.

"I don't know about that. I mean I'm not so sure," he said, scratching his chest. "It was just that old fool doorman was bluffed into letting us out. No, I did it—I'm the miracle worker."

"You told me different," Palmer said, looking searching from the pool.

"You think I'm being arrogant. You could be right. But I reckon what I really feel, Father, is that there isn't any such thing as a miracle—just favourable conjunctions of circumstances, that's all."

There was a scraggy girl in the crowd who leant forward anxiously and tapped Palmer's zebra arm.

"If you've really handed us over into the power of the machines, isn't there a danger they will end by ruling us completely?"

Palmer looked slowly about the echoing chamber before deciding what to reply. He looked at the lounging group

about him, most of whom had already recovered from the novelty of his presence and were interesting themselves in each other. He looked long at Otto, who had unstrapped his old shrine for comfort and was now cuddling the repellent girl in a purposeful way. Then his face crinkled into a grin.

"Don't worry, girlie! Men always cheat their gods," he said.

the rodent laboratory

by charles platt

HARRIS STOOD ON the catwalk in the darkened chamber, leaning against the railing, staring down into the brightly-lit test area below him. The rats were in one of their more active states: brown shapes wriggled and scuttled over the thinly-sanded flooring. A group of them huddled round the feeding troughs, jostling for the best position. A male chased a female into one of the breeding hutches. A mother crouched in one corner of the enclosure, suckling young rats only two or three days old, baring her fangs at any intruder. The population had increased, now, to the point where there was no longer any room in the hutches for females to rear their young.

Though it was some time after the end of his observation shift, Harris still lingered, staring unblinking at the area below, fascinated by the active, busy rats feeding and resting, procreating and dying in a restless rhythm which carried with it the elusive suggestion that, if one

stood and watched long enough, one could find some law or purpose to the meaninglessness of it all.

Across the chamber, a door opened, and for a moment grey light flooded in from the corridor. The footsteps, on the metal catwalk that ran round the walls of the observation chamber, told him it was Laurian; he looked up as she walked towards him, her face lit strikingly by the test-area lamps below.

"I got tired of waiting for you," she said. "Did you know it's half an hour since meal break started?"

"I'm sorry," Harris said. He looked back at the rats. In one corner, it looked as if a leadership battle would shortly be taking place. They were unusually active, jostling close together, grouped around one ageing and battle-scarred male and a younger, unusually large rat baring its fangs and making aggressive pawing motions. Harris watched intently; the battles were becoming more frequent as the population increased and slowly the structure of their society changed.

"Are you coming, Philip—" she said, her hand on his arm.

He looked up at her, glanced back once again at the test area, then finally turned away from it. With a stiff, reluctant movement he put his arm around her shoulders. They walked out of the darkened chamber in silence.

The grey corridors of the research block were narrow and dirty, reminding Harris of some claustrophobic underground warren. Widely-spaced fluorescent tubes cast a pale, cold light over concrete walls which were slightly damp.

The canteen had once been an officers' mess, when the block had been in military hands during the war. The only change that had come about since was the crowding of more tables into the room, to accommodate the growing research staff resident in the building. It still retained its old air of utility and drabness.

There were few others in the canteen when the two of them sat down to eat. Harris said little, answering Laurian's conversation briefly, where necessary. The need to be social depressed him. At the serving counter the tea machine hissed steam up to the ceiling; across the room, a woman wiped tables with a grey rag.

They finished their meal and pushed the plates aside.

"Let's go outside for a while," she said suddenly, breaking the silence.

"All right," said Harris. He followed her out of the canteen, through the entrance passage and out of the heavy double-doors at the block's entrance.

It was always a surprise to emerge from the artificial lighting of the research block and find bright sunshine outside. Harris found it unsettling. A sharp wind ruffled his clothes and swept down over the grassland that stretched as far as one could see. In the distance, moorland sheep were white dots against the green.

She took his hand, and they crossed the dirt road, that led to the village ten miles distant, and walked towards the cliff edge, the air smelling cold and clean after the mustiness of the block.

They stopped side by side, looking out over the grey-blue ocean.

"We ought to get outside more often," she said. "It's too easy to get too involved in the work and forget the outside world exists at all."

Harris looked along the line of the cliffs, up at the research block situated on slightly higher ground. Originally it had been a defence outpost and lookout position in the second World War. Thin slits were the only windows, overlooking the narrow beach at the foot of the smooth, vertical cliff face. The slab-like concrete walls sloped inwards, giving the building a squat, ugly appearance; the outlines of faded green and black camouflage markings could still be vaguely discerned, painted on the discoloured concrete. The building looked rooted into the ground, as if it had grown out of the rock.

It was as convenient a site as any for a cheaply based research establishment that, by its very nature, was best isolated from the outside world.

"What's troubling you, Philip?" Laurian asked, her arm round him, looking up at his face. The wind blew strands of her long, brown hair into her eyes; she brushed them away.

The freshness of the countryside had had a steadying effect on Harris's introspection. He smiled and held her close to him, kissing her gently.

"You're too involved in the work," she said, pulling away from him a little.

He sighed. "It has a kind of fascination that I can't quite describe," he said, looking past her out at the horizon. "A feeling of involvement—that if one could only be patient enough and watch long enough, one can eventually understand it all—why their little miniature society works as it does, what it all means, what it means to us, as city dwellers . . ."

"They're only rats, Philip. Is it that important?"

"You're close enough to the work to know it is. Already the whole of their social structure is changing—the overcrowding is having its effects. Some of the mothers have eaten their young straight after birth—others have left them abandoned. The average lifespan is growing shorter. The leadership is still held by one rat but the battles occur more frequently, now; the whole stability of the system is breaking up. Some of them act like drones, now, and others seem to be homosexual . . ."

"You can't keep your mind off it, can you?" she interrupted.

He didn't reply.

They both turned as they heard a shouted greeting from further down the hill. Harris squinted and saw it was Carter, one of the three men heading the research project. He was carrying a fishing rod and rucksack.

"Did you catch anything?" Harris asked flatly.

Carter walked up the slope to where they stood and paused to catch his breath. "Nothing of great interest," he said. "The sea's too rough, I suppose."

His eyes fell on Laurian. "You're looking very attractive today," he said.

She smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Carter."

"Come now, Laurian, we know each other well enough for you to call me Brian." He laid his hand on her arm. "It's that fresh, windswept look of yours. I'm a sucker for it, you know."

She smiled again, and blushed slightly. "Don't embarrass me with too many compliments," she said.

Carter laughed heartily; his hand dropped from her arm to her waist. "Nonsense, anyone as pretty as you must receive them all the time."

He turned to Harris, briefly. "By the way, Philip, you'll be on evening shift with me today—right?"

Harris nodded, saying nothing. Carter smiled. He laughed again. "All right, then," he said. "Be seeing you." He winked at Laurian, gave her hand a little squeeze, then walked up towards the research block.

"That man gets under my skin," Harris said.

"You mustn't let his Public School manner annoy you. It doesn't really mean anything; he's quite a decent character."

"It's not so much the way he talks, or the way he carries on with you. He's not that good a research worker; he talks too much, you feel he's not really as good as he likes you to think."

She shrugged. "There's too much backbiting been going on recently. I'm keeping out of it."

Harris sighed. "Everyone's a little on edge. We've been waiting too long for this experiment to yield results; now they're emerging, or beginning to, it's coming to a climax."

She looked up at him suddenly. "So you've noticed it too," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"The atmosphere of the place; edginess. Short tempers. I can almost feel the strain, sometimes. I was thinking it came from stepping on each other's toes all the time; the block just isn't big enough."

Harris's mind had wandered off the conversation. "You're probably right," he said vaguely.

They walked on a little way, following the line of the cliffs. Gulls soared up on the strong air currents, screaming plaintively, their cries carried away by the strong wind. White and grey cumulus moved slowly across the otherwise clear, blue sky. The air smelled sharp and clean.

"We'd better get back," Laurian said a short while later. "I'm on afternoon shift; we're sending out press releases, or something."

They turned and walked back up towards the squat building planted squarely at the top of the ridge. As they reached the entrance, a cloud swept over the sun, and the grey shadow shifted over them.

Inside the block, she smiled at him briefly and then hurried off to the PR section. Harris walked through the

low-ceilinged corridors, oppressive and grey, smelling a little musty and damp. The fluorescent tubes glowed as they always did, day and night, and the bright, fresh afternoon seemed to exist only outside the building. Inside, time was static.

On duty in the observation chamber that evening, Harris sat in the darkened room with Carter, watching and noting developments as they occurred. The silence in the place was overpowering. Under the one-way glass, the rats scuttled about, oblivious of the men watching in the darkened area above.

The lights that illuminated the rodents' test area slowly began to dim, simulating nightfall, and the two men switched over to infra-red viewing equipment. As light faded, the rats' activity slowed; many of them lay down to sleep. Harris himself had to stifle a yawn; the darkness of the chamber, heated to a comfortable temperature, was almost complete. The viewing screen and the few illuminated temperature and humidity gauges were the only brighter points in view.

Harris watched the screen until his eyes ached. He began to imagine he could see some kind of pattern in the random movements of the rats—began to imagine they showed some kind of form or intelligence.

Then, as he watched, something began to happen. At first it seemed only random movement; but then it seemed as if the rats instinctively knew what they were doing. In one corner of the enclosure a group of fifteen or twenty of them began to form up in a circle, facing inwards. Harris leaned forward. This was as yet unrecorded behaviour. He was overcome by the way they acted in unison, as if controlled . . .

"Something odd, here," he called to Carter, who was at the other end of the chamber checking on the control group of rats kept separate from the over-populated test area. "Can you come and have a look?"

But as he spoke the circle of rats broke up and they suddenly scattered into random activity; their movements once more independent.

Carter walked round the catwalk and looked in the screen.

"It's broken up, now," Harris said. "But they had formed into a circle, as if with some purpose . . . almost as if in unified movement."

"Perhaps you've been watching the screen too long, Philip," Carter said. "On the infra-red it can get pretty monotonous; you start seeing things, know what I mean?"

"It wasn't . . ." Harris began; but he saw it was better not to argue. His mind examined the experience carefully; looking back, he was sure of the impression that the rats moved as if guided by some . . . something . . .

And then he remembered another fact that made their actions even more peculiar. When he had called to Carter, several of the rodents had looked up, just before the circle broke, almost as if they could see through the soundproof, one-way double glass. Almost as if they had heard Harris's voice.

In his cubicle in the residential section the next morning, Harris was sitting at his desk writing, when Laurian came in.

"Can you help me out, Philip?" she said, from the doorway. Harris put down his pen, in a way glad of the distraction.

"Come in," he said, "tell me what you want."

"You can tell me how I fit nine people into eight rooms. There are two new shorthand typists here, for report work, I suppose. There are several journalists from the science magazines, who'll have to stay overnight. More additions to the lab staff . . . Philip, who's been bringing all these people here? We're overcrowded enough as it is."

"That's a question for the project directors," he replied. "Meanwhile, can't you shift the room dividers? They're movable. You could make the rooms a little smaller . . ."

"Although they're too small as it is."

"I know that, but there's no other answer, is there? You can't expect these people to stay in the village. It's ten miles away and there's no regular transport. And there's probably no accommodation there, anyway."

"Don't snap at me, Phil."

"I'm not snapping at you; I'm just telling you the obvious answer. I should have thought it would have been clear enough."

"If you didn't want to talk to me, you didn't have to."

"All *right*, then." They stared at each other in silence for several seconds. Suddenly she sighed, brushed her hair away from her face wearily.

"Why are we so edgy, Philip?"

Harris suddenly realized that sitting in his chair, every muscle was tense.

"I don't know," he said. "It's what you were talking about yesterday, isn't it? The atmosphere in the block; it's tense."

"In a way, I'll be glad when this research is over," she said, half to herself. "I'll see you later, Phil."

Harris watched her thoughtfully as she walked out of the room.

The canteen was hopelessly overcrowded; the air was thick with the smell of cigarette smoke and of fried food. The noise of talking and of the clatter of cutlery hit him like a wall of sound as he walked through the entrance door. The self-service queue was long and slow, and in the hot, damp atmosphere Harris found himself beginning to sweat uncomfortably.

When he had eventually been served, he stood with the tray of food scanning the room for Laurian. Suddenly he saw her, across the room; she was sitting with Carter at a table in one corner; he had his arm around her, she was laughing at something he'd said.

Something in Harris snapped. He shouldered his way across to the table, banged his tray down upon it.

"What the hell is going on?" he shouted, his voice all but drowned by the noise in the room. Carter looked up, surprised.

"What's that, Philip?"

"What are you trying to do?" Harris shouted. "Aren't there enough other women in this place for you to sink your hooks into?"

Carter stood up, his face reddening.

"Now, let's not be insolent about this . . ."

"Cut out the smooth public school talk, for God's sake."

"All right then, Philip. Just what rights are you standing up for? What's your exact claim that you're disputing? What right have you got to tell me what to do?"

"You wouldn't act like this if you weren't my superior."

"Rank's irrelevant, and you know it. Don't cause trouble, Philip. Why not back down gracefully just for once? Spare us a scene."

"*Me* leave *you* alone?" Suddenly Harris dropped his tray, the plates clattering to the floor, and grabbed hold of Carter's jacket. He shouted something inarticulate at the man and hit him. His zone of awareness narrowed until he could only see Carter, and only think of inflicting injury upon him. The noise of the room closed in around him; he lashed out, again and again, bruising his knuckles, only dimly aware of the crowd of people that had collected around him, trying to pull him away.

A hand clutched at his shoulder; he turned to push the intruder away, but slipped and fell. As he went down his head banged against a table-top and he lost consciousness.

He realized it was only a few seconds later when his eyes opened; the crowd of people was still gathered around him, Laurian bending down over him. His head throbbed painfully; gradually the haziness of his vision began to clear. The anger that had welled up in him suddenly vanished, leaving him feeling weak and stupid.

"What's the matter with you?" Laurian was shouting at him. He blinked, suddenly started trembling. He pulled himself upright, and saw Carter slumped over the table, his face smeared with blood. The crowd backed away as Harris stood up.

"What happened?" he kept saying, "What happened?" Suddenly it became very quiet in the canteen. "We'll have to take him to the sick room," Harris said, not quite sure of the logic behind this. It was as if someone else was speaking.

Somehow they dragged the semi-conscious Carter out

of the door and down the corridor. In the canteen behind them, the silence was broken as conversation started again. Soon the room was as noisy as before; an observer looking upon the scene from above would have seen the room packed with jostling forms moving with a seeming randomness of purpose, bunched around the tea and coffee counters and the food service line, pushing and shoving one another in their attempts to be served.

Two days later, Harris was again lingering in the observation chamber when Laurian came in to find why he was late for the meal break. She stood beside him on the catwalk, silent this time, following his gaze down onto the rats' enclosure. Once this room had been used for charting the battles of the war; staff below had shifted infantry and aircraft across the face of Europe, painted on the concrete slab that was now the floor of the test area. Officers had stood where Harris stood now, surveying the progress below.

Laurian finally spoke to him. "Have they told you, yet," she asked, "about what action's going to be taken . . . about . . ."

"Heard the news this morning," Harris said quietly. "It's just going to be overlooked; there was some kind of justification, and anyway, Carter wasn't badly hurt. I think they're more concerned with developments since our little encounter in the canteen."

"Meaning?"

"The 'edginess' we talked about is finding release, in simple violence. Two fights last night. Two apprentice lab assistants, and some worker who got annoyed with a journalist." Harris didn't sound at all interested in what he was saying; his voice was unemotional and flat.

"Look," he said, suddenly animated, "the large one, there, by the feeding trough." As they watched, the large rat threw itself at a smaller one, dragging it by the neck, kicking up the sanded flooring. It bit viciously, and the smaller one twitched and lay still. The large rat eagerly seized its place at the trough.

"Interesting," he said. "That's been happening more and

more often. Wait, now. Here come the scavengers." Thin, nervous-looking rats sidled up to the corpse of the victim and began dragging it away, chewing at it.

Laurian felt revolted, yet fascinated.

"That never used to happen," Harris said.

"Haven't they sufficient food?" Laurian asked.

"Ample. But there are certain meal-periods when the whole population suddenly decides, unanimously, to feed itself. The rest of the time there's little activity round the food troughs; very few of them go near there."

"It's so strange . . . They seem almost, almost . . ."

"Human?"

She didn't reply.

Harris looked down at the rats again. Suddenly, they all broke away from the feeding trough, in one spontaneous movement. They scuttled about the enclosure without apparent purpose, almost as if searching for something. Harris caught his breath as, perceptibly, they started to converge into a circle. The rats moved hesitantly, yet the overall movement seemed synchronized and purposeful. Once again, Harris had the elusive feeling that the operation was somehow co-ordinated. The rodents formed a near-perfect circle, all of them facing inwards, and then froze.

Harris opened his mouth, about to say something, when suddenly it was as if his consciousness somersaulted. Beside him Laurian stiffened, catching her breath. It was as if the mind opened up; as if barriers Harris had been unaware of suddenly fell down. His consciousness expanded; he seemed suddenly *aware* of the whole research block, and of all the people in it with whom he had been in close contact for the past two months. And Laurian, beside him: he suddenly felt he *knew* her, knew her personality and her mind, as never before. As if he had gained subtle entrance within her mind. The whole sensation was one of togetherness, oneness; a feeling of unity with Laurian and with everyone else in the building. It was almost overpowering.

Then without warning it broke down. He caught on to the metal rail to stop himself falling; his head seemed

to be spinning. He looked at Laurian. Her breathing was coming fast and shallow, through slightly parted lips. Without any words spoken, it was clear that the experience had been mutual.

Harris suddenly turned and looked down into the enclosure. But the rats were acting as if nothing had happened; they were again crowded around the feeding trough.

"Did you—did you see their behaviour just then?" he shouted across to the man on observation duty.

"I got it," he replied. "Second time it happened this afternoon. Any ideas what it means?"

"No," Harris said. "It's a new development. Tell me," he hardly dared to ask, "did you notice anything, er, just now? Did you feel at all . . . unusual?"

"What do you mean, exactly, Mr. Harris? Can't say I felt any different from normal . . ."

"Nothing," Harris said. "Must have been purely subjective."

He took Laurian's hand, and they walked out of the dark observation room. Her expression told him that however subjective the experience had been, she had shared it, if no one else had.

The next day Harris found his room in a state of chaos.

"I'm sorry, sir," a heavy-built man grunted, shifting Harris's bed out into the corridor, "but you've been reallocated. Number 32 is where you'll be, now."

"Why the change?"

"It's all the new scientists and people moving in," the man said, resting a moment. "Got to put them somewhere. So all the room partitions are being shifted round, new beds being brought in. Even so, don't seem as if there'll be enough room. Shouldn't wonder if there'll be people camping out in the corridors." He grinned and broke into a wheezing laugh, then caught hold of Harris's bed again and pulled it out of the room.

Harris threw his belongings irritably into his suitcases,

piled his books and papers in as best he could, and, loaded down with luggage, stumbled off through the narrow corridors in search of room 32.

The small building was packed with people, many clutching suitcases like himself, milling around. The atmosphere was becoming sweaty and oppressive, the resemblance of the block to an underground warren even more pronounced.

Finally he found his new room. He stood in the doorway, adjusting himself to the surprise. It was barely large enough for the bed in it; the only other item of furniture that had been squeezed in was a dressing table. There was no chair, no desk, no wardrobe.

Harris sighed. He dropped his things on the bed and walked out of the room.

He and Laurian had agreed to say nothing about the odd experience they had shared the previous day. Harris's outburst and attack on Carter in the canteen—something he did not fully understand himself—had been enough to class him as possibly unbalanced. A report of a strange, pseudo-psychic experience would not help the situation.

But as far as they could ascertain, the experience had been shared by no-one else. Harris's intuitive feeling was that in a way it had arisen out of the already strong mutual bond that he and Laurian shared; but the feeling remained only intuitive, and based on no concrete evidence. The experience had an unreal air about it which matched the strange, other-world atmosphere of the whole block—an atmosphere that, more and more, was assimilated and taken for granted, as if the research workers had forgotten the existence of the outside world. Inside the thick concrete shell of the building, constant-light and constant-temperature created the sensation of a timeless enclosure separate from the rest of the universe. This, combined with the eternally close proximity to one's fellow workers, induced a mood at first oppressive, later almost of security.

If he had undergone the experience in a normal, everyday environment, and not in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the block, Harris would have foud himself unable to accept it or believe in it. But now he was

nearing total involvement with the project and the artificial environment; he was almost entirely immersed in it. Like many others, he never bothered to step outside for exercise or fresh air any more. He spent longer and longer periods in the observation chamber, staring at the cramped, enclosed rodent world, the feeling that something of vast importance was coming nearer and nearer, though always just beyond his grasp, striking him more and more strongly.

He was, in a way, distantly aware of his unhealthy involvement in the work and with the other people in the block. He was able to sense that his social habits, his interests and even his ways of thought were changing subtly under the claustrophobic pressure of the cramped and crowded research block. Yet in a way he saw that this was what he was seeking—that total involvement in the society was the ultimate goal, ultimate fulfilment. Dimly it seemed that the rewards gained from losing touch with normality and entering the timeless overcrowded zone wholly, not just as an observer, would be worth the temporary loss of normal rational thought and physical health.

Though he might not have been able to put this into words, and though he was seldom consciously aware of the reasoning behind it, Harris felt the compulsion strongly; it guided most of his actions. Laurian perhaps sensed a little of his dedication. It was similar to that of the man who takes larger and larger doses of a drug in desperate efforts to reach a goal of understanding and fulfilment, for which he sacrifices food, rest, even his own life. But in this case there was hope that the goal was not illusionary.

So Harris stayed in the observation chamber, totally engrossed with the overcrowded world beneath him, leaning on the rail of the catwalk, eyes wide and unblinking; he spent as much of his off-duty time there as he could afford to. The rodent society continued to develop in new, inexplicable directions. The plywood towers that had been provided for use as accommodation for females during pregnancy had mostly been taken over by the males. Mothers reared their young in any available space in the rest of the enclosure, neurotically snapping and squabbling with each other. Occasionally males could be seen

carrying odd objects into the breeding towers; pieces of metal bitten off the feeding troughs, slivers of wood.

The ritual where fifteen or twenty of them gathered into a circle, as Harris had first observed it, was repeated more and more often—almost as if it were being practised. Once, when Harris had watched this together with Laurian, he had again felt the odd feeling of oneness and had been able to sense the whole of the block, as before. But this time the impact was not so great; it seemed almost a distraction from a slow build-up towards an unspecified climax. Nor did it seem as alien and frightening as it had done before; now, it was almost a natural function of the strange, introverted state Harris found himself in.

Still he waited, watching, looking for a purpose. Other researchers sometimes joined him. The feeling of fascination was spreading; it was felt that the experiment was on the point of leading to some concrete results. Men from other research fields visited the block, and stayed on, hoping that the inevitable breakthrough had almost been reached. More and more people crowded within the building.

"It's as if we're all waiting for something," Laurian said, a few days later. "Everyone's forgotten the existence of anything but the experiment."

"It won't be long, now," Harris said quietly. They were sitting quietly together in his minute room, shortly before he was due to go on shift.

"I know what you mean," she said. "It can't go on much longer; I can feel it. A kind of tension—but not a disruptive kind, a kind that binds everyone together. More and more I keep feeling that any minute it's all going to break, there'll be a great release . . ."

"You'd be right on practical grounds alone," Harris said. "Every factor is nearing its maximum. We can't lose much more sleep, we can't become more crowded, we can't, I feel, achieve a greater feeling of cohesion than there is now."

He stood up and walked restlessly to the door and back again. She watched him a moment.

"All right," she said. "I'll come with you, this time."

He walked out of the door and she followed him along to the observation chamber.

Others seemed to have the same idea; the corridors were crowded with people headed in the same direction. Everywhere Harris saw faces he knew as if he had been in contact with the people throughout the whole of his life. Everywhere was familiarity—to such an extent that he and most others had ceased really to notice the presence of colleagues and co-workers. Familiarity had achieved a new level.

As they entered the chamber, a dull rumble could be heard, from outside the building. Harris looked round, vaguely distracted by the noise, and then realized it was only thunder. Outside, it must be stormy, rainy weather.

The observation chamber was crowded. Harris wondered if this was the climax they had been waiting for; though he had not expected it to come so soon. Coincidence could account for the large number of people gathered here. But he hoped it didn't.

Another rumble of thunder could be heard; very faintly, rain pattered on the concrete roof. Few people noticed.

All attention was focused on the overcrowded rodent world in the experimental enclosure. The rats had entered yet another habit-pattern; the activity and movement of the past weeks had suddenly ceased, and now they lay dormant or crawled short distances lethargically as if the effort was too much trouble to make. Their eyes glinted in the lights of their enclosure, dull and unblinking.

Harris gnawed at his lower lip, tense, as he noticed that every little movement the rats made drew them closer to forming one large circle.

Behind him and on all sides, more people crowded into the chamber and thronged the catwalk that ran round all the four walls. Everyone was concerned only with the rats below. Eventually, the influx of people diminished, the distracting movement ceased. The atmosphere of tense expectancy was almost tangible; within the darkened, strange environment of the chamber one could almost

imagine that a seance was taking place. The feeling that one was living in a semi-imaginary, totally alien environment became irresistible; normality became a term without referent. And, as the crowded research workers and other members of the block stood and watched in expectant silence, the movements of the rats became smaller and less frequent. The circle of the brown rodents was perfectly formed.

Although he was expecting it, Harris was thrown off balance by the sheer impact of the sensations that flooded over him. Awareness embraced his mind, and again, the sensation of *knowing*, of omniscience, was breathtakingly strong. He felt as one with every person in the chamber —his eyes were their eyes, his mind linked with their minds, as one perfect inter-connected whole.

Fighting back the euphoria that threatened to overcome his consciousness, he looked down into the enclosure. The rats were engaged in mad activity; one of the breeding towers was overturned, and small objects dragged out of it.

He held Laurian's arm excitedly and pointed at the activity below. The rats had become a co-ordinated team, like a rippling mass of ants or a flock of migrating birds. Yet the co-ordination was better than this; it spoke of intelligence. Rats crowded to one corner of the enclosure —where, Harris recalled, there was an access tube for replenishing their food supplies. They held small, bright objects in their teeth and paws, almost like tools; and, as he watched, they began levering and scraping at the little door at the bottom of the access tube.

And still the sense of oneness, the overwhelming collective intelligence, flooded the senses. Many people had fainted; others appeared drunk. This time, the sensation was evidently experienced by all the people in the chamber. Few people paid any attention to the rats. Men staggered and fell, some clutching their heads, dazed and puzzled expressions on their faces. Here and there a woman screamed. The disorder was fast heading for a state of pandemonium.

Harris clutched the iron rail of the catwalk with one hand, holding on to Laurian with the other. From over-

head there came the sound of thunder, louder than before, adding to the rising level of noise in the chamber. There was little breathable air; the ventilation system was unable to compensate for the vast number of people packed into the place. Harris stood, breathing heavily, still fascinated and captured by the spectacle of the rats.

They had broken open the lower door of the access tube, using the primitive implements they had collected and stored in the past few weeks. Soon they would be able to escape through the simple trapdoor at the top of the tube.

They had to escape, Harris realized suddenly; they had to escape to survive. The awareness that had united them had brought realization that the cripplingly restricted environment of the test area could only lead to a slow death of the society and the rats in it . . .

"What's happening?" Laurian shouted in his ear, above the noise in the chamber that echoed around the concrete walls. Another clap of thunder sounded, still louder than before. "What's going on?"

Before Harris could try to explain, there was a final crash that made the building shudder. Harris looked up and saw, disbelievingly, the concrete roof split into two pieces; a huge chunk broke away and smashed down on to the glass roof of the rodent enclosure.

All the lights went out.

Harris clutched the girl to him, and groped for the exit, pushing through the crowds of stumbling, disoriented people. Suddenly he noticed that the *gestalt* experience had faded to a point where he was only dimly aware of it.

Another thunder clap, and the floor seemed to move under them. Harris had visions of the edge of the cliff breaking away, and battled more desperately to find the way out. The metal catwalk creaked and slowly buckled under the load of the mass of people; the wall split open and rain poured into the room. It was night outside; dim moonlight filtered in and lit the scene as men and women struggled to gain their footing and reach the exit.

Rats scurried mindlessly around; one sank its teeth into

Harris's ankle. He kicked it aside and climbed through the gaping hole on one of the walls, pulling Laurian after him.

The rain was falling in vast sheets outside; they were soaked in a few seconds. Vast stormclouds moved across the dark sky, now and then obscuring the moon.

Together the two of them stumbled clear of the research block, and stood watching as others emerged from it. The ground had subsided in one place, causing the building to fracture down the middle.

Harris's mind was numbed. He took deep breaths of the cold, damp air, and choked on it. How long was it since he had been outside? Time had become a meaningless quantity within the block. Now, it was difficult to readjust to the outside world.

He tried to clear his mind of the jumbled impressions, and attempted to sort out what had happened in the last chaotic minutes.

Laurian held on to him tightly, her hair saturated and limp with the rain. "I still don't understand," she said, "what it was all about . . . I can hardly imagine or picture it, now. It's like remembering another world."

"The rats achieved a group-awareness," Harris said. "The kind of *gestalt* that we experienced. It seemed to come as if it were a natural function of their environment; as if, when their society was sufficiently overcrowded, when everything became sufficiently familiar and well known; when each day is identical and one's surroundings are permanent and constantly experienced as a tangible force, then, links are formed between the people within the group.

"When the rats circled round that way, they must have been instinctively experiencing the impressions that you and I felt; they found true communication, the ultimate hive-mind."

"But why should we have felt it?"

Harris found himself shivering, partly through the cold wind, and partly through the abruptness of the change. It was almost like rebirth; the outdoor environment was unsettling after the weeks of living within the research block.

"What people didn't realize," he said, "was that our human society was an exact parallel of the rodent life we were studying. Progressive overcrowding within a restricted space, a totally alien and unreal way of life . . . The principle is the same.

"That gave rise to that feeling of *gestalt* in the observation chamber. But why should just we two have experienced it, earlier on?"

He paused, in thought. "If I'm right," he said, "and this all arose as a direct function of overcrowding, continual close contact, and familiarity, it's natural that the sensation should occur earlier between us. We already shared a lot of understanding and familiarity with each other's personality that was not common to anyone else in the block."

"And seeing it happen to the rats, those times, triggered it off in us?"

"Perhaps there was some leakage of the experience, from their minds to ours. Or perhaps other factors are involved. I've only just been able to fit this into words; while in the block, all I could do was sense it, and almost instinctively follow the ideas I sensed."

He looked up suddenly as, without warning, a bright tongue of flame shot out of the split roof of the block. Soon the fire spread, and the flames danced into the air, illuminating the grassland all around. Men and women from the block stood around it in a rough circle, silhouetted against the light of the fire.

"An electrical short, caused by the rain, I suppose," he said, half to himself. "So that's the end of the research block."

Several rats could be seen, in the bright yellow-orange light, scurrying away from the building.

"That was what they wanted," Harris went on. "Once they had found the group consciousness, they must have instinctively realized that, as a group, they couldn't survive in the long run unless they escaped from the restrictions of the test area. They managed it, but it doesn't seem to have done them a lot of good. Did you notice when the *gestalt*-feeling was lost?" he went on, on another tangent. "As soon as the closed environment was broken, when the building broke up."

She kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were wet and cold. "You can fit all the facts together tomorrow," she said. "Isn't it more practical to remember that we're ten miles away from the nearest habitation, right now?"

He smiled. "I still can't forget the world that we created in that building; it seems so vivid, yet so unreal."

"Someone must be organizing transport," she said, insistently. "Let's go and find it."

Together they hurried off through the rain, leaving the dying flames of the overcrowded world behind them.

Stalemate In Time

By Charles L. Harness

"Two mighty metal globes clung in a murderous death-struggle, lashing out with flames of poison. Yet deep in their twisted, radioactive wreckage the main battle raged—where a girl swayed sensuously before her conqueror's mocking eyes . . ."

—"Planet Stories."

AT FIRST THERE was only the voice, a monotonous murmur in her ears.

"Die now—die now—die now—"

Evelyn Kane awoke, breathing slowly and painfully. The top of the cubicle was bulging inward on her chest, and it seemed likely that a rib or two was broken. How long ago? Years? Minutes? She had no way of knowing. Her slender right hand found the oxygen valve and turned it. For a long while she lay, hurting and breathing helplessly.

"Die now—die now—die now—"

The votron had awakened her with its heart-breaking code message, and it was her duty to carry out its command. Nine years after the great battle globes had crunched together the mentors had sealed her in this tiny cell, dormant, unwaking, to be livened only when it was certain her countrymen had either definitely won—or lost.

The votron's telepathic dirge chronicled the latter fact. She had expected nothing else.

She had only to find the relay beside her cot, press the key that would set in motion gigantic prime movers in the heart of the great globe, and the conquerors would join the conquered in the wide and nameless grave of space.

But life, now doled out by the second, was too delicious to abandon immediately. Her mind, like that of a drowning person, raced hungrily over the memories of her past.

For twenty years, in company with her great father, she had watched *The Defender* grow from a vast metal skeleton into a planet-sized battle globe. But it had not grown fast enough, for when the Scythian globe, *The Invader*, sprang out of black space to enslave the budding Terran Confederacy, *The Defender* was unfinished, half-equipped, and undermanned.

The Terrans could only fight for time and hope for a miracle.

The Defender, commanded by her father, Gordon, Lord Kane, hurled itself from its orbit around Procyon and met *The Invader* with giant fission torpedoes.

And then, in an intergalactic proton storm beyond the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, the globes lost their bearings and collided. Hordes of brute-men poured through the crushed outer armour of the stricken *Defender*.

The prone woman stirred uneasily. Here the images became unreal and terrible, with the recurrent vision of death. It had taken the Scythians nine years to conquer *The Defender*'s outer shell. Then had come that final interview with her father.

"In half an hour our last space port will be captured," he had telepathed curtly. "Only one more messenger ship can leave *The Defender*. Be on it."

"No. I shall die here."

His fine tired eyes had studied her face in enigmatic appraisal. "Then die usefully. The mentors are trying to develop a force that will destroy both globes in the moment of our inevitable defeat. If they are successful, you will have the task of pressing the final button of the battle."

"There's an off-chance you may survive," countered a mentor. "We're also working on a means for your escape —not only because you are Gordon's daughter, but because this great proton storm will prevent radio contact with Terra for years, and we want someone to escape with our secret if and when our experiments prove successful."

"But you must expect to die," her father had warned with gentle finality.

She clenched her fingernails vehemently into her palms and wrenched herself back to the present.

That time had come.

With some effort she worked herself out of the crumpled bed and lay on the floor of her little cubicle, panting and holding her chest with both hands. The metal floor was very cold. Evidently the enemy torpedo fissionables had finally broken through to the centre portions of the ship, letting in the icy breath of space. Small matter. Not by freezing would she die.

She reached out her hand, felt for the all-important key, and gasped in dismay. The mahogany box containing the key had burst its metal bonds and was lying on its side. The explosion that had crushed her cubicle had been terrific.

With a gurgle of horror she snapped on her wrist luminar and examined the interior of the box.

It was a shattered ruin.

Once the fact was clear, she composed herself and lay

there, breathing hard and thinking. She had no means to construct another key. At best, finding the rare tools and parts would take months, and during the interval the invaders would be cutting loose from the dead hulk that clutched their conquering battle globe in a metallic *rigor mortis*.

She gave herself six weeks to accomplish this stalemate. Within that time she must know whether the prime movers were still intact, and whether she could safely enter the pile room herself, set the movers in motion, and draw the moderator columns. If it were unsafe, she must secure the unwitting assistance of her Scythian enemies.

Still prone, she found the first-aid kit and taped her chest expertly. The cold was beginning to make itself felt, so she flicked on the chaudiere she wore as an undergarment to her Scythian woman's uniform. Then she crawled on her elbows and stomach to the tiny door, spun the sealing gear, and was soon outside. Ignoring the pain and pulling on the side of the imitation rock that contained her cell, she got slowly to her feet. The air was thin indeed, and frigid. She turned the valve of her portable oxygen bottle almost subconsciously, while exploring the surrounding blackened forest as far as she could see. Mentally she was alert for roving alien minds. She had left her weapons inside the cubicle, except for the three things in the little leather bag dangling from her waist, for she knew that her greatest weapon in the struggle to come would be her apparent harmlessness.

Four hundred yards behind her she detected the mind of a low-born Scythe, of the Tharn sun group. Very quickly she established it as that of a tired, brutish corporal, taking a mop-up squad through the black stumps and forlorn branches of the small forest that for years had supplied oxygen to the defenders of this sector.

The corporal could not see her green Scythian uniform clearly, and evidently took her for a Terran woman. In his mind was the question: Should he shoot immediately, or should he capture her? It had been two months since he had seen a woman. But then, his orders were to shoot. Yes, he would shoot.

Evelyn turned in profile to the beam-gun and stretched

luxuriously, hoping that her grimace of pain could not be detected. With satisfaction, she sensed a sudden change of determination in the mind of the Tharn. The gun was lowered, and the man was circling to creep up behind her. He did not bother to notify his men. He wanted her first. He had seen her uniform, but that deterred him not a whit. Afterwards, he would call up the squad. Finally, they would kill her and move on. Women auxiliaries had no business here, anyway.

Hips dipping, Evelyn sauntered into the shattered copse. The man moved faster, though still trying to approach quietly. Most of the radions in the mile-high ceiling had been destroyed, and the light was poor. He was not surprised when he lost track of his quarry. He tip-toed rapidly onward, picking his way through the charred and fallen branches, thinking that she must turn up again soon. He had not gone twenty yards in this manner when a howl of unbearable fury sounded in his mind, and the dull light in his brain went out.

Breathing deeply from her mental effort, the woman stepped from behind a great black tree trunk and hurried to the unconscious man. For I.Q.'s of 100 and less, telepathic cortical paralysis was quite effective. With cool efficiency and no trace of distaste she stripped the odorous uniform from the man, then took his weapon, turned the beam power down very low, and needled a neat slash across his throat. While he bled to death, she slipped deftly into the baggy suit, clasped the beam gun by the handle, and started up the sooty slope. For a time, at least, it would be safer to pass as a Tharn soldier than as any kind of a woman.

two

THE INQUISITOR LEANED forward, frowning at the girl before him.

"Name?"

"Evelyn Kane."

The eyes of the inquisitor widened. "So you admit to a Terran name. Well, Terran, you are charged with having

stolen passage on a supply lorry, and you also seem to be wearing the uniform of an infantry corporal as well as that of a Scythian woman auxiliary. Incidentally, where is the corporal? Did you kill him?"

He was prepared for a last-ditch denial. He would cut it short, have the guards remove her, and execution would follow immediately. In a way, it was unfortunate. The woman was obviously of a high Terran class. No—he couldn't consider that. His slender means couldn't afford another woman in his quarters, and besides, he wouldn't feel safe with this cool murderess.

"Do you not understand the master tongue? Why did you kill the corporal?" He leaned impatiently over his desk.

The woman stared frankly back at him with her clear blue eyes. The guards on either side of her dug their nails into her arms, as was their custom with recalcitrant prisoners, but she took no notice.

She had analysed the minds of the three men. She could handle the inquisitor alone or the two guards alone, but not all three.

"If you aren't afraid of me, perhaps you'd be so kind as to send the guards out for a few minutes," she said, placing a hand on her hip. "I have interesting information."

So that was it. Buy her freedom by betraying fugitive Terrans. Well, he could take the information and then kill her. He nodded curtly to the guards, and they walked out of the hut, exchanging sly winks with one another.

Evelyn Kane crossed her arms across her chest and felt her broken rib gingerly. The inquisitor stared up at her in sadistic admiration. He would certainly be on hand for the execution. His anticipation was cut short with a horrible realization. Under the paralysing force of a mind greater than his own, he reached beneath the desk and switched off the recorder.

"Who is the Occupational Commandant for this Sector?" she asked tersely. This must be done swiftly before the guards returned.

"Perat, Viscount of Tharn," replied the man mechanically.

"What is the extent of his jurisdiction?"

"From the centre of the Terran globe, outward four hundred miles radius."

"Good. Prepare for me the usual visa that a woman clerk needs for passage to the offices of the Occupational Commandant."

The inquisitor filled in blanks in a stiff sheet of paper and stamped a seal at its bottom.

"You will add in the portion reserved for 'comments', the following: 'Capable clerk. Others will follow as they are found available.' "

The man's pen scratched away obediently.

Evelyn Kane smiled gently at the impotent, inwardly raging inquisitor. She took the paper, folded it, and placed it in a pocket in her blouse. "Call the guards," she ordered.

He pressed the button on his desk, and the guards re-entered.

"This person is no longer a prisoner," said the inquisitor woodenly. "She is to take the next transport to the Occupational Commandant of Zone One."

When the transport had left, neither inquisitor nor guards had any memory of the woman. However, in the due course of events, the recording was gathered up with many others like it, boxed carefully, and sent to the Office of the Occupational Commandant, Zone One, for auditing.

Evelyn was extremely careful with her mental probe as she descended from the transport. The Occupational Commandant would undoubtedly be high-born and telepathic. He must not have occasion to suspect a similar ability in a mere clerk.

Fighting had passed this way, too, and recently. Many of the buildings were still smoking, and many of the radions high above were either shot out or obscured by slowly drifting dust clouds. The acrid odour of radiation-remover was everywhere.

She caught the sound of spasmodic small-arms fire.

"What is that?" she asked the transport attendant.

"The Commandant is shooting prisoners," he replied laconically.

"Oh."

"Where did you want to go?"

"To the personnel office."

"That way." He pointed to the largest building of the group—two storeys high, reasonably intact.

She walked off down the gravel path, which was stained here and there with dark sticky red. She gave her visa to the guard at the door and was admitted to an improvised waiting room, where another guard eyed her stonily. The firing was much nearer. She recognized the obscene coughs of a Faeg pistol and began to feel sick.

A woman in the green uniform of the Scythe auxiliary came in, whispered something to the guard, and then told Evelyn to follow her.

In the anteroom a grey cat looked her over curiously, and Evelyn frowned. She might have to get rid of the cat if she stayed here. Under certain circumstances the animal could prove her deadliest enemy.

The next room held a foppish little man, evidently a supervisor of some sort, who was studying her visa.

"I'm very happy to have you here, S'ria—ah—"—he looked at the visa suspiciously—"S'ria Lyn. Do sit down. But as I was just remarking to S'ria Gerek, here"—he nodded to the other woman, who smiled back—"I wish the field officers would make up their august minds as to whether they want you or don't want you. Just why did they transfer you to H.Q.?"

She thought quickly. This pompous little ass would have to be given some answer that would keep him from checking with the inquisitor. It would have to be something personal. She looked at the false black in his eyebrows and sideburns, and the artificial way in which he had combed hair over his bald spot. She crossed her knees slowly, ignoring the narrowing eyes of S'ria Gerek, and smoothed the back of her braided yellow hair. He was studying her covertly.

"The men in the fighting zones are uncouth, S'rin Gorph," she said simply. "I was told that *you*, that is, I mean——"

"Yes?" he was the soul of graciousness. S'ria Gerek began to dictate loudly into her mechanical transcriber.

Evelyn cleared her throat, averted her eyes, and with some effort, managed a delicate flush. "I meant to say, I

thought I would be happier working for—working here. So I asked for a transfer."

S'rin Gorph beamed. "Splendid. But the occupation isn't over, yet, you know. There'll be hard work here for several weeks yet, before we cut loose from the enemy globe. But you do your work well"—winking artfully—"and I'll see that—"

He stopped, and his face took on a hunted look of mingled fear and anxiety. He appeared to listen.

Evelyn tensed her mind to receive and deceive a mental probe. She was certain now that the Zone Commandant was highborn and telepathic. The chances were only fifty-fifty that she could delude him for any length of time if he became interested in her. He must be avoided if at all possible. It should not be too difficult. He undoubtedly had a dozen personal secretaries and/or concubines and would take small interest in the lowly employees that amused Gorph.

Gorph looked at her uncertainly. "Perat, Viscount of the Tharn Suns, sends you his compliments and wishes to see you on the balcony." He pointed to a hallway. "All the way through there, across to the other wing."

As she left, she heard all sound in the room stop. The transcribing and calculating machines trailed off into a watchful silence, and she could feel the eyes of the men and women on her back. She noticed then that the Faeg had ceased firing.

Her heart was beating faster as she walked down the hall. She felt a very strong probe flooding over her brain casually, palping with mild interest the artificial memories she supplied; Escapades with officers in the combat areas. Reprimands. Demotion and transfer. Her deception of Gorph. Her anticipation of meeting a real Viscount and hoping he would let her dance for him.

The questing probe withdrew as idly as it had come, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She could not hope to deceive a suspicious telepath for long. Perat was merely amused at her "lie" to his under-supervisor. He had accepted her at her own face value, as supplied by her false memories.

She opened the door to the balcony and saw a man leaning moodily on the balustrade. He gave no immediate notice of her presence.

The five hundred and sixth heir of Tharn was of uncertain age, as were most of the men of both globes. Only the left side of his face could be seen. It was gaunt and leathery, and a deep thin scar lifted the corner of his mouth into a satanic smile. A faint paunch was gathering at his abdomen, as befitted a warrior turned to boring paper work. His closely cut black hair and the two sparkling red-gemmed rings—apparently identical—on his right hand seemed to denote a certain fastidiousness and unconscious superiority. To Evelyn the jewelled fingers bespoke an unnatural contrast to the past history of the man and were symptomatic of a personality that could find stimulation only in strange and cruel pleasures.

In alarm she suddenly realized that she had inadvertently let her appraisal penetrate her uncovered conscious mind, and that this probe was there awaiting it.

"You are right," he said coldly, still staring into the court below. "Now that the long battle is over, there is little left to divert me."

He pushed the Faeg across the coping toward her. "Take this."

He had not as yet looked at her.

She crossed the balcony, simultaneously grasping the pistol he offered her and looking down into the courtyard. There seemed to be nearly twenty Terrans lying about, in pools of their own blood.

Only one man, a Terran officer of very high rank—was left standing. His arms were folded sombrely across his chest, and he studied the killer above him almost casually. But when the woman came out, their eyes met, and he started imperceptibly.

Evelyn Kane felt a horrid chill creeping over her. The man's hair was white, now, and his proud face lined with deep furrows, but there could be no mistake. It was Gordon, Lord Kane.

Her father.

The sweat continued to grow on her forehead, and she felt for a moment that she needed only to wish hard

enough, and this would be a dream. A dream of a big, kind, dark-haired man with laugh-wrinkles about his eyes, who sat her on his knee when she was a little girl and read bedtime stories to her from a great book with many pictures.

An icy, amused voice came through: "Our orders are to kill all prisoners. It is entertaining to shoot down helpless men, isn't it? It warms me to know that I am cruel and wanton, and worthy of my trust."

Even in the midst of her horror, a cold, analytical part of her was explaining why the Commandant had called her to the balcony. Because all captured Terrans had to be killed, he hated his superiors, his own men, and especially the prisoners. A task so revolting he could not relegate to his own officers. He must do it himself, but he wanted his underlings to know he loathed them for it. She was merely a symbol of that contempt. His next words did not surprise her.

"It is even more stimulating to require a shuddering female to kill them. You are shuddering you know?"

She nodded dumbly. Her palm was so wet that a drop of sweat dropped from it to the floor. She was thinking hard. She could kill the Commandant and save her father for a little while. But then the problem of detonating the pile remained, and it would not be solved more quickly by killing the man who controlled the pile area. On the contrary if she could get him interested in her——

"So far as our records indicate," murmured Perat, "the man down there is the last living Terran within *The Defender*. It occurred to me that our newest clerk would like to start off her duties with a bang. The Faeg is adjusted to a needle-beam. If you put a bolt between the man's eyes, you may dance for me tonight, and perhaps there will be other nights——"

The woman seemed lost in thought for a long time. Slowly, she lifted the ugly little weapon. The doomed Terran looked up at her peacefully, without expression. She lowered the Faeg, her arm trembling.

Gordon, Lord Kane, frowned faintly, then closed his eyes. She raised the gun again, drew cross hairs with a nerveless wrist, and squeezed the trigger. There was a loud,

hollow cough, but no recoil. The Terran officer, his eyes still closed and arms folded, sank to the ground, face up. Blood was running from a tiny hole in his forehead.

The man leaning on the balustrade turned and looked at Evelyn, at first with amused contempt, then with narrowing, questioning eyes.

"Come here," he ordered.

The Faeg dropped from her hand. With a titanic effort she activated her legs and walked toward him.

He was studying her face very carefully.

She felt that she was going to be sick. Her knees were so weak that she had to lean on the coping.

With a forefinger he lifted up the mass of golden curls that hung over her right forehead and examined the scar hidden there, where the mentors had cut into her frontal lobe. The tiny doll they had created for her writhed uneasily in her waist purse, but Perat seemed to be thinking of something else, and missed the significance of the scar completely.

He dropped his hand. "I'm sorry," he said with a quiet weariness. "I shouldn't have asked you to kill the Terran. It was a sorry joke." Then: "Have you ever seen me before?"

"No," she whispered hoarsely. His mind was in hers, verifying the fact.

"Have you ever met my father, Phaen, the old Count of Tharn?"

"No."

"Do you have a son?"

"No."

His mind was out of hers again, and he had turned moodily back, surveying the courtyard and the dead. "Gorph will be wondering what happened to you. Come to my quarters at the eighth metron tonight."

Apparently he suspected nothing.

Father. Father. I had to do it. But we'll all join you, soon. Soon.

three

PERAT LAY ON his couch, sipping cold purple *terif* and following the thinly-clad dancer with narrowed eyes. Music,

soft and subtle, floated from his communications box, illegally tuned to an officer's club somewhere. Evelyn made the rhythm part of her as she swayed slowly on tiptoe.

For the last thirty "nights"—the hours allotted to rest and sleep—it had been thus. By "day" she probed furtively into the minds of the office staff, memorizing area designations, channels for official messages, and the names and authorizations of occupational field crews. By night she danced for Perat, who never took his eyes from her, nor his probe from her mind. While she danced it was not too difficult to elude the probe. There was an odd autohypnosis in dancing that blotted out memory and knowledge.

"Enough for now," he ordered. "Careful of your rib."

When he had first seen the bandages on her bare chest, that first night, she had been ready with a memory of dancing on a freshly waxed floor, and of falling.

Perat seemed to be debating with himself as she sat down on her own couch to rest. He got up, unlocked his desk, and drew out a tiny reel of metal wire, which Evelyn recognized as being feed for an amateur stereop projector. He placed the reel in a projector that had been installed in the wall, flicked off the table luminar, and both of them waited in the dark, breathing rather loudly.

Suddenly the centre of the room was bright with a ball of light some two feet in diameter, and inside the luminous sphere were an old man, a woman, and a little boy of about four years. They were walking through a luxurious garden, and then they stopped, looked up, and waved gaily.

Evelyn studied the trio with growing wonder. The old man and the boy were complete strangers. *But the woman——!*

"That is Phaen, my father," said Perat quietly. "He stayed at home because he hated war. And that is a path in our country estate on Tharn-R-VII. The little boy I fail to recognize, beyond a general resemblance to the Tharn line.

"But—*can you deny that you are the woman*?"

The stereop snapped off, and she sat wordless in the dark.

"There seemed to be some similarity—" she admitted. Her throat was suddenly dry. Yet, why should she be alarmed? She really didn't know the woman.

The table luminar was on now, and Perat was prowling hungrily about the room, his scar twisting his otherwise handsome face into a snarling scowl.

"Similarity! Bah! That loop of hair over her right forehead hid a scar identical to yours. I have had the individual frames analysed!"

Evelyn's hands knotted unconsciously. She forced her body to relax, but her mind was racing. This introduced another variable to be controlled in her plan for destruction. She *must* make it a known quantity.

"Did your father send it to you?" she asked.

"The day before you arrived here. It had been *en route* for months, of course."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said, 'Your widow and son send greetings. Be of good cheer, and accept our love.' What nonsense! He knows very well I'm not married and that—well, if I have ever fathered any children, I don't know about them."

"Is that all he said?"

"That's all, except that he included this ring." He pulled one of the duplicate jewels from his right middle finger and tossed it to her. "It's identical to the one he had made for me when I entered on my majority. For a long time it was thought that it was the only stone of its kind on all the planets of the Tharn suns, a mineralogical freak, but I guess he found another. But why should I want two of them?"

Evelyn crossed the room and returned the ring.

"Existence is so full of mysteries, isn't it?" murmured Perat. "Sometimes it seems unfortunate that we must pass through a sentient phase on our way to death. This foolish, foolish war. Maybe the old count was right."

"You could be court martialled for that."

"Speaking of courts martial, I've got to attend one tonight—an appeal from a death sentence." He arose, smoothed his hair and clothes, and poured another glass of *terif*. "Some fool inquisitor can't show proper disposition of a woman prisoner."

Evelyn's heart skipped a beat. "Indeed?"

"The wretch insists that he could remember if we would just let him alone. I suppose he took a bribe. You'll find one now and then who tries for a little extra profit."

She must absolutely not be seen by the condemned inquisitor. The stimulus would almost certainly make him remember.

"I'll wait for you," she said indifferently, thrusting her arms out in a languorous yawn.

"Very well." Perat stepped to the door, then turned and looked back at her. "On the other hand, I may need a clerk. It's way after hours, and the others have gone."

Beneath a gesture of wry protest, she swallowed rapidly.

"Perhaps you'd better come," insisted Perat.

She stood up, unloosened her waist purse, checked its contents swiftly, and then followed him out.

This might be a very close thing. From the purse she took a bottle of perfume and rubbed her ear lobes casually.

"Odd smell," commented Perat, wrinkling his nose.

"Odd scent," corrected Evelyn cryptically. She was thinking about the earnest faces of the mentors as they instructed her carefully in the use of the "perfume." The adrenalin glands, they had explained, provided a useful and powerful stimulant to a man in danger. Adrenalin slowed the heart and digestion, increased the systole and blood pressure, and increased perspiration to cool the skin. But there could be too much of a good thing. An overdose of adrenalin, they had pointed out, caused almost immediate oedema. The lungs filled rapidly with the serum and the victim . . . drowned. The perfume she possessed overstimulated, in some unknown way, the adrenals of frightened persons. It had no effect on inactive adrenals.

The question remained—who would be the more frightened, she or the condemned inquisitor?

She was perspiring freely, and the blonde hair on her arms and neck was standing stiffly when Perat opened the door for her and they entered the Zone Provost's chambers.

One glance at the trembling creature in the prisoner's chair reassured her. The ex-inquisitor, shorn of his insignia, shabby and stubble-bearded, sat huddled in his chair and from time to time swept his grave tormentors with glazed eyes. He looked a long while at Evelyn.

She got out her bottle of perfume idly and held it open in her warm hand. The officers and judge-provost were listening to the opening address of the prosecution and took no notice of her.

More and more frequently the condemned man turned his gaze to Evelyn. She poured a little of the scent on her handkerchief. The prisoner coughed and rubbed his chin, trying to think.

The charges were finally read, and the defence attorney began his opening statement. The prisoner, now coughing more frequently, was oblivious to all but the woman. Once she thought she saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes, and she fanned herself hurriedly with her handkerchief.

The trial droned on to a close. It was a mere formality. The prosecutor summed up by proving that a Terran woman had been captured, possibly named Evelyn Kane, turned over to the defendant for registration and disposal, and that the defendant's weekly accounts failed to show a receipt for the release of the woman. Q.E.D., the death sentence must be affirmed.

The light in the prisoner's eyes was growing clearer, despite his bronchial difficulties. He began now to pay attention to what was said and to take notice of the other faces. It was as though he had finally found the weapon he wanted, and patiently awaited an opportunity to use it.

The defence was closing. Counsel for the prisoner declared that the latter might have been the innocent victim of the escapee, Evelyn Kane, possibly a telepathic Terran woman, because only a fool would have permitted a prisoner to escape without attempting to juggle the prison records, unless his mind had been under telepathic control. They ought to be looking for Evelyn Kane now, instead of wasting time with her victim. She might be anywhere. She might even be in this building. He bowed apologetically to Evelyn, she smiled at the faces suddenly looking at her with new interest.

The man in the prisoner's chair was peering at Evelyn through half-closed eyes, his arms crossed on his chest. He had stopped coughing, and the fingers of his right hand were tapping patiently on his sleeve.

If Perat should at this moment probe the prisoner's mind . . .

Evelyn, in turning to smile at Perat, knocked the bottle from the table to the floor, where it broke in a liquid tinkle. She put her hands to her mouth in contrite apology. The judge-provost frowned, and Perat eyed her curiously. The prisoner was seized with such a spasm of coughing that the provost, who had stood to pronounce sentence, paused in annoyance. The wracking ceased.

The provost picked up the Faeg lying before him.

"Have you anything to say before you die?" he asked coldly.

The ex-inquisitor stood and turned a triumphant face to him. "Excellency, you ask, where is the woman prisoner who escaped from me? Well, I can tell you . . ."

He clutched wildly at his throat, coughed horribly, and bent in Evelyn Kane's direction.

"She . . ."

His lips, which were rapidly growing purple, moved without saying anything intelligible, and he suddenly crashed over the chair and to the floor.

The prison physician leaped to him, stethoscope out. After a few minutes, he stood up, puzzled and frowning, in the midst of a strained silence. "Odd, very odd," he muttered.

"Did the prisoner faint?" asked the judge-provost incuriously, lowering the Faeg.

"The prisoner's lungs are filled with liquid, apparently the result of hyperactive adrenals," commented the baffled physician. "He's dead, and don't ask me to explain why."

Evelyn smothered a series of hacking coughs in her handkerchief as the court broke up in excited groups. From the corner of her eye she saw that Perat was studying her thoughtfully.

four

TWO WEEKS LATER, very late at "night", Perat lay stretched gloomily on his sleeping couch. On the other side of the room Evelyn was curled luxuriously on her own damasked

lounge, her head propped high. She was scanning some of the miniature stereop reels that Perat had brought from his far-distant home planet.

"Those green trees and hedges . . . so far away," she mused. "Do you ever think about seeing them again?"

"Of late, I've been thinking about them quite a bit."

What did he mean by that?

"I understood it would be months before the field crews cut us loose from the Terran ship," she said.

"Indeed?"

"Well? Won't it?"

Perat turned his moody face toward her. "No, it won't. The field crews have been moving at breakneck speed, on account of some unfounded rumour or other that the Terran ship is going to explode. On orders from our High Command, we pull out of here by the end of the working day tomorrow. Within twenty metrons from now, our ship parts company with the enemy globe."

The scar on her forehead was throbbing violently. There was no time now to send the false orders to the field crew she had selected. She must think a bit.

"It seems then, this is our last night together."

"It is."

She rose from her couch and walked the room like a caged beast.

"You can hardly take me, a commoner, back with you . . ."

With growing shock she realized that she was more than half sincere in her request.

"It is not done. It is unlike you to suggest it."

"Well, that's that, I suppose." She stopped and toyed idly with a box of chessmen on his table. "Would you care for a game of Terran chess? I'll try to play very intelligently, so that you won't be too terribly bored."

"If you like. But there are more interesting . . ."

"Do you think," she interrupted quickly, "that you could beat me without sight of the board or pieces?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just thought it would be more interesting for you. I'll take the board over to my bed, and you call out your moves and I'll tell you my replies. I'll see the board, but you won't."

"A curious variant."

"But you must promise to keep out of my mind; otherwise you would know my plans."

He smiled. "Set up the pieces. What colour do you want?"

"I'll defend. Give me black."

She loosed her waist-purse, took a handkerchief from it, and set the purse on the deep carpet in the shadow of her table. She unfolded the chessboard in front of her on the couch and quickly placed the pieces. "I'm ready," she announced.

Indeed, everything was in readiness now except that she didn't know where the cat was. She regretted bitterly not having killed that innocent mouser weeks ago.

"Pawn to king four," announced Perat, gazing idly at the ceiling.

She made the move and replied, "Pawn to king three."

From the unlaced purse hidden on the floor a tiny head thrust itself out, followed soon by a pair of miniscule shoulders.

"Have you studied this Terran game?" queried Perat curiously, "or don't you know enough to seize the centre on your first move?"

"Have I made an error already? Was that the wrong move?"

"It's the first move in a complete defensive system, but few people outside of Terrans understand it. Pawn to queen four."

She had blundered in attempting the French Defence, but it was not too late to convert to something that could be expected of a Scythian woman beginner. "Pawn to queen three."

The grey doll was out of the purse, sidling through the shadows to the door, which stood slightly ajar.

"So you don't know the book moves, after all. You would

really have astonished me if you had moved your queen pawn two squares. I'll pay pawn to king bishop four. Will you have some *terif*?"

He spun around upright and reached for the decanter, looking full at the door . . . and the tiny figure.

Evelyn was up at once, cutting off his line of vision. "Yes, I think I will have one."

Telepathically she ordered the little creature to dash through the crack in the doorway. She heard the faint rustle behind her as she picked up the glass Perat poured.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "for a moment I thought I saw your little doll . . ."

She looked at him dubiously. "Really, Perat? It's in my purse."

He stepped lithely to the door and flung it open. Far down the hall there was the faintest suggestion of a scuffle.

"A mouse, I guess." He returned to his bed, but it was plain that he was unsatisfied.

The game wore on for half a metron. Perat's combinations were met with almost sufficient counter-combinations, so that the issue hung in doubt for move after move.

"You've improved considerably since yesterday," he admitted grudgingly.

"Not at all. It's your playing 'blind' that makes us even. No cheating! Keep out of my mind! It isn't fair to know what I'm planning."

Oh, by the merciful god of Galaxus, if he'll stay out of mind and the cat out of the communications room for another five minutes!

"All right, all right. I'll win anyway," he muttered, as he concluded a combination that netted him the black queen. "You could gracefully resign right now."

Evelyn studied the position carefully. She had made a grave miscalculation—the queen loss had definitely not been a part of the plan. She must contrive a delaying action that would invoke an oral argument.

"Bishop to queen rook eight," she murmured. Her telepathic probe, focused on the bit of nervous tissue that the mentors had cut from her frontal lobe and given to her mannikin as a brain, continued its tight control. In Gorph's office, far down the wing, the little creature was hopping

painstakingly from one key to another of the dispatch printing machine.

". . . takes priority over all other pending projects . . ."

"Your game is hopeless," scowled Perat. "I'm a queen and the exchange up on you."

"I always play the game out," replied Evelyn easily. "You never know what might happen. Your move."

". . . five horizontal columns of metallic trans-scythium nine hundred xedars long will be found in a Terran storeroom, our area code . . ."

"All right, then. Queen takes pawn."

"Pawn to queen knight seven," replied Evelyn. It was her sole remaining pawn, and she hoped to use it in an odd way.

Perat checked with his queen at queen bishop four, and Evelyn's king slid to safety at queen knight eight. Perat moved his rook from queen knight five to queen five.

"Do you intend to mate with rook to queen's square next move?" asked Evelyn demurely.

"under the strictest secrecy. Therefore you are ordered not to communicate . . ."

"Nothing can prevent it," observed the Viscount of Tharn sombrely. He had already lost all interest in the game and was contemplating the ceiling tapestries. With a lurch she brought her telepathic probe to rest, ready to prepare a false front for his searching mind. She must keep him out a moment longer, or all was lost.

"But it's my move, and I have no move," she objected, focusing her probe again.

". . . signed, Perat, Viscount of Tharn, Commandant, Occupation Zone One."

Through that distant fragment of her mind she sensed that something was watching the doll with feral interest.

The cat.

"So? No move? Then you lose," replied Perat.

"But my king isn't in check. You told me yourself that when my king was not in check, and I had no legal move, that I was stalemated, and the game was a draw."

In that other room, her telepathic contact guided the little figure down the table leg. Slowly now, don't excite the cat into pouncing. She had only seconds left, but it should

suffice to place the dispatch in Gorph's incoming box. The pompous little supervisor would send it by the first jet messenger without doubt or question, and the field crew would proceed to draw the five columns.

Pain daggered into her right leg!

The cat had seized her homunculus by the thigh; she knew the tiny bone had been crushed. She caught fleet, dizzy impressions of the animal striding off proudly with the little creature between its jaws. The letter lay where it had fallen, under the dispatch machine, almost invisible.

The doll ceased her blind writing and drew a tiny black cylinder from her belt. The cat's right eye loomed huge above her.

Mentally, Perat studied the chessboard position with growing interest.

"Idiotic Terran game," he growled. "Only a Terran would conceive of the idea of calling a crushing defeat a drawn battle. I'm sorry I taught you the game. It's really quite—*what was that*?"

"Sounded like the cat, didn't it?" responded Evelyn.

Her tiny *alter ego* had dropped from those destructive jaws and was dragging itself slowly back to the dispatch. It found the message and picked it up.

"Do you think something could have hurt it?" asked Evelyn.

The doll struggled toward Gorph's desk, leaving behind a thin red trail.

Then several things happened. Hot swords sizzled in Evelyn's back, and she knew the enraged feline had broken the spinal column of the doll. With throbbing intuition she collapsed her telepathic tentacle.

Too late.

Perat's probe was already in her mind, and she knew that he had caught the full impact of her swift telepathic return. She lay there limply. Her rib, now almost healed, began to ache dully.

The man continued to lie motionless, staring heavy-lidded at the ceiling. Gradually, his mind withdrew itself from hers.

"So you're high-born," he mused aloud. "I should have

known, but then, you concealed it very adroitly, didn't you?"

She sat up against the wall. Her heart was pounding almost audibly.

He was relentless. "No Scythian would play chess the way you did. Only a Terran would play for a draw after total defeat."

"I play chess well, so I am a Terran?" she whispered through a dry throat.

Perat turned his handsome grey eyes from the ceiling and smiled at her. His mouth lifted venomously as he watched her begin to tremble.

"Pour me a *terif*," he ordered.

She arose, feeling that she must certainly collapse the next instant. She forced her legs to move, step by step, to the table by his couch. There she picked up the *terif* decanter and tipped it to fill his glass. The dry clatter of bottle on glass betrayed her shaking hands.

"One for you, too, my dear Lyn."

She held the decanter several inches above her glass to avoid that horrible clatter, and managed to spill quite a bit on the table.

Perat held his glass up to touch hers. "A toast," he smiled, "to a mysterious and beautiful lady!"

He drank prone, she standing. She knew she would spill her drink if she tried to recross to her couch.

"So you're a Terran? Then why did you kill the Terran officer on the balcony?"

She was so relieved that she sank limply to the floor beside him.

"Why should I tell you? You wouldn't believe anything I told you now, or that you found in my mind." She smiled up at him.

"True, true. Quite a dilemma. Should I shoot you now and possibly bring the rage of a noble Scythian house down about my ears, or should I submit you to mechanical telepathic analysis?"

"I am yours, viscount," she laughed. "Shoot me. Analyse me. Whatever you wish."

She knew her gaiety was forced, and that it had struck a false note. The iron gate of doubt had clanged shut between them. From now on he would contain her mind

in the mental prison of his own. The dispatch beside Gorph's desk could have no further aid from her. Anyway, the cat had undoubtedly carried off the doll.

"What a strange woman you are," he murmured. A brief shadow crossed his face. "With you, for a little while, I have been happy. But in a few metrons, of course, you will depart under close arrest for the psych centre, and I'll be on my way back to the Tharn suns."

Within half a metron the office force would begin straggling into the Administration offices and her letter would be found and given to a puzzled Gorph, who would then query Perat as to whether it should not be in the incoming box for urgent matters. But what would Gorph do if his superior refused to communicate with him or anyone else for a full metron? The first messenger jet left very soon, and there was no other for four metrons. Would Gorph send it on the first jet, or would he wait? It was a chance she'd have to take.

She got up from the floor and sat down on the couch beside the Viscount of Tharn. "Perat," she began hesitantly, "I know you must send me away. I'm sorry, because I don't want to leave you so soon, and you do not want me to leave you until the last moment, either. Anything else that I would tell you, you might doubt, so I say nothing more. I would like to dance for you. When I dance, I tell the truth."

"Yes, dance, but take care of your rib," assented the man moodily.

She filled his glass again with a sure hand and replaced it on the table. Then she unloosed the combs in her hair and let it fall in a profusion of curls about her shoulders, where it scintillated in a myriad sparkling semicircles in the soft light of the table luminar.

She shook her shoulders to scatter her hair, and unhurriedly released the clasp of her outer lounging gown. The heavy robe fell about her feet, leaving her clad only in a thin, flowing undergarment, which she smoothed languidly while she kicked off her slippers. Her mouth was now half-parted, her eyelids drooping and slumbrous. Perat was still staring at the ceiling, but she knew his mind was flowing unceasingly over her body.

"I must have music," she whispered. The man made no protest when she pressed the controls on his communications box to receive the slow and haunting dance music from the officers' club in the next zone.

The main avenue of access to Perat was now cut. And Gorph was a bolder man than she thought if he dared knock on the door of his chief while she was inside.

She began to sway and to chant. *"The Song of Karos, the Great God of Scythe, Father of Tharn folk, Dweller in Darkness . . ."*

Perat's glass halted, then proceeded slowly to his lips. Of course, no educated nobleman admitted a belief in the ancient religion of the Scythes, but how good it was to hear it sung and danced again? Not since his boyhood, when his mother had dragged him to the temple by main force . . . He placed one palm behind his head and continued to sip and to think, as this strange, lovely woman unravelled with undulant body and husky voice the long, satisfying story of his god.

As she postured sinuously, Evelyn breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the dead mentors who had crammed her to bursting with Scythe folklore.

The luminous metron dial revolved with infinite slowness.

five

ONE METRON had passed when Perat laid his empty glass on the table, without releasing it.

"Enough of dancing," he murmured with cold languor, cutting his communications box back to its authorized channel. "Come here, my dear. I wish you to kiss me."

Evelyn glided instantly to the silken couch, tossing her hair back over her shoulders and ignoring the fact that her rib was alive with pain. She knelt over the reclining man and kissed him on the mouth, running her fingers lightly down his right arm. He relinquished his glass at her touch, and she refilled it absently.

Only then did she notice that something was wrong.

His left hand was no longer beneath his head, but was concealed in the mass of cushions that overflowed his couch in a mute, glittering cascade.

Perat swirled his glass silently, apparently watching only the tiny flashes of iridescence flowing from his jewelled right hand.

Evelyn thought: What made him suspicious? There's something in his left hand. If I only dared probe . . . But he'd know I was afraid, and I'm not supposed to be afraid. Anyway, in a little while it won't matter. If the field crew has started pulling the columns, they should be through in half a metron. If they haven't started, they never will, and nothing will matter then, anyway.

The man's face was inscrutable when he finally spoke. "You couldn't have gone on much longer, anyway, on account of your rib."

"It was becoming a little painful."

"Twice you nearly fainted."

So he had noticed that.

He continued mercilessly. "Why were you so anxious to keep me shut up for a whole metron?"

"I wanted to amuse you. We have so little time left, now."

"So I thought, until your rib began to trouble you. The reaction of an ordinary woman would have been to stop."

"Am I an ordinary woman?"

"Decidedly not. That's why the situation has become so interesting."

"I don't understand, Perat." She sat down beside him, forcing him to move his legs so that his left hand was jammed under the cushion.

"A little while ago, I decided to contact Gorph's mind." He took a sip. "It seems he had been trying to reach me through the communications box."

"He had?" She pictured Gorph's old-womanish anxiety. He had found the sealed message, then, but hadn't been able to verify it because his chief had been listening to a tale of gods. Had he or had he not sent the message by the early jet? It had to be! Possibly all five of the columns had been drawn by now, but she couldn't assume it. The strain-pile would not erupt for a full Terran hour after the fifth column has been drawn. From now until death, of one sort or another, she must delay, delay, delay.

Her blue eyes were widely innocent and puzzled, but the

nerves of her arms were going dead with over-tension. Perhaps if she threw the *terif* in his eyes with her left hand and crushed the numbing supraclavicular nerve with her thumb . . .

Perat turned his head for the first time and looked her full in the face.

"Gorph says he sent the message," he said tonelessly.

She looked at him blankly, then casually removed her hand from his knee and dropped it in her lap. He must absolutely not be alarmed until she knew more. "Apparently I'm supposed to know what you're talking about."

He turned back to the ceiling. "Gorph says someone prepared a priority dispatch with my signature, and he sent it out. I don't suppose you have any idea who did it?"

Time! Time!

"When I was Gorph's assistant, there was a young officer —I can't remember his name—who sometimes forged your signature to urgent actions when Gorph was out. This is true, Perat. My mind is open to you."

He fastened his luminous grey eyes on her. "I presume you're lying, but . . ." His mental probe skimmed rapidly over her cortical association centres. Her skill was strained to the utmost, setting up false memories of each of thousands of synaptic groups just ahead of Perat's probe. On some of the groups she knew she had made blunders, but apparently she preserved the general impression by strengthened verification in subsequent nets. She wove a brief tale of a young officer in charge of metals salvage who had sent an order to a field group to recover some sort of metal, and since Gorph had been out, and H.Q. needed the metal urgently, the officer did not wait for official authorization. His probe then searched her visual lobe thoroughly, but with growing scepticism. She offered him only indistinct memories of the dead officer's identity.

"Who was the man?" asked Perat as a matter of form, sipping his *terif* absently.

"Sub-leader Galen, I think." That would give him pause. He knew she had offered no visual memory of Galen. He would wonder why she was lying.

"Are you sure?"

She wanted to look at the time-dial on the wall, but dared

not. From the corner of her eye she saw Perat's left arm tense, then relax warily. His mental probe had fastened grimly to her mind again, though he must know it would be effort wasted. She conjured up an image of Sub-leader Galen in the act of telling her he was handling a very urgent matter and that he'd tell the Viscount later what he'd done. Then the face of the young officer changed to another of the staff, then another, then still another. Then back to Galen.

"No, I'm not sure."

Perat smiled thinly. "You wished to gain time, and I wished to idle it away. I suppose we have both been fairly successful."

The communications box beside the bed jangled.

"Yes?" cried Perat, all alert.

As his mouth was forming the word, his probe was collapsing within her mind, and her own flashed briefly into his mind. The hand under the pillow held a Faeg, aimed at her chest. But the safety catch was still on.

"Excellency?" came Gorph's tinny voice.

"Yes, Gorph? Have you replaced the columns?"

"Replaced" . . .? That seemed to indicate that the field crew had followed her forged order, then returned the columns by Perat's countercommand, relayed telepathically through Gorph. But once all the great rods were drawn, replacing them did not halt the strain pile. The negative potential would keep on increasing geometrically with time, as planned, to the final goal of joint catastrophe and stalemate.

Some sort of knowledge was drumming silently at her threshold of consciousness. Something she couldn't quite grasp. About the woman in the stereop? Possibly. It would come to her soon.

Ignoring Perat's gloating smile, she looked casually at the metron dial, and her heart leaped with elation, for the dial had ceased revolving. Electrons must be flowing from the centre of the ship through the walls, outward toward the surface two thousand miles away, and the massive currents were probably jamming all the wall circuits.

Within minutes, *finis*.

Could she really rest, now? She was beginning to feel

very tired, almost sleepy. Her duty had been done, and nothing could ever be important again.

Gorph was answering his master over the speaker: "Yes, your excellency, we got them back, that is to say, excepting that one of the five is only half-way out of its cradle."

Life was good, life was beautiful. She almost yawned. Most certainly all of the columns had been pulled out, and then four had been replaced and something had broken down with the fifth. But they had all been out, and that was the only thing that mattered.

"What happened, Gorph?" asked Perat, sipping at his *terif* again. His eyes were fastened on his mistress.

She knew that he had pulled the safety catch on the Faeg.

"When the crew took the rods out, the prime mover broke down on the fifth one, when it was only half-way out. They brought in another mover and got the other four rods back in, and now they're trying to repair the first mover and push the fifth rod back."

(The fifth rod had not been completely drawn. Oh Almighty Heaven!)

"Very well, Gorph. I need not repeat that none of the rods are to be moved out again, unless I appear to you personally. I'll talk to you later."

The box went dead.

Perat, now taking no notice of Evelyn, finished his *terif* leisurely. She sat at his side, breathing woodenly. She had done all that she could do. All five rods had not been withdrawn, and they never would be, now.

"If all Terran women are like you," he began slowly, "I cannot understand how you Terrans lost this battle." He did not expect an answer, and did not wait for one. His hard eyes seemed softened somewhat by a curious admiration. "Only your own gods know what you have endured in your attempt to start the pile."

She looked up wretchedly.

He went on: "Yes, we learned in the nick of time, didn't we? Our physicists told Gorph that the great rods were the core of a pile that could have converted both ships into pure energy, with not a shred of matter left over—something that all the fission piles in the two galaxies couldn't

do. It seems that the pile, if activated, would have introduced sufficient energy into the low-packing-fraction atoms, from iron on down to helium, to transform them completely from matter into radiation.

"Unpleasant thought! Now the Scythian plan will be modified slightly. We shall wait until we tear our globe away from yours, *far* away, and then prime movers left behind in your ship here can pull the columns again, all five, this time. Our globe then proceeds into the Terran Confederacy, and the war will be over. But of course, you'll know nothing about that."

He regarded her wearily. "I'm sorry Lyn—or is it 'Evelyn Kane'? If you had been of Tharn-blood, or even of the Scythian federacy, I would have married you."

She listened to him with only half a mind. Some strange, inaudible thing was trying to reach her. Something she couldn't grasp, but ought to grasp. What had the mentors told her to be ready for? Exhaustion lay like a paralysing blanket over her inert mind.

"You killed your countryman that day," he intoned, "just to ingratiate yourself with me. He was very generous to you. When he saw that you wouldn't shoot him with his eyes open, he closed them. Who was he?"

"Gordon, Lord Kane. My father."

The *terif* glass shook, and the man's face became perceptibly paler. He breathed stridently for a while before speaking again.

This time he seemed to be calling with earnest finality to the forbidding deity of his own warlike homeland, announcing a newcomer at the dark portals of the god: *"This woman . . .!"*

Evelyn Kane did not shriek when the Faeg-bolt tore through her rib and lungs. Even when she sank to the floor, the pain-lines in her own face were much better controlled than those in Perat's.

Then as she lay quietly on the thick, gilded carpet, with consciousness rapidly fading and returning with the regularity of her heart beats, she realized what had been calling to her. The piezo crystal in her waist pouch, still hidden in the shadows of her table, had been activated,

and had brought into focus within the room the dim, transparent outlines of a small space ship.

Perat saw it too, and his eyes widened as they traced it quickly from wall to wall.

"It's real . . ." whispered Evelyn between clenched lips. "Mentors wanted me . . . return in it . . . to Terra . . . secret of pile . . ."

A strange light was growing over Perat's face. "Of course! So that's why your father tried so hard at the last to break through our blockade and get a ship through! If the secret of the strain-pile had ever reached Terra, all the Tharn suns—indeed, the whole Scythe federation—would be novae by now! By Karos, it was a narrow thing!"

There was a soft gurgling in Evelyn's throat.

He flung his pistol away and sat down beside her, lifting her head to his chest. "I'll call the physician," he rasped through contorted lips.

She slid a cold palm over his hot cheek, caressing it lightly. "No . . . we die . . ."

He stiffened. *"We?"*

She continued to stroke his cheek dreamily. "Die with you . . ."

He shook her. "What are you talking about!" he cried. "The pile isn't going to erupt!"

"Crystal focuses . . . ship . . . only when pile . . ."

His face blanched.

She whispered again, so softly that he had to bend his ear to her lips. *"You escape . . . get in ship . . ."*

He stared at her incredulously. "You'd let me get away with the pile secret!"

She relaxed in his arms, smiling sleepily, while the tiny red trickle from the corner of her mouth grew wider. "Stupid of me."

She shivered. ". . . cold . . ."

The Viscount of the Tharn Suns, the greatest star-cluster in the Scythe federation, knotted his jaw muscles feverishly and gnawed at his lower lip. Somehow or other the strain-pile had been energized. Probably the terrific proton storm that had hidden both ships for years had compensated for the unrealized potential of the undrawn fifth rod. It was his

duty to the federation to throw this woman to the floor and take refuge between the shadowy, shimmering walls of the escape ship. He must carry the secret of the pile to safety with him. He had only seconds.

He looked down distractedly at the small creature who was destroying the proud ships that two great civilizations had spent a generation in building. She seemed to be in a deep, peaceful sleep. The only sign of life was a faint pulse in her throat.

She was the only woman that he had ever found whose companionship he could have . . . enjoyed hour after hour. He almost thought, "could have loved."

The room was growing quite warm. The tremendous currents coursing through the walls were swiftly growing stronger.

Another thought occurred to him: How had those Terran mentors planned for their escape ship to avoid the holocaust? Any matter within millions of miles would be destroyed. It was evident, then, that wherever the ship was, it was *not* within the danger zone.

Suddenly he understood everything.

With a queer smile, in which ribald surmise and tenderness fought for supremacy, he picked the woman up, carried her into the phantom vessel, placed her on the pilot's lounge, and strapped her in. From his waist-pouch he took a hypodermic syringe, removed the sheath from the needle, and thrust it into her arm. Her face twinged briefly, but she did not waken. He threw a blanket over her and then strode quickly to the controls. They were fairly simple, and he had no difficulty in switching the automatic drive to the general direction of the Tharn sun cluster. He wrote a hasty note on the pilot's navigation pad, and then turned again to the woman. He removed one of his duplicate jewelled rings and slipped it on her finger. His father would recognize it and would believe her.

Then he bent over her and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Perhaps I love you too, my dearest enemy," he whispered gently. "Educate our son-to-be in the ways of peace."

Again outside the ship, he spun the space lock that sealed her in. The ship's walls were now growing opaque and he could no longer see inside.

His communications box was jangling furiously in a dozen different keys, and anxious, querulous voices were pouring through it into the room. He snapped it off, loosened his collar, filled his glass to overflowing with the last of the *terif,* and cut off the table luminar. His stereop projector next had his attention.

He lay on his couch in the darkness of his death cell, studying with the keenest satisfaction his wife, son, and father, while they waved at him happily from the radiant stereop sphere.

Those Terran mentors had planned well. The escape ship would not be affected by the nearing cataclysm, because it was really in a different time plane—at least five years in the past. The catastrophe would simply release it to its original continuum, whence it would proceed with its precious cargo to the Tharn suns.

Odd effect, that time shift. He wished now he'd read more of the theories of that ancient Terran, Einstein, who claimed that simultaneity was an illusion—that "now" here could be altogether different from "now" in other steric areas. His son, unborn as yet "here," was more than four years old "there"—on the planet. Tharn-R-VII, where the lad played in his grandfather's gardens.

And then there was the mystery of the rings. The old count had not had another ring made of course. The ring the count had sent with the stereop coils must have been the same one that Perat had just placed on the finger of his bride. The ring sent with the stereops was merely his original ring brought back in the relooping of a time-line. In his "now" there was only one ring—the one he was wearing. In Evelyn's "now" there was the same ring, but that was logical, because her "now" would soon be five years earlier than his. Owing to this five-year relooping of time, it had been possible for the ring to exist in duplicate for six weeks. But very soon, in his "now," it would be destroyed for good.

He pressed the repeat button on the stereop and started the coil again. The boy had an engaging grin, rather like his own (he would indulge a final vanity), but without the scar. He hoped there would never be another war to disfigure or kill his son. It was up to the next generation.

As he swirled his *terif*, he smiled and thought of the note he had left on the pilot's pad: *Name him after your father—Gordon.*

* * *

". . . failed to find any survivors, or for that matter, any trace whatever of either globe, if one excepts the supernova that appeared for a quarter metron some thirty years ago at the far margin of the proton storm. We of the Armistice Commission therefore unanimously urge that further hostilies by either side would necessarily be indecisive . . ."
. . .—Scythe-Terran Armistice, History and Tentative Provisions (excerpts): Gordon of Tharn, Editor-in-Chief and Primary Scythian Delegate.

LOOK ON HIS FACE

●●●

JOHN KIPPAX

"STILL NOT A chance," said the captain. "Look at that mess, will you?"

He waved a hand at the descent indicator; instead of the three broad bands of red, yellow and blue, with the popping and changing numerals, there was only an irregular flickering; sometimes, for a few seconds, the pattern remained steady, and then it went back to its previous madness.

"One thing," said Kibbee, "they're trying."

"Oh, sure. They keep the indicator on. Best check they have on how the storm's going."

Both the captain and his passenger stood in control; the *Foldes* was a standard pattern cargo ship, no frills, few comforts, tightly designed to carry as much cargo as possible from the heavily exploited rim planets to the terminal on Lemnos III, from which point the cargoes

were reallocated to the big interstellar cargo vessels that flashed their way back to far Sol.

Kibbee glanced at the number three viewscreen; it showed a large segment of Kristos V, which the *Foldes*, at a height of eight thousand miles, had been orbiting for three days. It showed green and brown land, and large stretches of sea.

He rubbed his chin with a long, bony hand. His green eyes, sharp under the scrub of red hair, continued to gaze at the descent indicator. He tried not to show impatience.

"Have you ever known an electrical storm like this before, Anders?"

"I've known it. We're high, but there's still a little atmosphere, sufficient to take electrical discharges."

"Some discharges," said Kibbee, and sat his long frame into a padded couch.

"Characteristic of this system," said Anders, "lots of joy about."

No joy for me thought Kibbee. Only pain, and anxiety, and wondering, wondering, wondering, without knowing if such a thing as I seek can really be true, can really be happening. Why did no-one ever tell me before? She couldn't have been the only one to know. Am I deaf to the voice of truth? I am selfish, wrapped in my own conceit, I am unworthy. I should make a pilgrimage to a saint's tomb, on my knees, being whipped all the way . . .!

"—What did you say?" asked Kibbee abruptly, coming out of his own thoughts.

"There was a ship blew up, coming down through one of these," said Anders. "That's why we're careful now."

Kibbee gazed round the control room. Three men in padded chairs, with headphones, were watching the sweeps of dials. A fourth was at the control screen, useless, at the moment, but on duty. Yet another was at the firing board.

"They're on sir," snapped a radio op, and pressed a switch. A speaker spat suddenly, fizzes, burps, and a great surging frying pan noise, which settled down momentarily. Kibbee and Anders came close.

". . . Kristos V, cargo port here, Kristos V cargo port . . . .Hello, *Foldes* . . ."

Anders took a mike from a clip.

"You're on sir," said the op.

"Hello, cargo port, hello. Captain here . . ."

"Message from control for you, sir. Storm appears to be settling. Possibility of your landing twenty-four earth hours equals twenty-five-and-a-half hours Kristos time from now, twenty-two seventeen Kristos time. Please repeat . . ."

Anders repeated the message. Kibbee felt his heart begin to beat faster, and he tried to restrain his rising excitement. So, it might not be long, it might not be long.

He watched Anders' dark, saturnine face. They took them young, on this company, thought Kibbee. They paid them well, and worked them hard, and they threw them aside if they faltered or failed. Hard lines channelled at each side of Anders' mouth.

Kristos control asked:

"Any passengers to report?"

Anders kept his eyes on Kibbee's face as he answered that one. Kibbee knew that for all the voyage out here, Anders had been speculating about him. That was nothing; Kibbee was used to causing speculation. Spacemen looked at his lean, tough figure, his rough old coveralls, and his long, by no means genteel face and said *You're a what? Hey, Joe! Whaddya know? This guy here says . . .*

"One passenger," answered Anders.

"Name?" asked Kristos V control.

Kibbee handed the captain his little identity folder.

"William Rainsford Kibbee," read Anders. "Male, earthborn, earth ancestry, thirty-six years old. Identity number PRI/2235-71 . . ."

"Privilege classes must conform to general planet disciplines, as of nine hundred hours, thirty-third day of Juno last. Governor's order."

Kibbee's heart sank. Now what? Why did this have to happen, just at a moment when it was so important that he should get down, set foot on this planet? Why the difficulty? Wasn't it under earth control—admittedly leased out to a private company, Star Trade Incorporated, but even so . . . He wondered why the magic letters in front of his identity number were not going to help him, now.

"Ask him," said Kibbee, "if that restricts movement everywhere, or if . . ."

They were asking questions again. The speaker spat and fizzed, faded, then came up again.

"Occupation of this passenger on the PRI list, please, captain?"

Anders looked steadily at Kibbee before replying. The latter knew that it baffled a lot of them, knew, too, how from Kristos V would come the pause of disbelief, and then the request to repeat the information.

"Occupation," said Anders, "Christian priest."

The pause, as expected.

"Repeat, please."

"Christian priest," said Anders, and added pettishly, "just a few hundred million followers of this idea. Maybe you've heard of 'em?"

His tense face cracked into a grin. Bill thought, if I've done nothing else, this trip, I've made Anders think again. I believe he is on my side. Perhaps he was meant to be on my side right from the start, and I, full of my own wretched self importance, did not see it . . .

Anders was drunk when Kibbee first met him. It was in a dance and drink place on Lemnos Three, the planet where a hundred different spaceways met, where humans and humanoids of a hundred planets congregated, worked, played, got drunk and made love. There were two groups —those who worked for STI, and those who did not. Star Trade Incorporated, so Kibbee discovered, had its tentacles very firmly round some planets. These were the ones which had been leased for exploitation under terms which the huge STI ignored; the company ran its own people for government, usually puppets from whatever intelligent life was available on the planet, ran the police, the system of justice, the finance, and all the rest. And not many could say them nay. On Lemnos Three, it was not as bad as that. No one company had absolute power, there, but, even so, STI maintained its spies and its stooges, and they were ready to act in the interests of the company whenever necessary. If they killed, tortured, numbed or altered minds in the process of protecting the company's interests, what of it? This was the rim, where

things were wide open, despite the too-mild efforts of a Galactic Council which had too much to do . . .

Anders had been drunk. Kibbee was sitting on a seat in a corner of the place, sucking a pipe, with a lager in front of him. A girl had come and sat next to him, and had begun to talk. She was slim, and pretty, slightly oriental in appearance, and she would be about twenty three, by earth standards. She had a soft, sighing sound for a name.

"All alone?" she asked.

"All alone," said Kibbee. "Just watching, and thinking."

"Dance?"

He smiled; his face was long and creased and utterly friendly. He did not know what sort of a girl she was, but it wasn't hard to guess.

"Not now," he said. "Where do you come from?"

She started.

"Oh," she said, "Earth."

"Long way," said Kibbee, "were you regarded as an essential passenger?"

The simple question floored her.

"I—that is—I got here—by my own methods."

He could see that she was lying.

"Then if you were clever enough to do that, you would have been clever enough to get yourself a better job than being a dance-hall girl." He peered at her closely, his green eyes very steady. "Are you a dance hall girl, really? Are you, in fact, from Earth?"

He had not been prepared for the look of terror which leaped to her smooth brown features. She rose suddenly; her breath came sharply; and Kibbee at once regretted his deep ability to sum people up.

"Stooge!" she breathed. "You're an STI stooge." She glanced from him to the crowded dance floor over which the band blared, and then to the bar where a group of spacemen were getting steadily drunk, one dark one drunker than the others. "You're a spy for them, aren't you, you're a spy! All right—but I'll get away and you—"

"Stop." Now he rose and stood beside her. "I'm not a spy. Far from it. I'm a priest."

The gold-brown eyes, set slanting in the delicate face, regarded him with an expression which changed from fear to wonderment.

"What sort of a —?"

"Christian."

"Oh." She was still nervous.

"Look here. See my identity card. Not that that's conclusive. I just happen to be speaking the truth."

She examined the folder, and handed it back. For a long moment she stared at him.

"I believe you," she said, and sat again, slowly.

"And you're not from Earth."

"No. I'm not. I'm from Kristos Five."

"Is that far?"

"Eight Earth days."

"What are you doing here? You don't look like—like most girls of your age one sees in such places."

She laughed bitterly.

"Thank you. And you're right."

"Well?"

"Are you priests of your religion all as curious as you?"

"We're interested in people—any people."

"Even me."

"Even you."

"I don't see why I should talk to you."

"You came to talk to me."

"Yes, but I thought—"

"I know what you thought. But when you found out who I was, you didn't run away."

"If they found out who I was—"

"There's only myself listening. Tell if you want."

Her golden face, so young and live, looked at him with great anxiety.

"But you think I will tell you, don't you?"

He just smiled, and restuffed his pipe. He thought she'd tell. Excusing himself, he went and got another lager, returned with it. Lighting the tobacco, he smiled at her through the smoke.

"What's your name?"

"Ashtarah-ray-Sah."

He said it over to himself.

"That's beautiful. Are you telling, or walking away?"

She looked at him very hard.

"It is death for me, if you tell what I tell."

"I will not tell. But get up and walk away, if you want."

"No. I trust you. And one day earth must know—the whole galaxy must know—one day."

"About what, Ashtarah-ray-Sah?"

"About the independence movement on Kristos Five. About . . ."

. . . And so she began to tell Bill Kibbee, priest from Earth, who was spending three years looking round creation for his bishop, with the loose instruction to report back when he felt like it, or whenever there was something of outstanding interest. He sat back to listen, at first. The noise of the band, the laughter of the crowd and the drunkenness of the group at the bar, were strong in his ears, at first. But soon, he was sitting forward, hearing nothing but the sweet, almost sing-song tones of the girl who was not what she seemed, and who seemed to find relief in the telling . . .

At last, she had finished.

"And," he said, slowly, searching her face, "you've told no one else, of this?"

"Of course not. Even on Lemnos Three, where STI do not have total control, they still have power. And they would get me."

He did not know whether to believe it or not.

"Tell me about your planet, then. I want to go there. I *must* go there."

"Because of what I have told you?" she sighed, and her gaze was of admiration. "Cargo ships only. All STI controlled. They watch, always."

"My identity folder is marked PRI."

"Priest?"

"I'm sorry . . . The PRI rating stand for privilege, actually. We are subjected to minimum control, with that."

She did not look as though she meant to be cynical.

"So your kind of priests go along with the bossmen?"

"No, no." He smiled kindly. "It's just to help us get about, that's all—"

Then the man whom he had later come to know as Anders lurched away from his friends at the bar, and stumbled over to them. He placed his hands flat on the

table, and stared glassily at the girl. His face was flushed, his speech was thick.

"She's—pretty baby—ain't she?" he announced.

Kibbee looked at him tolerantly. Not his to condemn.

"I think so, spaceman." He glanced at the bars on the shoulders of the other's uniform. "I think so, captain."

"You mind—'f I siddown?"

Anders sat down without waiting for a reply. He was just looking round for his drink when two men in black uniforms with grey facings, and long pistols at their hips, walked into the bar. They stood looking for a couple of seconds, and a hush, with themselves as the centre, spread round the place.

"There," said one, and nodded to the girl.

"Quick!" said the other, and they made for her.

They were too late. She had taken the ring from her left ear, a blob like a pearl, and swallowed it. As the first gaunt policeman laid a hand upon her, she was dead.

They let Kibbee go, having thoroughly scrutinized his documents, and taken him through his story backwards. Anders, thoroughly sober from treatment they gave him before questioning, accompanied Kibbee. Once outside, in the warm, humid night of Lemnos III, Anders stopped to breathe deeply.

"Wow," he said, "I'm glad to be free of those characters. Foul lot."

"Not just doing their job?"

"Oh no. Each one makes money on the side by stooging for STI. I should complain. I'm a kind of stooge for STI myself." He cocked a thumb at his badge. "That poor kid. Came from Kristos Five. Pretty." He regarded Kibbee shrewdly. "I figure you edited what she told you before you told it to them."

Kibbee fell into step with Anders. On the wide sidewalks thronged the teeming life of this corner of the galaxy.

"You're right. I did edit . . . Where are you staying?"

"Company hostel. This way."

"My hotel's this way too . . . You work for STI, eh?"

"That's right. Take their money, keep your mouth shut, and no slip-ups. I can stand it for a few more years yet."

"You're on the Kristos V run?"

"Yes."

"Can you take me there?"

He had told Anders who and what he was. Anders surveyed him.

"If I read regulations right, I've got to take you, if you want to go, with that identity rating."

Kibbee smiled.

"That's it."

"You'll be watched every inch of the way, as soon as you set foot on the planet. You'd better have a good reason for going."

"I have. Not that I shall say a lot about that, Karl."

"They'll try to block you."

"I'm pretty durable."

Anders raked the other with a hard glance of appraisal.

"I believe you."

They had stopped on an intersection corner. A flashing sign caught Anders' eye.

"Could you eat something?"

"Could."

"Fine. We'll eat and talk. They sell earthstyle Chinese along here. That suit?"

"That suits," said Kibbee.

The *Foldes* had general stores in its hold. When it left Kristos V, it would be carrying the precious ores for which the planet was noted, and for which earthmen had made it a hell for the Kristosians. Kibbee had been as honest as he could be with Anders, without actually disclosing to the captain the true reason for his visit. There were things there, said Kibbee, which he had to investigate.

"To do with your religion?" asked Anders.

"Yes," said Kibbee.

"I should take it easy," said Anders. "Me, I try to be a good Buddhist whenever I can; that's too seldom."

Beyond that, Anders had expressed no interest in Kibbee's reasons. They were priest's reasons; that was enough.

"Hey, look at that," said Anders.

The descent indicator was showing some shape, at last. True, the red, yellow and blue bands shimmered, true,

the section lines were not yet steady, but there was an improvement.

"Looks better," said Anders. "I must get on to their control again."

Before he could do so, Kristos V got in touch with the *Foldes*. A face appeared on the screen, a round, severe, humanoid face, brown, thick browed, forbidding.

"Police controller here, Captain Anders. I want to speak to this priest you have with you."

"Here," said Kibbee, stepping in front of the scanner.

The police controller surveyed him.

"We have not had your like before. What do you want to do, preach?"

Kibbee answered easily.

"I'll fix a service for any earth Christians who want it. I'd like them to know I'm here, anyway. I just want to come and see. I have carte blanche from the Galactic Council."

The face of the other twitched in mirth, then became steady again.

"Well, well! From the Galactic Council! We shall leap to obey . . ." He eyed Kibbee very narrowly. "I can't stop you. But I can supply you with a guide. And if you are wise, you will obey him. Mister—er—Kibbee, you will report to the police office as soon 'jets closed' is signalled from your ship, please. All right?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Kibbee, don't, repeat *don't* think of doing otherwise."

The face disappeared. Port Control spoke.

"Possibility of your getting down, very shortly."

Anders said to the operator, "Keep in touch." Then he turned to his passenger. "You see the sort of thing you're up against. You could just stay around port centre, if you wanted, when we get down. All the Earthmen—all the Christians too, will be around there. Might be best."

Kibbee shook his head.

"Oh no. That's not it, at all. I want to see the planet. And the people."

"The people. They're nice enough, what I've seen of them. But—well, keep your nose clean, won't you? A man

can run into a lot of trouble, fast, in this part of the universe."

"Really? In this well ordered planet mined by STI?" asked the other, ironically. "You surprise me. No. A man in my line of business can't go through life staying out of trouble and keeping his nose clean. I know what I have to do. *I have* to do."

"And all this, because of what a girl told you in a bar?"

"Yes, just because of that. Because the reason why I'm here, is one of my reasons for living."

Behind Anders, the red, yellow and blue lines seemed to be getting steadier.

"Our priests wouldn't go into a bar," he ventured.

Kibbee nodded tolerantly.

"Publicans and sinners are what we have to work with," he said. "The least we can do is not to shirk what our Leader didn't shirk."

"And what's the most you can do?" asked Anders. He was genuinely concerned and curious.

"The most we could do," said Kibbee quietly, "is to look on His face."

The *Foldes* came down on a tail of fire, and men crouched behind blast walls on the drop area until she signalled "jets closed". Then gantries swung out, trucks came forward, some for the cargo, others containing customs officials and such. There was one little green truck, bearing the pick and star insignia of STI, which waited especially for Bill Kibbee. With it were two men, innocuous looking people, who nevertheless wore the black uniform about which Kibbee had been warned.

"Thanks, Anders," he said, shaking hands, "maybe you'll be taking me out again, before long."

The other shook hands warmly.

"It's been nice knowing you. But if I don't take you out, in due course, I shan't ask what's happened to you. You understand that? I keep my nose clean."

Kibbee smiled.

"I understand." He looked up at the lowering sky. "That storm's still about." A distant lightning flash emphasised his remark.

"We're down," said Anders, "that's all that matters."

"Well," said Kibbee, "goodbye, and thanks again."

The truck took the priest to Police Centre, where he spent an unnerving hour. They stripped him, tested his skin and his hair for dye, investigated his eyes for any possible re-colouring, and gave him a ruthless medical check. Finally, he was taken before the Police Controller. Before him on his desk lay Kibbee's identity folder.

"Sit down, Mr. Kibbee. Cigarette?"

The other pulled out his old pipe.

"No thanks, I prefer this." He filled it slowly, looking much at the Police Controller. Unabashed by the scrutiny, the other stared right back. "You satisfied, now?"

"Fairly. But why pick on us?"

Kibbee thought—if it seems to happen a hundred times, ninety-nine of them could be false alarms. But for the sake of the hundredth, we must enquire, we must make sure.

"I told you," was the level reply. "I'd like to look round, I'd like to see the native inhabitants. I'd like to meet any Earthmen, and if they are of my religion, I'll perform any necessary duties in that direction."

Outside, the thunder rolled, and the sky darkened again. The lights of the office came on, automatically.

"Very well, Mr. Kibbee." He pressed a switch, and spoke into a small microphone.

"Vargas—is Monsh-das there?"

"Yes sir."

"Send him in." He flipped the switch and turned to his visitor. "All right. So you want to see the planet. You shall. I will let you have a truck, and a Kristosian driver. He speaks our language fairly well, and three of the main Kristosian ones. He is also very reliable."

"You mean that he will report on me?"

"Certainly. And take my advice, Mr. Kibbee. We have had enough trouble with certain sections of the local inhabitants, recently, and we want no more of it. If your business here is religion, then mind your own business."

It was plain enough. It was as the girl had told him.

"What sort of trouble have you had?"

"It's simple, in its basis. We—STI—are the ruling power here. Anyone who tries to tell these people that there is a greater power than STI is looking for trouble." He

placed his hands flat on the desk, and looked at Kibbee with hard, bright eyes. "*Anyone* who tells them that, for any reason whatsoever. Clear?"

"Quite clear."

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

It was Monsho-das. He was a slim brown man, with oriental eyes. He wore a dark blue uniform. A large flash on his shoulder read *Terran/Galactic/Kristosian/Lemnosian*. He saluted the Police Controller. As Kibbee heard the man briefed, he felt excitement rising, rising within him. It would not be long, now, it would not be long! But —suppose that what he wanted was far away, on the other side of the planet? He must get there, somehow. With all the mining that was going on, there must be much transport. It was his duty, duty *duty*! A glorious word.

Monsho-das saw him lodged and fed, and then was ready to take him wherever he wanted to go. Kibbee chatted with the neat little man as he ate in a company restaurant. Kristos City was a company town, run by humans for humans, with the native people, though humanoids, in subservient work, for the most part. Kibbee, sensitive to people, had the feeling already that Monsho-das liked him; he found the Kristosian's appearance saddeningly evocative of the girl in the dance hall on Lemnos III.

At last, they were outside in the street. The buildings were white and severe in outline. The streets were broad, and multi-laned, with many flyovers. As Kibbee took his place in the little car, the thunder rolled again, and blue lightning more searing and potent than any similar manifestation on earth, ripped across the clouds followed by the noise of a million spaceships.

"That's some storm," said Kibbee. "It delayed our descent."

"It is bad," said Monsho-das. There was a curious neutral quality about his voice, as though much schooling had ironed out the emotion. "It has been bad for three days. Right now, I think it is going away." He seemed to dismiss the thunder from his mind. "Now, sir, where do you wish to go?"

This was the testing time. If Kibbee had judged his man rightly—and he felt that being given Monsho-das as guide was a piece of luck—now the story must be told.

"Is there a park near here, Monsho-das?"

"Yes, but why—"

"Take me there."

Monsho-das shrugged, and drove off. There were wheel cars, and a lot of the aircushion type; heavy transport stuff was not allowed in the business section, judged Kibbee.

At last they turned into a broad avenue, along one side of which was a pleasant stretch of parkland, with many blue-green trees.

"Ok. Pull up."

Monsho-das obeyed.

"Now, let's sit on that seat over there."

Monsho-das nodded, and went with Kibbee to the shade. Two brightly coloured birds flew off as they came up.

"Yes, sir?" asked the little man, as they sat.

This was it.

"Monsho-das, I want to tell you about my religion. Yours, I believe, is largely based on ancestor worship?"

The Kristosian looked puzzled.

"Yes. But you said you were going to tell me where you wanted to go."

"Correct. But, after I have told you about my religion, what it means to me, and what it stands for, then I hope that you will know where I want to go. In particular, I want you to pay attention to the story of the Founder of my religion."

Monsho-das knitted his brows. He nodded.

"I will attend, Mr. Kibbee."

Kibbee kept his voice low; speaking quickly, and with an urgency which he was not able to control entirely, he told the great story. The Kristosian was soon gripping the seat with both hands. And all the time, now near, now far away, the thunder rolled.

"—But," said Kibbee, "there was no escape for Him. He knew it. He knew that He would have to die for others, so He made no attempt to evade the terrible death that was coming . . ."

"Stop!" said Monsho-das, suddenly. He stood up, and faced the other. "This is a trick. It must be! You have heard this story, and you have altered this, and now you seek to trick me with your wild tale! I shall see that—"

"Hold it." Kibbee's long thin fingers gripped the guide's slender arm. With his other hand, he took from the top pocket of his coveralls his small copy of the Bible. He held it out to Monsho-das. "If you can read Terran, then read this. I could hardly have faked it. Look, here is the place; this is a book of old writings of the times of which I speak—"

And Monsho-das took the book, and read, until there came a moment when he lowered the volume, and looked with wonder and sadness at the priest from earth.

"It really—it really happened to you, Mr. Kibbee?"

"Yes, it did. Now do you see where I want to go?"

Monsho-das shook his head sadly, handed back the Bible, and rose. Kibbee knew that he had won.

"Come," said Monsho-das, "Though they star me for it, I will take you. I know my duty, too."

Once out of the city, they gained a wide highway. On each side rose hills like crinkled brown paper, and about all the hills there were heavy mine workings. Little railways ran here and there, while pressure cargo cars sped along silently.

"And you learned this from the girl who said she came from this planet. About Jahveh-lis, and how he was the son of a miner, who said that he was really the son of the universe, who taught things just like your religion?"

"Yes—and how he had begun to annoy the authorities because all the answers he gave sounded respectful at first, but when they thought about his words, they were double-edged. And about his followers, and how some people thought that he was a revolutionary leader."

"There are some who say that he was used by his own followers as a front for revolutionary activities."

Grim-faced, Monsho-das speeded up the car; they spun quickly along the grey ribbon, rising into the foothills. As they progressed, the number of cargo cars going the other way diminished.

"Did you know he said that he was born at the time a magic star appeared in the sky?"

"She did tell me that," said Kibbee, "and that many people said that the star was when the last independent orbit station of this planet was destroyed. That is one thing which ties up so well with—with what you read. There is the other story that thirty odd years ago there was an official killing of all male babies of a certain age, and he escaped it . . ."

They came to a signpost, and Monsho-das took the vehicle to a road which wound left.

"Not far now, Mr. Kibbee."

"Look, Monsho-das. *Is* he where you're taking me?"

The other was tight-lipped.

"You will see."

Only brown rocks and boulders rising on either side, now, with no comforting green showing anywhere. But a number of people appeared, all walking the same way as the little car, many poor-seeming, all native Kristosians.

The thunder seemed to increase, and the sky became darker and darker still, with clouds of an appalling density. Lightning, sometimes white but mostly pale blue, snagged and leaped about, plunging down to the ground like evil fingers.

It began to rain, and soon the hill road was running with little streams. All the time, the number of people going there was increased.

Kibbee trembled at the possibilities which lay so immediately ahead of him. Oh, it might be just a false alarm, there was no telling, but . . .

A mass of people ahead filled the road. Men and women similarly overalled, blocked the path of the vehicle. Monsho-das sounded a warning, and they parted for the car, revealing that a barrier had been set across the road; armed men stood by it. The rain still blew in gusts, and the lowering sky rumbled and split.

Monsho-das drew up at the barrier, and a uniformed man came forward, speaking rapidly in the local language. The driver produced his papers, asked Kibbee for his. The interrogator studied them, went to consult with another, finally returned with the papers, and then the barrier was raised, and they were through.

"Only residents of the village where Jahveh-lis was born are allowed through now. It seems that as soon as—as soon—that is, a big crowd had already collected when they heard the news, and they are not allowing any more people through . . ."

Kibbee felt alarm.

"What is really going on, then? What happened to Jahveh-lis, as you call him?"

Monsho-das spoke grimly.

"I suppose I must tell you. Though when I read in your book that you too, had had someone like Jahveh-lis on your planet, I did not want to say. I realised what he could have meant to us, and I did not want to admit that it was—perhaps—too late."

Now the little car topped the rise. Below it lay the huddle of small houses, and, still in the level part of the depression, were the workings of the mine. From behind these rose up more hills, dark and threatening under the weeping heavens.

The car stopped.

There were silhouettes against the sky.

Upon the far hilltop, Kibbee could see the outlines of three heavy shapes, like six-pointed stars, made of beams. A great fear clutched him, and a great sorrow.

"Can we get closer?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

Monsho-das took the car through the grubby town. They passed more walkers going their way. As soon as they left the town behind, and began to climb the hill, the numbers of people increased, many just standing, their heads bare in the flickering rain, staring towards the hill crest. The speed of the car dropped as the numbers grew, until at last they were going forward at little more than walking pace.

The lightning flashed, and seemed to dance along the hillside no more than twenty metres from them.

At last the crowd grew so thick that they had to leave the car, and go forward on foot. Kibbee's feet seemed like lead. He prayed that this first occasion might somehow prove, for his faith, a false alarm. Now, the roadway, already little more than a track, petered out completely, so that they were moving over rough ground to where

there was a declivity between the rocks, a hundred metres from the summit. The way up was through the declivity, and the crowd halted, stayed by a number of armed men.

Kibbee stopped, looking up the slope to the three great wooden stars. A flash of lightning lit them, and seemed to play for seconds. On each of the two outside stars hung the spread bodies of men. But the centre one was empty . . .

As he watched, hearing the parrot-like admonitions of the guards, he knew that tears were coursing down his cheeks.

"What happened to the one in the centre, Monsho-das?"

"Jahveh-lis. He was convicted with these two other men, who had been charged with stealing ore from the mine. His charge was sedition. On such charges, their bodies stay on the stars for a week before they are cut down, but the authorities made an exception for Jahveh-lis, they buried him, amid the dark rocks over there to the left, three days ago."

"May we go—to where that is?"

"None may pass these guards."

The people stood silent, and the rain began to pour again.

"What was he like, this Jahveh-lis?"

"Like us," answered Monsho-das, quietly, "just a kind-looking man, like us."

Kibbee thought that he would remember this scene all his life; the brown rocks, the rain, the waiting people, and the stark emblems of unpity ranged against the insensible sky.

"Why are they all waiting?"

Monsho-das was some few seconds before he answered.

"They remembered what Jahveh-lis said. The girl you met could not have told you this, because she left the planet before it happened. But Jahveh-lis said that he would die, on a hilltop, and that three days after he was buried, he would escape."

Kibbee's lips were moving in prayer.

Suddenly, the storm, which had been grumbling all the while around them, struck at their area with a fury. The clouds seemed to be so low that their bulging darkness almost touched the hilltop.

Kibbee felt his whole body start violently when the crash came. Women in the crowd screamed. He stood taller than they, and he saw what happened. The lightning struck with a tearing roar at the spot where Jahveh-lis was buried. The rocks sprang about, small chips and loose pieces flew, and the ground shook beneath their feet.

When the groan and rattle of sundered rocks had died away, and a vapour rose into the rain from the raw cleft, Monsho-das turned to speak to Kibbee. The priest was kneeling. Monsho-das, along with many of the crowd, stared curiously at the Earthman.

"Fantastic that the lightning should have struck just there—" began the little alien; and then he stopped. Something about Kibbee's attitude compelled his silence.

After half a minute, Kibbee rose to his feet.

"Let's go, Monsho-das."

"There is—nothing more?"

"No." Kibbee was deeply sad. "This time, I am too late to look on His face."

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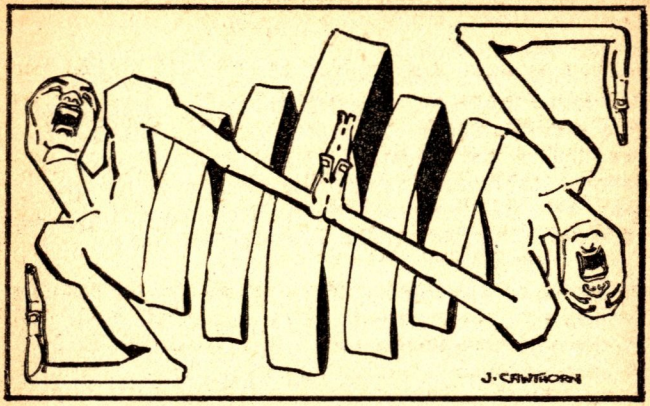

the transfinite choice

by david masson

SOMETHING WENT WRONG with the five-mile linear accelerator. The public were no wiser when the press radio, and TV had given their impressions of what the official spokesman's interpretation of what the atomic experts' version of their own suspicions was. By 1980 they were still arguing about it.

All Naverson Builth knew about it was that one moment he was standing by at the first of a new series of experiments and the next moment he was lying on his back and that the hall was completely deserted. Moreover, it seemed to have acquired a number of new gadgets and machines, and a different coat of paint. There was dead silence. The hall was lit, but rather dimly.

Naverson tried shouting. He discovered that he was all

right and eventually got to the doors. They were locked. He went round to the communication phone. The phone was not there. There was no trace of it or its connections.

He was still shouting and banging on the doors when a huge metal arm came out of nowhere and picked him up. About twenty feet up it pulled him through a hinged opening and deposited him on a floor which he could not recall existing at that height and place. A long jointed prong approached him and felt all round him, while his arms and legs were held back by clamps. It clicked disapprovingly and folded up. A metallic voice spoke from the roof. It said: "Namplize."

"Who the hell are you, and what the hell do you think you're doing with me?" shouted Naverson. "I was working in the hall and suddenly I find myself all alone. What've you done with the phone, and what are these machines pulling me about for? How long have I been here, anyway?"

"Namplize."

"Don't you speak English, then? Who the hell are you?"

"Namplize."

"Parlez-vous français? Qu'est-ce que l'on fait alors dans cette galère?"

"Namplize."

"Govorítye li vy po russki? . . . Türkiyizce konushurmusunuz?"

"Namplize-urnlay."

"Habla Usted español . . . Parla italiano?"

"Namplize-farce."

"Sprechen sie Deutsch? Um Gottes Willen, was ist hier los?"

"Namnadrissplize."

"To hell with you. I can't understand a word you say."

Silence.

The clamps tightened on his limbs and another long prong approached. It had a tiny mirror or window near its end, and an opposing pincer-pair alongside. It felt its way into his overall-pockets and pulled out and appeared to inspect various objects from them. Finally it got hold of a typed envelope addressed to him. It scanned this slowly all over, both sides, upside-down and sideways as well as right

way up, including the postmark (which for once was legible). Then it returned the envelope to the pocket, and folded up. The big arm, still clutching him firmly, swung him up into a recess in the wall, tidied his feet in, and a door slid shut. The recess shot up like a lift, stopped, a door slid open on the other side, and he was blinking at a small room dazzlingly lit. In it was a little old man with shaven poll, in a pale blue tunic, apparently seated at a console with stops and levers. He was facing the recess, and just taking a swig from a curiously-shaped flask, which he set down on the floor. Naverson clambered stiffly out, feeling his legs and arms.

"Now what the hell is all this? Who are you, and what are you doing in this plant? I've never seen you before here and you seem to have been monkeying about with the machinery."

"Suzzdummuvspightchplize," said the little old man gently but firmly, staring at Naverson. It was the same voice.

"I don't understand you. *Ne comprends pas. Verstehe nicht. Ya ne ponimáyu. Anlamiyorum. No capisco. No entiendo.*"

"W-atplize." The old man pressed a switch and called downwards: "Undrowa, hooh srigh. Nannriggig. Paarurwclurz. Paarurwimvlup, nammprax navverrazawn boughillut un paarurw-rawtung, prundatt prax wen-nawnsimtaow! Nattgurwuzzuzdum . . . Sregjunzplize."

A metallic voice cackled up at him. He pressed a button. Metal arms gripped Naverson. A little pang on one earlobe. Unconsciousness.

Naverson woke up in a swirl of mental confusion. Clamps were being peeled from his skull, which had been shaved. He was naked, lying on a couch. A few attendants, about half of whom (to his horror) appeared to be women, were studying charts and manipulating knobs. The room was even smaller than the last, and brighter. The temperature was about 80°F. He found that he was able to understand the speech of those about him, on the whole, though some of their nouns and even verbs were strange. The attendants were dressed in one-piece translucent suits which covered most of their faces, but were transparent at the eyes.

"Where am I?" he said, or rather he said "Waayaa?" *(Where here?)* in the speech of those around him, but the intention was the same and we can transpose from now on. *But let no one suppose that ours is more than a free translation . . .*

"In glossopsychic centre," said a voice behind his head, which proved to be that of a young man standing there. "You seem from year approximately one, nine, seven, two. Trouble in sub-quark domain probably switched you here, linear accelerator, year two, three, four, six. Linguistic shunt achieved. Skill, please."

"Skill? Elementary particle analysis."

"Perhaps try utilise. . . . Suit ready here, on please."

Naverson slipped into the translucent suit, which was evidently made to measure.

"Hungry," he said.

TEN MONTHS LATER, months of intensive education, found him in a post with the new world-government department of Direct Parameter Control ("Drik Premda Kindrurw"). Naverson thanked his stars. The world population was now some four millions of millions and the lot of most persons under the relentless pressure of their own increasing numbers was unenviable. Confined to a small cabin (with every mod. con.) in continent-wide multi-storey warrens, which only stopped at the sea and the mountains, they and their children "educated," supervised and entertained by giant television screens, compulsorily sterilised after their second child, fed on piped algal infusions, never seeing natural daylight except when drafted for their one years' open-air hard labour in every five of their first thirty adult years, the great majority had little to live for and nothing to die for. When children grew up (at 24, owing to the low diet) they had to find a new home, and the population computers assigned them one in a new block built at a new level above the old flat roofs, or in a marginal section nudging the nearest foothills. Roof blocks, however, were few, being difficult to construct because so many interfered with the air-transport and interplanetary roof-termini and the solar energy collectors. Such colonies as Mars and Venus and Luna could support were negligible.

Only the more active and enterprising workers such as the sea-farmers, and the higher brainworkers, had more freedom of movement, space, and occupation, and more choice of food. Naverson, at Direct Parameter Control, was one of those. Whether it was the undoubted genius with which he had started (he was a postgraduate of dazzling promise in the late 1960's), or the stimulating effect of the accident, or that of the cerebral pummelling he had sustained at the glossopsychic centre where they had imprinted in him understanding of the language, or all three, his examiners found him really capable of appreciating all the relevant advances from 1972 to 2346 A.D. in subatomic, subelemparticle (quarkic), subquark and hyposubquark physics. He discovered that the glossopsychophysiologist (who naturally knew nothing outside his own sphere) had been wrong in attributing his time-shunt merely to subquark events—it could not be due to anything grosser than hyposubquark phenomena. . . . The little old man he never saw again ; he was, in effect, night-watchman at the old accelerator, nowadays automated.

Most of Naverson's new colleagues, in any case, came equally fresh to the ideas of Direct Parameter Control, or D.P.C. as it was coming to be known. A formal introductory oration, or "Pip" (i.e. *Pep*) as it was called, ran somewhat as follows:

"Now sports, D.P.C. takes over where complex gross physical control too costly or too imperfect. Momently we feel our way, but expect expand into many subdepartments. Statistical assemblages normally poor fields, molecular operations good, genetic material best ; organisms and small living groups fair. Usual attack via subquark domain. 'Direct,' misnomer. Shunting quarkwise, subquarkwise, affects parameters. Each subdepartment to have four subdeps.: Parameter Assessment, Research, Application, Public Relations. In practice many of you will work in several. General questions?"

In a few months Naverson found himself assigned to the budding subdep. of Ageing Control (A.G., "Adjung Kindrurw"). His role finally settled into that of a researcher, with excursions into Application and P.R.

"See," he was explaining to a friendly pubhealth man

two years later, "geriatrics failed, unable increase life expectancy over 18%, active life over 12%. Direct parameters now target. Relevant parameters in ageing show in three quasi-dimensions as variety of helix. Organism enters at conception on broad base, spirals upward on time axis at constant gradient, and inward as on a cone/dome towards literal *point* of death, on slope peculiar to itself."

"Why spiral, why not straight line?"

"Straight line no end. Cyclic returns of the spiral correspond cyclic effects of internal/external environment, for instance annual. Comparative circumference-length corresponds comparative subjective and physiological time."

"You mean, long long hours of infancy?"

"Exact. Childhood hours pass like adult weeks, years flash by more and more swift towards old age, healing-times meanwhile lengthen; hence spiral inward, circumference shortens. At zero diameter zero circumference, healing infinitely slow, subjective time infinitely swift, death. . . . Width of individual's life's base and general slope of cone go with genus, species, variety, genes. Also affected by conception-environment, gestation, radiation, disease, accident. Mild radiation shrinks diameter, disease tilts cone in domewise, accident pushes dome in flattish; recovery swells it out. *Cylinder* up time-axis would mean immortality!"

"How 22nd Century would have welcomed this!"

"Yes, you mean when computers assessed individuals' health factors yearly, produced graphs and percent chances different death-causes different years ahead?"

"Exact. Tense cigarette-smoker aged 20, for instance, given choice 5% chance die senility at age 80, 25% death lung-cancer age 60, 30% bronchial 50, 25% coronary 40, 10% gastric cancer 35, or 5% vehicle accident 25. Panics, suicides, druggery."

"Now seek directly affect viability, prolong life, cheat computer!"

"What classes personnel?"

"Managers, directors, government chiefs. Later top brainworkers?"

"How attack?"

"Three possible: widen cone-base, steepen cone-side,

flatten spiral. First trying widen cone-base (conception); small animals. Subquark-wise. Subradiate parental gonads. Hope ready selected managerial-caste parents in year."

"What percentage time-increase?"

"First 10% age increase? Hope later cumulative 5% increase each generation from single dose, if trick findable."

"Useless general population, no longer life unendurable!"

In any case it was not to be. Research on the "cone-base" method produced feeble flies, overgrown tadpoles, foetus-like mice, sub-infantile baby monkeys after long gestations. The mouse-mothers and monkey parents that survived the pregnancies neglected their offspring; those grew up socially twisted, and lived their 110-percent life-spans a misery to themselves and a torment to their mates.

Builth, now head of the subdep.'s Research branch, was switched to cone-angle steepening, on which the Parameter-Assessment boys had now a full picture. Five years later he had the answer in the subquark domain: a tiny transmitter of subquarkons embedded in the pituitary as early as convenient, which would send its infinitesimal products through the organism and in a few weeks, it was expected, would affect genes and somatic plasm of every cell in the body, after which the transmitter was left in to function for life. No cumulative effect on later generations was possible this way, however.

Unfortunately they found that in 40 per cent of higher-animal experiments a psychopathic personality was induced if the transmitter was implanted in infancy. Implantation in adult life gave rise to mosaic effects, so that some cells persisted in ageing normally, and in up to 30 per cent of higher-animal individuals tried, these mosaics reduced the organism by its middle age to a distressing degree of malfunctioning, of which fits and cancers were only two of many manifestations.

"Sports," said Naverson Builth formally to his research team, "now must try parameter three: helix gradient. D.P.C.'s Director agreed switch our P.A. sports to gradient month ago."

"But this means hypo-sub!" called out Eck.

"Exact! hypo-subquark transoscillation necessary basis.

. . . No harm start these lines now, sharpen our tools against Parameter-Assessment verdict day."

Two years later the P.A. boys came up with the answer: all the known physical world was subject to the same "gradient," the natural rate of time. Its connexion with entropy was complex, but the basic rate was fixed.

It took eleven more years, years in which Naverson lived, slept, and ate helix-gradientry, before his hypo-subdep. found their answer: *infra*-hypo-subquark shunts were the only hope, for the fundamental structure of time lay in the i-h-s-q domain. Some amazing things came to light as a result of their researches. Mank Showk (Domenico Zhukov) was chatting to Naverson one day.

"Sole reason we cannot see/hear Past is, recession-velocity *c*, therefore its signals undergo transfinite red-shift, arrive with zero energy."

"What about Future?"

"Not in being. Continuous creation of Time, expansion from zero-volume Present. Or conversely, Present advances into Future with velocity *c*."

"Explain: whither?"

"Fourth space dimension. A moment 8½ minutes ago is one astrounit away along fourth dimension. A moment one year ago is one lightyear away along it."

"Then we shall never explore Future or Past?"

"Not on supra-i-h-s-q levels. Not on any practical level probably, and not at all without 50 years' grind."

"And no professional motive or money in present world conditions."

In fourteen further years, with Naverson now in greying middle age, the solution was found, after a fashion: the experimental rats, surrounded by the palladium coils, were pushed into a 0.01-percent flatter gradient, as assessed by computer. They simply vanished; they ceased to intersect with the rest of the known universe except instantaneously, and therefore imperceptibly. . . .

"Flatch!" called the Director on the visiphone to his opposite number in Population; "our A.G. sports have hit a Wunkun for you." A "Wunkun" was the current term for a rewarding disaster, an ill wind that blew somebody good, an ugly duckling that was somebody's golden-

egg-laying swan. The name derived from the name of the head of the century-old expedition round Venus that had shattered half the planet's surface, destroying itself in the process, and in so doing had made the planet landable-on and ultimately habitable.

"Out with ; I'm suicidal now: Earth's only three generations from standing-room. Riots, virus-epidemics increasing monthly. Like the 21st-century crash, but no solution this time."

"Visit, please: security."

"Right ; in 15 minutes till 45 minutes convenient?"

"Make 20 till 60."

"Non-poss.: 20 till 50?"

"Right."

When Flatch Bemp (i.e. Flotsham Bassompied) landed from Sahara, the D.P.C. Director, Kulf (pronounced "Kulluf") Gren (i.e. Kinloch Grattan) had a shot of lysergibenzedrine ready for him. "Now," said he, "I call Nevzen Bilis, dedicated man—he explains quick."

Naverson Builth appeared in the secure internal visiphone screen.

"Nev, this Flatch Bemp, Director Population."

Naverson nodded, a subservient greeting in those days. Flatch twitched his left eyebrow.

"Population may have use, your gimmick. Explain it."

Naverson explained that, depending on the degree of shunt, any gradient desired could be given to the organism.

"Steeper, too?" asked Flatch.

"Steeper too—ages *quicker* ; flatter slower."

"How many gradients total?"

"Infinite. Only limitations precision of infra-hypo-subquark gadgetry operation."

"In practice?"

"Say 10^5 flatterwise, 10^8 steeperwise. Technically possible also produce zero gradient or negative gradient, respectively eternal life and regression to infancy (backward time), humanly pointless. 10^5 flatter but positive."

Flatch spread his hands outwards, an outrageously extravagant gesture in that crammed and pressed world, but warranted by the moment and encouraged by his boost from the 1.-b. shot.

"Eureka! How apply shunt?"

"Chamber of coils. Any age."

"Size limit? Get in several together?"

"Say 70 metres cube; 34 times 10^4 cubic metres."

"Get crowd in then?"

"Possibly. Tell you in year perhaps."

"Eurekest! Select families from volunteers, promise lebensraum, shunt off, divide world population by 10^5 at least! Extend top privileges to all here, heaven on earth!"

A vast grin spread round his face. . . .

"Understand, moment security, silence, death penalty."

"Rest of team?"

"Temporary silence to lower echelons. Eh, Kulf?"

"Right. You are Project X now. To remain here, Flatch?"

"Exact, best remain here, channel to me via you, Kulf."

"Right."

IT TOOK TWO years to establish the intra-coil limits. They worked on elephants and on sequoias (complete with roots), also on families of zoo bears, and goats (most land animals were in zoos or labs, except farm animals too precious to waste). The practical limit proved to be a 97-metres-diameter sphere. The gradient-density limit worked out at $10^5 \times 2$ channels for the "flatter" gradients, and over 10^7 for the "steeper" ones. Flatch Bemp found ethical objections to sending people into a gradient with a shorter life-span, and again to extending the life-span beyond 300 years (besides, how many would ever volunteer for outside these limits?). So he was obliged to be content with the least flat of the flatter gradients, which meant under 10^4 channels. Still, to propose to divide the world's present population by nearly ten thousand was to give it a glimpse of hope.

"If we can take them at that rate!" murmured Naverson.

"Does Flatch know what we'll send into?" twanged Mank.

"Fowp's best theoretician. He and Eck say each gradient manifestation same multigrade reality, gross physical world same in each. Just ensure good population density shot in, enough specialists, build up civilisation in generation."

"Fully voluntary basis, Kulf," said Flatch two rooms away; "we'll appeal world-wide time-gradient emigration. Plenty volunteers, tough pioneers, independents, claustrophobes, crowd-haters. Ask full details. Computers assess potentialities, eliminate misfits, compose suitable shunt-manifolds, balanced gradient-populations. Details to include preferred life-span—of juveniles: parents to fit in or stay behind. Can't give a tenner, a twentier and a fiftier same gradient and expect all three live same length!" He chuckled fatuously.

Linked batteries of computer-complexes worked out time-logistics and densities so as to give the minimum of hardship. Meantime Naverson's boys (he was now in charge of the whole subdep. X) had built a series of Shunters, one for each desired gradient. Human bulk transport was easy and they preferred not to disperse the project at this stage; besides, the emergent migrants were best concentrated in one spot whence they could fan outward and where they could hold pioneer councils.

The emigrants were duly selected and shot off into the unknown. A rate of 10,000 a day was achieved, which exceeded Flatch's own logistics-researchers' forecast by a factor of ten, but was still an insignificant offset to the birthrate. Four years later, years of intense negotiation and effort, one thousand batteries of Shunters were up and the rate (improved for each) now totalled thirty world-million a day. Eventually Naverson, a prematurely elderly man at seventy, had 7,000 million leave each day through 30,000 batteries, dispersed over the margins of the habitable globe, a rate which might be expected to drain off nearly the current birthrate-excess. It was a real achievement to have reached this "plateau," thought Naverson.

The Shunter-complexes were nearly all sited on poorly-populated highlands away from the warren-edges, where vast reception-camps could be set up and where the migrants, when they passed through, would be able to survey the lowlands as they held their first councils. The scenes in the gigantic Reception Areas; as each accepted family with its minimal goods was admitted, documented, inoculated, made up on basic rations, weapons, tools, camped on its bench for two days, was re-checked for infection, was herded on, passed through, was corralled in

the polygonal eight-storey intra-coil chamber, and, with some 20,000 other indivduals, shot off into the unknown: would have electrified an Eichmann, at such an *Endlösung* to end all *Endlösungen*. But it was a *Dies Irae* minus the wrath. The countless hosts arrived, if not actually singing, at any rate chattering, to stream through their gates, not of pearl, but of palladium; and if they held hands as they saw the last of this continuum, that was only to be expected.

Naverson, on whom the strain of the great operation was telling, had a curious dream about this time. He was talking to Flatch (who was already dead in fact) and saying: "We are attenuating local world-line reality, riddling it, fractionating it. Previously 10^4 gradients dense, so to speak. Now only one. Emigrant populations burrowing structure. Won't survive 1/10,000 rarefaction much longer."

"Nonsense!" said Flatch and at that moment, the whole inhabited surface-region of Terra comploded, like a termite-infested building. Naverson woke up with pounding heart, sweating, dry-tongued, to hear the visiphone alarm calling. It was "morning," but he had slept in.

"Nev!" said the figure of Misk Howla (Flatch's successor; today he would have been Méthexis Ulvelæj). "Nev! Something up. Unexplained population figures, not down enough. A lot of illegal squatting empty marginal dwelling-spaces. Have they all come back?"

"Impossible," said Naverson; then he paused. "Check births, origins, genes if necessary, computerwise."

"Why?"

"Check first."

Ten days later the computer-complexes gave up their answer: up to 15 per cent of the world population (concentrated near the new dwelling-spaces on the warren margins) were unexplained, with no known origin. Their gene-type percentages gave a picture which was partly identical with that of the local population, but partly composed of puzzling variants which, or in proportions which, the computers were quite unable to match.

"Know why, Misk?" whispered old Naverson to the young Population Director in the dazzling privacy of the Directorial office, lit by real sunlight through real glass on the edge of a warren by the Ahaggar Mountains. "Know

why? The other gradients aren't void or uninhabited: they are full! Just like us, more or less, probably. Our time-universe is only one among millions, perhaps infinite number. *They've* hit on *our* method approximately same time-point."

Misk, an impulsive man, jumped through the window, 278 storeys up.

Naverson, who knew Misk's staff well now, took over Population's end of the problem and in another week had further details: the immigrant-sending gradients were all steeper; there were several thousands of them known to be sending at the moment, though rates and numbers were likely to increase. The sending chambers were not identical with his own, or in the same places, but created new populations in similar marginal areas. The immigrants had found themselves in a populous world where they had been expecting an empty one; however, they had made the best of a bad job and being enterprising, broke up their chamber-storeys, scattered, infiltrated the mass, occupied vacant cells in the warren-margins, and had evaded detection for some years.

Three months later a series of strange short-lived virus epidemics, beginning near the Alpine and Rocky-Mountains margins, seized 60 per cent of the American and European population, and killed 25 per cent of those they struck. In spite of the television propaganda, the survivors blamed the "invaders," and any unvouched newcomers to a warren district were butchered from then on, including the children. Later, actual Shuntee batches were found by out-labour gangs, sometimes still in their multi-storey capsules, and a fight to the death would ensue with such weapons as came to hand. Naverson pictured the same fate fallen and befalling, and to befall, his own shuntees. . . . At 75, he had reached retiring age. Worn out, he died, a disappointed man, in the grey winter of 2395 a few months later, leaving the Worlds to struggle with their monstrous burden.

IN FEBRUARY A.D. 2021 in the same continuum, just before the Second World Famine, the newscasts were full of the death of Naverson Builth, the brilliant young researcher struck down by a once-famous accident at the great

accelerator, who had lived on in a permanent coma for 49 years, kept alive by modern medical science. . . . It was *his* reality which had been fractionated by infra-hypo-sub-quark shunt.

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the keys to december

by roger zelazny

BORN OF MAN and woman, in accordance with Catform Y7 requirements, Coldworld Class (modified per Alyonal), 3.2-E, G.M.I. option, Jarry Dark was not suited for existence anywhere in the universe which had guaranteed him a niche. This was either a blessing or a curse, depending on how you looked at it.

So look at it however you would, here is the story:

It is likely that his parents could have afforded the temperature control unit, but not much more than that. (Jarry required a temperature of at least −50°C. to be comfortable.)

It is unlikely that his parents could have provided for the air pressure control and gas mixture equipment required to maintain his life.

Nothing could be done in the way of 3.2-E gravsimulation, so daily medication and physiotherapy were required. It is unlikely that his parents could have provided for this.

The much-maligned option took care of him, however. It safeguarded his health. It provided for his education. It assured his economic welfare and physical well-being.

It might be argued that Jarry Dark would not have been a homeless Coldworld Catform (modified per Alyonal) had it not been for General Mining, Incorporated, which had held the option. But then it must be borne in mind that no one could have foreseen the nova which destroyed Alyonal.

When his parents had presented themselves at the Public Health Planned Parenthood Centre and requested advice and medication pending offspring, they had been informed as to the available worlds and the bodyform requirements for them. They had selected Alyonal, which had recently been purchased by General Mining for purposes of mineral exploitation. Wisely, they had elected the option; that is to say, they had signed a contract on behalf of their anticipated offspring, who would be eminently qualified to inhabit that world, agreeing that he would work as an employee of General Mining until he achieved his majority, at which time he would be free to depart and seek employment wherever he might choose (though his choices would admittedly be limited). In return for this guarantee, General Mining agreed to assure his health, education and continuing welfare for so long as he remained in their employ.

When Alyonal caught fire and went away, those Cold-world Catforms covered by the option who were scattered about the crowded galaxy were, by virtue of the agreement, wards of General Mining.

This is why Jarry grew up in a hermetically sealed room containing temperature and atmosphere controls, and why he received a first-class closed circuit education, along with his physiotherapy and medicine. This is also why Jarry bore some resemblance to a large, grey ocelot without a tail, had webbing between his fingers, and could not go outside to watch the traffic unless he wore a pressurized refrigeration suit and took extra medication.

All over the swarming galaxy, people took the advice of Public Health Planned Parenthood Centres, and many others had chosen as had Jarry's parents. Twenty-eight thousand, five hundred sixty-six of them, to be exact. In any group of over twenty-eight thousand five hundred sixty, there are bound to be a few talented individuals. Jarry was one of them. He had a knack for making money. Most of his General Mining pension check was invested in well-chosen stocks of a speculative nature. (In fact, after a time he came to own considerable stock in General Mining).

When the man from the Galactic Civil Liberties Union had come around, expressing concern over the pre-birth contracts involved in the option and explaining that the Alyonal Catforms would make a good test case (especially since Jarry's parents lived within jurisdiction of the 877th Circuit, where they would be assured a favourable court-room atmosphere), Jarry's parents had demurred, for fear of jeopardizing the General Mining pension. Later on, Jarry himself dismissed the notion also. A favourable decision could not make him an E-world Normform, and what else mattered? He was not vindictive. Also, he owned considerable stock in G.M. by then.

He loafed in his methane tank and purred, which meant that he was thinking. He operated his cryo-computer as he purred and thought. He was computing the total net worth of all the Catforms in the recently organized December Club.

He stopped purring and considered a sub-total, stretched, shook his head slowly. Then he returned to his calculations.

When he had finished, he dictated a message into his speech-tube, to Sanza Barati, President of December and his betrothed:

"Dearest Sanza—The funds available, as I suspected, leave much to be desired. All the more reason to begin immediately. Kindly submit the proposal to the business committee, outline my qualifications and seek immediate endorsement. I've finished drafting the general statement to the membership. (Copy attached.) From these figures, it will take me between five and ten years, if at least eighty percent of the membership backs me. So push hard, beloved. I'd like to meet you someday, in a place where the sky is purple. Yours, always, Jarry Dark, Treasurer. P.S. I'm pleased you were pleased with the ring."

Two years later, Jarry had doubled the net worth of December, Incorporated.

A year and a half after that, he had doubled it again.

When he received the following letter from Sanza, he leapt onto his trampoline, bounded into the air, landed upon his feet at the opposite end of his quarters, returned to his viewer and replayed it:

Dear Jarry,

Attached are specifications and prices for five more worlds. The research staff likes the last one. So do I. What do you think? Alyonal II? If so, how about the price? When could we afford that much? The staff also says that an hundred Worldchange units could alter it to what we want in 5-6 centuries. Will forward costs of this machinery shortly.

Come live with me and be my love, in a place where there are no walls . . .

Sanza

"One year," he replied, "and I'll buy you a world! Hurry up with the costs of machinery and transport . . ."

When the figures arrived, Jarry wept icy tears. One hundred machines, capable of altering the environment of a world, plus twenty-eight thousand coldsleep bunkers, plus transportation costs for the machinery and his people, plus . . . Too high! He did a rapid calculation.

He spoke into the speech-tube:

". . . Fifteen additional years is too long to wait, Pussy-cat. Have them figure the time-span if we were to purchase only twenty Worldchange units. Love and kisses, Jarry."

During the days which followed, he stalked about his chamber, erect at first, then on all fours as his mood deepened.

"Approximately three thousand years," came the reply. "May your coat be ever shiny—Sanza."

"Let's put it to a vote, Greeneyes," he said.

Quick, a world in 300 words or less! Picture this . . .

One land mass, really, containing three black and brackish looking seas; grey plains and yellow plains and skies the colour of dry sand; shallow forests with trees like mushrooms which have been swabbed with iodine; no mountains, just hills brown, yellow, white, lavender; green birds with wings like parachutes, bills like sickles, feathers like oak leaves, an inside-out umbrella behind; six very distant moons, like spots before the eyes in daytime, snow-flakes at night, drops of blood at dusk and dawn; grass like mustard in the moister valleys; mists like white fire on windless mornings, albino serpents when the air's astir; radiating chasms, like fractures in frosted windowpanes; hidden caverns, like chains of dark bubbles; seventeen known dangerous predators, ranging from one to six metres in length, excessively furred and fanged; sudden hailstorms, like hurled hammerheads from a clear sky; an icecap like a blue beret at either flattened pole; nervous bipeds a metre and a half in height, short on cerebrum, which wander the shallow forests and prey upon the giant caterpillar's larva, as well as the giant caterpillar, the green bird, the blind burrower, and the offal-eating murk-beast; seventeen mighty rivers; clouds like pregnant purple cows, which quickly cross the land to lie-in beyond the visible east; stands of windblasted stones like frozen music; nights like soot, to obscure the lesser stars; valleys which flow like the torsos of women or instruments of music; perpetual frost in places of shadow; sounds in the morning like the cracking of ice, the trembling of tin, the snapping of steel strands . . .

They knew they would turn it to heaven.

The vanguard arrived, decked out in refrigeration suits, installed ten Worldchange units in either hemisphere, began setting up coldsleep bunkers in several of the larger caverns.

Then came the members of December down from the sand-coloured sky.

They came and they saw, decided it was almost heaven, then entered their caverns and slept. Over twenty-eight thousand Coldworld Catforms (modified per Alyonal) came into their own world to sleep for a season in silence the sleep of ice and of stone, to inherit the new Alyonal. There is no dreaming in that sleep. But had there been, their dreams might have been as the thoughts of those yet awake.

"It is bitter, Sanza."

"Yes, but only for a time——"

". . . To have each other and our own world, and still to go forth like divers at the bottom of the sea. To have to crawl when you want to leap . . ."

"It is only for a short time, Jarry, as the senses will reckon it."

"But it is really three thousand years! An ice age will come to pass as we doze. Our former worlds will change so that we would not know them were we to go back for a visit—and none will remember us."

"Visit what? Our former cells? Let the rest of the worlds go by! Let us be forgotten in the lands of our birth! We are a people apart and we have found our home. What else matters?"

"True . . . It will be but a few years, and we shall stand our tours of wakefulness and watching together."

"When is the first?"

"Two and a half centuries from now—three months of wakefulness."

"What will it be like then?"

"I don't know. Less warm . . ."

"Then let us return and sleep. Tomorrow will be a better day."

"Yes."

"Oh! See the green bird! It drifts like a dream . . ."

When they awakened that first time, they stayed within the Worldchange installation at the place called Deadland. The world was already colder and the edges of the sky were tinted with pink. The metal walls of the great installation were black and rimed with frost. The atmosphere was still lethal and the temperature far too high. They remained within their special chambers for most of the time, venturing outside mainly to make necessary tests and to inspect the structure of their home.

Deadland . . . Rocks and sand. No trees, no marks of life at all.

The time of terrible winds was still upon the land, as the world fought back against the fields of the machines. At night, great clouds of real estate smoothed and sculpted the stands of stone, and when the winds departed the desert would shimmer as if fresh-painted and the stones would stand like flames within the morning and its singing. After the sun came up into the sky and hung there for a time, the winds would begin again and a dun-coloured fog would curtain the day. When the morning winds departed, Jarry and Sanza would stare out across Deadland through the east window of the installation, for that was their favourite —the one on the third floor—where the stone that looked like a gnarly Normform waved to them, and they would lie upon the green couch they had moved up from the first floor, and would sometimes make love as they listened for the winds to rise again, or Sanza would sing and Jarry would write in the log or read back through it, the scribblings of friends and unknowns through the centuries, and they would purr often but never laugh, because they did not know how.

One morning, as they watched, they saw one of the biped creatures of the iodine forests moving across the land. It fell several times, picked itself up, continued, fell once more, lay still.

"What is it doing this far from its home?" asked Sanza.

"Dying," said Jarry. "Let's go outside."

They crossed a catwalk, descended to the first floor, donned their protective suits and departed the installation.

The creature had risen to its feet and was staggering once again. It was covered with a reddish down, had dark eyes and a long, wide nose, lacked a true forehead. It had four brief digits, clawed, upon each hand and foot.

When it saw them emerge from the Worldchange unit, it stopped and stared at them. Then it fell.

They moved to its side and studied it where it lay.

It continued to stare at them, its dark eyes wide, as it lay there shivering.

"It will die if we leave it here," said Sanza.

". . . And it will die if we take it inside," said Jarry.

It raised a forelimb toward them, let it fall again. Its eyes narrowed, then closed.

Jarry reached out and touched it with the toe of his boot. There was no response.

"It's dead," he said.

"What will we do?"

"Leave it here. The sands will cover it."

They returned to the installation, and Jarry entered the event in the log.

During their last month of duty, Sanza asked him, "Will everything die here but us? The green birds and the big eaters of flesh? The funny little trees and the hairy caterpillars?"

"I hope not," said Jarry. "I've been reading back through the biologists' notes. I think life might adapt. Once it gets a start anywhere, it'll do anything it can to keep going. It's probably better for the creatures of this planet that we could afford only twenty Worldchangers. That way they have three millennia to grow more hair and learn to breathe our air and drink our water. With a hundred units we might have wiped them out and had to import cold-world creatures or breed them. This way, the ones who live here might be able to make it."

"It's funny," she said, "but the thought just occurred to me that we're doing here what was done to us. They made us for Alyonal, and a nova took it away. These creatures came to life in this place, and we're taking it away. We're turning all of life on this planet into what we were on our former worlds—misfits."

"The difference, however, is that we are taking our time,"

said Jarry, "and giving them a chance to get used to the new conditions."

"Still, I feel that all that—outside there," she gestured toward the window, "is what this world is becoming: one big Deadland."

"Deadland was here before we came. We haven't created any new deserts."

"All the animals are moving south. The trees are dying. When they get as for south as they can go and still the temperature drops, and the air continues to burn in their lungs—then it will be all over for them."

"By then they might have adapted. The trees are spreading, are developing thicker barks. Life will make it."

"I wonder . . ."

"Would you prefer to sleep until it's all over?"

"No, I want to be by your side, always."

"Then you must reconcile yourself to the fact that something is always hurt by any change. If you do this, you will not be hurt yourself."

Then they listened for the winds to rise.

Three days later, in the still of sundown, between the winds of day and the winds of night, she called him to the window. He climbed to the third floor and moved to her side. Her breasts were rose in the sundown light and the places beneath them silver and dark. The fur of her shoulders and haunches was like an aura of smoke. Her face was expressionless and her wide, green eyes were not turned toward him.

He looked out.

The first big flakes were falling, blue, through the pink light. They drifted past the stone and gnarly Normform; some stuck to the thick quartz windowpane; they fell upon the desert and lay there like blossoms of cyanide; they swirled as more of them came down and were caught by the first faint puffs of the terrible winds. Dark clouds had mustered overhead and from them, now, great cables and nets of blue descended. Now the flakes flashed past the window like butterflies, and the outline of Deadland flickered on and off. The pink vanished and there was only blue, blue and darkening blue, as the first great sigh of evening came into their ears and the billows suddenly

moved sidewise rather than downwards, becoming indigo as they raced by.

"The machine is never silent," Jarry wrote. "Sometimes I fancy I can hear voices in its constant humming, its occasional growling, its crackles of power. I am alone here at the Deadland station. Five centuries have passed since our arrival. I thought it better to let Sanza sleep out this tour of duty, lest the prospect be too bleak. (It is.) She will doubtless be angry. As I lay half-awake this morning, I thought I heard my parents' voices in the next room. No words. Just the sounds of their voices as I used to hear them over my old intercom. They must be dead by now, despite all geriatrics. I wonder if they thought of me much after I left? I couldn't even shake my father's hand without my gauntlet, or kiss my mother good-bye. It is strange, the feeling, to be this alone, with only the throb of the machinery about me as it rearranges the molecules of the atmosphere, refrigerates the world, here in the middle of the blue place, Deadland. This, despite the fact that I grew up in a steel cave. I call the other nineteen stations every afternoon. I am afraid I am becoming something of a nuisance. I won't call them tomorrow, or perhaps the next day.

"I went outside without my refrig-pack this morning, for a few moments. It is still deadly hot. I gulped a mouthful of air and choked. Our day is still far off. But I can notice the difference from the last time I tried it, two and a half hundred years ago. I wonder what it will be like when we have finished?—And I, an economist! What will my function be in our new Alyonal? Whatever, so long as Sanza is happy . . .

"The Worldchanger stutters and groans. All the land is blue for so far as I can see. The stones still stand, but their shapes are changed from what they were. The sky is entirely pink now, and it becomes almost maroon in the morning and the evening. I guess it's really a wine-colour, but I've never seen wine, so I can't say for certain. The trees have not died. They've grown hardier. Their barks are thicker, their leaves are darker and larger. They grow much taller now, I've been told. There are no trees in Deadland.

"The caterpillars still live. They seem much larger, I understand, but it is actually because they have become woollier than they used to be. It seems that most of the animals have heavier pelts these days. Some apparently have taken to hibernating. A strange thing: Station Seven reported that they had thought the bipeds were growing heavier coats. There seem to be quite a few of them in that area, and they often see them off in the distance. They looked to be shaggier. Closer observation, however, revealed that some of them were either carrying or were wrapped in the skins of dead animals! Could it be that they are more intelligent than we have given them credit for? This hardy seems possible, since they were tested quite thoroughly by the Bio Team before we set the machines in operation. Yet, it is very strange.

"The winds are still severe. Occasionally, they darken the sky with ash. There has been considerable vulcanism southwest of here. Station Four was relocated because of this. I hear Sanza singing now, within the sounds of the machine. I will let her be awakened the next time. Things should be more settled by then. No, that is not true. It is selfishness. I want her here beside me. I feel as if I were the only living thing in the whole world. The voices on the radio are ghosts. The clock ticks loudly and the silences between the ticks are filled with the humming of the machine, which is a kind of silence, too, because it is constant. Sometimes I think it is not there; I listen for it, I strain my ears, and I do not know whether there is a humming or not. I check the indicators then, and they assure me that the machine is functioning. Or perhaps there is something wrong with the indicators. But they seem to be all right. No. It is me. And the blue of Deadland is a kind of visual silence. In the morning even the rocks are covered with blue frost. Is it beautiful or ugly? There is no response within me. It is a part of the great silence, that's all. Perhaps I shall become a mystic. Perhaps I shall develop occult powers or achieve something bright and liberating as I sit here at the centre of the great silence. Perhaps I shall see visions. Already I hear voices. Are there ghosts in Deadland? No, there was never anything here to be ghosted. Except perhaps for the little biped. Why did it cross Deadland, I wonder? Why did it head for the

centre of destruction rather than away, as its fellows did? I shall never know. Unless perhaps I have a vision. I think it is time to suit up and take a walk. The polar icecaps are heavier. The glaciation has begun. Soon, soon things will be better. Soon the silence will end, I hope. I wonder, though, whether silence is not the true state of affairs in the universe, our little noises serving only to accentuate it, like a speck of black on a field of blue. Everything was once silence and will be so again—is now, perhaps. Will I ever hear real sounds, or only sounds out of the silence? Sanza is singing again. I wish I could wake her up now, to walk with me, out there. It is beginning to snow."

Jarry awakened again on the eve of the millennium.

Sanza smiled and took his hand in hers and stroked it, as he explained why he had let her sleep, as he apologized.

"Of course I'm not angry," she said, "considering I did the same thing to you last cycle."

Jarry stared up at her and felt the understanding begin.

"I'll not do it again," she said, "and I know you couldn't. The aloneness is almost unbearable."

"Yes," he replied.

"They warmed us both alive last time. I came around first and told them to put you back to sleep. I was angry then, when I found out what you had done. But I got over it quickly, so often did I wish you were there."

"We will stay together," said Jarry.

"Yes, always."

They took a flier from the cavern of sleep to the World-change installation at Deadland, where they relieved the other attendants and moved the new couch up to the third floor.

The air of Deadland, while sultry, could now be breathed for short periods of time, though a headache invariably followed such experiments. The heat was still oppressive. The rock, once like an old Normform waving, had lost its distinctive outline. The winds were no longer so severe.

On the fourth day, they found some animal tracks which seemed to belong to one of the larger predators. This cheered Sanza, but another, later occurrence produced only puzzlement.

One morning they went forth to walk in Deadland.

Less than an hundred paces from the installation, they came upon three of the giant caterpillars, dead. They were stiff, as though dried out rather than frozen, and they were surrounded by rows of markings within the snow. The footprints which led to the scene and away from it were rough of outline, obscure.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I think we had better photograph this," said Jarry.

They did. When Jarry spoke to Station Eleven that afternoon, he learned that similar occurrences had occasionally been noted by attendants of other installations. These were not too frequent, however.

"I don't understand," said Sanza.

"I don't want to," said Jarry.

It did not happen again during their tour of duty. Jarry entered it into the log and wrote a report. Then they abandoned themselves to lovemaking, monitoring, and occasional nights of drunkenness. Two hundred years previously, a biochemist had devoted his tour of duty to experimenting with compounds which would produce the same reactions in Catforms as the legendary whisky did in Normforms. He had been successful, had spent four weeks on a colossal binge, neglected his duty and been relieved of it, was then retired to his coldbunk for the balance of the Wait. His basically simple formula had circulated, however, and Jarry and Sanza found a well-stocked bar in the storeroom and a hand-written manual explaining its use and a variety of drinks which might be compounded. The author of the document had expressed the hope that each tour of attendance might result in the discovery of a new mixture, so that when he returned for his next cycle the manual would have grown to a size proportionate to his desire. Jarry and Sanza worked at it conscientiously, and satisfied the request with a Snowflower Punch which warmed their bellies and made their purring turn into giggles, so that they discovered laughter also. They celebrated the millennium with an entire bowl of it, and Sanza insisted on calling all the other installations and giving them the formula, right then, on the graveyard watch, so that everyone could share in their joy. It is quite possible that everyone did, for the recipe was well-received. And

always, even after that bowl was but a memory, they kept the laughter. Thus are the first simple lines of tradition sometimes sketched.

"The green birds are dying," said Sanza, putting aside a report she had been reading.

"Oh?" said Jarry.

"Apparently they've done all the adapting they're able to," she told him.

"Pity," said Jarry.

"It seems less than a year since we came here. Actually, it's a thousand."

"Time flies," said Jarry.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"Of what?"

"I don't know. Just afraid."

"Why?"

"Living the way we've been living, I guess. Leaving little pieces of ourselves in different centuries. Just a few months ago, as my memory works, this place was a desert. Now it's an ice field. Chasms open and close. Canyons appear and disappear. Rivers dry up and new ones spring forth. Everything seems so very transitory. Things look solid, but I'm getting afraid to touch things now. They might go away. They might turn into smoke, and my hand will keep on reaching through the smoke and touch—something . . . God, maybe. Or worse yet, maybe not. No one really knows what it will be like here when we've finished. We're travelling toward an unknown land and it's too late to go back. We're moving through a dream, heading toward an idea . . . Sometimes I miss my cell . . . And all the little machines that took care of me there. Maybe *I* can't adapt. Maybe I'm like the green bird . . ."

"No, Sanza. You're not. We're real. No matter what happens out there, *we* will last. Everything is changing because we want it to change. We're stronger than the world, and we'll squeeze it and paint it and poke holes in it until we've made it exactly the way we want it. Then we'll take it and cover it with cities and children. You want to see God? Go look in the mirror. God has pointed ears and green eyes. He is covered with soft grey fur. When He raises His hand there is webbing between His fingers."

"It is good that you are strong, Jarry."

"Let's get out the power sled and go for a ride."

"All right."

Up and down, that day, they drove through Deadland, where the dark stones stood like clouds in another sky.

It was twelve and a half hundred years.

Now they could breathe without respirators, for a short time.

Now they could bear the temperature, for a short time.

Now all the green birds were dead.

Now a strange and troubling thing began.

The bipeds came by night, made markings upon the snow, left dead animals in the midst of them. This happened now with much more frequency than it had in the past. They came long distances to do it, many of them with fur which was not their own upon their shoulders.

Jarry searched through the history files for all the reports on the creatures.

"This one speaks of lights in the forest," he said. "Station Seven."

"What . . . ?"

"Fire," he said. "What if they've discovered fire?"

"Then they're not really beasts!"

"But they were!"

"They wear clothing now. They make some sort of sacrifice to our machines. They're not beasts any longer."

"How could it have happened?"

"How do you think? *We* did it. Perhaps they would have remained stupid—animals—if we had not come along and forced them to get smart in order to go on living. We've accelerated their evolution. They had to adapt or die, and they adapted."

"D'you think it would have happened if we hadn't come along?" he asked.

"Maybe—some day. Maybe not, too."

Jarry moved to the window, stared out across Deadland.

"I have to find out," he said. "If they are intelligent, if they are—human, like us," he said, then laughed, "then we must consider their ways."

"What do you propose?"

"Locate some of the creatures. See whether we can communicate with them."

"Hasn't it been tried?"

"Yes."

"What were the results?"

"Mixed. Some claim they have considerable understanding. Others place them far below the threshold where humanity begins."

"We may be doing a terrible thing," she said. "Creating men, then destroying them. Once, when I was feeling low you told me that we were the gods of this world, that ours was the power to shape and to break. Ours *is* the power to shape and break, but I don't feel especially divine. What can we do? They have come this far, but do you think they can bear the change that will take us the rest of the way? What if they are like the green birds? What if they've adapted as fast and as far as they can and it is not sufficient? What would a god do?"

"Whatever he wished," said Jarry.

That day, they cruised over Deadland in the flier, but the only signs of life they saw were each other. They continued to search in the days that followed, but they did not meet with success.

Under the purple of morning, however, two weeks later, it happened.

"They've been here," said Sanza.

Jarry moved to the front of the installation and stared out.

The snow was broken in several places, inscribed with the lines he had seen before, about the form of a small, dead beast.

"They can't have gone very far," he said.

"No."

"We'll search in the sled."

Now over the snow and out, across the land called Dead they went, Sanza driving and Jarry peering at the lines of footmarks in the blue.

They cruised through the occurring morning, hinting of fire and violet, and the wind went past them like a river, and all about them there came sounds like the cracking of ice, the trembling of tin, the snapping of steel strands. The bluefrosted stones stood like frozen music, and the long

shadow of their sled, black as ink, raced on ahead of them. A shower of hailstones drumming upon the roof of their vehicle like a sudden visitation of demon dancers, as suddenly was gone. Deadland sloped downward, slanted up again.

Jarry placed his hand upon Sanza's shoulder.

"Ahead!"

She nodded, began to brake the sled.

They had it at bay. They were using clubs and long poles which looked to have fire-hardened points. They threw stones. They threw pieces of ice.

Then they backed away and it killed them as they went.

The Catforms had called it a bear because it was big and shaggy and could rise up on to its hind legs . . .

This one was about three and a half metres in length, was covered with bluish fur and had a thin, hairless snout like the business end of a pair of pliers.

Five of the little creatures lay still in the snow. Each time that it swung a paw and connected, another one fell.

Jarry removed the pistol from its compartment and checked the charge.

"Cruise by slowly," he told her. "I'm going to try to burn it about the head."

His first shot missed, scoring the boulder at its back. His second singed the fur of its neck. He leapt down from the sled then, as they came abreast of the beast, thumbed the power control up to maximum, and fired the entire charge into its breast, point-blank.

The bear stiffened, swayed, fell, a gaping wound upon it, front to back.

Jarry turned and regarded the little creatures. They stared up at him.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Jarry. I dub thee Redforms——"

He was knocked from his feet by a blow from behind.

He rolled across the snow, lights dancing before his eyes, his left arm and shoulder afire with pain.

A second bear had emerged from the forest of stone.

He drew his long hunting knife with his right hand and climbed back to his feet.

As the creature lunged, he moved with the catspeed of

his kind, thrusting upward, burying his knife to the hilt in its throat.

A shudder ran through it, but it cuffed him and he fell once again, the blade torn from his grasp.

The Redforms threw more stones, rushed toward it with their pointed sticks.

Then there was a thud and a crunching sound, and it rose up into the air and came down on top of him.

He awakened.

He lay on his back, hurting, and everything he looked at seemed to be pulsing, as if about to explode.

How much time had passed, he did not know.

Either he or the bear had been moved.

The little creatures crouched, watching.

Some watched the bear. Some watched him.

Some watched the broken sled . . .

The broken sled . . .

He struggled to his feet.

The Redforms drew back.

He crossed to the sled and looked inside.

He knew she was dead when he saw the angle of her neck. But he did all the things a person does to be sure, anyway, before he would let himself believe it.

She had delivered the deathblow, crashing the sled into the creature, breaking its back. It had broken the sled. Herself, also.

He leaned against the wreckage, composed his first prayer, then removed her body.

The Redforms watched.

He lifted her in his arms and began walking, back toward the installation, across Deadland.

The Redforms continued to watch as he went, except for the one with the strangely high brow-ridge, who studied instead the knife that protruded from the shaggy and steaming throat of the beast.

Jarry asked the awakened executives of December: "What should we do?"

"She is the first of our race to die on this world," said Yan Turl, Vice President.

"There is no tradition," said Selda Kein, Secretary. "Shall we establish one?"

"I don't know," said Jarry. "I don't know what is right to do."

"Burial or cremation seem to be the main choices. Which would you prefer?"

"I don't—No, not the ground. Give her back to me. Give me a large flier . . . I'll burn her."

"Then let us construct a chapel."

"No. It is a thing I must do in my own way. I'd rather do it alone."

"As you wish. Draw what equipment you need, and be about it."

"Please send someone else to keep the Deadland installation. I wish to sleep again when I have finished this thing —until the next cycle."

"Very well, Jarry. We are sorry."

"Yes—we are."

Jarry nodded, gestured, turned, departed.

Thus are the heavier lines of life sometimes drawn.

At the southeastern edge of Deadland there was a blue mountain. It stood to slightly over three thousand metres in height. When approached from the northwest, it gave the appearance of being a frozen wave in a sea too vast to imagine. Purple clouds rent themselves upon its peak. No living thing was to be found on its slopes. It had no name, save that which Jarry Dark gave it.

He anchored the flier.

He carried her body to the highest point to which a body might be carried.

He placed her there, dressed in her finest garments, a wide scarf concealing the angle of her neck, a dark veil covering her emptied features.

He was about to try a prayer when the hail began to fall. Like thrown rocks, the chunks of blue ice came down upon him, upon her.

"God damn you!" he cried and he raced back to the flier.

He climbed into the air, circled.

Her garments were flapping in the wind. The hail was a blue, beaded curtain that separated them from all but these

final caresses: fire aflow from ice to ice, from clay aflow immortally through guns.

He squeezed the trigger and a doorway into the sun opened in the side of the mountain that had been nameless. She vanished within it, and he widened the doorway until he had lowered the mountain.

Then he climbed upward into the cloud, attacking the storm until his guns were empty.

He circled then above the molten mesa, there at the southeastern edge of Deadland.

He circled above the first pyre this world had seen.

Then he departed, to sleep for a season in silence the sleep of ice and of stone, to inherit the new Alyonal. There is no dreaming in that sleep.

Fifteen centuries. Almost half the Wait. Two hundred words or less . . . Picture——

. . . Nineteen mighty rivers flowing, but the black seas rippling violet now.

. . . No shallow iodine-coloured forests. Mighty shag-barked barrel trees instead, orange and lime and black and tall across the land.

. . . Great ranges of mountains in the place of hills brown, yellow, white, lavender. Black corkscrews of smoke unwinding from smouldering cones.

. . . Flowers, whose roots explore the soil twenty metres beneath their mustard petals, unfolded amidst the blue frost and the stones.

. . . Blind burrowers burrowing deeper; offal-eating murk-beasts now showing formidable incisors and great rows of ridged molars; giant caterpillars growing smaller but looking larger because of increasing coats.

. . . The contours of valleys still like the torsos of women, flowing and rolling, or perhaps like instruments of music.

. . . Gone much windblasted stone, but ever the frost.

. . . Sounds in the morning as always, harsh, brittle, metallic.

They were sure they were halfway to heaven.

Picture that.

The Deadland log told him as much as he really needed to know. But he read back through the old reports, also.

Then he mixed himself a drink and stared out the third floor window.

". . . Will die" he said, then finished his drink, outfitted himself, and abandoned his post.

It was three days before he found a camp.

He landed the flier at a distance and approached on foot. He was far to the south of Deadland, where the air was warmer and caused him to feel constantly short of breath.

They were wearing animal skins—skins which had been cut for a better fit and greater protection, skins which were tied about them. He counted sixteen lean-to arrangements and three campfires. He flinched as he regarded the fires, but he continued to advance.

When they saw him, all their little noises stopped, a brief cry went up, and then there was silence.

He entered the camp.

The creatures stood unmoving about him. He heard some bustling within the large lean-to at the end of the clearing.

He walked about the camp.

A slab of dried meat hung from the centre of a tripod of poles.

Several long spears stood before each dwelling place. He advanced and studied one. A stone which had been flaked into a leaf-shaped spearhead was affixed to its end.

There was the outline of a cat carved upon a block of wood . . .

He heard a footfall and turned.

One of the Redforms moved slowly toward him. It appeared older than the others. Its shoulders sloped; as it opened its mouth to make a series of popping noises, he saw that some of its teeth were missing; its hair was grizzled and thin. It bore something in its hands, but Jarry's attention was drawn to the hands themselves.

Each hand bore an opposing digit.

He looked about him quickly, studying the hands of the others. All of them seemed to have thumbs. He studied their appearance more closely.

They now had foreheads.

He returned his attention to the old Redform.

It placed something at his feet, and then it backed away from him.

He looked down.

A chunk of dried meat and a piece of fruit lay upon a broad leaf.

He picked up the meat, closed his eyes, bit off a piece, chewed and swallowed. He wrapped the rest in the leaf and placed it in the side pocket of his pack.

He extended his hand and the Redform drew back.

He lowered his hand, unrolled the blanket he had carried with him and spread it upon the ground. He seated himself, pointed to the Redform, then indicated a position across from him at the other end of the blanket.

The creature hesitated, then advanced and seated itself.

"We are going to learn to talk with one another," he said slowly. Then he placed his hand upon his breast and said, "Jarry."

Jarry stood before the reawakened executives of December.

"They are intelligent," he told them. "It's all in my report."

"So?" asked Yan Turl.

"I don't think they will be able to adapt. They have come very far, very rapidly. But I don't think they can go much further. I don't think they can make it all the way."

"Are you a biologist, an ecologist, a chemist?"

"No."

"Then on what do you base your opinion?"

"I observed them at close range for six weeks."

"Then it's only a feeling you have . . . ?"

"You know there are no experts on a thing like this. It's never happened before."

"Granting their intelligence—granting even that what you have said concerning their adaptability is correct—what do you suggest we do about it?"

"Slow down the change. Give them a better chance. If they can't make it the rest of the way, then stop short of our goal. It's already liveable here. *We* can adapt the rest of the way."

"Slow it down? How much?"

"Supposing we took another seven or eight thousand years?"

"Impossible!"

"Entirely!"

"Too much!"

"Why?"

"Because everyone stands a three-month watch every two hundred fifty years. That's one year of personal time for every thousand. You're asking for too much of everyone's time."

"But the life of an entire race may be at stake!"

"You do not know for certain."

"No, I don't. But do you feel it is something to take a chance with?"

"Do you want to put it to an executive vote?"

"No, I can see that I'll lose. I want to put it before the entire membership."

"Impossible. They're all asleep."

"Then wake them up."

"That would be quite a project."

"Don't you think that the fate of a race is worth the effort? Especially since we're the ones who forced intelligence upon them? We're the ones who made them evolve, cursed them with intellect."

"Enough! They were right at the threshold. They might have become intelligent had we *not* come along——"

"But you can't say for certain! You don't really know! And it doesn't really matter how it happened. They're here and we're here, and they think we're gods—maybe because we do nothing for them but make them miserable. We have some responsibility to an intelligent race, though. At least to the extent of not murdering it."

"Perhaps we could do a long-range study . . ."

"They could be dead by then. I formally move, in my capacity as Treasurer, that we awaken the full membership and put the matter to a vote."

"I don't hear any second to your motion."

"Selda?" he said.

She looked away.

"Tarebell? Clond? Bondici?"

There was silence in the cavern that was high and wide about him.

"All right. I can see when I'm beaten. We will be our own serpents when we come into our Eden. I'm going now, back to Deadland, to finish my tour of duty."

"You don't have to. In fact, it might be better if you sleep the whole thing out . . ."

"No. If it's going to be this way, the guilt will be mine also. I want to watch, to share it fully."

"So be it," said Turl.

Two weeks later, when Installation Nineteen tried to raise the Deadland Station on the radio, there was no response.

After a time, a flier was dispatched.

The Deadland Station was a shapeless lump of melted metal.

Jarry Dark was nowhere to be found.

Later that afternoon, Installation Eight went dead.

A flier was immediately dispatched.

Installation Eight no longer existed. Its attendants were found several miles away, walking. They told how Jarry Dark had forced them from the station at gunpoint. Then he had burnt it to the ground, with the fire-cannons mounted upon his flier.

At about the time they were telling this story, Installation Six became silent.

The order went out: MAINTAIN CONTINUOUS RADIO CONTACT WITH TWO OTHER STATIONS AT ALL TIMES.

The other order went out: GO ARMED AT ALL TIMES. TAKE ANY VISITOR PRISONER.

Jarry waited. At the bottom of a chasm, parked beneath a shelf of rock, Jarry waited. An opened bottle stood upon the control board of his flier. Next to it was a small case of white metal.

Jarry took a long, last drink from the bottle as he waited for the broadcast he knew would come.

When it did, he stretched out on the seat and took a nap.

When he awakened, the light of day was waning.

The broadcast was still going on . . .

". . . Jarry. They will be awakened and a referendum will be held. Come back to the main cavern. This is Yan Turl. Please do not destroy any more installations. This action is not necessary. We agree with your proposal that a vote be held. Please contact us immediately. We are waiting for your reply, Jarry . . ."

He tossed the empty bottle through the window and raised the flier out of the purple shadow into the air and up.

When he descended upon the landing stage within the main cavern, of course they were waiting for him. A dozen rifles were trained upon him as he stepped down from the flier.

"Remove your weapons, Jarry," came the voice of Yan Turl.

"I'm not wearing any weapons," said Jarry. "Neither is my flier," he added ; and this was true, for the fire-cannons no longer rested within their mountings.

Yan Turl approached, looked up at him.

"Then you may step down."

"Thank you, but I like it right where I am."

"You are a prisoner."

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"Put you back to sleep until the end of the Wait. Come down here!"

"No. And don't try shooting—or using a stun charge or gas, either. If you do, we're all of us dead the second it hits."

"What do you mean?" asked Turl, gesturing gently to the riflemen.

"My flier," said Jarry, "is a bomb, and I'm holding the fuse in my right hand." He raised the white metal box. "So long as I keep the lever on the side of this box depressed, we live. If my grip relaxes, even for an instant, the explosion which ensues will doubtless destroy this entire cavern."

"I think you're bluffing."

"You know how you can find out for certain."

"You'll die too, Jarry."

"At the moment, I don't really care. Don't try burning my hand off either, to destroy the fuse," he cautioned, "because it doesn't really matter. Even if you should succeed, it will cost you at least two installations."

"Why is that?"

"What do you think I did with the fire-cannons? I taught the Redforms how to use them. At the moment, these weapons are manned by Redforms and aimed at two

installations. If I do not personally visit my gunners by dawn, they will open fire. After destroying their objectives, they will move on and try for two more."

"You trusted those beasts with laser projectors?"

"That is correct. Now, will you begin awakening the others for the voting?"

Turl crouched, as if to spring at him, appeared to think better of it, relaxed.

"Why did you do it, Jarry?" he asked. "What are they to you that you would make your own people suffer for them?"

"Since you do not feel as I feel," said Jarry, "my reasons would mean nothing to you. After all, they are only based upon my feelings, which are different than your own—for mine are based upon sorrow and loneliness. Try this one, though: I am their god. My form is to be found in their every camp. I am the Slayer of Bears from the Desert of the Dead. They have told my story for two and a half centuries, and I have been changed by it. I am powerful and wise and good, so far as they are concerned. In this capacity, I owe them some consideration. If I do not give them their lives, who will there be to honour me in snow and chant my story around the fires and cut for me the best portions of the woolly caterpillar? None, Turl. And these things are all that my life is worth now. Awaken the others. You have no choice."

"Very well," said Turl. "And if their decision should go against you?"

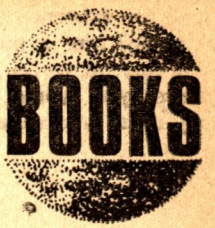
"Then I'll retire, and you can be god," said Jarry.

Now every day when the sun goes down out of the purple sky, Jarry Dark watches it in its passing, for he shall sleep no more the sleep of ice and of stone, wherein there is no dreaming. He has elected to live out the span of his days in a tiny instant of the Wait, never to look upon the New Alyonal of his people. Every morning, at the new Deadland installation, he is awakened by sounds like the cracking of ice, the trembling of tin, the snapping of steel strands, before they come to him with their offerings, singing and making marks upon the snow. They praise him and he smiles upon them. Sometimes he coughs.

Born of man and woman, in accordance with Catform

Y7 requirements, Coldworld Class, Jarry Dark was not suited for existence anywhere in the universe which had guaranteed him a niche. This was either a blessing or a curse, depending on how you looked at it. So look at it however you would, that was the story. Thus does life repay those who would serve her fully.

FAST-PACED BIOGRAPHY



SAM MOSKOWITZ is no academic. He is capable of confusing Horace Walpole with Hugh Walpole and he is a master of the mixed metaphor as well as the muddled syntax and split infinitive. He doesn't always get his facts right and what he calls modern science fiction hasn't got a great deal to do with *contemporary* science fiction (in this country at least). All this aside, he is science fiction's most dedicated bibliographer and biographer, a kind of super fan whose enthusiasm for conventional sf has apparently never waned. He has recently published two books. *Seekers of Tomorrow* (World, $6.00) is, like his earlier book *Explorers of the Infinite*, a collection of biographical pieces about well-known science fiction writers. *Modern Masterpieces of Science Fiction* (World, $6.00) is a companion volume to *Seekers of Tomorrow* and contains contributions from all the writers written about in the other book.

Sam's enthusiastic, somewhat over-dramatised approach to literary biography can be enjoyed almost like fiction in that it has pace, tears, laughter, melodrama and even suspense. How accurate an impression he gives of some of these writers is sometimes hard to say. When he says something like 'the response to *Green Yeast Beast from Betelgeuse* in the Spring 1938 issue of VULGAR SF SHOCK STORIES was unprecedented in that magazine's history—the letters came pouring in to sing its praises . . .' he makes the whole thing sound as if the story in question was the greatest piece of news since the abdication of Edward VII and that the magazine sold more copies in a week than the Bible in a century. In fact it usually means that there were ten letters that liked the story against three that didn't (and thirteen

letters about one story is a lot of letters for a magazine to receive) and the magazine lasted four issues instead of one.

Whatever faults they have, Sam Moskowitz's biographical essays are supremely readable and, for the reader willing to read between the lines, often revealing. The development of science fiction over the last forty years is traced in detail through the major writers who were responsible for that development—Edward E. Smith, John W. Campbell, Edmond Hamilton (as Moskowitz says, a badly underestimated writer), Jack Williamson, Murray Leinster, John Wyndham, Eric Frank Russell, L. Sprague de Camp, Lester del Rey, Robert A. Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon, Isaac Asimov, Clifford D. Simak, Fritz Leiber, C. L. Moore, Henry Kuttner, Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke and Philip Jose Farmer. Good examples of their stories can be found in the companion volume so that readers not familiar with their work may compare them.

This is a praiseworthy and extremely useful project and, to my knowledge, there has been nothing like it done before. It paves the way, perhaps, for more work along the same lines, perhaps in more literary and general terms to make even clearer the perspective that Sam Moskowitz has managed to give to the development of modern science fiction.

Modern Masterpieces of Science Fiction contains, what is more, many of the very best stories from the writers mentioned above. There is Smith's no holds barred *The Vortex Blasters* (appallingly written but full of verve and grandiose imagination), Campbell's *Night,* Hamilton's *Requiem* Sturgeon's *Microcosmic God,* Simak's *Huddling Place,* Leiber's brilliant *Coming Attraction,* Moore's *Doorway Into Time,* Kuttner's *We Guard the Black Planet,* Bloch's *The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton,* Bradbury's *Wake for the Living,* Clarke's *Before Eden,* etc., etc.

Both books are strongly recommended and will, moreover, appeal to the reader who is not normally interested in the biographical and bibliographical side of science fiction. The anthology deserves to become a standard reprint.

Bill Barclay

I LOVE YOU, SEMANTICS

A SCORE OR SO of years ago A. E. Van Vogt delighted, mystified and/or irritated the readers of ASTOUNDING SF with the adventures of his non-Aristotelian hero, Gilbert Gosseyn. In *The Players Of Null-A* (Berkley, 50 cents), second of the series, the action shifts from Venus, home of a civilization founded upon Null-A philosophy and the discipline of General Semantics (". . . an integrating system for all human thought and experience . . . the goal is flexibility of approach . . .") to deep space. Striving to defeat the would-be Galactic Dictator, Enro the Red, Gosseyn is caught in the interplay of fascinatingly ambiguous forces. It is typical of Van Vogt that his central character is the product of a system designed to clarify thought and yet spends most of the story in a state of bewilderment. Double-brained and many-bodied, the personification of his own multivalued logic, Gosseyn sees himself as a piece on a Galactic chessboard. But the game is of a peculiarly Van Vogtian brand; the values of the pieces are uncertain, the board is shrouded in shadows. Despite several notable challenges from later writers, this revival from 1948 reaffirms Van Vogt's position as the true Galactic Chessmaster.

Uncertainty is strictly a minor element in Keith Laumer's *Galactic Diplomat* (Berkley, 60 cents). Gathered from the pages of IF, the nine stories concern James Retief, member of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne of several centuries hence. Tall, tough, endlessly resourceful, he outwits and outfights countless colourfully comical extra-terrestrials while simultaneously foiling the double-dealing of his venal and cowardly superiors. Alien languages and *mores* he apparently absorbs through his pores. His enemies cannot shoot straight. What few extra-terrestrials there are who possess some measure of integrity, just naturally acknowledge his superiority. Written in a vein of humour reminiscent of Christopher Anvil plus a shot of dash and swashbuckle, the stories are entertaining but forgettable. The blurb describes Retief as the James Bond of the 27th Century. Not quite. Even Fleming's fantasy-figure was human enough to make mistakes.

Two more reprints attest the growing reputation of

J. G. Ballard. Closer to the traditional school of cosmic catastrophe than to his more controversial explorations of "Inner Space", *The Wind From Nowhere* (Berkley, 50 cents) depicts the disintegration of civilization before the mounting fury of a wind that sweeps ceaselessly around the globe. Filled with his customary vivid imagery, the novel is however badly weakened by some unconvincing melodrama centred upon a megalomaniacal constructor resolved to defy the elements.

Seven stories in *The Voices Of Time* (Berkley, 50 cents) explore the heartland of Ballard country where small communities crouch on the fringes of ancient deserts, interminable landscapes of repetitive geometrical forms burned and scoured of all irrelevancies, the naked bones of Time. Looking outward, the eye sees not Space, but deepening time-layers like Pythagorean shells of crystal. The two-fisted technologist of ASTOUNDING's heyday is replaced, in this setting, by a figure which it is tempting to label The Dissolving Hero. Faced with the breakup of the Universe he does not fight, but instead seeks, literally, to be absorbed. Stated most effectively in the title story, this theme is reflected in a kind of farcical, macabre mirror-image in *The Overloaded Man*. To absorb Madame Gioconda, the monstrous baroque prima-donna "heroine" of *The Sound-Sweep*, might tax the capacity of any universe. Here Ballard turns from cosmic events to a study of character and produces possibly the best story in the collection. Among the remainder, ranging from a claustrophobic account of men freed from sleep to a Stapledonian vision of ultimate consciousness, readers of the blurb will search in vain for *Prima Belladonna*. Relax. The 1962 edition omitted it, too.

Glance quickly through the sf and fantasy magazines of the 'forties and you may get the impression that Henry Kuttner was in all the rooms. And that those which he vacated were filled by his *alter egos*, Lawrence O'Donnell and Lewis Padgett. Together with a scattering of lesser pen-names they achieved an output even more notable for quality and command of technique than for quantity. Mayflower-Dell have mined a fraction of this rich lode in two collections, of which the latest, *The Best Of Kuttner* 2, (5s.) presents fourteen variations on familiar

Kuttner themes. To mention only three: that superb tale of a haunted demon, *The Devil We Know*, from UNKNOWN WORLDS; the sheer romanticism of *Clash By Night*, a pre-Hiroshima picture of undersea cities on Venus and the mercenaries who must fight to bring about their own defeat; and a wry look at the perils of fathering Homo Superior, *When The Bough Breaks*. Anticipating decimalization, a bargain at two point eight stories to the shilling.

Consider the following quotation: ". . . one clawlike hand extended to rip away the garment covering her naked breasts." If you find no inconsistency therein, then you may enjoy THONGOR OF LEMURIA (Ace Books, 40 cents) a further episode in the career of Lin Carter's barbarian adventurer from the Northlands of a vanished age. Sword-and-sorcery fiction, a minor subdivision of fantasy, tends to attract a readership peculiarly apt to identify with the imaginary worlds it creates. The resultant arguments between supporters of one or other set of pseudomyths can be highly emotional, whether dealing with the massively erudite Tolkien trilogy or the gorgeous ragbag of Howard's Hyborian Age. At its worst, this intense enthusiasm permits the publication and sale of ill-written and overly derivative material. At its best, it brings certain books to the attention of a wider public by ignoring the division between adult and juvenile fiction. Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone Of Brisingamen* (Ace Books, 50 cents) originally written and published here as a children's book, deservedly gets across the age-boundary in this American edition.

Garner sets himself the tricky task of establishing a fantasy world within the borders of his native county, Cheshire, and weaving it into the fabric of everyday life. Within sight and sound of busy market towns, dwarves and trolls in combat; anorak-clad hikers masked with snow-goggles await the onset of Fimbulwinter; the dark mines of Alderley Edge, dangerous enough in sober fact, disgorge a murderous horde of pale svarts in pursuit of the magical stone, Firefrost. Although his story is intended for the young, Garner happily refrains from rubbing off too many of the rough edges of his Celtic source-material. Axes crash, swords clang, heroes die bloodily. If still you

thirst for more . . . go on to *The Moon Of Gomrath* (Puffin Books, 3s. 6d.)

Avram Davidson's *The Kar-Chee Reign* forms half of an Ace Double (50 cents). Earth, drained of manpower and mineral resources by vast interstellar emigrations, is invaded by the mantis-like Kar-Chee. Scavenging for the remnants of useable elements in the planet's crust, they crack continents, displace seas, crush farmlands and villages, until a handful of humanity decide to stop running and start fighting. In the reverse half, *Rocannon's World*, Ursula K. LeGuin join the sisterhood of writers who deftly combine starships and swords. Rocannon, the scientist armed with an *Abridged Handy Pocket Guide To Intelligent Life-forms*, is an appealing figure as he sets out to save an exotic and violent world from destruction by spaceborne killers. Semley, the lost lady of the Angyar, the haughty Lord Mogien, the winged catlike windsteeds and the tunnelling Clayfolk, are creations to rank with the best of Norton and Brackett.

Two from AMAZING. Three from IF.
One from ANALOG. Two from F. & S.F.
Two from NEW WORLDS. Four from GALAXY,
and One from The Boy Scouts of America.

In total, *World's Best Science Fiction*: 1966 (Ace Books, 60 cents). Apart from a feeling that 1965 had better things to offer than R. A. Lafferty's *In Our Block*, from IF, this is an excellent 60 cents worth. Particularly recommended are Simak's quietly sombre *Over the River and Through the Woods*, the gory *Masque of the Red Shift*, by Fred Saberhagen and, from NEW WORLDS, David Masson's brilliant *Traveller's Rest*. The balance, from Lin Carter's tale of the writer of the unwritten classics, *Uncollected Works*, to Fritz Leiber's delirious 21st Century family living in *The Good New Days*, offers a choice of style and subject to meet most tastes. Merit badges to those Eagle Scouts of sf, editors Wollheim and Carr.

PER ARDUA AD ARTERIES

A scientific genius, smuggled into the West in the sixth decade of the Cold War to work on techniques of miniaturization, is injured. His life is threatened by a blood

clot in the brain, unreachable by normal surgery. Miniaturization reduces a party of specialists and their submarine to microscopic size. Armed with a laser gun, they are injected into his bloodstream. . . .

Isaac Asimov, writer of science-fiction, runs a poor second to Dr. Asimov, expositor of scientific fact, in *Fantastic Voyage* (Dennis Dobson, 21s.). Based on a screenplay by one writer, adapted by a second from an original story by two other fellows, it shackles the novelist to a banal band of film-characters. The brilliant surgeon with no talent for personal relationships; his beautiful girl assistant whose wiggle, so to speak, conceals a keen brain; the athletic, bantering hero who is rebuffed by the girl assistant. Etcetera, etcetera. Miniaturization as a science is none too credible, but with a muttered: "Presto-Hyperspace!", Asimov dismisses implausibility and conjures up a fascinating internal world of blood-rivers, streams and whirlpools where mindless bacterial armies battle. Visually, at least, the film version promises to be outstanding. Veteran sf readers may prefer to inspect the widescreen before buying the hardcover.

Veteran fantasy readers will find much that is familiar in *The Dark Side*, edited by Damon Knight (Dennis Dobson, 21s.). Covering more than a half century, between H. G. Wells' *The Story of the Late Mr. Elvesham* and the 1958 *Casey Agonistes* by Richard McKenna, the contents stand up fairly well to the passage of time. T. L. Sherred contributes *Eye For Iniquity*, as always a study of the ordinary man with one extraordinary gift in conflict with Authority. Well-written and for once light-hearted. *It*, an example of early Theodore Sturgeon, suffers from occasional patches of queasy coyness mingled with the horror in the manner of Disney. The roots of Ray Bradbury's recent novel, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, can be found in a less ambitious dark carnival of 1948, *The Black Ferris*. Promising much but never quite delivering, James Blish disappoints with *Mistake Inside*, while editor/critic Anthony Boucher disproves the saying that "Them as can't write, criticises" with an object-lesson in elegant briefness, *Nellthu*. The merely supernatural pales before Peter Phillips' evocation of a divided mind sliding inexorably into madness, in

C/o Mr. Makepeace. They, by R. A. Heinlein, has a cast of thousands . . . or has it? Avram Davidson and H. L. Gold humorously pit solid American-Jewish citizens against the uncanny in *The Golem* and *Trouble With Water,* and Fritz Leiber rounds it all off with the haunting *Man Who Never Grew Young.*

Edited and introduced by Frederik Pohl, *The If Reader of Science Fiction* (Doubleday, 4 dollars, 50 cents) is a rather expensive package for nine stories of varying quality. Robert F. Young's *When Time Was New* has a juvenile air but considerable charm with its mixture of time-travel, Martian children and battery-driven dinosaurs. James Retief slugs his way through *Trick Or Treaty,* not included in *Galactic Diplomat.* The dizzyingly complex hero and monstrously-motivated aliens of *The Silkie,* a distinctly kinky piece, demonstrate that Van Vogt has not deteriorated in exile. A punchline is the mainstay of *The Life Hater* by Fred Saberhagen, and John Brunner's entertaining *A Better Mousetrap* telegraphs its climax via the title. Pohl is present with *Father Of The Stars,* Jonathan Brand tackles the intricacies of interstellar justice in *Long Day In Court*; *Old Testament* is an unfresh treatment of the Spacemen-are-Gods-to-primitive-aliens plot by Jerome Bixby, and Fritz Leiber thinly disguises as fiction an article on computerized chess. *The 64-Square Madhouse.*

James Cawthorn

SHORTER REVIEWS

PENGUIN BOOKS ARE performing an extremely valuable service in their publication of cheap, well-written reports and surveys on both the hard and soft sciences. *The Addict In The Street* by Jeremy Larner and Ralph Tefferteller (4s. 6d.) is a sound piece of sociological reporting on American drug addiction, consisting primarily of case-histories taken from addicts themselves who agreed to be tape-recorded by Tefferteller. It is an excellent, unsensational book that helps throw light on the psychology—as well as the sociology—of drug addiction. A more academic book is Michael Carter's *Into Work* (4s. 6d.) which

deals with the problems of young people who have to decide what kind of work they want to do. Often these decisions result in a waste of talent which is never allowed to develop and, looked at from one point of view, contribute to society. Michael Carter discusses the inadequacies of the school system, of the Youth Employment Service and so on, and asks how these can be improved. It is, among other things, one of the most comprehensive popular discussions to date of the failures of our education system. Steven Rose, the brilliant young biochemist, has written a highly readable introduction to his subject in *The Chemistry of Life* (7s. 6d.) which is definitely one of the best popular books yet to see print. The field of biochemistry is a highly important one and one which relates very directly to our ordinary lives. There appear to be too few introductory books to the subject and Steven Rose's not only adds to the layman's knowledge but does so in a lucid and interesting way. Highly recommended. — WEB

The Saliva Tree by Brian W. Aldiss (Faber, 18s.) is a long short story written in a pastiche style that is slightly overmannered for a late Victorian style and a trifle undermannered for an early Victorian style so that it's hard to tell exactly what effect Mr. Aldiss was trying for since the setting of the story is in very late Victorian East Anglia. As a pastiche, therefore, the story does not altogether succeed, but as a story it is superb and well merits its SWFA "Nebula" Award. Invisible extra-terrestrials on a lonely farm with an unpleasant habit of fastening on to other creatures and "deflating" them, an appearance by H. G. Wells, other bizarre events and an excellently evoked sense of period (even if one isn't altogether sure of the period having any existence outside Mr. Aldiss's fertile imagination) make this one of the author's most entertaining novellas for a very long time. The other stories in the volume—*The Day of the Doomed King* (about historical Yugoslavia and the nature of the Slav) which originally appeared in SCIENCE FANTASY, another one from the same magazine, *Danger: Religion* (originally *Matrix*) and *One Role With Relish* which is a "straight" version of *Faceless Card* from SCIENCE FANTASY. *The*

Source and *Girl and the Robot with Flowers* are from NEW WORLDS. *Legends of Smith's Burst* is an early story originally from NEBULA. *The Lonely Habit* and *A Pleasure Shared* are beautifully chilling murder stories and *Paternal Care* is a mood-piece with a moral. This is the richest and most varied new selection of Mr. Aldiss's short fiction for some time and is one of the best I have read for a long time.

—RH

The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction, 15th series, edited by Edward L. Ferman (Doubleday, $4.50), is one of the best F & SF collections for a while. It contains Roger Zelazny's wonderful story *The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth* about the hunting of strange sea-creatures in the oceans of an imaginary Venus. The prose is rich and the images superb and the book is worth getting for this story alone. Others worth mentioning are *Four Ghosts in Hamlet* by Fritz Leiber (not f *or* sf, but bloody good), *Something Else* by the designer of the little motif for this column and editorial and letter column, Robert J. Tilley, *Keep Them Happy* by Robert Rohrer and *Eyes Do More Than See* by Isaac Asimov. The F & SF weaknesses are here, too, in stomach-turning whimsy (*Aunt Millicent at the Races* by Len Guttridge, is a typical example), but in nothing like proliferation of recent years. Ferman seems to be shaping into a really good editor—perhaps the best since Boucher. We shall see.

—WEB

The Year's Best SF, 10th Annual Edition, edited (created, almost) by Judith Merril (Delacorte Press, $4.95). How can such a good book be so comparatively cheap? Miss Merril's talent for editing is well-known. Not only does she select with taste, discrimination and dedication, she links her selections with commentaries that were, until she began reviewing for F & SF, about the only really widely-read literate and progressive pieces of critical writing in American sf. Judith Merril has in fact waved the flag of progress and improvement where many of her famous contemporaries have dug in their heels for the duration. Almost alone she has crusaded, in her anthologies, for

better standards, greater depth and more careful writing in fantasy and science fiction. Her efforts are rewarded by the steady improvement in the field and an increasingly higher standard of published science fiction and fantasy to choose from. Outstanding stories in the current collection are from J. G. Ballard, Fritz Leiber, John Brunner, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Bashevis Singer and other established writers. Particularly encouraging are the excellent stories by the new, literate American writers. These are writers with apparently far wider-ranging imaginations and more sophisticated understanding of writing than their U.S. predecessors (on the whole)—Roger Zelazny with his *A Rose for Ecclesiastes*, Thomas M. Disch with *Descending*, Robert Rohrer with *The Man Who Found Proteus* are three that are particularly outstanding. Miss Merril not only collects the best of the established writers (from "inside" and "outside" the field—a distinction she has helped destroy, by the way) but has a nose for sniffing out the talented newcomer. She has been in science fiction since the forties. She was in the forefront then. She is in the forefront today. Unlike most of yesterday's revolutionaries, she is as fervent a crusader for change as she ever was. Her annual collections are a beacon for us all.

— JC

A Mirror for Observers, Edgar Pangborn (Penguin 3s. 6d.). "In a small Massachusetts town two Martians, disguised as human beings, are locked in a bitter struggle for the mind of a child genius." Thus runs Penguin's back cover blurb, which, although I suppose is quite accurate, is not likely to win any new readers.

This is a pity, for the book is a marvellous one for conversion purposes. It has its faults—a little stickiness, occasionally rather unconvincing characterisation, requiring sometimes a little too much credulity in the reader. Also, if *The Trial of Callista Blake* is anything to go by, Pangborn's mainstream stuff is much better than his science fiction. But nonetheless, *A Mirror for Observers* stands head and shoulders above most sf, and is heartily recommended.

— LJ

All correspondence to:
The Editor,
NEW WORLDS SF,
87a, Ladbroke Grove,
London, W.11.

Sex and Atheism Willy Nilly

Dear Sir,

I suspect that it was with tongue in cheek that you published Mr. Hunt's letter in issue 159. However, some of the gross misconceptions expressed there are still so widespread that it is worthwhile killing a few of them off for those who are still unbelievers in the contemporary sf scene.

(1) Your correspondent names 1939 as the date when "true sf writing" ceased to exist. 1939, believe it or not, was the year in which the Second World War broke out. The bulk of writers featured in NEW WORLDS have grown up in its aftermath; their ethos is the ethos of modern society; their psychological, sociological, educational backgrounds can hardly not have been influenced by the kind of society it has produced in the West—materialistic, egocentric and accumulative to an overwhelming extent. Writers reflect the society they inhabit, otherwise their work is worthless and irrelevant.

(2) "Why are your authors so pre-occupied with the sexual angle?" asks Mr. Hunt. (Are they?) He should have read Harry Harrison in a recent number of SF HORIZONS. Before 1939 (and still today, apparently), sex was a strictly taboo subject in sf magazines. Censorship was exercised. Wasn't this a more unhealthy state of affairs than the one now extant? Even Mr. Heinlein, it seems (in a recent novel) has not recovered from the 'strait-jacket ethos' of those days.

There is nothing basically wrong with sex in fiction. Many of the greatest novelists of our century have used it tellingly—Lawrence, Joyce, Sartre, Golding, Braine—the list is endless. Sex, however, should not be used incidentally: this is the crux of all *good* writing. Everything in a story or novel must serve a strict purpose. The most serious recent attempt to do this with sex was Langdon Jones's *I Remem-*

ber, Anita. If he was not completely successful (though I think he was on a first reading), it was not for the lack of trying. Sex used purely incidentally, on the other hand, is wrong as it shows a weakness in craft. This is the fault—a damning one—of the bulk of today's pulp literature.

There is also sex and Sex. *I Remember, Anita* was an attempt at capitalisation. The enigmatic Faustaff in James Colvin's *The Wrecks Of Time* is undoubtedly a practitioner of sex in a minor guise: I would call it 'bawdry' in the best Elizabethan style (*The Alchemist*). Mr. Colvin's use of bawdry is a little marginal to his theme, but it could be condoned on the grounds that it illustrates Faustaff's non-too-puritan approach to life.

(3) Mr. Hunt expresses a yearning after the days of solid-fuel sf. Alas, sir! those days are dead and gone, lost in the limitless chasms of deep space! Things change, they do not stay as they are; would you have Sartre writing in the style of Voltaire? Golding in the style of Dickens? Burroughs in that of Henry James or Conrad? Science has caught up with sf, but writers have new horizons to exploit instead of bewailing the passing of what may have been great. Take a look at any informed British sf journal or magazine and the fact will hit you between the eyes. Progress! You can't beat it.

(4) "The sf writers of the not-too-distant past were true craftsmen." But if Mr. Hunt describes everything post-1939 he's ignoring nearly 30 years of development! Sf didn't reach its greatest peaks until the forties (see the recent ASTOUNDING anthologies), when the pulp that had gone before became recognizable as something validly like sf. And those 'greatest peaks' are only so-called: this is Heinlein just after the war (as quoted in NW 159):

"Much so-called science fiction is not about human beings and their problems, consisting instead of a fictionalized framework, people by cardboard figures. . . ."

How right he was! This is the touchstone of craftsmanship—to create, if not reality, at least consistent possibility, both in situation, character, and dialogue. It took the mainstream novel almost a century to progress to consistent possibility—from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), when the truly 'modern' novel finally arrived. Give sf a chance. It is,

after all, a purely 20th Century phenomenon, though there are a few odd shoots pushing up in people like Samuel Butler before then.

Today, at least, we have signs of coming maturity in approach and treatment—in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*; Aldiss's *Non-Stop* (I haven't read *Greybeard*); Ballard's *The Drowned World*; Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero*; and others.

No, Mr. Hunt, sf is decidedly *not* a dead dog.

Richard A. Poole, Plas Gwyn, Bangor

MIT SFS INDEX

Dear Sir,

The Second Edition of the MIT Science Fiction Society Index to the sf magazines is now out. This edition covers the years 1951-1965, taking up where Don Day left off. Unlike our previous edition, this one contains all of the American professional magazines published, and most of the British magazines. In addition to listings by author and title of works, we have a listing alphabetically by magazine, and by date within a magazine. Since all of this would run to 828 pages of pica type, we have reduced the type size by 50 per cent photographically, so that it will fit into 207 pages, plus three introductory pages printed full size. Most importantly, all of the Index has been proof-read at least three times.

Physically, the book is 8½ inches by 11 inches, hardbound, and printed on 50 pound paper by the offset process. This job was done by a professional printer, the Spaulding Moss Company of Boston.

If you find occasion to mention the Index in print, it would be much appreciated.

Erwin S. Strauss, 116 Broadway, Cambridge, Mass., U.S.A.

Australian sf Review

Dear Sir,

The enormous success of the recent Australian SF Convention has led to the establishment of a serious sf journal which will appear monthly under the editorship of John Bangsund and myself. The magazine will retail through newsstand and bookshop outlets, details of which have just been completed on an Australia-wide basis, and by subscription to overseas readers.

One of the purposes of AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW will be to ensure greater communication between writers and readers in Australia and encourage the development of Australian sf towards achieving a definite character of its own.

We should like to hear from all those interested, both in this country and overseas.

Lee Harding, Olinda Road, The Basin, Victoria, Australia

ALTERNATE EARTHS

Dear Sir,

Reading Mr. Collyn's *Unification Day* in No. 162 has prompted me to think about other 'alternate world' stories I have read, and I notice that they all have one thing in common: The story-world is always much worse (i.e. less advanced technically, or more repressed, or much more overcrowded) than our actual world.

In the classic on this theme, *Bring the Jubilee*, the Northern States have lost the Civil War, and are weak and backward: "Only a rare millionaire . . . could afford to indulge in a costly and complicated minibile requiring a trained driver to bounce it over the rutted and chuck-holed roads." The hero, a historian, gets his long-awaited chance to change the course of history and arrives in our world. (The fact that the rest of the world in this story is fairly advanced does not disprove my thesis, for it acts as a spur on the hero to want to see a strong U.S.A.) Poul Anderson's *Delenda Est* (in *Guardians of Time*) shows a world much more primitive than ours: "Apparently this world had developed a rule-of-thumb engineering, but no systematic science worth talking about." It must be stressed that the story-worlds are not just different—in this story, for instance, astronomy has never even developed. Ward Moore at least gives us technical *divergence* (e.g. gas lighting instead of electricity) to compensate for political *deterioration*, while Anderson gives us the worst of both worlds. On a different line, Pohl tries to justify the H-bomb in *Target One* (*Alternating Currents*). Survivors of an atomic war manage to kill the student Einstein, and immediately find themselves in a vastly overcrowded world. "Sing a dirge for one hundred and fifty thousand children of atomic cataclysm. We killed a man from the

past and wiped them out, and with them their shattered, festering planet. And for nothing." Unfortunately we can't be sure that even a hundred and fifty people would survive an atomic war, otherwise it might be worth trying.

Closer to home, and Mr. Collyn's story, are *The Fall of Frenchy Steiner* and Giles Cooper's *The Other Man*. Both show a German-dominated Britain, oppressed and unhappy (and I certainly would not argue that such would not have been the case). Hilary Bailey is interested in the human aspect, not the scientific (and very good she is too); Cooper's technical side shows slave labour building a vital road with pick-axes—but perhaps he forgot that the Germans invented the rocket (amongst other things). Here again, one shows political repression, and the other both political and scientific.

Unification Day also gives the worst of both worlds. Since Napoleon conquered us scientific progress has been limited to the tram and the radio, and the English are a subjugated race. Without going too deeply into the moral aspects of the story (Is Nationalism right?) I can prove the point I have been leading up to. That is, Why are writers afraid to show an alternate world which is better? In which people are happier, life is more comfortable and science is more advanced? (For it seems that science must be the yardstick for judging human progress. Only short-sighted romantics look on the 16th Century as a Golden Age). Why is there a mental block which prevents writers imagining a world improved by a change in history? I am inclined to think that such thoughts would lead to frustration with our every-day lives, so much so that we would not be able to tolerate it. We can always look forward to a better future, but not to a better present.

C. GODWIN, Rectory Cottage, White Roding, Dunmow, Essex.

THE ASSASSINATION WEAPON

Dear Sir,

Ballard never states his aims and conclusions baldly—it's rather as though he just points at them. If you can see where he's pointing, what he says comes across crystal clear, but if you can't, you have to try and figure it out.

Re. *The Assassination Weapon*, the jigsaw-type presentation he uses here was effective in *You and me and the Continuum*, but here (for me at least) the pieces seem to fall into place slightly askew. I adjusted it after a second reading, but I've got a suspicion that things aren't quite right. This sort of "warped poetry" is intriguing, though—and I'd like to see more of it.

Brian M. Stableford, 16 Thompson Road, Denton, Lancs.

Dear Sir,

I must congratulate you on a wonderful April issue, and thank you for bringing us one of the best magazine stories I have read this year, *The Assassination Weapon* by J. G. Ballard. From what Bill Butler says in his article on William Burroughs, the two authors have a lot in common. So much so that a controversy seems to be inflating around the works of Burroughs, just as one did around Ballard's works about a year ago. I have never read anything by Burroughs, so I won't try to comment on him. It is the idea of symbology which fascinates me.

From what I've read, it seems to be associated particularly with these two authors, and in a minor way, with the American author Cordwainer Smith. Whether the minority like it, or the majority like it, it is something that at least deserves recognition. It is unique to this decade. It has moved away from convention, and given us something new to come to terms with. This is a good thing, for surely it helps to stop the mind from stagnating, and sinking too deep into mediocrity.

We've become accustomed to the everyday concepts of sf, and you know how much the passing of the "sense of wonder" is bemoaned. But it hasn't passed, it is merely lying dormant, and awaiting the right weather; it wants the wet season to pass, and then once again it will dare to show itself. If more people would try to come to terms with Ballard and Burroughs, they just might realize this. The doctor can't be blamed for the patient's illness, he can only offer a cure, if the patient rejects, then there is nothing more the doctor can do.

Don't crucify these authors for being original, crucify those who fail to see it.

Jim Grant, 7 Sydney Road, Fairmile, Christchurch, Hants.

NEXT MONTH IN NEW WORLDS

An ALL-STAR ISSUE will be on sale next month. It will contain *Behold the Man!* by Michael Moorcock, a controversial story about a 20th century psychiatrist who goes back to the time of Jesus of Nazareth; J. G. Ballard's story *The Atrocity Exhibition* (which has already been described by those who have read it as by far his most successful story to date); Brian Aldiss's somewhat shocking view of how the A-bomb centenary might be celebrated, *Another Little Boy*, plus original stories by Arthur Sellings (*That Evening Sun Go Down*), Thomas M. Disch (*Invaded by Love*), the first science fiction story by the *avant garde* publisher John Calder (*Signals*) and a collaboration by Charles Platt and B. J. Bayley (*A Taste of the Afterlife*). Watch for the superb Keith Roberts cover. Subsequent issues will contain Harry Harrison, Judith Merril, William F. Temple, Roger Zelazny, Thomas M. Disch, Langdon Jones, Kris Neville, Jon DeCles, Brian W. Aldiss, David I. Masson, J. G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Edmond Hamilton, Anne McCaffery, James Colvin, Charles Harness and many more popular U.S. and British sf writers. Make sure of your copies by taking out a subscription today.

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Printed by Richmond Hill Printing Works, 23/25 Abbott Road, Winton, Bournemouth

INSIDE NEW WORLDS

* MAN communicates with God by radio
* SCIENCE changes a world into an icy hell—so that men might live on it
* SOCIOLOGICAL experiments with rats get out of hand

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