

Science Fantasy

BURNETT SWANN, KEITH ROBERTS
LANGDON JONES, PHILIP WORDLEY



SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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Editorial by Kyril Bonfiglioli

C. E. Montague, the 'fiery particle' who turned the *Manchester Guardian* into a great paper, once wrote that all good writers are either 'putters-in' or 'takers-out'. The first sort build a phrase round a 'boss-word', a sentence round a key-phrase, form paragraphs of carefully-matched sentences, and inlay them with epithets until their colour and texture is exactly what they envisage. T. B. Swann, whose final serial draws to a close in this number, is surely one of these: one could no more trim down his work without damaging it hopelessly than one could clip a few inches off the side of a good painting. The other sort—the 'takers-out'—tend to work as Kipling did, by pouring out the whole of their narrative as it comes to them, using every epithet that occurs, then putting the whole thing away for a few weeks. Reading the MS again with a clear mind, one finds, if one is honest with oneself, that at least a quarter can be excised. This process can be repeated until there is not an ounce of surplus fat on the story and the result is a crispness and tautness which cannot be acquired otherwise. (Kipling used a camel-hair brush and a pot of Indian ink for his deletions.)

Keith Roberts, I suspect, must work in some such way: his astringent little tale in this issue would have spread, in the hands of many other writers, over three times as many pages, yet every necessary word is there and the background, though only suggested, is as real as though he had lavished description on it. Incidentally, this versatile man is also responsible for our current cover, which heralds his latest story in the Anita series, due next month.

The rest of this issue is, I rather think, well up to standard. Alistair Bevan repeats his former success with "The Typewriter", Langdon Jones gives us a long-player—"The Empathy Machine", there is another strange imagining of Johnny Byrne's and Douglas Davis puts a **new** twist on the time-safari—one of my favourite science-fiction topics.

There is a very promising crop of newcomers: Philip

Wordley, Patricia Hocknell and Roger Jones: let us devoutly hope that they are all stayers for science-fiction must, I feel, receive a constant flow of new blood if it is to grow, rather than just stay alive.

We have now, as promised, taken the plunge and gone monthly, as have **NEW WORLDS**, and have a great collection of fine material on the line for the next few issues, including long stories by Harry Harrison, Robert Wells, John Rackham and—back from his Balkan wanderings—Brian Aldiss.

—Kyril Bonfiglioli

PRESENT FROM THE PAST

by Douglas Davis

The place was miles from anywhere. They drove him in a high-speed aircar across the moors, the cushioning jets tumbling the wild grasses in an undulating dance, leaving a trembling trail like birds' feathers rippled and ruffled in a sudden breeze.

The white concrete dome of the Chronotransporter Research Department moved into view from behind a low hill, outlined against the pencil scribble of rain-heavy clouds. Nearer, and he saw that it was completely encircled by a high wall.

At the gate they were stopped by a guard. A flutter of paper, a few words from the driver, and the massive steel shutters moved apart with the noise of an angry bee. The aircar's retracted wheels were down; the vehicle rolled across the wide courtyard and stopped before a door in the side of the dome.

He was ushered quickly and quietly into a small reception office. The official there interrogated him laconically and unemotionally, checking off the details with a thick sheaf of papers.

"Your name, please?"

"Doctor William Messenger." Messenger, tired after the non-stop journey from London, was beginning to feel a little irritable. After more than six months of negotiation with the Chrono Department—six months of application, re-application, interviews, security and medical check-ups and form-filling—he was almost ready to drop the whole business. No use protesting—he'd been warned by everyone that the Chrono Department was up to its ears in red tape and security.

"Your profession?"

"Palaeontologist."

"Your business?" Well, they knew more about *that* than he knew himself. However . . .

Wearily, he told the official the facts that were already set down in the sheaf of papers. His field of research?

"I'm making a special study of prehistoric amphibians and reptiles, specifically the Cynodontia." (Now ask me how you spell *that*, he thought, staring balefully at the bent head of the civil servant. But there was no need—it was all written down on the forms).

A few seconds later Messenger was ushered into a larger, plusher office. This time the reception was very different. The grey-haired Director welcomed him with palpable non-Department friendliness—embellished, moreover, with sherry and martini. He was introduced to high ranking Chrono officials and technicians. They went over the details again with a refreshing lack of official atmosphere—and now Messenger realized that the last strand of red tape had been cut. The real business was beginning.

Destination, Lower Triassic. Geographical location, South Africa. Objective, observation of mammals. (Messenger jibbed a little at "mammals", but the Director laughed. "We've got enough jargon of our own," he said. "Can't expect us to observe your scientific subtleties. These things you're going to look at are animals to all intents and purposes—and *that's* mammals to us.") The period of the visit was to be twelve hours. Messenger was to use one of the new solo transporters—a sort of do-it-yourself version of the big, fully manned Chronotransporter. The solo machine was ideal for his kind of project—a short observational visit with perhaps a brief period outside. The machine was equipped with easily-handled controls, full to the hilt with fail-safe devices, and on automatic recall to the Chrono dome.

"Safe as houses," said the Director. "But watch your step, doctor. The Triassic is a rough period. Nothing like the Silurian or Ordovician. Cephalopods and primitive fish are pretty straightforward compared with reptilian life. Still—don't need to tell you your business. You know more

about it than I do." Messenger smiled to himself. It was the first occasion in the six-months' ordeal by officialdom that the Department had condescended to admit that he knew anything at all.

But now that he had got through the red tape, Messenger had to admit to himself that he was lucky. Back Travel—the official term—was a hopeless dream for anyone but a top-ranking scientist. In the couple of years in which the system had been perfected and the Chrono Department set up, fewer than a dozen people had succeeded in convincing the Department that their particular line of research would benefit from Back Travel. Messenger was the latest recruit to this highly exclusive group.

For the rest of that day he familiarized himself with the transporter.

They gave him a mild anaesthetic to bolster him against what the Director called "acceleration stress". Then he was lying on his back on an extremely comfortable divan inside the transporter, his awareness gradually diminishing as the drug took effect; but he was none the less amused at the last-minute scurrying of technicians in and out of the circular room. A little while after, he realized he was alone. A faint humming, very far away it seemed, now came to his ears. A dim blue light glowed overhead. Drowsy, Messenger made an effort to concentrate. Opposite the divan, a desk console built into the wall, a few pinpricks of ruby light winking from its panel. Sliding doors that concealed banks of electronics, apparatus and stores. An armchair in the very centre of the floor. A large television screen. But his brain refused any longer to attend to these details. Instead, he found himself pleurably contemplating the prospect of composing a paper—a brilliant paper—on the Cynodontia. On Cynognathus in particular, with any luck.

Cynognathus, the dog-shaped animal with dog-like teeth; not perhaps as impressive as any of the bug-eyed monsters that the Saurischia or the Ornithischia could produce—Cynognathus was no snake-necked dinosaur—but a very handsome brute none the less. Or a very ugly brute if you

liked. The British Museum had the fossil remains of several. Most of the Cynodontia were mammal-like reptiles not much more than twelve inches long, but old Cynog was an eight-footer or thereabouts. Short-legged, heavily built, a thumping great tail—this was the evidence of the fossils. Half a reptile, half a mammal; representing (he thought dreamily) a very interesting phase indeed. Regard (he said to himself, thinking of that brilliant paper) the combination of Gorgonopsian and Therocephalian features . . . oh, yes, a very interesting phase indeed . . . the vestigial features are most revealing and the mammalian tooth differentiation, four incisors, one canine, five premolars and four molars . . . on each side, if you please . . . a carnivore, of course . . . but a most interesting phase, most interesting . . .

He awoke in darkness. But when he had blinked for a few seconds he realized it was not quite dark. Then that it was becoming steadily lighter. Not, however, because of the dim blue glow from the roof of the transporter. Something else. He turned his head, raising himself on his elbow, and found himself facing the three-foot television screen.

Dawn. It was dawn outside. But a wild dawn, this. A sky slashed with ripples of flaming orange and cobalt violet, with acid yellows and greens tumbled in a sea of velvet blue and black and purple. A sick dawn that threatened to spew the sun out of the tormented sky.

He rubbed his eyes and swung himself to the edge of the divan, scanning the big screen. Turning the dial below the screen, he swung the camera control so that it made a circular sweep of the entire surroundings of the transporter. The same on all sides. The wild sky potent with cosmic forces. An abstract of angry colours squeezed violently on to the canvas of the clouds. A dawn that broke one hundred and eighty million years ago.

Messenger gaped at the scene.

The sun had been thinly obscured by cloud, but now a flame seemed to cut the cirrus with a sudden whiplash, and a streak of lightning-bright orange-yellow ripped across the sky. The boiling Triassic sun burst out and flooded the

screen with dazzling light. For a second, Messenger recoiled as from a great heat—but then realized there was none, none that could be experienced in the transporter, at any rate.

Soon all traces of the violent dawn vanished. The sun shone in a clear milky blue sky. An hour later, after a breakfast conjured from the manipulation of a panel of buttons, Messenger was assessing the situation as he sat at the desk console. So far as he could judge, the transporter had come to rest at the foot of a steep hill. To one side was an open stretch of sandy sun-baked ground sparsely dotted with small islands of fronded vegetation. Beyond this, the edge of a forest—more likely a jungle—of tall palm-like trees. This stretched away to right and left of Messenger's view without a break. Swinging the camera around to face the opposite semicircle, he saw the steep hillside. There were tumbled boulders at its foot, near the transporter itself; a few fern-leaved trees on the lower slopes. The open areas of ground appeared to be sandy; he could see how the wind swept eddies of yellow dust off the surface. But there was no sign of life of any kind. No bird flickered or flapped above the tree tops. Nothing crawled, walked or hopped over the arid soil. But Messenger was convinced that the location was right; fossil remains of the Cynodontia were most common in the Karroo Sandstone formation of South Africa.

He waited.

Within ten minutes he had spotted his first Triassic creature—an armour-headed reptile that waddled slowly out of the jungle; an amphibian, for water dripped from its scaly sides. There was probably a pool or swamp concealed behind the trees. Messenger kept the video camera running continuously, determined to secure a complete film record. He made up a snack lunch and ate it before the screen, dropping his fork occasionally to grab a pencil and make notes. And he was kept busy: several small Cynodonts turned up soon after the armour-headed creature had vanished into the trees again.

Some time later he was watching a small creature, something like a lizard or iguana. It scuttled out from behind a

rock and dodged into a tuft of spear-like grasses. Messenger lost it after a while, but almost immediately another lizard of the same type jerked across the sand and began sending up scurries of yellow dust as it poked about. Messenger became intrigued by the darting creature and began making a quick sketch of it. "There, that's the head—yes, a bit like an iguana—scaly back, bluish brown colouring. Let's have a look at those feet . . . um, yes . . ."

A dark shape lunged across the screen. The little lizard seemed to turn a somersault and shoot out of view. "What the hell!" said Messenger and turned the tracking knob. What he saw made him tremble with excitement.

Cynognathus.

The beast filled the centre of the screen. This was the real thing, and a big fellow, too—a six-footer at least. Messenger's mind grappled with impressions. A long, low body, scaly like a crocodile, a huge thick tail tapering to a point that brushed the ground, short stumpy scale-covered legs with huge claws pressed into the sand, a small wedge-shaped dog-like head, red pin-point eyes. The mouth—Messenger shuddered a little—was champing on the remains of the lizard. The canine teeth were all too obvious.

Almost bemused, Messenger stared at the reptile, saw the lizard finished off, saw Cynog turn its ugly head so that its features were fully seen in all their repulsiveness. Then it moved slowly out of view.

Messenger pulled himself together and cursed, his fingers reaching for the tracking knob. Good! Cynog was in full view again, ambling across the sand, still well out in the open with the dark background of the forest beyond. Messenger tracked the creature diligently. Now the hillside came into view. Cynog was apparently moving around the transporter and probably aware of its presence, for occasionally it turned its head so that it appeared to be staring directly at Messenger.

"What a fantastic brute!" Messenger—he had forgotten the eaten lizard now—could not help admiring the creature. With a bubbling enthusiasm, he told himself that he was a lucky man. The Chrono Department hadn't ceased to emphasise that he might see nothing worth seeing, that they

couldn't guarantee a thing. But now Messenger felt he could cheerfully forgive them all the red tape he had endured.

Damn! The reptile had vanished again. The hillside with its piled boulders was still on the screen, but no Cynog. Messenger moved the tracking knob slowly, all the way round, until he faced the jungle backcloth. Still no Cynog. Then back again slowly to the hillside. Ah! There he was, half hidden behind a cluster of rocks. Messenger's fingers tightened on the control. Then Cynog moved completely out of sight behind the rocks. For a full minute Messenger trained the camera on the spot, but the reptile stayed hidden.

It was at this point that Messenger decided to go outside. It was, he knew, perfectly safe to do so. And he had good reasons. It was not enough to say he had seen a perfect specimen of Cynognathus; he wanted to be able to say he had seen it with his own eyes, not with those of the camera. And he wanted a reasonable estimate of its size, a better one than the screen could give. Moreover, he realized, he wanted to see, smell and experience that raw prehistoric day outside.

Preparations were simple enough. Leaving the camera pointed to the rock cluster, and glancing at the screen from time to time, he slipped on the emergency pack provided, and strapped on the powerful handgun that was more than capable of stopping Tyrannosaurus or Diplodocus, let alone the comparatively small Cynog.

Determined though he was, Messenger now became aware of his nervousness as he looked again at the scene on the screen. Was Cynog asleep behind those rocks, or had he slipped away? There had been no movement since the creature had vanished, although Messenger had spotted one or two small reptiles moving slowly together far over on the hillside. He moved to the console and poised his hand over the button that would set the exit doors sliding apart. He hesitated—then jabbed his finger down on the button.

The air was very hot, the sun blinding. Messenger stood

in the open doorway, glancing nervously about him. He had emerged with the cluster of rocks almost exactly ahead of him, and the scene was exactly as he had seen it on the screen. But out here there was no automatic air-conditioning; it was hot, almost unbearably hot, even half in the shelter of the doorway. Messenger screwed up his eyes against the glare and stepped gingerly on to the ochrous dust of Triassic Africa. The silence astounded him; there came to his ears only the faint rustle of leaves in the mild breeze and the shuffle of his booted feet in the dust.

It struck him suddenly that he had not the least idea what he intended to do. Suppose that Cynog was indeed behind those rocks? And suppose that the creature made an attack on him? Messenger had the handgun, but that, as he well knew, was for use only in an emergency, in self-defence. Killing Cynog was just about the last thing he would have thought of. He hoped the creature was behind the rocks and asleep; that way, he could have a good look, preferably while unobserved. That would satisfy him.

His hand on the butt of the gun, he crept slowly towards the rocks, now only a few yards away. It was heavy going because of his protective suit and boots, but he made it at last. The central rock was almost as tall as himself; on either side of it was a clutter of smaller boulders. Nervously, his hand still on the gun, he edged closer to the tall rock, flattened himself against it. For a moment he stood there, hardly daring to move further. Then he straightened and craned forward.

Nothing. There was nothing there. Cynog was gone, and probably gone for good.

The tension broken, Messenger swore. He was determined now to get one last look at Cynog if it were humanly possible. He scanned the rocky hillside that rose up before him, but there was no sign of life of any kind—no, he was wrong, something had moved over to the left . . . but it was only another of the lizard-like creatures.

Messenger turned. The sun's high position in the sky suddenly reminded him of the time. He was about to look at his watch when he became aware of something ahead of him. Something lying on the ground, maybe ten yards

away. Messenger blinked. The sun was in his eyes. He put up his hand to shield them.

Then he went cold with fright. Cynognathus was crouched on the ground, his snarling mouth half open, his pin-point eyes directed at Messenger. A few yards behind the creature stood the transporter, incongruous against the background of untamed jungle.

Messenger was a quiet man, unused to violence, unused, in fact, to anything requiring physical action. Now he began to tremble while his mind struggled against panic. He could make no guess at Cynog's intentions, but the creature was a carnivore—the eaten lizard flashed across his mind. Messenger put a quivering hand on the gun and slowly drew it from the holster. At the same time he began to back away, his left hand feeling for the rock which a short while ago had sheltered the reptile. His feet stumbling against the stones, he edged towards the side of the rock pile, not letting his gaze shift from the still snarling face of Cynog. Then, with a deft movement, he swung himself around and got behind the boulders.

Cynog rose and came slowly forward. His mouth opened and a kind of rumbling grunt came from it. Messenger tensed himself and poked the gun over the chest-high rock, but the barrel was trembling like a wand. If he fired and missed—by god!—he might hit the transporter, immediately behind the creature. He dared not risk causing any damage to the transporter.

Cynog still came forward, very slowly. Messenger could see the clawed feet whisking up the dust.

He glanced quickly behind him. There was another pile of rocks a short way up the hillside, about twenty yards off. With a hasty glance at the still advancing Cynog, Messenger made up his mind to run for it. He turned and pelted for the rocks—faster than he had thought possible in the heavy suit and the thick boots. Gasping, the sweat streaming down his face and into his eyes, he flung himself behind the rocks.

Cynog had come a short way farther and then stopped. The reptile was now looking towards him but making no movement.

Sweating and trembling, Messenger again pointed the gun. If Cynog came after him now, he could blast away without danger to the transporter, which was still visible but no longer in the line of fire. It occurred to him that he might even now send a blast over the reptile's head and scare him off for good. But as his finger moved over the button, Messenger decided to wait. He was in no danger for the moment, and he *was* having a damn good look at Cynognathus—he might as well carry on being a scientist and observe while the going was good. Still panting, he took stock of Cynog's size. The reptile was nearer seven foot in length, he decided, maybe a little more . . .

Suddenly Cynog swung round and began to amble off in the opposite direction. Now that his fright was over, Messenger didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed—a little of both, perhaps. Scared of a weak-kneed palaeontologist, he told himself, craning his neck to see where the creature was going. But the first pile of rocks was obstructing his view again. He could just see Cynog's huge tail disappearing behind the boulders.

Messenger emerged cautiously from behind the rocks and began to move slowly down the hill, his gun at the ready. But now Cynog had vanished again. Still keeping his eyes on the spot where he had last seen the reptile, Messenger moved stealthily down until he was back again by the first rock pile. There were a number of boulders scattered around here; Cynog might have crept behind any one of them. Messenger paused, then began to tread carefully about among the boulders, the gun still in his hand, his finger on the button.

Soon he had covered most of the ground within a short distance of the transporter, and he had a feeling now that he had seen the last of Cynog. He sat down on a low boulder facing towards the jungle and watched the fronded tree-tops moving lazily in the hot breeze. But there was now something nagging at the back of his mind. Something he had forgotten, that he ought not forget. He squinted up at the high sun—and in a sudden wave of panic, he remembered . . .

The time! The time!

He hadn't realized just how long he had been dodging around these rocks in this blinding heat, chasing that damned Cynog. The most elementary precaution of all, and he'd forgotten it. He stumbled to his feet, fumbled at his sleeve, pulled back the cuff and stared at his watch. The face seemed to dance before his eyes.

Fifteen seconds to 12 o'clock.

Fifteen seconds. Now his feet seemed leaden; he was trembling again and soaked with sweat. He raised his eyes and saw the transporter, barely fifty yards away. It seemed to be shimmering in heat haze—or was it just that the sweat was trickling into his eyes and fogging his vision? He stumbled forward, his feet kicking against the stones, sending up showers of dust. His heart was thumping like a drum . . .

Inside the transporter, a tiny green light winked on the console. The clock in the centre of the panel registered 12 noon. There came a soft sighing sound, and the oblong of brilliant sunlight that illuminated the circular room suddenly narrowed and vanished as the doors slid out from the walls and clicked together.

Messenger had stumbled and fallen within a few yards of the doorway. He lay sprawled in the yellow dust, his fingers clawing at the ground.

Inside the Dome, the transporter settled on its ramp. A group of technicians moved forward, the Director among them. He always made a point of personally welcoming back the distinguished Back Travellers. As the doors remained closed, he signalled to a technician to operate the outside control. It was not uncommon for Back Travellers to arrive back sound asleep.

This one was.

Cynognathus, dog-toothed reptilian beast, lay sprawled on the softly-cushioned divan, a dribble of saliva hanging from his jaws, his huge tail draped over the edge.

It was easily the most comfortable cave he had ever found.

—DOUGLAS DAVIS

THE EMPATHY MACHINE

by Langdon Jones

The face that looked back at him from the shaving mirror was alive. All over the face, tiny muscles twitched. There were deep lines scored across the twitching forehead below the silver-streaked hair, and more lines radiated down from the bottom of the nose to branch out round the tightly closed mouth. There were little nests of lines coming from the corners of the eyes, and with every twitch they jerked in a little sympathetic motion.

It was a perfectly ordinary twenty-first century face.

It was a lean face, a face that seemed to be marked by a perpetual hunger. The eyes were deep set, and glowed with a strange, inner light, like a madman's eyes. With every twitch, the face held for a second, the lopsided grin of the idiot, before it relaxed again. The face, strangely enough, looked no different from the way it had looked yesterday. Even though this terrible, earth-shaking resolve had finally been reached, there was no difference. The face was the same one that had always looked out at him.

Making up his mind to kill his wife had made him look no different at all.

He was the same twitching Henry Ronson that he'd always been. The change in his mind was well hidden by the layers of jerking tissue.

Suddenly the surface of the mirror became a mass of oily colours, and then resolved into the smaller image of another man.

"I smoke Pop panatellas," he said. "Do you smoke Pop panatellas? You should smoke Pop panatellas. Why don't you smoke Pop panatellas? Why don't *you* smoke Pop panatellas?" The man blew a puff of smoke which

filled the mirror. "I smoke Pop panatellas for peace—calm—happiness." The smoke cleared, showing a peaceful pastoral scene, while soft banks of violins shimmered in the wood-smoke, sunset air. "You *need* to smoke Pop panatellas too, like me . . . Enjoy *your* moments of peace, like me . . ."

Ronson's twitch grew a little worse. "Peace . . ." he said quietly. BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

B A M !

A softly seductive face filled the mirror.

"Are you a—man?" the girl whispered. She gave a soft little moué, which somehow gave the impression of strange hungers, and a strange mixture of desire and satiation.

"Then you shave with Shaviceam?" she said, licking her lips wetly. Then she moved back suddenly, an expression of surprise on her face. "No? NO?" She didn't say another word, but turned and walked away. As she walked she suddenly made a disgusting noise, and before his eyes dissolved into an old hag, hobbling away.

He felt suddenly sick. There were six more coms to wait before he could have his mirror for completing his shave, and he decided that it wasn't worth the wait. He wiped the cream from his face, trusting that he had covered his face properly. Then he turned and walked towards the bathroom door.

It didn't open.

"Oh, Christ!" he said.

A trio of tiny high voices came from the door.

"Check my relays," sang the door. "Check my relays,
check my relays,
check my relays,
and fit Price's,
and fit Price's,
and fit Price's,
and fit Price's,
and fit Price's."

The house suddenly rumbled as a rocket strained up from the nearby drome. The door swung open, condescend-

ing to let him through. He strode into the other room, his stomach tense. He pushed his hair back nervously, then sat in one of the small armchairs. Immediately the chair began to rock backwards and forwards. He braced his feet on the floor, knowing it was hopeless, and the chair continued to rock.

"Oh stop it! For Christ's sake!"

He leapt to his feet, and then sat on one of the smaller chairs. Suddenly the wall screen flared with light. He cried out, and covered his eyes. The flare died into a picture. It was a woman; not seductive this time, but efficient. As she spoke, certain words were flashed onto the screen as she said them.

"*Ladies*," she said, "have you tried *Esstees*? You'll agree with me that they're the *best* there is. And don't forget, when the *Famly Doktor* comes round, all you have to do is say why you like *Esstees* and answer a simple . . ."

"Oh Jesus," he said, "I'm in hell. I've sinned and died, and I've gone to hell with all the other damned souls. I'm here for eternity. I've got this for ever." Suddenly a chime announced the return of his own, personal Tormenting Demon. A ball of rage rose within him; his fists clenched, his stomach lurched.

". . . and you will agree that *Esstees* are the *best* there is!"

The shoe caught the woman right in the mouth, and the picture broke up as the wall screen shattered. Slivers of screen slid down the walls, and smoke drifted lazily up from the wreckage.

"The best what, for Christ's sake? The best what?"

He was trembling as he sat back in the chair.

At least he had the satisfaction of imagining a slightly reproachful look in the efficient woman's eye as she had broken apart. He hoped that the satisfaction of that would last him through the next ordeal.

"Henry!" came the voice of his wife; his dear, fat, loving wife. "Henry, what have you done?"

"I should think that's perfectly obvious. Even to you. His teeth gritted as he spoke.

As he had spoken, his wife had walked into the room, and she now stood, bewildered.

"There was this woman," he said, "and I got her right in the mouth with my shoe."

Marian walked across the room, and looked down at the wreckage with disbelieving eyes. She sniffed.

"Oh no," he thought, "For God's sake don't cry. I swear I won't be able to stand it if you cry."

His wife had the capacity for crying often and easily. She was one of those women who cry with reproach, a martyred look in their tear-filled eyes. Every time she cried, Ronson hated her all the more.

She didn't cry, however. She looked up with brimming eyes that never quite spilled over.

"Think of the money, Henry," she said quietly, "and look at the mess." She looked up at the black recess in the wall, filled with the silver traceries of the circuit, where the screen had been.

"Oh Henry," she said, "my lovely wall-screen."

"It was worth the money. Just to get that woman in the mouth. And when the police come round to find out why our screen is not operating, well we had a little accident."

"Yes, Henry," she said, and she got down on her knees and began to clear up the fluoroglass.

"Yes, Henry," he mimicked, viciously. He came out of his seat and grabbed her by the shoulders, almost shaking her in his intensity. "Is that all you can say? Haven't you got any fight left in you at all?" She said nothing, just looked at the floor. He pushed her away, then turned and strode from the room. He went to his bedroom and sat down on the bed. He was a fool. Why did he always have to take the bait? She had him just where she wanted him. Her docile approach was calculated—correctly—to inflame him. She knew it and he knew it. It was a gambit that couldn't be broken. How could one win against passivity and tears? He knew that he'd have to go back and apologise, and he could bitterly imagine her smugness when she realised she'd won again. Worst of all, these scenes had no cathartic effect at all.

Pain was still spearing his stomach; his face was still twitching.

Marian's digestion was fine; so was her face, save for the isolated blemish; she loved the coms and the noise and the frenetic competitive hurry. She was insane. And he had to apologise to her. Still, he would grant her this apology as one grants a cigarette to a condemned man. He would avenge all the apologies, all the humiliations in one burst of cathartic, destructive frenzy. She would die; what was one apology more or less?

As he walked back into the room he was almost jaunty.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said, "I don't know what's been coming over me lately."

He put his hand on her shoulder, and she reached up her hands and clasped it, still on her knees.

"That's all right, darling," she said, "we both really need this holiday."

"Yes," he said, "it will be good to get away to Mars; away from this bustle for a while."

For that was where the deed was to be done. Out on the great uncharted deserts of Mars. The planet had been colonised, if one could call a large dome a colony, but there were still vast areas of desert which were uncharted and unexplored. It would be a long time before the body of Marian would be found. There were, he had heard, little patches of soft sand, and if one stepped on them, one would sink as if they were water. All he had to say was that Marian had wandered off and disappeared. As far as they would be concerned, Marian would be buried beneath the soft sand. Well, so she would, but she wouldn't be buried very far. Just far enough to make her discovery long enough delayed.

"It sounds so romantic!" she breathed, and he started, and felt a guilty flush spread over his face.

"Yes," he agreed, "it will be wonderful."

Marian spoke again.

"It will be just like a second honey—" then she abruptly stopped. His mind flashed for something to say to break the heavy silence.

"Yes," he said, "it will be very nice. Expensive, but worth it. Definitely worth it."

A face appeared on a screen by the door; a glamorous female face.

"Someone at the door," sighed the doorbelle, "Use Price's relays."

Ronson turned from his wife, and made for the door. He passed his hand over the release catch, and the door slid open. Outside stood two policemen.

"Mr. Ronson?" asked one of the policemen. His heart pounded in his ears with a kind of premature guilt.

"Yes."

"We notice that your wall screen isn't functioning, sir."

Ronson breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment he had almost expected one of them to say, "We hear that you are planning to kill your wife."

"Er—no. No, it's not. We had a little accident."

One of the policemen indicated something to the other with his truncheon, pointing it down towards Ronson's feet. He looked down and with horror saw that he hadn't yet put on his shoe. The policemen both walked forward, forcing him to retreat down the hall. His thoughts were whirling.

"I bet the little bitch deliberately leaves my shoe in the wreckage!" he thought desperately to himself, knowing that she would. Oh hell! What a situation.

One of the policemen roughly pushed him into the room. Marian was now standing in the centre of the room. And there—and there in a conspicuous position in the centre of the wreckage was his shoe. The bitch!

"All right, lady," said one of the cops, "get out of here," and he pushed her roughly into one of the bedrooms. Ronson felt sick with fear. It was no use trying to fight the cops. They had absolute power. You do what the cops tell you. You don't argue. Not unless you *want* to be beaten up or killed. The cops never came round on their own. There were always two of them. They always carried truncheons and guns.

One of the cops walked across to the wreckage, pretending not to see the shoe.

"Oh dear, sir," he said, "you *have* had an accident, haven't you? A most unfortunate accident. Oh, what an accident, indeed." He pushed at the fluoroglass with his foot, and shook his head sadly. "Still," he continued, "it's lucky that it was an accident, otherwise you would have been in trouble."

"Maybe," thought Ronson wildly, "maybe he *hasn't* seen the shoe!"

But as the wild hope flared, the cop bent down and picked up the shoe.

He walked up to Ronson.

"All right," he said, "you deliberately smashed that screen, didn't you?"

The bitch! He would get her for this!

"No," he said, shakily, "no, I didn't."

"You smashed it, didn't you?"

"No."

"Yes, you did."

"No I didn't."

"Is it your shoe?"

"Yes."

"How did it get there?"

"Well, I—"

"You threw it, didn't you?"

"No."

The policeman suddenly grabbed the front of Ronson's coat, and lifted his fist painfully.

"Don't mess about with me!"

Ronson stayed where he was, not saying anything. He remembered the advice of friends, "the more you fight, the more you'll get hurt; they can't fight someone lying on the floor, they'll just kick a few times and then lose interest." "For God's sake never hit them back. The ones that die; those are the ones that hit them back."

Suddenly the first policeman released his grip on Ronson's coat. He looked across at the other one.

"You know what, Joe?" he said, elaborately and slowly.

"What?"

"I think this guy did it."

"Tut-tut."

"We can't prove anything, though. We can't *prove* it wasn't an accident. He's going to walk around unpunished for this. I think that's bad."

"Unpunished criminals walking about the place," said the other policeman.

Suddenly the first one whirled, and his fist crashed into Ronson's stomach, filling him with white pain. He struggled instinctively to keep upright, to ward off any attack. The policeman in front of him was getting out his truncheon. It was nearly two feet long, and was made of shining ebony. He heard strange noises, and realised that they were coming from him, as he gasped to take a breath. He felt cold sweat running down his face. The policeman turned to look at him, and leisurely raised his truncheon above his head.

There was a sudden high-pitched whistle. The policeman brought the truncheon down half-heartedly, and it glanced from Ronson's head and hit his shoulder, sending him sprawling to the floor. The policeman picked a slim tube out of his pocket and inserted it into his ear. The whistling stopped. He listened for a while, then motioned to the other cop, and they both walked out of the apartment, leaving Ronson lying there on the floor. When he heard the cops finally go, he painfully clambered to his feet. He felt a little stream of blood trickling down the side of his face. He bent almost double with the pain in his stomach.

Suddenly he felt his wife's arm around his shoulders. He felt genuine fear, wondering what she would do while he was thus unprotected. But she did nothing, probably because two attempts at murder in five minutes would be too much of a coincidence. Instead she just murmured into his ear, and he looked round to see tears in her eyes, and spilling a little down her cheeks. "You goddam murdering bitch!" he wanted to say. But his voice was not there any more; now it was all he could do to draw a breath.

"Murderess!" he gasped; but it just came out as a grunt.

"Yes darling," she said.

Later that night in his bedroom, he felt lonely. He felt like being with Sheila. She was a sweet girl, Sheila. She was unintelligent, and her emotions were all of the

most superficial, but she could give him what he had never had from Marian. She would respond to him; she would love him. And if it was only love of a most limited kind, at least it was love. At least, she used to make him feel like a man. Marian had never been a real woman, from the time they had first married. It was strange, really; he was sure that Marian did love him, in her own way.

He knew though, that the only reason that Marian married him was because of the apartment. This three-roomed apartment represented his fortune; not a very great fortune, but a fortune nonetheless. Marian had been poor; she had been raised in a community home. From a life of fifty people to a small hall, a three-roomed apartment just for the two of them was undreamed luxury to her. As it would have been to most people. She probably used to dream about a one-room 8×8 cell, in the gigantic honeycomb of the city. Just enough room for a bed and a cooker. And she had ended up here, in this luxury. A three-room apartment with carpets and automatic doors, and its own toilet. All of which she would get when he died.

She had tried at first to be subtle. To urge him closer and closer towards suicide. Everything that he had done, she had tried to frustrate. In fact her coldness might just have been another thing like this. Still, it didn't matter; now he had Sheila he didn't go to her at night. She had failed. He didn't kill himself. He had suffered too much from the society as it was; the little added things counted for nothing. And so now she had descended to more direct means. It was obvious that she had left his shoe in the wreckage deliberately, hoping that he would be killed by the police. With a shock, he realised that now he was fighting for his own survival. But, with some satisfaction, he remembered that the fight would soon be over.

The wall clock suddenly chimed:—

“It's midnight dead,
it's midnight dead,
not asleep yet?
not asleep yet?”

Stay in bed,
stay in bed,
with sleepihed,
with sleepihed,
sleepihed!

As he walked from the air-lock, Henry Ronson felt supremely happy. There had been a few coms on the rocket, but at least they had been in tolerable quantities. Marian linked her arm in his as they walked down the ramp. He found that the discomfort, and the hissing sound of the nose unit, was disconcerting, but he guessed that he would soon get used to it. The gravity, after his period in free-fall, seemed almost normal, and apart from that it might just have been a cold day at home. But what caused them both to gasp in amazement was the wide space of the desert, that stretched in its flatness for miles around them. For a moment they both felt panic; as city-dwellers the longest distance they were used to was the length of the unit halls, no more than a hundred yards. For a moment they both felt as though they were drowning in the vastness of it all; they felt insecure, as if they would suddenly fall. But slowly the feeling passed, and they were able to look at the scenery more objectively. The desert rolled gently to the horizon. There were some hills, but they were gentle and rounded. The sand was multicoloured. It was mainly red, with yellow streaks, but here and there were patches of green and blue. Despite the coldness of the air, everything gave a terrific impression of—dryness. One could sense that this was a parched land. The sand was soft and dry, the air felt sterile and dead. But it was not as depressing as Henry might have expected. It was dead, but in its deadness it had gained a new kind of beauty. It was the clean, graceful beauty of the skeleton, as opposed to the softness of the flesh. The soft redness of the sand was beautiful; the rounded, dead hills were beautiful, like the dead breasts of a marble statue. It was a timeless land, and it was all his to explore.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" said Marian, and he looked down with a start at his wife; for a moment he had forgotten her. Yes, he felt that Mars was going to be a friend.

"Here is the vehicle," said the attendant, "No. 23. It's giving out a constant signal, so we shall be able to check up on where you are all the time. And remember, check the sand each time before you step out. There are quite a lot of dangerous spots about here."

"You hear that, honey?" Ronson said to Marian. Then he turned to the attendant. "She's always doing silly things." Not true, but Marian didn't say anything. That was good; he could just imagine it at the inquest. It would be one of those little touches that are terribly convincing.

He put the little bag of provisions in the back of the car, and pressed a tip into the ready hand of the attendant. Then he helped Marian into her seat, then stepped over the edge of the oval-shaped car and into the driving seat. He pressed the starting button, and with a whine, the car jerked, then rose smoothly. Now it was even more like a boat as it rode its air cushion, and it bobbed a little as he shifted his weight in the seat. He felt like ironically humming something about Davy Jones, but knew no shanties that would apply. It would be rather a pretentious touch anyway. He pressed his foot gently on the accelerator, and the craft moved forward slowly into the air lock. As soon as the door closed behind him, the one in front began to open, and as he moved the car forward, out of the dome and into the Martian air, their nose-units began their hissing again.

He pressed his foot down even harder, and soon the craft was skimming across the sand at a tremendous rate. Behind them was a giant dust-cloud that had been left by their passing, and the dome was already hidden in the dust.

"Oh boy," he cried, "It's so good to get away from those damn coms!"

"I don't mind them," said Marian, "in fact I miss them in a way."

Marian was not like him. She was a born city-dweller. She had been brainwashed from childhood, and she belonged to the city. Here she was like a fish out of water,

and the thought caused him a malicious gleam of pleasure. He wasn't like her. His mind had been sharpened by the years of struggle to attain his position. Although he suffered, at least his mind was his own. It was strange; people in the city seemed to be divided into two groups. Those like Marian and those like him. Every year there seemed to be more and more like Marian, with their unworried faces, and their complacent expressions. He wondered just how long it would be before the City swallowed up all human thought, and was inhabited by mindless shells in the shape of people.

"Where are we going?" called Marian.

"I don't know where *you're* going, dear," he muttered.

"Pardon?"

He indicated a hill on the horizon. "We'll head for *there*," he said, "that looks interesting. It shouldn't take us too long to get there." And he pushed the pedal down to its fullest extent, and the car skimmed even more swiftly towards the hill. He felt a great exhilaration as the car sped on its way, and he felt down in his left hand pocket, to check on the cool smoothness of the gun. As he fondled the weapon he looked up at his wife's face. She was clearly enjoying the ride; there was a smile on her face, and her eyes were half-closed with the pleasure of the speed. "Enjoy it," he thought, "enjoy it for all you're worth," and he curled his finger lightly around the trigger. She had put on a lot of weight since they had married, and now her face was rounded and puffy. The flesh had swamped her bones, and with the pinkness of her skin, she looked as if she had been fashioned out of some plastic. He felt that were he to lean over and touch her chin, it would be hard and smooth, and it would have plastic sliminess. She ate enormously and indiscriminately, and as a result, her forehead was dotted by little bright red pimples. God, what did I ever see in you! he thought. But her hair was the same; naturally fair, it hung softly down the back of her neck. He wished that the car didn't have a windshield; he would have liked to have seen it streaming out behind her.

Her figure too, despite its plumpness, still had some

measure of grace, and sometimes, watching her, he could still feel some degree of animal desire. It was always unexpected, and always annoying, as he knew that she would never be able to completely satisfy that desire. It was strange; during their courtship, she had been warm and passionate; too much so really. On many occasions they had tottered on the brink of love, and had parted trembling and unhappy. He wondered what would have happened if they had made love before they were married. Would they have got away with it? Imagine being sent to prison for the sake of loving *that!* He remembered how, at the time, the law had seemed so unfair. He wondered just how many couples had taken the risk. It was a thought that made him shudder at the sheer *evilness* of it all. Now he could see the reason for the law. Imagine couples copulating freely, whether they intended marriage or not. He drew his thoughts delicately away from the subject. Sheila now, she was different. She was there to fill a need that could not be filled by his wife. Making love to Sheila was legal, for was it not necessary to his own well-being? In fact when he returned, he would marry Sheila, if he could get a permit. He would marry her for, with his wife dead, their relationship would automatically become illegal. It was either that, or resign himself to celibacy. Things would certainly be different with his wife dead. He hoped desperately that he would be able to get a permit. Somehow he just couldn't visualise celibacy.

He drew his eyes back to the windscreen. They were now almost at the hills. He noticed with surprise that here and there were a few scrubby bushes. Life of any sort was something he just hadn't expected to see here, and he wondered just how much those bushes had been forced to adapt, that they might cling to a last remnant of life. How many hundreds of feet did their roots extend down, to find traces of water?

As the hill rapidly approached, he gently eased the pressure on the pedal, and the car gently began to slow. He saw a little plateau, a small platform below a great cleft in the hill, and he banked the car up on the first rise. Round the car went, following the gentle line of the hill,

until he levelled it out on the plateau itself, and brought it to a gentle halt.

The hill, he now saw, was of a completely different shape from its appearance at the dome. A gigantic "V" was cut out of the centre; a cleft more than a valley, so that the sides were almost two hills. The cleft didn't quite meet at the bottom, and there was a black area extending across, in which could be seen vague details of something below. He looked back the way they had come, and near the horizon he saw the dome, a tiny silver bubble.

He suddenly looked at his wife, as she strained across, trying to see something. He fingered the gun. Should he do it now, or would he give her a little while longer?

"Look!" came his wife's astonished whisper, and he looked in the direction she was watching. For a moment nothing registered, but then he saw it.

It was its size that had made him miss it. It was big, and neither of them had consciously looked at it. If they had seen it out of the corner of their eyes, they would not have realised how incredible it was. On Earth it would have been normal. Here it was impossible.

It was a spire; a white stone spire, and it came up through the black fissure in the ground to tower at least fifty feet in the air, between the hillsides. It was very slim, and it looked delicate and fragile. It was obviously artificial, and yet somehow—different. In the instant he saw it, he knew that, however incredible it seemed, that spire had not been raised by Earth hands. He suddenly felt a cold fear wash down his spine.

"Oh God," he said, "what have we found?"

They both stared for a full five minutes at the spire, as if mesmerised, neither of them speaking. Suddenly Ronson turned to his wife.

"We've got to go down there," he said.

Marian looked round at him wildly.

"No!" she said, fear in her eyes, "we can't. Let's go back and tell them at the dome."

"Don't you realise?" he said impatiently, "if we tell them we shall never see this place again? They'll come out here and seal it off, and all we shall ever see will be

photographs? Can't you see the opportunity we have? Don't you realise what this is?"

"Oh, Henry," she wailed, "I can't; I'm scared!"

"Well, I'll go down alone, then."

"No!" she cried, as he walked away from her, towards the near edge of the cleft. As he strained down, trying to see into the blackness, he heard her scramble up and arrive beside him. Without a word he stood up, and began to walk along the edge of the cleft. At this end of the cleft there was no overhang, but the walls dropped straight down, and it was impossible to get down there without ropes. But as he walked along, he suddenly found a place that seemed a lot more accessible. At some time in the distant past there had been a rockfall over the edge of the cleft. Rocks and boulders were piled up, right up to the edge, and sloped their way down into the darkness, providing, almost, a natural staircase. He swung himself off the edge, and found his footing on the top of the giant rock-pile. Then he began the long climb down, testing each rock before he put his foot on it, and gingerly stepping down and backwards. Marian scrambled ungracefully over the top, and began to follow him, climbing down better than he would have expected. The going got easier and easier as the slope levelled out, and soon the incline had levelled to such an extent that he was able to stop and get to his feet. As he waited for Marian to catch up, he turned, and tried to see what was a little distance below, on the bottom of the cleft. However, it was still too dim to be able to make out anything. He looked upwards then, and saw the narrow strip of dazzling light that was the sky. He could see, then, that what they were in was almost a vast underground chamber. It stretched away a long distance on either side of the strip of light. He drew his eyes away from the light, so that they might become accustomed to the dimness and, as he heard Marian scrambling after him, began walking carefully down the rocky slope.

As he got lower and lower, so more and more became visible. He felt a thrill of excitement as suddenly he began to make out the dim, bleached outlines of more buildings.

How big was this place? As he got still lower, the realisation gradually dawned on him that there was a complete underground community. He could see hundreds of vague, spectral buildings in the dim light that filtered down, but no details were visible at all. Soon he had got to rooftop level. The nearest buildings had been ruined by the rock fall, but here and there, spider trceries hung in the air; curved, delicate buttresses soared; thin, curved walls stood delicately.

"What have we found?" he whispered, and his voice was lost in the vastness of the cavern. Soon he arrived at the bottom of the fall, and found himself up against one of the walls. He stretched out a cautious hand to touch it. It felt like bone china beneath his hand. Marian came up beside him in a flurry of stones.

"Oh look at it!" he cried, "A genuine Martian city! I wonder how many millions of years it has been here."

As his eyes became more and more accustomed to the dim light, so he was able to see more and more clearly, until, after a few moments, it was almost like being in a dim day back on Earth. He moved on, round the ruined wall. He came face to face with what had obviously been the main highway through the community. It was wide, and it stretched at least two miles, right to the other end of the city. At the far end could be seen the bottom of the spire, much thicker, and tapering as it went towards the ceiling of the cavern. Here and there a little wreckage was lying about on the road, which was lined by buildings.

They began to walk forward, as if dazed, away from the ruined buildings of the rock-fall, and towards the centre of the city. As they walked, so the buildings on either side of the road became more and more complete, until it was possible to get quite a clear idea of what they had originally looked like. It was easy to see that no two buildings had looked alike, although they were all delicate and tall. Some had been supported on struts, like thin bone fingers; some had gently curving walls, others were flat; some had arches and gracile bridges, others were flat-footed and textured. Over all there was an essence of timelessness that stifled the lungs and turned the blood

into thickness and slowness. One sensed that these buildings had been here an eternity, an unimaginable period of time. It was as if a mountain of millenia were pressing down, suffocating. There was so much time locked up here, that it was as if the sense of time had disappeared altogether, and one moment merged soundlessly with the next.

The sounds of their footsteps were rude in this vaulted mausoleum, and as they walked, they unconsciously tip-toed, trying to stop the sounds of their steps.

After a time, they stopped outside one of the buildings.

"I'm going in to have a look," Ronson whispered, "Coming?"

Marian nodded, and he turned and walked through a slender archway into the dimness of the building.

"What was that?" hissed Marian, freezing the blood in his veins.

"What?" he whispered back.

"I heard a noise."

"Imagination," he muttered, as he groped forward into the darkness of the interior.

"I swear I heard something!" she whispered, close behind him, and she sounded terrified. Her fear communicated itself to him, and he strained his ears for sound. Hearing nothing, he stepped forward again.

"There it is again. There *is* something! Oh, Henry, I'm scared!"

This time he had heard the noise. He could not have described the sound, he heard it almost unconsciously. All he could have said was that it was a noise that definitely hadn't been made by either of them. It was a sort of muted click.

There was a blaze of sudden light. Marian screamed, her voice echoing shockingly in the cavern. He saw her with her fists pressed to her face. His heart lurched and his stomach turned. His head shot round, vainly searching for something on which he could fix his eyes. A tangible danger that he could fight. There was nothing. The light remained, casting its radiance on the bleached white walls.

"Good God," he muttered, as his heart subsided.

"What is it?" came Marian's panicky voice.

"Automatic lighting," he said, "It comes on as you step in. And it still works, after all this time."

Marian sighed heavily, and seemed to slump.

"I'm scared," she said, in a dead voice, "I'm scared."

"There's no need to be," he said, "This is wonderful."

He turned and motioned her out of the house again. A few seconds after they had stepped from the door, there was a click, and the lights plunged out. He stepped back inside the entrance, and, much quicker this time, the lights came on again.

Now he looked round at what they revealed. The inside of the building was reminiscent of a castle. The first room had a sloping, domed roof, and in each corner of the room a column rose, becoming more and more decorated, until it joined the ceiling and became just ceiling decoration, which merged in the carved centrepiece. There were two entrances to the room, apart from the one through which they had just come, and they were arches, fatly curving. He walked across to one of the arches and went through. In the next room there were some spidery chairs that would never have supported the weight of a human body. In the corner stood a metal construction with little tubes of glass set into the surface. It looked as if it was electrical in nature, but he could see no way of operating it, even if it did still work. The next room was featureless, save for some round metal plates stacked in one corner.

"Let's try somewhere else," he said, "There might be more to see."

As they walked out of the building, the lights flicked off, leaving them in gloom.

"They must have had some method of lighting the whole cavern," said Ronson, "It's obvious that they were as used to bright light as we are. Come to think of it, I wonder why they built the city down here. Defence, perhaps."

The next building was low and square. He stepped inside, and light flooded the interior. Along each wall were rows of cubicles, and in the centre of the floor was a large desk, the bulky top of which was held by one steel support that was only about two and a half feet high, but which tapered from a diameter of a yard to incredible slender-

ness, about half an inch, where it joined the desk. Ronson walked across to one of the cubicles.

"Good Lord!" he said.

"What is it?" called Marian, and she hurried over.

A red light was pulsing behind a glass circle set into the wall.

"Whatever it is, it's still working," he said, shaking his head in amazement. Marian looked over his shoulder at the compartment. It could be seen that this, and all the other compartments were divided into two by thin partitions that only stretched out about a quarter of the distance of the main cubicle partitions. Inside the larger half was a couch, set against one wall, and a small domed object rested on the couch, with a wire that led to the wall. Ronson went over and held the object in his hands, turning it over curiously.

"It seems to be some kind of headpiece," he said, "But it isn't designed for humans; it's much too large."

As her husband spoke, Marian left him and went into the other section of the cubicle. As she walked away, Ronson turned the headpiece over to look curiously at the inside, and then he carefully lifted it onto his head, to see what it felt like. Without him noticing it, the red light went out. Marian walked into the next compartment. This was much smaller and was featureless, save for what appeared to be a silver handle set into the wall. She looked about her idly for a while, and then went over to examine the handle which was the only real feature of the room. It was quite thick, and the surface of it looked vaguely prickly, as if it were a silver cactus. She curiously put out a hand to touch the strangely textured surface. She touched it.

void

space

black

nothing

Where was he?

Awareness. Identity. Something something falling enclosed. I. The concept; the idea, hold that idea! I. Me. An existence, an entity. In nothing. An entity enclosed in nothing. All blackness, and a cowering entity. I. Who am I? Where am I? I am no-one. I am nowhere. Time has been passing, an incredible, unimaginable time. Time of what? There is no time. Nothing. Relaxation. Thought. What *was* I? *Where* was I? Gone. What? Gone where? What has gone? Something. Something *before*. Before what? Before *this*. What is this? Where am I? Self. I exist. I am I. Memories . . . OF WHAT? I. Memories of me. I am, I am a man. Henry Ronson. I remember! But what am I now? Where am I now? What is this darkness? *Where is my body?* I have no body. I am an idea; an entity. But how did I get here? The *machine!* The head-piece, the cubicles, the city.

A sudden gush of memory filled his mind. A mind. He was just a mind enclosed in nothingness. But suddenly he realised that he would be able to move. He knew that he could move. He cautiously made a small movement, and he knew somehow that he had succeeded. Different coordinates; different feeling. He slowly began to move again. As he travelled along he got definite impressions from his surroundings. Vague turbulence boiled up at him. An impression of things happening. He plunged down towards this strangeness.

He reeled back, shattered. His mind contracted towards nothing, and then recovered a little and began to collect itself. He was too frightened to move. There had been nothing but WANT. But the WANT was so powerful that it had been completely overwhelming. He had never known such a power of wanting before; he never knew that it could exist to such a degree. But then he realised that nothing he would have to face could be worse than that, and he gained a little confidence. He slowly, cautiously began to move again.

As he moved he became aware of something ahead. It was a sort of strip of impressions that soared upwards to infinity. He was near the bottom of this strip, he knew. He plunged in.

He saw a picture. But it was clearer than that. He was *in* the picture. It was almost as if he were watching the picture with his own eyes. But he knew that he was powerless to do anything but watch; he was an observer only.

There was a misty world around him. In front of him appeared the world. The world was a clump of things in front of his face. The observer noted that they appeared to be fingers, and this was his world. The world was fingers. Then everything changed. Perspective altered, he was drawn into something. It was nice. The thing was drawing him in. The thing that had lifted him. Where was that part of the thing that he liked so much? Here it was! It came swooping towards him in its whiteness. He felt himself responding eagerly, and he grasped it with pleasure. The observer gave a mental gasp. That had been a baby's bottle! He withdrew into the blackness. He didn't understand! He regarded the strip. He could sense that the thing plunged straight down into the centre of this strange world. He decided to follow it; it wasn't far to go.

He plunged down, following the strip. It became fainter and fainter, until it was a mere thread. And then he caught the first impression from the interior. He slowed his advance desperately, as it threatened to destroy his recently found equilibrium.

The impression he was getting, as he hovered on the outskirts, was an impression of self. He could tell that further down it was of unimaginable strength. But here he could just tolerate it if it got no stronger. No wonder it had nearly disoriented him. It was a strong impression of self—but *it was a different self!*

"I," said the centre, "I am. Marian Ronson," *Marian Ronson*—the name of his wife!

Suddenly everything came clear to him, and the remainder of his memories flooded back. Somehow the machine had put him inside the mind of his wife. He had a moment of panic, like a drowning swimmer, and he struck out blindly for the surface. How could he get out? How could he escape? Nearer and nearer the surface he came, but when he was only a few seconds away, he blundered into the strip.

She was in bed with her husband. He was kissing her. "Good God," thought the observer, "It's my wedding night!" Her body responded eagerly and warmly to his hands. She was full of overwhelming love and desire for her man. The feelings were almost too much for the observer to bear. She loved him, *how* she loved him! She loved him so much, that she gently moved to do something that would show him how she loved him. Suddenly his hand caught her chin roughly, and lifted her face. His mouth was twisted, and she felt sudden fear. What had happened?

He lifted his hand, and hit her viciously across the mouth.

"You filthy, perverted little bitch!" he shouted.

And then followed such an incredible torrent of pain and suffering and agony, that the observer blundered wildly out of the strip, his mind reeling under the impact of such strong pain. It was a long time before any coherent thought could emerge, but gradually, against his will, almost, he regained some rationality. "Oh God," he thought, "No wonder she was frigid." He could not feel, he could only observe, but he knew that when he returned to his body, the full impact of what he had seen would hit him. But now his mind was clear and incisive, and it moved logically from thought to thought, although he tried not to think. No wonder she couldn't respond to him after that! No wonder she began eating compulsively, to try to forget her sense of failure and her misery.

He remembered other things he had picked up from her mind. The sympathy she felt for her husband, who was one of those who didn't fit in with society. Humanity was changing, slowly, to meet new circumstances. But some didn't change, the ones like Henry. They would fight all the way and they would never win. But she didn't blame him. He couldn't help his own blindness, and she loved him. She could easily forgive him for all the things he did to hurt her; he didn't mean them. And if his unpredictability forbade her having any kind of social life, then that was all right. She married *him*.

Now everything was clear. Too clear. He knew her,

through and through. She *didn't* cry easily. She only cried when she was suffering great pain. She cried often because she was often suffering great pain. Pain that was caused by him. And yet no part of her mind blamed him. It was *her* fault because she didn't understand him, and she had failed him. She loved him, desperately. And in his paranoic way, he had misconstrued her simple love as hate! She loved him and needed him, and he gave her nothing but pain. She gave all she had, and was rewarded by grief. Everything wrong with the marriage had been his fault, and he had been too blind to see it.

Suddenly he realised that he was about to break surface.

He was looking out of her eyes, a strange, still picture. Her arm was touching the handle in her cubicle. He saw something out of the corner of her eyes, and he turned his full attention to this. It was a fuzzy, unfocused picture of the cubicles. A pair of legs was lying on the floor, stretching out of one of them. His legs. His body. It was just a little more . . . a little more . . .

As he recovered consciousness, he heard her scream, and come round to him.

"Henry, darling, what's the matter? What's happened?"

He felt tears running down his nose and cheeks as he pulled himself to his knees. As he heard her coming round to stand beside him, he gave way to the tears completely. He lunged forward, and pressed his face to her legs, crying like a child.

"Oh Marian," he sobbed, "Will you ever be able to forgive me?"

There was a little silence, then Marian spoke.

"Forgive you?" she said, "Forgive you for what?"

—LANGDON JONES

HARVEST

by Johnny Byrne

1. There had never been a time when the War outside the Valley was not banging and thundering away hidden by the mountains. No one called it a War. To the people who lived and worked in the Valley it was a constant unnameable presence; obscure and yet familiar like the wind. In Winter the frozen echoes of despairing armies raked the Valley; in Spring drifted across the mountains the renewed murmur of combat as the armies strained like clumsy dancers. Nobody knew the secret of the War. Nobody called it a War. Nobody cared.

2. Time fingers lengthen. Aged bone no longer white but yellow. She slept upstairs lulled by the bony creaking. Pasted to her shrivelled breast the child whined tighteyed and eager. Downstairs he tossed in and out of sleep talking cloudy pictures to the winter room. Outside the loud silence of snow and wind nibbling the night from the stiffened dawn.

3. During their first Spring together Martin took her outside every evening after he had eaten and would place her in the special swing he had made for her and rock her gently. Then he would whisper secret songs about the beautiful things that would soon be growing in the fields. Trudy didn't understand the endless songs about planting and growing that Martin would sing for her. Instead she would ask him if he loved her and how much and would he always for she had to know. And Martin not understanding and humming even louder would make up little planting jingles which he thought would make her smile.

4. The light in the room had almost totally failed. Yet if he looked again through the window it still seemed as bright outside as when he had first entered. Snow was falling. He could hear the wind and beyond the Valley the noise. Occasionally he could see the flashes.

He remembered she had examined his face very closely as soon as he came into the house. She did it as if she meant to reassure not only herself but him too on some obscure though vital point. She seemed old and wise and

full of tricks and secrets. Her clothes were as vague as to colour. She moved with a grace that belied her age and ugliness. Her face, puckered and scored by too many suns and too many frosts, had the colour and texture of a lemon long forgotten in some old cellar. The skin about her face and neck was thick and heavy; but the eyes looking young and clear since the day she had begun to speak were black ripe and brilliant. Her voice had a harshness that somehow fitted the half-sung half-spoken monotony of the words that came from her. He felt rather than heard each phrase as it was detached to hover heavily burning its way into his brain.

Outside, the wind was rising, almost drowning the creaking of the swing. In the room Martin could see the shadows jump and skitter about the fire. The old woman had stopped talking.

Quite suddenly he realised that he was singing. He was singing the song she had sung the day when they had first met. He stopped a moment as the memory came to him. She smiled and nodded for him to continue. He did. He had to. The melody was kicking up a racket inside his head.

The old woman became excited. She jumped up and began to caper about in a grotesque imitation of a very young girl's innocent dance. As he sang to the erratic rhythms of her faltering steps he watched the shadows her movements caused to flicker about him. Unexpectedly a plaintive mewling sound was heard from the top of the house. They both stopped, he puzzled, she eager. The cry was repeated more insistent now. She became very active again. She hurried him into his room casting anxious looks upward all the time. He heard her going up the stairs already beginning in her throat to croon little gentle harsh sounds of love and reassurance.

5. The noises seemed to get louder and away behind the hills he saw knives of many-coloured fire slice the night.

One day when Martin was out turning over his favourite plot of land and the War was banging away as busy as ever, three oddly dressed foreigners came exhausted-looking into the kitchen where Trudy was preparing dinner. They demanded in hoarse and guttural accents that she immedi-

ately show them where the treasure was hidden. Trudy tried to smile away the menace in their eyes as she told them she knew nothing about any treasure. They refused to accept her excuses. The tall one who was obviously the leader motioned to the other two who quick as a flash grabbed her and began to question her more closely. Ignoring her frightened enquiries about the latest news from their beautiful capital they began to torture her. Every time she refused to give them the information they required the toothy one would ask her the question again always the same question in the same way with a monotony which betrayed his unfamiliarity with the language. And at each refusal the other, the one with the livid burn that chased his skull from chin to eyebrow, would raise the cleaver and slice off a finger. The question again and off with another and so on until pretty soon no more fingers and later again no more hands and finally no more arms. But Trudy didn't know much about what was happening now and heard only her voice raised unnaturally high leaping invisibly round the kitchen while deep inside her skull the eyes of the leader slid about wetly. Faintly she was aware of her silver fingers jerking like sickly birdclaws on the kitchen table. She was trying to tell them they had no right to look so exhausted when the blinding darkness carried her off. Then the foreigners searched about for a while looking lost and baffled but soon gave up and made off in the direction of the shifting sounds of war that echoed from behind the hills.

6. The child presses adoring eyes harder against the old tingling body. The bed crackles as she stirs awake. She hums softly and watches its screwed-up face flicker with pleasure. Little sounds escape through the sleepy clutching of its blackveined hands.

7. Martin neglected his fields. His wordless musical love helped to pull her back to life. His gentle hands would rustle through the long golden hair as he told her the secrets of the live things growing in the earth. And colours sparked in her numbed mind when he spoke like this.

One night a stranger who looked like Martin stood above her bed. It was a Martin Trudy had never seen before. A

stony frozen-up Martin but talking very rapidly. He tried to tell her about the man he had met in the fields where he was preparing for the Autumn planting, how he had tried to tell Martin about the war. But that night the noise outside the Valley was stronger than usual and Martin's voice mingled with its thunder until she didn't know which was loudest and it was impossible to listen.

She asked him what the thunder was. He told her it was War and Provocation. She felt him savour these words like new and beautiful additions to his fields. Provocation. He said it many times fingering her hair, his voice sinking but not as gentle as once it had been.

The man had told him how the armies moved like a blight over the countries outside; how the land was a swamp of clotting blood; how the rotting corpses formed stepping stones of ugly softness; how life ceased wherever the shouting armies passed. These and many other new words the man had told him. Also that at last the war might soon be over. But it would be bad here for the armies were pushing ever closer to the Valley and one day would come spilling over like a sea of scalded animals trampling life and light from the beauty of his fields. And now here he was with the Autumn planting to prepare and her armless and his brimming from the eyeballs with War and Provocation. Trudy began to cry but he pretended not to hear. She felt his fingers twisting her long hair into painful knots. Finally speaking very slowly he told her she would have to come outside with him. The man wanted to see her. It was necessary for only then could he know whether it had been Provocation. Martin would carry her himself. There was nothing to be afraid of. He would show her his summer harvest dancing in the silver light.

He wrapped her carefully and took her out into the night carrying her across the fields. Just behind the nearest hills the night was being ripped apart by sound and fire. Martin thought he had never seen anything so beautiful. He tried to tell her but she wouldn't answer. She just stared at him, her eyes wide open and full of something he couldn't understand. Then he heard screaming and the ground began to open up around him showering him with humming

lumps of sodden earth. More screaming. Martin felt panic leap inside him and he began to run. The night was alive, alive with smoke and unimagined noises beating him to the ground. She fell from his arms and when he rose the red light caught the streaming hair of Trudy who was lying quiet now, her lips stretched back from her mouth. He picked her up again. Perhaps fear had made him stronger for she felt much lighter now. She felt very light in his arms as he sped across the fields. He met the man who guided him to shelter. Not too far away he heard the sound of many voices raised in something that was not song.

8. After he had eaten she became voluble. He sat by the fire and she began telling him an interminable story that was very difficult to follow.

(Soon he will learn that it is always the same when she begins speaking. First she will load logs onto the fire. Then sitting in the silence with him watching she will begin to hum softly fixing her eyes somewhere above his head. And soon she will bob slowly. So slowly at first that he doesn't see her begin. Then faster to a rhythm all her own. Her head will press stiffly forward. He will watch the play of light on the heavy-skinned face and neck. The eyes glinting dully will fix on his hands. He doesn't know. Watch him. Winter freezes. And as the story rushes out he will sit waiting for the veins to appear. He won't see them very well at first but gradually they show pumped black and slow by the intensity of the words until he sees what looks like a black juicy web bulging from the face and neck.)

He felt his eyes dull with sleep. He heard drifting from upstairs the voice of the old woman, felt it carried on the melody. A voice that clanked. A sad and brittle song that slid inside his head soaking up everything in its path. Leaving nothing but the painful Autumn sound soothing soft and slow. So he slept.

(There is a sound in the room and he wakes to find her standing beside him tendering a carefully-held bundle. A noise that he has heard before comes from its wriggling interior. Mindlessly he peers and examines the child. Its head has the appearance of something plucked from the earth, round as an onion with the hungry-looking hair

tufted on the crown. The child makes the noise again and the old woman croons and touches it. She begins talking again. Tells him about the wonder of the Autumn crop. The miracle of the Spring harvest. She tells him that this is not her son. She tells him that this is her husband. Outside the sounds of war die down and the stillness breaks something inside him. He doesn't see her leaving.

Quietly it flows downstairs freezing awake. He hears his voice raised loud, singing to the room. He listens and feels his eyes pop with the strain of hushing himself quiet. The room bellies as a charred log suddenly flares smashing furniture into splinters of coloured light. The song clamour dies to a trickle on his lips. He sits up and he hears the painful echoes deep inside his skull settle into an easy whine. Upstairs her hum has muffled out into her story again. He watches himself rise and go to the window. Outside the wind is a screeching animal that savages the panicky snow. Through the fits and flurries of the storm he sees the old woman's swing in crazy flight. Once more he hears her voice become loud and brittle with excitement. It mingles with the sated gurgles of the child as he curls his tiny legs around the withered much-loved flanks. The whine inside his head becomes a scorching roar. He pushes open the window to bellow at the hulking shapes of rock and tree. He wills them gone and off they go startled by the fury of his anger. He smiles. He lowers himself gently down forcing his body into the airy confines of his head. This way the song is dead. All is silent. Warm. A gust of wind comes howling through the open window and sends him tumbling about the room. He sits up shaking the sound from his eyes. The song is on his lips again. He is brimming for tomorrow. He will suck to the seed her grape eyes. She is all fruit. Pluck all her winter apples. Spread wide the dusty branches of her legs. He lies down once more. All is quiet. The child sleeps. The wind is dying. Keening softly now. Watch me, watch me, he whispers, watch me.)

9. Martin felt something stir inside him as he watched the man's fingers curl through the hair of the still Trudy. The man suddenly jerked and the head came away from the trunk which had been mangled by the shell fire. They both

stared at her in silence, the man never letting go of the hair. Martin watched him bend down and examine the open-eyed face of his wife. The man shook his head. It must have been Provocation, he said, but it didn't matter after all. Martin saw the man's face screwing into pig every time he looked at Trudy. Martin told him how much he loved his beautiful wife with the long cornripe hair; he told him not to look at her like that; he told him about the songs he sang her and the way he used to rock her in the evening on the swing. He told him that now she would sleep until the long Winter went under and how after the Spring planting he would watch her rise more beautiful than ever high above the other things that grew whispering in the summer nights. The man didn't seem to hear. Martin watched him gather Trudy's head closer to him and whisper words in a language Martin didn't understand. Martin felt the stirring again and picking up a rock he broke the man's head in. The man didn't say anything. He just lay grinning up at Martin forever. Prising open the fingers Martin picked his wife up by the hair and humming quietly went home.

The noise that winter moved far off to the East. Every evening while the snow buried the land Martin would take his wife out to the swing and rock her. At last he found words to tell of his love. Soon, he told her, they would be together all the time. He said she mustn't worry if her lips were cold. How long her hair was! Hair by the fire he used to brush it till it crackled like the Autumn frost. And afterwards in bed he would laugh and whisper telling her what she wanted to know. And so Winter passed.

One day in early Spring when the rumbling could just be faintly heard from the East again Martin carried his wife out to the plot of land he had carefully prepared for her. He said that even the birds were singing just for her that morning. Kissing the beautiful hair of his wife Martin placed the upsidedown head gently but firmly into the shallow hole. He packed the earth tightly around the level of the ears and went home singing.

During the long Summer Martin jealously guarded his precious crop and in Autumn went to gather his harvest.

Here is the first piece by another newcomer—one from whom we shall be hearing a great deal. Immediacy is the only word for the particular quality his work has.

PETROS

by Philip Wordley

Man had surpassed himself this time ; no-one could deny that he had come far in his brief stay on earth ; but his lofty miracles of brick and steel, his thought-defying conquests of the elements, his climb from ape to angel were as nothing compared to this, his latest magnificent act. He had finally, after much heart-breaking, sinew-tearing effort, done it. He had destroyed all he had ever built. And that, reflected Rafael as he sat on his pile of rubble, had sure taken some doing.

After the awful majesty of that last-ever explosion, a vast and sickening silence had descended. Mist oozed around the shattered rocks. The sun at noon peered through a perpetual late autumn afternoon ; winds wandered through the eye sockets of Westminster and followed the desolate Thames to the Atlantic. The birds flitted through the silent ghastliness of Epping Forest looking for trees ; and out of the mists had come the barbarian hordes from Huddersfield.

Rafael, Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Christ on Earth, missionary to the dead lands and Ambassador Extraordinary of the See of Rome, turned on his rubble and tested the heap of roasting stones to see if they were hot enough to warm his bath. There was a smell of scorched flesh and he hastily withdrew his foot. Getting up gingerly he picked up a rusted crowbar, and his back muscles rippled healthily as he levered the hot rocks one by one to steam and sizzle in the sunken pool at his feet. This was his one luxury and he was proud of himself for thinking it

up. The bath water never became exactly hot, or even warm really, but it was better than goose-flesh in a dank and icy pool.

As he wallowed, Rafael reflected on his position. Here he was, the most important church dignitary below the Pope—the *only* church dignitary, come to that, stuck out here in the foetid fogs of Britain to preach a gospel of peace and love to a handful of bare-ribbed and leprous shards of men who were all that was left. Peace and love? That was a real laugh.

Not that the work wasn't interesting. It was certainly not what he was used to. Before the bang he had been a builder's labourer. It certainly made a change. Destiny had caught up with Rafael three hundred feet up on the scaffolding surrounding St. Peter's Dome. He was not really thinking of Destiny, or God, or what man had done to God's world. He was wrestling hundred-weight slabs of concrete, as it happened, and jockeying them deftly into place on top of the great wall surrounding St. Peter's which represented the first piece of building since the disaster and which, it was hoped, would be barbarian-proof. Rafael doubted it as he fielded another block that came whistling in tooth high. Those barbarians were pretty determined chaps.

Domenicò Ravazzi, Supreme Pontiff, formerly vicar of Brescia (pop. 3,000) craned his neck as he stood in the shadows of the wall and regarded Rafael. Down here in the court-yard a band of slaves who had been British and American tourists before the bombs went up were feeding the rope slings with more concrete cubes, under the enthusiastic supervision of Enrico Stacci, head of the Imperial Roman Army (formerly known as Rico's Mob. Well, *someone* had to take over and keep law and order). Rico and his boys had just entered the vaults of the National bank of Italy when all hell broke loose, and when they had emerged, they realised that none of their cargo could ever be of any use to them now. Still, the vault had been a good fall-out shelter. And now Rico, former small-time hood and extortionist, was strutting about in his scarlet tunic, and Domenico, former small-time priest, was conse-

crating the concrete; and both were engaged in rebuilding Rome. And Rafael? He was catwalking around the scaffolding, sixteen stone of rude muscular health, and certainly not over-awed by his unique position as first-rebuilder of the world. He was getting hungry and he needed a shave, and he needed a woman, in that order.

The vicar of Christ on Earth stopped regarding him. He had made his mind up. Something had happened to him as he had watched Rafael.

Some message without words had come into his mind, and he knew it for what it was. His silvery tones reached the ears of Rico who was joyously whipping his forty-first slave that morning, and Rico's arm was stilled. He listened to what the Pope had to say, then he put it into his own language and sent a full-voiced roar up to Rafael who had perched himself on a new-laid cornerstone. "Hey Rocky! Shift your can offa that concrete and come down-a here. The boss wants ya." Rafael rose immediately and a bit too quickly. The cornerstone dislodged itself with a scraping grind, and the Army lost its leader. Rafael slid down the scaffolding and stood looking at the mess. He was a kindly man, and he had liked Rico. The pontiff tripped across the court-yard, lifting his soutane as he stepped over the corpse. Christian burial was called for; but first he must speak to Rafael. The voice within him could not be silenced. "Rafael," he said, and his eyes were burning with an enthusiasm that was not of this world, "Rafael, God needs you."

And that, reflected Rafael to his bath-water, had been that. He had never really understood quite what it was the old guy wanted him to do. But he had been taking orders all his life, and if the Holy Father wanted a church building, it didn't matter where it was. Rafael would build it. A lot of the other things that had been said and done had gone over his head. There had been a lot of talk about a Call, a summons, and a very embarrassing moment when he knelt and the Pope, with tears in his eyes, had laid hands on his head and intoned something in Church language. Then there was the boat which had brought him to the sea-washed lowlands of Dover and left him there

with a Bible, a trowel, a spirit level and a spinning head. So much to have happened, and *Dio mio!* so quickly!

Well, he had built his church. The question now was, what was he going to *do* with it? The Pope's instructions on that subject had been very vague. When Rafael had shown bewilderment, the Pontiff had smiled and said, "There will be a message, Rafael. You will hear. Then you will know."

So far no message. The Holy Father had made no further contact with him; not that this was really surprising, as a month ago, while Rafael was getting the roof on the church, his Holiness had been quartered by erupting Corsicans, and no-one lived who could declare him a martyr or even cared. Except Rafael, who had liked the old guy. Otherwise he wouldn't be here, waiting with growing puzzlement for a message that would never come. Not from the former Vicar of Brescia, anyway; and Rafael, who was a simple man, could think of no-one else who could send him a message. He had worked hard all his life, he had been a good Catholic, and he had never beaten his wife, and never would, now she was gone. But his reading was not so hot, and he didn't go in for this salvation of souls bit. He just tried hard to be a good joe and that was the best he could do. The fact that that was more than the mass of people on earth had even the desire to do was something you could never get through to Rafael, even if you could find the easy words. The Pope had not even tried. God wanted Rafael, so God got him, without Rafael really having much idea of what was going on.

So here he was, with a new and empty church among the mists, and no-one around for miles, waiting.

He was still waiting when he looked around and found he was not alone. There were about a dozen of them standing on rocks around him in a wide and attentive circle. They reminded him of a wolf-pack he had seen in an old movie once. But these were men. Men of a sort, anyway. They were all very much alike, as wolves are. Half-starved, thin lipped, and watching him with a gauntly eager anticipation. They had made no noise as they came, and they made no noise now.

After about five minutes, Rafael had had enough. He got up, and the circle narrowed. He took a few steps over the rocks, and there was a tight ring of men about him, still silent, but smiling now. One or two were slavering at the mouth. Rafael was no chicken, but he shivered.

"You guys want-a me?" he said. It sounded foolish even to him. "Depends," said one of the men. He was the tallest, with a more wolfish grin than any of them, and obviously the leader.

"Depends on what?" Rafael said. They snickered, and one of them stropped a knife on the back of his hand. "Depends on what you got in that building," said the tall one, jerking a thumb towards the church without taking his eyes off Rafael.

"Nothing in there," said Rafael. "Don't give us that," said the tall man, "you don't go building a shack like that just to live in, mate. You got a food-store there". "Go and look-a for yourself," Rafael said very patiently. "Ain't-a nothing there. That's a church."

They just stood and gazed at him for a full minute. The leader's jaw dropped, and he turned away in disgust.

"Bloke's a nut case," he said.

"Maybe not," said another. "Maybe he reckons we won't look if he tells us it's a church."

The thin-lipped crowd nodded in solemn agreement, and the tall man smiled into Rafael's face. "That it, wop?" said he, "are you playing games with us?"

"No game," said Rafael. "Go look for yourself."

"I will, mate, I will," said the boss and he said something very quickly to his companion. In seconds Rafael was hemmed in by grinning figures, so close he couldn't have reached for his handkerchief if he had had one. He smelled their foul breath. It smelled of home-made whisky and bad meat.

The tall man was away for about a couple of minutes, while Rafael sweated and looked into the front rank of faces inches from his own.

"They're going to eat me," he told himself disbelievingly. "The bastards are going to eat me."

Then suddenly he was breathing air again in the centre

of a watchful ring. The leader was looking him up and down with something like bafflement on his face.

"Well," he said at last. "It's like no church I've ever seen, but I guess that's what it is, lads. We got ourselves a bleeding Christian." "You a parson, Christian?" said the one with the knife. He didn't look at Rafael, just went on stropping it.

Rafael considered. The idea had never struck him before. What *was* he?

"Well, yes, I guess that's-a what I am," he said slowly. "Yes, that's-a right. I'm a priest and this here is my church."

"Well, fancy that, now," said the leader. "A priest. A bloody real live stinking wop priest with his own bleeding church. Where's your congregation, father Wop?"

"No congregation," said Rafael evenly. "Just me and the birds."

The tall man's mouth dropped even further, then widened into a beam of pure joy. "Do you hear that, mates?" he crowed. "Do you just hear that? Just him and the birds, he said. Saint bloody Francis, that's what we've got here."

Then they were on him. The one with the knife slashed at his jugular, and Rafael brought the trowel down edge-ways on his wrist. The knife dropped on to the rocks and the man fell back howling. Rafael shook two off his back. Then, grimly, with his back to the church wall, he got busy. When the leader called a halt, five of them were out of the fight and the rest had fallen back warily and were prowling around at a safe distance from the blood-stained trowel and the huge fist that held it. It was not the first fight Rafael had been in. Dark back streets or grey windy rocks, it made little difference to him. This was something he did understand.

The leader waved his men back, then he stood and looked at Rafael. The missionary was scratched and torn from neck to waist, and one eye was closed. But the other eye was full of fight, and the rest of him was still in fair shape. His chest was matted with blood, but not heaving unduly. He was ready for the second wave. It never came.

The leader looked at him for a long time, then without

a word turned and scrambled off over the rocks. The others picked up their injured, and followed. They kept taking backward glances at Rafael, and there was admiration in their looks. Rafael looked after them in bewilderment. Then he grinned and shrugged his shoulders. As a priest he might be a washout; but as a man at least he could command respect. But what good would that do?

When he came back from foraging the next day, his church was half full. They were all there, his visitors of yesterday, and there were more of the same stamp. Scrawny, hollow-eyed women and grimy children made up the rest of the congregation. They looked round as he came in. Then the leader stood up and turned awkwardly towards him. They all stood. Rafael was speechless. Of all things, he never expected this. He walked up to the front of the church, but he could not see where he was going. In a daze he turned to face them, and they sat down and waited for him to speak.

It seemed to Rafael that he would never speak again. Something had happened to his throat. Then he opened his mouth, and the only words he could think of came out in a croak.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee——”

Slowly at first, then like a rolling snowball of sound, the sitters joined in. Rafael had only a hazy notion of the form of service, although he had been a regular church-goer, and having to say it in English didn't make it any easier. But no-one seemed to mind. What they couldn't remember, or had never heard, they made up as they went along, with the stronger voices leading the rest. And somehow it seemed to sound right.

At last there was silence. “God,” thought Rafael, “they're waiting. What can I say to them? I'm not a priest. They'll lynch me if I can't say something good. They're expecting something to give them strength, and what can I do? I know no more than they do.”

“Friends,” he said and the silence hit him like the soil on a coffin lid. “Friends, I don't know what to say. I don't-a know no more about God than you do. I know he's a good-a God, and he don't-a want you to go around killing

and that sorta thing. He wants you to love one another. I guess that means helping them as can't help themselves, and finding them food, and—and I guess that's all." He drew another breath. "I don't-a know nothing about being no priest. All I know is what I heard the Father say in my own-a church back home. I'll do what I can, but that's not much. I reckon that's all I gotta say. Come again tomorrow, and I'll try to think of something else." He paused, "Oh, and something else I wanta say. Lotsa you look like you got-a nowhere to live. If you wanta shelter in my church, okay. I gotta no food for you, but I gotta roof and walls, and you're welcome to that." Then he stopped and sat down. The congregation still sat silent. Then they rose, and went, each one turning to look at Rafael before going out into the mist.

Well, thought Rafael, that's that. They won't come back no more. They came to me, and I didn't have nothing to give them. *Dio mio*, help me! I built this church, and it's ready, but I'm not. Send me the message, tell me what to do, and how to do it. If I don't find out, they'll kill me.

They were back before nightfall, and more besides. They filed into the church without a word. Some carried blankets and one had an oil stove. They roamed about the floor till they picked a spot. Then they dropped their belongings and settled down by them, still in silence. Rafael's flesh started to creep. Then the talking started, quietly at first, then louder, till it was a natural chatter. Rafael sighed. It was going to be all right for now, anyway. But how long could it last? What when they found he had no answer to their needs but a roof? God, he needed help himself. How could he help them?

It got dark inside the church, and Rafael decided it was time to go hunt tomorrow's breakfast. He walked down the church, stepping over the dozing figures he could hardly see now. At the door he stopped. A voice said, "God be with you and keep you all," and he realised it was his own.

An answering murmur from all still awake came from the shadowed floor. "God be with you, father." A little boy of about ten got up from his blanket by the door and clutched Rafael's hand. "Bless me, Father; I can't go to

sleep." Rafael said something, he didn't know what. The boy seemed satisfied and lay down again. Rafael went out of the door and leaned against it, taking in big lungfuls of mist. He found he was crying.

When he looked up, there was a man leaning on the wall beside him. A little guy with a dark face and black bushy hair. He had thick eyebrows which joined above his nose, and his eyes were small and bright. Rafael didn't know how long he'd been there. Perhaps he's been there all the time.

"Is your name Rafael?" asked the little man. He had some sort of accent.

"That's right," said Rafael. "How do you know——" Then he stopped. "Are you the one I've been waiting for—the one with the message?"

The little man smiled. "Sure, that's right, Rafael. I've brought you the message."

"Then give it me!" Rafael almost shouted, "you're just in time. Another day and they'd have known I was a phoney."

"You're no phoney, Rafael," said the little man. "And here's your message."

When he had said it, he walked off over the rocks, and Rafael watched the mist swallow him. Funny little guy, and he'd only said a few words. But it was all Rafael needed. Now he knew what to say when morning came. It was going to be all right.

And that was queer, because the little man hadn't really told him how to carry on at all. All he had said was one short sentence.

"On this rock will I build my church."

—PHILIP WORDLEY

FLIGHT OF FANCY

by Keith Roberts

The Professor Emeritus flexed the bow in his hands. "Now this," he said, "is very interesting. Just you see." He fitted an arrow to the string and shot it. They watched the shaft until it had fallen to earth. Then he said, "What curve did that describe then? What curve, lad, what curve?"

The young man searched his painfully acquired scraps of general knowledge. He said, "A parabola, I suppose."

The Professor Emeritus capered with delight. "Wrong, lad, wrong. An ellipse!"

The young man looked bored. He said, "It doesn't matter what sort of curve it is as long as it finishes up in a rabbit."

The Professor was scornful. "Pah. Where's your initiative, lad, where's your resourcefulness? Where's your mental agility? Look here." He seized a burned stick from the campfire and began to draw on the ground with more vigour than accuracy. He said, "Here's the earth. Circular. I know you don't believe that but for once you'll have to take my word." He added a small loop to the circle. "Here's the trajectory of the arrow. Out o' scale, of course. Now then. Suppose we make the arrow a damn great thing, and shoot it a lot harder." He drew another curve. "See what happens? The flight is not interrupted by the earth's circumference until much later."

The young man frowned over the drawing. He said practically, "You mean it goes farther."

The Professor Emeritus did another jig. "That's it, lad. That's the idea. You've got it."

The young man pouted. His hunting had been unsuccessful, so he was not in a good mood anyway. He said, "I can't see what use all this is to us."

The Professor scrawled a great, swirling ellipse round his original figure. He said, "This is over-simplification of

course, but suppose we shoot an arrow so damn hard it does this. See? All the trajectory is now outside the circumference of the planet. But"—he raised a finger dramatically—"an ellipse is a closed figure. Therefore . . ."

The young man said, "The arrow comes back to where it started. That isn't much fun."

The Professor gobbled faintly, then gave up. He said, "But you don't see—oh, forget it." He limped into the cave behind them and started rootling about. He came back holding a rusty can. He said, "Corned beef again. Rolf, we really shall have to make another trip into a town."

The young man did not answer. He was kneeling over the diagram, moving his finger round and round the large ellipse. When he looked up his face was alight with enthusiasm. He said, "But this is simply capital, sir. It's space flight. Why hasn't someone done it?"

The Professor Emeritus grunted. He said testily, "They did. That's why we're in this mess. Where the hell's the opener?"

—KEITH ROBERTS

ONLY THE BEST

by Patricia Hocknell

The campaign had started in late autumn. One balmy day, a memory of summer before winter became inevitable, a slash of dirty sunlight forced its way through the gloom of Charing Cross station and found a garish yellow poster with the words "Only The Best" written across in fluorescent red letters. With the sun as a spotlight, a few people had noticed it. Two or three days later the first full-page spread had appeared in a national magazine. The same lettering, same red on yellow words across the page.

Then suddenly, like a torrent, it was everywhere. The hoardings were covered, magazines saturated with it. What had once been a cliché had become a byword. The great red on yellow signs had become so familiar to Londoners that they were hardly noticed. They were almost forgotten, but not quite; what was it they were advertising, and why?

The next stage of the campaign began with the same poster at Charing Cross: just an addition to the words. Now the message was "Only the Best Is Good Enough for YOU". Then there were free balloons for the children with the words on them; streamers floating behind planes carried the message. There was even a song in the top twenty with the words sung over and over to a catchy beat. Then, when everyone was beginning to tire of wondering, they were told. A washing machine!

Not "just" a washing machine, but the machine of the century. Incredible! Exciting! The most fabulous machine ever invented! So what was so wonderful about this machine? they asked—and were told. It had been invented by a government cybernetics expert. A completely revolutionary design. The only machine made for the housewife which incorporated a type of computer enabling the machine to think for itself!—At least as far as washing was concerned.

Every time they switched a television set on, it seemed, there was a film showing all the wonderful things the washing machine of the century could do. It certainly

was an unusual shape, looking rather like a circular television set, with a square platform on the top. Placed on each side of the front opening there was a pair of pincers, with a telescopic action, for the machine to sort and load the washing. This was one of the major selling points, the fact that the machine was able to cope with every phase of washday. It sorted clothes, cleaned them—it used an improved chlorinated hydrocarbon solvent which so completely digested the dirt it removed that it never needed renewing. It ironed, aired, folded, and the finished article was then passed gently out of a slot at the top of the machine onto a tray. All in all, it sounded a good buy. Especially at such a low price. By the time the advertising was in its second month, women were starting to find ways of persuading husbands to buy.

Freda Harper's problem was probably unusual. She wanted an "Only the best", but trying to think of a way to persuade her husband to buy her one was not an easy task. If only it wasn't so cheap. No matter that it was the only machine in the world that did so many wonderful things, it was too cheap. Jack always said that if a thing was worth having, it was worth paying for. She hadn't mentioned her feelings all the time the campaign had been growing, but after three months she thought it time to open the subject. So far the only comment she had heard him make on the matter was "Only the Best? At that price it sounds more like 'Freedom for the Masses!'" which wasn't very promising.

It was a grey January Monday when she began. "Jack," she said tentatively, "Jack, the washer isn't working too well again. It really is time I had another . . ." she trailed off, uncertain that he was listening.

"You burnt the toast again this morning," he said, "If you were asking for a new toaster, I could understand it." He shook the paper, and a few dark crumbs rolled off, in between the sheets. "What's the time?"

"Half past nine. You'll be late if you don't get up soon." Freda pushed back the covers. "I've got work to do, even if you haven't. I'm going to start on the washing. . . . If there's one job I hate it's washing . . . and ironing."

Jack laughed and stretched his arms over his head. "Yes, ma'am. I get the picture. It's those ads for 'Only the Best' that're getting you, isn't it? But ducky, at that price!"

Freda played a trump. "Dick Jacobs is getting Irene one."

"Really? Can't be doing as well as he says, if that's all they can afford!"

"She got a mink stole to go with it. Dick said that the machine would save so much of her time and his money that a mink was almost a necessity to go to all the places they intended to go, now." She crossed her fingers and hoped. It wasn't strictly true. Irene was getting the mink, but not for the reasons that Freda had just given. It was a present from Dick in a fit of guilty conscience. Something to do with his secretary. Still, there was no point in giving Jack ideas in that direction: he was bad enough, anyway, she thought, watching him comb his fingers through his dark hair. No grey hairs for him. She felt jealous every time she watched him do that.

"Well, we'll think about it, old thing." He stretched lazily, before he got out of bed, and Freda knew she had won.

She went to order the machine, and discovered to her dismay that there was a delay in delivery. She would have to wait for several months. Freda hated to wait for anything. As soon as she had made up her mind to have a thing, she was edgy until it was hers. The months of waiting got on Jack's nerves as much as hers. Still, as the salesman said, the best was worth waiting for, wasn't it?

Then one morn̄ning it was there. It stood in the kitchen, milky white, edged with stainless steel. They had cleared a space for it the night before and Freda had got up early that morning to wait for the men to bring it, hugging herself from sheer covetousness every time she looked at the place where it would stand.

She hurried into the kitchen, arms full of assorted washing and, putting it in the sorting basket at the front of the machine, she flicked the wall switch. It was on! She held her breath: would it do all it should? With

incredible rapidity it pushed aside the coloured things, the first hurdle over, then sorted the cotton clothes out and put them through the front opening, slammed the door shut, and almost immediately they flopped through the top slot, dry, neatly folded, and not a crease to be seen. The process began again, and in a few moments the basket was nearly empty.

Freda ran to get something else to put in it. Washing had never been so much fun. She stripped the beds, although she had already changed the sheets that morning. The curtains too, all round the house, table cloths, serviettes, anything washable. The salesman had been right: it had been worth waiting for.

By the time Jack got home that evening, she was exhausted, and the machine was on its last possible load of washing.

"Oh, darling, it's marvellous," she sighed happily. "I've washed everything: you'll never have to wait for a shirt again!"

"It would be nice not to have to wait for my dinner, too!" he grumbled. "This is the third time this week that it's been late. You said when you had that washing machine things would be so much easier for you."

"Well, it will, Jack," she was conciliatory. "But today, I was so excited with it, I just couldn't stop using it. Look, it's finished now. I'll put it away in a while—we'll have dinner now—all right?"

They sat down to dinner half an hour later. Freda couldn't resist a passing pat at the machine on her way to the table. It seemed to jerk.

"Didn't you switch that damn thing off, Freda?" Jack wanted to know.

"Yes, I'm sure I did," she replied. "Look, you can see the switch—it is off. Funny, that. Oh, well, perhaps the floor is damp there." And she began eating her pork chop.

A sudden flurry of motion, and the cloth was off the table, dishes flying in all directions. Jack was on his feet, mouth open, eyes starting in surprise.

"THE MACHINE!" Freda screamed, and then quieter, "the—the machine, it t-t-took the c-c-cloth off the table."

"I can see that. But it's supposed to be switched off. You said it was."

"It was. Look, it still is. How does it do it, then?" she was nearly weeping, as the machine burped up the neatly washed tablecloth.

"What the hell happened to my chop?" muttered Jack, rather shakily, but rapidly regaining his poise.

"Over here, perhaps." Freda said weakly, moving past the machine. She screamed as she felt a pull on her skirt. It tore down the front, and as she turned she saw it disappear into the machine.

"Look, it is switched off." Jack sounded almost calm. "So how is it doing this?" He picked up the regurgitated skirt, and handed it to her, pulling out the wall plug at the same time. He stepped back smartly as the machine made a grab for his trousers. Missing them, it grabbed the cat, which was rubbing its back on Jack's legs. What happened next was horrible. A moment later there was a fur piece on top of the washing machine, fluffy and clean. But no cat.

Freda reached the sink in time, and was violently sick.

"My God!" said Jack, "the thing's gone completely haywire. It's dangerous. I always said that price was too good to be true!"

"They sounded so wonderful. Never having to put water or soap in, it seemed as if it would be a wonderful thing, it just seems to eat dirt with the stuff that's in it, and it goes on and on."

"Goes on and on is right. And dirt isn't all it can eat, it seems. That cat knows that, now. But it isn't using any power. Come on, I'm going to ring the manufacturers. What's their number?"

After a while they gave up. "Everyone else must be having trouble, too." Jack said. "We'll leave it till morning. It must have been a short circuit or something; perhaps there's something wrong with that plug. Unlucky for the cat, that's all—Hey!" he laughed suddenly, "remember the old stories about cannibals, thinking they developed the characteristics of the victims they ate—"

next time you use the machine you may find you've got a mouser instead of a washer!"

Freda burst into tears. How could he be so callous? She'd been fond of that cat. Besides after that she would never be able to use the machine again. Well, not for a while, anyway. Poor cat . . . it couldn't have done the machine much good, either.

She was up early the next morning. The sun shining through the curtains had awakened her suddenly. It was spring, and a day out would help her forget the shock she had had last night. If she had a big breakfast, she wouldn't have to bother about lunch. Eggs, bacon—"Jack, did you have a snack last night?" she called peevishly.

"Yeah, had a bacon sandwich—why?"

"Half a pound of bacon in one sandwich is overdoing it a bit, isn't it?"

"One slice, I swear! That's all there was."

"One slice! I bought half a pound yesterday! It must have been a heck of a slice. Well, you'll have to have poached eggs."

After Jack had gone, Freda sat down with a cup of coffee and looked at the washing machine. She was nearly forty, she thought: never had a child. She was beginning to convince herself that the cat had been the only outlet for her affections. "Poor puss," she crooned experimentally. Pussy in the washing machine. She stood up cautiously, and went to the machine. It was obviously not working now. She wondered morbidly where the cat was now and, remembering Jack's cruel joke of the night before, patted the cold enamel.

"Poor pussy, is she hungry?" she said and giggled hysterically. She switched the machine on, and put the tea cloths on the sorting basket. The machine went through the process of cleaning in a perfectly normal way.

"There's a clever pussy!" she said triumphantly, "Freda can make you work, can't she?"

Freda decided not to go out, after all. It was a lovely day, a perfect day, crisp, with a hint of sun yet to come. But that poor cat couldn't go out, so she decided to stay and keep it company. She knew in the back of her mind

that she was being foolish, but she didn't really care. Somehow she knew the cat was imprisoned in that thing—that machine. She had to be kind to the machine, to help poor pussy.

There was a knock at the door. The butcher boy, with the meat that she had ordered the day before. "Leave it on the table," she said, "and come through, I'll give you the money." Freda never left delivery boys alone in the kitchen. It was always possible that they would take half the order back again. She followed him to the door.

It was a pity that she hadn't checked the order, she reflected, as she put the meat away. It seemed that she had paid for a pound of sausages that she hadn't had. She picked up a piece of paper that must have fallen from the table. It lay by the washing machine, and she raised her arm to switch the current off. Something stopped her. It must be like dying, she thought, every time we switch the electricity off, and her arm dropped to her side.

"Music, puss?" she said as she switched the radio on.

At the end of the week, Freda was going through her bills, sitting by the fire, a glass of milk in one hand, a biscuit in the other—she had looked for some ham to make a sandwich, but Jack must have been there first again. He seemed to have become a secret eater, just lately. She would have to talk to him about it.

"We'll have to cut down, Jack: we're spending too much money on meat, these days. We've never used so much food before. You know in a job like yours that you shouldn't eat so much."

They sat in silence for a while, the firelight making the room dim and golden. "Freda," Jack said, "you're looking a bit tired, you know. A holiday wouldn't be a bad idea. You seem a bit nervy, and some of the things you've said . . ."

Ignoring him, Freda said, "Pussy isn't feeling too well. I think we'll have to get the engineer in again. Last time he came he said that the solvent had gone a bit funny. Developed unusual properties, he said: something about the structure changing. And today she hasn't been as fast as she should."

"Freda!" Jack almost shouted, "That's exactly what I mean. You know damn well that it is only a washing machine. The fact that we've had all this trouble with it only goes to prove my point. It's never worth buying anything cheap. The only good thing about that machine is its slogan, which was a stroke of genius on the part of whatever madman started the whole business. I'll get that thing out of here tonight. Put it in the garage."

"Jack, no! I'm sorry about the way I talk about it, but it really does seem as if the cat somehow is part of the machine, ever since it, well, went in there, the machine seemed more like a—a person, really, than a machine. I suppose it *is* just the machine going wrong, but it looked sick to me, and that's the way I feel about it. Leave it there for tonight, and I'll get the engineer to have a look at it in the morning. Come on, let's get to bed: I am tired—you're right."

It must have been about three in the morning when they were suddenly awakened by a rumbling, clanking noise that seemed to go on for ever. It sounded as if something heavy and unwieldy were being dragged upstairs.

Jack got unwillingly out of bed. "Stay there, Freda," he said reluctantly, "I'm going to see what it is." He opened the bedroom door, and froze, staring with disbelief at the sight that met his eyes.

Freda, unable to bear the suspense, ran and, looking over his shoulder, squealed.

About four feet tall, it stood in the gloom of the hallway, white enamel gleaming dully, stainless steel smile glinting in the light from the bedroom.

"Oh, Jack, she's brought her kittens for us to see. Poor pussy, doesn't she look hungry!" and before he could stop her, she had pushed past him, into the hall.

He shut the bedroom door and leaned against it, trembling. He wondered if it was worthwhile trying to climb out of the window, and as he stood, undecided, he heard, unbelievably, his wife's giggle. "Come on in, Jack: the water's fine!"

—PATRICIA HOCKNELL

THE ISLAND

by Roger Jones,

*"I do not surrender to you,
I only wait." (Stirner)*

There were three of them. They lived in the hut on the beach. Rastrick was in charge.

Very often Rastrick was not nice to the others. Particularly he was not nice to Minus. To Erg he was less nasty. Minus had a dog-like, passive, kick-inviting manner, which made him an obvious butt for Rastrick's unpleasantness. At the same time it made him rather an unsatisfactory target. Kicking Minus was too much like kicking a jelly-fish: there was no resistance. This refusal to fight back angered Rastrick and he bullied Minus all the more.

Rastrick's comparatively humane treatment of Erg was part of the system. There was, if you like, a kind of hierarchy. Rastrick bullied Erg and Minus, but especially Minus. Erg also bullied Minus, especially when Rastrick was away. Rastrick encouraged this arrangement because it kept Erg happy and the status remained more or less quo at all times. Minus had no opinions, and no feelings to be considered.

Apart from their co-operation in the bullying of Minus, there was another, more subtle bond between Rastrick and Erg. This was the knowledge, or at least suspicion, on Rastrick's part that Erg had seen him one night in the copse on the North Cliff.

* * *

As there was a hierarchy, so there was a routine. Both were necessary because Rastrick said so. Often. There were few things Rastrick said that he did not say often. And if Rastrick said a thing was so, then it was so. Because Rastrick had his information from the House direct.

On rare occasions in unbending mood, Rastrick would summon Erg and Minus to him and lecture them. These lectures usually took place in Rastrick's half of the hut, separated by a partition from the quarters shared by Erg and Minus. Seated at his table, the others standing opposite in attitudes of respectful attention, Rastrick would point out at length, in condescending and paternal tones, what he called the Facts of the Situation. Though life was not easy for any of them, there could be no doubt that it was better so. Where would they be without System, without Order? Where would they be without the Routine which was the living proof of the extent to which others were prepared to burden themselves with responsibility for every aspect of the daily lives of their subordinates? And was it not the rankest ingratitude to repay such selflessness with grumbling? Was not a measure of (menacing overtone) discipline a light price to pay for their relief from the mighty burden of care and worry—a burden which they themselves were so obviously ill-equipped to bear?

To these homilies Erg and Minus would listen in silence. They knew better than to answer Rastrick's highly rhetorical questions. They knew better than to try to follow exactly the logic behind the numerous and intricate arguments Rastrick used to drive home his points. And afterwards, in their own part of the hut, Erg used to go through the whole thing again for Minus's personal benefit. What he lacked of Rastrick's dialectical subtlety he compensated by a ready resort to violence. Erg maintained that this type of persuasion was especially suited to Minus's feeble intellect and inferior social status.

The House stood at the top of the Hill. It commanded a view of the entire island except certain portions of beach which were concealed from the House by the cliffs which backed them. Rastrick went to the House once every seven days for orders. It was his habit to leave in the evening and return about noon the following day. The distance to the House was not great, but the Hill was steep and the one path rocky. The House seemed farther from the beach than it actually was; some trick of the light, combined perhaps with the angle from which they normally saw it,

seemed to blur its outlines, almost blending it at times into the hard grey rock on which it was built.

The beach where they lived was in plain view of the House. There were no cliffs between the unseen watchers at the top of the Hill and the strip of sand with its jetty and the long hut which made up their effective world. Into the minds of the three men the idea of this constant surveillance to which they were subject had sunk over the years, until it was no longer a consciously formulated thought. But the knowledge was there, like the idea of breathing, and as permanent and as real.

Minus was not allowed to leave the beach. Erg went once every twelve days to collect wood from the other beaches and from the copse on the North Cliff, which was on the opposite side of the island. Erg was permitted, in the course of his duties, to enter the copse from the seaward side. At no other point might he leave the area directly bordering the sea. It went without saying that any divergence from his permitted sphere of activity could have been observed from the House. In which case . . . Erg preferred not to think about it.

Every seventh week the day of Erg's wood-collecting coincided with Rastrick's trip to the House. It was on such a day that, returning unusually late, Erg had seen Rastrick in the copse.

* * *

It was Erg's opinion that Rastrick's visits to the House must be the occasion of spiritual and perhaps even physical exertions of the very highest order on the part of their leader. It was difficult to interpret in any other light the apparent discrepancy between, on the one hand the obvious comfort of Rastrick's life on the beach, and on the other his repeated assertions that life was not easy *for any of them*. During the six days out of seven that Rastrick spent on the beach his work was one hundred per cent supervisory. On the purely physical level it is no exaggeration to say that he never lifted a finger. The others waited on his every need. It was obvious, therefore, that Rastrick did his suffering when he was elsewhere: in other words, when he was up at the House.

This theory did not rule out the possibility that Rastrick suffered mentally and spiritually six days out of seven, but maintained a calm and carefree air in the presence of his subordinates. However, this was not a possibility which ever occurred to Erg, who was not personally given to the spiritual agony, awful sense of responsibility and so forth, which are the privileges of Command.

As a prop to his deductions Erg adduced: one—Rastrick's abnormally subdued manner and other signs of fatigue that could sometimes be detected in him on the day of his return; two—Rastrick's obvious lack of embarrassment at the total and glaring absence of manual labour from his daily curriculum.

Erg often expounded this theory to Minus during Rastrick's absence, or at night when they were alone in their bunks. Its premises granted, it was good theory and logically sound. Erg was particularly attached to it because it proved beyond all doubt the care and forethought which whoever arranged their lives had brought to the task, the equity which governed the allocation of duties and privileges. Yet the frequency with which Erg made Minus listen to his ideas on the subject, and the wheedling, half-hopeful vehemence with which he challenged him to mention any way in which things might have been arranged both differently and better, are difficult to explain. Perhaps the thought that once a week Rastrick had to suffer on their behalf seemed in some way a justification, even a motive, for Erg's own ferocious ill-treatment of Minus on the other six days. But what satisfaction Erg could have derived from the ready assent of the apathetic and insignificant Minus remains a mystery. Minus would say yes to anything if ordered to. Otherwise he said nothing.

Perhaps then Erg felt something lacking in these one-sided colloquies. Though right and necessary, it was at times just the tiniest bit regrettable that Minus had no opinions of his own, either on the discomfort or otherwise of Rastrick's personal situation, or indeed on any other matter. There was something quite definitely unsatisfactory about Minus's willingness to say yes when told to do so; likewise, there was something not quite right about

his failure to say yes when not ordered to do so. In other words, Minus was a poor conversationalist. It could hardly have been otherwise. Minus's occupation was not the sort which commonly attracts people of a high order of intelligence. Its daily performance neither required nor inspired those flights of pure intellect which might have made Minus a more stimulating companion on the spiritual plane.

Minus's main task (apart from such routine chores as cooking and waiting on Rastrick) was the polishing and arrangement of the stones on the beach.

The patterns for the arrangement of the stones were changed every week on Rastrick's return from the House. They consisted invariably of elongated rectangles interspersed with circles having a diameter exactly equalling the height of the rectangles. Squares, circles of the wrong size, triangles, and irregular polygons of all sorts were not permitted. There was, however, considerable variation from week to week in number and disposition of the orthodox rectangles and circles. Rastrick's supervision of Minus during the hebdomadal performance of this task was extremely close and demanding. Particular attention had to be paid to regularity of shape, rectitude of line and evenness of disposition. At such times a certain duality might have been observed in Rastrick's attitude to Minus and his task: sometimes he would jeer at Minus saying that so degrading and pointless an occupation was merely an expedient dreamed up by a benevolent authority to keep Minus busy and happy in the face of his total incompetence to perform any really useful function; other times, he would take extraordinary pains to impress on Minus the value and necessity of the job which was his lot. Without, however, actually specifying the precise function of the stone patterns; and this was something which Minus for his part had long ago stopped even trying to guess at.

Rastrick of course knew what the stones were for. He did not tell Minus, because as he said it was not necessary for Minus to know. Erg occasionally hinted that he himself was in on the secret. But on the few occasions Minus

had plucked up the courage to ask for enlightenment he had been met with violence, evasion or abuse.

Erg's job was the care and maintenance of the jetty. He completely repainted it on an average once every ten days. This accounted for the enormous supply of paint which was kept under tarpaulins behind the hut. There was no question about the importance of Erg's job. For it was to the jetty that one day the Boat would come, changing all their lives. But neither Erg, nor Rastrick himself, claimed to know exactly who or what the Boat was, or looked like, or what exactly would happen on that great day when at last the Boat came to them bringing . . . What? And indeed it was precisely these questions which formed the main topic of conversation between Erg and Minus. When there was any conversation. Which was almost never.

The reason for this paucity of amicable discourse lay in the different natures and social positions of the parties involved. Also in the seldomness with which a desire for conversation on the part of one coincided with a like desire on the part of the other, and/or with a suitable opportunity for mutual indulgence. Also in that fact that Minus's part in any conversation was restricted, for reasons detailed above, to a mere handful of mandatory yeses.

These factors combined to keep sapient colloquy to a minimum.

The redistribution of the stones according to the new pattern for the week seldom took more than a day, even with Rastrick at his most demanding. The remainder of his working time Minus spent in raking the beach around the stones to keep it smooth and free of debris; and in polishing and arranging in piles according to colour, shape and size his reserve supply. These were aspects of Minus's work which Rastrick seldom deigned to oversee in person. Thus, during a considerable portion of his waking life, Minus was left free to pursue his second, secret, invisible and totally unguessed-at occupation.

Minus's other occupation was: cerebration or thinking.

* * *

Scene—the hut; time—night. Erg snoring. Minus snor-

ing. Muffled snoring from Rastrick's quarters. Rastrick and Erg asleep. Minus not asleep but awake, thinking.

Minus knew without realising it that the people most likely to get the right answers are the people who ask the right questions. In subconscious accordance with this principle Minus had formulated the following questions which he considered to be pertinent to his situation: (1) Who lives at the House? (2) Are there more than one of him? (3) Supposing Erg is not lying, what was Rastrick doing in the copse? (4) How soon is the Boat coming? (5) And then what? (6) Why do the stones have to be changed so often? (7) Why is Rastrick so nasty? (8) Where can I find the answer to these questions?

Minus called this his Short List. That is, it was a list of questions from which he had eliminated, over the years, (a) all questions too nugatory to deserve serious attention; (b) all questions to which he already knew the answer; (c) all questions whose solution would automatically be implied in the solution of another question.

Minus was fond of his Short List. After the long years of weeding and pruning the survivors were all old friends. Sometimes, however, he wondered if he was applying the standards of group (c) with sufficient rigour. Question (2) for example, was definitely suspect from this point of view. But he had developed a certain affection for it after so long, and so he let it stand, despite vague misgivings. Besides, Question (2) was involved so closely with Question (1) that it would have been very difficult to say which was the more expendable. And attempts to combine the two questions in one—e.g.: Who and how many live (?lives) at the House?—left a lot to be desired.

On this particular night and at this particular time Minus was giving particular attention to Question (8), it being a Thursday. He usually did it that way—one question a night. It was a good system; from it Minus reaped the benefits of methodic and orderly enquiry, while avoiding the monotony of always thinking about the same question on the same night of the week. This consideration, too, had weighed heavily on his decision not to reject Question (2) or combine it with Question (1).

Minus stopped snoring.

Rastrick and Erg continued to snore because they were still asleep. Minus had stopped snoring not because he was awake, for, as has already been explained, he was awake before. He stopped because on this particular night at this particular time he realised rather suddenly that, if he knew the answer to Question (8), there was a ninety per cent chance or better that all other questions would be reduced to child's play and mere worn out superfluities. He began to snore again, more thoughtfully.

Perhaps five minutes later the snores stopped for the second time. Minus had realised another thing. He knew the answer to Question (8).

When his snores resumed this time they were real snores.

* * *

The ground under his feet was grey and black in the moon. There was a cicada singing somewhere in the grass. He could hear his own breath and the sound of his feet on the steep path. He could hear the sea, quieter than he had ever heard it. He went up without pausing until his breathing began to hurt and, looking up, he saw the lump of the House above him not fifty yards away. Then he stopped and rested, his head down, putting his hands on his knees to take the weight off his spine. When he felt better he raised his head and looked again. The walls were silver-grey and the windows thick black holes. No light came through those windows, and no sound. He straightened slowly and went on.

He found a doorway, but no door. He peered and listened. Nothing. He took from one pocket a candle and from another matches. He lit the candle and went in.

There was only one room: it occupied the whole interior of the house. There was quite a lot of furniture. Most of it—bunks, tables, chairs, shelves—was made of some light, shiny metal, which showed no traces of rust. Other things—wood, paper, cloth—had succumbed wholly or partly to age, rot and the work of animals, (rats or ants or both), and crumbled to dust and splinters. Dominating the centre of the room and reaching to the ceiling was a

box of the same shiny metal about twelve feet square. It had a number of little glass windows and many rows of knobs and buttons. There were several similar but much smaller boxes bracketed to the walls in different parts of the room.

He shuffled slowly about, bending now and then to peer at something on the floor. Dust had laid a uniform blanket of grey everywhere which swallowed his footsteps like sand. There was a smell in the place, unfamiliar and strong—like mushrooms perhaps . . . He couldn't place it.

His inspection completed, he stood still in the middle of the room leaning his back against the metal casing of the machine, and digested the information he had so far. The answer to Question (1) was: nobody. The answer to Question (2) was: seventeen.

Minus had never seen a skeleton before but he knew what a skeleton was, and that these were skeletons. Seventeen of them. Most were lying on the bunks; two or three were clustered in a heap at the foot of the machine; one was sitting at a table as though it had gone to sleep there with its head on its arms—and never woken up. Mixed with the dust and bones were small pieces of clothing and equipment—belts, boots, buttons, a pair of spectacles—which had not perished. Minus stooped and picked up a button from the floor. He blew on it then rubbed it on his sleeve. He held the candle close and peered. The markings on it meant nothing to him. It was familiar enough, though. He had the same buttons on his own clothes. So had Erg; so had Rastrick.

His fist closed tight around the button and he stood still for a few moments, thinking. Then he went out. In the doorway he paused long enough to blow out the candle and throw it down on the floor. It sank into the dust as though returning to its rightful place.

His way took him, not back to the beach, but further away from it. He walked like a man asleep, looking straight ahead with eyes that focused on nothing. His arms hung loose at his sides. Occasionally he stumbled on a stone or some unevenness in the rough path; but he never looked down. It seemed as if nothing could have interrupted that

dead, purposeful walk. He moved fast. Before long he could hear the wind in the twisted fir branches of the copse; and the sea, much louder now as the waves arched and smashed themselves on the rocks far below at the foot of the cliff. The sound of the wind was hopeless and sad; the sound of the sea was angry. Both found an echo deep inside him in feelings long suppressed, hidden even from himself, but which boiled up now with every step he took.

He had never been here before, but his walk never slowed or faltered. A few moments and he was in the trees. Still he moved straight ahead, turning his head from side to side now as he went, hunting. The trees cut off some of the moonlight, but his eyes quickly adjusted to the deeper shadow. The copse was not large. He soon found what he was looking for, in the place where he knew it must be.

Rastrick was standing immobile at the very edge of the cliff, where the trees opened out onto nothing. His face was to the sea. Minus saw him and made a sound that was half sob, half shout. Rastrick heard it and turned. Minus stopped about ten feet away. For a long moment the two men looked at each other. Something on Rastrick's face glittered in the moonlight. Tears. He had been crying. He stared dully at Minus. There was no surprise in that look, only a kind of hopeless resignation. He made no attempt to speak. It was Minus who broke the silence. He had almost to shout to make himself heard over the wind and the waves.

"Rastrick. I have some questions . . ."

As he spoke he brought up the hand with the button in it and thrust it towards Rastrick. Perhaps Rastrick interpreted the gesture as a threat. He took a step back and fell out of sight.

Minus crawled to the cliff-edge and looked over. He had no trouble identifying the dark form printed on the pale rock below. On a boulder which jutted above the reach of the swirling water Rastrick was spread like a victim on an altar. His head had opened like a tomato and from it a dark stain flowed to meet the greedy sea.

* * *

When Minus got back to the beach the stars were begin-

ning to go out. He went into the hut and lighted a lamp. Erg lay in his bunk where he had left him, and could be counted on not to move. He was lying on his back with his mouth open. The wooden handle of a breadknife protruded from his throat just below the Adam's apple, and the point of the knife was an inch deep in the wooden boards which took the place of a mattress. Minus looked down at him without expression. There was a great deal of blood; already some flies had found it and were buzzing and wading about contentedly.

Minus put the lamp down on the chair and with a sudden awkward movement he jerked the blanket up to cover Erg's head. Under the blanket the knife-handle still stuck up grotesquely. Leaving the lamp where it was, Minus turned and went out. The door closed very quietly behind him.

He went down the beach, walking like a tired machine. He came to the stones and began to break up the patterns with his feet and kick sand over them. There was something curiously disdainful in his heavy, deliberate movements.

When he had finished he walked very slowly out to the end of the jetty and sat down to wait.

The sun came up out of the sea.

—ROGER JONES

THE TYPEWRITER

by Alistair Bevan

Flush Hardman sneered his well-known sneer and lit a cigarette. Lavinia, the beautiful heiress who had travelled incognito to England in an attempt to trace the stolen jewels of her mother, the Comtesse de Serignac, clutched despairingly at his knees. "Oh, Flush," she breathed, "Take me with you. Without you I am nothing."

Hardman extinguished the flame of his monogrammed lighter, blew smoke into the scented air of Lavinia's bedroom and placed his foot gently against the side of her jaw. He pushed until she lost her grip and a further shove sent her rolling away to sob heartbrokenly in a corner. Flush walked out quietly, not without regret for the poor lovely fool. Halfway down the stairs he straightened his back and the spring returned to his stride. He crossed the luxurious lobby of the hotel, paused outside as his eyes flicked right and left in an automatic gesture of caution. Then he walked to his car, slid behind the wheel and eased the roadster out into the London traffic. On the dash a solitary light winked; at a touch of his finger aerials like tuna rods slid up from the fins. The voice of his Chief crackled round the cab, speaking on the wavelength reserved for Hardman alone.

"Come in, Flush, we've got a job for you. A job that only you can handle . . ."

Flush Hardman tucked the cigarette into the corner of his mouth, reached down and clicked a switch. Already he could feel the old tingling, the rising excitement at the prospect of yet more danger.

"Trust me, Chief; I'm on my way."

The tail lights of his car vanished in the night . . .

Henry Albert Tailor took the last sheet from the typewriter and sat for a moment with it in his hands. He was quivering a little from reaction. The final page; yet another novel completed and ready for the publisher. Oh, it was a great feeling to be a writer! Henry lit a cigarette, his third that day.

He sat back, trying to convince himself he liked the taste of smoke. He had only taken up the habit after inventing Flush Hardman. He had begun to drink at the same time, ominous cocktails and slim glasses of Chartreuse, with now and then the superb profanity of a Bloody Mary. To a certain extent Henry Albert tried to live in character. Once he had even bought a car, though that phase had been short lived. There had been that distressing affair in Great Portland Street, the inevitable little paragraph in the morning paper that had begun "Henry Albert Tailor, the well-known author and creator of the famous Flush Hardman, was fined today at . . ." Henry shuddered. The whole business was best forgotten. He was not cut out for hard living. At least, only through the medium of his typewriter. He brightened, re-reading the paragraph about the unhappy Lavinia. That was the way to treat women, show them who was boss. No woman could hold Flush Hardman; and, through him, no-one could hold Henry Albert Tailor. He was the lord of all Hardman surveyed.

Henry looked round the jumbled room and his little chest swelled with pride. Let 'em all come: he and Flush would cope. The public was clamouring for Hardman stories, and he had the outline of another work in his mind already. The first big scene would be a fight between Esmeralda, the beautiful gypsy girl, and Eileen, the suave, aristocratic daughter of the British Ambassador to Izrakistan. It would be staged in a quarry; consumed by their hopeless love for the sinister secret agent, the two girls would roll down the muddy slope biting and clawing at each other's clothes. It was all forming in his mind, phrases and sentences, even whole paragraphs. Henry's fingers itched, but it was too late to begin now. There was always tomorrow. He yawned, reached for the cover of the typewriter. He'd make an early start in the morning.

In front of him, the typewriter clicked.

Henry sat sharply upright, nose quivering, little hands still clutching the plastic cover. For a moment he had about him something of the attitude and appearance of a startled rabbit. The machine had clicked, definitely clicked;

and he was sure his eyes had not deceived him, the space bar had jumped and the carriage had moved along. He put his hand out cautiously ; snatched it back as if expecting an electric shock. The typewriter stayed silent.

Henry pulled uncertainly at his little wispy moustache. Then he laughed. The sound rang loudly in the room ; it started shivers up his back. He shook his head. He must have imagined the incident. Or maybe something in the machine had slipped. Perhaps the carry-back wanted seeing to again. That must be it ; the typewriter was getting worn. It had been a good machine ; it had typed a few thousand words for him, had that . . . Forgetting his previous fear, Henry touched the worn keys affectionately. He was aware, not for the first time, of an almost mystical link between himself and his typewriter. Without it he was nothing ; Henry Albert Tailor, an ex-clerk, an insignificant, shuffling little man whom nobody minded and whom women ignored. Once at the keyboard he was Flush Hardman, tough, laconic, killing without compunction ; part superman, part devil.

Henry noticed that he had forgotten to type "The End" beneath the last words of the script. He slipped the quarto back under the platen, wound it through, locked onto caps and tapped out the words, adding a double line beneath them. There : that was better. It hadn't looked finished before. Henry centred the carriage and put the typewriter to bed. Shortly afterward he himself retired, to dream of Flush Hardman's car droning through the night.

He was up early next day ; he whisked a cloth round the flat, tidied the cups and glasses that had accumulated during the last chapters of *A Gun for Julie*. He called a taxi and had himself driven to his agent's office. He left the completed typescript there with instructions that he was not to be phoned during the day. He bought a new ream of typing paper and half a dozen ribbons, telling the shop assistant to put them on his bill. On his way out of the store he swelled with pride ; he distinctly heard the girl say : "Oh, that's Mr. Tailor ; you know, Henry Tailor what writes the Flush Hardman books. He gets all his materials from us . . ."

On his way home in the cab the title of the new book flashed across Henry's mind. *Esprit de Corpsé* . . . that was it, of course. It could not be bettered. When the taxi stopped Henry leaped out and all but danced a jig on the pavement. The new work was going to be the best of all the Hardman books. They would have to make a film of it, they would just have to. He would be able to take a long vacation. A yacht, Madeira . . . He tipped the taxi driver the best part of ten shillings. The novel was almost complete in his mind. All he had to do was write, and write . . .

The typewriter misbehaved again that evening.

Henry had intended to take a break at about nine o'clock and go out for a bite of supper, then come back and work into the small hours. The first chapter was complete and he intended to push on with number two. The story was coming along better than he had hoped, better than he had dared to imagine. He took the last quarto from the machine, laid it on the table and went across to the wardrobe to fetch his coat. As he turned away from the typewriter, it clicked—twice.

Henry swung round as if something had been jabbed into his back. There was the machine sitting innocently on the table, the pool of light from the writing lamp, the scatter of completed sheets, the neat stack of fresh paper. Everything was normal; but as Henry stared the mechanism clicked again, and this time he had no doubt the space bar had moved.

He remembered what he had told himself the night before about worn parts slipping and cams getting out of line and needing replacement. He squared his shoulders, raised one eyebrow sardonically as Flush would have done and took his coat from the hanger. He was halfway to the door when the typewriter started to clatter like something possessed. The carriage reached the end of its travel and as if to settle all doubts zipped back to the right and began to rattle again.

Henry's small hands pattered over the machinery. "'Ere, stop . . . stop . . . what's got into the thing . . . must be going mad . . ."

The typewriter became silent.

Henry sat on the edge of the chair, hands tucked between his knees, the coat still round his shoulders. He frowned at the typewriter for a long time. Then he picked up the script from the table and began to study it. On page eight there were three separate errors, and the numbering sequence was wrong. . . .

Henry ate no supper that night. He worked through the small hours, the typewriter turned on its side in front of him, carefully dismantling and cleaning its moving parts. He was no mechanic but long association with the machine had taught him the purpose and mode of operation of most of its complex innards. When he had finished the dawn was in the sky; his hair was rumpled and his eyes were shadowed from lack of sleep. The typewriter shone like a new pin. Henry had found nothing wrong with it at all; he sighed, shrugged and tapped out an experimental 'quick brown fox' on a fresh sheet of paper. The characters were sharp and black and nicely aligned. He squinted along them, admiring their accuracy. He spent half an hour on the corrections to *Esprit de Corpsé*, then washed his hands and turned in to get what sleep he could.

That evening the machine typed its first unaided sentence.

Henry had got to the part of his narrative where Esmeralda, the beautiful gypsy girl who had obviously been attracted to Hardman when he first arrived in the deceptively sleepy hamlet of Valoise-de-Croix, had been wounded in the exchange between Flush and the agents of the sinister international organisation Partek, with which Hardman had already come to blows in *Touch of a Cold Hand* and *The Fatal Bellman*. After driving away the attackers the Special Agent had carried Esmeralda into an alley where he skilfully bound up her bullet-grazed thigh. Henry sat over the typewriter for a moment mentally savouring the situation, and as was his habit he laid his hands softly along the sides of its chassis. Instantly the paper moved up round the platen, the carriage slid to one side, the keys rattled and Esmeralda, Henry saw, slowly lifted her bloodstained knee and rubbed it sensuously along Hardman's cheek. . . .

Henry's scream was long and thin and expressive of extreme torture. He was through the door in a second and down the stairs in three bounds, off hatless and coatless along the quiet street. A hundred yards away he boarded a bus without bothering to enquire its destination. He did not leave the vehicle until it arrived at the depot on the other side of London.

Henry sat in the saloon bar of a dingy pub and turned over the situation in his mind. Until the third Scotch he was convinced he was going mad; after the fourth he felt steadier and less inclined to take a dismal view.

"Telepathy," he muttered, to the bewilderment of a courting couple who were sullenly sharing the bar with him. "That's the answer. Must be. Owned the thing so long it knows what I want afore I——" He stopped, aware of the staring of two pairs of unsympathetic eyes. But the train of thought went on. After the fifth Scotch the thing did not seem so illogical after all, and halfway through the sixth the dazzling possibilities of the situation burst on Henry. That last line had been superb; just the right amount of sadism there, the sort of laced thrill that had made the Hardman books popular with millions. Yet Henry had not been intending to write the words, or anything like them. They must have come welling up from his subconscious and somehow gotten themselves directly onto paper, no checks, no holds barred. What if the machine would do it again, any time he wanted? It would be superb; he would be writing his books as no author had ever written before. The Hardman novels were already sensational. With this new gimmick they would be . . . there wasn't a word for it. Explosions, ten-point hydrogen warfare. Henry groaned aloud at his stupidity in cleaning the machine. He might have upset the link, closed the door on a new world of experience. It would have been disastrous.

He was nearly up to the sandpit sequence. What he and the machine would make of that . . . recklessly, he ordered another Scotch; this time a double. Just wait till he got back . . .

As events turned out it was some time before Henry sat

down at the keyboard again. Before he started work he re-read a newspaper clipping about himself. "Henry Albert Taylor, the well-known author and creator of Flush Hardman, was involved last night in the sort of situation for which Hardman himself has become famous. Charged at Bow Street Magistrates' Court with causing a breach of the peace and with assaulting a policeman, Taylor stated that he 'had had a few drinks to celebrate the idea for a new book'. He was released on bail . . ."

Henry smiled. It was the sort of publicity that would do his sales no harm at all.

He put a fresh sheet of paper into the machine, closed his eyes, concentrated hard and touched the chassis with his fingers. Nothing happened, and Henry's eyes popped open again in alarm. He prodded the typewriter anxiously, making encouraging clicking noises with his tongue, but the machine stayed obstinately silent. Henry felt his world crumbling; then he took a firm grip on his nerves. The thing probably had to be given a start. Yes, that was it, it must need warming up. He began to work, slowly at first, then faster as he became engrossed in his theme. Flush carried Esmeralda to his car; the Hardman Special, equipped with everything from long-range transceiver equipment to cocktail cabinets. As night was falling the secret agent arrived at the gipsy camp where Esmeralda shared a caravan with her aged grandmother. To make way for the coming scene Henry hurriedly wrote the old lady off on a long-distance clothes-peg selling spree. Hardman carried his conquest into the caravan and laid her gently on her bed.

The typewriter took over.

As the courtship progressed Henry's eyes began to bulge and his breath became more and more uneven. His nose got closer to the lines forming under the flying matrices. "No," breathed Henry. "No, I don't give it credit . . . Well, there's a thing . . . I never had no idea . . ." When the scene was finished he felt physically exhausted. He lifted his hands and the typewriter obediently stopped.

Henry collected the sheets, put them in order and sat on the bed to read them. At least the machine had disposed of

one theory. This material had never come from his subconscious. He was beginning to realize how little he had known of the Facts of Life. And there was something in the writing that made him relive the episode as he read it back. The charm worked every time; for a few minutes he really was Flush Hardman, he experienced everything his character thought and felt while making fiery love to a gipsy girl. Henry wiped his forehead, which he discovered was running with sweat. How the prose was getting itself written was no longer important. There was a fortune to be made here.

The typewriter began to rock its carriage forward and back as if impatient to begin again. Henry scurried to serve it, dropping the quartos in his haste. He fed another blank into the machine, and Flush Hardman began to live again.

At dawn the typewriter let its owner rest. Henry tottered to the bed, lay down on it and was almost immediately asleep. He was worn through; during the last few hours he had survived a stockwhip battle with Black Bart, the bullying king of the gipsy tribe; narrowly escaped death when the crazed Eileen had tried to force his car over a cliff; foiled an attempt by Partek to end his life by stuffing his pillow with tarantulas, and rescued Esmeralda from lingering death under the beaks of Black Bart's troupe of trained cormorants. In addition the plot of the book had increased in complexity. The original business of the missing British diplomat was merely a blind; the abduction had been arranged to draw attention from a fiendish plot. Partek intended to take over the minds of mankind by employing the new drug PB70, the formula for which Hardman was sure was hidden somewhere in Valoise-de-Croix. Henry slept late; within an hour of waking he was back at the typewriter. He was unshaven and bleary eyed, and now a bottle of Scotch stood at his elbow. He was going to need plenty of stimulation before the book was done.

By the following morning he was wondering whether he was going to last the distance. The formula, inscribed on the bottom of a fake Ming vase, had been smuggled out of Valoise by the hitherto unsuspected Comte de Latour, and Hardman and the faithful Esmeralda were in pursuit. The

scene had shifted from rural France to London, where Hardman had almost fallen victim to a poisoned dart blown at him by an automatic apparatus concealed in the ventilation grille of his room. From London to Bonn, and from Bonn to Istanbul where there had been an intriguing if irrelevant interlude with the daughter of a Turkish opium smuggler; from Istanbul back to Paris, where Hardman had rejected the further advance of the now repentant Eileen. Henry was more than half convinced the willowy, ash blonde beauty was in fact in the pay of Partek, who were probably blackmailing her father, but he could not be sure. The plot was not his own any more; the machine had taken complete charge. Henry merely fed it its paper and sat bug-eyed at the results.

It was after noon before he woke, stiff and sore from the beating Hardman had received at the hands of the Comte de Latour before Flush had succeeded in pitching the unfortunate nobleman over a cliff. The last chapter had been set in England, in Cornwall, and Henry knew the show-down was approaching. Eileen, Esmeralda, Hardman and a mixed bag of Partek agents were all quartered in the same village, posing as tourists while they hunted for each other and for the formula, which Hardman now suspected had been hidden in the keel of a yacht owned by the sinister Englishman Lord Walthamstowe. By three that morning Flush was chained to the bottom boards of the vessel while Walthamstowe, now revealed as a sadistic maniac, etched his family crest on the secret agent's torso with a hot iron preparatory to burying him at sea in the best tradition. Henry, moaning with pain, took charge of the flying keys long enough to bring a scantily clad Eileen leaping gun in hand down the companionway. Walthamstowe died colourfully, but the respite was brief; Partek agents had surrounded the yacht in force and Flush was compelled to cast off and head out into the Atlantic pursued by an enemy helicopter and with only the two warring girls for crew. Henry had managed to twitch Esmeralda back into the script; she had been his favourite from the start and he insisted on retaining some control over his own book.

At five in the morning he was compelled to take a short rest, leaving the helicopter poised over the yacht and the characters in a state of suspended animation, but at six the impatient chattering of the typewriter brought him back to his desk. The first sheet of paper he offered it was sucked in so rapidly his fingers were almost trapped. The chopper opened fire on the fugitives, Flush taking evasive action while Eileen and Esmeralda retaliated spectacularly with Verey pistols. The climax came when Hardman, in a moment of aberration, shot the pilot of the aircraft, bringing it down incontinently onto the deck of the yacht. The remainder of the scene was fought out in a limbo of flame and smoke; it ended with all the participants dead save Hardman and Esmeralda. Henry gulped with relief. There had been some tight moments. Hardman, only slightly inconvenienced by a shoulder wound, kicked into the water the body of X, the hitherto faceless chief of Partek, and set to work to build a quick raft from the remains of the sinking yacht.

Henry's eyes became glassy. His mouth opened and closed and there was complete silence in the room. Flush Hardman, the undefeated, the hero of a dozen sagas, was staring into the muzzle of a sub machine gun.

So it had been Esmeralda all along who had been working for Partek. Henry's mind raced frantically as he recalled the dozen or so clues to her true identity. And he had insisted on writing her onto the yacht! He sat dry-mouthed. The machine worked slowly and Esmeralda began to laugh, throwing back her head so that her long hair blew round her face. Henry reached out cautiously, an inch at a time, but he was too late. A moment before his fingers closed on the quarto the typewriter roared malevolently. Henry twitched as the slugs tore into Hardman's body; he rose to his feet, gurgled, clutched his throat and slid to the floor amid an avalanche of glasses, bottles, tea-cups, carbon paper and double-spaced script. He threshed about for a time and lay still.

The typewriter paused for a moment, then the paper clicked upward six lines. The platen moved to the right and the keys rattled again. "The End," wrote the machine.

THE BLUE MONKEYS

By Thomas Burnett Swann

This is the third and last part of a novel of ancient Knossos and the beasts of ancient myth. Thea and Icarus, the adolescent children of Cretan Aeacus and a Dryad, have taken refuge in the forest where once their mother lived and have been befriended by Eunostos the Minotaur and other Beasts. Crete is being invaded by the savage Achaeans and a party of these under Ajax is attacking the forest, which has been betrayed by some of its denizens, the seductive, bee-like Thriae. Ajax is determined to have Thea, who has already thwarted one of his attempts to ravish her. Eunostos the Minotaur, who tells the story, is preparing the defence of the forest together with his friends the Centaurs.

In the time preceding a battle, the trivialities of peace become eloquent. The lamplit roots of my den, twisting their friendly protection above our heads, seemed to say: Enjoy while you can the pungent musk of scrambled woodpecker eggs and the amber conviviality of beer poured from a skin. Tastes sharpen, colours intensify, and love, like a friendly ancestral serpent, leaves a beneficent trail across the floor. Thea and I had fought each other in the house of Amber: with blows and crueller words. But no one alluded now to our differences. After the war, we would speak again of the old anger and the old pride and admit, perhaps, that each had needed to speak yet spoken too much. But now, in the forest's last tranquillity, I knew that I loved her with all the ardour of my once fickle heart. It is said that the Great Mother was formerly a maiden, slender and virginal, who lived in a house of willow boughs where all the animals came to bring her food and lay their horns and antlers beneath her hands. Willingly would I have laid my tangled mane beneath my Thea's hand. She did not touch me, but sometimes her

hand trembled in the air between us, as if with the least encouragement it would come to rest like a tired butterfly. Shyness held me from touching her, and the fear that, once having touched, I would love her to my despair and perhaps destruction.

Every morning we met in my shop. Icarus whittled arrows from the boughs of linden trees and Thea fitted them with heads of flint, sharpened to lethal points. My workers and I were hammering a shield for Icarus.

"I ought to surrender," said Thea. "It's me they want, much more than you and Icarus. It was I who angered Ajax—hurt his pride. If I went to him now, he might forget his invasion."

"He's a warrior," I said, "with a taste for battle. Any battle. His hurt pride is merely an excuse for launching him on a new adventure. Achaeans are always getting their pride hurt to give them a pretext for war. They hold it over their heads like a parasol and rattle their swords when it catches a few raindrops. Even if you went to him, he would still attack us. In addition to our gold, we're worth a fortune as slaves. It's been a long time since Panisci performed in the court of Egypt."

"And a Minotaur," said Icarus. "They would probably send you to pleasure the queen. I expect you would bring ~~two~~ fortunes. Much more than my sister."

"And," I continued quickly to Thea, "even if you could stop the war, I wouldn't let you go to him. I don't mean to let you out of the forest again."

"I have no wish to leave." She touched my hand at last. "What are our chances, Eunostos? I have seen those dreadful Achaeans. Their only love is to fight. They are brutally strong and foolishly brave and so girded with armour—greaves, cuirasses, helmets—that their flesh is almost unassailable."

"The Centaurs also are stout fighters," I said. "Farming keeps them in shape. Being both horse and rider, they surpass the best cavalry. They can charge like the wind, grapple with their hands, and kick with their hooves."

"But numbers are against us, I think. How many Centaurs are there?"

"Forty males."

"There must be a hundred Achaeans with Ajax, and all of them armed to the teeth. The Centaurs have only their clubs and their bows and arrows."

"Don't forget the Panisci, and don't mistake them all for children. Some are middle-aged and very wily. There must be fifty of them" (they were much too furtive for an exact count).

"And how many Thriae?"

"Fifty, but some are drones and of little account. The queens, I suspect, will guide the Achaeans and show them every secret turning in the forest. There will be no chance for us to lay an ambush, except in the deeply wooded sections where the Thriae can't fly."

"But we have you," said Icarus proudly. "You're worth an army of Achaeans, I am going to fight at your side."

"In time you will," I said. "In time we will fight together like two old comrades. For the moment, however, I want you to stay with Thea and the Telchines to store supplies and guard the house. If the Centaurs and I should lose the first battle, I will need a place in which to lick my wounds, and as you know, this tree is as good as a fort."

He sighed heavily but did not protest the disagreeable order. Truly, I thought, he is learning to be a warrior.

"I will guard your house," he said, "and keep it safe."

"Now look at the shield my workers have made for you!" I said, touched by his vow. Shaped like a figure-eight, embossed with luck-bringing serpents inspired by Perdix, it was such a shield as kings have born into battle to give their names to legend. Accepting the gift from Bion's two front legs, Icarus held it at arm's length and waved his free arm as if to brandish a sword.

"Ho," he cried, "ho," as he stepped and lunged, parried and ducked, pretending to run me through the chest. Then he remembered to thank the Telchin. He patted his head. "It is very beautiful." The Telchin was not impressed. "It is quite the most fearful and deadly shield I have ever seen!" he continued. "It will help me to slay a dozen warriors, and mingle their blood with its golden snakes. I will name it for you. I will name it Bion."

The Telchin bobbed his head in wordless devotion.

It was Pandia who came to tell us that Chiron had blown the conch shell to assemble his army.

They marched across the field in ragged but resolute lines, their leather boots tearing the yellow gagea and cracking the willow rods of our fallen glider. They moved toward the trees like walking flames, yellow of armour, its bronze enkindled by sunlight; yellow of beard below their crested, sunbright helmets. The queens of the Thriae, Amber among them, circled busily above the soldiers. The sullen workers had yet to make their appearance, but the drones were dimly visible on the far side of the field, beyond the range of our arrows but close enough for their animated chatter to reach us like a distant droning of bees.

We lurked in the trees, and clumsy shields of cow's hide, hurriedly made by the Centaurs in our few days of grace, lay at our feet like the pelts of animals. At Chiron's signal we stepped between the trunks, aimed with unhurried precision, and loosed a volley of arrows. The queens of the Thriae shot above the threatening shafts. They shook their fists and their sweet voices piped incongruous oaths; Amber, the youngest, was also the loudest in her denunciation of the "foul horses" and the "rutting Minotaur". The hundred Achaeans fell to their knees in a ring and raised their broad round shields above their heads. They resembled a giant tortoise, and our well-aimed arrows fell noisily but harmlessly onto their collective shell. Again, the creak of the linden bow, the twang of the arrow guided with the green tail feathers of a woodpecker. Again, the stout, resistant shell. Six times we drew and loosed our arrows. At last a few of them began to penetrate the crevices between the shields, and one of the shields, two, three collapsed as if a giant invisible foot had stepped on the tortoise and broken a part of its shell. But our quivers would soon be emptied.

"Enough," said Chiron. "Let them advance. We will fight them among the trees."

Once among the trees, they had to advance in narrow files, and the branches above their heads were so heavy with vines that the Thriae could not guide them and point

out our hidden presences. But arrows were useless in such terrain and among the close-set trees the long Centaurs and the tall Minotaur were limited in their prowess. Here, the best fighters were the sly, agile Panisci. Their little hairy bodies could blend with the vegetation. They could crawl where Centaurs could not walk; retreat, advance, circle, harass with their bruising slings. They fired at the areas of flesh which were not protected by armour—the face—the arms, the thighs. Their stones moved so quickly that they might be mistaken for large, soundless insects; they were no less painful for they disabled instead of killed.

Cries of astonishment greeted the first barrage. Men clapped hands against their wounded flesh and drew them away when their fingers oozed with blood.

"It's children," squealed Ajax (I knew him from Thea's description). "They've sent their children against us!"

"Children, Hades," cried Xanthus, the one who had lost his ears. "It's goats!" He lunged at a flying hoof and received a blow to his chin. "And watch those hooves!"

One of the Achaeans, harrassed out of his line by the slingers, leaned on the trunk of an oak to catch his breath. A faint groaning of wood alerted him to scan the leaf-shrouded limbs. Did the rascally slingers—children, goats, demons, whatever they were—hide in trees? A noose-shaped vine tightened around his neck and jerked him from his feet. He kicked and waved his arms; he could not scream. The friends who cut him down discovered a corpse who had bitten through his tongue. Above their heads, a woman's laughter tinkled among the branches; her green hair was indistinguishable from the leaves.

But furtive slingers and gallant Dryads could not be expected to stop the Achaean advance. Only the Centaurs and I could hope for decisive victory, and not among trees but in the first clearing. We watched them stagger with slain or wounded comrades into the open grasses and imbibe courage from the bountiful sun. We counted their losses: three we had killed with arrows; four had been stunned by the slings of the Panisci; and three had been hanged by Dryads. It was time for the Centaurs and me.

By choice I am not a fighter, but a worker of gems and

metals, a sometime gardener, a peace-loving rustic, and finally a poet. But who can follow a trade or write a poem when helmeted warriors are stomping about the country and threatening to ravish the women? The time to fight is not the time to garden, and no Beast should hesitate to exchange his hoe for a sword. I preferred the hoe. On the other hand, I did not fear the sword.

"Despoilers of women," I thundered. "Burners, looters, pillagers, and Zeus-damned Northerners!"

The Achaeans awaited our charge with stupefaction. Their mouths dropped open as if they had broken their jaws, and their blue eyes widened to utter vacuity. Well, perhaps they had reason to blanch. Forty thundering Centaurs can raise more clatter than a hundred horse-drawn chariots. Then I saw that the cause of their dread was not the Centaurs. It was me. The Minotaur. The Bull That Walks Like a Man. They scattered before my advance like chickens surprised by a wolf. They risked the multiple hooves of Moschus or Chiron to escape the mere two arms of a Minotaur. No sooner had I swung my axe than I found myself swinging at empty air. One of them, two, I laid on the ground with well-aimed blows, but the others kept out of reach. Enough. I did not intend to tire myself in futile pursuit.

"Ajax," I boomed. "In the name of the Princess Thea, I challenge you to mortal combat!"

No true warrior, least of all a battle-loving Achaean, can ignore a personal challenge, and Ajax, in spite of his ignorance, lechery, and dirt, was not a coward. He lost no time in answering my summons, though I cannot say that he exactly charged me; rather, he squeaked: "Minotaur, here I am!" and tensed himself to receive my blows.

Somewhat doubtfully protected by my shield of cow's hide, I charged him with the anything-but-doubtful deadliness of my double-headed axe, its bronze blade smelted and sharpened in my own shop. My battle-axe was much less wieldy than Ajax's sword, but much more deadly if I landed a blow. You never jab with an axe like a fisherman spearing fish—you swing and slash in great half circles, from side to side or head to foot. He jabbed, withdrawing;

I swung, advancing. When his potent shield deflected my blows, I discarded my useless framework of hide and pressed him with such abandon that he dropped his shield and clutched the hilt of his sword with both of his hands. The muscles which Thea had once admired in my arms tautened to the struggle; leaped beneath my skin like the slashing claws of a crab. You know, I am clumsy when I walk in the house. I stumble on carpets and trip on stairs. I overturn pitchers of wine and spill bones in my lap. But a furious rhythm directed me as I lunged and parried, lunged and parried, gaining a foot, holding my ground, gaining, holding, gaining. The clash of metal became a martial music which stirred my feet, my hands, my torso to the long exhilarating dance of war. And Ajax started to tire. He blinked the sweat from his hairy-browed eyes; he gasped like a diver wrestling an octopus.

"Xanthus," he called at last. "Pluton, help me!" and two of his cohorts, battling a wounded Centaur, leaped to defend their chief. Two, mind you. Three men against one Minotaur. I swung my axe in a rapid, deadly circle. But the earless Xanthus used his sword like a spear and threw it at my legs. It slashed me above the ankle. I gave such a roar that a momentary silence settled across the field; Achaeans and Centaurs poised between their blows and stared at me with gleeful or sorrowful eyes; awaited the fall of the Beast which had walked like a Man.

While Xanthus recovered his sword, Ajax and Pluton pressed their attack. They thought, no doubt, to find me lamed and helpless. But my roar had vented anger and not defeat. The side of my axe bit into Pluton's neck; in the handle, I felt the spasms of his death-struck body. I had no time in which to recover my axe. Ajax came at me with murder in his hand. He looked like a hungry sphinx. The stench of him struck me in the face.

"Ajax," I railed. "You ought to take a bath." I lowered my horns and butted him off his feet.

Then I heard Chiron's cry: "Withdraw, withdraw to the woods!"

Withdraw? Unthinkable! Had not my forefathers said: "Never turn tail until you have lost your horns"?

But I saw the reason behind the command. A second army had entered the field.

CHAPTER VIII:

ARROWS AND HONEY

A hundred fresh Achaeans had entered the field. Probably Ajax had lured them from the coast with promises of gold and slaves: Centaurs to draw their chariots; Panisci to sell in the marketplace at Pylos. Our retreat was rapid but not disorganised. We left behind us five dead Centaurs, their limbs awry in the grim ungainliness of death, and yet their eyes still open and seemingly as sentient as when they had scanned a new network of irrigation ditches or studied the secrets of the Yellow Men. Fortunately, the reinforcing Achaeans did not follow us into the trees; they seemed content to succour their battered comrades, who had lost a fifth of their numbers to hooves and battle axes.

"We shall go to defend our town," said Chiron, when a grove of carob trees had separated us from the hateful field. "Eunostos, why don't you get your friends and join us? We have enough food to withstand a long siege. Remember how we beat off the wolves for three whole weeks?"

"You might bring us a few skins of beer," whispered Moschus, who followed close on my tail.

"If I stay in my house," I explained, "we will make the Achaeans divide their strength. Small as it is, it can stand a siege." I could not admit that I doubted the strength of their town, in spite of its bristling moat.

"Do as you please," said Chiron, though Moschus audibly grumbled. "I hope your little friends can draw a bow."

"They are both good fighters. And of course they blame themselves for the war. Thea offered to surrender herself to Ajax."

"Not a bad idea," muttered Moschus, but Chiron silenced him with a glare.

"Tell them they aren't to blame. Sooner or later, Men were bound to attack us. We are too unlike them—our hearts as well as our bodies. Nature to us is sometimes irascible, sometimes unpredictable, but still—a friend. To them, in spite of all their talk about worshipping the Great Mother, she is either a slave or a master. They fear her unless they can put her in chains."

I travelled home by way of Pandia's house. Her town was undefended, and I wanted to offer her asylum in my trunk. It was not really a town; a hamlet, no more, with a dozen hollowed logs placed in a ring around a carefully cultivated berry path—blackberries for food, bearberries for a bracing, astringent drink. The patch was criss-crossed with narrow paths and thickly quilled with posts where baskets of berries could be hung on wooden hooks. The open ends of the logs confronted the patch and allowed the owners to keep a watchful eye for the stealthy crows which came with twilight.

I crossed the crooked stream which carried snow from the mountains and laved the town in a cool, perpetual breeze. No one greeted me; no one contested my approach. I paused at a low, thorn-rimmed fence and raised the latch of the gate with as much noise as possible to announce my arrival. The back ends of the logs, sealed with clay and stained with umber, stared at me like lidless eyes. I walked between two of the logs and emerged within the circle and facing the front doors. Each log was high enough to accommodate a standing Bear Girl and long enough to enclose two rooms, their rounded walls hewn and polished to a smooth finish. The first room served as a pantry, whose open shelves abounded with jars of honey and bowls of berries, and also with trays of freshly smoked fish, a little rank to the nostrils of a Minotaur. The second room, invisible behind a curtain of dried black-eyed Susans strung on silken strands, I knew to be the sleeping quarters or, in the term of the Girls, the Repositorium. One of the Girls was moving drowsily through the berry patch and filling a pail which hung from her paw.

"Where is Pandia?" I asked without polite preliminaries.

She pointed to one of the logs. "Asleep. It's the Afternoon Repose, you know. I was sleeping too till I dreamed about dinner."

Stooping to half my normal height, I entered the porch of the designated house, flung aside the curtain of black-eyed Susans, and found Pandia asleep beneath a coverlet of rabbit skins, with a pot of Cretan Bears-tail twisting its yellow and purple flowers on a table beside her couch.

"Pandia?" I called. "PANDIA." She did not stir.

"Bears," I said.

She threw back the coverlet and almost overturned the pot of flowers. "Bears?"

"Human bears, Achaeans. They have won the first battle and entered the forest. Would you like to come to my house and stay with Icarus and me?"

"Yes."

"Would your friends like to visit the Centaurs? They would be much safer there."

"We don't like the pigs. Besides," she added, "the Achaeans may not bother us. There is nothing here they could want."

She neatened her hair with a comb of tortoise shell, hurriedly tied her rabbit sash in a bow with unequal ends, and followed me out of the village with one regretful look at the berry patch.

"Do you know what war is?" she sighed. "It's giving up berries so you can stick swords in people."

"But if we don't give up berries, we shall have to lose Thea and Icarus."

"You're right," she admitted, "and Icarus is worth a whole patch. He's rather like berries himself, you know. Good to have at the table or in the kitchen, sweet but not sugary. Except he doesn't have thorns."

"He's learning to grow them. He must."

We jogged through the forest on rapid, silent feet. I always lower my horns when spurred by danger, an instinctive reaction, no doubt, to shield myself with the fiercest part of me. Crippled as I was by a sword-slashed ankle, Pandia matched my pace and sometimes spurred ahead of

me in her eagerness to join Icarus. Her nub of a tail quivered with fear and excitement.

I felt an enormous relief when I saw my house, its friendly brown ramparts lifting an island in the afternoon. Then I stopped. The house was beleaguered by Thriae! A dozen of the dour workers, conspicuously absent before the battle, were wheeling above the trunk with dulcet cries of "Drown Icarus" and "Burn Thea" (you would rather expect them to boom like warring generals, but even the workers have honied voices). Arrows whirred from the trunk like the green woodpeckers whose feathers guided their shafts. One of the Thriae stiffened in the midst of a cry and fell from the air as if she had turned to stone. Good. Thea and Icarus were manning the parapet. But how could I reach the door with my lamed ankle?

"Pandia, do you want to go back to your village? You may be safer there."

"Not while those Harpies are after Icarus."

I lifted her in my arms, bending to shield her body, and entered the deadly field. We had covered a third of the distance to the trunk when the Thriae saw us. Like geese in the shape of a wedge, they wheeled to attack us with a shower of rocks, which they carried in quivers at their sides and hurled with deft jabs of their hands. The drone of their wings made a low, continuous thunder. The rocks were small but jaggedly cutting. My large, bowed back made an excellent target, and so did the fiery thatch of my head. For once I was glad of my matted hair, which doubtless kept me from a broken skull. The rock I most resented struck the tip of a horn and made my entire body throb like the clapper of a swinging bell. If they've chipped my horn, I vowed, by Hippos, the god of horses, I will wring their scurvy necks!

Then the door in the trunk opened to disgorge my three workers. I handed Pandia into their multitudinous legs and bounded after them, striking the door jamb and setting the cowbell to a frantic reverberation. Inside the door, I waved to Icarus and Thea on the walkway below the parapet. Suddenly the pain in my ankle erupted into my head. I was briefly conscious of falling to the ground and,

at the same time, falling on sleep. The warm grass seemed a linen coverlet rising to enfold me.

I awoke to Elysium. My head lay in Thea's lap. She was fragrant as always with myrrh and marjoram, and her little hand touched coolness to my forehead. The ghost of a dream lingered in my brain: Before my waking, it seemed, a sweet, incredible fire had touched my lips (a dream surely?). I closed my eyes to recapture the fire.

"I saw you blink, Eunostos. Open your eyes and tell me how you feel."

"First, tell me what happened here."

"When you came with Pandia, those dreadful women had been attacking us for an hour. They are gone now, but they've cut your garden to pieces with their stones."

My grape vines littered the ground like murdered snakes. The parasol hung in tatters, the clay oven had lost its door, and the fig tree looked as if locusts had stripped its branches. It resembled a quarry more than a garden.

I sat up and touched my rock-battered horn; no chips were missing. I stretched my bloodied shoulders; Thea, I found, had eased their smart with a cloth soaked in olive oil. I tested my ankle, which promised to hold my weight.

"We must look for total invasion," I said, and told her about the second army. "First, we shall have to guard against fire. Do you mind a little rain?"

With the help of a stone provided by the Thriae, I narrowed the mouth of my fountain until I had thinned and widened its shower to a misty spray which covered the entire trunk.

"The wood will soak," I explained. "Then it won't be easy to set on fire, even with burning arrows."

Pandia opened her arms to the downfalling spray. "But there isn't a rainbow," she sighed, and entered the house to take a nap. "The better to do battle," she called from the stairs.

Thea, Icarus, and I assumed positions behind the parapet. The workers appeared to be guarding the door. They crouched in six-legged readiness as if they momentarily anticipated the assaults of a battering ram.

It was Icarus who sighted the enemy. "Achaeans. Just a

few, I think." Probably the main host had gone to attack the Centaurs. "But they have a secret weapon."

The secret weapon advanced gigantically across the clearing, a humped, tented vehicle which somehow moved without wheels. After a few seconds of perplexity, I recognized a harmamaxa, a large wagon invented in Asia Minor and covered with a rounded tent of canvas: Achaean booty, no doubt, from one of their innumerable and far-flung raids. In Babylonia, such vehicles were drawn by horses, but animals are vulnerable to arrows and this harmamaxa was powered by men who, having removed the floor and the wheels, pressed towards us on foot while holding the wagon over their heads and most of their bodies. Thus, except for their feet, which were shod in thick leather boots, they enjoyed complete protection from arrows. Instead of the stationary turtle we had faced this morning, here was a turtle in motion, slow, cumbersome, but almost unassailable from a distance. Through the embrasures in the parapet, we fired a stream of arrows at the rounded roof. They stuck in the canvas harmlessly as if they were quills, and the turtle became a porcupine. I looked at Icarus as he fitted an arrow into his bow. His bare chest, sun-bronzed above a green loin cloth, rippled with manly muscles. And yet he remained touchingly a boy, pitting his arrows against the well-guarded giants of Ajax. I gazed at Thea in wordless communion. Between us, I tried to say, we will shield him, fight for him, die for him. Somehow, it was always innocent Icarus who seemed to need protecting instead of Thea. Innocence has been called the strongest armour; it is only strong, however, in the company of goddess-fearing Men and godly Beasts; not Achaeans.

"They'll have to come out to attack," said Icarus, wincing at his failure to slow the tortoise. "Then we'll pick them off like the wild pigs they are."

"But they'll be at the walls," I said darkly.

"Eunostos," gasped Thea. "The door has opened. Your workers are leaving the fort!"

Dear Zeus, did they mean to betray us? Perhaps unknowingly I had wounded their pride.

"Bion!" I called, but I heard the frenzied buzz of their battle-cry and knew that they meant to defend us and not betray us. The Achaeans stopped in their tracks. The harmamaxa swayed into rooted stillness.

Attack!

Like angry dogs, they darted between the exposed feet of the Achaeans and slashed at their leather boots with savage pincers. Their hard hides protected them from the halfhearted kicks of Men who were trying to hold a wagon above their heads and most of whom could not see the nature of their attackers. The wagon swayed and lurched as if it were bounding along a rocky road behind a pair of fright-crazed stallions, and finally heaved on its side. Twenty-five terror-stricken Men scrambled to their feet and scurried in all directions to escape the pincers.

Once they were free, however, and face to face with their determined but after all not very sizeable attackers, the Achaeans regained their courage. I heard their commander rallying them:

"Strike at their joints, Men!"

Deflecting our arrows with their shields, they struck repeatedly at the waving, root-like limbs, and their sharp-edged swords began to slice through the joints. The result was no less lamentable for being inevitable. My workers were soon hobbling over the grass in complete helplessness, while the warriors struck at the tough but not impervious membrane which joined the halves of their bodies, till the halves lay twitching in separate agony. Thus died my brave and beloved friends, devoted as dogs and far more intelligent; artists of the beautiful as well as warriors.

Icarus was sick at his stomach, and I—well, I ran down the ladder, waving my bow and hurling every oath which came to my tongue: "Butchers!" "Wolf-lovers!" "North-erners!" I meant to go to my friends, shieldless though I was, and avenge their dismemberment.

An arrow struck at my feet and jarred me to a halt. "That's what they want," cried Thea, waving her bow. "To lure you into the open and hack you to death. Bar the door and *come back to the parapet!*" She spoke with the rough urgency of an Amazon, but tears had dampened her tunic

and she looked like a little girl who had lost her doll. Rage in behalf of my workers melted to tenderness for the brave girl who, in spite of her grief, had acted to save my life. I barred the door and returned to the parapet to watch the determined Achaeans right their harmamaxa and resume their advance on the fort. Behind them, ten of their comrades had fallen to arrows and Telchin pincers.

Icarus shaded his eyes and pointed to the western sky. Diminutive fly-shapes materialized into nine pairs of Thriae, each pair supporting a branch which in turn supported a large bucket. Directly above the house, they began to tilt the buckets and pour the contents down on our heads. Amber, brown, and yellow in turn, it was much too thick for oil, snaking as it fell like a heavy rope flung at our heads. Honey. It was scalding honey which hissed when it struck the spray from the fountain and, not yet cooled, lashed into streamers and droplets and splattered our skin like a horde of terrible mosquitoes. We slapped out our burns and tried at the same time to raise our bows, but the wavering mist of the fountain distorted our aim, and the Thriae emptied their buckets and wheeled out of range before we could thin their ranks.

By now the harmamaxa had reached the walls and attached itself to the door like a huge fungus. We felt the blows of axes under our sandals. Without leaving their tent, the Achaeans had cut through the canvas wall and now they threatened to smash the oak rectangle of the door. The loss of their comrades had given them room in which to wield their axes.

"Icarus," I said, "help me lift the oven onto the parapet."

His eyes brightened with expectation. "We'll drop it on their heads!"

We dragged, heaved, and wrestled it up the ladder; we poised it, hollow but heavy, above the harmamaxa.

"Now!"

The canvas roof, which had stopped a score of arrows, buckled under the oven like molten lava. A thud. A body-wrenching groan. Hurried movements concealed beneath the partially deflated but still unbroken canvas. Then,

again, the deadly crunch of the axe, which bit into wood like a hungry weasel, a little more hungrily with each bite, and would only sate itself when it swung on air.

There were no more ovens to drop on their heads. I considered other defences. Shower them with arrows when they toppled the door? Charge among them with my battle-axe? The sudden return of the Thriae settled the question.

"Retreat," I shouted. "We can't fight two enemies at the same time."

We scrambled down the ladder, cringing as the hot droplets began to strike our backs, and gained the easeful coolness of the stairs. The last to descend, I paused to stare through the mist of the fountain at the ruined garden and the shredded parasol, the vines and the leafless fig tree. A Beast's love for a garden can be as strong as his love for another Beast. Who can say if the poppies dream of butterflies in amethyst clouds, the fig tree dreads the coming of the ravenous bees to puncture its fruit, the vines exult in the sun and, growing warm, drowse in the lengthening shade of a parasol? Dreams, dreads, exultance, and repose—and love, always love. Leaves instead of limbs, but hearts and brains, identity and individuality. It is not necessary to walk in order to love.

The taste of loss was wolf's-bane in my mouth.

At the foot of the stairs, I pulled the lever which loosed a hidden panel and choked the stairwell with earth. The Pharaohs of Egypt utilize the same principle in their tombs to guard their mummies and their boat-shaped catafalques. (Where do you think the Egyptians learned their secret? From my own ancestors.)

"They can dig us out," I said, "but I doubt if they brought any shovels. Achaeans are fighters, not plumbers."

"And if they try?"

"We'll leave by the back door."

"Back door?" cried Thea and Icarus in unison.

"Yes," I said, pausing to heighten their expectation. It is always pleasant to divulge a secret under dramatic circumstances. "You didn't think I would live in a house with a single door, did you? Remember my cave? *Two* doors,

in spite of its apparent rusticity. Here, it's the same. Let me show you."

Between the roots in the far wall of the bedroom, a large stone, the width of my shoulders, rested in gray anonymity. I delivered a sharp blow with my hoof and the stone turned on a pivot to disclose a narrow passageway no taller than a Minotaur on all fours. "It cuts right under the field and comes out in the forest. Tomorrow or the next day, I can slip from the house and reconnoitre to see if the Achaeans have left the trunk. They are not going to stay up there permanently. There are too many riches to steal on other parts of Crete. When I return, I'll rap six times and then you can open the door."

"It's time for supper," said Pandia, rising from her nap in the moss, or rather, rising *with* the moss and resembling a perambulatory thicket. "Have you beaten off the enemy?"

I told her about our retreat.

"You've laid in supplies, I trust?"

"Adequate but not elaborate."

"We shall just have to diet."

We climbed the ladder to prepare our frugal dinner. In the light of a single lamp, the usually amiable vines looked sombre and strangling, as if they might drop on our heads and tighten their leathery tendrils around our necks. Between us lay platters of cheese and the kind of bread called *gouros* (dough mixed with lentils), a skin of beer, and a cup of water for Pandia. When Pandia asked for sweets, Icarus fetched her a jar of pennyroyal from the workshop. But the sight of the forge and tables without their faithful workers took his appetite.

"Eunostos," he said, "do you think you could say some words in memory of Bion and the others?"

"I'll try," I said, and made up a tiny poem, rough and unpolished but at least loving:

Elegy to a Telchin

Who will guard the nest,
Gather mushrooms now,
Milk his aphid-cow?
Lightly let him rest.

There was a long silence, and then we tried to talk. I touched Thea's hand. "We're perfectly safe down here. They can't reach us without a lot of digging, and we would hear them in time to leave by the back door. Even if they shut off the fountain, dry out the trunk, and set a fire, we're well insulated by the roots."

She forced a smile. "The roots, you say. They look—well, as if they had turned poisonous and begun to watch us."

"Nothing that lives underground will hurt you. Not here, at least. Only the things that come from the surface."

"Achaeans," she said, "and those witchy Thriae. It's all my fault, Eunostos. If I had accepted Ajax's advances, none of this would have happened. He would have taken me back to Mycenae with him as his concubine—Achaeans, they say, are surprisingly gentle to women in their own country—and reared Icarus like his son."

"But you wouldn't have come to the forest. You wouldn't have known about your mother."

"Or you. I don't regret the forest, Eunostos. I regret what I brought with me from the world of Men. I opened a door."

"A forest is like a snake," I said. "Occasionally it needs to shed its skin, just for the sake of change. Sometimes it sheds with the seasons. Now, it is shedding in a different, harsher but still necessary way. It is shedding safety which threatened to become stagnation. You can be sure, though, that its new skin will be strong and beautiful."

"You're being kind," she said, "but not very honest."

Pandia seemed to be napping. She had closed her eyes and opened her mouth. But the rest of us tried to talk and avoid the apprehensions which come with silence.

"I expect," said Icarus, "that the Achaeans want your shop as well as us. The gold, I mean."

"Yes," I said. "To melt down in their own land. You know, they are excellent goldsmiths, if you don't mind morbid subjects. You ought to see their death masks."

"Death masks," said Thea pensively. "And dead vines above our heads. The friendly snakes have died. Or something has killed them."

"Nonsense. It's the way the lamp is burning. It makes us all look dead. Like Pandia there. I think it's time for bed."

Thea and Icarus rose to their feet.

"Take the lamp," I suggested. "I'll light another for myself."

Pandia kept her place.

"Pandia, wake up and come to bed," said Thea. "You'll be more comfortable on the moss." She held the lamp under the girl's face. The round eyes were closed like clenched fists, the vivid mouth was drained to a deathly pallor.

The reason lay at the back of her neck, a small, dark hump. I crushed it between my fingers—its little bones snapped easily, its feathers oozed blood, Pandia's blood—and threw the pulp to the floor with a spasm of uncontrollable shivering. A Strige, a vampire owl. Pandia raised her head and struggled to open her eyes. She rubbed the back of her neck.

"I dreamed of bears. They were chasing me until I was very tired. I couldn't lift my feet. I felt their hot breath on my neck."

I pointed to the crushed body.

She gasped and clung to Icarus. "A Strige."

"Yes, but we found him in time. You'll feel all right in the morning. It must have flown down the stairs while we were fighting the Thriae in the garden. No doubt, they sent it to devil us. Rats, moths, all night-flying creatures are their friends. There may be others."

We searched the house, sifting the moss on the floor of the bedroom, peering under the tables in the workshop, standing on benches with a raised lamp to examine the roof of the den, and found a second Strige, balled among the roots and apparently asleep. Soft, brown, seemingly all feathers, he looked as harmless as a baby rabbit, but I knew that he lived on blood, which he sucked so unobtrusively that the victim might die without discovering his presence. If you find an animal dead in the forest for no apparent reason, examine the back of his neck for the marks of two small fangs.

Thea was visibly shaken. She put a protective arm around Pandia's shoulder and whispered, "My dear, it's all right now. This will never happen to you again."

"Yes," I said, "it's all right, but I think we shall all feel safer sleeping together in the bedroom."

We lay close to each other, Icarus, Thea, Pandia, and I, and shared the warmth of hope in one of those bleak and endless-seeming hours which end as surely as banqueting, games, and love. Pandia clutched my hand until she fell asleep, and then I held her fingers, her almost-paw, loving her tenderly (yet wishing, must I confess, that she was Thea). I was tired and sad and missing my workers, and my wounded ankle throbbed as if the tentacles of an octopus alternately squeezed and released, squeezed and released. the parted flesh. The usually soft moss aggravated the bruises and burns on my back.

I awoke in the night, when the thinly flickering flame announced the near-exhaustion of its oil. Thea was gone. I thought: she has gone to give herself to the Achaeans.

CHAPTER IX:

WOLF'S-BANE

"I'm going to get her back," I said when Icarus and Pandia, awakened by urgent shakes, blinked in the light of the dying lamp. "I'm going to get her back, and kill that murderous Ajax. He's a wicked Man, and his Men are wolves, and they will not leave this forest with Thea." I felt like the stony bed of a stream in summer, dry and parched and sprayed with the fine dust which blows from Libya. I felt—untenanted.

"I'm going too," said Icarus.

I shook my head and explained impatiently why he and Pandia ought to stay in the house, she for protection, he to protect her.

"I can go where you can't," he continued, the rare soldier who knows the rare time when he ought to question his commander. "They can see your red hair for a mile, and even when you stoop, you look as big as a griffin. But

I can *sneak*. I'm very good at it. At Vathypetro, I learned to sneak out of the palace when I was six years old, and I've been practicing ever since."

"I'm going too," said Pandia. "I can't sneak but I can bite." She bared her small but numerous teeth. "They're made for fish heads as well as berries."

"Some one has to stay here," I explained to her. "To let Icarus and me back in the house. You'll be quite safe. If you hear any tunneling, then and only then you can leave by the back door."

Pandia acquiesced with such ill humour that I hesitated to turn my back and risk my tail within the range of her teeth. Fortunately, Icarus mollified her with a brotherly kiss on her head. Girded with loin cloths and armed with daggers, we bent to enter the tunnel. In a limited space, we did not wish to be encumbered with bows and arrows.

The tunnel was never tall enough in which to stand, and only sometimes tall enough in which to crawl; sometimes we had to wriggle on our stomachs, scraping our bare legs and chests over roots and stones, and I found myself forcibly reminded that my workers had built the passage for their own peregrinations and not for the egress of a seven-foot Minotaur and the five-foot son of a Dryad.

"Icarus," I called behind me, booming in the cramped, earthen corridor like the angry Bull-God before he sends an earthquake. "We are going to come to some water which leads out of the tunnel. I'll go first. If everything is clear outside, I'll swim back and get you. Otherwise, wait a few minutes and then return to the house."

The underground water was almost as cold as the melting snow which fed it in the mountains. I dived, negotiated a passage the size of a door, and slid to the surface in the same stream which ran by Pandia's village. I sent the merest of ripples widening to the bank, where a large water rat eyed me from the mouth of a burrow belonging to a Paniscus, and green branches swayed in the current like the tresses of drowned Dryads. I returned for Icarus and, shivering violently, both of us climbed onto the bank and shook ourselves to restore warmth.

"Eunostos," he chattered. "R-remember when you

s-said that one day we would be old c-comrades facing battle together?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said. "We are. Not old, but comrades. I want you to know that wherever you are, I am. To fight at your side and stand guard when you fall asleep. I want you to know that you are—friended."

I have known two loves, I thought, one for a girl who wished to be my sister and therefore cut me like broken coral; one for a boy who wished to be my brother and therefore comforted me like the moss in which I sleep. If I had died before they came to the forest, my soul would have been a serpent, kind but ugly and earthbound. Now it will be a butterfly, and no barriers of wind will hold me from the perilous chasms of the clouds or the tawny orchards of the sunflower.

Warmed at last, we crept to the edge of the field which held my house. A tendril of smoke arose from the garden, like a beanstalk climbing the sky, and the scent of venison piqued our nostrils.

"The swine," said Icarus. "Gorging themselves in your house."

"Yes," I said, "but at least they haven't burned it."

"Think of the housecleaning after they're gone," he sighed. "Bones in the fountain. Grape skins on the bench. And you know," he lowered his voice, "they won't bother to use the watercloset."

When we turned from the house to pursue our mission, the snake Perdix coiled at our feet.

"Uncle," said Icarus, muffling his joyful cry into a whisper. He clasped the snake in his hand and addressed him with great solemnity, careful to speak each word with separate emphasis. "Did you know that Thea has been captured?"

Perdix opened his mouth and flickered his forked tongue.

"He says he understands," explained Icarus. "It's the only way he can communicate, since I've never learned to speak in real snake. He really does understand what I say. Not everything, of course. Adjectives give him trouble. But if I speak slowly, he catches the nouns and verbs. That

time when Ajax was chasing Thea, just before we came to the forest, it was I who sent Perdix into the room to make Ajax angry. He can help us now, I think." He restored Perdix to his familiar haunt in the pouch of his loin cloth. I was still not convinced that the snake could help our mission, but I dared not belittle him within the range of his fangs.

Icarus with his snake was no longer a child with a pet. Rather, he treated Perdix as a warrior treats a dependable ally, a horse or a war dog, with trust, affection, and dignity. The three of us headed toward the town of the Centaurs, the obvious place for the main host of Achaeans and also for Thea's surrender.

Along the way, we found that Ajax had preceded us to Pandia's village. No house had escaped a pilfering, and Pandia's log had been split down the middle by an axe. Shattered crockery and a few smoked fish, evidently not to the taste of the conquerors, testified to what had once been her well-stocked larder. They had emptied her Cretan bears-tail out of its pot, as if they suspected a cache of coins and, worst of all, they had turned the communal berry patch into a small wilderness of raucous crows, uprooted posts, and stripped vines. The Bears themselves, it appeared, had been captured by Ajax and carried on his march.

Icarus glanced at the crows and scattered them with a well-aimed handle from a honey pot. "I'm glad Pandia didn't come," he said. "It would have broken her heart."

"Or turned her stomach," I said, and resumed our journey with revenge as well as rescue to spur my hooves.

We approached the farms of the Centaurs with great stealth, in case the besieging Ajax had stationed guards to protect his rear. Where the forest met the vineyards, Icarus climbed a tree to locate the enemy. I myself am not adept at climbing (except the oaks of Dryads). The branches have a way of buckling under my weight or catching my tail. But Icarus insinuated himself into the foliage with a skill which did credit to his mother's race; and after his reconnoitring branches parted to release him without a rustle.

A cobweb stretched over one of his eyes and gave him the look of a pirate, and a pirate's ferocity crackled in his voice when he told me what he had seen.

"They are not besieging," he said. "They have already captured the town! It's too far to see clearly, but I could just make out bands of helmeted men wandering through the streets, as if they owned the place. I'll have to move closer to get a real look."

"Wait till night. Then we'll go together."

Darkness is a going instead of a coming; an absence of light rather than a presence of bat wings, mummy wrappings, ravens, or whatever other fanciful figure of speech we poets use to describe her. But a going can be as welcome as a coming, and daylight, hateful for what it showed, faded like a lamp which has burned its olive oil and left us to the kind secrecy of night. We crossed the vineyards, their green grapelets invisible beneath a moonless sky, and bypassed the compound to avoid exciting the animals. We saw, after first hearing, two Achaean patrols. They had been celebrating; they were still imbibing. They sang or laughed as they made their rounds, and paused whenever they met to swap convivialities. Under their belts they carried little flasks which they swapped and tipped to their mouths with a maximum of contented smacks. It was not hard to avoid them. If they saw us at all, they must have mistaken us for a pair of palm trees with broad trunks and without fronds.

We came to the clump of olive trees which I had previously noticed beside the moat, and one of them looked so staunch and concealing that I felt emboldened to risk my weight in the branches. I saw that most of the Achaeans had gathered in the theatre to hold a banquet. They had built a fire in the pit and, using their swords as spits, begun to roast their dinner. Thea, our precious, surrendered Thea, sat on one of the tiers and seemed oblivious to men, fire, and food. The earless Xanthus pointed toward the fire as if to say: "Will you share in our feast?" She shook her head. "Thea," I wanted to cry, "accept his invitation. Your supper last night was a bit of cheese and a slice of bread. You went to the Achaeans of

your own will and now you must eat their food in order to keep your strength." Then I discovered the reason for her abstinence. The Men were eating not only the domesticated pigs of the Centaurs, but some of the blue monkeys from the forest. The skinned and spitted bodies were clearly recognizable in the light of the fire, as eager cooks jostled each other to lower them into the flames and turn them from side to side. Blue monkeys. Thea's monkeys. The forest's laughter, she had said. I thought of what she must feel to have them offered her on a spit or a platter.

The men who were not cooking tiddled from horns or wineskins, sang ribald songs about the women of their conquests—raw-boned Israelites who would slip a knife in your back when you closed your eyes, olive-skinned Egyptians who bragged about their sphinxes and pyramids and made you feel like crass barbarians, and Cretans with bare breasts who were good mistresses once they had satisfied their pride by making a show of resistance. One man sang a ballad about the famous Cretan bosom, which he variously compared to ant-hills, burial mounds, and helmets, none of them happy comparisons, it seemed to me (being a poet, perhaps I am too critical). Laughter, coarse and brutal, interrupted the songs, and Ajax, the swaggering victor, moved among his Men, drank their wine, and claimed the tenderest morsels from their swords.

Thus, the conquerors. The conquered lay in the streets. The sad, ungainly bodies of those gracious farm-folk, the Centaurs, together with splintered houses, broken lanterns, and torn tapestries, attested to a fierce battle in the very heart of the town. The surviving Centaurs, I saw, had been shut in the animal compound with their sheep and oxen and were now being guarded by a small contingent of soldiers, most of whom stood at the gate while two of their number patrolled the high and virtually unclimbable walls of thorn. None of the males had survived the battle; a handful of females and children, along with the hapless Bears of Artemis and three Panisci, comprised the prisoners. I felt as I had when I saw my workers slaughtered before my eyes; if anything, worse, for Centaurs are higher beings, no less loyal and far more kind and intelli-

gent. Chiron, the blameless king; Moschus, a bore but lovable: their faces came to haunt me, noble of mane, and the thunder of their hooves. But tears are a luxury not permitted to warriors on the threshold of battle. I stifled my grief into a far corner of my brain and let my anger flare like the fires in the forge of Hephaestus, the smithy god, when he works his bellows; anger which spurs the body to valour, the mind to craft.

"Those poor Centaurs," said Icarus when we had left our trees and met to whisper plans. "And the blue monkeys. How do you think the Achaeans got them?" It was the lingering child in him which lamented the Centaurs and the monkeys with the same grief.

"They are trusting creatures. Ajax may have lured them right into the town with the offers of food. Or maybe they followed Thea."

"I wish we could enter the town as easily as the monkeys."

I deliberated. "Perhaps we can send a weapon even if we can't go ourselves."

"A *secret* weapon?" The harmamaxa had fascinated him. But the weapon I had in mind was less obvious and much more devilish.

"Remember my telling you about our war with the wolves and how Chiron thought of feeding them wolf's-bane? It's a rather innocuous looking root, a bit like a dark carrot. But the monkeys love roots of all kinds. If we could get them to eat wolf's-bane, and drive them toward the town before they died—"

"The Achaeans would eat them, but Thea wouldn't. They would poison themselves!"

"Exactly."

"Is the poison always fatal?"

"When taken in sufficient quantities. Smaller quantities act like a sedative. Either way, the enemy would be knocked out long enough for us to release the captives and take the town."

We spent the night in my cave, sitting back to back and sharing each other's warmth in the damp, cold air: friend and friend, remembering what we had lost; warrior and

warrior, plotting tomorrow's vengeance and what we hoped to win.

Icarus said at last: "Eunostos, I am cold all over except for my back," and I cradled him in my arms until he slept. He had no wish to remain a child, but it pleased him for the moment to relax from the stance of a warrior into the old childish ways of need and dependence, and it pleased his friend to father and shield him. It is one of the ways of love to delight in the youngness, the littleness, the helplessness of the beloved.

When the sun crept yellow feelers into the cave, we went to look for wolf's-bane. The plant had never thrived on temperate Crete. Its favourite habitat is the cold northern mountains of the mainland, where the sun is a sometime visitor instead of a king.

"Perdix will help us," Icarus announced. "A snake should know about roots of all kinds. He lives among them." He drew the snake from his pouch and addressed him with tenderness. "Don't you, Perdix?"

"Does he understand the word wolf's-bane?"

"It explains itself, doesn't it?" To the snake he said with great emphasis: "WOLF'S-BANE. ROOTS TO KILL A WOLF."

The tongue flickered with what I presumed to be comprehension and perhaps a touch of petulance because Icarus spoke to him as if he had no tongue to catch the vibrations of human speech. Icarus stooped to release him and, before he could touch the ground, the snake escaped from his fingers. We hurried to follow him through the undergrowth.

"I think he's after a female," I whispered when the sweat of the chase had begun to mat my hair.

"He's doing his bit for Thea. After all, she's his great-great-niece. Though," he admitted, "I expect he loves me best. I've never stepped on his tail."

Possessed of a tail myself (though its altitude preserves it from treading sandals), I could understand the snake's preference.

In less than an hour, he led us to the ragged and unscalable cliff which formed the eastern boundary of the

forest. In the shadow of the cliff and the further shade of a large carob tree, we found a clump of wolf's-bane. Like their four-legged namesake, the plants prefer shadows to sunlight. I knew that in late summer they would burst into showy but somewhat sinister hooded flowers, like visored helmets, of blue, yellow, purple, or white; now, however, they were flowerless and innocent-seeming, with cleft leaves like slender, tapering hands. We pulled them up by their stalks and shook the dirt from their thick, tuberous roots. They did not look appetizing, but neither does a carrot, a raw fish, or a plucked chicken.

It was not hard to find a congregation of blue monkeys, the happiest of animals and perhaps the most talkative. You can hear their chattering from a great distance, a multitude of cries which merge their separate sharpnesses into a single music. Merry, trusting, affectionate, they recognized Icarus and me as familiar faces and, at the same time, spied the bait in our hands. One of them jumped on my shoulders and, twining his legs around my neck, bent to clutch at a root. I made a soft chattering which I supposed to approximate monkey and gestured toward the town of the Centaurs, as if to say that I would feed him when we reached the town.

I looked at Icarus and saw the tears in his eyes. "We're killing them for Thea," I reminded him. "To save her from those ruffians."

"I know," he said, "but treachery is still treacherous. Otherwise, why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying," I snapped so sharply that the monkey jumped from my shoulder. "I'm trying to comfort *you*."

"You're always trying to comfort someone—Thea, Pandia, me—and doing very well at it. In fact, you're the most comfortable person I know. But sometimes you need comforting too. I think you ought to marry Thea as soon as you rescue her."

He did not doubt that we would be successful or that, once rescued, she would wish to marry me. To be admired by such a boy—well, it made me want to reach and aspire until my heart more nearly equalled my height.

The monkeys followed us in a long, vociferous stream,

and I earnestly hoped that no Achaeans would issue from the trees to contest our advance. Once, a Dryad called to us from her bower, her face poised in the branches like a water lily in a green pool. In the past she had always scorned me, but now she called in a husky whisper:

“Eunostos, take care of yourself. The forest depends on you.”

At the edge of the forest, still under cover of trees, we fed the monkeys. With a touching but not entirely successful attempt to avoid biting or scratching us, they plucked the roots from our hands and ate them so quickly that they did not have time to notice their bitterness. Then we waved our daggers and ran at the unsuspecting creatures with a show of great ferocity. At first they mistook our actions for a game and tried to wrestle the knives out of our hands. We had to strike them with the flats of our blades to prove our hostility. I shall never forget their cries of astonishment and disbelief. We watched them vaulting across the trellises of the vineyard, still in a pack and more aggrieved than frightened.

We could not follow them into the fields by daylight, but Icarus, climbing another tree, witnessed the meeting between the monkeys and the Achaeans, who heard their arrival and came from the compound to investigate. Already the monkeys were growing sluggish with the poison, which strikes painlessly but with first a tingling and then a deadening of all sensations, and the men dispatched them with swords and returned to the compound. The Achaeans, who were not acquainted with the monkeys' usual vigour, had no reason to suspect their condition. They received the congratulations of their friends on a good catch; they paused; they seemed to deliberate, no doubt asking themselves if they ought to share their prize with those in the town. Generosity or fear of Ajax provided the answer, and selecting the plumpest to keep in the compound, they strung the remaining bodies on a rope and headed for the town.

When the absence which is night had made our presence reasonably undiscoverable, we crossed the fields and, encountering no patrols, resumed our vantage points in the

trees beside the moat. Two bonfires writhed in the darkness, like orange squids in the lightless depths of the sea: one in the theatre, one in the compound. It was the many-tentacled fire in the theatre which held my attention.

Tonight the Achaeans did not lack women. They seemed to have spent the afternoon hunting in the woods, and three Dryads, drawn and haggard, their long hair dishevelled and, in places, apparently torn out by the roots, represented their catch. I rejoiced that Zoe was not among them. The four queens of the Thriae and several of the drones had also come to the banquet, but as guests instead of captives and of course without the workers, who are not endowed for orgies. The four queens strutted around the pit as if they had conquered the forest through their own prowess, and they jangled more than their usual number of bracelets—spoils, no doubt, from the gutted homes of the Centaurs. Later, I learned that the queens had indeed proved helpful traitors by surprising the Centaurs in the gate-tower and lowering the bridge to Ajax's Men. The hope occurred to me that they might forget themselves in the flush of victory and scatter their fatal kisses among their allies, but they chose to stand on their dignity as queens—they smiled and received compliments but did not descend to the familiarities of love. The drones, however, simpered like courtesans among the rugged Achaeans, who, along with the Cretans, enjoy a considerable versatility in sexual practices, and Amber's brother seemed to be collecting a small fortune in arm-bands, pendants, and rings.

Achaeans are altogether indiscriminate in their pleasures. They can eat, drink, and wench in the same breath, and tonight they lost no time in cooking the blue monkeys, together with fish, venison, and the last of the Centaurs' pigs. Even while fondling a skin of wine, a drone, or a Dryad, they lifted the deadly meat to their lips and ate with relish. Haunches and limbs were passed from hand to hand until everyone received at least a modicum of the tender meat and enough poison, I trusted, to drug even if not to kill him. On the topmost row of the theatre, a sly little chap concealed himself in the shadows to enjoy an undivided

monkey, but three of his comrades followed him from the pit, dismembered the animal, and left him only the head, which, however, he ate without protest. The vegetarian Thriae did not partake of the meat, nor did the Dryads, and when Ajax presented a skinny leg to Thea, she flung it in his face. He slapped her onto the stones, retrieved the leg, and shredded the meat from the bone with one raking bite.

"Bloody barbarian," I muttered. "I'll ram that bone right down your throat."

"Shhhhhh," warned Icarus. "You're starting to bellow. After we rescue Thea, you can ram it anywhere you like."

When men have drunk enough wine to float a penteconter and eaten enough meat to sink a round-built merchant ship, they usually want to sleep, but the sudden sleep which overpowered the Achaeans resembled the miasmatic mists which rise from the bowels of Sicily and prostrate travellers when they leave their litters to drink at wayside fountains. They began to slump on the stairs; they stretched in the pit, swords clattering, wine cups falling from limp fingers. Those who had eaten lightly succumbed more slowly; had time in which to view their friends with dazed astonishment before they joined them in heaped and sprawling confusion.

The Thriae could not account for the strange sleep of their hosts. Intoxicated? Drugged? Exhausted by the rigours of conquest? They fluttered above the prostrated bodies, their dulcet tones growing shrill; they shouted, prodded with jewelled fingers, clamoured—the queens for attention, the drones for caresses. Quietly the three Dryads congregated around Thea and began to help her collect the Achaean daggers.

Amber, kneeling to prod a recumbent body, lifted her head to confront an armed and determined Thea, who seized the gauzy membrane of her wing and delivered a slap which spun her head as if it had been struck by the boom of a sail. By now the drones and the other queens had mounted the air, and the oldest queen, she of the mottled skin and bulging eyes, pelted Thea with bracelets until the girl relaxed her hold on Amber's wing. With a

fury of fluttering, Amber rejoined her sisters and called to Thea as if she were spitting:

"Dearest one, I hope that a Strige will suck your blood and blue-flies pick your bones."

The Thriae began to mass above the pit, stripping their bracelets to use as missiles; though one of the queens was old, and the drones were effeminate cowards, Thea and three harassed Dryads could hardly hope to repel an attack from the air. It was time, I felt, to announce my presence.

"Thriae," I boomed, "I am coming to get you with my army!" I thrashed about in my tree like a small whirlwind, and my army of one gave a roar which suggested Minotaur blood in his veins.

The Thriae retreated with such precipitous haste that two of the drones collided and almost fell to the ground before they could disentangle their wings and, casting regretful looks at the prone, manly bodies of their allies, flutter after their queens. It is said that queens, drones, and workers flew to the land of the Achaeans to live on Mt. Parnassus, deliver oracles of doubtful authority, and receive the tribute accorded to deities. (If this were a tale instead of a history, you may rest assured that I would have drowned them in the sea like Icarus' namesake, the ill-fated son of Daedelus.)

Thea and the Dryads resumed their task of disarming the Achaeans. Some were dead or dying; some would awaken with wracking pains and without weapons. Ajax, kneeling dazedly beside his friend Xanthus, struggled to his feet and held his great sword between him and the girl who had caused his ruin.

"She-wolf," he groaned. "I am going to kill you!" For a wicked man attributes his own sins, his own wolfishness, to those who oppose him.

Slowly, laboriously, he raised the sword above his head, as if through fathoms of water. She did not wait for its descent; she drove her dagger between his ribs. The sword fell from his hand and clattered onto the stones. At first, he did not fall, but faced her with draining defiance.

"Goddess," he said, and crumpled at her feet, his yellow beard pressing against her sandals.

She stared at his body with stricken horror. Even from a distance, I saw the rigidity of her arms and the enormity of her eyes. But she did not weep. She had killed a man and the act appalled her, but the gods had forced her hand. She knelt to remove his dagger.

Icarus and I climbed from our tree. First we entered the compound and, disarming the drugged or slain Achaeans, released the prisoners. No one spoke; there are no appropriate words to greet a victory which comes too late and at too great a cost.

Finally, I said: "We will go to the town and bring the survivors to the compound where we can watch them."

They trooped after me in a proud and sorrowful file. The Panisci, furtive and mysterious, vanished into the night to return to their burrows in the banks of the stream. I thought: I will feed the Bears of Artemis from the leavings of the Achaean feast—the fish and the venison—and make them beds under the stars with the fatherless children of the Centaurs.

"Thea," I called across the moat. "Will you lower the bridge for us?"

She came to me along the path which Chiron had walked in the time before the invasion, a woman who, at sixteen, had put behind her the girlhood which, even at Vathypetro, had been shadowed by the owl-wings of maturity. The Dryads followed her in deference and awe. At last she was one of them, utterly, yet also the strongest of them.

"Thea," I said as she walked from the glowing heart of the fire, out of the light and into the darkness; salamander, phoenix, goddess, illuminating the great fastnesses of the night and my own heart.

CHAPTER X:

THE PASSING OF THE BEASTS

Twenty-one Achaeans in all had survived the poison. Those in the theatre stirred with fitful groans and rolled their heads as if to dislodge the demons that haunted their

dreams. We lost no time in carrying them to join their comrades in the compound.

"After I surrendered, they refused to leave the forest," Thea explained when the drowsy warriors, clutching their stomachs or rubbing their eyes, were safely lodged behind the walls of thorn. "According to Ajax, I had caused him so much trouble that he meant to repay himself with all the riches in the forest. If I showed him the underground passage to your workshop, he promised to set me free. Of course I showed him nothing."

"What did he intend to do with you? Take you back to Mycenae?"

"I think he intended to kill me. Somehow, I seemed to frighten him. He called me the Beast Princess."

"He was right, you know."

The next morning, while Icarus entered my house through the tunnel to rescue Pandia, I led a band of Panisci to the edge of the field and blared a challenge to the garrison in the trunk. The Panisci were armed with slings, I with a battle-axe, and we dragged a red-eyed Xanthus on a rope to corroborate our claims to victory. The Achaeans were not long in appearing behind the parapet. I could see the glint of their helmets through the embrasures.

"We have won the war," I boomed, "and killed your leader, Ajax. Those of your friends who survive are now our hostages. If you wish to save them and yourselves, discard your weapons and leave the forest before sunset."

They greeted my claims with derisive laughter. Smug in their captured retreat, feasting from cockcrow to the time of lamps, they had good reason to scorn an ultimatum.

We jerked our captive out of the trees and flaunted him in his ignominious ruin.

"Listen to them," he urged his friends. "Ajax is truly dead and every one of us has been poisoned by their magic." He pressed his stomach for emphasis. "It will get you too unless you do as he says!"

Laughter yielded to consultation, excited voices to the groan of the crude timbers which served as a door. Framed

in the doorway behind his shield, a single warrior addressed us. His insolence could not conceal his fear:

“Send us Xanthus and let us question him.”

We could spare one hostage to prove our claims. An eager Paniscus prodded him with his sling, and the earless Xanthus, dragging his rope and casting timorous glances over his shoulder, reeled to join his friends.

Led by Xanthus, the Achaeans left my house in the afternoon, and the next morning we sent their comrades from the compound to overtake and join them beyond the forest. I had taken their weapons, armour, and tunics and, knowing the Achaeans cultivate their beards as the visible sign of valour, I had forced them to shave with a coarse bronze razor which left their cheeks the colour of a radish. Kings and conquerors, they had come to humble us, and they left like a column of slaves being marched to the infamous marketplace in Pylos.

Again, the forest belonged to the Beasts, but to people whose heroes are dead, whose towns lie in ruins, and who must momentarily expect another invasion, the taste of victory can be as bitter as hemlock.

Two weeks after the departure of the Achaeans, a patrol of Panisci caught a Cretan just as he entered the forest and brought him none too gently to the town of the Centaurs, where Thea, Icarus, and I were helping the females to rebuild their houses. Black-haired, narrow-waisted, thin as the peasants who live in the reed hovels along the Nile, he blinked nervously; he looked like a man who had come from a long and gruelling battle, not yet won. Aeacus, of course, had sent him.

“Thea,” I called, wanting secretly to butt him into the moat. “Will you bring your guest some coconut milk?” It was all we had to offer. The Achaeans had drunk our wine, and the grapes were not yet ripe. I left him with Thea and Icarus in one of the bamboo stalls, newly rebuilt and hung with the few silks which had not been dirtied by the boots of the conquerors or used to clean their armour.

I crossed the bridge. Every evening, usually with Thea and Icarus, I returned to my house to work and sleep.

Centaur females patrolled the moat and guarded the animals—two cows, a bull, seven sheep—which remained in the compound.

“They have come for your friends?” asked the Centaur whose name was Rhode, daughter of the noble Chiron. Before the war, she had worn a white water-lily in her hair. She had cut her hair the day of her father’s death, and the short tresses no longer could hold a stem.

“Yes, Rhode.”

“Will Thea and Icarus return with the Cretan?”

“I don’t know.”

“There will always be someone who comes to invade our peace. They will never leave us alone, will they, Eunostos? Isn’t it time we left the forest? Returned to the Isles?”

The Isles of the Blest, she meant. The land in the Western Sea from which we had come, in the age before men: a pleasant and sunny land, without dangers—and also without adventures.

“The gods will tell us the time,” I said. “It will be soon, I think.”

I waited in my garden for Thea and Icarus. In the ivory moonlight, the fountain swayed like a rain-drenched palm touching the earth with its fronds. I had dug a new staircase under the ground, and of course my workshop and other rooms had escaped the depredations of war. Not the garden, however. There was no parasol, and my fig tree had been uprooted and burned for wood. My trellises were bare, and the new seeds I had planted had not had time to sprout. It was still a garden without greenery.

“Knossos has not yet fallen,” said Thea excitedly when she arrived with Icarus. “Our father is still fighting. He learned from Xanthus, who is now his captive, that Icarus and I were here in the forest. He could not come himself because the city is under siege. But he sent his messenger to urge us to stay where we are until the war is won. That’s what my father says, but—”

“But you want to go to him. You think you can help him.”

The ardour died from her voice. “I don’t want to go,”

she said dully. "I want to stay here with you and our friends. But he is my father, and the Cretans were once my people. In spite of their faults, they are better than Achaeans. It will be bad for all of us if Knossos falls."

"And what can you and Icarus do to keep it from falling?"

"You yourself have taught us how to fight."

Silence returned to the garden; silence, except for the cricket-voices of the fountain and the quick breaths of Icarus, who looked at me with the unquestioning worship of a boy who expected the one decisive action, the one infallible command which would solve his dilemma.

"I don't want to go back to my father," he said. "He was like a shadow. He carried darkness wherever he walked."

"Sadness," said Thea. "Not darkness."

"Whatever it was, it was cold. You couldn't touch him, you know. He had a way of drawing back as if your fingers might dirty his robe. It's you I love, Eunostos. Haven't I become a Beast?"

"You always were," said Thea. "You didn't have to come here, as I did, to find the Beast in you. Perhaps you ought to go back to find the Man. At least, a little of him."

"What Thea means," I said, "is that you and I, Icarus, have hearts like forests. Maybe we need to cut down a few of the trees and build a city."

"Or save a city," she said. "Knossos. Will you come with me, Icarus? If only for a little?"

For a little? Forever, I thought.

"Must I go, Eunostos?"

"Thea will need you," I said, wrenching the words like an arrow from my heart. I held him in my arms for the last time. I held the young forest before it had lost the singing of its sweetest birds and the lifting of its tallest trees; I held its fawn and rabbit, bear cub and pink Paniscus with cloven hooves and tail like the curl of a grapevine, and the warm fledgling of the woodpecker, enclosed in his fort of twigs; all things small, vulnerable,

and hopeful, all things that wish to grow. But I could not arrest the passage of that treacherous lizard, time.

"Icarus," I said. It was neither a cry nor a plea, but the simple, final utterance of a name which I loved. I did not watch him when he left the garden.

We sat in the midst of the fountain as if it could wash our pain to the insubstantiality of moonlight. The sadness of moonlight is real but a little remote. Stars cry out in loneliness, and the moon, I think, is the loneliest of goddesses. Still, they are far away, and the loss they tell has the wistful sweetness of a tale about the maidenhood of the Great Mother or an old song sung by the Dryads when they turn their handmills and grind the barley to flour. But the sadness of a house and a garden is different and very close; as close as the hot coal which burns your hand or the captured bat which screams to free itself from the tangle of your hair.

"I had hoped," she said, "to see your trellises hold new vines." She caught my hand between the coldness of her fingers. "Eunostos, it is a Man's—or a Beast's—tragedy that two loves may call him in different directions. By following one, he is bound to leave the other. Leave, I say, not lose. No love is ever lost. It changes its form like water, from lake to river to cloud, and when you are most a desert, it falls from the sky in fructifying rain."

"I don't know about rain," I said. "I was never a philosopher, and I'm no longer a poet. If you have to go, I want to go with you. Protect you till you join your father and then fight in his army. You know I can fight. You've seen me with my bow!"

"How can you leave your people? There is only you to lead them. You see, my dear, you also have two loves. Those with a single love—how poor they are! Ajax and war, the Thraie and gold. Ours is the treasure of pharaohs."

"I don't feel like a pharaoh. I feel like a palm tree without my coconuts."

"You'll get them back. And blue monkeys to play in your branches. I'm going to leave you now. You must close your eyes. They stare and stare and ask what I cannot give."

Her sandals leaving the garden were as hushed as the hooves of a fawn.

Aeacus did not forget the Beasts who had sheltered his children. He sent a second messenger, who drank from a coconut in the house of a Centaur, loosened the belt which constricted his narrow waist, and told me about the war. The Achaean army, it seemed, had fought to the gates of the palace, which, lacking the walls of mainland citadels like Mycenae and Tiryns, had been frantically buttressed with timbers, rubble, and even the stone bathtubs from the royal suite. Aeacus himself lay wounded and close to death when his battered Cretans, among them Icarus, marched through the corbelled arch of the gate to what appeared to be their last and mortal defeat. But even while the lamentation of the women resounded through the gardens and the pillared courtyards, the Princess Thea appeared on the walls and urged her warriors to victory in the name of the Great Mother and the Minotaur. The besieging Achaeans gasped when they saw her beauty: the crimson, helmet-shaped skirt emblazoned with jet-black ants; the bared breasts, flaunting fertility in the very graveyard of war; the golden serpents coiled around her wrists; the pointed ears and the greenly tumbling hair which lent to her chiselled features a wild and intoxicating barbarism.

Archers forgot to draw their bows. Swordsmen fell to their knees and raised their swords like talismans above their heads.

A hush and then an outcry.

“Sorceress!”

“Goddess!”

“Beast Princess!”

It was then that the boy Icarus charged them with his shield Bion. They saw his pointed ears. They knew him to be her brother. They had come to fight puny Men—sailors and merchants and perfumed courtiers—and not these bright, avenging children from the Country of the Beasts.

“The Beast Prince!”

They stared, they dropped their weapons. They reeled

toward the sea, trampling vineyards, stampeding goats among the hillocks of red poppies, fleeing, fleeing the Children of the Beasts. To their wooden ships they fled, scrambling up the hulls like avid crabs, hoisting the black sails until they bellied with wind and bore them away and away from the sword-strewn beach and the boy who waved his shield and hurled after them the curse of the Minotaur.

"And now," concluded the messenger, flushed with the telling, "the smoke of hecatombs has made a forest of the afternoon. Burnt offerings to the god of battles! Sandarac and myrrh in the caves of the Great Mother! Flowers gathered from the liberated fields—poppies and roses, violets and asphodels to garland the victors, Thea, the Beautiful, and Icarus, Prince of Warriors. Aeacus himself was carried to watch the garlanding. He has not forgotten your kindness to his children nor the loss you suffered fighting against Achaeans. It is he who has sent me to offer you the gift of two ships to return you to the safety of your homeland, the Isles of the Blest. His own sailors will man them, and no country is beyond their sailing. You will find both ships at the port of Phaestus. They will be provisioned on your arrival."

I carried with me only the wicker basket from my picnic with Thea and Icarus, and in it my green tunic, a flask of beer, a few honey cakes, a reed pen, and some strips of papyrus (you see, I had started to write my history); and over my shoulder a hoe. There would always be gardens.

I met my friends in the town of the Centaurs. Pandia led the Bears, who had never returned to live in their own village with its plundered logs and withered vines. In spite of her tender years, she had won a name for being something of an Amazon and she bared her teeth proudly as the Girls trooped after her across the drawbridge, the oldest of them looking no more than twelve and holding the hands of daughters or grand-daughters who might have been their sisters.

"Wouldn't Icarus be proud to see me?" she said.

"Yes," I said, "and so am I."

Next came the Centaur children, some of them very

young and trying to gallop in several directions at once, and last, the mothers with their few belongings strapped to their backs: a lantern, a wicker cage for crickets (empty), a coverlet for cold nights at sea. At the edge of the woods, we found the Dryads waiting in covered litters built from their trees. After they had boarded the ships, the wooden hulls would protect them until they could find new trees in the Isles of the Blest. The Panisci had offered to carry them. You would hardly have recognized the once mischievous goat boys as they lifted the litters on their hairy shoulders and moved through the forest with no attempt to frighten their passengers or race their friends. I took my place at the head of the company.

"Eunostos," called Zoe from her litter. "Will you walk beside me?"

She had started to look her three hundred and seventy years. Was this the great-hearted temptress who had danced the Dance of the Python and emptied a skin of beer with a few gulps? No longer did she stir my blood, but she stirred my heart to a deep, aching tenderness.

She took my hand. "You're not the Eunostos I used to love. You have—how shall I say?—grown up."

"Up, perhaps. Not wise."

"A truly wise man is too modest to recognize his own wisdom. If I had not grown old while you were growing up, I could have loved you the best of all my lovers!"

The trees of the Dryads, denuded of branches to build the litters, had dropped their leaves in premature autumn. The village of the Bear Girls had been entirely occupied by the crows, who had gutted the logs and the berry patch with the thoroughness of a forest fire, and the burrows of Panisci had fallen to water rats who, with twigs and mud, were busy diminishing the large entrances to their own size. Do you know the story that the Forest was once a god, young as the sun who steps from the sea in the morning? That he ruled the earth until the Coming of the Great Mother and then willingly retired to the foot of the hills with memories enough to content him for many centuries? If the story is true, I think he has now grown tired of remembering.

Our ships ride at anchor, sturdy of cypress, twin-masted, with dolphin-shaped pennants hanging from the beaked prows and purple moons painted along the hulls. Today, the last pithoi of olive oil, the last kegs of water and wine, the last foodstuffs of cheese and hard-cruste**d** bread, raisins, dates, and dried figs, will be carried on board from the mule-drawn wagons sent by Aeacus. Tomorrow, if the gods send favourable winds, we will sail for the Isles of the Blest, a voyage of great distances and many perils, of dog-headed monsters with teeth as long as daggers and waves as tall as a three-storied palace. But Cretan ships can swim like dolphins, play in the troughs and mount the tallest wave. They have circumnavigated the great continent of Libya; I think they will find their way to our blessed islands.

Leaving my ship in the late afternoon, calling to **Pandia** as she painted the letters I-C-A-R-U-S below the prow, I have climbed for the last time to the cave which I call the Chamber of the Blue Monkeys, a forgotten shrine to the Great Mother. I have come to finish my history, written laboriously on papyrus and fastened together into a long scroll like the famous Egyptian Book of the Dead. I shall leave the finished scroll in a copper chest for the Men of the future.

After we have sailed to the islands, I think that legend will not be kind to us. The Centaurs will thunder through many a battle as the barbarous foe of Men and their well-ordered cities, and the Minotaur, the Bull that Walks Like a Man, what will they say of him? His tail will grow forked, his horns will sprout like the antlers of a stag, and the gloom of his lightless caverns will terrorize children and young virgins. "Beast" will become synonymous with "animal", and "bestial" will be an epithet applied to savages and murderers. Men of the future, open this cave and find my scroll and read that we were neither gods nor demons, neither entirely virtuous nor entirely bad, but possessed of souls like you and in some ways kinder; capable of honour and sacrifice—and love. Consider if bestially is not, after all, akin to humanity. Read and understand us, forgive us for having once defeated you,

and forgive the author if he has allowed his own loss to darken his story.

I, Eunostos, Minotaur, thus conclude my history, the Passing of the Beasts.

EUNOSTOS

MINOTAUR

No sooner had I written the black, sprawling letters of my name than a hand touched my shoulder.

"Dearest Eunostos," she said. "I will not ask to read what you have written. If it is true, it has not drawn a pretty picture of me." A nimbus of light from the mouth of the cave illuminated her scarlet, belled skirt and the golden serpents around her wrists.

The nearness of her numbed me like a draught of wolf's-bane. At last I said: "Is it going well in Knossos? The Achæans have not returned?"

"Not yet. One day, I think, they will surely conquer us. But not soon. We shall have a little more time in which to deserve a little more time."

"And Icarus is well?"

"He is a great hero. All the girls of Knossos are in love with him."

"And he with them?"

"With none of them."

"And you have come to tell me good-bye. It was kind of you, Thea."

"To tell you good-bye? My poor, foolish Minotaur, I have come to go with you, and not out of kindness either!"

"But the sea is treacherous," I cried. "Do you know the perils beyond the great pillars? The dog-headed monsters, the whirlpools, the clashing rocks—"

"It was I who chose your ships. The best in my father's fleet—at least, in what is left of his fleet."

"You will leave your father?"

"I have always loved him. But I came late to loving my mother. Now her people have called me."

I seized her hand and brought it reverently to my lips. "I will be your eternal friend!"

"Friend indeed! I will come as your wife or your woman, but not your friend. How shall we meet except through the flesh? The soul must see through the body's eyes and feel through the body's fingers, or else it is blind and unfeeling."

"You say that our bodies should meet. But you are beautiful—and I am a Beast."

"Yes, a Beast like my own mother, and lordlier than any Man I have ever known! Do you know why I tried to eclipse you with clothes? Because you stirred me with your splendid manliness! Stirred and frightened me with feelings which had no place in my tidy garden of crocuses."

She removed the signet ring I had given her in the forest and laid it lovingly and yet with great finality beside my scroll. "This, my most loved possession, I shall leave for the Goddess and in memory of my friends, the blue monkeys. Having found my Minotaur, I can part with his ring."

With grave simplicity, she knelt at my feet. "Love has been a climbing for me, Eunostos. Now I have climbed until I can kneel to you."

"No, no," I pleaded. "You mustn't kneel!" I lifted her from the earth and held her in my arms, and she kissed me with such a sweet and burning ardour that she might have been one of the naughty Dryads who have studied the secrets of love for three hundred years. I held her with fierce tenderness and without shame and knew that love is not, as some poets say, a raging brush fire, but a hearth-fire, which burns hotly, it is true, but in order to warm the cold sea-caves of the heart and light its pools with anemones of radiance.

"If only," I cried, "if only Icarus had come too!"

And of course he had, with Perdix.

—THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

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