

Science Fantasy

No. 45
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Short Novel

**THE
MAP COUNTRY**
Kenneth Bulmer

Novelette

**STUDIO 5,
THE STARS**
J. G. Ballard

Article

**Studies in Science
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**10. FITZ-JAMES
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Somewhere there was the torn half of a map which led into a strange country—not of this world. To possess the map led to madness, in more ways than one, yet its possession was essential for the orderliness of the world.

THE MAP COUNTRY

BY KENNETH BULMER

o n e

Roland Crane heard the crash of breaking glass in his study from the hall where he had gone to tap the barometer and curse the windy, overcast, beastly weather. The sound echoed hard on a blast of wind that shook the isolated old house. The carpet rippled the length of the hall like an anaconda. The lamp swung from its chain, sending shadows like bats across the walls.

He ran angrily back, almost colliding with the incomplete suit of armour, in time to see the second maid, young Annie, burst into tears.

Strewn at her feet across the Persian carpet shards of glass glittered in the table-lamp's illumination like the aftermath of a battle. Crane looked up.

All along the windowless north wall his map frames hung, some faded, some brightly coloured, tattered, dimmed with

age, charred, inscribed with loving and painstaking care and the lavish curlicues of writing from the hands of men long dead. That wall dominated the room. Across from it the curtained windows and ceiling-high bookshelves counterpointed in modern sombre book-learning the high brilliance of those maps. They spoke of daring and the great venture across unknown seas, of the beckoning mists of undiscovered lands and the siren call of the sea. The salty tang of romance breathed from them into the close confinement of the sombre study.

In the centre of the 1580 Italian of the Florida Gulf and the westward islands a star-shaped outline revealed the brighter colour of gold leaf beyond, where no glass lay to dull the lustre.

"I'm sorry, sir. I just don't know how it happened."

Annie's nose was red and her cheeks shook and her whole scrawny frame trembled. She peeked at him over her hands, pressed tightly to her face. Her bright bird-like brown eyes were wet and overflowing.

Crane's anger dissipated. Annie was the daughter of old Annie who had served him as well as she had his father, and that had been back before the first World War, before Roland Crane was thought of, when Isambard Crane was building up the engineering works that now kept his son in idle luxury. Not exactly idle, though. Men of affairs tended to misjudge Crane on the basis of his inherited affluence.

The map was unharmed. He took four quick strides to the frame and checked. There was an odd blueish tinge to the glass. It had shattered into the shape almost of a perfect seven-pointed star.

He turned on Annie.

"That's all right, Annie. And stop crying, for goodness sake!"

"I'm sorry sir—"

"What were you doing in here at all this time of night?"

Annie gestured to the coffee table. A tea-pot covered with a hand-knitted cosy, a cup and saucer, milk and sugar, and a heaping plate of buns, with a dish of butter and a knife and toasting fork reminded Crane that he had rung for tea.

"Why didn't Molly bring it?" Molly was the first maid.

"It's her night off, sir—"

"Oh." Crane laughed. "Well, it's not a very pleasant one. The wind must be gusting past seventy. Probably the

one I heard in the hall twisted the fabric of the house in some way, vibration, and the glass must have been weak—never mind now. Just clear the glass away.”

“Yes, sir.”

The telephone rang.

“Oh, drat it,” said Crane ungraciously, and crossed to the wall-table where the phone crouched like a sentient spider, connected to the web of the world.

He didn’t recognise the voice. The storm must have interfered with the telephone line as well as smashing his map glass; he realised it was a woman, but the squawks and ululations and clicks made any further guess impossible.

“Mr. Roland Crane?”

“Speaking.”

“The Mr. Roland Crane who is interested in maps?”

Crane’s mental defences alerted. Before he could make his usual cautious reply, the woman’s voice went on:

“Interested in buying maps? I have something you might care to see.”

“Oh?”

“Perhaps I could come out to Bushmills—?”

“We-ell—”

“I have a car. I’m in the “Royal George” in town. I could be with you in half an hour.”

Crane thought of the drive out from Market Nelson, with the road winding upwards on to the inhospitable moorlands, with the scraggy trees lying flat with the wind and the road glistening with unshed water, the gutters and ditches miniature raging torrents. No weather for a woman. He thought of the Coup des Dames, and smiled wryly to himself; his notions of womenkind stemmed from the pages of old books, where knights in shining armour defended shrinking demoiselles from fire-breathing dragons. Today, the girls twisted the necks of the fire-breathing dragons pretty efficiently themselves.

“All right, Miss—?”

“Harbottle.”

He shuddered, and went on: “Very well, Miss Harbottle. If you care to drive in this weather, tonight, then what you have for sale must be highly interesting. Come out, by all means.”

The phone went dead at once. That might be a fallen telegraph pole just as easily as the replacement of the receiver.

He watched as Annie finished clearing away the glass. Odd that the glass had broken at all, really ; but that had been a treasure bought entire, frame, map glass and all. The glass was old and weak. He made a mental note to check all the other framed charts and maps. Those in the ponderous sliding drawers of the cabinets were preserved better, perhaps ; but he would have missed that oriflamme of colour along the wall.

Maps perhaps formed too great a part of his life. He wondered, not for the first time, whether or not he followed a will o' the wisp. His interest in maps stemmed from that early odd experience ; he had told the story a few times but, meeting raised eyebrows and smiling incredulity, he hadn't bothered lately. The main fact that the search went on still was good enough.

The buns toasted well before the banked fire roaring in the hearth. Wasteful ; perhaps, shedding a benison ; yes. And that was what counted with Roland Crane.

He poured tea and added milk and sugar and lay back in his winged armchair with the sliding seat and back fixed in the most comfortable position years of experience had taught him. It was good to be alive. It was good to be rich with financial cares handled by a remote glass-walled office in the City of London. It was good to live a full life in these bleak moorlands of the west country, and to go off on a dig during the season, working with men and women who shared his archaeological dedication. The idle wasting away of life that was a disease with the rich would have killed him inside three months.

Next season would be—if he was lucky—Turkey. A great deal to be dug up there, to be found, to be added to the store of human knowledge.

He drank more tea and ate a toasted bun, liberally smeared with good rich butter, and lay back in the great winged armchair, well content with life.

Miss Harbottle had wasted no time. She'd probably driven up that winding road with the wipers tick-tocking across the windscreen, the tyres hissing in the rain, a cigarette held casually between her red lips, clocking a steady sixty.

She looked that sort of girl.

Annie ushered her in, said that she would bring fresh tea, and closed the door silently.

Miss Harbottle advanced with outstretched hand. Crane took it, looking at her, suddenly and disastrously uncomfortable.

Miss Harbottle had fair wavy hair, cut murderously short. She had the face that could find a match only in those old books Crane had read as a child, a face that made the faces of modern magazine advertisement girls look the vapid blanks they were. She wore slacks and a short leather coat, an attire for which she apologised at once.

"Felt it more suitable for the weather. Filthy ride."

"Yet you came anyway," Crane said, handing her to a chair. "It must be very important." He looked vainly for a case.

She laughed, sitting down. "I'm afraid I played a little deception on you, Mr. Crane. I have no maps to sell."

Crane sat up. "Well, what on earth—?" he began.

Her face, while still retaining all its vitality and vivacious line, was sombre, penetrating and intelligent. She leaned forward.

"I'm not selling maps, Mr. Crane. But I am interested in acquiring a map—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Harbottle." Crane was brusque and annoyed. "If you knew I collected maps you should also have known that I do not sell. I—"

"I know, Mr. Crane. I am interested in one special map. A map which I believe you, also, do not have."

"Oh?"

Her eyes were hidden now behind down-dropped lids. He wondered for a panic stricken instant what she was thinking; then he rallied. That was between him and his memories alone.

"Well, Miss Harbottle—"

"And my name isn't Harbottle. That happens to be the name of the proprietor of the "Royal George." I used it on the spur of the moment."

"But why—?"

"Mr. Crane. If I told you that I am looking for a certain map and came to you for assistance, what would you say?"

"Well. Only that if I could help you I would, of course. But I think it very unlikely."

"So do I."

"What! Well, then?" Crane was exasperated.

"Mr. Crane." The girl whose name was not Harbottle spoke with concentrated seriousness. Her eyelids rose and her eyes—of a deep and disturbing blue—held Crane's hypnotically. "I am interested in a map—a map that has been torn down the centre."

"Ah!" said Crane, and was silent.

In the room the feeling of tension existed just as strongly as the wind clawed at the windows and buffeted the house. A door banged somewhere far off above ; probably the beds were being turned down. Annie had probably assumed that Miss Harbottle who was not Harbottle would be staying the night. It would be a charitable gesture to offer. Crane ignored all these outside sounds.

A map, torn down the centre !

An old map, on thick curling paper with print that was difficult to read. Yet not too old. Young enough to be used by a motorist wanting to find his way along mainroads in the country. Along roads that had run in the same grooves since the time men traversed them searching for fresh flints. A map that did exist—or had existed—an ordinary map, a cheap mid-nineteenth century map printed all in black.

Yes, Crane knew of a map that had been torn down the centre.

But was that map the one this girl was talking about ?

The answer to that question could only be : “ yes ! ”

Crane composed himself. He poured out more tea. His hand trembled so slightly that the tea fell neatly enough ; its scatter would have covered a half crown.

“ You’d better tell me the rest of it, Mis Har—I beg your pardon—”

“ Polly Gould.”

“ Miss Gould, then perhaps we can—Polly Gould ? You’re not Allan Gould’s sister ? ”

“ No.” Then, at his expression, she smiled and said ; “ I’m his cousin.”

“ Well, then—can you tell me if there is any news about Allan ? ”

“ None. Since he disappeared no one has heard a word. And that was five years ago. So we’re not likely to hear anything now.”

“ No. I’m sorry. You were fond of him ? ”

“ Pretty much.” She was off handed about it ; it cut deep. “ He was in love with me. Wanted to marry me. I didn’t. I sometimes wonder if—but then—what with the map and all I just can’t make up my mind—”

Her distress was obvious.

Crane felt unnecessary.

“ Well, anyway,” he said brusquely. “ Perhaps you’d care to tell me why you’ve come to see me.”

"The other day I was speaking to Tom Bowles—you don't know him and, anyway, he isn't important."

Crane felt sorry for poor Tom Bowles. Being so summarily dismissed by this girl was something like the end of the world.

"He mentioned that he'd heard a funny story from friends and they'd picked it up from overhearing an Admiral talking in his club. The story was so odd that it had got around."

Crane nodded. "You can spare me the story. I know."

Polly Guild put down her cup and stared at Crane. "I don't know it all, not the details. But I want you to tell me. It is very important that you do so, Mr. Crane."

Crane scowled at the fire. "I can't see how this very funny story—to quote your friends—can have any bearing on your visit. It merely explains how you know I am interested in a map that has been torn down the centre."

"I guessed you would say that." The fire leaped up, throwing a lurid glow across their faces, picking out the silver glitter of the crossed rapiers on the wall, flinging back a blinding reflection from the broken map glass. "I can tell you that Allan had that map—"

"He had it !"

"Yes. He had it. He used it. Just as you did."

"My God !" Crane was in a cold sweat. That someone he had once known, an old army friend, had actually possessed the map—his map !—and he hadn't known. And Allan had actually used it. Incredible !

Polly said : "You'd never told Allan the story. I didn't know until Tom told me. Perhaps, if you had—"

"You think he disappeared—*there* ?"

"I don't know what I think. Perhaps, if you tell me the story and fill in the details, I might have something more to go on than a fifth-hand account told with all the boring club jargon thrown in. Well ?"

"I can hardly refuse." Crane sat back in the chair. His voice sank, so that Polly leaned forward, hands under her chin and elbows on knees, to hear him.

t w o

"I must have been five or six at the time," Crane said. "We were touring—father, mother, Adele and myself—but touring where I cannot remember. The experience was so strange that none of us mentioned it, and now that my parents are dead and Adele is—well"—he swallowed and went on—"that doesn't matter. She cannot tell me. That is what matters in this context."

"I know about your sister," Polly said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, they look after her well. She plays with her dolls and her pretty ribbons and lets them wash her face and dress and undress her. She'll be thirty-four next birthday."

Polly remained silent.

After a moment Crane said: "We had a big red car. I remember that because all cars were black in those days. A big tourer and I loved to sit up front with the hood down and let the slipstream whip into my face. I can feel it now." He put one hand to his cheek and rubbed, thoughtfully. "We were going from one town to another—naturally, I don't know where—and I was anxious to get there for an ice cream. I remember bits and pieces, flashes of memory; not the whole affair in a nicely ordered sequence. To remember anything at all from that age means it must have impressed me very forcibly. This did."

"Yes?"

"Just as we were leaving the outskirts father realised he didn't have a map. There must have been alternative routes or something. I believe it was my fault; I'd used the map to make a paper hat. Anyway. There was a junk shop, you know, old stuff that people toss out and that lies in windows gathering dust for years on end. Then a rich American happens by and pays enough to keep the owner living for another five years. There was a book tray outside. Twopence each. Nothing much under a shilling these days. Father asked the man if he had a map. He had. He had a map all right."

"The map."

"Yes. The map. It was folded into the back of a guide book. Father just tossed the book onto my lap and we set off. The next flash that comes is of hearing my father using words I didn't understand and of mother shushing him. There was only half the map there. Someone had torn half of it off."

“Wasn’t a remark . . .?”

“I think it was Adele. Probably my mother, though, she had a whacky sense of humour. It doesn’t matter. They said : ‘I suppose when we reach the torn off part of the map we’ll all fall off the edge.’ It made me laugh.” Crane fiddled with the teacups, thinking back, feeling the sun and air and the way the big old red tourer rolled around the corners. He could see the map spread out on the seat between him and his father, upright behind the gnarled wheel, leather gauntleted hands so firm on the wheel, so gentle with the old paper of the map.

“We drove on, in the sunshine, through the green fields, not a house or a soul in sight. The telegraph posts were all leaning at crazy angles, and the road was very white and dusty. Then father said : ‘Well, hold on, folks. This is where we fall off.’ and we all laughed. We were still laughing when the grey mist closed down from nowhere.”

He shivered.

“We couldn’t see a thing. One minute we were driving in the sunshine, doing fifty along the white road. The next we were groping forward in a dense mist. It was still warm. The car still ran. Father dropped the speed to ten miles an hour ; and we groped on. Then I started to cry.”

“You were frightened?”

“Yes. Well, scared, wondering what it was all about. When Adele said : ‘We’re not really going to fall off the end of the world silly !’ it only made it worse. I cried all the harder. Eventually father decided to turn back. We retraced our course and came out into the sunshine again. When father checked the map, and mother, too, we found that the mist began at exactly the place where the map was torn.”

Polly Gould shivered her slim shoulders and moved closer to the fire.

“Father laughed it off. He was a big man. Isambard Crane. Biggest engineer in all the west country. ‘Probably a local freak,’ he said. I didn’t know what he meant ; but it sounded comforting. We went on again. We crept through the mist, hearing nothing apart from the rumble of the car. Then, after about ten minutes, the mist began to thin.”

Crane put the cup down. He guessed that he’d break it if he went on with the story holding it in his hand.

"The mist shredded away. We were out in the sunshine again. Father laughed and said that that was that. We went on around a bend in the road and then—then—"

"Yes?"

"A confusion. A roaring from the engine as father turned the car around fast, tyres spinning. A distant glimpse of turrets and towers, of fire and smoke and the thin keening of trumpets. I cannot bring that scene to mind though I have tried many and many a time. A silver globe from which spurted livid tongues of flame. A tall structure which I think of always as a tree, laminated, many branched, and yet so huge that no tree exists on the same scale. A vibration in the air, a gossamer sheening of the atmosphere that set a rippling curtain many folded, between us and the scene beyond." Crane shook his head. "I have tried to recapture the feelings we all had, the inexplicable sense of dread, the heightened pulse-rate, the dread knowledge that this place was evil—and yet evil designed for one end, that of good; inexplicable as that sounds."

"Inexplicable—and almost crazy."

Crane smiled wryly at Polly. "Yes, Miss Gould. Crazy."

"You ran through an industrial fog-belt into one of those god-awful industrial towns, all smoke and soot and flame, and the feeling of evil, of men's lives being warped and crushed, is strong enough there to curl a philosopher's beard."

"So I have thought many times. That must be the answer. To a child's eyes a factory belching smoke and steam and flame as the Bessemers tilted would appear as a cacophonous mystery, a place of terror and fascination. Oh, yes, don't think I haven't thought about this."

"I believe you have, Mr. Crane. I merely said that to test your reactions. You forgive me? Good. Now, Allan—"

"Yes. Your cousin. He had this map—"

"What happened afterwards? To the map, I mean."

"Father turned the car around fast. We went out of there and through the mist without slackening speed until we reached the sunshine once more. Then we backtracked and found a fork which took us a longer way around. We didn't speak much of what we had seen."

"All right. Frankly, Mr. Crane, I cannot see what this did to you. You ran into an industrial belt, and saw the monstrous growth of factories with a child's eyes. I had been hoping that you would help me with my search for my cousin. It seems I was mistaken."

"Just a minute. I've told you the story that is current. I haven't added further details, details which I have told no-one. I think it only fair for you to give me your side of the story."

"That's simple enough. Allan planned a long motoring holiday. He was on leave—"

"He stayed on as a regular? Yes. I decided that soldiering and Cranes didn't go hand in hand. I think I was right."

"Maybe you were. He'd found a girl friend—Sharon something-or-other—and they were going to do the grand tour of Ireland."

"Ireland!"

"Yes. You knew Allan had disappeared in Ireland?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. But I didn't know he had the map. You mean—all this happened to me in Ireland?"

"If it did, Mr. Crane."

"What do you mean—if? I may be crazy, but as surely as I sit here, I went through that mist and saw another world."

Ireland. So all his motoring excursions about the bylanes of England had been fruitless. He had no memory of crossing the sea, when, as a child he had begun that momentous tour with his family. Ireland. Well, if enchantment did enter the picture then Ireland was the right place for that.

Polly stared at him. "Did you say another world, Mr. Crane?"

"Yes. And not only do I mean a different world from that a child had experienced." Wind caught the windows and shook the stout walls of the old house. The fire leaped up and shadows wavered eerily on the ranked books. "Another world. A different world from anything we could ever know, or anything we could ever dream."

"Perhaps you'd better finish your story."

"When you tell me what happened to Allan."

"He wrote that he'd picked up an old guide book and was intrigued by the illustrations. Steel engravings. He also said in his letter that there was an old map in the back that had been torn in half. He said that for the hell of it this girl, Sharon, was going to compare the old routes with the modern. She had a theory that the carriers could find their way about better than modern lorry-drivers. She was a bit of a crank on things like that. Low heels, hand-woven plaids, wooden utensils from Scandinavia, vegetarian. You know the sort."

"Hardly the type for Allan, wouldn't you say?"

"You didn't see her."

"Oh."

"They left Belfast one bright morning and were never seen again. That was five years ago."

"I thought he wanted to marry you?"

"This was after I told him no. Finally. In a terrible scene. Sharon was to assuage his pangs. Anyway, she'd have made him a better wife than I would have. But you see, that's why I feel responsible—"

"No. No, not you, Polly. The map. The damned map. I tell you here and now, Allan did follow that map, he went through the mist, and one of those blasted clanking monsters got him." He stopped, realising what he had said.

"Clanking monsters?"

He made a vague gesture. "Through a child's eyes. I don't know what they were. But they came running out of the little trees ahead of us, clanking and shining, with seemingly dozens of legs and spinning treads and long flailing arms reaching out for us. That's why my father turned the car so fast. I haven't told anyone that, before you."

"And that's why your sister Adele is—is the same mental age now as she was then?"

"Yes."

"That's why you have this personal grudge against the map?"

Crane scowled. "How can you have a personal grudge against a bit of paper? A loathing, a terror, a mortal fear that it might reveal things better left undiscovered, yes. That might result in you burning the accursed thing; but it wouldn't be a personal grudge."

"You never did tell me what happened to it."

"I didn't think about it at the time. Out of the mist of memory I recall that incident itself. When my father died I went through his effects half expecting the guide book locked away in a japanned steel box, with its key attached to the ring he always carried on a chain in his pocket. Nothing, of course. I suppose you can say that the idea of regaining possession of that map has obsessed me. The guide books I've pawed through astound even me. But what must have happened is obvious. Father disposed of the book fast at the time. It's been kicking about junk shops and second hand bookstalls waiting for a buyer—"

"Allan."

"Yes." Crane hesitated, and then said: "Unless other people used the map, went through the mist into the—well, what can we call it but the Map Country—and vanished. And then the people—the beings, entities, aliens, what-have-you—who dwell there simply returned the map to our world and waited for fresh victims."

"But that presupposes—"

"Yes. It does rather, doesn't it?"

The tea was cold. The butter melting in the dish looked greasy. All the buns had been toasted and eaten. Crane rang for Annie and when she had cleared the table, he went across to the cabinet and produced bottles. He raised an eyebrow at Polly.

"Same as you. Scotch. Straight."

"Raw it is. Here."

As they drank slowly and reflectively with the fire glow reddening their faces Crane studied this girl with a slow and appreciative scrutiny that held nothing of insolence or rudeness. She stared into the fire, oblivious of him and he wondered if she was thinking of Allan and that last quarrel.

Her cousin had rushed off to Ireland in a rage, with a second-best girl-friend, had bought the guide book and the map and, thinking to deaden whatever pain he felt over Polly, had followed the map to—to where? To the Map Country.

And that told him precisely nothing.

He rose and picked from the bookcase an Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland. The names rang sweet carillons in his ears. "From Belfast," he said, musing. "No. The names mean nothing to me—apart from a tang of longing."

"When do you leave?" Polly asked, with an upward tilt of her head.

He smiled. They were establishing a rapport already and he found the sensation pleasant, restful—and direfully alarming.

"In the morning. I can catch the early train and the plane—"

"I'm coming too, of course."

"But—"

It took Roland Crane less than thirty seconds to realise that he was seldom going to win arguments with Polly Gould.

He was still pointing out when they left the plane at Nutt's Corner and took the bus into Belfast that this didn't seem the

sort of adventure for a girl. She merely told him to contact his bookselling friends and start the hunt for a mid-nineteenth century guidebook of some indeterminate part of Ireland, and containing in the back the torn half of a map. Neither of them entertained much hope of that approach ; merely coming to Ireland wouldn't bring the catalogues of the booksellers any closer than back at Crane's home, Bushmill. But it was some sort of lead.

Polly went off tracking down the last people Allan had seen before setting off.

They reported back to each other, sitting at a low table in the lounge of their comfortable hotel. Results—nil.

"The booksellers were pleased to see me, naturally," said Crane, leaning back in the deep leather armchair and yawning. "Whew, I'm tired. But they shook their heads and expressed a sympathy that was sincere and universal. Not a one." He scratched his nose. "Except, that is, for one old character who advised me to try Smithfield. I told him I was looking for a book and not a side of beef—"

Polly chuckled. "Yes, I know. It is disconcerting to find a general market and junkshop area called Smithfield. Difficult for an Englishman to disassociate the other Smithfield from his mind."

"I agree. Especially when Smithfield was the scene of many a tourney, with knights in full armour jousting there—or didn't you know that?"

"No. Anyway, what about it? Did you go?"

"Nope. Tomorrow." He frowned. "The biggest upset of all was what this same old character told me. Apparently another man has been looking for a guide book and from this man's description of what he wants to buy, I'd wager half my collection he's after the same book as us."

"Some one else—after the map!"

"That's what the man said."

"That sheds a totally new light on this—"

"Does it? I don't really think so. If the map is being put back into circulation again, then it must be sought after—"

"I really can't go along with your theory there—"

"You're right of course, Polly. It is only a theory and so wild and woolly a one as to make nonsense of the sanity of the world we live in." He stood up, lean and tall, and smiled down on her. "Me for shut-eye. Tomorrow, Smithfield."

t h r e e

But even though he tramped the fascinating alleyways of Smithfield, amid the noise and bustle, in the quieter, dusty and time-corroded sections, and turned over so many tattered books—all guide books—that he wondered how anyone had ever found their way about without them, he did not turn up a guide book with a torn map in the back. Correction—he turned up many guide books with ripped and frail maps in the back ; but that warning zephyr he knew would creep up his spine when he found the right one did not happen. He returned to the hotel, discouraged. Everyone to whom he had spoken had been helpful, bringing out piles and armloads and old tea chests full of books, had even helped him to turn them over—but one and all they'd shaken their heads.

"Sorry, sir. Feller called McArdle was here, askin' the very same questions, sure he was."

McArdle.

Who the hell was this McArdle to come poking into Crane's life, trying to steal *his* map ?

Polly, too, that evening looked crestfallen. "I found the hotel where Allan stayed that last night. Run-down sort of place. I spoke to the proprietor. The place has changed hands since then. After all, it was five years ago."

"Hard luck, Polly."

"I've a lead to the man who owned it at the time, though. Thought we could hire a car and run out there tomorrow. Little place called Ballybogy. About four miles north west of Ballymoney."

"All right, I'm game." The obvious thought occurred to Crane. "I suppose his name isn't McArdle ?"

"No. Should it be ?"

"If this was straight detection, yes, it should be. But we're mixed up in something a little stronger than mere crime and sudden death. The death's there, well enough, but I don't believe it to be sudden." Crane could not have explained the dark thoughts crowding his brain except by bringing in the fey influences of Ireland—influences he had heretofore scoffingly derided.

"His name," Polly said, "is O'Connell. Will you see about the car ?"

Crane, thinking back to that filthy night he had first met Polly, said : "On condition you drive."

"Done."

Crane found it easy enough to obtain a car, a late model Austin, and Polly took it through the traffic and out along the excellently surfaced roads with a sure, gentle touch that amused and impressed Crane. The green countryside sped past. The sun shone and fluffy clouds wallowed in a mild blue sky like a fleet of white-winged galleons. Crane held the Ordnance Survey on his knee and followed their progress through the enchanted names of Ireland.

Ballybogy was just a tiny whitewashed village of closed front doors lining the main street. They were directed to O'Connell's cottage, knocked, and after stating their business, were admitted into the neat, snug, dark little parlour. O'Connell was a brownfaced, wiry, sharp-eyed gnome of a man. He twinkled at them.

As his daughter brewed tea and laid out pan bread and Irish butter, scones and home-made jam from the strawberries of the previous summer, O'Connell racked his brains, thinking back to a single night five years previously when a man and girl had stayed at his hotel. Amazingly, he remembered.

As he explained why he remembered, Crane's amazement was replaced by mounting excitement. He leaned forward on the black-wood chair.

"And you say, Mr. O'Connell, that the man scared you?"

"Not scared, young man." O'Connell rubbed his chin. "I recall he was possessed of the evil eye—"

"Oh, come now, father!" O'Connell's daughter had a shop perm, and nylons, and a well-cut flowered dress—she was no half-wild girl from the distant bogs. "That's all nonsense!"

Despite the sunshine flooding in through the open door and the cheerful wink of the china ornaments and the tea things on the table, Crane could not help a feeling that perhaps the old man's dark theories were not nonsense. As soon as you set foot in Ireland you realised that anything at all could happen here.

The story as it came out was in itself sensational; but Crane was vividly aware of the undercurrents, the things that were not said, the possibilities this fresh approach opened up.

"The eye o' the devil himself," O'Connell rumbled.

From what Crane pieced together, what had happened was simply that O'Connell remembered that night five years ago when Allan Gould and Sharon had been staying by reason of the simple fact that that night his hotel had caught fire.

Allan and Sharon had been drinking a lot, which made Polly frown, and they were creating quite a disturbance. A stranger had walked into the hotel lounge, called for a drink, and had sat down at their table. He'd had the face and the eyes of the devil, according to O'Connell. Crane was willing to give O'Connell the benefit of being an expert in those matters.

"Him and the young feller got talking. He was trying to buy a book off him and the young feller wasn't having any." O'Connell shook his head reflectively. "Before you could say Cuchulain they were pummelling each other like it was the glorious twelfth itself. The young feller was well—it was like this—" O'Connell stopped, and rubbed his nose. "It was like he was hittin' the whole world, hittin' that feller with the devil's face."

"Poor Allan," breathed Polly.

"And then," O'Connell said with some small satisfaction, "me hotel caught fire, the whole works, entire."

"But I went there yesterday—" Polly protested.

"Terrible fine fire service we have in Belfast, miss. All the best bedrooms running with water and ash. But, d'you know—"

"Now, father," his daughter said in a voice that held an unmistakable warning.

He rounded on her. "Now what d'you take me for, girl! Don't know what happened? Didn't I see it with my own eyes, then?"

"You know what the insurance people said. You were lucky they didn't press you too hard . . ."

"Faith, and all! I'm sitting here and telling you, girl, that that devil-faced feller lost the fight with the wee lad and set my hotel afire with his devil's spit. That's what I'm atelling you of!"

"Oh, father—!"

Crane glanced at Polly. She had her lower lip gripped in tightly between her teeth. She looked intense and, caught unaware in a betraying pose, appealingly lovely. Crane looked away again, fast.

O'Connell's daughter—they never did learn her name—said: "You mustn't mind father too much. He always claimed that the stranger set the hotel alight with his eyes. I must admit that he did look—well—odd. He booked in but of course never stayed the night. I didn't like the look of him then—"

"Booked in, you say?" Crane stepped in quickly.

"That's right."

"Do you remember his name?" He waited, aware of the thump of blood through his temples and the dryness of his throat.

"Sure and all we do. 'Twas a McArdle—"

"McArdle!"

Crane nodded at Polly's surprised exclamation.

"McArdle," he said, and the satisfaction purred in his voice.

"D'you know the feller then?" asked O'Connell.

"No, we don't." Crane stood up. "But I'm much obliged to you, Mr. O'Connell. We intend to make the acquaintance of this McArdle chap as soon as maybe."

"Sooner if possible," Polly added; and Crane knew she was back on form again.

Crane, speaking with great gravity and emphasis, said: "Tell me, Mr. O'Connell. Can you possibly remember if the young man, Allan Gould, gave any indication where he was going in Ireland? It is most important that we know."

"Divil a word did he say to me on that score. From what they were arguing about I seem to remember a scrap of paper they kept prodding with their wee fingers. But 'twas a lovely fire—only time I remember the best bedroom's fire ever drew properly—"

"I know it is difficult for you to recall details of a night five years ago. But the hotel fire fixes it for you—is there nothing more you can tell us?" Crane was pleading now, openly and unashamed. Something about this whole fire story annoyed him in an obscure way.

"Well," O'Connell swivelled around to stare at Crane. "Don't blame me if it's nothin' but a trick of an old man's memory. After I retired and sold the hotel my mind don't seem as keen as 'twas—"

"Yes, Mr. O'Connell?"

"I think they talked about County Tyrone . . . But mind me; I'm not after saying they did. Just that I think they did."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Connell," said Crane simply. He was already standing in the little parlour, and when Polly rose also they crowded the place with sunshine and shadow from the windows. O'Connell looked up, smiling. He began to pack a pipe kept handy on the mantles shelf. His daughter stood up, a little embarrassed, now, at the parting.

Polly smiled at her. "A lovely house you have, Miss O'Connell. You must be very proud of it."

Miss O'Connell beamed and, having been won over, Polly knew, they could now depart with dignity and all rites fulfilled. As they sat in the car she said wistfully: "An interesting life, with no complications."

Crane chuckled offensively. "Don't you believe it. They have as many complications in a small village as you'll find any day in London. Come on, start her up. We've no time to waste."

"County Tyrone?"

"When we're ready. I'm thinking of McArdle."

All the way back to Belfast, through countryside that, with its unpredictable shifts of mood, was grey and brooding, misted with rain, Crane thought about McArdle.

When Polly pulled the car up before their hotel he was right back in his thoughts at the place he had started.

"I'll go along," Polly said, "and check the hotel register. If McArdle booked in his address must be there."

"Yes, you do that, Polly," said Crane humbly. He hadn't thought of it. Not at all. Polly was the practical one.

She came back to late lunch with a triumphant expression. A triumph, Crane noted, that overlaid a grimness.

"He gave his address as some place in County Tyrone."

"Well now," said Crane.

"Only trouble is that the place name has been obliterated by burns. The whole register is badly charred. They keep it in the safe and regard it as a curio. A memento of the Great Fire if you follow me."

"Yes. Well, it's too late to do much more today. Any ideas?"

"I ought to try to find a story this afternoon."

"Huh?"

Polly looked at him reflectively, gently pulling her lower lip.

"You're a rich man, Mr. Crane?"

"Why, I suppose so. And what's all this Mister Crane stuff, anyway?"

"Rolley?"

"I've grown accustomed to it."

She laughed. "Well, Rolley, hasn't it occurred to you that a young unmarried girl has to work for a living?"

It hadn't—not in Polly's case, at any rate.

"Why—huh—" Crane said intelligently.

"I'm a reporter—I kid myself I'm a journalist ; not yet, but that'll come. My paper think I'm on to a big story here—as I well might be—"

But Crane was blazing with anger.

"Is that all you've dragged me here for—to get a story for your confounded paper?"

She blazed right back.

"Have you forgotten Allan?"

At once he was contrite. "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry, my dear. Just that, well—I've got so bound up in this thing that the thought of millions of gawpers prying into it over their breakfast cereal turns my stomach over."

"Don't worry. By the time the story is finished with us—or us with it—and I file it you'll be as blase as the next."

Thinking of the thoughts that had crowded his brain in O'Connell's neat cottage, of the dark enchantment of Ireland, Crane said slowly : "I wonder."

Polly sensed those vague forebodings. "This isn't any supernatural hocus-pocus we're mixed up in, Rolley. That man McArdle points that up for us. There's some mighty queer goings on going on—but they can all be explained away, never you fear."

This time Crane didn't say : 'I wonder.' But the thought was still in his brain and refused to be dislodged.

All Crane's hopes were now centred on County Tyrone. He checked his Ordnance Survey. Enquiries elicited the interesting information that much of the county was wild, sparsely inhabited, forbidding. Tremendous areas of bog and waste land seemed to him to promise far more than any neatly patterned fields of intensive agriculture. He retained the Austin for the next day and Polly used it for business of her own. At dinner she reported.

"Filed a story—can't remember what, even now—and made some other investigations. Nothing. MacArdle isn't known around the newspapers. I checked a couple of booksellers and the name was on their list of catalogue customers ; but that's all. He buys maps and guidebooks. Only."

"I know I'm becoming very impatient to get to County Tyrone. Tyrone ! Brings up some memories from the well of recollection, eh?" He picked up his knife and fork and then laid them down again. "Seems odd that I've been to Ireland

before, been to Tyrone, and yet can't remember a thing. Nothing was ever said in the family."

"That's easily understandable."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is." And he began eating again.

After dinner Polly claimed she had some of the mysterious tasks women are slaves to before a journey of any description, and, at a loose end, Crane wandered into the lounge. Silence dabbled at by the clock and fibrillated by turning newspaper pages daunted him. The night was fine, cool but dry, so he decided to saunter about Belfast a little, wondering why he bothered. He was afire to get started.

He had ditched all his theories about the Map Country.

He wanted to keep an open mind, completely open, and let the unravelling facts speak for themselves, form the truth without distortion by a too feverish brain. The facts, at this moment, were all at variance. If his childhood experience had really happened in Ireland as he now believed, then how—if, in addition, it had happened in the boglands of County Tyrone—could it be explained away on the supposition of the fogs and fury of an industrial factory town? And that was only one so-called fact that had to be juggled with. No—Crane hadn't forgotten that they were searching for a man and a girl who had disappeared here five years ago.

four

A light rain had begun to fall—nothing unusual about that—but it was enough to cause Crane to turn back for his hotel. Lights gleamed slickly from the wet pavements and cars went by with a swish. The sometimes comforting closeness of rain was all about him.

"Can you direct me to Queen's Bridge, please?"

Crane was momentarily startled. The man had appeared from the curtain of rain unexpectedly. "Why—why it's down that way—" He pointed.

"Thank you. Mr. Crane, isn't it?"

"Ye—what?" Crane looked harder, feeling his senses drawing themselves together. "Who are you?"

"That's of no consequence. I just wanted a word with you."

The man's hat shadowed his face. A jut of chin showed beneath a livid slash of mouth. He had picked his spot well—midway between lamps. Rain splashed off the pavements.

"Go home, Mr. Crane. Go back to England, where you belong. We don't want your sort here."

Crane was over that first jolt of surprise. He let his body lean forward a trifle, not much, just enough to feel the weight come on to the balls of his feet. His hands hung limply at his sides. He said: "McArdle?"

The dark shadow before him might have bowed ironically. It wouldn't have mattered. "At your service, Mr. Crane."

"On what grounds do you suggest I go home?"

"Now that you know of my existence, the grounds have changed. It might have been before that you were an Englishman. It might have been that I didn't like your colour—anything. But now that you have found out my name and are quick enough to realise that a stranger speaking to you is me—well, I can only warn you for your own good. You'll run into a great deal of trouble if you persist in looking for this map. It is not for you. It never was intended for you. Forget about the map, Mr. Crane, and go home!"

"Why are you searching so desperately for this map, McArdle?"

"It's no concern of yours." The stranger in the darkness was disconcerted by Crane's matter-of-fact manner. His eloquence had failed him.

"But it is of concern to me, McArdle. There is only one map. Why shouldn't we pool resources, try to track it down together?"

McArdle's bark of explosive sound, there in the rain-filled darkness, was not a laugh and Crane for a moment wondered if the man were sane. But anyone who would go to the lengths these two men were going for a map couldn't be regarded as sane, could they? Yet—this was no ordinary map. Crane remembered that old car ride, and he thought of Allan Gould. His fists clenched at his sides as he spoke.

"You won't tell me why you want this map, McArdle. But it must be obvious to you that I know. I'm looking for it as well, am I not?"

"A blind man, searching for a corpse in the night. That's all you are, Crane."

"A corpse! Is Allan Gould dead, then?"

"Dead, rotted, cremated—how do I know? He went—where he went." McArdle took a pace nearer. His tones changed, almost wheedled. "Just drop the whole thing,

Crane. That girl with you will never find her cousin. That I promise you. Once you go in—that is, you're running right up against a nasty death, Crane. You think you know that with the map you will find Gould. But I tell you that map is not for you—it is not for any man of this world ! I'm trying to help you, Crane, to warn you. I know how to deal with the map when I find it—"

"If you find it," Crane said savagely. "I suppose you'll burn it. That's all your sort have ever done, throughout history, burned the things they couldn't understand."

"But I do understand, and you do not. And I cannot tell you anything about this map. You have the crazy notion that if you find it you will also be able to find Gould. I tell you this is not so—"

"No ?"

"Well, then—you may find Gould or what is left of him, but you will also be destroyed yourself !"

Crane knew that this man would tell him nothing more. Whatever else there was to learn about the map he must find for himself. And the determination in him to do just that was a strong, black tide, bolstered by his own anger.

A cruising taxi idled past with a lick of tyres ; neither man took any notice of it. Wind gusted more strongly, wrapping Crane's light raincoat around his legs. He felt the growing chill of the night. McArdle stood, tall and spare, rain glinting from the brim of his hat, each droplet caught and split the distant lamplight so that, for an odd timeless instant, Crane glimpsed something more than a mere man standing there on the prosaic rain-slicked Belfast pavement.

Then he shook his shoulders, feeling the wetness seeping through, and brought himself back to the present. McArdle was just a man. That he could imagine anything else showed how off balance he was. This damned map—this whole damned affair—was throwing him for a spineless, addle-brained ninny. He opened his clenched fists, moving the fingers slowly.

"If you have nothing else to say, McArdle, then goodnight!"

He turned away, still tensed, still ready for anything that might happen.

McArdle was no fool. The man simply said mockingly : "And goodnight to you, Crane. Just forget all about this and go home. I'm doing you a favour."

Crane did not answer, walked off, head bent against the rain, hands now thrust deeply into his raincoat pockets.

Damn McArdle ! And damn the map ! In fact, taking everything that had happened—damn the whole boiling !

And then he remembered Polly and immediately reconsidered that decision. No map—no Polly.

The map at least had done something positively good for him. He luxuriated in the warm glow spreading in him as he thought of Polly. He walked back to the hotel in a remarkably good humour.

She was waiting for him in the lounge, a woman's magazine folded on her knee, a cup of coffee—stone cold—on the table and a cigarette burning into an inch long ash drooping from her mouth. She smiled weakly as he walked in.

When he told her of his meeting with McArdle in the rain he began to think there was something odd in her reaction, when she lost that little smile and blue arc-lights began to snap—as Crane thought, aghast—from her eyes, he realised that there was indeed something very much amiss.

"You idiot !" she blazed out at last as he lapsed into silence. "You nitwit ! You utter jackass—you—you . . ."

Crane sat down. "I thought you'd—" he began. Then : "What's the matter ? I'm not allowing McArdle to frighten me off. I told you so."

"That's not it !"

"I was ready in case he began anything funny—I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd tried to lay me out. He might just have thought I had the map on me." Crane studied her. She glared at him with such wrath that he wondered the wall at his back did not burst into flame.

"That's the whole trouble, Rolley ! The whole trouble with you ! You were ready for him—my God !" Her sarcasm scorched. "You were ready tensed up with clenched fists in case he tried to shake the truth out of you—well, you benighted nitwit—why didn't you grab him instead ? You were there with the man who knows the answers and you let him get away ! Rolley—what's up with you ? You should have grabbed him, run his arm up his back and frogmarched him back here so we could have had a little chat with him. Well ?"

Crane had nothing to say.

He could, of course, have said that it hadn't occurred to him. He could have said that, anyway, if it had, he wasn't accustomed to snatching strangers in the street. He might have pointed out that McArdle might have resented being man-handled and have called out. A policeman might have agreed with McArdle.

He could have said all this. Instead he lowered his head and looked away. Hell ! This girl made him feel like a criminal.

"I'm sorry," he said lamely.

Quite deliberately, Polly stood up. She let her cigarette ash fall into the cup of coffee creating a disgusting sight. "Are we still going to County Tyrone in the morning? Now that McArdle's here in Belfast? Is there any point?"

"I think so." Crane was tired and his head had begun to ache. "I think so. Allan went that way and, if what we believe to be true is true, then so did I. I might recall something on the way . . ."

"A faint hope," she said, still with that cold and distant voice, standing, looking down on the ruined coffee. "But at least something. Good night, Rolley. If you run into McArdle again, just let me know. We might get somewhere then." And she walked off as though she'd just missed a six inch putt on the eighteenth at Portrush.

Staring after her, Crane returned to his old philosophy.

"Damn the map," he said under his breath. "And damn all cocky super-efficient women, too."

And went to bed.

The Austin strode sweetly out along the grey roads, skirting south of Lough Neagh, dappled with cloud shadow and the glint of sunshine. The morning had begun with a constraint between the two seekers after the map, and silence filled the car deafeningly. The wastelands, the rolling hill-clumps, boggy and sparsely clothed with stunted bushes, enveloped them. Every now and then the road ran along a causeway, raised above the low-lying marsh. This was turf country. The air smelled sweet. Despite his own impotent inward-directed anger, Crane began to feel good. The horizons extended, the sky expanded—the world was a great and wonderful place. His lungs expanded, too, in keeping with the mood of this vast, desolate and open space.

They passed very few people. Isolated farmhouses, each one ringed with its protective screen of trees, looked somehow

forlorn, as though outposts of humanity, forgotten, and awaiting the final dissolution of the world. Sheep were white dots on the hillsides, clearly seen, yet so far off that they might have been white blood corpuscles in the veins of giants, sleeping through the ages.

The road meant nothing to Crane.

The brooding land, the sense of isolation and the broad sweep of the wind, all conveyed no spark of remembrance. He stared through the windscreen at the unwinding road, half-conscious of Polly, lounging behind the wheel, trying to recapture the feelings and impressions of a five year old.

"Nothing, Rolley?" It was the first time she had spoken in miles.

"Not a thing. Sorry."

"For God's sake! Don't keep on being sorry."

"Sor—all right. Maybe we took another road."

"Might have. North of the Lough from Belfast. Longer. Have to try it tomorrow."

"Lunch in Omagh?"

"Check."

A sort of preparatory friendship had been restored, then.

Later on, Polly said out of the blue: "Just who is McArdle, anyway? I'm after the map because I believe it will lead to me Allan. You want it because of an experience of your childhood. We're both following this will o' the wisp on the shakiest of foundations; our whole deductive process can collapse at any minute. But we want the map for a positive reason. Two positive reasons. Why does McArdle want it?"

"Search me," Crane said. "He was more warning me off for my own good than suggesting that he particularly wanted the map. I suggested that if he found it he'd burn it. He didn't contradict or agree."

The car rounded a curve and sped down a long shallow hill.

"If your idea—which you later rejected—is sound, and the map is put into circulation again after people have gone through into the Map Country as victims, then maybe McArdle also went through at some time and is searching for the way back."

"I wish I'd had a look at the fellow. In the rain and darkness he was just a tall spare shadow. The raindrops made a halo around his hat brim."

"Very pretty—but it doesn't help."

"No."

"Huh—civilisation ahead."

"Omagh. Yes," Crane said thoughtfully. "Maybe McArdle did go through into the Map Country and maybe he is desperately seeking for a way back. If this is true—then I'd be a little sorry for the fellow."

Polly glanced sideways at him, sharply, her face shrewd and calculating.

"Why sorry for him? What makes you say that?"

Crane could guess easily enough what she was thinking. In that acute brain of hers the idea was growing that perhaps he hadn't told her the whole story; that he had held out on some vital detail. She half expected that he, too, might be seeking to return to the Map Country for—for what?

"What do you expect us to find there?" he asked with sarcasm too evident in his tone. "Houris, fountain of wine, the secret of immortality, or the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow?"

She had the grace to flush slightly. The car increased speed and rounded a curve faster than Crane liked. He said: "We're in this together, Polly. Maybe we have different reasons; but as of now we work as a team. Check?"

She smiled, relaxing. "Check."

Omagh turned out to be a neat market town, hilly and subject to flooding. They found a parking place and had a meal. Then the spectre that had been gnawing at Crane arose. What, exactly, had he hoped to accomplish by coming here? He had recognised nothing on the road. McArdle was in Belfast. Polly was fretting. It looked, and being as kind as possible, as though he had bungled it all again.

They were standing beside the Austin and Polly was looking at him, not saying anything, just standing, looking.

Crane put a hand on the door handle. He tried to make the action sharp and decisive, as though he'd made up his mind.

The man crossing towards them must have interpreted it that way, because he began running, and shouted: "Hi! Just a minute, please."

Crane turned at once. The divertisement was welcome.

The man was young, strongly built, with a square, browned face and the strong and amusingly blunted features of a clown. Crane had time to glimpse the stubbornness in the line of mouth and jaw. Then a pale oval of silver light grew like an

unfolding lily in the air above the man. Crane stood, open-mouthed, quite still and silent, watching.

The running man was holding something in his hand, a scrap of bright blue, holding it out towards Crane.

He must only then have realised he was running forward in a bath of silver light, for he looked upwards, startled. He began to shout. This time the shouting was a scream ; high and terrified. The oval of lambent light hovered and descended. It dropped down like a ghostly parachute, enveloping the man, starting at his head, running down over his shoulders, engulfing his body, entwining itself about his legs.

There was only a tall and narrow oval of liquid light, there in the car park, with the sun shining and the clouds high in the sky and the old market town all about.

Then there was only the sun and clouds and the car park in the town.

Polly said : " Oh, my God !" but faintly. Crane turned to her at once. Put an arm about her waist. She stared at him. Her face was drained of blood.

five

Crane moved around the car, opened the door, put Polly on to the seat. He sat himself behind the wheel, started the Austin, put it in gear and went slowly out of the car park. He drove mechanically. It began to rain and he switched on the wipers. His eyes followed the metronomic tic-toc across the screen and saw the ripples and balloons of water rilling down. He did not say anything at all. He just sat there, driving the car, watching the rain and the silvery-gleaming pavement.

There was nothing to say.

Polly shivered and straightened in the seat. She began to tidy herself up, fresh make-up, lipstick, a moistened finger along her eyebrows. She did not look at Crane. He kept his face stonily ahead, watching the road, not knowing which way he was going, lost in more than the slanting rain.

The downpour had broken suddenly in heavy driving lines of rain ; as suddenly it passed with the lightening of the sky and the rolling away of grey cloud masses. A watery sun shone shyly, peeked down on the soaked land.

" Where are you going, Rolley ?"

"Huh?" He glanced at her, bemused. "Oh—going? Hell, I don't know. Anywhere. Anywhere away from that damned car park and that—that—"

"We're in this thing right up to our necks now, you know that, don't you?" Her voice was steady and grave.

"Yes. We've been mixed up in it for some time without knowing just how far committed we were. Who was that poor devil, anyway? What did he want? What—"

"You ask the questions, Rolley. I don't know the answers."

"Who does?"

Crane swung the wheel, turning the car, brought her round and back again on to the road leading into Omagh. His mouth hurt from the pressure of his teeth and he had consciously to relax his tension. The decision to go back helped.

Polly tapped him lightly on the elbow.

"You're going back? Is that wise?"

"Wise or not—it's the only decent thing we can do. Some poor devil back there may be lying on the ground, badly hurt. We can't just skip out on a responsibility; we witnessed the accident."

"You're talking as though this was just a road accident—"

"Of course! Maybe he was struck by lightning. You—"

"Have you ever seen lightning like that, Rolley? Act your age, man!"

"Have you ever seen anyone struck by lightning?"

"Well—" she fidgeted. "No. No, I haven't. But that's just a quibble."

They were bowling down the main street again, heading back through rapidly drying puddles to the car park.

"Well, then, Polly. You tell me what you think happened."

"You saw the same as I did."

"All right. This is a civilised country, Polly. You can't just go around ducking your responsibilities just because you think there was something—something odd, about it all."

"That wasn't a civilised act, Rolley." She was angry now. "And you damn well know it. That man was killed—kidnapped—*taken*. He's not lying on the ground with a broken skull from a lightning stroke. Turn the car, Rolley. Let's get out of here!"

The vehemence of her words, the tremble of her lips, scared Crane. Polly Gould was a tough girl; yet she was plainly very frightened, with a fear she tried to cover by anger. As for

himself, he felt a detached desire to investigate, to find out more. And now Polly was begging him to take her away.

He said, slowly : "I'm like the character who kept calm because he didn't know the full details, is that it, Polly?"

"Some. You can turn at this next corner—"

"I fear nothing very much about this—this flicker of light. It could easily have been lightning. You get very odd effects with the ball variety. But, Polly—" he turned to look at her and then swung back as the car's tyres hit a pothole. "I'm scared when I think you may crack up. If you really think so, we'll head straight back to Belfast and take the next plane home."

After a time, during which Crane halted the car by the kerb, she said slowly : "No. Rolley. We can't run out now. You know as well as I do that that man wasn't struck by lightning. The rain hadn't started then, anyway. Whoever—whatever—wants the map tried to stop what he—or it—thought was an attempt to pass it on to us or to contact us in some way."

"Supposition."

"But a pretty conclusive supposition, don't you think?" She blazed the query at him, her eyes wide, her bottom lip trapped between white teeth as soon as she had finished. Crane had to make a decision, then ; a decision that he knew he was making incorrectly.

As usual, he found an excuse to avoid an immediate decision. A small white-painted tea shop with a narrow red door stood on the opposite side of the road. The tiny windows were filled with cake-stands and brightly-coloured tins. It looked pert and charming, set amid the frowning rows of stark front-garden houses.

Crane locked the car and ushered Polly across, not meeting her eye, knowing that she had guessed the reason for his actions. But, at that, they both needed a cup of tea. The experience in the car park, for all their acceptance of it and their matter-of-fact attempts to rationalise it away, had been nerve-chamfering to an alarming degree. Over a cup of tea and a thickly buttered slice of barn brack, Crane faced the problem again.

He knew that he ought to say : "Okay. If that's how you feel we'll go back right away." But some unsuspected devil of obstinacy deep within him resented such a tame ending. He

very much wanted to find the Map Country. For Polly's sake he wanted to find out what had happened to her cousin. He didn't feel right about giving it all up now.

The most scary thing of all was his own lack of fear.

He sipped tea moodily, staring past cakes out the window. A small tousle-haired boy pushed that same tousled-head into the shop, stared around and began to withdraw. His eyes focussed on Crane and Polly. He stopped back-peddalling, froze, jerked forward, and then backed out as though he'd stuck his head into a furnace. The door slammed.

"What's up with him?" Polly asked in a voice that showed she hadn't the slightest interest.

Crane didn't bother to answer.

They'd finished their second cup of tea when the door opened again and an old, bent, white-haired man entered. His hair was a clear white, brushed up stiffly and standing out at the sides. His thin face, deeply furrowed, was burned brown and formed an oaken frame around startlingly blue eyes, so blue they appeared all white. He walked towards Crane with the near-stepping and deliberate walk of the aged.

Without invitation he seated himself at their table.

"And would you be the man lookin' for the map, now?"

Crane thought very deliberately: "So I've been saved a decision—again."

"I must be," he said. "Otherwise you wouldn't ask."

"Fair," the old man said. "Very fair." He squinted down his nose at them, then took out a red handkerchief and laughed. "Well, ye look a sight better than that McArdle."

Crane waited, motioning Polly to silence.

"Ye saw what happened to poor Barney?"

"Barney?"

"The wee idiot lad. Him as looks after the motor cars. Terrible, it was."

"Oh." Crane understood now. "We never did pay the car parking fee."

The oldster cackled. "I wouldn't let that weigh on me conscience, son. Barney'll be the third—the third in twenty-five years. I've known 'em all, so I have."

"For God's sake get to the point!" Polly's face was blotched, the lipstick lividly patchy on bloodless lips.

Crane touched her hand gently.

"What did you see, Mister—?"

"What you did. And you can call me Liam." He cocked an eye at them. "And none of your 'old Liam,' either. I'm not finished yet." And the cheeky old devil leered lecherously at Polly.

Crane smiled and Polly perked up. The rigidness left the hand Crane was touching.

"Why, Liam?" Crane said softly. "Why did it happen?"

"You don't waste time, son, sure you don't. It won't be necessary for me to spend hours explaining. They took Barney and the other two so they could feel safe. And safe they are, the murdering devils."

Crane glanced at Polly. He guessed her thoughts paralleled his—another O'Connell?

Crane realised that this oldster sitting across from him was not as ancient and decrepit as he looked. There was a sparkle in him like the flash from the surface of running water—and like running water he would be slippery and hard to hold. He also appeared to think that Crane knew more than he did, which might be awkward or useful. Crane chanced a gentle nudge.

"They thought they had the map, eh, Liam?"

Liam chuckled. His leathery face creased. "Sure and all that's what they thought. Three times in twenty-five years—and each time wrong." And he chuckled quietly to himself, the rheumy water standing in his eyes. Crane waited.

Presently Liam said: "And what's the map worth, then?"

"At the moment," Crane said, putting artificial hardness into his voice, "precisely nothing."

"Is it nothing you say!" Liam rocked back.

"Nothing."

"Faith—then I'm wasting my time!"

"Maybe. And maybe not. Tell me, is it true that Barney was taken because they thought he had the map?"

Liam stared back as though Crane had suddenly sprouted horns.

"Well, of course. And why else should they take the poor wee creature?"

"And they thought those other two—the others in the twenty-five years—also had the map?"

"Of course."

"Do you know where they went, Liam?"

"Yes."

Crane leaned forward. He was trembling very slightly, and he could feel his heart beating as though he were a neurotic, unable to sleep. He swallowed. "Have you been there, Liam?"

The reply should not have surprised him. What was unsettling was the matter-of-fact, off-hand way Liam said: "Sure. Coupla times. In the long ago."

"In the long ago," Polly repeated in a whisper.

"And since then they've been after you for the map, Liam. That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes. I thought you knew all this—McArdle said as much."

"You've met McArdle?"

For a moment Crane thought he had pushed his naive questions too far. Liam screwed his blue eyes up. "The way you talk, any one'd think you didn't know—McArdle roughed me up the wrong way. I'd not take it kindly if you ran out on me another way, not at all, at all . . ."

"I won't. Just that this isn't an everyday happening, is it, now?"

Liam lost his watchful look. "You won't be contradicated in that, son. Most unnatural, sure it is. But you say the map is worth nothing?"

"At the moment." Crane took a deep breath. "How much were you thinking of asking for it?"

"Ah, now." And Liam curled up and went into his shell like a tortoise tickled by a lettuce leaf.

Polly said: "If they snatch people they think have the map and you have it, why don't they snatch you, Liam?"

He showed no apprehension. "They can't seek through brick walls, and what they can't see they can't eavesdrop on. That's why I waited until you were safely under a roof first. Just don't talk about this out of doors, that's all."

Crane sat quietly. Opposite from him sat a man who had, by implication, possession of the map. And yet the fever of impatience in him was quiescent, calm; content to sit and wait. Why?

Crane didn't know. But they were dealing here with forces that were alien and unnatural and he trusted his own instincts. The time for heady action had not yet come. When it did he felt he would be better and stronger for this hiatus, this calm before the storm.

He had come a long way since that stormy night when his 1580 Italian of the Florida Gulf and the westward islands had gleamed more brightly through a seven-pointed star shattered in its glass. Perhaps there was some tenuous connection between that shattering and his present position ; he doubted it. But you never knew, you never knew.

That was the night Polly Gould had erupted into his life.

Liam was talking again, here in this tiny tea room in a neat market town in the boglands of Ireland. Outside the clouds had massed again ; as Crane watched the rain started. Inside the shop colours faded and he shivered a little.

"If a man knows how to use the map, why, then, you cannot put a price on it. It's more wonderful than any pot of gold at the foot of a rainbow."

"A treasure map," said Polly, contempt slurring her voice. She tossed her head. "Is that all you offer?"

Liam smiled wisely at Crane.

Crane said : "When did you last go into the Map Country, Liam?"

"Is that what you call it? Well, 'tis a good enough name. The Map Country. Faith, yes." He would have gone on speaking but the door of the tea room swung open again and a tall, dignified, roughly-dressed man entered. The man's eyes were those of one used to looking far distances under a misty sky. His hands were square and strong ; hands that knew the cunning of cutting turf. He came straight up to Liam.

"And what is it, Sean, that you should be worrying me when I'm talking to foreigners?" demanded Liam wrathfully.

The man was humble ; his dignity remained ; but he showed very clearly that he was lower in the pecking order here than Liam. He twisted his cloth cap nervously.

"'Tis only that I'd like another week, Liam. Everything's gone awry. The cow—"

"All right, Sean. It seems to me that I've heard all this before."

Crane watched, fascinated. Here was country politics, country finances of the old school, being enacted before his eyes. He could guess the outlines of the farm running down, and the loan, and the pressure for repayment. Another week. Well—how many weeks would that make?

Liam surprised him. The blue eyes were gentle and the bristling white hair lost its aggressiveness as he said : "Yes,

Sean. Another week. I know you mean well—but never mind that now. Away with ye—and stop your thanks, man.”

Sean’s dignity cloaked his gratitude ; but he shook hands as a drowning man shakes hands with a lifebelt.

“ You’re a good man, Liam, for all that you’ve never done a stroke of work in your life. The money’s never meant anything to you—”

“ Away, man !” roared Liam.

Sean turned and made for the door. “ Goodbye now,” he said, bobbing his head.

“ Goodbye now,” Liam answered automatically.

Ulstermen, both.

“ What did he mean,” Polly asked with feminine rudeness that merely charmed, “ by the money’s never meant anything to you ?”

Liam chuckled again, a wet, wheezing rustle of good-humour. He drank the tea that Crane, for one, had not seen provided for him.

“ I’ll tell you, young lady. It’s all part of the same story, and I’m not ashamed to admit that I’ll be pleased to be rid of it—both parts.”

The same tousle-headed boy they had seen before put his tousled head into the tea room. “ They’re about, Granfer. On the prowl. Ma’s having her twitches agin.”

“ Drat,” said Liam, rising and throwing coins onto the table in payment for the tea. “ Come on. Ma’s never wrong.” Going out the door with Crane and Polly in instant but perplexed pursuit, he added : “ Ma’s my daughter and his mother ; but she’s looked after the family so long now we all call her Ma.”

Liam stopped by the Austin, one hand on the front nearside mudguard. He peered about, like a hound-dog scenting.

“ This is our car,” Crane said. “ Any use ?”

“ Aye, that it is. Inside with ye both. Quick, now !”

Polly was behind the wheel, with Liam by her side. Crane found himself in the back with the tousle-headed youngster bouncing up and down on the upholstery.

“ Which way ?” asked Polly crisply.

“ Och, anyway. Just move away from here.”

The car started, carrying them quickly out of town. Crane looked at the hedges and stone walls fleeting past. The boy was absorbed in the experience of driving in the car, Polly was

giving her attention to the driving, adjusting her mental outlook into the bargain, too, surmised Crane. Liam lay back, breathing shallowly with a wheezing cough every now and then. Presently he said : " Take the left fork and stop at the crossroads."

Polly did so. At the crossroads a stone-built house of two storey leaned against the wind. Rain glinted from blue slates and tall narrow windows. It was growing dark and the rain and wind in the huddle of trees about the house were suddenly and disturbingly eerie. Crane waited for Liam's next oracular pronouncement.

" Let's go inside," he said casually. " It's going to be a soft night."

Crane walked up the pathway to the frowning facade of the house by Polly's side. He felt no wonder that he should be doing this. He knew only that he must not let Liam get away until the man had parted with the map. For Crane now felt absolutely sure that the strange white-haired man did possess the map. And the map was a central part of his life.

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Inside Crane might have been in some super-luxurious hotel, with ever mod-con the hand of ingenious man could contrive for the well-being of indolent millionaires. Modern decor, subdued lighting, central heating, futuristic armchairs that swivelled at a touch and adjusted to the most comfortable positions. Wall-screen television. A bar backed by such a liquor display as might have stocked a whiskey-distillers' convention. Rugs ankle-deep in floating pile.

Polly exclaimed rapturously.

Liam dropped into a chair and reached out a hand. On the table attached to the chair's arm a bottle and glasses appeared through a trap door, and he poured one each. They drank, relishing the thick fiery potency of the stuff.

" Now I see what Sean meant about the money," Polly said.

Liam lowered his glass. " Aye. And it's all gone. Every last penny."

" But this house—" Polly said. Her voice trailed. She'd only just then caught on to her own rudeness; Crane smiled to himself as he saw the colour mount in her cheeks.

The tousle-headed boy broke in again to save the situation.

"Ma says they're not around here, anyway. She's making dinner—"

Liam nodded affectionately. "You go and help. Mind, now! Attend to your business."

"Yes, Granfer." And the youngster vanished.

"I feel a dire responsibility for him," Liam sighed, and drank again. "When his father—when his father died, it fairly broke Ma's heart. That map," he finished, savagely.

Crane leaned forward. "Tell us about the Map Country."

A relationship had been set up between these three people, the sharing of common experiences, within the space of an hour or two; Crane recognised that the fact went far beyond this past hour and extended to a knowledge of the map's existence and a desire to possess it—or the knowledge it could bring. For Crane's whole purpose was undergoing a change. No longer was he seeking the map for the map's sake; no longer was he merely interested in rescuing Allan Gould. He sensed something else—something greater—in the finding of the map.

What Liam told him, at first, merely awoke old memories. Forty years ago, when Liam had been a feckless youth full of Irish bounce and living in a land torn by rebellion and war, in the time of the Troubles, he'd needed a map for some dark and devious purpose of his own and had turned up the map—The map—in some odd little corner shop where it had mouldered for decades. Using it, he had stumbled into the Map Country.

As he said, with a lop-sided smile: "It was a lucky thing I was carrying a Lee-Enfield .303 and a bag of grenades."

Thinking back, trying to pierce the blank of childhood memory, Crane wondered what good rifle bullets and grenades would have been against the clanking monsters.

"That trip I cleared enough to set me up in life, find me a wife and a fine house, and give me, as I thought, no more worries."

Polly and Crane exchanged looks. Here was the old treasure story being trotted out again. Liam didn't know it, but neither of them was interested in the treasure—if it existed. He was making a pitch without need. Crane said: "So you found some treasure. Bully for you. But what about the Map Country. You went back. What is it like?"

This time Liam was taken aback. He set his whiskey down and stared at them. "You're after buying the map, are ye not? And if that is so, why else but for the treasure?"

Crane said : " Your daughter married and your son-in-law and you went back into the Map Country for more money—or whatever the treasure may be. He was trapped there. Now you've come to the end of the money and need more . . . Am I right ?"

Liam's white head bowed. " Yes, son. That's about the way of it."

Polly clucked sympathetically.

Crane went on prodding. " You've come to the end of the cash and your grandson is too young to go in and you're—you're not too old, Liam," he said, altering his attack as understanding came. " You're scared !"

Liam did not answer. The hand holding the whiskey glass tightened and relaxed, tightened and relaxed.

At last he said : " For forty years I've lived in the shadow of them. They sense the map is somewhere hereabouts. But I've beaten them so far, and I'll beat them still." The conviction in his voice was dulled and chill. " I have to have money, enough to tide me over 'til—enough for Ma and the boy. I can't last out much longer."

" How about Sean ?"

" A flea bite." Liam looked up at them and the passion in his ravaged face was a terrible thing to see. " You don't know what it's like, living with the knowledge that a paladin's fortune lies over the hill, and you too scared to run across and fetch it."

" I can imagine," said Polly, softly.

" Colla and me went in just before the boy was born. I had a submachine gun from the war and Colla the grenades. We loaded the lorry and ran out but they caught us. Colla . . ."

Polly said firmly : " Clanking monsters with arms ?"

" Aye," Liam said dispiritedly. " I might have guessed you'd know. McArdle seemed to know a lot, too." He wheezed spitefully. " But none o' you have the map. Don't forget that."

" So you want more money, Liam. And if you haven't the courage to go into the Map Country yourself after it, you're willing to sell the map in lieu. All right. How much ?"

The tousle-headed boy—Colla Junior—put his head in the door. " Dinner's ready. Ma says she'll flay you if you let it go cold."

Liam rose slowly, rolling the whiskey glass between his hands and then swallowing its contents in one gulp. His blue eyes did not leave Crane's face. "How much?" he repeated, and then turned abruptly, and made for the door. Perforce, Crane and Polly followed.

Over dinner, a simple meal eaten in luxurious surroundings, nothing was said about the Map Country. Ma turned out to be a wispy, neat-figured woman with the penetrating blue eyes of her father. She had, to the watchful Crane, a perpetual air of listening, as though ready to start up at a sound. He ate his meal in silence. Polly did the same. Ma and her son chatted desultorily about local tittle-tattle, in which, surprisingly, Liam joined. There was no embarrassment here.

Crane felt a touch of sympathy with this family, given a head start in life by Liam and the treasure from the Map Country and then fallen on evil times, unable to continue with their standard of living and no man in the house to shoulder the responsibility and venture once again into that eerie other world beyond the mist. Clear evidence showed that certain valuable items had been sold from the house. How did that tie in with the loan of money to Sean? Why didn't Liam ask Sean to go into the Map Country?

The answer to that came as Liam laid down his knife and fork, looked across with those startling eyes, and said quietly: "One hundred thousand. Yes or no, Mister Crane?"

Crane's first thought was that Liam knew who Roland Crane was, knew he was the son of Isambard Crane, the biggest engineering concern in all the west country. Oh, sure, he could find a hundred thousand without too much difficulty, annoying, but nothing his office couldn't handle. As to the worth of the map—how, after all that had happened, could mere money be measured against the uncanny power vested in that scrap of paper?

He thought: 'To live with an emperor's ransom on the other side of the hill—and too scared to go across and fetch it!'

Slowly, speaking with care, he said: "Would you trust us to go into the Map Country, Liam, and bring you out the treasure?"

"You want the map, you pay me—now!"

"Trust is a beautiful thing," Polly said, amused.

"Aye," Liam nodded. "You bring out the treasure and you can have your hundred thousand back. But, of course,

you wouldn't want to then. A pocketful of gems is worth more than a mere hundred thousand."

"And a lorry load?"

The thrust went home. Liam said: "The lorry's still there."

Polly favoured Crane with one of her enigmatic looks. Whenever she did that Crane wanted to turn her over and tan her stern. He contained himself manfully, realising that the question of the money had been settled as soon as Liam spoke.

"All right," he said. "Where's the map?"

Polly put a hand to her lips, surprised despite herself. One thinks of a man as being rich; but when he gives evidence of it, it still surprises. Crane smiled sourly at her.

"Hey, Ma—what is it?"

They all swung first to look at Colla Junior and then at his mother. Her face was pallid, her eyes rolled back. She trembled all over and every now and then her body twitched.

Liam jumped up, his face livid.

"They're about! The damned dratted things, they're about!"

He ran out of the room like an old bearded crab, scuttling between rocks on a sandy shore. When he returned, Ma was more restful, supported by Colla and Polly. He carried a submachine gun. "Write me a cheque and a note to cover it."

Crane complied, adding a separate note to his office.

"They'll pay, without question," he said, tapping the note.

"They'd better—" he began.

Polly cut him off. "What have you to lose? You're too scared to use the map yourself. If we don't come back, you're no worse off. Give us the map, Liam, and let us be off."

He glared at her, resentfully. He shifted the tommygun.

Crane now felt he had no time to waste on sympathy for the old man. He was a poseur, a husk, a worn-out shell that once had housed an intrepid youth. Living in indolence on easy money had sapped not only his morale, it had sapped his will-power. He watched as Liam went to a window and peered out.

"They're about," Liam said uneasily, fidgeting with the gun.

"The map," Crane said harshly.

Reluctance stiffened Liam's fingers. He put a hand into his coat pocket, withdrew it, fingered the gun and then, as though plunging into the ice-hole on Christmas Day, pulled out a leather wallet, tossed it on the table.

Crane's and Polly's hands met over the wallet.

She withdrew, laughing a little shakily. "Sorry, Rolley. You paid for it. Yours of course.

Crane had no time for gallantry. He mumbled something, opening the wallet, unfolding waxed paper, prying down into a secret he had waited the best part of his life to unravel.

Difficult to comprehend—this was the moment he had been looking for all these years.

The packet was strangely thin for a guidebook. Understanding brought with it a flash of annoyance at his own sluggishness. Wax paper sibilated. The light reflected from white paper, only faintly browned with age, from a tracery of black lines, from a map, from the map, and from the roughly torn edge that ran clear from top to bottom.

The map.

Here in his hands, at last, in the strange luxurious house of a family who had lived on the proceeds of the map, in the heart of the boglands of Ireland. His hands trembled now, unashamedly. He thought of his father, and of Adele, who played with her dolls.

"Where's the guide book?" demanded Polly, suspiciously.

Liam said: "Faith, what more do ye want?"

Crane said: "Don't you realise, Polly. This isn't the map that my father and Allan had. Haven't you understood? This is the part of the map that was torn off."

In that moment Crane's brain was like nothing so much as a detached and floating iceberg, drifting frozen in arctic seas. Everything he and Polly had learned about the map and the Map Country shrieked danger! With flashing red signals and the banshee wail of sirens. He had already decided that he was going in alone; Polly must be left behind. But now, now the ice sheath began to melt and slither from his mind. He thought of the evil lozenge of light engulfing the car-park attendant; the story of Colla, left to rot with an abandoned lorry, the gnawing fear that had destroyed the happy life of this family; of Allan; and of his own time-distorted memories of fearsome monsters, clanking with power and courage-consuming fire.

Ma sobbed, a bubble of sound that followed shockingly on the silence in the room. Liam held the cheque. Polly stared at the half-map—the *other* map—and speculation made her breath faster. Young Colla went quickly to his mother.

"Yes," Liam said thickly. "They know ! They know !"

Polly took the map from Crane, refolded it, slipped it into the leather wallet. Her hands were steady, but beads of perspiration dewed in roseate drops across her brow.

"Come on, Rolley. Let's get out of here."

He went at once, thankful, half-audible goodbyes guillotined by the closing door. They were outside on the porch in the windy wet darkness, with the brooding house sombre at their backs. It seemed a long and naked way to the car.

As Polly switched on the dome light, Crane switched it off.

"No lights," he said shortly.

She started up and they drove sloshily through the puddles, away from that house with its pitiful secrets and festering fears. They headed east.

"How well can they seek us ?" Polly said once, fretfully.

Crane didn't bother to answer. He didn't know. But he could feel the fear coiling in him, urging him on, wanting Polly to send the car slamming headlong through the rain-filled darkness. She drove fast but with her natural skill, so that the big car rolled around the bends with full traction, the tyres scarcely murmuring.

seven

Eighteen people die every day on the roads of Britain, and although Ulster is part of the United Kingdom and not a part of Great Britain, Crane began to wonder with a savage self-mortification whether it might or not turn out that he and Polly would make that number up to twenty. At that, it would be one way out of the mess. He knew that as each minute passed he grew more and more frightened and reluctant to enter the Map Country. Big words tended to melt in the face of the threat he knew lay over the hills.

Out of nowhere, Polly said : "Do you think that tommygun of Liam's would be any use against that oval of light ?"

The answer was self-evident ; but Crane had to say : "No."

"Well, so far we haven't seen it. Maybe they didn't spot us."

"We hope."

"I'll have to switch on the main beam soon. Can't see a damn thing—"

"All right." Crane drew a deep breath. "All right. We don't want to up the rate to twenty—"

Polly glanced at him, puzzled ; but offered no comment, and the lights went on. It seemed to Crane only a moment thereafter that he saw the saloon parked at the roadside. Polly swung smoothly out to pass ; but the man with upraised arms, pinned in the beam like an enemy bomber, halted her. She brought the car to a stop.

A face peered in at the driving window. A man's voice said : " I'm so sorry to stop you on a night like this ; but we've run into a spot of trouble—"

Polly said something sympathetically and Crane wondered, with a part of his mind that wasn't scurrying frantically for shelter, if she welcomed the interruption. Crane crouched low in his seat, thankful the dome light was off.

Oh, sure, he recognised the man looking in. Probably he was stopping all the cars out of Omagh, just to make sure.

Crane felt completely useless, dewed with the sweat of fear, as he slouched back in the darkness of the car.

Polly put her hand on the door handle and Crane moved. If she opened the door the courtesy light would go on and McArdle would spot that he had found his quarry.

" What—?" began Polly.

A torch beam cut through the gloom, fastened like a fly in a spiders web on Crane's face. He winced back, blinded.

" It's him !" He could hear McArdle shouting. Then the sound of running footsteps nearing. Polly cursed. Crane heard a soggy thump and through a haze of dancing blood-red specks, glimpsed vaguely the torch disappear, McArdle vanish, and the sudden, bent-forward apparition of Polly's face in profile with a ferocious look of fierce hatred plastered all across it. Then the car lurched forward in a gasping tearing of gears and spinning tyres.

" Duck !" shouted Crane automatically.

Polly bent above the wheel and the windscreen followed the rear window into shattered confusion. Cold wet night air whipped in. More shots must have been fired, lost in the roaring of the engine and the whickering crack of wind blustering through the car.

" Cripes !" Polly said. Then she threw back her head and laughed. Crane, slowly straightening, stared at her in amazement.

" You all right, Polly ?"

" Of course."

"Oh—I see." Then : "What hit McArdle?"

"He wasn't the only one with a torch. He didn't know me, of course. Your warning was only just in time. I hit him with my torch—a rubber covered one—but it laid him out on the ground."

"But they'll follow."

"Yep. So—what now?"

"It's damned cold in here. I suggest you get moving as fast as you can away from here. We'll have to sit and shiver."

"Right. One thing remains the same. We still have the map. It's snugged down in my pocket."

Crane smiled at the girl. "You keep it. If McArdle does catch up—"

"Not if the old bus holds out."

The car responded magnificently, streaking along the dark roads beneath the occasional twinkle of stars as they cleared one patch of drifting cloud and its attendant rain before plunging once again into the fine downpour. The threnody of wind and rain began to work insidiously on Crane and he wondered anxiously how long Polly could keep it up. He began to fret about their route ; they seemed to be fixed on this single strand of road so that McArdle had no difficulty at all in following. He was thinking that he ought to consult the map about alternative routes when the mist clamped down.

"Blast !" Polly said in her best ladylike way. "We could have done without this. Still, it'll slow McArdle, too."

"Two racing cars, chasing through fog—what a laugh," Crane said. He felt like beating the air with his fists. If McArdle got hold of Polly there was no knowing what might happen.

"I'll have to slow down, Rolley." The car slackened speed as she spoke. "Can't see a damn thing."

They groped forward in the dank gloom, tendrils of mist writhing in through the smashed screen, chilling them with a miasmatic breath. Crane coughed a couple of times.

Polly nodded forward. "Looks like a fire. What—?"

Crane peered ahead, through the curling banks of fog. Up there the world expanded into a roseate halo, a round, chromatic whorl of incandescence that neared as the car crept forward. Glints of silver light reflected in the swirling fog. The colour brightened, deepened, took on a ghostly golden colour that reminded Crane of something he should know,

some familiar fact of everyday life that for the moment escaped his memory. It was like—it was like—

"Like coming out of fog into sunshine!" said Polly, suddenly, sitting up and gripping the wheel hard.

"Sunshine!" Crane echoed. "But it's night-time!"

Now the golden radiance was all about them, creating a nimbus of glory that irradiated the whole world. Then they had broken through, and the mist was behind them, and the green countryside lay all before them, bathed in the warm and glorious rays of the sun.

Polly stopped the car with a jerk and they both sat there, conscious of the warmth about them, yet numbed, frozen, chilled to the core of their beings.

At last, licking his lips and moving his tongue as though it belonged to someone else, Crane said: "Welcome to the Map Country."

"The Map Country!" echoed Polly. They both looked ahead, trying to take in their new surroundings, lost to the danger following them along the road.

For the road still ran between green hedges and low stone walls, still curved gently over rounded hills, with the distant purple and grey mountains dotted with scraps of naked rock. The road ran slantwise before them, empty, waiting, sinister.

"This is no road in Ireland," whispered Polly.

"We'd better turn back—" Crane said.

"McArdle?"

"At least he's a man. Here, we could find, anything."

"True on the last. But, McArdle, I wonder . . ."

They were saved further argument. Crane glanced at his watch. "If McArdle was still following he would have been up on us by now. Let's face it, Polly. We had the map—the half that gives ingress to the Map Country from the east—and McArdle doesn't. We were following that map, and we came here. He won't."

"All right." Polly was staring ahead, trying to see over the brow of the hill flanking the curving road. "But what's that up ahead?"

Crane looked. At first he thought it was a brewed-up tank; then he recognised it as the wreck of a lorry.

"That'll be Colla," he said flatly.

"Well—" Polly took a breath and started the car. "We're here. So let's do some of the things we said we'd do when we started out on this."

Crane realised, as they rolled forward slowly, that things hadn't panned out as they'd expected. His whole entry into the Map Country had been as different as he could have imagined. But then, difference, strangeness, the very breath of the unknown—all these were implicit in the present precarious situation. He waited as the car pulled up beside the shattered lorry.

Liam had spoken the truth. Three suitcases lay on the splintered wooden floor. They were scratched and blackened, as though subjected to heat, and when they were opened some of the diamonds within must have been burned. But the other jewels flashed a stunning sparkle of light on to the sunlit air.

"Cripes !" Polly said, flabbergasted.

"Remember, you're a lady, Polly. And sling the cases into the boot. Remember, they'll have cost me a cool hundred thousand."

"Mercenary, blood-sucking capitalist," Polly said. They both knew the infantile line of back-chat was covering the fear that made them want to drive screaming from this spot.

There was no sign of Colla.

"Now look, Polly. We can't go on. It'd be madness. So okay. We've found the Map Country. And it isn't as we expected. We're pretty sure we'll be killed. Let's get out."

"What about Allan ?"

"He's been gone five years, Polly. You've grown accustomed to thinking of him as dead. Why try to change that now ? And, anyway," Crane finished with a brutal directness that sought to cover the flaws in this new argument "he is probably dead now. Like Colla."

That set look of stubbornness fixed itself on Polly's face and Crane sighed and felt an impending and unpreventable disaster. But, to his surprise, she said : "And you ?"

"I've discovered there is more to worry about in life than a map or map-hunting. So I wanted to re-enter the Map Country. I don't think I can help Adele now. So I'm here. Now, all I want to do is get to hell out of it."

Polly gave a strangled laugh. "Maybe that's an impossibility. Maybe we got to hell in it, already."

"Maybe. Come on—"

"No Rolley. I'm sorry. Look, you can walk back to the mist and walk out safely by yourself if you must. But the sun is shining, there is no immediate sign of danger, and I feel rebellious. I came here to find Allan. I can't just turn around now, now I'm almost there, where ever he is, just because—"

“Because you might get killed?”

She made a face. “It’s not quite like that.” She stood beside him in the dust of the road, stirring patterns with her toe. “Anyway, I’m going on for a little.”

She was determined. Remembering his first encounter with her, Crane did not try to argue any more. A leather satchel lay in the dust of the road and he bent to pick it up. Grenades. He remembered Liam speaking of them. Oh, well, he had used them before and had a good throwing arm. He put his arm through the shoulder strap and adjusted the satchel so that it rested comfortably on his left hip.

His fingers were fumbling the stiff leather of the strap and the corroded metal of the buckle when Polly screamed.

He looked up fast.

A memory of his childhood rushed back. He felt bleakly exposed.

Across the grassland angling towards the road rushed a shining, fire-breathing, many-armed clanking monster.

His childhood remembrance had not played him false, then. Maybe the distant fire and smoke and towers he had seen as a child were not apparent now—they must be on the far side of this fantastic country, accessible if you held the other portion of the torn map.

But the clanking monsters were real enough. There were two of them. Critically, with the experience of the years, his army training in anti-tank techniques draining away much of that enervating supernatural fear, he recognised the tank tracks, the prehensile jointed arms, the ruddy flare of some inner power source that vomited through venturi-styled exhausts, and rationalised the whole into a vehicle of war, made by—and then smart rationalisation broke down. These charging tanks had never been made by the hand of man.

His own hand found the familiar pineapple feel of a grenade, an old World War Two mark, and his brain was in the middle of wondering if the thing would still work as his body went through the motions of pin extraction, of checking and of hurling with muscle-wrenching force. Then he was diving into the car and Polly’s foot was pressing the accelerator to the floor and the engine was threshing in agony as the tyres spun.

“Come on, you brute!” Polly was yelling.

Crane remembered his father and the way the big old red tourer had roared with spinning tyres. He sweated. The grenade fell beautifully.

The leading tank reared to one side with a track blasted from a sprocket wheel and flailing into smaller and smaller whippings as it coiled around the driver. Bad design, Crane thought, fleetingly, as he watched the second clanking monster gain with every yard.

For a few seconds it was touch and go.

Then the gallant Austin showed her speed and the clanking and fire-vomiting venturis lagged, faltered, and dropped away.

"That was a near thing," Polly said quite calmly. She held on to the wheel and her trim body was firm and without a tremor. She'd probably had the shakes when Crane was jumping about outside.

"Too near." He looked back through the leering eye of the smashed back window. The clanking monster was still coming on along the white ribbon of road. The sun struck errant gleams of gold from its hide.

"You realise, I suppose," he said, "that we're heading straight into the middle of the Map Country?"

"I had noticed."

"So?"

"That's where Allan is likely to be. You can knock out those clanking beasts, tanks or whatever they are, with your grenades. You've done it once. You can do it again."

And that, he reflected with due solemnity, was Polly Gould to the life.

Around them as the car fled along the naked strip of road the country unfolded, green dales merging gradually into a broad and monotonously flat plain, dotted with clumps of trees and threaded by the glint of lazy rivers. The sky remained high and blue and distant, speckled with drifting cotton-wool clouds. In other circumstances, the scene would have been peaceful, enchanting. But not in the wild and misty bog-lands of Ireland, not where it should be dark with night and hazed with mist and rain.

The sun did not look to be at the right declination for this time of year. Crane took his pocket compass—without which no map-enthusiast is correctly dressed—and flicked open the cover. After a moment he took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and then looked again at the compass.

"For your information, Polly," he said carefully, "the north magnetic pole is now situated somewhere around the south pole. I thought you might be interested."

The look on Polly's face surprised Crane. He had expected incredulity, perhaps, or a girlish indifference to odd scientific facts. Instead, she nodded with certainty, and said: "Wasn't the north magnetic pole in the Antarctic about a million years ago, last time?"

"Last time?"

"Well, even I know that it has changed poles from time to time in the course of the Earth's development. I believe the last time compasses would have pointed south was a million years ago. Wasn't that one of the results from I.G.Y.?"

"So you're suggesting that the Map Country exists a million years ago, that we've gone through into the past?"

"Could be."

She was damned matter-of-fact about it, Crane grumbled to himself. Far too contained—or was it merely that he was the old woman of the party, the chicken-hearted, the frightened?

The tank had now been dropped behind them, lost along the road beyond the gentle undulations that appeared so slight and yet were enough to hide the clanking monster's metallic body. The flat plain was in reality like a petrified ocean, ridged with long rollers athwart their line of passage.

"And still only the one damned road."

"We can't go back," Crane agreed. "That's certain. Not, that is, unless we knock out that second tank." He was stubbornly determined to think of the clanking monsters not as that but as mere tanks. They were probably robotic; he didn't care to dwell on who or what might be driving them otherwise.

The car slid gently across the crown of the road, skimmed the offside verge and then, as Polly turned the wheel, surged back onto the left hand lane again. Crane looked at her.

"I don't suppose they obey the Highway Code here," he said. "And you needn't bother about driving on the left, but what was that swerve for?"

Polly bit her lip. "I don't know, Rolley. The car just went by itself—whoops—here we go again."

The car snaked up the road. Crane gripped the door strap and held on anxiously.

Polly wrestled with the wheel, spinning this way and then, as the car skittered across the road, spinning that. The frown of concentration on her face, the grim set to her jaw, all added to Crane's fear.

He was looking hard at her ; yet a movement beyond her profile attracted his attention. Out there on the plain the trees were in wild motion. He saw a clump with their strange towering trunks and feathery clumped heads bending and bowing, lashing down until they brushed the ground and then whipping back the other way so rapidly he felt sure their trunks would snap.

"Slow down !" he shouted, stricken with unreasoning panic.

Out there the whole plain was moving ; the long rollers of grass were rolling in reality, were surging forward and up and down like the monstrous waves of a blasphemous sea. His mouth open in horror and his eyes staring, Crane saw that maelstrom of solid earth, and he cowered down on the seat of the car.

"Good God !" Polly screamed. She stamped on the brake.

The Austin slid to a halt. Now they could clearly see the sinuous writhings of the road ; like a rippling length of white rope it gyrated away before them.

"What's happening ?"

"I don't know. But anything can happen here—and evidently it does !"

"Look, Rolley," Polly said at last. "The road remains firm. It goes up and down and around ; but it is nowhere broken. It stays there all the time." She pointed towards the clump of trees that had first taken Crane's eye. "Those trees—they've gone. They've been sucked down. And, look, over there, those rocky crags have just been upthrust."

"Whatever's happening out there, then," Crane said slowly, losing some of that elemental fear, "is purely on the natural level. The road, the man-made artifact, is unaffected."

Polly laughed, a trifle too shrilly. "If you can call a sea of solid earth natural, then, yes, you're right."

e i g h t

At first they didn't realise what happened next. Then, when the soft white flakes began to drift into the car and disappear into tiny patches of moisture, gleaming in the sun, they had to accept it.

"It's snowing !" Crane said, and was surprised that he could still feel surprise, here in this maniacal other world.

Polly had regained her usual poise. She put a hand to her hair and shivered as the snow built up with unbelievable speed so that a carpet of white covered everything.

"If this was what it was like a million years ago then I'm glad I wasn't born then."

"No. We weren't born then. But we are there—now."

"If we are there. We don't know where we are."

"Except that we are in the Map Country."

"Yes. The Map Country." Polly's voice was steady.

Crane decided he'd better show a little spirit.

"And it cost me a cool hundred thousand."

Polly didn't laugh. But she said : "Plus the hotel and crossing expenses and the hire of the car."

"The car !" said Crane. He ducked his head fast and checked "We've less than half a tank left."

"You've only just thought of that ?"

"Yes." He kicked himself mentally very thoroughly. The lack of petrol would have been a trump card to have played in getting them to turn back to their own normal world.

"Hadn't we better think about—?" he began uneasily.

"Our pal's catching up," Polly said crisply, looking in the rear view mirror.

Crane sighed. "Okay, okay. Just a minute."

He opened the door and stepped out onto crunchy snow. The road had quietened down now although the ground beyond still rose and fell queasily. He waited until the tank was at the optimum range and then tossed the grenade very accurately. He ducked.

When he looked up after the blast the tank had fallen on its side off the road, and its starboard arms were going up and down with the movement of the ground. A wisp of smoke rose from it. After the noise the silence was menacing, broken only by an ominous hissing from the wrecked tank.

Again Crane felt he should exert himself. Polly was so much of a personality, so tough, mentally even more than physically, so independent and youthfully modern a character.

He said: "I think I'll take a closer look at that clanking monster." He used the old name deliberately. "Hold on."

He wasn't surprised when she joined him. Together they walked across the snow-covered road, leaving large and sploidy footprints. It was not at all cold and the snow gradually ceasing had no power to lay. Their feet rang hard on the old road surface by the time they reached the wreck.

The hissing noise had stopped.

"Something hot against the snow," surmised Polly.

Crane walked up the road to the tank warily, wishing he had a gun and yet recognising the fallibility of that.

"Yes," he said, not taking his eyes off the machine.

The body, he could see now the thing was in repose, was big and barrel-shaped, with plenty of room inside for power sources, controls, radio equipment—and people. The tank track sprocket system was relatively simple and uncomplicated and, because of that and because of a lack of armour protection, had been easily blasted by the grenade. But the flail-like arms posed a different problem.

"Have you seen anything like that before?" he asked.

Polly shook her head. "No. Can't say I have."

Crane mused, worrying at odd memories, trying to bring into focus an elusive picture.

Beneath his feet the ground still trembled slightly, a diminishing shudder that rippled in dying waves out across the land from which the snow was visibly melting. The sun began to pull steam from the sodden fields. Somewhere—and most strangely—a bird was singing. Now there seemed to be more trees, thick clumps and groves of them, stretching out in all direction. A river, too, had appeared slowly winding close to the road. Glints sparkled from its surface.

All the time he stood there Crane was aware of the background thought in his mind: *What happens next in this nightmare world?*

Polly said: "Only thing I can think of are cranes." And she laughed.

Crane smiled weakly. "Yes. The arms are like derricks. But it's not that . . ."

He pushed the elusive memory away and bent closer to the smashed tank. There was no hole or hatchway by which he might have entered. On the broad back, canted now, were three radar bowls. They had stopped revolving. Whip aerials rose springily from the rear, where the dramatic venturi showed blackened and pitted orifices. The metal looked blued and tough and there was not a square inch of paint on the whole thing.

"We could build something like this if we had to with our present techniques," Crane said slowly. "But it would all be fakery. There'd be no need for a half of all this dramatic appearance." He touched the venturis disdainfully. They were still warm.

"How about the arms?"

"They'd be more difficult—" And then he had it. "Of course. They remind me of the long-range handling gear used by nuclear physics men when they deal with hot stuff. You put your hands in controls and operate the remote extension hands and peer through the glass—that's it."

"So someone could sit miles off and control these things by radio, see by tv or radar, and manipulate those arms?"

"Something like that."

Polly shivered and turned away. "Let's hope he—or it—isn't watching us now."

Walking back with her was an ordeal. He wanted to keep rotating his head on a stiff neck and look back. He fought down the impulse. "If they are, then there's not much we can do." He put a hand on the car door. "You realise that the way back is now open?"

"Yes. But I believe more firmly than ever before that Allan is up there someway." She pointed ahead. "That way."

Without another word Crane entered the car.

After a time in which the Austin purred comfortably along the white road between the river and groves of the tall, top-heavy trees, Crane said musingly: "Allan went into the Map Country from the east—as I did in the beginning—and we are entering from the west. The actual point of entry, we know, is where the map is torn."

Polly sat up with a jerk, pulling on the wheel. Her rounded chin went up, too, defiantly.

"You mean there's no way of telling how much country lies between the two points here?"

Crane shook his head. "No, Polly. I mean that the lines of directions we took crossed. If Allan was going one way and we the other and we both entered the Map Country at the same point—why, then—"

"We're going away from each other!"

Crane had the decency not to say anything to that.

The car stopped precipitately. Polly switched off at once, propped her elbows on the wheel and put her head on them. "All right, Rolley. What do we do now?"

The result of his remarks surprised Crane. Then he chuckled to himself. Polly was working up to something; she was far too fire-proof to be shaken much by this revelation.

"If that theory is true, then we can never enter the same part of the Map Country as Allan. When we go back to enter his half, we'll pop out through our torn map into the real world."

"So?"

"Alternatively—" Crane snapped his fingers. "Let's have a look at the map, Polly. It might give us another idea."

She handed the wallet over without bothering to open it.

The wax paper crackled as before—and then the map was in Crane's hands. He opened it cautiously. His attention centred at once on the torn edge.

"An old all-rag paper," he said, feeling and looking. "Before they cut down Canada for the daily scandals. And the edge is rough—far rougher than you'd expect. Look—"

He fibrillated the fibres gently.

"That's linen—real good solid cellulous base, with a bit of cotton for bulk. And the edges have been savaged."

Polly looked at his sideways. "Well, Rolley?"

He smiled. "I believe that the other section of the map is as jaggedly torn as this. That means there is a fair size section of map actually missing—if you like, a long narrow stripe of nothing down the middle." He tapped the paper. "And that, my dear Polly, is the Map Country."

"So Allan is on the other side of this narrow strip." She turned the ignition key and started the car. "Good. So we can get on. All that flap was for nothing."

Crane looked at her disgustedly. "Women!" he said.

Despite their flippancy, despite the off-hand manner they talked about the macabre events about them, both of them, Crane was acutely aware, were tensing up and, as it were, wincing back from the terrors ahead. For now they could not

long be delayed. Liam refused to re-enter the Map Country. Colla had never returned from it. Men had been snatched by lambent ovals of light. And Allan Gould and his girl had vanished completely.

Crane sat nervously fingering the grenade bag, wishing he had enough courage to tell Polly to turn the car around and enough force of character to make her do it. But, being in essence what he was where women were involved, he did nothing and let her have her own way.

And the anticipation of fear screwed down with every revolution of the wheels.

"There's one thing in your favour," Crane said. "If this road is the only stable thing here then Allan is likely to be on it. Or near enough to spot us."

"So I trust."

"What's he been living on?"

"Berries, fruits, game—we passed a whole herd of ruminants back there. You were looking the other way."

"Oh? If this is a million years in the past the Ice Ages won't have started yet so I'd expect this sort of climate and herds of animals. But—"

Very seriously, Polly said: "I don't think we're in the Past, either. We're in some—some *other* world."

"And if we were sensible people we'd get out of it—quick."

"Must you keep on?"

"Sorry."

"Look—there's something beyond those trees."

Crane took one look, leaned across the girl and wrenched the steering wheel around. The car left the white road in a tortured shriek of tyres, jounced across yielding grass and came to an outraged stop beneath the trees. Shadows fell from the branches. Crane opened his door and clutching his bag of grenades to his side, leaped out and darted back the way the car had come, crouching, taking cover behind the boles of trees. He peered out and along the road.

"What is it, Rolley?" Her clear voice reached him, no hint of panic there.

"Quiet!" he said, softly, waving her down. She walked up behind him with the selfconscious stealth of a lion on his first kill.

Together, they stared out from the trees, taking good care to remain well-hidden in the shelter of the trunks.

"The Moving Heath," Crane whispered. "I never thought to see that come true."

Across the road, moving from one side to the other in a steady and unhurried stream, were lines of ambulant bushes. Each bush was perhaps five or six feet in height and as broad across, with many tiny leaves glittering silver and olive green as they flashed and fluttered in the light. The trunks were dark grey, seamed with a cracked bark. Crane concentrated on one bush and looked hard and carefully.

The thing extended a long pinkish root before it, secured a firm anchorage—the root could not have penetrated much more than six inches or so into the ground, like a worm—and then up-anchored other roots to the rear and moved forward with the slightest of trembles until the first root was again freed to probe forward. The bushes moved at about two miles an hour Crane guessed, although judgment of speeds that low was always difficult.

"I don't believe it," Polly said indignantly.

"Agreed. It has been proved impossible by biologists. But I expect these bushes only move now and again; they don't keep on the prowl all the time."

"You think they move to escape the living earth?"

"Possibly." Crane stiffened. "Look there—in the sky, swooping on them."

"Good Lord!"

All the bushes turned from olive green and silver to a solid silver mass. Leaves curled and rolled into silver thorns. A perceptible increase in speed surged through the mass of bushes. There must have been two hundred or more. The leaders were already across the road, hurdling the strip of unproductive barrenness, their roots probing the soil beyond and taking them into the shelter of the trees.

And on them, from above, dived the birds.

Bird?

"Well, then," said Crane. "Animals with wings and tails and feathers and wide reptilian jaws and yet nothing like the museum reconstructions of *Archaeopteryx* or *Archaeornis*. And they'd be a hundred and seventy or so million years ago. And there'd be no grass or trees like this—no angiosperms. I doubt we need to worry about dinosaurs yet."

"Thanks," Polly said sarcastically. Still her voice was firm and controlled. Crane felt like standing up and running, screaming blue bloody murder.

The birds dived in steep stuka-attacks on the bushes, tearing at the branches with teeth and claws. The bushes lashed back, striking down the bright coloured bodies, sending feathers puffing in bloody clots.

"They're after those golden fruit each bush has hanging on its inner branches," Polly said. She was watching all this as though from a guinea seat in the stalls. "Evidently the bushes of this world don't require birds to do their propagating for them."

"No," said Crane, chuckling weakly at the macabre idiocy of the thought. "They can get about quite well themselves, thank you."

"And the birds don't take kindly to that. Whee ! Look at that one ripping that bush up—oh—look, that other bush lashed out and ripped him—oh, Rolley—it's horrible !"

He put an arm around her, not surprised that she had suddenly awoken to the vicious horror of the scene. Polly took a long time to see evil in anyone. Her continued friendship with him proved that ; she was far too independent a girl to care for his money. They watched the struggle in silence for a space.

In struggling forwards the bushes gradually congregated under the trees on the far side of the road where their massed defence at last put the birds to flight.

For an excruciating instant Crane thought the birds would spot the two crouching humans and attack ; but they flew off sluggishly and he relaxed. His arm was still about Polly. He left it there.

"This is a chaotic place," he breathed, shakily.

"Agreed." She was still trembling ; but she rose briskly enough and walked off to the car. "A real mad house. But we have a job to do here."

He decided that he had to speak plainly to her. By this time it was apparent that she was acting under the stimulus of excitement and the drug made her reckless and uncaring so that she wasn't fully responsible for her actions. The sight of the battle between the animate bushes and the reptilian birds had shocked her back partially to a realisation of where they were ; but the very extraordinary nature of that experience itself deadened her understanding. Crane had seen that sort of feverish activity in battle.

He said : "I'll drive, Polly."

The wheel was hard and slick beneath his fingers before she could protest, the offside door slamming solidly. She walked around the back of the car and got in the near side.

"All right, Rolley. If you like."

"I'm going on down this road another mile. After that, if we see nothing, I'm turning back. If we do see anything, well, let's hope we'll still be able to turn."

She opened her mouth to argue ; but Crane switched on and revved the engine unnecessarily loudly.

They bumped out onto the road and swung around to face their direction of travel. The animate bushes swayed and swivelled ; but stayed rooted under the trees.

"A madhouse," repeated Crane.

"Rolley," she said thoughtfully after a time. "Have you noticed that the sun isn't moving in the sky ?"

Crane hadn't. Now he said : "I believe you're right."

"Does that mean it's always the same time here, then ?"

He glanced at his watch. "We've been here just over three hours by my watch. The sun should have moved in that time."

"It hasn't. I'm sure of it."

"I wonder what McArdle's doing ?"

"He knows about the Map Country. He must realise we disappeared off his road. So he'll be waiting for us somewhere when we emerge." Crane pushed the grenade satchel more comfortably around on his left side. He didn't say any more.

"I'm sure all these things are connected in some way," Polly went on, addicted, it seemed, to chattering when she was a passenger. "This other world place doesn't operate on the same sets of natural laws as does our world."

"Could be." Crane peered ahead, half listening, watching for the first glimpse of—of what ? Of what he didn't know ; but whatever might loom up next he intended to be ready for it. And the mile was nearly spent.

n i n e

The road crawled up a slight hill and before the car had reached the top Crane could see the fiery glow beyond. He stopped the car below the crest, got out and walked on up until he could lie down and look over and across the undulating plain and the rivers and trees to the scene on the horizon. Polly dropped at his side.

"That's it," Crane said with satisfaction. "That's the sight—factory, city, hell, what-have-you—that I saw as a child."

"It's a long way off."

"Just as well. Look." He pointed to the road, a thin strip of whiteness running directly to the distant buildings. "Tanks. Half a dozen of them. All trundling this way."

"You think—?"

"They're coming out to find out what happened to their buddies, why those two didn't respond to signals." He looked more closely at the city. "I think we'd better get out of it whilst we have the time." He felt unnaturally calm.

That roaring, fiery, gleaming adjectival monstrosity over there had last been seen by him when, as a child, he had been enjoying a country holiday with his father and mother and sister Adele. Now his father and mother were dead and Adele was—well, Adele was now just as she had been then in everything except physical age. Distance hazed detail. He caught tantalising glimpses of that monstrous branched tree and that silver bowl from which flames licked ruddily. His memory had not played him false then. The impudent thought occurred to him that he should have a camera. But, then, people would scoff at camera trickery. He slid back and stood up.

"Come on, Polly. We can't do any more. You've just got to face it about Allan."

She didn't answer. But her face distressed Crane.

Back in the car and tooling along the way they had come, a sense of defeat rode Crane heavily. Hell! What more could rational people do? If they'd gone on towards the city or whatever it was, the tanks would certainly have dealt with them as they must have done with Allan Gould and Colla. The best bet was to return to the normal world and prepare and plan for another expedition here into the Map Country. They'd been pitchforked into it without warning, quite unexpectedly, without arms, food or a reliable method of long-term transportation. He glanced at the petrol gauge. Just enough to take them back to the torn edge of the map.

He continued to drive. The feel of the controls beneath hands and feet gave him a sense of purpose and a material task on which to fix his impatience. The miles fled back as the road unrolled. Twice the surrounding country went through upheavals with the solid land rolling like the mid-Atlantic; Crane kept the car going stolidly, compensating for each treacherous lurch of the queasy road surface. Polly sat huddled up at his side, not speaking.

They were, Crane realised with savage self-mockery, a forlorn little band.

Going back they saw not only perambulating bushes but a whole forest on the march. Great birds swooped from the sky and once a raking talon scored all along the paintwork of the car's bonnet. Crane gunned the car, bashed it solidly into the bird's body, felt a sadistic satisfaction as the feathered reptilian flyer spun away, screeching.

Monsters with greeny-grey hides, slimy and rank, blundered from the river and stood, glaring stupidly at the road and the fleeting car ; but they did not venture further.

"They've been tamed by the tanks," Crane said. "This road is a single lonely streak of sanity running through the chaos of this world."

Up hill and down long slopes the car sped. The rear view mirror showed an odd glimpse of a clanking machine far off. The Austin had the legs of them. A black object appeared on the road ahead and Crane tensed up. Then he relaxed, consciously slackened the grip of his fingers on the wheel.

"Colla's truck. Nearly there."

There was no warning. The petrol needle still read that half a gallon or so should be in the tank. But without a sigh or a cough, the engine stopped and the car ran gently forward, gradually slowing to a stop.

Even as Crane cursed and jumped out the leading tank appeared over a distant rise behind them.

There was one last, desperate, seemingly hopeless chance.

"We can't run for it !" Polly said. For the first time she sounded really scared. Their situation was enough to make the toughest of tough characters drool in fear.

"Come on," Crane said, and started running for the wrecked lorry.

The petrol can he remembered seeing lashed to the back beckoned. He panted up to the lorry, took a couple of quick breaths, then unlashed the can. He shook it.

"Empty !"

"Oh, Rolley—what can we do ? What can we do !"

The clanking monsters bore on remorselessly.

There was no time for finesse. Crane took out his big pocket knife, opened the spike and, crawling under the lorry, found the petrol tank. He jabbed savagely with the spike.

After a half dozen frenzied blows it went through.

Petrol spurted out, raw and red.

"Black market stuff," he said. "I might have known."

He shoved the can under the flow. When it was full he stumbled out, scrabbling on the road, not worrying about the petrol splashing away to waste. He sprinted back to the car.

"Stay there!" Polly halted, hesitated, and then went back to the wreck. His trembling fingers made a hash of opening the petrol tank then the divine splash of petrol gurgling into an empty tank reached him. He stuck it until half the two gallon can had been emptied, then raced to the driving seat, propping the can against the passenger seat, and switched off. Bonnet up priming pump, thump up and down, the clank of treads in his ears like the trump of doom, race back to the driving seat, switch on, starter . . .

The starter whirred. Whirred again. Then the engine caught and he slammed in the gear and moved forward. The mirror told him that the leading monster was a scant twenty yards away. The tyres spun.

He slithered to a stop beside Polly.

"Jump!" he shouted. They were racing forward again. "This petrol by rights should have evaporated in the years the lorry's been there. You must be right. Time doesn't function here."

"Hurry, Rolley. Hurry!"

He hurled the big car along the road and the clangour of the tracks behind was beginning to fade. Yes, he began to think they'd make it. He even began to look ahead to the stories they might or might not tell about this mad escapade. And, there were always the gems . . .

A light outrivalling the sun grew in the air. Shadows wavered and then fled all together away from a blinding spot somewhere above the car. Polly shouted. Crane twisted to see but the car roof obscured his vision—a part of his mind recognised that he had been lucky; a light of that intensity could have blinded him.

"Don't look up!" he shouted.

The car lurched, careering from side to side. He was flung against the door, his wrists cracking on the wheel. More pieces of glass were dislodged and fell with a tinkle that was last in the bedlam. A tyre blew. The car slewed right around, skidding backwards and then toppling to land in the ditch. The bonnet pointed at the sky. One wheel still revolved.

And Crane and Polly, unhurt, cowered in their seats as the fiery glow smote upon them.

For a heartbeat that might have lasted an eternity, nothing happened. Crane risked cracking one eyelid. The light was still strong; still powerful so that his eyes watered; but he could see enough to chance a quick slither to the road. He hunkered in the shadow of the wrecked car. In quick glimpses he tried to make out what was happening. The first and most important was the sight of the leading tank bearing down on him, arms outstretched. Big grapnel-like jaws swung purposefully. He reached for a grenade, feeling the heat of the metal, and tossed it as well as he could.

The blast fell short of the charging tank. Panic clawed at Crane. He had to get out of here, fast. "Polly! You can risk half-opening your eyes now. Come on. We've got to run for it."

Polly slithered out, her short leather coat flaring.

"Those damned things—"

"Run, Polly. For the torn edge and the mist. Run!"

The glow in the air was all about them. They ran struggling over the road and to Crane the feeling of being an insect scuttling along the beam of a torch exploded the boil of anger in him. He stopped to turn and hurl another grenade. The violence of the fire in the sky made as nothing the grenade blast. But the pursuing tank slewed and skidded, a writhing arm struck the car's roof and sheared it away in gleaming metal. They ran on, panting.

"Oh, God!" Polly screamed. "Look!"

In the air, hovering a few feet above the ground directly before them, a pale lozenge of light winked into being. It shone with a pallid reflection of the monster glow in the sky.

He tried to halt his stumbling feet and to draw back, to recoil from the eerie phantasm. Polly collided with him and they both staggered forward. He fumbled out a grenade and prepared to hurl it straight at the oval light.

His hand was raised, the pin out, when the voice struck through to him. The lozenge of fire vibrated in time to the words.

"Do not struggle longer, little man. We are taking you away—"

Crane hurled the grenade with all the lost desperation in him.

The lozenge of fire swelled, grew, bloated with a chiaroscuro of living colour rippling over it like coloured waters of a fountain. Then it swooped and engulfed them both.

Blackness shot through with the fire of agony and defeat crushed down on Crane so that he cried out in futile wrath. The last thing he knew was of Polly in his arms, clinging to him as they both fell unimaginable distance through echoing emptiness.

The voice said : " Misunderstanding is always the lot of those who seek to improve the worlds."

Crane was alive. He was unconscious ; yet he could hear and see with a more vivid intentness and understanding than ever before in his life. He could see beyond the lozenge of light in which he was imprisoned towards the horizon. Glistening like a Christmas tree a missile gantry lifted—high, higher than any he had seen before on any film. This was real. This towered. It was the tree he had seen as a child, that he had but lately fled from. Beside it the workshops and hangars crouched low, busy with fire and thunder. The towers and turrets of that childhood vision resolved now into a complex of engineering workshops and refineries, from which the glow and flood of colour illuminated everything about.

" Who are you ?" demanded Crane of the lozenge.

Only Polly answered, unseen, somewhere at hand but amorphous, lost in the misty fire that was the oval of light.

" Rolley ! Rolley, I'm scared."

" Don't be frightened—" A new voice. A soft, gentle voice resigned to an eternity of waiting.

" Who's that ?" Crane said again ; but this time he spoke to a man and not a lozenge of fire. " Polly—are you all right ?"

" Polly ?" The distant voice was hollow, sepulchral. " Polly Gould—I knew a girl called Polly Gould but she said no and I couldn't bear it then. But not now. Not now—"

" Allan !" Polly said, shocked.

Some time after that in the misty fire in which Crane could not see his body but only the all enveloping ghostly radiance, the commanding voice that had first spoken returned. They listened. Allan, his girl-friend, Colla, two or three others, Polly, Crane—they all listened.

" At last we have completed our mission upon your world and are free to depart." There was no triumph in the words.

"Chaos has been defeated. To the intelligent mind, chaos is abhorrent."

"Who are you?" shouted Crane into the misty vastness.

"That is of no consequence, except to say we endure from time past to time yet unborn. We are here to order your world, to bring it forth from the ages of chaos and upheaval. We plan, we order, we arrange. And now we are done."

"How are you done?"

"We have finished our task for many ages; but the dark passions of the mind cannot be measured by even such as we." Was there sadness in the words? "We waited only for the last map of those wantonly torn and displayed to your world." Crane had no pocket, he had no suit, he had no body. Polly was in the same plight. But he knew well enough that they no longer had the map—The map! So they had lost, after all.

"So you visit our planet and map it for yourselves," Crane began. "What right does that give you—"

"Not so." The distant whisper was tired. "We do not map your world for idle curiosity. Until we draw a true representation of any world of this galaxy that world cannot exist in our space-time continuum understanding. The planet is formless, featureless, until a true map is drawn. We are the map-makers; but we are more, for we are reality-makers. And one of our number deserted his trust and sought to flee into your world with maps as treasure-hoard against his mortal immorality."

Crane had that part taped. "McArdle?"

"That is the name he uses now. He sought to live forever in this world. When he tore the maps he opened a path into original chaos. We could not close that path until the master maps were whole again and in our possession."

"The fallen angel . . ." whispered Polly.

"Will you release us now?" shouted Colla. "My wife is due—I should be there—"

"He doesn't know," Polly said.

"He will joy in the knowledge when we are free," Crane said. Sharp anxiety pricked his complacency. "Will we be free?"

The distant voice replied. "We have no reason now for detaining anyone further. Until we had all the maps we must send forth our messengers clothed in light; but they were weak and could not discern clearly. It has been a long and painful waiting for us."

Crane could feel pity for these entities. They had a job and did it. He said : " And is this Map Country a sample of chaos ? "

" A small sample. It has been mapped but incorrectly and the true maps were taken from us. Walking plants, heaving plains—the whole is nearly primeval chaos. The only map that mattered to us for the last five hundred solar years has been the master map, reprinted again and again by McArdle, and then stolen from him in the middle of your last century. We have much work to do—there are so many worlds spinning in the black death of unformed original chaos—"

So until a planet was all mapped out, all neatly latitude and longitude on paper, it was a chaos of primitive disorder. That concept fitted in with his own feelings about maps and the way of the world. Hell, plenty of islands and continents had been mapped by the ancients, never to be found again. Had they been waiting for a true representation to be made by these mapmakers before those lands could even exist ?

" Yes," said the voice answering Crane's thoughts. " Until we commit a land to paper that land is a formless phantasm, without shape or reality."

" So now you have the damned map," said Polly. " You can stick the two halves together again and buzz off. So how about letting us go ? "

Crane felt a vast desire to know more about these people—beings, aliens ? —who travelled the galaxy mapping the worlds and bringing order from chaos. Would they have visited Mars ? Had they carefully traced the lines of the canals ; did that make them real ?

He said carefully : " We people of Earth are getting ready to send our rockets to the Moon, and Mars and Venus. Have you visited those worlds yet and mapped them ? "

" They were mapped when the most complicated form of life upon this world was an organism that had just discovered that a collection of specialised cells all tacked together has advantages over a single cell." Quite clearly to Crane the amusement bubbled in the distant voice. The alien map-makers were rounded personalities, then ; not mere puppets pulled by the strings of a grandiose and empty destiny.

" And Earth ? "

" Geological changes must take place in a viable planet ; by that we mean a planet that is fit to support life. Your early map-makers gave us much pleasure. They helped to create a

half-real world until we made a true representation of that land—”

“So some of those old travellers’ tales were true—”

“True only that we had not yet organised the fresh lands the travellers visited.” The sombreness in the voice returned. “You have a fine world here. So fine that McArdle sought immortality with in its comforts. For we are tired, tired, of travelling the galaxy mapping the worlds.”

“Why do it then?”

“It is our manifest destiny—if we do not sacrifice our lives to this task, then who is to bring order from chaos?”

There was no answer to that. The melancholy in that distant voice wrenched at overstrained emotions. And into that whirlpool of sadness, Allan Gould’s voice erupted.

“Take me with you ! Take me away from here, with you, to the farthest ends of the galaxy !”

“No, Allan !” That was his girl-friend.

“What you ask is barely feasible, little human. But you might take the place of McArdle. We shall see, we shall see.”

Polly’s voice cut through the mist. “Don’t go, Allan ! And you, you of the golden mist and the mappery—how about letting us go ?”

Crane recognised the near-hysteria in her, the fear below the smooth surface that caused her to speak so flippantly.

A clamour of voices followed Polly’s in the glowing mist. there were people held here because the map-makers thought they had the map and could not be released. No one would believe his story. No one could. It was beyond the bounds of that normal world in which everyone dwelt with such a sane and narrow vision.

Dwelt only by courtesy of the map-makers ?

“And the treasure ?” he asked because he had to.

“A bait. A device to bring anyone with the map into the Map Country—or, rightly, as we call it, the Unmapped Country.” The voice held sorrow and compassion. “We have the map and so you may return to your own world. Take care of it. For we will not return. Once we have formulated a planet with an intelligent life and civilisation, then we visit it no more. What you do with your world depends upon yourselves.”

“And if those damned fools blow it all up ?”

"No map will recreate the whole from the pieces. Guard what we have made for you well. We leave you. You will not be harmed."

Gently, driftingly, lulled by subtle motions, Crane drifted in the prevailing luminescence. He felt the hard ground beneath him. And he opened his eyes upon the car stuck in the ditch, of Polly lying half in and half out of the door. He stood up. A hundred yards away a wrecked lorry disgorged a man who began running wildly towards them.

And Barney, the car park attendant advanced on them with a blue ticket in his hands.

"Allan's gone!" The girl's stricken face and tear-stained cheeks told Crane and Polly that the map-makers had taken Allan Gould at his word.

"Where will he go, what wonders will he see?" whispered Polly. "I—it is my fault—"

"He asked to go." Crane was gently brusque. "He knew what he was doing. In fifty years time we might begin to envy him."

He took Polly into his arms. "The map-makers have gone. They have the maps McArdle stole, all of them. We took in the last piece."

"Yes." Polly relaxed against him. "But poor old McArdle. He's stuck here now, to live and die as an ordinary Earthman. Poor devil."

"Oh, I don't know," said Crane. "Being an Earthman—or Earthwoman—is all right. Especially if you have someone to share the world with."

As he spoke Crane was hoping that the world wouldn't be blown up, after all the work of the map-makers, before he and Polly and their children had had a chance to enjoy it.

—Kenneth Bulmer

Jim Ballard's first delightful fantasy, "Prima Belladonna" in No. 20 had a somewhat exotic setting known as Vermilion Sands, a coastal paradise where the 'long-hairs' idled their time away. He returns to this setting where modern poets produce their wares with the aid of an IBM computer.

STUDIO 5, THE STARS

BY J. G. BALLARD

o n e

Every evening during the summer at Vermilion Sands the insane poems of my beautiful neighbour drifted across the desert to me from Studio 5, The Stars, the broken skeins of coloured tape unravelling in the sand like the threads of a dismembered web. All night they would flutter around the buttresses below the terrace, entwining themselves through the balcony railings, and by morning, before I swept them away, they would hang across the south face of the villa like a vivid cerise bougainvillea.

Once, after I had been to Red Beach for three days, I returned to find the entire terrace filled by an enormous cloud of coloured tissues, which burst through the french windows as I opened them and pushed into the lounge, spreading across the furniture and bookcases like the delicate tendrils of some vast gentle plant. For days afterwards I found fragments of the poems everywhere.

I complained several times, walking the three hundred yards across the dunes to deliver a letter of protest, but no one ever answered the bell. I had only once seen my neighbour, on the day she arrived, driving down the Stars in a huge El Dorado convertible, her long Nile-blue hair swept behind her like the heraldic head-dress of a dynastic goddess. She had vanished in a glimmer of speed, leaving me with a fleeting image of sudden eyes in an oval ice-white face, a profile like the death mask of an Assyrian princess.

Why she refused to answer her bell I could never understand, but I always noticed that each time I walked across to Studio 5 the sky was full of sand rays, wheeling and screeching like anguished bats. On the last occasion, as I stood by her black glass front door, deliberately pressing the bell into its socket, a giant sand ray had suddenly fallen out of the sky at my feet.

But this, as I realised later, was the crazy season at Vermilion Sands, when Tony Sapphire heard a sand ray singing, and I saw the god Pan drive by in a Cadillac.

Who was Aurora Day, I often ask myself now. Sweeping across the placid out-of-season sky like a summer comet, she seems to have appeared in a different role to each of us at the colony along the Stars. To me, at first, she was just a beautiful neurotic disguised as a *femme fatale*, but Raymond Mayo saw her as one of Salvador Dali's exploding madonnas, an enigma serenely riding out the apocalypse. To Tony Sapphire and the rest of her followers along the beach she was a reincarnation of Astarte herself, a diamond-eyed time-child thirty centuries old. It would be too facile now to say she was all of these, and perhaps it would be best to take her at her own evaluation.

I can remember clearly how I found the first of her poems. After dinner one evening I was resting on the terrace—something I did most of the time at Vermilion Sands—when I

noticed one of the streamers lying on the sand below the railing. A few yards away were several others, and for half an hour I watched them being blown lightly across the dunes. A car's headlamps shone in the drive at Studio 5, and I assumed that a new tenant had moved into the villa, which had stood empty for several months.

Finally, out of curiosity, I straddled the rail, jumped down on to the sand and picked up one of the ribbons of pale pink tissue. It was a fragment about three feet long, the texture of rose petal, so light that it began to flake and dissolve in my fingers.

Holding it up I read:

... COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY, THOU
ART MORE LOVELY ...

I let it flutter away into the darkness below the balcony, then bent down and carefully picked up another, disentangling it from one of the buttresses.

Printed along it in the same ornate neo-classical type was:

... SET KEEL TO BREAKERS, SET FORTH ON
THAT GODLY SEA ...

I looked over my shoulder. The light over the desert had gone now, and three hundred yards away my neighbour's villa was lit up like a spectral crown. Below it the exposed quartz veins in the sand reefs along the Stars rippled like necklaces in the sweeping headlights of the cars driving into Red Beach.

I glanced at the tape again.

Shakespeare and Ezra Pound? My neighbour had the most curious tastes. My interest fading, I returned to the terrace.

Over the next few days the streamers continued to blow across the dunes, for some reason always starting in the evening, when the lights of the supper-club traffic illuminated the lengths of coloured gauze. But to begin with I hardly noticed them—I edit *Wave IX*, an avante-garde poetry review, and the studio was full of auto-tapes and old galley proofs. Nor was I particularly surprised to find I had a poetess for my neighbour. The studios along the Stars are chiefly occupied by painters and poets—the majority abstract and non-productive (in fact the Stars is one of the most notoriously far out colonies along the hundred-mile length of

the Beach, all the way from Ciraquito to Lagoon West. Most of us were suffering from various degrees of beach fatigue, that chronic malaise or tedium vitae which exiles the victim to a limbo of endless sun-bathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces, but I still managed to bring out a regular monthly issue of *Wave IX*.)

Later, however, the streamers drifting across the sand became rather more of a nuisance. When the protest notes achieved nothing I went over to my neighbour's villa with a view to seeing her in person. On this last occasion, after a dying ray had plummeted out of the sky and nearly stung me in its final spasm, I realised that there was little chance of reaching her.

A small hunch-backed chauffeur with a club foot and a very twisted face like a senile faun's was cleaning the long cerise Cadillac in the drive. I went over to him, and pointed up to the strands of tissue trailing through the first-floor windows and falling on to the desert below.

"These tapes are blowing all over my villa," I told him. "Your mistress must have one of her VT sets on open sequence."

He eyed me across the broad bonnet of the El Dorado, then sat down in the driving seat and took a small flute from the dashboard.

As I walked around to him he began to play some high rather irritating chords. I waited until he had finished and then asked in a louder voice: "Do you mind telling her to close the windows?"

He ignored me, his lips pressed moodily to the flute. I bent down and was about to shout into his ear when a sudden gust of wind swirled up across one of the dunes just beyond the drive, in an instant whirled across the gravel, flinging up a miniature tornado of dust and ash that completely enclosed us, blinding my eyes and filling my mouth with grit. Arms shielding my face, I moved away from it towards the drive, the long streamers whipping around me.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the squall vanished, the dust stilled and faded completely, leaving the air as motionless as it had been a few moments previously. I saw that I had backed about thirty yards down the drive, and to my astonishment realised that the Cadillac and chauffeur

had disappeared, although the garage door was still open.

My head rang strangely, and I felt irritable and short of breath. I was about to approach the house again, annoyed at having been refused entry and left out to suffer the full filthy impact of the dust squall, when I heard the thin piping refrain sound again into the air.

Low, but clear and strangely menacing, it sang in my ears, the planes of sound shifting about me in the air. Looking around for its source, I noticed the dust flicking across the surface of the dunes on either side of the drive.

Without waiting, I turned on my heel and hurried back to my villa.

Angry with myself for having been made such a fool, and resolved to press some formal complaint, I first went around the terrace, picking up all the strands of tissue and stuffing them into the disposal chute, then climbed down below the villa and cut away the tangled masses of streamers.

Cursorily, I read a few of the tapes at random. All printed the same erratic fragments, intact phrases from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats and Eliot. My neighbour's VT set appeared to have a drastic memory fault, and instead of producing a variant on the classical model the selector head was simply regurgitating a dismembered version of the model itself. For a moment I thought seriously of telephoning the IBM agency in Red Beach and asking them to send a repairman round.

That evening, however, I finally spoke to my neighbour in person.

I had gone to sleep at about eleven, and an hour or so later something woke me. A bright moon was at apogee, moving behind high strands of pale green cloud that cast a thin light over the desert and the Stars. Leaving the lights off, I stepped out on to the veranda, immediately noticed a curiously luminescent glow moving between the dunes. Like the strange music I had heard from the chauffeur's flute, the glow appeared to be sourceless, but I assumed it was cast by the moon shining through a narrow interval between the clouds.

Then I saw her, appearing for a moment among the dunes, strolling across the midnight sand. She wore a long white gown that billowed out behind her, against which her deep blue hair drifted loosely in the wind like the tail fan of a

paradise bird. Streamers floated lightly about her feet and overhead two or three huge purple rays circled endlessly. She walked on, apparently unaware of them, a single light behind her shining through an upstairs window of her villa.

Belting my dressing gown, I leaned against a pillar and watched her quietly, for the moment forgiving her the streamers and her ill-trained chauffeur. Occasionally she disappeared behind one of the green-shadowed dunes, her head raised slightly, moving directly away from the boulevard towards the sand reefs on the edge of the fossil lake.

She was about a hundred yards from the nearest sand reef, a long inverted gallery of winding groins and overhanging grottoes, when something about her straight path and regular unvarying pace made me wonder whether she might in fact be sleep-walking.

I hesitated briefly, watching the rays circling around her head, then jumped over the rail and ran across the sand towards her, waving and calling out.

The quartz flints stung at my bare feet, but I managed to reach her just as she neared the edge of the reef, broke into a walk beside her and touched her elbow.

Three feet above my head the rays spat and whirled in the darkness. The strange luminosity that I had assumed came from the moon seemed rather to emanate from her long white gown. Brilliantly white, it cast a powerful sheen on the slopes around us.

My neighbour was not somnambulating, as I thought, but lost in some deep reverie or dream, her wide black eyes staring opaquely in front of her, her slim white-skinned face like a marble mask, motionless and without expression. She looked round at me sightlessly, one hand gesturing me away, then suddenly stopped and glanced down at her feet, abruptly becoming aware of herself and her midnight walk. Her hooded eyes cleared and moved, she saw the mouth of the sand reef and stepped back involuntarily, the light radiating from her gown increasing with her alarm.

Overhead the rays soared upwards into the air, their arcs wider now that she was awake.

"Sorry to startle you," I apologised. "But you were getting rather close to the reef."

She pulled away from me, her long black eyebrows arching.

"What?" she said uncertainly. "Who are you?" To herself, as if completing her dream, she murmured sotto voce: "Oh god, Paris, choose me, not Minerva—" She broke off, stared at me wildly, her carmine lips fretting, then strode off quickly across the sand, the rays swinging like pendulums through the dim air above her, taking with her the pool of amber light.

I waited until she reached her villa and turned away. Glancing at the ground, I noticed something glitter in the small depression formed by one of her footprints. I bent down, picked up a small jewel, a perfectly cut diamond of a single carat, then saw another in the next footprint. Hurrying forwards, I picked up half a dozen of the jewels, and was about to call out after her disappearing figure when I felt something wet in my hand.

Where I had held the jewels in the hollow of my palm now swam a small pool of ice-cold dew.

I found out who she was the next day.

After breakfast I was in the bar when I saw the El Dorado turn into the drive. The club-footed chauffeur jumped out of the car and hobbled over in his curious swinging gait to the front door. In his black-gloved hand he carried a small pink envelope. I let him wait a few minutes, then opened the letter on the step as he went back to the car and sat waiting for me, his engine running.

*I'm sorry to have been so rude last night.
You stepped right into my dream and
startled me. Could I make amends by
offering you a cocktail? My chauffeur
will collect you at noon.*

Aurora Day.

I looked at my watch. It was 11.55. The five minutes, presumably, gave me time to compose myself.

The chauffeur was studying his driving wheel, apparently indifferent to my reaction. Leaving the door open, I stepped inside and put on my beach jacket, on the way out slipped a proof copy of *Wave IX* into one of the pockets.

The chauffeur barely waited for me to climb in before moving the big car rapidly off down the drive.

"How long are you staying in Vermilion Sands?" I asked, addressing the band of curly russet hair between the peaked cap and black collar, all that was visible of him.

He said nothing, and as we drove along the Stars suddenly cut out into the oncoming lane and gunned the Cadillac forward in a tremendous burst of speed to overtake a car ahead.

Settling myself, I put the question again and waited for him to reply, then smartly tapped his black serge shoulder.

"Are you deaf, or just stupid?"

For a second he took his eyes off the road and glanced back at me. I had a momentary impression of bright red pupils, ribald eyes that regarded me with a mixture of contempt and unconcealed savagery. Out of the side of his mouth came a sudden cackling stream of violent imprecations, a short filthy blast that sent me back into my seat.

He jumped out when we reached Studio 5 and opened the door for me, beckoning me up the black marble steps like an attendant spider ushering a very small fly into a particularly large web.

Once inside the doorway he seemed to disappear, and I walked through the softly lit hall towards an interior pool where a fountain played and ancient white carp circled tirelessly. Beyond it, in the lounge, I could see my neighbour reclining on a chaise longue, her white gown spread around her like a fan, the jewels embroidered into it glittering in the fountain light.

As I sat down she regarded me curiously, putting away a slender volume bound in yellow calf which appeared to be a private edition of poems. Scattered across the floor beside her was a miscellaneous array of other volumes, many of which I could identify as recently printed collections and anthologies.

I noticed a few coloured streamers trailing through the curtains by the window, and glanced around to see where she kept her VT set, helping myself to a cocktail off the low table between us.

"Do you read a lot of poetry?" I asked, indicating the volumes around her.

She nodded slowly. "As much as I can bear to."

I laughed. "I know what you mean. I have to read rather more than I want to." I took a copy of *Wave IX* out of my pocket and passed it to her. "Have you come across this one?"

She glanced at the title page, her manner moody and autocratic. I wondered why she had bothered to ask me over.

"Yes, I have. Appalling, isn't it? 'Paul Ransom'," she noted. "Is that you? You're the editor? How interesting."

She said it with a peculiar inflexion, apparently considering some possible course of action. For a moment she watched me reflectively. Her personality seemed totally dissociated, her awareness of me varying abruptly from one level to another, like light changes in a bad motion picture. However, although her beautiful mask-like face remained motionless, I nonetheless detected a quickening of interest.

"Well, tell me about your work. You must know so much about what is wrong with modern poetry. Why is it all so bad?"

I shrugged. "I suppose it's principally a matter of inspiration. I used to write a fair amount myself years ago, but the impulse faded as soon as I could afford a VT set. In the old days a poet had to sacrifice himself in order to master his medium. Now that technical mastery is simply a question of pushing a button, selecting metre, rhyme, assonance on a dial, there's no need for sacrifice, no ideal to invent to make the sacrifice worth-while—"

I broke off. She was watching me in a remarkably alert way, almost as if she were going to swallow me.

Changing the tempo, I said: "I've read quite a lot of your poetry, too. Forgive me mentioning it, but I think there's something wrong with your Verse-Transcriber."

Her face snapped, she looked away from me irritably. "I haven't got one of those dreadful machines. Heaven's above, you don't think *I* would use one?"

"Then where do the tapes come from?" I asked, puzzled. "The streamers that drift across every evening. They're covered with fragments of verse."

Off-handedly, she said: "Are they? Oh, I didn't know." She looked down at the volumes scattered about on the floor. "Although I should be the last person to write verse I have been forced to recently. Through sheer necessity, you see, to preserve a dying art."

She had baffled me completely. As far as I could remember most of the poems on the tapes had already been written.

She glanced up at me, gave me a vivid smile.

"I'll send you some."

t w o

The first ones arrived the next morning. They were delivered by the chauffeur in the pink Cadillac, neatly printed on quarto vellum and sealed by a large floral ribbon. Most of the poems submitted to me come through the post on computer punch tape, rolled up like crude automat tickets, and it was certainly a pleasure to receive such elegant manuscripts.

The poems, however, were impossibly bad. There were six in all, two Petrarchan sonnets, an ode and three free-form longer pieces. All were written in the same strange hectoring tone, at once minatory and obscure, like the oracular deliriums of some insane witch. Their overall import was strangely disturbing, not so much for the content of the poems as for the bizarre, off-key mind behind them. Aurora Day was obviously living in a private world which she took very seriously indeed. I decided she was probably a wealthy neurotic able to over-indulge her private fantasies.

I flipped through the sheets, smelling the strange musk-like scent that misted up from them. Where had she unearthed this curious style, these archaic mannerisms, the 'arise, earthly seers, and to thy ancient courses pen now thy truest vows'? Mixed up in some of the metaphors were odd echoes of Milton and Virgil, in fact the whole tone reminded me of the arch-priestess in the Aeniad who lets off blistering prophetic tirades whenever Aeneas sits down for a moment to relax.

I was still wondering what exactly to do with the poems—promptly on nine the next morning the chauffeur had delivered a second batch—when Tony Sapphire called in to help me with the make-up of the next issue. Most of the time he spent at his abstract beach chalet at Lagoon West, programming an automatic novel, but he put in a day or two each week on *Wave IX*.

I was checking the internal rhyme chains in an IBM sonnet sequence of Xero Paris's as he arrived. While I held the code chart over the sonnets, checking the rhyme lattices, he picked up the sheets of pink quarto on which Aurora's poems were printed.

"Delicious scent," he commented, fanning the sheets through the air. "One way to get round an editor." He

started to read the first of the poems, then frowned and put it down.

"Extraordinary. What are they?"

"I'm not altogether sure," I admitted. "Echoes in a stone garden."

Tony read the signature at the bottom of the sheets. "'Aurora Day.' A new subscriber, I suppose. She probably thinks *Wave IX* is the *VT Times*. But what is all this—'nor psalms, nor canticles, nor hollow register to praise the queen of night—'? " He shook his head. "What are they supposed to be?"

I smiled at him. Like most other writers and poets he had spent so long sitting in front of his VT set, staring at it blankly, that he had forgotten a period had actually existed when poetry was handspun.

"They're poems, of a sort, obviously."

Tony laughed. "Do you mean she wrote these herself?"

I nodded. "It has been done that way. In fact the method enjoyed quite a vogue for twenty or thirty centuries. Shakespeare tried it, Milton, Keats and Shelley—it worked reasonably well then."

"But not now," Tony said. "Not since the VT set. How can you compete with an IBM heavy duty logomatic analogue? Look at this one, for heaven's sake. It sounds like T.S. Eliot. She can't be serious."

"You may be right. Perhaps the girl's pulling my leg."

"Girl. She's probably sixty and tipples her eau de cologne. Sad. In some insane way they may mean something."

"Hold on," I told him. I was pasting down one of Xero's satirical pastiches of Rupert Brooke and was six lines short. I handed Tony the master tape and he played it into the IBM set the metre, rhyme scheme, verbal pairs, and then switched on, waited for the tape to chunter out of the delivery head, tore off six lines and passed them back to me. I didn't even need to read them.

For the next two hours we worked hard, at dusk had completed over 1,000 lines and broke off for a well-earned drink. We moved out onto the terrace and sat back in the cool evening light, watching the colours melting across the desert, listening to the sand rays cry in the darkness by Aurora's villa.

"What are all these streamers lying around under here?" Tony asked. He reached down and pulled one towards him, caught the strands as they broke in his hand and steered them on to the glass-topped table.

"—nor canticles, nor hollow register—" He read the line out, then released the tissue and let it blow away on the wind.

He peered out across the shadow-covered dunes at Studio 5. As usual a single light was burning in one of the upper rooms, illuminating the threads unravelling in the sand as they moved towards us.

Tony nodded. "So that's where she lives." He picked up another of the streamers that had coiled itself through the railing and was fluttering instantly at his elbow.

"You know, old sport, you're quite literally under siege."

I was. During the next days a ceaseless bombardment of ever more obscure and bizarre poems reached me, always in two installments, the first brought by the chauffeur promptly at 9 o'clock each morning, the second that evening when the streamers began to blow across the dusk to me. The fragments of Shakespeare and Pound had gone now, and the streamers carried fragmented versions of the poems delivered earlier in the day, almost as if they represented her working drafts. Examining the tapes carefully I realised that, as Aurora Day had said, they were not produced by a VT set. The strands were too delicate to have passed through the spools and high-speed cams of a computer mechanism, and the lettering along them had not been printed but embossed by some process I was unable to identify.

Each day I read the latest offerings, carefully filed them away in the centre drawer of my desk. Finally, when I had a week's production stacked together, I placed them in a return envelope, addressed it "Aurora Day, Studio 5, The Stars, Vermilion Sands," and penned a tactful rejection note, suggesting that she would feel ultimately more satisfied if her work appeared in another of the wide range of poetry reviews.

That night I had the first of what was to be a series of highly unpleasant dreams.

Making myself some strong coffee the next morning, I waited blearily for my mind to clear and went out on to the terrace, wondering what had prompted the savage nightmare that had plagued me through the night. The dream had been

the first of any kind I had had for several years—one of the pleasant features of beach fatigue is a heavy dreamless sleep, and the sudden irruption of a dream-filled night made me wonder whether Aurora Day, and more particularly her insane poems, were beginning to prey on my mind more than I realised.

My headache took a long time to dissipate. I lay back, watching the Day villa, its windows closed and shuttered, awnings retracted, like a sealed crown. Who was she anyway, I asked myself, and what did she really want?

Five minutes later, I saw the Cadillac swing out of the drive and coast down the Stars towards me.

Not another delivery! The woman was tireless. I waited by the front door, met the driver half-way down the steps and took from him a pink wax-sealed envelope.

"Look," I said to him confidentially. "I'd hate to discourage an emerging talent, but I think you might well use any influence you have on your mistress and you know, generally . . ." I let the idea hang in front of him, then added: "By the way, all these streamers that keep blowing across here are getting to be a damn nuisance. Have a word with her, whisper in her ear."

The chauffeur regarded me out of his red-rimmed foxy eyes, his long beaked face contorted in a monstrous grin. Then, shaking his head sadly, he hobbled back to the car.

As he drove off I opened the letter. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Mr. Ransom

Your rejection of my poems astounds me. I seriously advise you to reconsider your decision. This is no trifling matter. I expect to see the poems printed in your next issue.

Aurora Day.

That night I had another insane dream.

The next selection of poems arrived when I was still in bed, trying to massage a little sanity back into my mind. I climbed out of bed and made myself a large martini, ignoring the envelope jutting through the door like the blade of a paper spear.

When I had steadied myself I slit it open, scanned the three short poems included.

They were dreadful. Dimly. I wondered how to persuade Aurora that the requisite talent was missing. Holding the martini in one hand and peering at the poems in the other, I ambled out on to the terrace and slumped down in one of the chairs.

With a shout I sprang into the air, knocking the glass out of my hand. I had sat down on something large and spongy, the size of a cushion but with uneven bony contours.

Looking down, I saw an enormous dead sand ray lying in the centre of the seat, its white-tipped sting, still viable, projecting a full inch from its sheath above the purple cranial crest.

Jaw clamped angrily, I went straight into my study, slapped the three poems into an envelope with a rejection slip and scrawled across it: "*Sorry, entirely unsuitable. Please try other publications.*"

Half an hour later I drove down to Vermilion Sands and mailed it myself. As I came back I felt quietly pleased with myself.

That afternoon a colossal boil suddenly developed on my right cheek.

Tony Sapphire and Raymond Mayo came round the next morning to commiserate. Both thought I was being pig-headed and pedantic.

"Print one," Tony told me, sitting down on the foot of the bed.

"I'm damned if I will," I said. I stared out across the desert at Studio 5. Occasionally a window moved and caught the sunlight but otherwise I had seen nothing of my neighbour.

Tony shrugged. "All you've got to do is accept one and she'll be satisfied."

"Are you sure?" I asked cynically. "This may be only the beginning. For all we know she may have a dozen epics in the bottom of her suitcase."

Raymond Mayo wandered over to the window beside me, slipped on his dark glasses and scrutinised the villa. I noticed that he looked even more dapper than usual, dark hair smoothed back, profile adjusted for maximum impact.

"Saw her at the 'psycho i' last night," he mused. "She had a private balcony up on the mezzanine. Quite extraordinary. They had to stop the floor show twice." He nodded to

himself. "There's something formless and unstated there, reminded me of Dali's 'Cosmogonic Venus.' Made me realise how absolutely terrifying all women really are. If I were you I'd do whatever I was told."

I set my jaw, as far as I could, shook my head dogmatically. "Go away. You writers are always pouring scorn on editors, but when things get tough who's the first to break? This is the sort of situation I'm prepared to handle, my whole training and discipline tell me instinctively what to do. That crazy neurotic over there is trying to bewitch me. She thinks she can just call down a plague of dead rays, boils and nightmares and I'll surrender my conscience."

Shaking their heads sadly over my obduracy, Tony and Raymond left me to myself.

Two hours later the boil had subsided as mysteriously as it had appeared. I was beginning to wonder why when a pick-up from The Graphis Press in Vermilion Sands delivered the advance 500 copies of the next issue of *Wave IX*.

I carried the cartons into the lounge, then slit off the wrapping, thinking pleurably of Aurora Day's promise that she would have her poems published in the next issue. She had failed to realise that I had passed the final pages two days beforehand, and that I could hardly have printed her poems even if I had wanted to.

Opening the pages, I turned to the editorial, another in my series of examinations of the present malaise affecting poetry.

However, in place of the usual half-dozen paragraphs of 10-point type I was astounded to see a single line of 24-point, announcing in bold-face caps:

A CALL TO GREATNESS!

I broke off, hurriedly peered at the cover to make sure Graphis had sent me advance copies of the right journal, then raced rapidly through the pages.

The first poem I recognised immediately. I had rejected it only two days earlier. The next three I had also seen and rejected, then came a series that were new to me, all signed 'Aurora Day' and taking the place of the poems I had passed in page proof.

The entire issue had been pirated! Not a single one of the original poems remained, and a completely new make-up had been substituted. I ran back into the lounge and opened a dozen copies. They were all the same.

Ten minutes later I had carried the three cartons out to the incinerator, tipped them in and soaked the copies with petrol, then tossed a match into the centre of the pyre. Simultaneously, a few miles away Graphis Press were doing the same to the remainder of the 5,000 imprint. How the mis-printing had occurred they could not explain. They searched out the copy, all on Auroroa's typed note-paper, *but with editorial markings in my handwriting!* My own copy had disappeared, and they soon denied they had ever received it.

As the heavy flames beat up into the hot sunlight I thought that through the thick brown smoke I could see a sudden burst of activity coming from my neighbour's house. Windows were opening under the awnings, and the hunchbacked figure of the chauffer was scurrying along the terrace.

Standing on the roof, her white gown billowing around her like an enormous silver fleece, Aurora Day looked down at me, an insane Medea watching the dismemberment of her children.

Whether it was the large quantity of martini I had drunk that morning, the recent boil on my cheek or the fumes from the burning petrol, I'm not sure, but as I walked back into the house I felt suddenly unsteady, and sat down hazily on the top step, closing my eyes as my brain swam.

After a few seconds my head cleared again, and leaning on my knees I focussed my eyes on the blue glass step between my feet. Cut into the surface in small neat letters was:

Why so pale and wan, fond lover?

Prithee, why so pale?

Still too weak to more than register an automatic protest against this act of vandalism, I pulled myself to my feet, taking the door key out of my dressing gown pocket. As I inserted it into the lock I noticed, inscribed into the brass seat of the lock:

Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards.

There were other inscriptions all over the black leather panelling of the door, cut in the same neat script, the lines crossing each other at random, like filigree decoration around a baroque salver.

Closing the door behind me, I walked into the lounge. The walls seemed darker than usual, and I realised that their

entire surface was covered with row upon row of finely cut lettering, endless fragments of verse stretching from ceiling to floor.

I picked my glass off the table and raised it to my lips. The thin blue crystal bowl had been embossed with the same copperplate lines, spiralling down the stem to the base.

Drink to me only with thine eyes.

Everything in the lounge was covered with the same fragments—the desk, lampstands and shades, the bookshelves, the keys of the baby grand, even the lip of the record on the stereogram turntable.

Dazed, I raised my hand to my face, in horror saw that the surface of my skin was interlaced by a thousand tattoos, writhing and coiling across my hands and arms like insane serpents.

Dropping my glass, I ran to the mirror over the fireplace, saw my face covered with the same tattooing, a living manuscript in which the ink still ran, the letters running and changing as if the pen still cast them.

You spotted snakes with double tongue . . .

Weaving spiders, come not here.

I flung myself away from the mirror, ran out on to the terrace, my feet slipping in the piles of coloured streamers which the evening wind was carrying up over the balcony, then vaulted down over the railing on to the ground below.

I covered the distance between our villas in a few moments, raced up the darkening drive to the black front door. It opened as my hand reached for the bell, and I plunged through into the crystal hallway.

Aurora Day was waiting for me on the chaise longue by the fountain pool, feeding the ancient white fish that clustered around her. As I stepped across to her she smiled quietly to the fish and whispered to them.

“Aurora!” I cried. “For heaven’s sake, I give in! Take anything you want, anything, but leave me alone!”

For a moment she ignored me and went on quietly feeding the fish. Suddenly a thought of terror plunged through my mind. Were the huge white carp now nestling at her fingers once her lovers?

three

We sat together in the luminescent dusk, the long shadows playing across the purple landscape of Dali's 'Persistence of Memory' on the wall behind Aurora, the fish circling slowly in the fountain beside us.

She had stated her terms: nothing less than absolute control of the magazine, freedom to impose her own policy, to make her own selection of material. Nothing would be printed without her first approval.

"Don't worry," she had said lightly. "Our agreement will apply to one issue only." Amazingly she showed no wish to publish her own poems—the pirated issue had merely been a device to bring me finally to surrender.

"Do you think one issue will be enough?" I asked, wondering what really she would do with it now.

She looked up at me idly, tracing patterns across the surface of the pool with a slender green-tipped finger. "It all depends on you and your companions. When will you come to your senses and become poets again?"

I watched the patterns in the pool. In some miraculous way they remained etched across the surface.

In the hours, like millenia, we had sat together I seemed to have told her everything about myself yet learned almost nothing about Aurora. Strange enigmas revolved around her, obscuring her personality. One thing alone was clear—her obsession with the art of poetry. In some curious way she regarded herself as personally responsible for the present ebb at which it found itself, but her only remedy seemed completely retrogressive.

"You must come and meet my friends at the colony," I suggested.

"I will," she said. "I hope I can help them. They all have so much to learn."

I smiled at this. "I'm afraid you won't find them very sympathetic to that view. Most of them regard themselves as virtuosos. For them the quest for the perfect sonnet ended years ago. The computer produces nothing else."

Aurora scoffed. "They're not poets but mere mechanics. Look at these collections of so-called verse. Three poems and sixty pages of operating instructions. Nothing but volts and amps. When I say they have everything to learn, I mean about their own hearts, not about technique, about the soul of music, not its form."

She paused to stretch herself, her long beautiful body uncoiling like a brilliant python. Then she leaned forward and began to speak earnestly. "Poetry is dead today, not because of these machines, but because poets no longer search for their true inspiration, no longer drink at the ancient well which has always been the one real source of their art. These automats have merely come in to fill the vacuum. First and last poets everywhere must return to their only inspiration."

"Which is?"

Aurora shook her head sadly. "You call yourself a poet and yet you ask me that?"

"A single question has an infinity of answers," I rejoined. "I merely asked for yours."

She nodded and stared down at the pool, her eyes listless. For a moment an expression of profound sadness passed across her face, and I realised that she felt some deep sense of guilt or inadequacy, that some failing of her own was responsible for the present malaise. Perhaps it was this sense of inadequacy that made me unafraid of her.

"Have you ever heard the legend of Melander and Corydon?" she asked.

"Vaguely," I said, casting my mind back. "Melander was the Muse of Poetry, if I remember, the White Goddess. Wasn't Corydon a court poet who killed himself for her?"

"Good," Aurora told me. "You're not completely illiterate, after all. Yes, the court poets found that they had lost their inspiration and that their ladies were spurning them for the company of the knights, so they sought out Melander, the Muse who told them that she had brought this spell upon them because they had taken their art for granted, forgetting the source from whom it really came. They protested that of course they thought of her always—a blatant lie—but she refused to believe them and told them that they would not recover their power until one of them sacrificed his life for her. Naturally none of them would do so, with the exception of a young poet of great talent called Corydon, who loved the goddess and was the only one to retain his power. For the other poets' sake he killed himself . . ."

" . . . to Melander's undying sorrow," I concluded. "She was not expecting him to give his life for his art. A beautiful myth," I agreed. "But I'm afraid you'll find no Corydons here."

"I wonder," Aurora said softly. She stirred the water in the pool, the broken surface throwing a ripple of light across the walls and ceiling. Then I saw that a long series of friezes ran around the lounge depicting the very legend Aurora had been describing. The first panel, on my extreme left, showed the poets and troubadours gathered around the goddess, a tall white-gowned figure whose face bore a remarkable resemblance to Aurora's. As I traced the story through the successive panels the likeness became even more marked, and I assumed that she had sat as Melander for the artist. Had she, in some way, identified herself with the goddess in the myth? In which case, who was her Corydon?—perhaps the artist himself. I searched the panels for the suicidal poet, a slim blonde-maned youth whose face, although slightly familiar, I could not identify. However, behind the principal figures in all the scenes I certainly recognised another, her faun-faced chauffeur, here with ass's legs and wild woodwind, representing none other than the attendant god Pan.

I had almost detected another likeness among the figures in the friezes when Aurora noticed me searching the panels and abruptly stopped stirring the pool. As the ripples subsided the panels sank again into darkness. For a few seconds Aurora stared at me as if she had forgotten who I was. She appeared to have become tired and withdrawn, as if recapitulating the myth had evoked private memories of pain and fatigue. Simultaneously the hallway and glass-enclosed portico seemed to grow dark and sombre, reflecting her own darkening mood, so dominant was her presence that the air itself paled as she did. Again I felt that her world, into which I had stepped, was completely compounded of illusion.

She was asleep. Around her the room was almost in darkness. The pool lights had faded, the crystal columns that had shone around us were dull and extinguished, like trunks of opaque glass. The only light came from the flower-like jewel between her sleeping breasts.

I stood up and walked softly across to her, looked down at her strange face, its skin smooth and grey, like some pharaonic bride in a basalt dream. Then beside me at the door I noticed the hunched figure of the chauffeur. His peaked cap hid his face, but the two watchful eyes were fixed on me like small coals.

As we left hundreds of sleeping sand rays were dotted about the moonlit floor of the desert. We stepped between them and moved away silently in the Cadillac.

When I reached the villa I went straight into the study, ready to start work on assembling the next issue. During the return ride I had quickly decided on the principal cue-themes and key-images which I would play into the VT sets. All programmed for maximum repetition, within twenty-four hours I would have a folio of moon-sick, muse-mad dithyrambes which would positively stagger Aurora Day by their heartfelt simplicity and inspiration.

As I entered the study my shoe caught on something sharp. I bent down in the darkness, and found a torn strip of computer circuitry embedded in the white leather flooring.

When I switched on the light I saw that someone had completely smashed the three VT sets, pounding them to a twisted pulp in a savage excess of violence.

Mine had not been the only targets. Next morning, as I sat at my desk contemplating the three wrecked computers, the telephone rang with news of similar outrages all the way down the Stars. Tony Sapphire's 50-Watt IBM had been hammered to pieces, and Raymond Mayo's four new Philco Versomatics had been smashed beyond hope of repair. As far as I could gather not a single VT set had been left untouched. The previous evening, between the hours of six and midnight, someone had moved rapidly down the Stars, slipped into the studios and apartments and singlemindedly wrecked every VT set.

I had a good idea who. As I climbed out of the Cadillac on my return from Aurora I had noticed two heavy wrenches on the seat beside the chauffeur. However, I decided not to call the police and prefer charges. For one thing the problem of filling *Wave IX* now looked almost insoluble. When I telephoned Graphis Press I found, more or less as expected, that all Aurora's copy had been mysteriously mislaid.

The problem remained—what would I put in the issue? I couldn't afford to miss an edition or my subscribers would fade away like ghosts.

I telephoned Aurora and pointed this out.

"We should go to press again within a week, otherwise our contract expires and I'll never get another. And reimbursing a year's advance subscriptions would bankrupt me. We've

simply got to find some copy. As the new managing editor have you any suggestions? "

Aurora chuckled. "I suppose you're thinking that I might mysteriously re-assemble all those smashed machines? "

"It's an idea," I agreed, waving at Tony Sapphire who had just called in. "Otherwise I'm afraid we're never going to get any copy."

"I can't understand you," Aurora replied. "Surely there's one very simple method."

"Is there? What's that? "

"Write some yourself! "

Before I could protest she burst into a peel of high laughter. "I gather there are some twenty-three able-bodied versifiers and so-called poets in Vermilion Sands"—this was exactly the number of places broken into the previous evening—"well, let's see some of them versify."

"Aurora!" I snapped. "You can't be serious. Listen, for heaven's sake, this is no joking—"

But she had put the phone down. I turned to Tony Sapphire, then sat back limply and contemplated an intact tape spool I had recovered from one of the sets. "It looks as if I've had it. Did you hear that—'Write some yourself'?"

"She must be insane," Tony agreed.

"It's all part of this tragic obsession of her's," I explained, lowering my voice. "She genuinely believes she's the Muse of Poetry, returned to Earth to re-inspire the dying race of poets. Last night she referred to the myth of Melander and Corydon, I think she's seriously waiting for some young poet to give his life for her."

Tony nodded. "She's missing the point, though. Fifty years ago a few people wrote poetry, but no one read it. Now no one writes it either. The VT set merely simplifies the whole process."

I agreed with him, but of course Tony is somewhat prejudiced there, being one of those people who believe that literature is in essence both unreadable and unwritable. The automatic novel he had been 'writing' was over 10 million words long, intended to be one of those gigantic grotesques that tower over the highways of literary history, terrifying the unwary traveller. Unfortunately he had never bothered to get it printed, and the memory drum which carried the

electronic coding had been wrecked in the previous night's pogrom.

I was equally annoyed. One of my VT sets had been steadily producing a transliteration of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in terms of an Hellenic Greek setting, a pleasant academic exercise which would have provided an objective test of Joyce's masterpiece by the degree of exactness with which the transliteration matched the original *Odyssey*. This too had been destroyed.

We watched Studio 5 in the bright morning light. The cerise Cadillac had disappeared somewhere, so presumably Aurora was driving around Vermilion Sands, astounding the cafe crowds.

I picked up the terrace telephone and sat on the rail. "I suppose I might as well call everyone up and see what they can do."

I dialled the first number.

Raymond Mayo said: "Write some myself? Paul, you're insane."

Xero Paris said: "Myself? Of course, Paul, with my toes."

Fairchild de Mille said: "It would be rather chic, but . . ."

Kurt Butterworth said (sourly): "Ever tried to? How?"

Marlene McClintic said: "Darling, I wouldn't dare. It might develop the wrong muscles or something."

Sigismund Lutitsch said: "No, no. Siggy now in new zone. Electronic sculpture, plasma in super cosmic collisions. Listen—"

Robin Saunders, Macmillan Freebody and Angel Petit said: "No."

Tony brought me a drink and I pressed on down the list. "It's no good," I said at last. "No one writes verse any more. Let's face it. After all, do you or I?"

Tony pointed to the note-book. "There's one name left—we might as well sweep the decks clean before we take off for Red Beach."

"Tristram Caldwell," I read. "That's the shy young fellow with the footballer's build. Something always wrong with his set. Might as well try him."

A soft honey-voiced girl answered the phone.

"Tristram?" she purred. "Er, yes, I think he's here."

There were sounds of wrestling around on a bed, during which the telephone bounced on the floor a few times, and then Caldwell answered.

"Hello, Ransom, what can I do for you?"

"Tristram," I said, "I take it you were paid the usual surprise call last night. Or didn't you notice? How's your VT set?"

"VT set?" he repeated. "It's fine, just fine."

"What?" I shouted. "You mean yours is undamaged? Tristram, pull yourself together and listen to me!" Quickly I explained our problem, but Tristram suddenly burst out laughing.

"Well, I think that's just damn funny, don't you? Really rich. I think she's right. Let's get back to the old crafts—"

"Never mind the old crafts," I told him irritably. "All I'm interested in is getting some copy together for the next issue. If your set is working we're saved."

"Well there, wait a minute, Paul. I've been slightly pre-occupied recently, haven't had a chance to see the set. Hold on, will you."

I waited while he wandered off. From the sounds of his footsteps and an impatient shout of the girl's, to which he replied distantly, it seemed he had gone outside into the yard. A door slammed open somewhere and there was a vague rummaging. Curious place to keep a VT set, I thought. Then there was a sudden loud hammering noise.

Finally Tristram picked up the phone again. "Sorry, Paul, but it looks as if they paid me a visit too. The set's a total wreck." He paused while I cursed the air, then said: "Look, though, is she really serious about the hand-made material? I take it that's what you were calling about?"

"Yes," I told him. "Believe me, I'll print anything. It has to get past Aurora, though. Have you got any old copy lying around?"

Tristram started chuckling again. "You know, Paul, old boy, I believe I have. Rather despaired of ever getting it into print but I'm glad now I held on to it. Tell you what, I'll tidy it up and let you have it tomorrow. Few sonnets, a ballad or two, you should find it interesting."

He was right. Five minutes after I opened his parcel the next morning I knew he was trying to fool us.

"This is the same old thing," I explained to Tony. "That cunning Adonis. Look at these assonances and feminine rhymes, the drifting caesura—the unmistakable Caldwell signature, worn tapes on the rectifier circuits and a leaking condenser. I've been having to re-tread these for years to smooth them out. He's got his set there working away after all."

"What are you going to do?" Tony asked. "He'll just deny it."

"Obviously. Anyway, I can use the material. Who cares if the whole issue is by Tristram Caldwell."

I started to slip the pages into an envelope before taking them round to Aurora, when an idea occurred to me.

"Tony, I've just had another of my brilliancies. The perfect method of curing this witch of her obsession and exacting sweet revenge at the same time. Suppose we play along with Tristram and tell Aurora that these poems were hand-written by him. His style is thoroughly retrograde and his themes are everything Aurora could ask for—listen to these—'Homage to Cleo,' 'Minerva 231,' 'Silence becomes Electra.' She'll pass them for press, we'll print this weekend and then, lo and behold, we reveal that these poems apparently born out of the burning breast of Tristram Caldwell are nothing more than a collection of cliché-ridden transcripts from a derelict VT set, the worst possible automatic maunderings."

Tony whooped. "Tremendous! She'd never live it down. But do you think she'll be taken in?"

"Why not? Haven't you realised that she sincerely expects us all to sit down and produce a series of model classical exercises on 'Night and Day,' 'Summer and Winter,' and so on. When only Caldwell produces anything she'll be only too glad to give him her imprimatur. Remember, our agreement only refers to this issue, and the onus is on her. She's got to find material somewhere."

four

So we launched our scheme. All afternoon I pestered Tristram, telling him that Aurora had adored his first consignment and was eager to see more. Duly the next day a second batch arrived, all, as luck would have it, in longhand, although remarkably faded for material fresh from his VT set the previous day. However, I was only too glad for anything that would reinforce the illusion. Aurora was more and more pleased, showed no suspicions whatever, here and there made a few minor criticisms but refused to have anything altered or re-written.

"But we always re-write, Aurora," I told her. "One can't expect an infallible selection of images. The number of synonyms is too great." Wondering whether I had gone too far, I added hastily: "It doesn't matter whether the author is man or robot, the principle is the same."

"Really?" Aurora said archly. "However, I think we'll leave these just as Mr. Caldwell wrote them."

I didn't bother to point out the hopeless fallacy in her attitude, and merely collected the initialled manuscripts and hurried home with them. Tony was at my desk, deep in the phone, pumping Tristram for more copy.

He capped the mouthpiece and gestured to me. "He's playing coy, probably trying to raise us to two cents a thousand. Pretends he's out of material. Is it worth calling his bluff?"

I shook my head. "Dangerous. If Aurora discovers we're involved in this fraud of Tristram's she might do anything. Let me talk to him." I took the phone. "What's the matter, Tristram, production's way down. We need more material, old boy. Shorten the line, why are you wasting tapes with all these alexandrines?"

"Ransom, what the hell are you talking about? I'm not a damned factory, I'm a poet, I write when I have something to say in the only suitable way to say it."

"Yes, yes," I rejoined, "but I have fifty pages to fill and only a few days in which to do it. You've given me about ten so you've just got to keep up the flow. What have you produced today?"

"Well, I'm working on another sonnet, some nice things in it—to Aurora herself, as a matter of fact."

"Great," I told him, "but careful with those vocabulary selectors. Remember the golden rule: the ideal sentence is one word long. What else have you got?"

"What else? Nothing. This is likely to take all week, perhaps all year."

I nearly swallowed the phone. "Tristram, what's the matter? For heaven's sake, haven't you paid the power bill or something? Have they cut you off?"

Before I could find out, however, he had rung off.

"One sonnet a day," I said to Tony. "Good God, he must be on manual. Crazy idiot, he probably doesn't realise how complicated those circuits are."

We sat tight and waited. Nothing came the next morning, and nothing the morning after that. Luckily, however, Aurora wasn't in the least surprised, in fact if anything she was pleased that Tristram's rate of progress was slowing.

"One poem is enough," she told me, "a complete statement, nothing more needs to be said, an interval of eternity closes for ever."

Reflectively, she straightened the petals of a hyacinth. "Perhaps he needs a little encouragement," she decided.

I could see she wanted to meet him.

"Why don't you ask him over for dinner?" I suggested.

She brightened immediately. "I will." She picked up the telephone and handed it to me.

As I dialled Tristram's number I felt a sudden pang of envy and disappointment. Around me the friezes told the story of Melander and Corydon, but I was too preoccupied to anticipate the tragedy the next week would bring.

During the days that followed Tristram and Aurora Day were always together. In the mornings they would usually drive out to the abstract film sets at Lagoon West, the chauffeur at the wheel of the huge Cadillac. In the evenings, as I sat out alone on the terrace, watching the lights of Studio 5 shine out into the warm darkness, I could hear their fragmented voices carried across the sand, the faint sounds of crystal music.

I would like to think that I resented their relationship, but to be truthful I cared very little after the initial disappointment had worn off. The beach fatigue from which I suffered then numbed the senses insidiously, blunting despair and

hope alike. If anything, I preferred to sit back and watch the younger people pursue their passions, taking my pleasures vicariously.

When, three days after their first meeting, Aurora and Tristram suggested that we all go ray-fishing at Lagoon West, I accepted gladly, eager to observe their affair at closer quarters.

As we set off down the Stars there was no hint of what was to come. Tristram and Aurora were together in the Cadillac ahead while Tony Sapphire, Raymond Mayo and I brought up the rear in Tony's Chevrolet. We could see them through the pale blue rear window of the Cadillac, laughing at each other over something, Tristram reading the sonnet to Aurora which he had just completed. When we climbed out of the cars at Lagoon West and made our way over to the old abstract film sets near the sand reefs they were walking hand in hand, Tristram in his white beach shoes and suit looking very much like an Edwardian dandy at a boating party.

The chauffeur carried the picnic hampers, and Raymond Mayo and Tony the spear-guns and nets. Down in the reefs below we could see the rays nesting by the thousands, scores of huge double mambas sleek with off-season hibernation.

After we had settled ourselves under the awnings Raymond and Tristram decided on the course and then gathered everyone together. Strung out in a loose line we began to make our way down into one of the reefs, Aurora on Tristram's arm.

"Ever done any ray-fishing?" Tristram asked me as we entered one of the lower galleries.

"Never," I said. "I'll just watch this time. Hear you're quite an expert."

"Well, with luck I won't be killed." He pointed to the rays clinging to the cornices above us, wheeling up into the sky as we approached, whistling and screeching. In the dim light the white tips of their stings flexed in their sheathes. "Unless they're really frightened they'll stay well away from you," he told us. "The art is to prevent them from becoming frightened, select one and approach it so slowly that it sits staring at you until you're close enough to shoot it."

Raymond Mayo had found a large purple mamba resting in a narrow crevice about ten yards on our right. He moved up to it quietly, watching the sting protrude from its sheath

and weave menacingly, waiting just long enough for it to retract, lulling the ray with a low humming sound. Finally, when he was five feet away, he raised the gun and took careful aim.

"There may seem little to it," Tristram whispered to Aurora and me, "but in fact he's completely at the ray's mercy now. If it chose to attack he'd be defenceless." The bolt snapped from Raymond's gun and struck the ray on its spinal crest, stunning it instantly. Quickly he stepped over and scooped it into the net, where it revived after a few seconds, threshed its black triangular wings helplessly and then lay inertly.

We moved through the groins and galleries, the sky a narrow winding interval overhead, following the pathways that curved down into the bed of the reef. Now and then the wheeling rays rising out of our way would brush against the reef and drifts of fine sand would cascade over us. Raymond and Tristram shot several more rays, leaving the chauffeur to carry the nets. Gradually our party split into two, Tony and Raymond taking one pathway with the chauffeur, while I stayed with Aurora and Tristram.

As we moved along I noticed that Aurora's face had become less relaxed, her movements slightly more deliberate and controlled. I had the impression she was watching Tristram carefully, glancing sideways at him as she held his arm.

We entered the terminal fornix of the reef, a deep cathedral-like chamber from which a score of galleries spiralled off to surface like the arms of a galaxy. In the darkness around us the thousands of rays hung motionlessly, their phosphorescing stings flexing and retracting like winking stars.

Two hundred feet away, on the far side of the chamber, Raymond Mayo and the chauffeur emerged from one of the galleries. They waited there for a few moments, and then suddenly I heard Tony shouting out. Raymond dropped his spear gun and disappeared back into the gallery.

Excusing myself, I ran across the chamber, found them in the narrow corridor, peering around in the darkness, Tony flashing his torch.

"I tell you," Tony was insisting. "I heard the damn thing singing."

"Impossible," Raymond told him. They argued with each other, then gave up the search for the mysterious song-ray and stepped down into the chamber. As we did I thought I saw the chauffeur replace something in his pocket. With his beaked face and insane eyes, his hunched figure hung about with the nets of writhing rays, he looked like a figure from Hieronymous Bosch.

After exchanging a few words with Raymond and Tony I turned to make my way back to the others, but they had left the chamber. Wondering which of the galleries they had chosen, I stepped a few yards into the mouth of each one, finally saw them on one of the ramps curving away above me.

I was about to retrace my steps and join them when I caught a glimpse of Aurora's face in profile, saw once again her expression of watchful intent. Changing my mind, I moved quietly along the spiral, just below them, the falls of sand masking my footsteps, keeping them in view through the intervals between the overhanging columns.

At one point I was only a few yards from them, and heard Aurora say clearly: "Isn't there a theory that you can trap rays by singing to them?"

"By mesmerising them?" Tristram asked. "Let's try."

They moved further away, and Aurora's voice sounded out softly, a low crooning tone. Gradually the sound rose, echoing and re-echoing through the high vaults, the rays stirring in the darkness.

As we neared the surface their numbers grew, and Aurora stopped and guided Tristram towards a narrow sun-filled arena, bounded by hundred-foot walls, open to the sky above.

Unable to see them now, I retreated into the gallery and climbed the inner slope on to the next level, and from there on to the stage above, then made my way to the edge of the gallery, from which I could now easily observe the arena below. As I did so, however, I was aware of a strangely eerie and penetrating noise, at once toneless and all-pervading, which filled the entire reef, like the high-pitched sounds perceived by epileptics before an attack. Down in the arena Tristram was searching the walls, trying to indentify the source of the noise, hands raised to his head. He had taken his eyes off Aurora, who was standing behind him, arms motionless at her sides, palms slightly raised, like an entranced medium.

Fascinated by this curious stance, I was abruptly distracted by a terrified screeching that came from the lower levels of the reef. It was accompanied by a confused leathery flapping, and almost immediately a cloud of flying rays, frantically trying to escape from the reef, burst from the galleries below.

As they turned into the arena, sweeping low over the heads of Tristram and Aurora, they seemed to lose their sense of direction, and within a moment the arena was packed by a swarm of circling rays, all diving about uncertainly.

Screaming in terror at the rays whipping past her face, Aurora emerged from her trance. Tristram had taken off his straw hat and was striking furiously at them, shielding Aurora with his other arm. Together they backed towards a narrow fault in the rear wall of the arena, which by a miracle provided an escape route into the galleries on the far side. Following this route to the edge of the cliffs above I was surprised to see the squat figure of the chauffeur, now divested of his nets and gear, peering down at the couple below.

By now the hundreds of rays jostling within the arena almost obscured Tristram and Aurora. She re-appeared from the narrow fault, shaking her head desperately. So their escape route was sealed! Quickly Tristram motioned her to her knees, then leapt out into the middle of the arena, slapping wildly at the rays with his hat, trying to drive them away from Aurora.

For a few seconds he was successful. Like a cloud of giant hornets the rays wheeled off in disorder, and then, horrified, I watched them descend upon him again. Before I could shout Tristram had fallen, stung more quickly than I was able to see. The rays swooped and hovered over his outstretched body, then swirled away, soaring up into the sky, apparently released from the vortex.

Tristram lay face downwards, his blonde hair spilled out across the sands, arms twisted loosely. I stared in amazement at his body, at the swiftness with which he had died, then looked across to Aurora.

She too was watching the body, but with an expression that showed neither pity nor terror. Gathering her skirt in one hand, she turned and slipped away through the fault.

So the escape route had been open after all! Astonished, I realised that Aurora had deliberately told Tristram that the route was closed, had virtually forced him to attack the rays.

A minute later she emerged from the mouth of the gallery above. Briefly she peered down into the arena, the black-uniformed chauffeur at her elbow, watching the motionless body of Tristram. Then they hurried away.

Racing after them, I began to shout at the top of my voice, hoping to attract Tony and Raymond Mayo. As I reached the mouth of the reef my voice boomed and echoed into the galleries below. A hundred yards away Aurora and the chauffeur were stepping into the Cadillac. With a roar of exhaust it swung away among the sets, sending up clouds of dust that obscured the enormous abstract patterns.

I ran towards Tony's car. By the time I reached it the Cadillac was half a mile away, burning across the desert like an escaping dragon.

That was the last I saw of Aurora Day. I managed to follow them as far as the highway to Lagoon West, but there, on the open road, the big car left me behind, and ten miles further on, by the time I reached Lagoon West, I had lost them completely. At one of the gas stations where the highway forks to Vermilion Sands and Red Beach I asked if anyone had seen a big cerise Cadillac go by. Two attendants said they had, on the road *towards* me, and although they both swore this, I suppose Aurora's magic must have confused them.

I decided to try her villa and took the fork back to Vermilion, cursing myself for not anticipating what had happened. I, ostensibly a poet, had failed to take another poet's dreams seriously. Aurora had explicitly forecast Tristram's death.

Studio 5, The Stars was silent and empty. The rays had gone from the drive, and the black glass door was wide open, the remains of a few streamers drifting across the dust that gathered on the floor. The hallway and lounge were in darkness, and only the white carp in the pool provided a glimmer of light. The air was still and unbroken, as if the house had been empty for centuries.

Cursorily I ran my eye round the friezes in the lounge, then saw that I knew all the faces of the figures in the panels. The likenesses were almost photographic. Tristram was Corydon, Aurora Melander, the chauffeur the god Pan. And I saw myself, Tony Sapphire, Raymond Mayo, Fairchild de Mille and the other members of the colony.

Leaving the friezes, I made my way out past the pool. It was now evening, and through the open doorway were the distant lights of Vermilion Sands, the headlights sweeping along the Stars reflected in the glass roof tiles of my villa. A light wind had risen, stirring the streamers, and as I went down the steps a sudden gust of air moved through the house and caught the door, slamming it sharply behind me. The loud report boomed through the house, a concluding statement upon the whole sequence of fantasy and disaster, a final notice of the departure of the enchantress.

As I walked back across the desert the last streamers were moving over the dark sand. I strode firmly through them, trying to re-assemble my own private reality again, the fragments of Aurora Day's insane poems catching the dying desert light as they dissolved about my feet, like the fading debris of a dream.

Reaching the villa, I saw that the lights were on. I raced inside, to my astonishment discovered the tall blonde figure of Tristram stretched out lazily in a chair on the terrace, an ice-filled glass in one hand.

He eyed me genially, before I could speak winked broadly and put a forefinger to his lips.

I stepped over to him. "Tristram," I whispered hoarsely. "I thought you were dead. What on earth happened down there?"

He smiled at me. "Sorry, Paul, I had a hunch you were watching. Aurora got away, didn't she?"

I nodded. "Their car was too fast for the Chevrolet. But weren't you hit by one of the rays? I saw you fall, I thought you'd been killed outright."

"So did Aurora. Neither of you know much about rays, do you? Their stings are passive in the on season, old chap, or nobody would be allowed in there." He grinned at me. "Ever hear of the myth of Melander and Corydon?"

I sat down weakly on the seat next to him. In two minutes he explained what had happened. Aurora had told him of the myth, and partly out of sympathy for her, and partly for amusement, he had decided to play out his role. All the while he had been describing the danger and viciousness of the rays he had been egging Aurora on deliberately in the arena, and had provided her with a perfect opportunity to stage his sacrificial murder.

"It *was* murder, of course," I told him. "Believe me, I saw the glint in her eye. She really wanted you killed."

Tristram shrugged. "Don't look so shocked, old boy. After all, poetry is a serious business."

Raymond and Tony Sapphire knew nothing of what had happened. Tristram had put together a story of how Aurora had suffered a sudden attack of claustrophobia, and rushed off in a frenzy.

"I wonder what Aurora will do now," Tristram mused. "Her prophecy's been fulfilled. Perhaps she'll feel more confident of her own beauty. You know, she had a colossal sense of physical inadequacy. Like the original Melander, who was surprised when Corydon killed himself, Aurora confused her art with her own person."

I nodded. "I hope she isn't too disappointed when she finds poetry is still being written in the bad old way. That reminds me, I've got twenty-five pages to fill. How's your VT set running?"

"No longer have one. Wrecked it the morning you phoned up. Haven't used the thing for years."

I sat up. "Do you mean that those sonnets you've been sending in are all hand-written?"

"Absolutely, old boy. Every single one a soul-grafted gem."

I lay back groaning. "God, I was relying on your set to save me. What the hell am I going to do?"

Tristram grinned. "Start writing it yourself. Remember the prophecy. Perhaps it will come true. After all, Aurora thinks I'm dead."

I cursed him roundly. "If it's any help I wish you were. Do you know what this is going to cost me?"

After he had gone I went into the study and added up what copy I had left, found that there were exactly twenty-three pages to fill. Oddly enough that represented one page for each of the registered poets at Vermilion Sands. Except that none of them, apart from Tristram, was capable of producing a single line.

It was midnight, but the problems facing the magazine would take every minute of the next twenty-four hours, when the final deadline expired. I had almost decided to write something myself when the telephone rang. At first I thought

it was Aurora Day—the voice was high and feminine—but it was only Fairchild de Mille.

“What are you doing up so late?” I growled at him. “Shouldn’t you be getting your beauty sleep?”

“Well, I suppose I should, Paul, but do you know a rather incredible thing happened to me this evening. Tell me, are you still looking for original hand-written verse? I started writing something a couple of hours ago, it’s not bad really, about Aurora Day as a matter of fact. I think you’ll like it.”

Sitting up, I congratulated him fulsomely, noting down the lineage.

Five minutes later the telephone rang again. This time it was Angel Petit. He too had a few hand-written verses I might be interested in. Again, dedicated to Aurora Day.

Within the next half hour the telephone rang a score of times. Every poet in Vermilion Sands seemed to be awake. I heard from Macmillan Freebody, Robin Saunders and the rest of them. All mysteriously that evening had suddenly felt the urge to write something original, in a few minutes had tossed off a couple of stanzas to the memory of Aurora Day.

I was musing over it when I stood up after the last call. It was 12.45, and I should have been tired out, but my brain felt keen and alive, a thousand ideas running through it. A phrase formed itself in my mind, and I quickly picked up my pad and wrote it down, then found myself chasing another word-train.

Time seemed to dissolve. Within five minutes I had produced a beautifully turned sonnet, the first piece of verse I had written for over ten years. Behind it a dozen more lay just below the surface of my mind, waiting like gold in a loaded vein to be brought out into daylight.

Sleep would wait. I reached for another sheet of paper, then noticed a letter on the desk to the IBM agency in Red Beach, enclosing an order for three new VT sets.

Smiling to myself, I tore it gratefully into a dozen pieces.

—J. G. Ballard

STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

Fitz-James O'Brien was one of the great pioneers of the American short story. He was a contemporary of Poe and Hawthorne and his style was distinguished without being pretentious, though he died too young to produce more than a handful of science fiction classics.

10. Fitz-James O'Brien

by Sam Moskowitz

Any serious student of American letters, asked to name the half-dozen writers of the nineteenth century who exerted the greatest influence upon the development of the American short story, would be most unlikely to omit Fitz-James O'Brien. In all honesty, he would have to admit that O'Brien's high standing as a practitioner of the short story was earned primarily on the basis of the science fiction he wrote, secondarily on his works of fantasy and horror and on his other works, not at all.

His most famous story, *The Diamond Lens*, became the literary sensation of the year when it appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* for January, 1858. The story deals with a young microbiologist, who, in his thirst for knowledge, is frustrated by the limitations of his instrument. To find a way of constructing a superior one, he consults, through a medium, the

spirit of Leeuwenhoek, known as the father of microscopy. Informed that he needs a diamond of 140 carats in order to construct a finer instrument, he obtains such a stone by killing a close friend who owns one.

Through a special lens, ground from the diamond, he views in a drop of water a microscopic world of surpassing beauty. In that tiny cosmos, his attention is drawn to a humanlike female creature he names Animula. He falls hopelessly, despairingly in love with the small unattainable woman, whose grace and delicacy make the most accomplished women dancers of the ballet appear gross and clumsy by comparison.

Though the drop of water containing the fantastic, minute world was coated in oil of turpentine to insure its protection, it gradually evaporates, Helpless to do anything about it, the young scientist watches his beloved Animula shrivel and die.

Shattered by the experience, he loses the will to work and spends the rest of his life on public charity. Occasionally he is invited to lecture at optical societies, where his theories are always regarded as good for a laugh.

The tale carries the reader along with such verve, displays such a richness of imagination and engenders so high an interest, that it is little wonder that the editor of *Atlantic* felt that he could claim sole credit for publishing an original work of fiction which was destined to change the entire direction of American short-story writing.

This claim was not completely without substance, for though O'Brien did not write with the brilliant economy of means and accomplished style of Edgar Allan Poe, he did add an effective note of credibility to his stories by placing them in the familiar setting of the New York City of his day. The result was the beginning of a trend which the famous critic, Arthur Hobson Quinn, in his book *American Fiction* termed "The Transition to Realism." That O'Brien was able to contribute to and profoundly influence a trend towards realism with stories of scientific extrapolation is impressive evidence of his originality and literary skill.

Fitz-James O'Brien was not to be permitted to enjoy the plaudits of the critics for long. No sooner did *The Diamond Lens* achieve wide popular recognition, than O'Brien was accused of having derived the theme of his story from an unpublished manuscript by Williams North, entitled

Microcosmus. Since North was dead and the manuscript in question was not found among his effects, the accusation could not readily be confirmed or disputed. As a result, O'Brien found himself trying to stamp out rumours that were springing up everywhere like prairie fires.

Finally, Dr. Alfred H. Guernsey, editor of *Harper's*, came to O'Brien's defence by publicly stating that he had read North's manuscript, which had previously been submitted to him and rejected, and that there was not the remotest similarity in the handling of the microscopic world theme by the two authors. North's manuscript was never found, so the science fiction world lost a story of historical interest, if not of significant literary importance.

The long-range influence of *The Diamond Lens* is nowhere better displayed than in the great number of similar stories which were submitted to editors after Ray Cummings' *The Girl in the Golden Atom* appeared in *All Story Magazine* for March 15, 1919.

What of Fitz-James O'Brien himself—his origin, background and life?

O'Brien was born in Ireland on December 31, 1828, the son of a well-to-do lawyer. Even as a youth his stories and poems were published in Irish, Scottish and British magazines. He squandered an inheritance of eight thousand pounds in two and one half years. Following an unsuccessful attempt to run off with the wife of an English officer, he fled to the United States. He arrived in December 1852, and within a few short months succeeded in placing poems and stories in several American publications.

His earliest reputation rested largely on his somewhat flowery poetry and for some years his verse was lavishly praised by the critics of the period. When William Winter put together the first hard-cover volume of his work—it was published by James R. Osgood and Co. of Boston in 1881 under the title of *The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien*—the poetry was placed ahead of the fiction and occupied nearly half of the book.

The literary downgrading of his poetry came quickly, however. In the second edition of the book under the title *The Diamond Lens and Other Stories*, published in 1885 by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, all the poems were omitted.

In the United States, O'Brien lived the life of a true Bohemian, almost as if he considered Bohemianism inseparable from the literary accomplishments of a true man of letters. He never married, or worried where his next dollar was coming from and he played literary God to the aspiring writers of his circle. He was welcome in the better social as well as literary circles. His literary career in the United States lasted only ten years.

When the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the Union army and was wounded in one of the earliest skirmishes. His wound became infected and he died shortly after an operation in which part of his left arm and shoulder were removed. The date of his death was April 6, 1862. O'Brien, then a lieutenant, was only thirty-three years old!

While *The Diamond Lens* derived much of its form from Poe and Hawthorne, *The Wondersmith*, another highly admired short story, which first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* for October 1859, was patterned after the style of E. T. A. Hoffman. The tale is a superbly atmospheric blend of science and fantasy, so individualistic that it remains unique of its type in American literature.

The use of wooden manikins which can perform many of the actions of a human being make this tale historically important as one of the earliest robot stories. What no one has ever mentioned is the debt A. Merritt's classic horror-fantasy *Burn Witch Burn!* owes to this story. Not only the basic plot, but the other devices—the fiendish, soulless devil dolls; the evil mover behind the scenes; the tiny, needle-like weapons dipped in poison, employed by the dolls; the malevolent eyes of the manikins—are all so similar to those in *The Wondersmith* as to make coincidence unlikely.

In *The Wondersmith*, there is a truly memorable scene in the battle between the 'Lilliputian assassins' and two caged, talking Mino birds. During the battle, in which the Mino birds had inflicted heavy casualties on their murderous adversaries, they are outflanked: "Quick as lightening the Mino turned to repel this assault, but all too late; two slender quivering threads of steel crossed in his poor body, and he staggered into a corner of the cage. His white eyes closed, then opened; a shiver passed over his body, beginning at his shoulder-tips and dying off in the extreme tips of the wings; he gasped as if for air, and then, with a convulsive shudder, which ruffled all his feathers, croaked out feebly his little

speech. 'What'll you take?' Instantly from the opposite corner came the gurgle, as it were, of 'Brandy and water.' Then all was silent. The Mino birds were dead."

Earlier the same year, the March issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* had carried O'Brien's story *What Was It? A Mystery*, which is a well conceived, almost documentary account of a man who is attacked by an invisible creature and who, after a terrific battle, subdues it. A plaster cast is made of the mysterious thing, which reveals a humanlike form with a hideous face. The creature refuses to eat any food set before it and starves to death, carrying its mystery to the grave with it.

Chronologically, this story precedes Guy de Maupassant's *The Horla* and Ambrose Bierce's *The Damned Thing*, both with very similar plots. There is strong internal evidence that Bierce drew heavily upon the idea and techniques of presentation of *What Was It?* in composing his own story. It is extremely doubtful that de Maupassant was actually influenced by O'Brien, since there is no bibliographical record of O'Brien's story being translated into French. It is more likely that the invisible creature in *The Horla* was de Maupassant's symbolisation of the mental twilight that he knew was encroaching and eventually did engulf him completely.

Probably the least known of all of O'Brien's science fiction stories is *How I Overcame My Gravity*. This story may have been the last piece of fiction by that author to appear in print. It was published anonymously, more than two years after his death in the May, 1864 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and was never reprinted until *Satellite Science Fiction* resurrected it for its June, 1958 number.

While marred by the use of a dream ending, which is now virtually taboo in science fiction writing, the story is nevertheless skilfully written. It has a distinct historical importance for suggesting the gyroscopic principle as a possible antigravity method and for advancing the theory that a weightless object, hurled hard enough by a catapult, might travel away from the earth forever.

Had O'Brien dared just a little more in the direction of this line of reasoning, he might have preceded Edward Everett Hale, by a few years, as the first human being to

suggest in either fact or fiction, the concept of an artificial earth satellite. As it was, O'Brien might very well have sparked Hale's thinking along such lines, since both were contributors to the same periodicals during the same period and it is more than likely that Hale read most of O'Brien's output.

Another Hale—Edward Everett Hale's sister, Lucretia Peabody—has involved the name of Fitz-James O'Brien in a literary mystery that still has not been solved to everyone's complete satisfaction. A set of books published in 1884 titled *Stories by American Authors*, carries as the lead story in Volume 3, a tale entitled *The Spider's Eye*. This story, originally published anonymously (as were most stories of that period) first appeared in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* for July, 1856 and dealt with the possibility of reading people's thoughts through acoustics.

The entire plan and development of the story and even some of the phrases seem typically O'Brien's and a pattern can be shown in the plotting similar to that of *The Diamond Lens*, which appeared two years later. When the story was included in *Stories by American Authors*, O'Brien was given credit for authorship both on the front binding cloth and inside the book. However, a second edition of the set, published in 1898, attributes the story to Lucretia P. Hale, who made her reputation writing charming juveniles such as *The Peterkin Papers* and books on crocheting like *Faggots for the Fireside*.

Were it not for the fact that Lucretia P. Hale has written at least one other fantasy, which appears to be incontestably her own, the story in question could probably be listed without challenge as one of O'Brien's. It is a story, whose imagination and execution would bring him no discredit.

The facts of the matter are that Lucretia P. Hale has had published under her own name, in both *Atlantic Tales* and in a separate book, *Queen of the Red Chessboard*, a fantasy bearing the last mentioned title. In its original, anonymous publication, in the February, 1858 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, only a month after the appearance of O'Brien's smash success, *The Diamond Lens*, in that same magazine, *Queen of The Red Chessboard*, judged by its adroit writing and perfect short story form, could easily have been mistaken for a work of the transplanted Irish author.

The story is a slickly written fantasy of a chess queen who turns into a real woman and is followed into the real world by the White Prince, who has held her prisoner on the chessboard. Given the choice of marrying a real human and remaining free, she chooses to return to the chessboard as a prisoner of her White Prince.

Internal evidence in the story would have made its classification as one of O'Brien's very likely, since there is one passage which remarkably expresses the basic idea of *The Diamond Lens*, as follows: "Is all this beauty around you created merely for you—and the other insects about us? I have no doubt it is filled with invisible life."

This fantasy demonstrates that Lucretia Hale was perfectly capable of writing a short story of the calibre of *The Spider's Eye*. It seems probable that when that story was collected for the book, it was understandably mistaken for one of O'Brien's works. The error was undoubtedly spotted by Miss Hale who probably saw to it that a correction was made in the second edition.

Perhaps this controversy may have a salutary effect and result in unearthing other stories of a similar nature by Miss Hale, so that she will at least be considered when appraisals of American fantasy writers are made.

The Golden Ingot by Fitz-James O'Brien (1858) may ring familiar to some, since it was adapted to television only a few years back. It tells of an old scientist, searching for a way to turn baser metals into gold, who believes he has succeeded when one morning he finds a gold ingot in his crucible. He dies of a stroke upon learning that his daughter, in order to make him happy, has saved her money and secretly purchased a gold ingot. While almost a bit too direct and bare and containing a note of the over-melodramatic, the story is nevertheless an effective one.

Among the better known fantasies of Fitz-James O'Brien is *The Lost Room* (1858), which tells of a man who leaves his room on an errand; then returns to find it filled with strangers, and the furniture changed. Unable to prove it is his room, he tosses dice for it and loses. He is ejected. When he tried to regain entrance there is only a blank wall and he never again finds his room. This story has inspired the writing of dozens of others on similar themes. Despite some not-too-convincing dialogue on the part of the lead character, the overall effect is powerful and memorable.

One of the most charming and delightful fantasies woven by O'Brien is *The Dragon Fang Possessed by the Conjurer Piou-Lu* (1856). In modern times, only Frank Owen has come as close to capturing the complete essence and mood of Chinese story-telling. This tale of a Chinese conjurer is strikingly successful and truly outstanding.

If there was any factor that characterised O'Brien's talent it was his professional versatility. This is aptly displayed by his mastery of the standard ghost story gambit in *The Pot of Tulips* (1855). In that story the ghost of a man who hid evidence of his wealth, so that a child he thought was not his own would fail to inherit his property, returns from the grave to remedy his error by pointing out the hiding place of his legacy. It is a good story of its kind, strongly reminiscent of another great Irish fantast, Sheridan Le Fanu.

A beautifully wrought weird prose pastel by O'Brien *The Child Who Loved a Grave*, was never reprinted since its original anonymous publication in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for April, 1861, until Groff Conklin included it in his paper-bound collection *The Graveyard Reader* in 1958. It tells of the unhappy boy of drunken and bickering parents, who forms an attachment for the quiet grave of a child. He gains solace by spending time there. When it develops that the grave belongs to a member of nobility, it is dug up and the remains removed overseas. Deprived of his only source of comfort, the boy before going to bed that night, tells his father that he is going to die and begs that he be buried in the newly opened grave. The next morning the father finds him dead.

It is quite possible that O'Brien may have written one of the earliest surrealistic fantasies in *From Hand to Mouth* which was originally serialised in *The New York Picayune* during 1858. Disembodied eyes, ears, hands and mouths fill a hotel room in this story, which, though skilfully composed in a style of startling modernity and decided impact, loses the reader with situations so complex, that no one can figure them out, not even the author, who never finished the last instalment.

The publisher of the weekly, Frank H. Bellew finally completed the story himself. Despite this, *From Hand to Mouth* was twice reprinted in book form, once in 1868 in *Good Stories* and again in *Famous Stories*, believed to have been issued in 1879. In any form, it remains a collector's item.

Other stories by Fitz-James O'Brien, worth mentioning for their elements of the supernatural or horror are *The Bohemian* (1885), which employs hypnotism to induce extra sensory perception. Though the devices of the story are dated, a number of passages are sheer poetry. *Jubal, the Ringer* (1858), concerns a bellringer who employs a flock of bats to loosen the plaster binding the stones of his belfry, then utilizes the acoustical vibrations of his bell to bring the stones crashing down into the church, killing himself and the woman he loves (who is marrying another), together with the marriage procession. *A Terrible Night* (1856) is a suspense story where a man kills his best friend as a result of a fear-induced nightmare. The wife in *Mother of Pearl* (1860), kills her child and attempts to kill her husband while under the influence of dope.

O'Brien's failing, from the long-term literary view, was that he was *too* talented, too versatile and too conscious of what the market of his period preferred.* O'Brien was a true professional—whether in story, essay, poem, song, play or critique, he could usually strike the mood of the times and give the editors and the public just what they wanted. Making a sale was not his problem.

The result was that if O'Brien depended upon his general fiction and verse for his standing among American authors, anything more elaborate than a footnote in a general history of literature would have been an act of courtesy.

Only when he turned to science fiction or fantasy did he begin to display the full force of his truly outstanding talents. At such times his interest in the subject matter compelled him to write with his mind on the story instead of the editor or the public. Though his output of such work was small, the average quality is truly remarkable and its far-reaching influence is still visible in the field of science fiction and fantasy today.

—Sam Moskowitz

* A comprehensive picture of the life and writings of Fitz-James O'Brien, including his poetry and non-fantasy can be obtained by reading Francis Wollé's biography and bibliography titled *Fitz-James O'Brien*, a work of top-rank scholarship.

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