

# Science Fantasy

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# SCIENCE FANTASY

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People discussing wit usually end up by pointing out that brevity is its soul. Perhaps that is why the telegram lends itself so well to humour. My favourite example is the interchange between a newspaper editor and a dilatory journalist who had been sent abroad as a special correspondent. After a fortnight without receiving a single news story the editor cabled:

**EXPLAIN UNNEWS**

The reporter, a man of spirit who disliked "cablese" replied

**UNNEWS GOOD NEWS**

The editor, however, had the final word, as editors usually do, with

**UNNEWS UNJOB.**

What I am working around to saying is that there is rather little to say this month, except that I hope readers will agree that our contents continue to show steady improvement.

Oh yes, in the course of a little session with Brian Aldiss, Jim Ballard and some Liebfraumilch I did pick up some news about forthcoming science fiction highlights of this year. Brian Aldiss' novel **EARTHWORK** is due out very soon and so is J. G. Ballard's **THE DROUGHT** while Harry Harrison's rollicking series is to be embodied in a novel bearing the splendid name of **BILL THE GALACTIC HERO**. Brian Aldiss has also recently finished a long tale called (can I have remembered this correctly?) **THE SALIVA TREE**. He says this is of such a gruesome nature that it actually keeps him awake at night. Its destination is uncertain at present. What I have definitely secured from him is a long story (I'm afraid I cannot bring myself to use the word "novelette") called **MAN IN HIS TIME** which is a thoughtful, adult exploration of human beings trying to come to terms with an insoluble problem posed by space-flight. It's a very good one: see next issue.

# THE OUTCAST

by Harry Harrison

"What's the trouble there?" Captain Cortar asked, looking down through the thick viewport of the ship's bridge at the ground a thousand feet below. There were tiny, foreshortened figures behind the fence, at the edge of the spaceport, surging about a copter that had just landed. With precise movements First Officer Deixem turned on the electronic telescope, focused it on the crowd and switched the image to the main console screen.

"Seems to be a mob, sir—not too big, and the police cars are holding them back. They're throwing things at a man who just came out of that copter—he's hit!"

They were both staring intently at the screen now. The injured man was holding his hand to the side of his head and had fallen to his knees, then he vanished from sight behind the massed green uniforms. The knot of police surrounding him moved quickly through the doors of the operations building, followed by a barrage of stones and other small objects. Once they were out of sight the crowd milled about and then began to disperse.

"I have never liked this planet," the captain said, turning away from the screen. "The people are too short tempered, too violent. We are going to leave as soon as all our passengers are aboard. When will that be?"

"Only a few minutes, sir. The purser reports that the last ones are clearing customs now."

"Good. Close all except the passenger airlock and we'll begin takeoff procedure as soon as they are all aboard."

"Permission to leave the bridge, sir."

"Granted."

Deixem took the centerline elevator down to the passenger deck and walked over to the central airlock where the elderly purser was standing with one of the crewmen.

"A full load indeed, Deixem," the purser said, holding out the passenger list. "All aboard but one, just two empty cabins this flight, we'll make a good profit on liquor alone—they have the look of a drinking crowd."



"Let's check this against the boarding cards, captain wants to make an early takeoff."

It was quickly done. The cards and names tallied and all but one were accounted for.

"Origo Lim," the first officer said, reading the name aloud from the list.

"Here," a deep voice said behind them as the escalator carried the last passenger up to the lock.

"Welcome aboard the *Vengador*," Deixem said, turning. "If you will please give your boarding pass to the purser, this crewman will show you to your cabin . . ."

His voice died as he looked at the man standing before him. Blocky, solid figure, quietly dressed. Somewhere in his middle years, skin very tanned and freckled, a bald spot creeping back from the high forehead, hair cut very short. A fresh white bandage on the side of his head.

"Would you remain here a moment, passenger Lim?" Deixem said, all the warmth drained from his voice. He switched on the intercom and spoke into it. "The last passenger is aboard, captain."

"Very good. Seal ship."

"One moment, sir. The passenger—he's the man that we saw the crowd stoning a few minutes ago."

There was a long silence before the captain spoke again. "Is he a citizen of this planet?" Deixem looked at the boarding card that he still held.

"Yes, sir—he's a native Delamondine."

"Are there any other passengers from Delamond aboard?"

Deixem glanced at the purser who shook his head *no*.

"No others, sir."

"All right. Can this passenger hear me now?"

"He can, sir."

"Then hear this. Passenger, there is some trouble here that I do not care to know about. You have legally purchased a ticket and if you were a criminal the police would not have allowed you to leave. If there were other Delamondines aboard ship I would refuse you passage since I want no trouble aboard ship. Your passage will be honored—but if you cause any difficulties you will be locked in your cabin for the duration of the voyage.

I do not want your problems on this planet brought aboard my ship, is this clear?"

First Officer Deixem had been watching the passenger while the captain was speaking, and his hand automatically slid towards the gun at his hip. Origo Lim had not moved and his mouth was still set in a straight, noncommittal line—but his eyes! They had tightened, half closed in concealment of the hatred burning there, a hatred that seemed almost ready to overwhelm the man. Then the lids shut and Lim's wide shoulders lowered a fractional amount, and when his eyes opened again the emotion was gone. When he spoke his voice was tonelessly neutral.

"I understand, captain. I would like to go to my quarters now."

The intercom went dead then Deixem gave a slight nod. The purser checked off his list and the crewman bent to pick up the plain metal suitcase that was Lim's only piece of luggage. "If you will follow me," he said, "I will take you to your cabin."

"There's going to be trouble," the purser said, "I can smell it. That one has the authentic odor of trouble."

"Don't be an old fool," Deixem snapped, because he felt very much the same way.

The purser chuckled and turned to close the airlock.

The first incident occurred just after the breakthrough. This was the traditional time for passengers to meet, to join in toasts to a happy voyage and get to know one another. During takeoff and pre-jump maneuvering they had been strapped into their acceleration couches and gently drugged to ameliorate the effects of the power surges and free fall. Now that they had safely made the transition to jump-space and the artificial gravity had settled their stomachs they were ready to relax. The purser had prepared a large bowl of his Procyon Punch, an innocuous tasting mixture of fruit juices heavily laced up with ethyl alcohol that could be counted upon to warm the party up. As the lounge filled he replenished the bowl and heated some more frozen canapés in the small oven behind the bar. He was the only member of the ship's company present since the crew did not mix with the passengers and the officers would meet them first at dinner. It was



a colorful crowd with most of the men dressed in high fashion slashed-velvet while the ladies' bodices were low-cut and daringly transparent: most of them wore Cutherdamm pantaloons.

"I would like a large brandy with ice."

The purser closed the oven door on a tray of canapés and looked up at Origo Lim, his professional smile ready.

"Why don't you try the punch, sir, courtesy of the captain . . ."

"I don't drink punch. Double brandy."

The purser had trouble maintaining his friendly expression before Lim's stolid face. He started to say something more, then changed his mind. "Of course, sir. On the *Vengador* the passenger is king." The familiar words somehow seemed foolish addressed to this man: he turned quickly for the brandy bottle.

Lim was just raising the drink to his lips when the shrill scream cut through the background murmur of voices. The glass dropped from his hand as he spun about, balanced alertly on the balls of his feet. In the stunned silence the woman screamed again and he saw her, standing by the serving table, the carving knife forgotten in one hand while she stared at the blood dripping from the fingertips of the other. She must have been cutting a slice from the cold roast and had managed to carve herself instead. Lim moved swiftly across the room and grabbed her wrist.

"The cut is superficial," he said, and the flow of blood stopped as his thumb clamped down on the artery. His words had no effect on the woman who screamed even louder. His free hand cracked her sharply across the face and the wailing instantly broke off.

"You there," Lim said, taking the carving knife from her and using it to point at a nearby man, "Bring me the first-aid box."

"I can't—that is I don't know where one is . . ." he stammered.

"Don't be a fool, they are all marked clearly on the diagram above every bunk. The nearest one is in the washroom there, next to the sink. Someone bring this woman a chair."

Her face was pale, the red handprint standing out sharply, and she sank gratefully into the chair. The crowd began to move again and the sound of voices grew, two women hurried forward but Lim waved them away.

"Just a moment, if you don't mind."

The man in the purple jacket hurried back with the first-aid kit and Lim flipped it open with one hand and extracted a tube of antiseptic cream. He spread this quickly the length of the cut and pressed an adhesive bandage over it. "That will take care of it for the moment, but I suggest that you see the ship's doctor as soon as possible."

Lim went back to the bar, brushing by the man in the purple jacket who tried to thank him: a circle of women closed in about the woman who was staring foolishly at her bandaged hand.

The purser had a fresh brandy waiting for him, to replace the one he had dropped.

"Very neatly done, sir, if I may say so. In the name of the ship I should like to extend my thanks."

Origo Lim drained the glass without answering him, turned and left the room.

"Surly bastard," the purser muttered between puckered lips.

The second incident happened at dinner. Most of the passengers, twenty-three in all, made up a single party, the retinue and companions of the High Duchess Marescula from the planet Cutherdamm, their next port of call. Most of the tables had been arranged in a U so that they could all sit together, where the ship's officers joined them. At a smaller table were the young honeymoon couple who had been with the ship since they had left Grossolan, who obviously preferred eating alone. At a table against the far wall, by himself, sat Origo Lim. There was a great deal of talk at the large table, and a number of heads turned to look at the solitary diner.

"We really should thank the man for helping Clela, don't you think, captain. Perhaps invite him to join us for a drink?" The High-Duchess was also looking at Lim, blinking near-sighted little eyes that were set like raisins in the rounded bulge of her face.



Captain Cortar made a noncommittal noise. He had heard about the accident and heartily wished that the duchess would let the matter drop, though he could not very well tell her that without giving some explanation.

"Of course you agree, captain, it is only polite. Damin-Hestt . . ." She nodded the towering mass of her green-tinted grey hair towards the thin man in purple who sat across the table from her. He had apparently been talking to his companion, but he sprang to his feet the instant she spoke his name.

"High-Duchess?"

She explained and he bowed slightly, turning from the table. Origo Lim saw him approaching but did not look up from his soup until the man stood next to his table.

"Yes."

"You must pardon my intrusion, but I am Damin-Hestt, Protocol to the High-Duchess Marescula of Cutherdamm, whose cousin-german it was you aided so handsomely earlier, and the High-Duchess would like . . ."

"Just a moment," Lim said, raising his hand and cutting the other off. "Before you offer any invitations, don't you think you had better know my name?"

"But of course! No discourtesy intended . . ."

"I am Origo Lim."

Damin-Hestt's mouth gaped open, but no sound came forth, his eyes widened and he took an inadvertent half step backward.

"That's what I thought you would say." Lim was smiling for the first time, but it was a wintery smile totally without humor. "You can go back now."

The protocol pulled himself together with an effort, first taking a handkerchief from his sleeve to dab at his face before wheeling about sharply and returning to the large table. He whispered something to the High-Duchess who gave a light shrug and turned her attention back to Captain Cortar. The brief incident had not been noticed by the rest of the table and Damin-Hestt rejoined their fluttering talk. Yet, for the rest of the meal, whenever the conversation passed him by he would sit in thought, an expression of worried concern on his face.

None of this had escaped the captain, and he was half

expecting it when the protocol approached him after dinner.

"Captain, might I speak with you, it is of the utmost importance."

"Of course. What is it?"

"Not here, it is a confidential matter," Damin-Hestt's eyes darted about the room like trapped birds. "If you could spare me a few moments, privately . . . ?"

The captain did not like it, but he had no option. "All right, be in my private quarters in an hour." He turned back to the table and picked up his glass.

Before the hour had elapsed the captain excused himself and went to his quarters and was seated at the desk when Damin-Hestt entered.

"Now what is this about?" he asked, with very little sociability left in his voice.

"Captain, do you know who that man is, the one seated by himself?"

"I should, I have the passenger list. Why do you ask?"

"The passenger list—I had forgotten about that! Will you be posting the passenger list, captain? I really don't think it is wise . . . that is I don't feel you should . . ."

"Damn you, sir, what do you mean by giving me orders?" The captain reacted strongly, feeling more than a little guilty because he had already delayed well past the usual posting time. "What is there about this man that is bothering you?"

"Perhaps you do not know, he might be travelling under a false name. He is Lim—"

"I know that, Origo Lim."

"*Butcher* Lim!" He almost snarled the words.

"What do you mean by that? Explain yourself."

Protocol Damin-Hestt drew himself up, suddenly cold and scornful.

"I assure you, captain, I have no intention of discussing this man in any detail, that is not the sort of conversation I indulge in. I wish to ask you simply to see that Lim does not eat in the same room with us, nor use the same facilities. The High-Duchess does not know who he is, and I pray she never does. If she discovers that she actually ate in the same *room* with him—! I don't have



to tell you that if the Duchess is displeased it might have a bearing upon your commercial relationships with Cutherdamm. I am not threatening you, captain, just stating an obvious fact. It will go very badly for both of us if there is any trouble."

Captain Cortar held his temper in check; this fool wasn't the cause of the trouble, just its mouthpiece. And the threats were real enough. He must get to the bottom of this at once.

"If you will return to the lounge I will investigate this matter, then contact you there. The *Vengador* is a taut ship and we have no room for trouble—of any kind."

"Thank you, captain. I shall await your call."

The door closed behind him and Cortar slammed his heavy fist down on the desk. There was only one man to talk to about this. "Lim," he muttered angrily and punched a finger at the communicator. "Origo Lim . . . Butcher Lim . . ." The screen lit up.

"Sir?"

"Deixem, I want to talk to the passenger Lim, here in my quarters. At once. Don't call him—go and bring him yourself. Fosseis will take command on the bridge until you return."

"Yes, sir."

By the time the knock sounded at his door the captain had composed himself. He waited until Deixem was out of the compartment and the door was closed before he spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked as he heard the lock click shut.

"I thought we had discussed this already, captain. I am Origo Lim."

"That is your name. Now tell me why those people rioted and stoned you at the spaceport."

"I don't think they liked me."

"Don't play games with me, Lim!" Both men were standing now, facing each other across the width of the desk, very alike in their glowering pugnacity. "I want you to tell me why you are called 'Butcher' Lim."

"You've been talking to that purple fop, haven't you? He is looking for trouble."

"Yes, Damin-Hestt talked to me, but neither he nor I are looking for trouble—we want to avoid it. But before I make any decisions on the matter I want to know what there is about you that seems to bother these people so."

Lim was silent, then the cold smile pulled at his lips. "I killed two-hundred and three people," he said. The captain raised his eyebrows inquiringly—but showed no reaction.

"Well, what is the rest of the story, there must have been mitigating circumstances, an accident perhaps, or you would have been executed? Tell me everything so that I can reach an intelligent decision and calm down these frightened Cutherdamm idiots."

Lim reached behind him for the chair and settled into it, some of the tenseness seemed to have gone from his spare frame, as though he had relaxed his eternal guard ever so slightly.

"Please sit down, captain, I apologize if I have caused you any trouble. I can see now that you have been very fair but I'm afraid that I am so unused to this attitude that I didn't recognize it. The story is a simple one . . ."

"Join me in a drink, if you will," Captain Cortar said, taking a bottle filled with colorless liquid and two glasses from a drawer, formally acknowledging the truce. They drained their glasses in a single motion and Lim seemed almost relaxed as he held his up to the light.

"Ethyl and distilled H<sub>2</sub>O—I haven't tasted that since my student days!"

"A spaceman's drink, it's called Rocket Juice—though I have no idea why."

"In the hospital it was called Embalming Fluid."

"You are a medical man then?"

"Doctor of Medicine—or rather I was." The tenseness returned, he sat further forward on his chair. "I do not enjoy this story so you will excuse me if I condense it a bit. It begins with the fact that on Delamond bronchogenic carcinoma is almost endemic, this is a particularly painful and gruesome form of lung cancer. The only other things of interest on the planet are the heavy metals



industries, the narrow minds of the inhabitants and their foul tempers. It is logical to assume that the fumes from the smelters and factories, obviously rich in carcinogens, are the cause of the disease, so research has always been slanted in that direction. Various attempts have been made to force the metal barons to put fume traps on their smokestacks, and they have reluctantly contributed small sums to research laboratories. It was my bad luck to discover in the normal course of treatment of an allergic patient what I considered to be a connection between the pollen of a certain type of plant and the growth of bronchogenic carcinoma. My results with laboratory animals were satisfactory and my published results had an enthusiastic reception. The metal barons wanted to prove themselves innocent so they gave me all possible aid. Strings were pulled and the road smoothed to enable me to test my theories on volunteers in a prison hospital, all condemned men who had been offered a pardon if they survived my ministrations. I hoped to be able to induce cancer with my pollen extract, then cure it by resection before it became too advanced. I was the only one concerned with curing the men, they could have all died and the authorities wouldn't have cared."

Lim was silent, his eyes looking not at the captain but at a scene in his own mind that he would never forget. The captain refilled his glass and he drained it gratefully.

"That is about all there is to it, captain, except for the ending. I am the only person who ever succeeded in making cancer contagious, since my poisonous extract worked even better than I had hoped. Not only did the subjects contract incurable carcinoma of a particularly virulent kind, but they coughed and spread cancerous cells throughout the hospital—and the prison. I have two-hundred and three deaths on my conscience, captain, a heavy burden. That is what disturbs me far more than their prison sentence, the lashings or the hatred. I *am* a butcher, and the only sensible thing they did was to take away my license."

"They could not hold you responsible."

"They did. They wouldn't have cared in the slightest if only prisoners had died, they would probably have

congratulated me for saving the state money, but among the slain were the warden and seventeen of the guards."

"All political appointees, I trust?"

"You are indeed a well-travelled man, captain. All political appointees. I was judged in advance by the press, a triumph of yellow journalism, and condemned to ten lashes a month during my life sentence. I had some friends and a good bit of money—all expended now—so I served only seven years and managed to secure passage on your ship. It is not a very attractive story, Captain Cortar, and I'm sorry to have inflicted it upon you."

"It is a far better tale than I would have expected from the hysteria I have observed. Now fill your glass again and I'll see if I have any cigars in the humidior."

The captain used the opportunity, while he found and lit the cigars, to decide upon the best course of action. He could force Lim to do exactly as he wished, and if the doctor had been a lesser man he would have taken that course and been done with the problem once and for all. Confine him to his cabin and send him his meals. Seven years with a lashing every month. No, he could not be a jailer too.

"I hope that you will help me to work something out," he finally said when the cigars were drawing well. "For his own sake, the Protocol Damin-Hestt will not reveal your identity, but to buy his silence you will have to stay away from the Cutherdamm party. He is horrified at the thought of your dining in the same room as that elephantine and particularly stupid High-Duchess."

"Could I have my meals in my cabin? I would frankly prefer that, I still don't enjoy crowds."

"It would make matters a good deal easier, but I will not confine you to your quarters. There is still a matter of your presence in the lounge during shipday."

"Is there only the one lounge? I would be grateful to be away from these people."

"There is the officers' dayroom. You would be welcome there."

"I would not intrude—"

"It is not an intrusion, but a welcome solution to a problem that could cause this ship a good deal of trouble."



It was settled that easily. Then, for the sake of general welfare Captain Cortar violated his Ghozghan code of personal honor and had the passenger list posted with a false name for Origo Lim. The correct list was entered in the ship's log and the captain knew he would not rest well until the false one had been destroyed. Then he called in those members of the ship's company who knew Lim's real name and explained that this was being done for the ship's security and that the dishonor of the lie was all his. Since they were all Ghozghan none of them questioned his decision or asked for an explanation. Lim, under the name of Alvis, found himself a welcome guest in the officers' dayroom.

"Come in, sit down," the junior member of the mess, Second Officer Fosseis told him eagerly. "Have a container of beer. We never see a new face here so yours is just about as welcome as rain in the desert. I'm Fosseis. The fat one with the stupid expression is Janti, our incompetent engineering officer, the tall, gloomy one with the face like a horse—I think you know him—is Deixem, first officer and head drunkard. Don't do it! DON'T DO IT!!"

Fosseis shouted this last as he tried to escape, but the engineer, Janti, was even faster, jabbing out with a storage cell that had sharp wires projecting from both terminals. His arm swung after the leaping Fosseis and the pointed wires slipped through the seat of his pants and touched the quivering flesh beneath. There was a quick buzz and Fosseis howled loudly. Lim forgot himself enough for the moment to join in laughter with the others.

"I hope you can throw darts half as well as you can bray like a donkey," Fosseis said, scowling severely at Lim while he rubbed his shocked bottom.

Lim had never played the game, but the scoring was simple enough to master and his skilled surgeon's hands quickly learned to control the flight of the darts. They had a practice round to teach him the game and opened more beers. Janti sat down on the couch—then sprang to his feet again with a wild lurch that spread his beer across the room: one of the battery-shockers had been

planted in the cushion. Then they tossed for turns and began to play an earnest game of darts.

While they threw Lim learned a little about their personal code of manners. On duty they were bleak as winter ice, formal and humorless, doing as impersonal and perfect a job as was humanly possible. But once off duty they relaxed completely, all distinctions of rank were forgotten and practical joking became almost a duty. The battery-shockers were everywhere and in constant use.

In spite of his newly acquired skill Lim had bottom score, about what he had expected. He raised a last beer while the darts were stowed away, and as he did a dagger of burning pain shot through his back. The beer spilled down his shirt as he whirled, arms curved and ready to grab, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace of pain and anger.

Young Fosseis stood before him, a battery-shocker in his hand and a victorious smile slowly disappearing from his face. "The loser at darts always gets it . . ." he was saying, but his words broke off when he saw Lim's expression. The battery fell to the floor as he drew himself up in a formal Ghozghan manner. There was dead silence in the room.

All of this Lim saw and understood in a moment, and realized that he had been accepted among them as an equal, which carried with it the burden of being an equal in the practice of the practical joke. They could not know that his back was still unhealed from the final whipping three days earlier.

It was an effort to control the anger that flooded him, and he hoped that his laugh didn't sound as hollow and artificial to them as it did to him. He kept his right arm out, extending it to Fosseis.

"I didn't know that the loser was electrocuted in your games, but I should have expected it. Just startled me for a moment. No hard feelings—will you shake on that?"

Not sure of himself, only half-relaxed, Fosseis extended his hand. Lim reached out and took it, pumping it enthusiastically up and down. At the same time he drew the young officer closer—and his left hand flashed swiftly to the other's elbow. His fingers gave a quick squeeze on



the ulnar nerve where it passed over the condyle of the humerus, the so-called funnybone. Fosseis yiped and jumped away, swinging a lower arm that now hung limp and numb.

"But I should have told you *my* rule," Lim found the smile came more naturally now. "Whenever I get a jolt of electricity I paralyze the nearest person's arm."

They all laughed then, even Fosseis as he kneaded his limp muscles, but it had been very close. Lim felt the prickle of sweat on his skin and realized how much he needed the companionship of men like these: seven years as a pariah had left their mark.

"The old duchess must have had a touch of indigestion," Deixem said the following evening. "She wasn't up for dinner and I saw that beetle Baleef scurrying in and out with a worried look. For once I enjoyed my food without her quacking in my ear."

"Rank has its privileges, my boy," Captain Cortar said unabashedly, sinking two darts in a row into the center bullseye. "When you are captain of your own ship you can order *your* first officer to dine with the passengers."

"My hope for that glorious day is the only thing keeping me in the service, if not for that I would go back to Ghozga and into pig-farming with Fosseis' family." They laughed, as always, at the repetition of this time-worn joke. Lim laughed too, though he could not ignore a sudden twinge of warning.

"Is this Baleef a doctor—the ship's doctor?" he asked.

The captain looked up, the only one who had noticed something in his voice, perhaps because he was the only one who knew his entire story.

"He's a doctor, though he's not a member of the crew. Most of our flights are cargo runs and we don't carry one, but for these passenger voyages we always sign a sawbones on. We knew this Cutherdamm party would be returning home so we found a physician when we touched down there on the outward trip, one of their own people."

"Dr. Baleef," Deixem said, screwing up his face. "Not my idea of a doctor at all. I wouldn't trust him with one of Fossy's pigs."

"The passengers seem to enjoy him," Cortar said, "And that's what he was hired for."

The conversation turned to something else and Lim tried to forget about Dr. Baleef. He sincerely hoped that indigestion was the only thing wrong with the High-Duchess Marescula.

When three days had passed and the duchess still remained in her cabin, Lim found an opportunity to talk to the captain alone in the dayroom.

"What's wrong with her, is it anything serious?"

"I don't know. Dr. Baleef keeps insisting that it is only a minor infection that will clear up quickly—but he seems worried. I'm beginning to agree with the others that the man is a fool."

"What kind of infection?"

"Skin, on the woman's hands I believe. Now the complaint is that it has moved to her feet. Probably gout from over-indulgence."

A sudden fear swept over Lim, but he allowed none of it to show.

"Skin infections can be nasty, and highly contagious. For the good of your ship you should be sure that the man is controlling it. I wonder if—" he broke off. Captain Cortar looked up sharply, his smile gone.

"If you know something, doctor—?" He used the title deliberately.

"I'm sorry, captain—but I'm not a doctor any more. They've taken that away from me. But if you are concerned that this Dr. Baleef may be incompetent I can certainly give you the benefit of my training by offering what advice I can."

"I would ask no more from you."

"Good. Then get some information from Baleef. Tell him you would like to know the temperature of the Grand-Duchess's extremities, the skin temperature of her hands and feet as well as skin temperature readings inside her knees and elbows. Then, if you can phrase it delicately enough, tell him you would like the royal rectal temperature as well."

"He'll be curious about this. What do I tell him?"

"If he is a good doctor he will know why you are asking,



and won't bother you with questions. If he is as incompetent as you all seem to feel just tell him that medicine is your hobby and your real ambition is to be a veterinary or something like that."

The captain stood up, his duty-expression firmly on his face.

"Will you wait here until I return?"

"Of course."

The off-duty officers dropped in and bullied him into a game of darts, but his heart wasn't in it. He was losing badly when the phone buzzed and one of them answered it. "That was the captain," he said, going back to the game. "He wants to see you in his quarters."

Cortar was waiting for him, frowning over a strip of tape from a recording thermometer. "Can't make a thing out of this," he said when Lim came in, "Hope it makes more sense to you. But you were right in your suspicions about the dear doctor. He went pale and almost fell over when I asked him about the temperatures. Rushed right out to get them for me and never bothered to ask why I was interested. I think we hired a very bad one there and I'm going to flay and pickle our Cutherdamm agent when I get hold of him. Now tell me what's going on." He handed over the tape.

Origo Lim examined it closely, his face revealing nothing of what he felt. It was all there, he could see it clearly at first glance. Body temperature three degrees above normal, temperature at the elbows and knees two degrees below normal.

Temperature of the hands and feet twenty degrees below normal.

"What is it?" the captain asked sharply. Lim raised his head.

"Topham's pachyacria."

"I've never heard of it."

"It has almost been wiped out, though cases still crop up—like this one. It is highly infectious, but easy enough to control because it has an incubation period of almost two weeks after exposure, and the vaccine can be administered up until the last day with assurance of complete immunity. I imagine half of the people in this ship are

infected by now, so I suggest immediate vaccination for everyone."

The captain visibly relaxed. "That's a relief to know. But why hasn't this fool Baleef reported it by now—he seemed to know what I was talking about?"

"He had good reason, the primary case, High-Duchess Marescula. This is a very—well, disfiguring disease. I think Dr. Baleef is frightened."

The tension returned, in reality it had never been gone.

"If I get Dr. Baleef in here will you talk to him—Doctor Lim?"

Lim hesitated before he answered. "I cannot practise medicine again, if I did I would be under an immediate death sentence on any planet in this area. But I can speak. If a physician talked to me it would merely be a conversation, I could offer no advice. What he did after he left would be at his own discretion, I could take no responsibility."

"They didn't make it easy for you—death sentence indeed!"

Lim smiled. "I told you that Delamond was a brutal world. And this Dr. Baleef will have to know who I am and talk to me with full knowledge of my history. But he will be glad for any kind of help—I'm sure he would take advice from the devil himself if it got him out of this mess."

"Very good. I'll get him up here at once."

The most prominent thing about Dr. Baleef was his nervousness. He was a small man with a waxy moustache that he kept plucking at with thin fingers that were never still. His mottled skin stayed moist enough to form little droplets of perspiration about the chin. When they were introduced his hand went limp in Lim's grasp after a feeble contraction to acknowledge the greeting. Lim watched him closely as the captain briefly told him about Lim's real identity and the reasons why he was traveling under an assumed name. The doctor showed no shock when the name Origo Lim was mentioned, he had obviously never heard of the case, in fact his relief was obvious when he learned that there was another physician aboard.

"Why, this is wonderful, a stroke of luck!" he clasped



his hands before him, smiling broadly. "If we could have a consultation, doctor . . ."

"I'm not a doctor," Lim snapped. "I thought that was made clear. I will be in enough trouble as it is if the authorities even find out that you were discussing a case with me. If they think that you have been consulting me in a professional capacity I am liable to a death sentence. Is that clear?"

"Oh perfectly, doctor—that is, Sire Lim, perfectly understood," the fingers were pulling at the moustache again. "What happens in this room is just between us and will go no further, I know we can rely upon the captain's discretion, the spacemen of Ghozgha are well known for their rectitude, but I digress. The case of the High-Duchess has become serious . . ."

"It always was serious. What is your diagnosis?"

"Well, in the beginning there was some doubt, one can't be sure, it is difficult as you know. Many diseases simulate others. There was the need to avoid spreading alarm . . ."

"She has Topham's pachyacria, hasn't she?"

Dr. Baleef's skin was suddenly sallow and he looked as though he were going to faint. Before he could speak he had to moisten his dry lips.

"Yes," he finally said under his breath.

"Have you operated yet?" Lim's voice was flat and emotionless.

"No, you see I suggested to the High-Duchess that there might be some minor surgery, she absolutely forbid it, yes she did. Insisted that I wait until we reached Cutherdamm to consult her own doctor there." His voice died away and he lowered his eyes to his fingers, twisting together on his lap.

"How far has the necrosis spread?" Lim asked quietly. Captain Cortar listened and said nothing, understanding only that something was very wrong.

"Of course, the fingertips, the fingers that is, in the beginning, but now the wrists and the temperature of the toes—"

"You fool," Lim breathed and Dr. Baleef flushed and lowered his eyes again. "Are you a qualified doctor?" Lim snapped the question.

"How dare you, sir? You assume too much—I have my M.D. and a D.El.I. as well. Up until recently I was chairman of the Epia State Medical Association. I am fully qualified."

"A political doctor," Lim said, and this time made no attempt to hide the contempt in his voice: he turned to the captain. "This is very serious. Topham's pachyacia is easy to identify by the marked temperature changes in the various parts of the body. It strikes the extremities first, usually the fingers. When this occurs it is too late for vaccination and immediate surgery is the only cure. The body cells affected by the microorganism simply die, then the infection is passed through the cell walls to the adjoining cells. There is swelling, minor pain, but generally only a localized numbness. All this is very deceptive. The affected tissue is dead and has to be cut away, while uninfected tissue must be removed as well for at least two inches in every direction. This of course means amputation, on early cases just fingers or toes. I haven't seen the patient, but it sounds like the High-Duchess will have to lose both hands and probably her feet as well." He turned back to Baleef who was half collapsed in his chair. "When will you operate, doctor?"

"But—you don't understand—I cannot, she forbids it."

"If you don't operate she will die, it is as simple as that. I suggest you prepare for surgery—immediately!"

Without looking at them, Dr. Baleef drew himself slowly to his feet and left the cabin, stumbling slightly in the doorway.

"You were very hard on him," Captain Cortar said, but there was no condemnation in his voice.

"I had to be, to force him to understand. He has been playing politics with medicine so long that he has forgotten a doctor's first responsibility is to his patient's health—nothing else. Once he faces that he'll be all right, the surgery is simple enough. However, if you don't mind a suggestion, I think you ought to send one of your officers along to help him, as moral support."

"First Officer Deixem, he's the best man for the job."

He made the call and brought out the bottle. They had a drink and Lim was standing and just ready to leave when



Deixem entered and saluted in the formal Ghozgan manner.

"I regret to report that Dr. Baleef is dead," he said.

Protocol Damin-Hestt found the three of them in Dr. Baleef's cabin, looking down at the corpse that was neatly dressed in a synthsilk dressing gown, lying peacefully on the bed.

"What happened, why did you call me?" he asked, then gasped as he saw the body.

"Dr. Baleef has committed suicide," Origo Lim said, pointing to the empty hypodermic on the floor. He took a small bottle half full of clear fluid from Baleef's limp hand. "Martitron, one of the strongest tranquilizers, two drops a day are very relaxing. With 5 cc. you become so relaxed the heart stops pumping and the brain drowns off. A very easy way to go. Dr. Baleef's problem was too big for him to solve so he died and left it to me."

"You?"

"There is no one else. The High-Duchess must be operated on at once, this has been delayed too long already. I am the only person on this ship who can do this, but I shall be sentenced to death if I do."

"Is the operation that necessary?" the protocol asked.

"Imperative. I have no choice. Or rather I do have a choice. I can ignore the entire matter and allow the High-Duchess to die, just as the law has ordered me to."

"You must help her—you took an oath as a physician—"

"The oath no longer applies. I am forbidden by law."

"Captain Cortar," Damin-Hestt said angrily. "You can order this man to operate, you must, you are the captain of this ship."

"I can do nothing. It is beyond my jurisdiction."

"Is it?" Damin-Hestt was white with rage now. "You hired an incompetent doctor, a fool that did not perform this vital operation, then committed suicide. You are responsible——"

"Stop!" Lim ordered, as angry now as Damin-Hestt. "I will do what must be done, I have no choice. The old woman is not to blame for the bungling of the doctor."

The anger vanished instantly and the protocol smiled.

"You are a brave man, Dr. Lim. And no trouble shall come of this, I assure you. The High-Duchess's companions will understand once I have explained, they will keep your secret. It will be said that Dr. Baleef operated before he died, your name will not be mentioned."

He went out and Lim was aware for the first time that First Officer Deixem had stood by silently, hearing everything.

"Now you know this much," Lim told him, "You should know the entire story. The captain will tell you who I am and what I have done, and I want the crew to know as well. They have taken me in, accepted me under a false name, and I don't like it. I'll feel much better if they all know who Lim really is."

He left and went directly to the High-Duchess's cabin: the protocol was waiting in the hall. "She's sleeping," he said. "What do you want me to tell her?"

"Nothing. Just verify that what I say is true. This is my case and I am the physician." Even as he said this he felt his shoulders lifting a bit, squaring. Pride! He smiled to himself. A doctor just one last time, a very complicated form of suicide.

The High-Duchess Marescula awoke as he was taking the temperature of her arm, pulling it away from his so that it flapped heavily onto the blanket. "Who are you?" she asked dully. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm a physician," Lim said, pushing his thumb deep into the grey skin of the forearm: when he removed it the impression stayed. "Dr. Baleef has met with an accident and cannot attend you. I have been asked to help." He turned to the medical kit on the table beside the bed.

"I might have known it—Baleef is an idiot. I hope you do better. He said he wanted to operate but I told him no quickly enough. It's circulation trouble, I've had it before . . ."

"You should have allowed him to operate, High-Duchess, it would have been easier. There is no other choice."

"No . . ." she screamed in a cracked voice, her eyes wide and staring, her lower lip and the wattles of her neck vibrating with fear. "You cannot touch me! I forbid it! I forbid it . . ."



With swift precision Lim placed the spray hypodermic on her upper arm and the droplets of liquid were blown directly through her skin into her bloodstream. She collapsed without a sound.

"What will you do?", protocol Damin-Hestt asked worriedly. "What kind of operation? Baleef mentioned her fingers, something about her toes . . ."

Lim pulled the covers back over the gross, limp figure. "I shall have to amputate both legs below the knees. And both arms midway between elbows and shoulders."

*Dr. Origo Lim wanted no more aid than that offered by the miraculous devices in the ship's surgery. Once the High-Duchess Marescula was on the operating table he locked the door and disconnected the phone. This was the world of his competence and skills, and his alone. He scrubbed and dressed, holding out his arms so the one-piece surgeon's suit could be slipped on by the robot. Transparent and germ-proof, it covered him like a second skin, while he breathed through a diaphragm filter inset over his mouth. He could speak through this filter, too, since all of the machines were voice controlled. While the dressing was being completed he watched the display dials: the patient was in deep anesthesia, blood pressure as good as to be expected, oxygen consumption, temperature, ECG reading, all under control. At a quiet command a super-sonic scalpel was slapped into his outstretched palm. He bent and made the first incision.*

"You will keep her unconscious, under an anesthetic or something won't you?" Protocol Damin-Hestt asked. He stood by the physician, looking down at the immense, bandaged form on the bed. The room was silent except for the High-Duchess's slow, heavy breathing.

"No," Lim said, "That could lead to complications. For the patient's sake she should be conscious and able to eat and drink."

"For the doctor's sake unconsciousness might be more practical. The High-Duchess is a very wilful woman, she will not like what has been done."

Origo Lim could not help smiling at the worried man.

"Why, protocol—you're not advising against your employer's interest in my favor, are you?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. It may be for my own interest. Let us say that, for our mutual benefit, the wisest course would be to have the High-Duchess regain consciousness in the hospital on Cutherdamm where all of the most expensive specialists would assure her that she had received the proper—ah, treatment, and that it will all be quickly repaired. It can be—can't it?"

Lim nodded. "Limb grafts can begin within six months, barring complications. And you may be right about her unconsciousness from a political point of view—but I can't justify it medically."

Damin-Hestt shrugged and made an acquiescent gesture with one long-fingered hand. "You are the doctor," he said.

The High-Duchess Marescula was more than angry, there was a touch of madness in her eyes. She could not see what had been done to her body, strapped down and concealed beneath the bedclothes, nor did she want to. "My beauty defiled," she said shrilly, perhaps still thinking herself back in the Royal Court of her youth when she had been very lovely. "Who is the doctor that did this?" she demanded and, in spite of Damin-Hestt's gesture of warning, Lim told her his real name. "Butcher Lim! Butcher Lim! It had to be you! I read about you on Delamond, I know all about you. Get out, stay away from me, I won't have you near me!" She sank back onto the pillow, sobbing.

Lim left complete instructions regarding nursing procedures with the High-Duchess's ladies in waiting; they would take care of everything that was necessary. A small unit broadcast her temperature, blood pressure and other vital readings to a receiver that he kept with him. He could supervise her care from anywhere in the ship while the women took over the simple bedside tasks. In the corridor outside he checked to see that the instrument was functioning well, then went towards the officers' dayroom. He hesitated slightly before entering, then pushed the door open, his features fixed in the blank expression he had learned in prison.



Second Officer Fosseis saw him as soon as he entered and hurried over, a worried look on his round face.

"Why didn't you tell us you were a sawbones as soon as you came aboard? We're all in need of free medical advice, that Dr. Baleef would never tell me anything. Look here, look in my mouth, don't you think I got an abscess in that big tooth right back there?"

He opened his mouth wide, right under Lim's nose, and Lim automatically looked down. As soon as he did Fosseis reached inside his gaping jaws and whipped out all of his teeth, a complete artificial set. "Here, Dr. Lim, maybe you can see them better close up."

The dart players laughed loudly—as they did at all practical jokes—then turned back to their playing. Fosseis staggered away, chortling with glee and snapping the teeth at everyone he passed. As he opened a beer Origo Lim felt his taut muscles relax, an unaccustomed feeling of pleasure gripped him. These men all knew who he was, what had happened, yet they treated him like a human being. He had almost forgotten the sensation. Then memory returned and he swallowed hard at the beer. He was in trouble and on Cutherdamm there would be no friendship, no friendship at all.

Trouble was not long in coming. In the privacy of his quarters Captain Cortar showed Lim two sheets of paper. *For Lim's sake do not let the message be sent*, the first read, it was unsigned. On the second sheet were a series of code groups of five letters each.

"What does it mean?" Lim asked, looking from one paper to the other.

"The code groups? I don't know—but I can make a close guess. It's trouble for you, the High-Duchess must be talking to her people and arranging something. This message was handed in to the radio room with instructions that it be sent to Cutherdamm as soon as we broke out of jump-space. I don't recognize the hand-writing, but I'm sure the note is from Damin-Hestt, there's no one else who could possibly have written it."

"He's trying to keep his word, since he did promise there would be no trouble. What will you do about the message?"

"Put it in the file and forget it. We break out in less

than twelve hours, but there is trouble with the main transmitter. The message will not be sent."

"Very opportune, isn't it?"

"Not very. The power tube and both spares are in my closet and I have plugged in one we burnt out last trip. There are no lies involved, since there really *is* trouble with the main transmitter. Now."

"Happy landings," Lim smiled, but the smile was only on the surface. He was safe until they touched down on Cutherdamm—but then what?

One hour after they had broken out of jump-space and had swung into orbit for Cutherdamm the alarms howled through every compartment in the *Vengador*. If there had been an accident Lim knew he could be needed, so he followed the officers to the bridge. Captain Cortar was pacing up and down, his face swollen with rage, clutching a crumpled piece of paper in his fist.

"Read this," he said, shoving it towards Lim who pressed out the wrinkles. His features hardened as he scanned the brief message.

*Arrest Butcher Lim landing on Vengador for criminal operation on High-Duchess Marescula.*

"Two of the duchess's men entered the radio room and overpowered the operator," the captain said. "They used the emergency transmitter and broadcast that message on the emergency frequency for at least twenty minutes before they were discovered. The transmitter has a limited range, but there are powerful listening stations who surely picked it up. I'm sorry . . ."

"It's not your fault—or your responsibility—captain." The look of prison coldness was back on Lim's face. "You have helped me, but from now on I will have to take care of myself." They both turned as First Officer Deixem came in, rubbing the bruised knuckles of his right hand.

"We have found the two men who attacked the radio operator, sir. They are locked in the brig."

"Did they give you any trouble?"

"None to speak of, captain. I wish it had been more." He turned to say something to Lim but he was too late, he was already leaving the bridge. As he went out he met Protocol Damin-Hestt in the doorway.



"Dr. Lim," he said, "I have been looking for you, to apologize for what has happened. I tried to stop . . ."

"Go straight to hell, you and your wonderful promises." Then he was gone.

In the remaining hours before touchdown the *Vengador* was as silent as a ghost ship. The crew stayed at their posts, silently going about their work, while the passengers kept to their quarters. Loud, victorious laughter echoed from the High-Duchess's cabin while Damin-Hestt was bitterly and quietly getting drunk in his.

If Captain Cortar noticed that a Cutherdamm cruiser paralleled their course and landed at the same moment they did, he gave no sign. They touched down and he killed the engines just as a half-track troop carrier raced up and disgorged a platoon of soldiers beneath the ship's high fins. It was night on Cutherdamm and a spotlight from the carrier lit up the passenger airlock as it opened. An officer stamped up the gangway and the soldiers stood beneath it, guns ready and alert.

"Captain Cortar?" the officer asked as he entered the bridge and saluted. The captain noticed that he was a full general as he returned the salute.

"Very good of you to come, general. I'll have the two prisoners turned over to your men, in chains of course. Attack on a space officer while in flight is a serious crime——"

"What are you talking about?" the general said impatiently, hitting at his pants leg with a swagger stick. "I'm here after Butcher Lim, where is he?"

"There is an Origo Lim aboard, but he has committed no crimes to my knowledge."

"What? What kind of foolishness is this? The emergency call was received from your ship——"

He was interrupted by the howl of sirens on the field outside picked up by the hull microphones, and searchlights came on, flicking over the ferro-concrete plain.

"There, look!" someone said, and they saw, from their high vantage point, the running figure of a man now caught by the lights. He reached the wire fence that surrounded the field but now bursts of flame sparkled around him as the soldiers fired. The figure staggered and dropped

something he had been carrying, then ran on to the fence, swarmed over it and vanished in the darkness beyond.

The shrill of a phone buzzer cut through the bridge.

"Captain," a voice reported, "Second Officer Fosseis has been attacked, he's unconscious near the stern inspectionway—it's been opened."

Bit by bit the pieces were fitted together. Fosseis, sitting limp and dizzy with a blood-stained bandage around his head, had seen nothing. He had been struck down from behind. But the two prisoners, now released from the brig near the engine room, had more to report. They had seen Butcher Lim pass their cell carrying a metal suitcase. The stern inspectionway was open and since it was set into one of the fins not too far above the ground it could have been used to escape the ship. Then the object was brought in that the escaping man had dropped—Dr. Origo Lim's suitcase with his few personal possessions. It was identified by the prisoners as the one Lim had been carrying.

"An officer of mine has been attacked and might have been killed," Captain Cortar said with barely controlled rage. "I want this man captured, general. I'm assigning to you all of my officers and crewmen who can recognize this Lim, to aid you in your search. I hope you will inform me as soon as he has been taken."

"Of course, captain," the general saluted and withdrew to organize the manhunt.

Unhappily, it failed. Cutherdamm City is an old city, a sprawled out and jumbled warren of narrow streets and ancient buildings. The fugitive had gone to ground and, after four days, Captain Cortar reluctantly withdrew the men he had assigned to the general and prepared to leave. The passengers were gone and the cargo loaded, he could not afford to stay planet-bound any longer.

As soon as they were in space and had cut radio connection with Cutherdamm someone laughed, and an instant later they were all laughing, weeping tears of joy that they had been restraining for days. There is nothing a Ghozghan likes like a good practical joke. Even First Officer Deixem laughed uproariously—and howled with pain at the same time—as Dr. Lim dressed the burn on his arm.

"They're still searching . . ." he gasped, "Grubbing



through every rat's nest in that broken down city!" he laughed louder, almost choking. Lim smiled, he enjoyed the joke but couldn't see it as being quite that funny.

"This is the first time I have had a chance to thank you—" he said.

"No thanks!" Deixem gasped and drained his beer. "I wouldn't have missed this show even if they had blown the arm off. Anyway, they are terrible shots, those Cutherdamm recruits. I was afraid they wouldn't hit close enough for me to make it look as though I had been forced to drop your bag. Just a lucky shot."

"But you were in danger—"

"Nonsense! Once over the fence I was in the clear. I tied up my arm then nipped around a corner and joined the others from the ship. Just one more ship's officer joining the search. They checked carefully when we came back aboard—but no one bothered to check how many of us had gone out!" This struck him as being the funniest thing in the universe and he went off again into gales of laughter.

Lim made one more attempt to thank these men who had saved his life: he searched out the captain.

"Won't hear a word of it!" Captain Cortar protested, forcing a beer into his hand. "High-handed people come on my ship, cause nothing but trouble, assault my radio operator, make illegal use of the emergency transmitter, try to frame a friend of mine on a trumped up charge. Nothing else for us to do. That and the other motive."

"What motive?"

"To get a good doctor cheap, with your criminal record and all you'll have to take whatever salary I offer you!"

"But—you don't usually ship a medical officer. And you forget I have no license."

"From now on we have a doctor aboard—you. I want no more fiascos like the one with Dr. Baleef. And the Ghozghan medical society will qualify you in a minute, once they hear the whole story—particularly about the joke! So you see—you're all set."

"Yes," Dr. Origo Lim said, looking around at his shipmates. "I am all set, aren't I?"

—HARRY HARRISON

# SONG OF THE SYREN

by Robert Wells

Long afterwards, Sorensen, the expedition's senior space-botanist, had time to reflect that it had all begun with women or, more specifically, two women.

He had been on his way to the Plant Cultivation Block that significant morning when he passed Kempenfeld's quarters and noted with disgust from the musical bedlam going on inside that the spacers had been smuggling the latest pop recordings to Marietess Kempenfeld again.

The girl had been only twelve when Sorensen stretched space exploration regulations and pulled all the strings in the Space Department to allow her to accompany her grandfather to Petra. Old Kempenfeld was the most experienced plant-tender in that part of the galaxy and Sorensen had badly wanted him on the Petran expedition, but he was Marietess's only guardian after her parents died in a transport accident and he could not be persuaded to leave Solar without her.

Now, five years later, she had become a serious liability to Sorensen. On the sober, hard-grafting space frontier she was like a bird of paradise among eagles. Spoiled by her grandfather, pretty, vivacious, she was a candle flame to the space navigators who glided like moths in from the dark stretches between the stars. They smuggled her prohibited candy and the latest Solar fashion magazines; discs and tapes and pop music to cheer her exile. They flirted with her and told her tall stories about their space voyages.

Sorensen suspected that even his own well-immunised and dedicated staff on the Base were beginning to suffer. Only a week ago young Bill Loads and Knut Hansen were involved in a scuffle with two spacemen at Spaceport. It had come to nothing serious, but had provoked a sharp rebuke from the Expedition Leader at Habek. Sorensen, whose views on life outside of space-botany were simple,



had little doubt as to what had been at the root of the squabble.

On his tour of P.C. Block that same morning he met Portia Haley in the low-temperature house where some of the Petran mosses were under cultivation. He had just come from hearing the music at Kempenfeld's and wasn't in the mood for meeting anyone, least of all Portia.

She was a sixth year student, one of the brightest in the unit's botanical section, but it was an open secret that she would resign when her seven years tour of study was complete and opt for a mating and reproductive role back in Solar. In the space frontier jargon she was a 'revert'.

Maybe for this reason she felt herself to be a sort of local competitor with Marietess and she was one of the few on the Base staff who had no time or sympathy for the gardener's granddaughter.

Helmets were worn compulsorily in all the plant cultivation sections because of the chance of human bacterial contamination. Over the helmet radio-link Portia said: "I wonder if any of these species could be related to our sonorous alpinates. I could swear that I've heard a faint note somewhere in the section. I pick it up mostly late in the day. But it often goes days between manifestations. I haven't been able to locate the source because it never lasts long enough."

Sorensen shook his head. "I shouldn't think so," he said dubiously. "These are very low developments compared to our singing flowers." He liked to display his poetic inclination to the students, replacing technicalities with fanciful names of his own invention.

"Anyhow," said Portia, "what I'd like to do is set up a tape and a couple of microphones over one night and maybe play back a recording of the alpinates emissions. I reckon there may be stimuli . . ."

Sorensen gave a non-committal grunt and moved away to escape if he could her pedantic insistence, but she wouldn't be put off. "Look," he said at last, "I might as well tell you flatly that I won't authorise any off-beat experiments in the P.C. Block right now, Miss Haley. Before we start monkeying with the environmental set-up I want to know everything about the way these specimens grow,

live and reproduce under normal, Petran conditions. That's a space-botanist's job and that's why we're here."

So far as the pressurised overall permitted Portia could be seen to give the ghost of a shrug, and with a curt nod to her Sorensen stalked out of the house. He went moodily down the gangway past the other cultivation houses and then up a ramp to a door which led to the Restricted Section of the P.C. Block.

Only senior officers on the Base had access and Sorensen noted with some annoyance that three of the combination of tumblers on the lock had been left unscrambled. Of course it saved a few seconds the next time it had to be opened, but it didn't rate well for maximum security. He made a mental note to take the matter up with Bill Loads.

The Restricted Section was sub-divided into self-contained units many of which were so crowded with plants of various species that it was impossible to see into the interior. Make a damned fine place to hide if anyone felt like ducking duty, thought Sorensen; and maybe that's why . . . He renewed his resolution to thrash out the business of the unscrambled combination as soon as possible.

He gave a cursory glance at one or two units, checked a humidity level here and wiped a slide there for any traces of pollination, but his real goal was Section 19.

When he was inside with the door closed he reduced his oxygeniser to a whisper, depressed his suit and breathed a contented sigh. The Petran alpine atmosphere which Section 19 reproduced closely resembled human environmental conditions.

Sorensen stood quite still for a moment looking eagerly about him at the strange flora, one hand hovering over the button which would operate the suit's external pick-up. He looked like a child that denies itself a certain intense pleasure to savour it first in imagination.

When at last he did operate the button it was an eerie music which flowed into his helmet.

Each of the five species of alpine flowers that had been discovered on Petra had its distinctive note and the impression given to human ears by a random collection at



different stages of maturity was of some dwarf orchestra tuning its instruments before a miniature symphony.

Hardly any experimental work had been done as yet on the singing flowers. They had proved to be among the most delicate and capricious subjects to bring into cultivation under artificial conditions. Several of the first batches brought laboriously from the Petran Alps had perished for no apparent reason.

The specimens in Section 19 were the first that had really responded with any success and Sorensen would allow no special treatments or experiments with them, and only a few super-staff could handle them. All efforts so far had been concentrated on keeping them alive in captivity and virtually nothing was known of them, least of all what profound function their music fulfilled, although Hansen was pursuing theories of his own concerned with their nutritional patterns.

Absorbed by the weird song, Sorensen wandered this way and that among the benches, his imagination leap-frogging over a whole multitude of problems to the time when he would freight his first, precious cargo of singing flowers back for the amazement and admiration of the people of the Old Galaxy.

Such unique organisms would have been worth a fortune to some speculator of the old merchanting kind. Sorensen recalled the horrifying and lucrative traffic there had once been in the first discovered living creatures outside Solar—the tiny vole-like inhabitants of Kappa II—which had led to their extinction.

But in any case the singing flowers had so far proved poor travellers. No one had yet been able to devise a satisfactory technique even for getting a living specimen intact as far as the next planet in this galaxy, let alone making the enormous space-jump to Solar.

Suddenly the botanist felt uneasy. He tried to ignore the sensation at first and get back to his pleasant daydream, but his rigorous training snapped his mind back to its job and the analysis of what was wrong.

Methodically he checked reactions. He pressurised the suit, boosted the oxygen, walked to the end of the house and checked the temperatures and pressures of the atmo-

sphere outside. Still something was wrong. He cut out the external microphone and enveloped in silence realised at once that what had been wrong was a distinctly alien note among those of the familiar symphony; almost a cry of anguish.

He hastily cut the microphone in again, but the intrusion was gone and, although he made two careful circuits of the Section, straining every fibre of his ear-drums to locate the dissonance, he could detect nothing.

## II

Four days later they were all silent, wiped out; several months of dangerous and arduous pioneering work erased in one short, Petran night.

Sorensen was getting out of bed when the visorphone buzzed and, without waiting to get the go-ahead signal, Loads' shocked, hollow-cheeked face swam onto the screen.

"Bill?" queried Sorensen.

"I'm in the R.P.C. Block, Chief. It's the alpinates. Something's happened to them."

"What?"

"They're dead. All of them."

Sorensen ran, but something in the way his assistant had looked and spoken told him haste was futile.

What had happened in Section 19 was murder. Without any sign of physical violence or disturbance the singing flowers had been killed. Hardly recognisable, they lay in the glittering, ashy shale that was the soil of Petra, collapsed, rotting and silent.

In the face of such a disaster Sorensen found himself speechless. The putrefying vegetation about him seemed grossly unrelated to the fragile, sound-producing plants which had given him such keen pleasure and the illusion of a niche in space-botanical posterity. A skeletal frond still retaining a trace of its natural yellow against the glass, a black shape frost-bitten in death on the far side. These were the only phantoms that remained to testify to the recent presence of the singing flowers.

When at last the botanist found his voice it was thin and



brittle over the radio. "You've checked the atmosphere and temperature control."

"Yes, sir. Variation was well within the permitted limits all night."

"No glass fault or fracture?"

"No, sir. The alarms were all set when I came on."

"Who was the night duty check?"

"Kempenfeld, sir."

"And the last routine worker yesterday?"

Loads hesitated and said: "I . . ." and then stopped and Sorensen snapped: "What's the matter with you? Damn it! You've checked the signature in the duty book, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir." Loads had regained his composure. "Knut was the last worker in the R.P.C. Block."

"Right." Sorensen felt annoyed at having lost his temper. He was closer to Loads than to any other member of his senior staff and suddenly his intense disappointment seemed selfish. "You realise that I'll have to report this to Habek, Bill, and they'll order a full investigation?"

Loads nodded. "Barbera will enjoy getting a crack at the Arts and Crafts units. I expect he'll come over himself to see if he can break up the team."

Sorensen surveyed the slaughter once again. "I still can't believe it. Something fantastic happened in here last night to cause this."

"Did you notice one thing?" said Loads. "The degree of damage seems to be directly proportional in intensity to the distance from the observation seat. The stuff in the nearer trays is nearly totally destroyed from root to tip, while up against the panes along the furthestmost branches you can still see a bit of original foliage left clinging here and there."

"Yes," said Sorensen, "yes."

"Like the blast from a radiation shell, or shock waves or . . ."

"No," said Sorensen. "Anything like an explosion would have left other obvious traces. And anyway there's nothing in here to explode and I can't think of anything that anyone would have brought in here which might. The instruments would have picked it up and registered any intense

vibration. Looks as though you're right about the distribution of damage, but what maniac caused it and how?"

"It looks terribly like revenge," said Loads hoarsely.

Sorensen couldn't be sure whether the catch in his voice was really a manifestation of remorse or something more. He measured it against his five years acquaintance with his assistant's moods and temper. Uncertainty?—more like apprehension. "On whom and for what?" he asked, but Loads obviously thought he had said enough and gave no answer.

Sorensen's head started to ache after he had radioed the news of the destruction of the singing flowers to Habek. Between waiting the inescapable reply from Barbera and starting preliminary enquiries himself he went to the medical station to get a sedative. What he got in addition was some information he had not bargained for.

"Sit down," said Dr. Rolf. "You can tell that leave is overdue. You're the third non-routine patient this week. The staff's cracking up."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Hey—don't bite me. It was just a joke."

Sorensen sank back into the chair. He felt the drug he had just inhaled flush swiftly along his over-taut nervous system. "Well, who were the others?"

The jagged ache drained out of his neck and temples, but was momentarily replaced by a numbness. He resisted it to concentrate on what Rolf was saying.

". . . on the door of a refrigerator." Rolf chuckled. "Man, I told him, 'a door hits you on your nose or your forehead. You'd have to be in a damn' funny position to get a bruised lip off one.' And, mind you, he had a bruise coming up on his cheek that he thought I couldn't see and so he hadn't mentioned it. No, he can be a queer devil, that young Hansen. I reckon it'll be a good job for him when his time comes up for that transfer to Gysomon!

"I thought—aha! been scrapping with the spacers again, my boy. You'll get yourself into real trouble one day. And then I'm blessed if half an hour later that lively young wench of Kempenfeld's doesn't bounce in to get something for her cold and asks if I can't give her some plastic skin as well because Grandad's skinned his knuckles open-



ing some specimen packs in the P.C. Block. Bloody old liar! I met him the same evening and asked him about the knuckles. Said he'd caught them on a culture tray in the Lab!"

Rolf sorted with infuriating calm through some papers in the desk drawer while Sorensen waited. "Come on, Sim, Come on," he said at last in exasperation. "When was all this?"

"Oh, two days ago. Of course I put two and two together and they added up to a bunch of fives on Hansen's lip, eh? Can't understand it, of course. Hansen's younger, stronger. Could have blown the old man away if he'd sneezed."

"And this is all pure conjecture, anyway?"

"Oh, Charles—you don't conjecture a busted lip and skinned knuckles."

"No, but it could be that Hansen hit his face on the fridge door and Kempenfeld skinned his knuckles opening canned samples in the P.C. Block." Sorensen tried to make the sarcasm in his voice as pointed as possible.

"Oh, yes. Except you would think that Kempenfeld would have been able to remember just how he hurt his hand." It was impossible for anyone to penetrate Rolf's armour of self-possession. "And that one of my orderlies actually saw the old man go for Hansen. He had been drawing stores and he came back past the investigation labs. He noticed Hansen and the old man in one of them. He thought they looked a bit hostile so he stopped to watch. He saw them arguing, then Kempenfeld hit Hansen and apparently Knut just stood there for a second and then he walked away."

"And you didn't report it to me?"

"Well, Charles, I didn't know it till yesterday when I thought Kempenfeld's and Hansen's stories sounded fishy and I started making enquiries." Rolf rolled his head in an effort to stress the triviality of the incident. "And really I had made out a report. . . ." He extracted the paper he had been looking for and handed it over. It was a memorandum dated the day before.

"Were you going to suppress this?" asked Sorensen.

"Oh, I can't say that, Charles. I thought you'd been looking very harassed lately. . . ."

"You know the rules, Sim."

"And I know you. But what's happened? You look as sore as hell."

"I see you haven't heard the news," said Sorensen. "If you had bloody well reported this to me yesterday it might have helped to prevent a murder." And he left the doctor's office so fast that Rolf thought the photo-electric door control wouldn't get it open in time and he would walk straight through it.

\* \* \*

"Murder! All right, if you want to dramatise it," said Barbera. "Everyone is suspect. Everyone is guilty." He had usurped Sorensen's seat behind Sorensen's desk and the botanist had to make do with his secretary's chair.

"A team—and by that I mean everyone who oils a robot right through to you—would not have let this happen or would have known instantly why it happened when it did. Somewhere here in the chain there are weak links. They have to be found and reforged. If there are too many the chain itself will have to be discarded."

He took one of Sorensen's files and lightly beat some dust away from the desk-top, unconscious, heedless even, that it was re-lighting on Sorensen's suit.

"Yes, but on the other hand we ought not to rule out a natural cause entirely."

Barbera's eyes, almost as black as his beard, so that their pupils were invisible, scrutinised Sorensen in a detached way. "Well, you are the botanist. I suppose you would hardly have caused me to come here and waste my time if it was a natural misfortune."

Sorensen retreated. "No, sir, no. What I meant was that in frontier space you can never be sure what elements . . ."

Barbera was uninterested in these hypothetical escape routes. His dark eyes roamed the ceiling. "The best line you can offer is that of revenge after a quarrel. And yet the injured party could not have destroyed the specimens without being immediately discovered by the very person he set out to injure; because although Hansen was the last person on routine work in the Restricted Section Kempenfeld was the night check who made an inspection that night



after Hansen had left. Could Hansen have gone into the Section after it was inspected?"

"Yes—but the robot watchman would automatically have recorded it."

"And it didn't."

"No one went into or came out of the Section between Kempenfeld locking up and Bill Loads going in next morning."

"Now," said Barbera, "neither Hansen nor Kempenfeld admit the quarrel?"

"They both admit it, but I think they're both concealing what it was really about."

"Two mature, experienced and long-service space workers just jump up and punch one another for no reason. Is that what they are saying?"

"Hansen says it was a misunderstanding and Kempenfeld says his blood sugar count was down because of over-work."

"Do you believe that?"

"No," said Sorensen. "Hansen's reason is an obvious evasion and I checked with Dr. Rolf about Kempenfeld's ailment. He says Kempenfeld hasn't consulted him about it for weeks."

"And you've tried to break them down on these points, of course?"

"They stick to what they say."

"So what do you believe?" Sorensen felt that dark penetrating gaze clamped onto his face again.

"I don't know. It's specially difficult with Hansen and Kempenfeld. They have no counter ambitions. Kempenfeld is almost wholly concerned with tending the delicate specimens to routines laid down by me. Hansen is my top researcher in chemical nourishment techniques. Professionally their paths hardly cross."

"So, we are going to look outside the professional sphere for the source of their misunderstanding?"

Sorensen nodded.

"Any ideas?"

Sorensen shook his head. Barbera began to draw a small, geometrical composition on Sorensen's scribbling bloc. He scratched away for some time and then said: "This female

botanist you have on staff here—Miss Haley—she's a reversion, isn't she?"

"But that doesn't make her a suspect," said Sorensen. "You know there's a steady 10 per cent drift out on any project group no matter how well you think you've screened them. And the women revert more easily than the men."

"There you go," said Barbera, gently cross-hatching a rhomb. "You want to spring up in defence of everyone. I only asked a question."

"Yes," said Sorensen, hating every word that fell calmly from the dark thicket of beard. "Yes, she has already made it clear that she'll apply for a repatriation permit and a matrimonial certificate when her six years are up."

"She hasn't worked on the alpinates?"

"Not specifically. She's done some good general classification work. She is rather inclined to off-beat experiments . . ."

"Reproductive?" Barbera interrupted in a murmur.

"No." The answer had escaped Sorensen before he realised that the question had been mockingly ironic.

"Such as, then?"

Sorensen related his encounter with Portia Haley in the P.C. Section four days before the disaster.

"She wanted to try recording the alpinates' sound emissions?"

"Not exactly. She claimed she'd heard an intermittent note, a sort of alien sound, in one of the other houses. It was the primitive moss or the tundra section, I think. She wanted to record the alpinates' music and play it back there to see if she got any response."

"But you didn't think it was a good idea."

"Portia is always coming up with crazy stuff like that," said Sorensen. "Besides, I have a planned programme of work. I make it a rule on any new project to know all it's possible to know about the flora under natural conditions before I start putting in machines and equipment that might upset the environmental balance."

"Couldn't you have isolated a small section of the specimens for recording? It wouldn't have mattered if they had suffered. Presumably you would have had plenty left."



"Hansen had already used up any spares I had," Sorensen snapped. "He's been researching along a line of his own that the sounds they make have a nutritional or reproductive stimulus. But we couldn't get them to reproduce here and we couldn't send out Alpine expeditions every week and anyway they travelled badly. I had to try to preserve the ones I had. At least they were growing."

"Do you think that the frustrated Miss Haley—I mean the scientifically frustrated side of her, of course," said Barbera with a remote smile, "—could have got into the Restricted Section and done a little experimenting without permission?"

Sorensen said: "I've wondered if something like that did happen. If something utterly hostile had been introduced there it could have caused the horrible results you've seen. But Portia doesn't have admittance to the Restricted Section. I haven't allowed anyone but seniors there for the time being. Only about five people can work the combination lock."

"I see. She couldn't have been taken in there for some reason by one of the seniors."

"No," said Sorensen. "We started doing occasional practical work in the section with selected students. But we stopped it because we thought it wasn't safe for too many people to be around there."

Barbera thought while his pen still worked away tirelessly at his design. "Who is Miss Haley tutoring with just at this present time?"

Sorensen had to think about it. "She's with Hansen's class," he said.

"Well," said Barbera, after a short silence, "I think we'll see Miss Haley first."

Sorensen dared to shrug although he felt anything but indifferent. "Just as you like."

Neither man spoke again until Portia came in. Then Barbera stood up and asked her to take a chair. As Sorensen listened to the Expedition Leader's friendly opening questions he thought that for a man who scorned reverts Barbera showed them a great deal of old-fashioned charm.

". . . didn't expect it. No, no, of course." Barbera had

gone back to his absorbing geometrics. The design had begun to spread out of the corner of Sorensen's pad down toward the centre. When he put a question Barbera raised his eyes to look at Portia, but he would lower them again to his self-imposed task as soon as she started to answer.

"What I'm getting at," he said pleasantly, "is not whether you carried out any experiments, Miss Haley, but whether you might have had some in mind and mentioned them; to a colleague, for instance?"

"I did meet Mr. Sorenson in the P.C. Section one day and said it might be worth while recording the alpinates and setting up a tape in the section . . ."

"Why was that?"

"While I was working late there I thought I picked up a peculiar sound. Like a musical note. I was sure I'd heard it on one or two occasions previously. I'd heard it that day too."

Sorensen watched her face. She looked quite jaunty. She had already anticipated the next question and when Barbera put it she enjoyed herself with the answer until he interrupted. "But just forget standing instructions and discipline for a moment. If you had been head botanist would you have risked any instruments in there? Were you positive enough about it?"

"I wasn't actually asking to set up an experiment in the Restricted Section."

"No, I understand that—but it would have meant making a recording of the alpinates first, would it not?"

"Oh, yes."

"Now, can you go back to my original question?"

Portia considered it. "Yes," she said. "I heard something alright. Whether it came from the plants or not perhaps I shall never know."

"This sound. Was it high? low?—which key? Do you know music?"

The girl shook her head. "You have to wear a helmet in that section. It might have been distorted. It only lasted a second or two anyway and was very faint. Rather faint, but I don't know about key. The funny thing was it was only about once in four days. I started to keep a log of it."

"That's interesting," said Barbera. "You might let me



have that at some time." He sketched a rhomb at the north-west corner of his design, drew a firm line to complete its open side and asked briskly: "Was it a sound like the alpinates' so-called song?"

She thought. "That's why I thought it was important to record it."

"Well?"

"I thought the mosses might be related to the alpinates in plant geneology."

"Was it the same kind of sound or wasn't it?" Barbera had failed to balance the last ace on top of his carefully constructed house of cards.

"I can't tell you, can I? We're not allowed in Section 19. It's under total restriction."

"Yes," said Barbera, "you're right, of course. Thank you, Miss Haley. That's all for now."

When the door had closed behind her, Barbera resurrected and uttered a very antique obscenity. He drew a thick black line across his geometrical puzzle and scratched first in his beard, then in his pocket. "Why didn't she answer yes or no?" he said.

Sorensen saw his point. It would have made things easier certainly.

"Do you think she could have?"

"Yes," said Barbera. "Yes, I bloody well do."

### III

After the mid-day meal Barbera took the transcripts of his morning interviews and went to Sorensen's living quarters, but when the botanist looked in after dealing with some of the routine work of the base which had accumulated, he found that Barbera had fallen asleep.

Between the setting of its major sun and the rising of its minor Petra enjoyed a twilight period. These three hours were set aside for rest and recreational activities at all bases in the northern hemisphere and most of the base personnel were free of duties.

Sorensen did not feel like sleeping. He wandered instead through the deserted corridors of the base and without any

specific destination in mind used the lift to ascend to the observation dome which covered the roof of the main block.

Several other members of the base staff were scattered about the room, two playing chess, another reading, one writing a letter, one idly identifying stars in the strange sky with the aid of a revolving stellar-map set in the wall. Absorbed in their various pursuits, no one took any notice of Sorenson.

He went to the camera-obscura cubicle. This was little more than a toy set up for the amusement of the idle watcher to spy on what was going on outside without himself being seen.

Sorensen turned the lens here and there at random. So far the Petran landscape within the range of the instrument offered little variety. The road to the spaceport was straight and empty. The excavations for the new observatory and the laboratory extensions were scattered with idle robot workers and their covered equipment.

Under the shelter of the north cliff wall, work was in progress for a layout of botanical gardens where Sorensen hoped one day to collect and cultivate naturally all the various Petran flora.

This was a project dear to his heart and he let the telephoto lens linger there. In the shadowy, two-dimensional picture on the flat screen he could imagine the half-formed terraces, groves and banks filled with plants known and as yet unknown.

When the first hint of movement touched the screen, almost off the picture to the left, his first impression was of a fugitive flicker of light from the minor sun, due now to rise. Even as he swung the instrument, still without more than idle curiosity, to focus better on that part of the workings, he realised that the sun's violet aura had not yet reached the horizon.

It did so just as Sorensen located the source of animation in the dead landscape. The weird light of the Petran sub-dawn, soaking the black land to mauve, revealed two figures in the shelter of a nascent rockery.

Their pressurized suits and uniform helmets made the recognition of attitudes one for pure conjecture, but it



seemed to the botanist that they were involved in the deep resolution of some problem.

In his excitement he blew up the lens magnification too hastily and the picture blurred. Cursing, he fiddled it back into focus, but by now the two outside had also recognised the approaching dawn. They parted. One made his way back hurriedly towards the base buildings while the other was already receding out of the camera-obscura's range down the yet unplanted glades of the future botanical gardens.

As the nearer of the two loomed on the bottom of the screen and disappeared, Sorensen recognised the stoop and shamle of Kempenfeld. He tried again to swing the camera to catch the last glimpse of the gardener's dawn companion, but he had by now disappeared completely among the excavations.

Sorensen left the booth in a hurry. He almost collided with someone as he swung the door open. It was Marietess Kempenfeld and she gave a little cry and jumped to avoid him.

Sorensen went to the communications phone in the corridor and dialled the number of the duty room at the internal air-lock. He waited impatiently. It shouldn't be difficult to check who had gone out with Kempenfeld. There was no prohibition on leaving the buildings at any time although in practice few did so during the mid-day twilight, but for safety purposes no one was allowed out through the lock anyway without checking his name and his oxygen supply kit first.

"Tell me who passed through during the rest period," said Sorensen when the security officer answered his call.

"Just Mr. Kempenfeld, sir," the man replied promptly.

"You're mistaken."

"Oh, no, sir. I've been duty officer since before major sunset. I checked all the construction staff inwards at 1400. Only Mr. Kempenfeld went out about half an hour ago. He's just come back in. Do you want to speak to him? He's in the ante-room putting away his o.s. equipment."

"No," said Sorensen hastily. He would be able to confront Kempenfeld later if necessary and it might have more impact if it came as a surprise.

So many unexplained things were happening in a quiet, sinister way that he was on the verge of doubting the evidence of his own eyes.

"You know," said Barbera, "when a unit starts cracking it goes from top to bottom. Unfortunately, I've seen it a dozen times. Take this fellow Loads . . ."

Bill Loads had just left the office and Sorensen had spent an uncomfortable twenty minutes watching the bearded Expedition Leader make his closest associate look like a guilty schoolboy.

"Bill's as sound as they come," Sorensen said quietly. "I'd risk my reputation on it."

"You may have to," said Barbera with cruel candour. "That lad is concealing something."

"Probably only the fact that he didn't make adequate arrangements to keep the combination setting on the Restricted Section fully scrambled, but is that such a heinous crime?"

"It might be. I don't know. But this is more specifically what I mean." Barbera pressed the switch to rewind the tape on the recorder and when he was satisfied he picked up the interview at a selected spot.

"It seems to me that the Restricted Section would be a good place to go for a bit of privacy," his voice said, coming out of the machine.

"Yes, but it's not on open admittance. Only about six of us can use it at present." Loads. His voice sounded even more tense condensed and compressed into the black box.

"You never take anyone else in there?"

"Not without permission from Mr. Sorenson."

"Who has been in there recently other than the six admitted personnel in the register?"

The tape whirred, recording Loads' period of thought. "I can't remember the last time anyone was in there."

"Does anyone ever take any of the students on tutorials in there?"

"We started it. Then we had to stop it because one or two of the unconditioned specimens picked up human bacterial infections and were damaged.



"So Miss Haley has never been in Section 19?"

The tape had recorded no reply, but Sorensen recalled the abrupt shake of the head with which Loads' had answered the question.

"Or anywhere else in the Restricted Section?"

"No, sir."

"Then I wonder" (Barbera's voice was as soft as honey) "how she knows what sound the alpinates make."

"I don't know . . . Did she say . . .?" Again the tape, reeling gently from one spool to the other, remembered silence, Barbera's fierce eyes inviting further comment, Loads' tongue covering his lips while his eyes slid momentarily sideways to seek help from his chief before he said: "I might have mentioned it to her."

"How do you mention a sound?"

"Described it, then."

"In the line of duty or what? Is Miss Haley a personal friend?"

"There are eighty-two people on this base." Loads' voice had gone up a note or two. "We all see a lot of each other. Miss Haley and I are botanists. We discuss our work. Naturally we do. The singing flowers are one of the most striking specimens we've ever worked on."

"I see you have a preference for the romantic terminology of your chief."

Barbera stopped the tape. "When you consider it," he said, "you begin to wonder why Miss Haley didn't think to mention to us how she acquired her musical education."

The obvious line which Barbera was pursuing might have made Sorensen laugh on a different occasion, but he had just thought of something. He leaned forward and set the machine off again, winding the tape on at high speed while the distorted voices of Barbera and Loads gabbled through the rest of the interview in ludicrous squawks and tweets. When there was only a foot or two of the tape remaining he cut it back to its normal speed and to Loads' voice saying: . . . "I heard about it. It wasn't anything serious. Tempers get ragged sometimes. It's being cooped up so close together. Even the most thorough space-ethic training can't eliminate human failings."

"You didn't report it to Mr. Sorensen."

"No, sir. Doc Rolf said to leave it to him."

"Ah, yes. Well, I think that's all for the moment, Mr. Loads. I think I'd like to interview Mr. Hansen now. Can you ask him to come up?"

"I don't know whether he'll be around," Loads had said. "He went over to Spaceport to freight out some of his belongings to Gysomon."

"That's it," said Sorensen, switching off the recorder. "I didn't check the vehicle port. It must have been him. It must have been Hansen."

"Will you do me the courtesy of explaining?" said Barbera. Sorensen repeated what he had overseen from the camera-obscura an hour before.

"Hansen and Kempenfeld again, eh? Not exchanging blows this time. But why out there in the dark?" Barbera began to draw another design. Sorensen would need a fresh pad if the investigation continued much longer.

"Perhaps . . ." Sorensen stopped abruptly.

"Yes, you're probably right." Barbara did not need the rest of thought to be expressed. In fact he seemed to have anticipated it. "They were agreeing their story to protect the unity of the team and conceal the truth about their quarrel."

"Let's see what they have to say," said Sorensen without enthusiasm in his voice.

"Which doubtless had our charming revert at the back of it," said Barbera.

"Eh?" The two men had been following different lines of thought, but it took Sorensen only a second to realise what Barbera was still driving at. "Oh, no!" he cried in protest. "Kempenfeld is a grandfather."

Barbera's eyes were cold. "Nothing so crude," he said icily. "You misinterpret me. If I must explain every thought in detail I think that Hansen and Loads have been conspiring to use the Restricted Section for" (he selected the word with exaggerated care) "private purposes. Kempenfeld found out and tried to stop it."

"What private purposes?" asked Sorensen.

"Do you remember what the first hint of instability at this base was?" Barbera seemed to be asking the question not so much of Sorensen as of himself. The botanist did



not understand anyway, but before he could say so Barbera had hurried on.

"What caused the fight at the spaceport? No! Don't put on that air of injured dignity. It mattered! It mattered because whatever lies have been told about it you and I know that it was over or about that girl of Kempenfeld's. Who were in the fight? Loads and Hansen. Two perfectly good frontier workers subverted by the most primitive emotion we've dragged with us out of Solar."

"But . . ."

"Loads with Haley and Hansen with that Kempenfeld brat! Don't you see, Sorensen? I know that you've been on the frontier so long you probably have forgotten everything you ever knew about it, but when people are afflicted by that they want to be alone. And when they're alone they kiss! They put their mouths together." Barbera thumped the table. "Now where is the only damned place you can get out of sight of everyone else on this base and play at loving? The alpine section where you can safely take off your helmet and space suit."

"With all respect to your logic," said Sorensen, "you haven't got a shred of evidence to support that theory. And even if you're right the sudden collapse of the singing flowers remains unexplained. A kiss is a kiss and whatever other biological function your suspects may have been experimenting with is still not explosive enough to have destroyed them like that. They were put out much too fast and too devastatingly."

"Yes, yes, you're right." Barbera got up and walked to the window. "But if we can establish that there was a good deal of traffic other than that which met the eye in Section 19 we shall come a little nearer to isolating the culprit."

"Let's get Hansen's and Kempenfeld's stories," said Sorensen.

Barbera sighed. "Too late, of course, but we'll see what they have to say."

What the nutritionist and the gardener did have to say manifested itself as a careful pact, even more obvious when seen in transcript.

As well as cutting a tape, the recorder simultaneously converted speech into a visual shorthand record on a

separate reel. In the evening, while Barbera broke off his interviews to get a meal and some sleep in Sorenson's room, the botanist took the transcripts and locked himself in his laboratory to study them.

As Barbera had foreseen, it had been too late. The versions of the disagreement leading to the fight were now identical, bringing airtight hatches down over the real cause.

The conspiracy, if such it was, had even held out against Sorensen's unexpected questions about the dawn meeting he had overseen. They had guessed that someone might have seen them there and admitted it cheerfully. Kempenfeld had been restless and had taken a walk among the gardens to see how the construction was getting on. Hansen had been on his way to the spaceport and, seeing a figure in the gardens, had stopped to investigate. It all interlocked perfectly.

Where Barbera had made some inroads into the barrier of silence was in a sharp exchange with Hansen, provoked by a deliberately crude reference to his championing of the gardener's granddaughter in the earlier spaceport episode.

Sorensen read through the dots and curves with as much apprehension as though they might have been capable of recreating themselves in voices once more darkened by anger.

"... space acrobats. Nothing to worry about except the next sleep between planets. Corrupt as hell most of them. How can you avoid it, living more in dreams than reality? Smuggling, looking for a woman before the hatch closes again, inventing stories about places that never even existed."

"But you seem to like their company. I understand that you get out there quite a lot. You know a few of them intimately?"

"I have a few friends there. It doesn't make me respect their profession."

"You even risked your job to fight one."

"He said something disgusting. . . ."

"About Marietess Kempenfeld?"

"That's right."



"What was it."

Hansen told him. The shorthand almost flowed together. He had been getting angry, talking rapidly.

"Now," said the Expedition Leader, "you hit him because it was true and you resented it, or because he was lying?"

"I hit him because Marietess has grown up here. We all know her . . ."

"Some better than others, I suppose?"

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"Don't you?"

"Perhaps you'll explain it to me, sir."

"Do you think . . . damn it!" The symbols darkened noticeably and overlaid one another as the two men lost their tempers. Barbera had been shouting: "Do you imagine you deceive me? You have been using the Restricted Section to meet that girl. I don't think it could have been her honour you were defending at the space-port."

"I have never taken her to or met her in the Restricted Section."

"Or anywhere else?"

"I can't go on with this, sir."

"Aha!"

"It's damned impudent to . . ."

"Forget it," snapped Barbera. "I imagine I can understand your rather obvious indignation. Now, since we are denying things at the rate of ten per second I suppose I may take it that you deny any knowledge of the reason for the insecurity of the combination lock on the Restricted Section door?"

"It could have been coincidence."

"But you did know that it was insecure?"

"Bill Loads mentioned it to me and asked me to make sure if I unscrambled it to scramble it again afterwards."

"You would agree that if you or Mr. Loads or any of the others wanted to slip in quickly or allow someone else to do so without attracting too much attention and without giving away the full combination the simplest way would be to descramble three tumblers and leave only one to manipulate?"

"It would be simple."

“Good. Can you think of anyone Mr. Loads might have been interested in meeting in Section 19.”

Jagged symbols of laughter danced up and down the tape. “Who—Bill? I hope not. I mean, no. No. Maybe half a dozen Petran troglodytes if such things existed. They would mean more to him than twenty women.”

“You don’t think he might have been interested in instructing Miss Haley there?”

The tape could not record Hansen’s grin of satisfaction, but Sorensen remembered it. “Sir, I don’t see how this helps. . . .”

“You aren’t the only one in the team to tell me that, but just now I am exploring not so much ‘who?’ as ‘how?’ or even ‘why?’ After I get that straight maybe the ‘who?’ will surrender without a struggle. I’ll put it to you bluntly. Do you think or know there is any affair between Loads and Haley?”

“There would be if Portia could help it,” said Hansen, “but Bill Loads is a ‘total’. He soaked up the frontier training like a sponge. If she put up her mouth for a kiss he’d start calculating what effect on atmospheric temperature the labial friction might have.”

“And you, Mr. Hansen; did you soak up the space ethic as well? Now that we are calmer I shall revert to our little exchange about Miss Kempenfeld. I suggest to you that you have an affair with this girl, that you have been using the Restricted Section to meet her and that her grandfather objected and was provoked into attacking you by your insolence . . .”

“You’ve heard the old man’s story,” Hansen said with a shrug. “If you don’t believe him perhaps Marietess can convince you.”

Through the night Sorensen read on, sleepless and uneasy. Marietess had been called up from the administration office where she was learning to feed one of the Series I computers. Sorensen had given her a job there to provide her with something to do on Petra when her schooling finished. Hers was the next voice on the tape.

“I know I’m not like some of the other girls. I wouldn’t want to be. They aren’t women. I’m like Portia Haley. I shan’t stay here.”



"What is your ambition—to leave with Knut Hansen when he goes to Gysomon?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't try to deceive me." The snarl in Barbera's voice crackled over the tape in thick, dark symbols. "Hansen has already admitted what you have done together in the Restricted Section out of sight of your grandfather."

It was a daring lie, but it didn't succeed. The girl just shook her head quite calmly. "I've never been in the Restricted Section. Not with anyone."

Sorensen tracked back over the tape and read the interlude several times. He couldn't help thinking that Marietess's reaction had been far too sober. It looked as though the question had been foreseen and prepared for.

"Did you know that your grandfather and Hansen had had a fight?"

"I didn't think it was a fight. I knew Grandad hit him."

"You haven't any idea why, of course?"

"Grandad's getting old. He loses his temper sometimes. Didn't he tell you why?"

Barbera had avoided the question and continued with something else, but the girl had a natural poise and insolence probably backed up (Sorensen thought) by thorough rehearsal. The Expedition Leader could not shake it.

Towards the end of the tape there was a mysterious, untranslatable scoring. Sorensen puzzled over this for a long time, wondering whether something had gone wrong with the machine. Curious, and determined to let nothing pass, he went down to the administration offices and fed the tape back. He was rewarded by a shattering sneeze. Then he remembered that Marietess was the victim of a bad cold. He recalled that Rolf had treated her for it.

He took the transcript back to the laboratory. It ended where Barbera's interrogation of Dr. Rolf began and in the end Sorensen flung it from him impatiently. He could find no flaw in the tissue of half-truths, concealments and lies. While Barbera slept peacefully upstairs, the senior botanist continued to struggle with his own thoughts.

What am I really trying to prove? Sorensen thought.

That it was none of my people caused the death of the singing flowers?

He got up to pace uneasily round the laboratory. What had Portia said about that random sound? And it was four days later, wasn't it, when the murder occurred. Four days. His weary mind refused the task of further correlation and comparison.

He stared out of the window. Briefly, like the end of a thought expiring, a rocket ship arched into the sky from the spaceport and disappeared to become another pinprick of light among the fading stars.

Sorensen remained staring at it, feeling himself on the point of a revelation, but his mind refused the final effort.

Sitting in the chair he slept for a while himself, but was aroused rudely by a shout from Barbera. The botanist leapt out of his seat and was mortified to see that the Expedition Leader was not there in person, but only as an image on the visorphone. He looked refreshed and perhaps more aggressively cheerful than ever. "Sorensen, radio Spaceport and tell them I wish to leave in one hour for Habek."

Not fully comprehending, Sorensen's hand groped for the radio-telephone. Barbera roared with laughter. He was in high good humour.

"Since I see you haven't slept and you're too tired to flatter me by asking the right questions, I'll come down and see you."

"Yes, sir," said Sorensen.

When Barbera had faded from the screen he got a sleepy operator to connect him with the spaceport controller. "Have the E.L.'s coaster out and crewed up ready to leave in an hour," he snapped.

"Investigation all over then, sir?"

"He hasn't told me yet," snapped the botanist, "but I guess he must have something up his sleeve or he wouldn't have tried to catch us all in our pyjamas."

"Incidentally, sir, I didn't tell you before because it was rather early and I didn't think it was important . . ."

"What wasn't?"

"Well, one of your staff freighted out a package today. He didn't have a clearance. He said it would be okay, but



you were tied up talking to the E.L. and he would get your signature on the docket and send it back right away. But he left the papers out here."

"Oh, damn"—leave it for now," said Sorensen. "Call me back later." He had just heard the outer door open. Barbera strode in, dressed for travelling.

"Well," he cried heartily, "since you've been up nearly all night I suppose you've beaten me to the answers after all."

Sorensen would have liked to be able to say yes. He knew how much this would have spoiled Barbera's enjoyment, but he had to shake his head wearily.

"As a consolation to you, I must say that you provided me with the necessary spark of inspiration which led me to a solution. Perhaps I ought to say the most likely solution, because I don't think you'll ever know for certain."

"Ah?" murmured Sorensen.

"A kiss, you said, is not explosive enough in bacterial content to have destroyed the singing flowers. One of those rather colourful turns of phrase in which you excel. It lodged in my mind."

"Then," Barbera continued, "I was re-reading the transcripts in my room and I got on to the interview we had with that old bore Rolf. His psycho-somatic theories, and rambling on about the treatments he'd had to hand out in the last fortnight for headaches, cuts, black eyes and for a cold. A common cold, Sorensen! The undefeated parasite we have dragged all over the universe with us. And what is one of the symptoms of a cold? The sneeze! A bacterial explosion of violent intensity! You won't deny that.

"There is your solution. Whom did Rolf treat for a cold only a day or two before your mysterious murder?"

"Marietess," said Sorensen. "But how would she have come to be there? She certainly wouldn't have tried to meet anyone there on the same night her grandfather was doing an inspection."

"Exactly," said Barbera. "But it was Kempenfeld himself who was taking her there.

"You see, he couldn't trust himself to leave her alone in the living quarters at night after he'd found out about

her and Hansen. So when it was his turn for night inspection he started to take her along with him.

"Probably she used to be left in one of the less glamorous sections reading those awful magazines or listening to her portotape with that dreary music the spacers will smuggle in for her. No doubt the alien sounds Miss Haley heard at four day intervals came from that and not from any delicate specimens of yours, since I see that the duty roll made Kempenfeld night check every fourth day."

Sorensen gripped the arms of his chair.

"But this is a young lady easily bored," Barbera went on. "While Kempenfeld was making his rounds she strayed in search of adventure. This took her into Section 19 at last. Having heard the stories about the alpinates she was foolish enough to remove her helmet. She was overcome by an attack of sneezing. Bacterial explosions, Sorensen! By the time her grandfather got back the place was teeming with dangerous microbes."

Sorensen tried to keep calm. The theory became more plausible with every word, yet in the forefront of his mind, alerted now by a fresh, disturbing thought, there burned the solitary question-mark of a rocket ship's track curving up into the night sky.

Then Barbera dropped his bombshell. With a wide smile he said softly. "You are possibly about to say 'circumstantial evidence' and dismiss my case. At my own invitation Miss Kempenfeld paid me a visit during the early hours of this morning while her grandfather was asleep. She turns out to be quite a charming little thing when you get her by herself. She had a confession to make and, I suspect, she wanted to turn the heat off Hansen. She confirmed and amplified my theories."

"I see," said Sorensen. "She would."

But the Expedition Leader missed the irony in the remark. "What unusual creatures these reverts are," he mused. "So open to a little kindness; so excitable. It was all in the line of duty, of course."

Sorensen looked at him in disbelief. It seemed monstrous. Perhaps he imagined it, but did Barbera have just the hint of a cold himself?

"Well," said Barbera, "I leave you to clear up the matter



now. Thank heaven it was only carelessness and nothing more serious. Get rid of these reverts, my boy, and you'll still have your basic team intact and ready to work undisturbed."

Sorensen felt a fleeting contempt. After all, a pretty face was the oldest trick in this or any other world.

When the Expedition Leader had gone he picked up the radiophone and called Spaceport again. It required only a few curt questions and their answers to settle the matter. "Radio the captain of that ship," he ordered. "Order him to put in at the nearest station and have that package transferred back to me as fast as he can."

Then he telephoned the base security officer and had Hansen put under arrest.

#### IV

Under carefully controlled conditions, Sorensen opened up the insulated case and the curious, unharmonic music of the singing flowers escaped and filled the Section. Eight good, healthy specimens had been sealed in the case with the portotape player which had formerly belonged to Marietess. They looked no worse for their trip into space and back.

"With your ingenious re-wind and playback device I think they might well have survived the trip to Solar," said Sorensen.

Hansen gave a grin. "They would have made quite an investment for me and Marietess if they had really captured the market. How did Barbera finally realise what we were doing? I thought we were clear when he soaked up that story of Marie's and left looking so pleased with himself."

"He still believes it," said Sorensen. "It will be my pleasure to disillusion him. He's so damned arrogant and persuasive that he almost convinced me too. But right up to the end I kept on believing that something I had seen or heard and which had registered subconsciously would reveal the plot if only I could hit on it again.

"I nearly failed. I was so weary after sitting up all night that the thing wouldn't stick far enough out of my mind

for me to grab it. It was that rocket ship I happened to see blasting off. You had told Loads that you were going to Spaceport to see about freighting some of your personal equipment out to Gysomon. But then I remembered that the Gysomon freighter runs tomorrow. Today's shot is the long one for Solar.

"And still I couldn't see why. Then Barbera came in and started bragging about his neat solution which, he didn't realise, had been tailored for him by you and Marietess. He made some remark about the sort of music Marietess liked and the spacers smuggling it to her and immediately I saw how it could have happened, why, and how you had involved the old man to confuse us and provide cover for you.

"Marietess had been using her porto-tape player to pass the time while her grandfather had kept her in the Restricted Section with him. She knew about your nutrition theories and being a sprightly young lady she probably noticed that when she was using the porto-tape in the vicinity of Section 19 her music had a strange effect on the singing flowers. Let us say that it was an effect which manifested itself in them to the extent of stimulating an extra production of notes every day when she had been there. These, I believe, were what Portia Haley identified and I also heard them once for myself.

"You followed her observations up and discovered that the flowers could in fact be stimulated by small doses of the relatively complicated harmonics of human music and you hit upon a novel way of freighting them out from Petra to make a fortune for yourself.

"At the same time you undoubtedly saw a cunning means of forcing Kempfenfeld to help you while concealing from him the thing you were really working for.

"You worked secretly to perfect a container and when you were ready you removed the plants you wanted—the healthiest, most robust specimens—when you were in Section 19 on your routine work. You knew Kempfenfeld would be bringing Marietess into the Section after you had left that night and you arranged that she should take the porto-tape straight into 19 and leave it full on while Kempfenfeld was working through the other houses. Half



an hour of that was enough. The singing flowers were destroyed by the time Kempenfeld rushed in; stimulated out of existence. The missing specimens went unnoticed among the carnage and you suggested to Kempenfeld, who was probably out of his mind with what might happen to Marie if her supposed carelessness and his breaking of the rules were discovered—you suggested, I say, that the best thing he could do would be to get rid of the murder weapon.

“You offered to help him by getting one of your spacer cronies to smuggle out the porto-tape player and Kempenfeld brought it out to you and handed it over in the excavations during the rest period.

“You already had your container souped-up to ensure the specimens arriving in perfect condition and all you had to do was fit the porto-tape into the box with the prepared feed music when you were safely out of sight of base and on your way to Spaceport.

“You had already got Marietess to fix some faked papers for you in the administration department to clear Control and freight the box out to Solar. After you’d seen the case safely loaded you got an unexpected call at the field. Marietess had seen me coming out of the camera-obscurer booth and had guessed I had seen you meet her grandfather. In your haste to get back here and fix up a watertight story for Kempenfeld you forgot to bring away the clearance papers.

“Somebody got alarmed at Spaceport Control and when I radioed them—about something else as it happened—they tried to get a posthumous, verbal okay.”

“Heads will fall everywhere,” said Hansen wryly.

“Others will spring up to take their place,” said Sorensen. “That is a law of creation we have found everywhere we have set foot.”

He raised the lid of the container once more and both men listened intently, each with his very different emotions, to the syren’s discordant song.

—ROBERT WELLS

# MORIARTY

by Philip Wordley

I managed to get the gelignite packed into the lock this time before she showed up. She's slipped at last, I thought. But before I could wire up the charge, there she was—Moriarty. One hundred and seventy-five self-assured pounds of blonde beaming efficient Los Angeles policewoman. She leaned easily against the safe door and fixed her big reproachful eyes on me. "Not again, Wilkie!" she murmured in a sort of resigned bellow. "Surely you know by now you can't get away with it." And she wagged a baton-sized finger at me reprovingly. "Hope springs eternal," I told her. I wasn't even surprised to see her. It had happened too often.

"I know I boobed when I chose the one city in this big, big country to have a telepathic cop who can think herself from place to place. But I keep trying. Sometime—just once, that's all I ask—you're going to be tied up on a case somewhere, and then I'll have made it. I'll skip town with the takings and you'll never see me again."

"I'd follow you, you know," she said. "I can trace your mind wherever you go. But I don't want that to happen. I don't want you to start a life of crime." And she gazed deep and worriedly into my eyes. I pulled my mask up. I couldn't stand that look. It made me feel like a small boy.

"But why not, for gosh sakes?" I asked her. "You're a cop, not an angel of mercy. Why don't you let me do a job and pick me up with the goods, 'stead of just tantalizing me? This cat-and-mouse game's driving me nuts."

She came over and pulled down my mask. I let her. She outweighed me, and I knew it wasn't padding on those fore-arms. She gave me the big gaze routine again, and I squirmed like a sun-struck worm. "Because," she said in that vibrant voice that had given me nightmares since I hit L.A., "because I happen to like you, Wilkie, and I think there's better things in store for you than jail. You could make something of yourself, something to be proud



of—something other people could be proud of.” And she paused, and gave me a deep, deep look. “I know you’ve led a straight life up to now, even though you’ve not made the big league in anything, and I want to keep it that way. That’s why I’m not giving up on you, Wilkie. I’m going to block you at every turn, be always that one step ahead of you, till you give up out of sheer frustration.”

“Then what?” I said. “So I get frustrated here. So I blow town and go to another one that hasn’t got psychic cops with mother-hen fixations.”

“You could, I guess,” she said, and so help me, she looked worried. “But I hope to get to you before that happens, and show you how fine a thing it is to walk tall in your own eyes and in the eyes of others as well.”

“One thing you have done, at least,” I said. “You’ve shown me you’re different from any other cop I’ve ever known, even without the science-fiction bit.”

“You’re lucky,” she said. “If I’d been any other cop you’d have been in the pen long before now.”

“If you’d been any other cop,” I pointed out, “you’d never have got near me. I would have been way off, and a sight richer.”

“There is that,” she said thoughtfully. “You’re good, all right, I’ll give you that. The way you got into the strong room of that bank on 23rd Street—if I didn’t know. I’d swear you could teleport too.” I must have looked blank, for she went on. “Teleport—you know, thinking yourself where you want to be, same as I do.”

“Oh!” I said. “No, Moriarty dear, I don’t need tricks like that. Like you say, I’m good, but good. So why can’t you let me *do* something with that talent?”

“Because if I did, I’d be compounding a felony, and besides I’d have to take you in,” she said unhappily. “And my name’s Jane.” And she gave me a soulful look of sad tenderness, that should have looked all wrong with her build. It didn’t, and I caught myself wondering why.

“You don’t have to wonder,” she said in a small voice. “If you think for a moment of something besides that safe you’ll know why.”

I thought, and I knew, and it hit me like a city block fell on me. “It wouldn’t work,” I said when I could say

anything. "Would-be safe-artists and woman cops just don't go together." She looked at me.

"I know," she said. "I'm big, and I'm fat, and I'm ugly. You don't have to tell me."

"For once you read me wrong," I said. "You're big, all right, but the other things just aren't so. You're all woman, Mor—Jane, and if you weren't a cop and I weren't what I am, we could go places. But the way things are, it's no use. Besides a wife, or even a girl, doesn't fit into what I've got planned."

"Well," she said miserably. "There it is, I guess. But I'm still not about to let you spoil yourself. Not in my town anyway."

I tore my mind from what suddenly didn't seem so bad. "Jane," I said, "how come you're an ordinary cop? With your gifts, you could make Sherlock and Matt Holbrook look like high-school kids."

"I'm happy the way I am," she said. "My beat's nicely sewn up; everyone on it knows better than to try anything. That sector of town's real quiet, and that's all my superiors want. If they knew what I could really do, I wouldn't be one of them any more. There'd be no limit for me, I know; but the old friendliness would go forever. Imagine the way the precinct boys would feel wherever I went if they knew their thoughts weren't private."

"I know," I said, "and I'm still friendly."

"You're different," she said. "No, I prefer it this way."

"And you think *I'm* wasting myself," I said. "Jane, you're a nut."

"Nut yourself," she said. "I've kept *you* quiet."

"Suppose I were to shoot you," I said in my best hoodlum voice, "I could take this whole town." "You wouldn't," she said, "and I know you don't have a gun." "Okay, Jane," I said wearily. "That's me through for the evening. What d'you want me to do now?"

"Remove that gelignite from the lock first," she said, business-like again, "then I've something else to ask you."

This was something I'd never come up against. I'd never got so far as to put in the jelly before, and when its in, the only way it is got out is by the time-honoured way of blowing it out. That's the point of putting it in.



"How do I do that, without blowing the safe?" I said. "It's packed tight, and if I scrape it out it might blow just for the fun of it."

"Suck it out then," she said. I stared at her, but you don't argue with Moriarty when she's being a cop. I sucked.

I went on sucking till my eyes weren't seeing straight and my knees were interlacing, but finally I'd got it all out, and staggered away from the safe.

"You all right, Wilkie?" she said, all concern, and laid a hand like a steam hammer gently between my shoulder-blades. Have you ever swallowed gelignite? It's not nice.

"Well," I said, fifteen minutes later, when I'd decided I wasn't going to die. "You said you'd got something else to ask me."

"Yes, Wilkie," she said in a careful sort of voice. "I want you to rob a bank for me."

"This stuff's gone to my head a bit," I said. "For a moment there I thought you said you wanted me to rob a bank." "I did," she said.

I said nothing at all. It was like swallowing the gelignite again, only this time it felt like it had exploded. I started my brain going again with an effort, and what I thought drew Moriarty to her full height, with her considerable frame quivering with indignation. She looked quite spectacular; but I wasn't so concerned with that at the moment.

"Don't you dare even think that, you—you criminal?" she hissed.

"You should know me better than to imagine I was saving you from a jail sentence just to feather my own nest."

"What d'you expect me to think?" I snapped. I was shocked and disillusioned more than I had ever been. So this was the real Moriarty. The Moriarty I thought I knew, and was getting to—but never mind that.

She sat down on the desk, and suddenly looked very small and defenceless. "Yes, I guess you would think that," she said. "I keep forgetting you can't read minds."

"Are you trying to tell me you have some *honest* motive for this?" I said more gently this time. I'd never seen her this way before, and it did things to me.

"Of course I am, you jerk," she yelled, and she was the old Moriarty again, shoulders square and eyes shooting blue sparks. "So listen to me, and don't interrupt. You owe me a favour or two, and what I want you to do isn't just for me, it's for a whole lot of folks who'll wind up broke if you don't help."

I sat down to listen. "This had better be good, Jane." I said. Good? It was a honey, even for Moriarty.

"Have you ever heard of Bosie Schneider?" she asked.

"Sure I've heard of him," I said, "a smart operator, but a bit on the crude side. You'd need a sten-gun squad to handle his mob. You're not asking me to tangle with him?"

"As if I would," she said. "I just want you to beat him on a job."

"Why don't you ask me to do something safe, like crossing the freeway blindfolded on stilts?" I asked.

"Schneider would put so much lead into me they'd need a truck to carry my coffin. No, thank you, Moriarty—not even for you."

"Now just listen," she said, very patiently. "The way I've got this worked out, you and Schneider won't even meet. It's like this. Bosie's coming to town the day after tomorrow. I know that, same as I know what he intends to do, because men like Bosie have strong, simple thoughts with no trimmings. They're beauties to read, a telepath's dream. Well, when he and his boys get here, they're going to move in on the First National Bank a few minutes after opening on Friday and take the vaults for all they've got. They've no fancy plans. They've got enough artillery to stop a quad of Marines, and that's the way Bosie likes to do business. It's not subtle, but his lawyers are, and no State has ever managed to peg him yet."

She took a deep breath. "I want Bosie. I'm not concerned with getting the bouquets for it, just the personal satisfaction of knowing it was me."

"So where do I come in?" I said. "You know what he's going to do, and when. Why——?"

"Why don't I alert the whole police department, and let them take him in the act? Think with the brain, Wilkie. What cop in his right mind's going to believe I can read



minds? They'll know I've had no tip-off because people just don't squeal on Bosie.

"So they'll just figure I've gone mushy in the head. And if they don't—if they take me seriously——." She stopped.

"I get it," I said. "They'll find out your secret and that's what you don't want. But I still don't see where I fit in."

"Like this," she said. "Bosie's set for Friday morning. So you hit the vaults Thursday evening, and we stack the proceeds somewhere safe. The bank staff has to know nothing of this. That's important."

"It usually is," I said. "Shut up," she said. "Well, come Friday, you're waiting in the 'phone booth across the street from the bank just before nine. About two minutes after nine, Bosie and his babies will move in—front door of course, nothing else for Bosie. They'll show the staff their arms supply, and that'll keep anyone quiet and attentive. It will take two minutes from entering the bank to reaching the strong-room. That's when I want you to use that 'phone—two minutes after you've seen them go in. You ring the precinct, and there should be a dozen cars there inside another two minutes. Well, as you pick up the 'phone Bosie's lads are in the vault. They will have the keys, so it will take about 30 seconds to find that the strong-box is empty. They'll report this to Bosie upstairs, and he'll start asking around for the money. He'll never believe they're just as surprised as he is. He'll simply think they've had a secret strongroom installed since the last plans were drawn. They'll keep him stalled for at least five minutes till he realises they're telling the truth. By then it will be too late. We'll have the place surrounded."

I just sat and looked at her in wonder. "Moriarty," I said, "even I think you're marvellous, and I thought nothing would surprise me about you now. It can't go wrong." And I leaned over and kissed her cheek. She went scarlet, said "Oh! Wilkie!" and vanished. Pete knows where she went; but as I left the building I heard a massive scream of brakes as traffic piled up about three blocks away, and I wondered.

\* \* \*

Michelangelo had his Sistine Chapel, Botticelli had his Birth of Venus, Lincoln had his Gettysburg Address and I

had the First National Bank. It was like that. A thing of poetry, a miracle of co-ordinated hand and eye, a moment of perfection that would never come again, every dog's day rolled into one. From the entry into the bank (don't ask me how I did it, that's a trade secret) to the second when the strongbox door blew as softly as a mouse in sneakers, it was beauty itself. And even then, when I had achieved my dream, it was not so beautiful as the million-and-a-half dollars in Treasury bills that lay before me. I, Wilkins Alexander Cornell, had pulled off the greatest single-handed bank haul in history. Then Moriarty came very quietly out of the corner where she had stood for I don't know how long, and I came to earth. No moment lasts for ever. She stood beside me, and we gazed with reverence on the loot. "I never thought I'd ever appreciate the work of a safe-breaker," she said softly, "but there's art in every field. You're the king, Wilkie." And there were real tears in her eyes. "Come on, Jane," I said. "Let's get this stuff locked up somewhere before I weaken."

Very reluctantly, we stowed the whole lovely lot in the receptacle Moriarty had teleported with her. It looked like a coffin, and that's what it was.

"Where are you putting this?" I asked her. "In the Parkside Cemetery?"

"My dad's a coffin-maker for a funeral parlour," she said rather defiantly, as if daring me to laugh. "He's got a stack of these in his attic. This will be safe there."

"Why this one in particular?" I asked. She gave me the look again. "He's saving this one for himself," she said.

We spent a few more minutes there. There's few places more private than a bank strongroom at midnight with the alarm system shorted out.

Then, "I'll have to go," she said. "See you tomorrow around nine."

"Jane," I said, "keep away, please. Let the other cops handle it. There's bound to be shooting."

She squeezed my hand. I'm glad she did it after I'd done the strongroom job, not before. "Don't worry about me, Wilkie," she said, "I'm not about to die. Not now." Then she put her hands on either side of the coffin as if she was going to lift it. And I was alone in the vault.



I put everything together again, connected up the alarm system (another trade secret) and left. It was a cloudy night, and tomorrow could be wet, besides everything else; I went back to my apartment, and dreamed fitfully of packs of wolves with sten-guns chasing big blonde policewomen in grass skirts through a forest of coffins. Fitfully is the right word.

\* \* \*

Friday was wet, all right. By the time I made the 'phone booth I looked like something a drowned rat would pity. It's all right for Moriarty, I thought. She could have thought herself here and turned up dry and smiling. I wished she would. Not that there'd have been room in the booth. But it would be worth standing in the rain to know just where she was when the guns started popping.

At nine prompt a junior teller came and opened the bank doors. At 9.02 a black sedan the size of a bus pulled up in front of the doors, and they all piled out and went in. It looked like there were fifty of them from where I stood, but there couldn't really have been more than a dozen.

Two minutes is a heck of a time when you're watching the sweep hand of a watch pace them out. They'd be in the vaults and out now, surely. Still, Moriarty had said two minutes, and I didn't think she'd have goofed. At 9.04 I picked up the phone. Slowly, that is, because there was a guy at the wheel of the car and another one propping the bank wall up. I lifted the phone to my face but slowly, and dialled the cops. Nothing happened. The phone was dead.

Then I saw the trodden notice in the puddle outside the booth window. It said, "Out of Order".

Things went blank. I guess I stood there like I'd frozen to death. It couldn't happen. It shouldn't happen. It had happened. Everyone in that bank was a dead duck if Bosie got mad and turned his boys loose to find where the money was. And no-one would know, and they could die for not knowing.

This is the end of my dream, I thought.

This is where nightmare sets in. Then I looked out of

the window and saw Moriarty come walking down the street, and the whole world caved in.

I couldn't yell. I couldn't move. I just watched as she approached the bank. What was she doing here? Then I realized. She was all woman, but she was all cop, too. She was expecting the cars to get here at the second she did, and she wanted to see Bosie's face when they nailed him.

As though I was dreaming, I saw Moriarty slow down, falter in her stride. She'd realised something was wrong. Go back, Jane! I yelled but without any sound. There's still time. Turn round slowly and beat it.

The guy by the wall mustn't have had any mind at all. If he had she didn't read it. He just grabbed her as she drew level, and bundled her through the door. There was an awful silence.

At least, I thought, they haven't shot her. Yet.

Without realising I'd moved, I was out of the 'phone booth and halfway across the street. Nothing was in my mind but Moriarty. Nothing about the small army in the bank and the hood in the car. Just Moriarty; where she was I was going to be, and nothing was going to stop me.

The man at the wheel didn't even try. In a kind of daze I saw his face gaping up unbelievably as I pushed open the glass door of the bank. Maybe he figured one more in there would make little difference, and if I was nuts enough to be that one, then what the heck.

Inside it was like a still from a movie. The frozen figures of the tellers backed against the wall with hands raised, the goons with the artillery in various menacing positions, one guy by the entrance to the vaults with his mouth open, a big guy with a scarred pan who had the manager by the throat and appeared to have been making an enquiry—and Moriarty. She was stiller than any of them. In the split second before my entry really produced any action, I saw her slumped on the floor with a lump on her forehead the size of a walnut. She hadn't had time to teleport.

They started to move. The muzzle of a tommy-gun started to swing in my direction. I didn't care. I felt no fear, no uncertainty, nothing but a black, blind rage that tore at my heart and stiffened every muscle. I wished for one



thing alone. I wished that all their guns were gone ; then it would be just them against me. I willed them to drop their guns harder than I'd ever willed anything to happen.

That was when the fun started. There was a bluish blur and a crash that went off in the hush like a forty-five gun salute. And there they stood, the whole bunch nursing skinned knuckles and strained wrists after some power from outside man's understanding had ripped their arsenal from their hands and slung it through a half-inch plate window.

The silence had been dead before ; now it was ghastly. Everyone did nothing very very quietly. Then the hoods began to come round ; but by that time I'd got the message. It couldn't have been Moriarty. She was still out. Therefore it must have been me. I was more Moriarty's type than either of us had realised.

Telekinesis, she called it later. The power to move objects from here to there by telepathy and mammoth concentration. All that was so much duck fodder to me then. All I knew, or had to know, was that somehow I could make things happen by thinking them so. It was round about then that I started to enjoy myself.

Bosie and the boys made their play. They rushed me, and I stood stock-still and slammed them back against the counter. They went white and three of them fainted. The rest came on again, and a table from the far wall slid across the floor and mowed them down. The jerk who'd come from the vaults made his move a bit late. I back pedalled him hard against the nearest wall, then dropped the President's picture on him from twelve feet up. It was a big picture, and he slept.

That left three in the fight, and already one of the tellers had quit his trance and was calling the cops. The others were cheering, of all the crazy things, and as the three came at me mouthing unpleasant opinions, I looked out of the corner of my eye, and there was Moriarty, sitting up groggily. I flashed her a quick 'I love you', then hood number one tried to knife me.

He got himself in the foot. Most painful.

Hood number two arrived, and I caught him with a right

that owed absolutely nothing to telekinesis. Did the trick though. Then there was just me and Bosie Schneider.

He was something else, was that guy. He thought fast. Two chairs came at him from either side, and he dodged them and kept coming. There was something in his eyes I didn't like. I launched an inkwell from forty feet away, and it exploded over his head like a .38 shell and showered over his puss. He didn't care for that, I could tell, but still he kept coming. I knew then that I'd have to pull out all the stops if I wanted to be around at my wedding.

I'd no idea just how many ledgers there were lying about in a bank. I found out. There's a lot, and they all took off at once, like a flight of dusty buzzards. Bosie looked up at them and we both stood dead still and watched them as they congregated up close to the ceiling in a solid mass. Bosie tried to move. I held him there, and that wasn't hard because he was rooted with terror, anyway, and his nerve had gone.

Then they came down like the angel on the last day only faster. Too fast for me to realise I was too close to Bosie. Then I realised——

When the green flamingos finally quit flying through a yellow sky in bomber formation I was lying cradled in Moriarty's great, cosy arms and the Precinct boys were carting out the wreckage of Bosie and his mob.

"Oh Wilkie, darling!" she was laughing and sobbing at once. "So you're one too! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know myself," I said, getting a bit closer. "A man in love can do miracles, it seems."

I don't suppose you've ever been kissed with emotion, zeal and passion by a hundred-and-seventy-five pound police officer in full uniform. Try it some time. But find your own police officer. This one's mine.

"Tell me, Moriarty," I said a few weeks later. "Why did you need me to rob the First National that Thursday? I've never figured that out. You could have just materialised inside the strong-box (it's big enough) and then thought your way out with the loot."

"Well, darling, its like this," she whispered into my bandages. "I got pretty deep into your mind, and I realised it wasn't the money first and foremost that urged



you on to crime. You might have thought so, but it wasn't. You simply wanted the chance to prove to yourself and at least one other person that you were the world's best cracksman. And I had to give you that chance, because I wanted to love a happy man."

Well, I married her. After that I couldn't do much else. We've had happiness all the way; and if Wilkie Junior does teleport himself from the nursery to the icebox every night and come out with a bulging stomach and icicles on his pyjamas, I guess it's only to be expected. That kid's inherited my criminal instincts. Now with a bit of training, he could be——

No, dear, don't throw me out of bed. I promise I'll never think *that* thought again. No, what *can* I think of? Ah, yes——

—PHILIP WORDLEY

# BRING BACK A LIFE

by John Rackham

Peter Raynor opened his eyes, and immediately shut them again. Both movements gave him the sensation of having red-hot skewers thrust through his brain. Keeping absolutely still, he waited for the shrill echo of that agony to subside, and thought, very hard. He had seen nothing but blackness, but, so long as he remained motionless, there was no more pain. So his eyes were probably not to blame. He became aware, gradually, of the ebbing sting of a needle in his arm, of the low murmur of voices, of the rough restraint of something over his head. A blindfold? Hardly had he deduced so much than a voice confirmed it.

"He's coming round. Shall I remove the hood?"

"If you please." The second voice was older than the first, and had authority, for all it was gentle. Raynor felt a fumble at his neck, and then the glare of light hurt his eyes. But that fiend's pain was gone. Just to be sure, he shook his head, and there was only the ghost of an ache. Looking across a table-top which glowed with the patina of age and loving care, he saw a very familiar face. That broad forehead, those hooded eyes, the great beak of a nose, were all favourite meat for political cartoonists. This was Lord Alford, Permanent Secretary of State for Interplanetary Relations. It was he who had requested the removal of the hood. He spoke again, now.

"Let's be sure we have the right man," he said. "You are Peter Raynor, bio-chemist, of Corne and Palin Laboratories?"

"That much is right." Raynor spoke louder than he intended, to hide his growing fear. "That much. But everything else seems wrong," he looked to left and right, recognising faces and personalities every bit as well-known as Alford's, and repeated, "Everything else seems wrong. Where am I, and what's happening?"

"The whereabouts of this house need not concern you.



As for what is happening, you were waylaid, Mr Raynor. You were rendered insensible, with a drug. You were brought here, and revived. All highly illegal and reprehensible, yet I am telling you this, openly, and you obviously know who I am. All this, Mr Raynor, because we need you. *We need you.*"

Raynor looked right and left again, just to be sure he wasn't dreaming, or demented. He saw Stanley Dacre, Minister of Health and Hygiene—Lord Royle, the War Minister—the Fuel and Power Minister, Blakeslee—and others of the party in office. But he also saw Dr Lindguard, and Sam Severage, and Professor Cannon, of the Rationalist Science party, Her Majesty's loyal Opposition. Mingling the confusion came belated rememberings. He had left his modest flat in Putney to keep a regular once-a-week date with some exercising equipment in a Kensington gymnasium—a warm, innocent evening—two dark and large men materialising from a doorway—four strong arms and a pad over his face—and this!

"It's ridiculous," he said, hoping it was the truth. "This kind of thing—doesn't happen! It's some kind of joke. Isn't it?"

"I have to convince you that we are serious," Alford said, still very quietly. "That we need you for a dangerous and vital task. I have it on good authority that you have, from time to time, expressed strong criticisms of our age, Mr Raynor. You are something of a student of history, and make no secret of your preference for bygone times—high adventure—excitement!"

Raynor bit his lip. This was a bit of truth he would rather have forgotten, just now. Pet phrases such as "might and main", "sweat of the brow", "when men were men" and "sense of high achievement", came back to mock him. It was all very well to rail against an electronically comfortable, conformist age, and to glow over the glories of the past, but it was quite another thing to have the challenge taken up like this.

"Suppose I refuse? I can refuse, can't I?"

"You can," Alford nodded. "If that is your decision, without hearing more, then you will be taken from here, all memories of this moment will be erased from your

mind, and we will arrange for you to be found, wandering, suffering from temporary amnesia—or something of that kind. I speak in general terms, of course, leaving the technicalities to those better able to deal with them. The choice is yours.”

“Choice?” Raynor’s voice cracked with consternation. “You call that a choice? My professional reputation gone down the drain, to say nothing of my private life. Found wandering—amnesic—do you realise what that—what the hell do you want *me* for?” He glared at the ring of grim faces, and it grew on him that this was real and in deadly earnest. “What have I done?”

“It’s not what you’ve done, Mr Raynor, but what you are. Allow me to explain.” Alford sat back, closing his hooded eyes for a moment. “Can I assume that you have at least a conversational acquaintance with the current political situation, in so far as it affects our Extra-Terran Colonies?”

“I know what I’ve seen and read in the newsfax. I’m no politician. Mars wants complete independence. Lunar wants quasi-independence, a kind of colony status. We want to keep on running the whole show from Earth. That’s about the size of it. In my opinion, for what it’s worth, I can’t see why we are keeping on with an old mistake. Why not let the man on the spot be the arbiter of his own fate?”

“That’s honest, at least,” Alford smiled. “But it is precisely that kind of oversimplification which is ruining everything the twenty-first century could bring us. For fifty years now mankind has scrambled for a foothold on the brink of total annihilation. Out of that nightmare has come one hard lesson, the futility of splitting into factions. City against city, nation against nation, one ideology against another—is the pathway to Hell. The universal brotherhood of Man is the only thing which can save us, this time. We are beginning to make it a reality, to turn back to the sanity, the ways, the standards of an earlier age. You, Mr Raynor, ought to appreciate that, at least.”

Raynor frowned, testing the argument savagely. “It sounds fine—but is freedom and independence to go by the board?”



"That is child's talk. Where is the freedom in cut-throat competition? What independence is there in the right to plunge the whole of humanity into radio-active ashes? But enough of that. The facts are these. Three weeks from now there is to be the first major conference to decide which way we are to go. A meeting between the Tripartite Powers—the Sino-Soviets, the United States, and the British Commonwealth of Nations—and the high representatives of Mars Colony and Lunar City Complex—to come to an agreement. An agreement of some kind. This must be settled around a table. Once and for all, Man must prove that his differences can be rationally settled. This *must* be!"

"All right," Raynor shrugged. "I'm no rabid politician. I'll accept your say. But what has this to do with me?"

"Patiently. I come to that. You will have seen, around *this* table, representatives of both parties. That will show you we are agreed on this."

"All right!" Raynor shouted. "All right. You're agreed. Will you get to the point where I'm involved?"

"Gently, Mr Raynor. There are two more steps you must follow. One is this. The prospect of agreement at the conference is slight. I do not exaggerate in the least when I tell you that it stands or falls on Sir Herbert Fremantle, our Prime Minister."

Now Raynor had no argument at all. Sir Herbert was acknowledged to be the statesman of the age, the man of the century, known to everyone.

"But—?" he muttered, in bewilderment.

"But—" Lord Alford said, in a voice of doom, "—Sir Herbert has developed Ringer's Paresis. The secret is a week old. We cannot keep it much longer. Do I need to explain further?"

Raynor groaned and shook his head. He knew about the paresis, its symptoms, its effect on the personality—and the hopelessness of any real cure. "It's a blow," he said, harshly, "and I'm sorry to hear it. It's a ghastly thing to happen to anyone, and especially so to Fremantle—now. But I still do not see where I'm involved in this. You're surely not looking to me for a cure? True, I'm a bio-chemist—and true, I know as much about the origins and pathology of Ringer's Paresis as anyone, which is not say-

ing much. But I'm neither doctor nor miracle-worker. If I had a therapy I would be unable to apply it—and I haven't got it anyway. No-one has!"

"People have been cured!" Alford said, gently.

"By chance. By guesswork. Look, have you any idea of the problem involved?" Raynor demanded, and cast his eyes round at the silent rest. "Do you know why science can't cure Ringer's?"

"We know," Alford nodded, "but suppose you tell *us*, Mr Raynor. It might help to clarify our purpose."

"I'm damned if I see how, but I'll tell you. The paresis is due to malfunction of certain brain-areas. The malfunctions, in turn, are the result of a combination of viruses, together with certain genetic peculiarities. The symptoms come much too late to be of any help. By the time *they* show, the various factors have combined and recombined until it is virtually impossible to determine what the original causes were. So far as I know, there are seven known virus strains, and a dozen genetic variations—and the possible combinations run into thousands—each one requiring a specific antidote. You may strike lucky with the first one. Or you may go on trying one after another until the patient dies before you hit the right combination. That's the hard truth, whether it fits your story or not."

Alford turned his head aside. "Severage—you can add something, I think?" Raynor turned to look at the burly red-faced man who rose now. It was easy to forget that Sam Severage was a doctor, and highly qualified, so thoroughly had he made himself known as a political speaker. At this moment his platform oratory was in abeyance.

"The paresis is old, possibly a thousand years old," he said. "We have only just learned to recognise and isolate the symptoms from a host of similar complaints. Now—sir—if we could trace back Fremantle's lineage, and put a finger on the ancestor, the single ancestor in which the two fatal factors first came together, the two genetic factors—if we could do that, and obtain a blood-sample—"

"If wishes were horses," Raynor growled. "Don't you think I've had the same wish? If we could do that we could check the paresis in a matter of hours. But such records



don't exist. Why should they? Why—how—would an observer record something he didn't know?"

"You would know!" Severage said, bluntly. "If you could be presented with a string of ancestors, you would be able to pick out, with the naked eye, the one responsible—and take a blood-sample—wouldn't you?"

"Are we *all* mad?" Raynor demanded, forgetting his fear in the greater wonder of this insane discussion. "Ancestors? Where are you going to get ancestors from?"

Alford turned his head to his other side, now. "Dr Lindguard?"

"Mr Raynor." The man who rose to speak now was small, thin-faced and fervid, noted for his acid wit and utter disregard for conventions. "You make it clear that you think us all insane. I do not blame you. Why should I co-operate to save the life of the man who will be my opponent in the next plebiscite? Yet I am doing it. And I am not mad: That, sir, is a measure of the urgency of this matter. It is, also, a measure of the length to which we, of the Rationalist Science Party, are prepared to release new discoveries in the interest of humanity. It's all right, Alford, I am not making a party point, I am endeavouring to prepare our young friend here for what will surely sound like lunacy to him. Mr Raynor, we propose to return you to the past."

"You are going to do what?" Raynor half-rose and fell back, stunned by the ridiculous sentence. "Return me to the past? Time-travel? Now I *do* know you're all mad."

"It will take you some time to absorb the notion that we are all very serious. I could use that time to stun your mind with theory on mass-time transformations but you would be no wiser at the end. Instead I will try to tell you in as simple words as possible just what will happen."

Raynor stared at him and felt his first chill of real fear. This, no matter how ridiculous it sounded, was real. These people were not joking, at all. Lindguard, particularly, was more coldly serious than Raynor had ever seen him on multivision.

"We can displace a material object into the past," he said, "for a limited duration. The energy expenditure is enormous, and depends on three variables; the actual mass

of the object, the actual amount of time displaced, and the degree of probability of co-existence. If I may express it so—the past is a plenum, is full. Sending any object back is equivalent to pushing it into an already filled space. It helps, greatly, if the object resembles something already extant there. The object, in this case, is a ring—a family heirloom, the property of Fremantle, and which has been in his family for many generations. This—” he put down a small box on the table, “contains a replica of the ring. But hollow. It contains a micro-syringe. You will know what to do with it—when the time comes.”

“A ring!” Raynor stared at the box, and then at Lindguard. “But—what about me?”

“Simplifying again, *you* will remain here, physically. Your ego—personality—soul—whatever you like to call it—will be returned down the time-stream. Never mind how, that is not your concern. You will be able to co-exist with various people, at various times, who are sufficiently your somatotype to permit identification. The ring, your physical resemblance to the Fremantle genetic type—and various other things which will be taught you under hypnosis—will enable you to travel back along the line of inheritance until you find the one ancestor you are seeking. Then—and only then—will you assert control over the body you happen to inhabit at that moment. You will somehow take a blood-sample, re-secure the micro-syringe within the ring—and that will be all!”

“All!” Raynor could hardly make his voice function. “You make it sound easy. But what if something goes wrong? And why me, anyway? Why me?”

“Perhaps I’d better explain that part,” came a quiet voice from Raynor’s right side, and a slim, grey-haired, grey-suited man made a slight smile. “My name is Smith. I can tell you, precisely, just how many namesakes I have. I’m probably the only man in Britain who can do that. I’m the Operational Chief of Personnax, Great Britain.” Raynor shivered, excusably. Personnax, the giant memory-storage bank which held in its stacked layers of micro-magnetic files the vital statistics of every living person on the planet, was a shiver-making thought to quite a lot of people.



"I was asked to find a certain person, a man satisfying certain criteria. Male, of a certain coded somatotype, aged between twenty-five and twenty-seven, English, unmarried, healthy, fit, skilled in self-defence and offence, able to absorb information quickly and accurately, acquainted with general historical patterns, skilled in bio-chemistry, no political bias. That's quite specific. Personnax picked you, Mr Raynor."

"Only me?"

"Only you."

Raynor turned back to Lord Alford, who smiled, sympathetically.

"You see how it is, now?"

Raynor saw, and felt weighted by the responsibility. All thought of refusal, any last lingering doubt, had to go. But that only made the fear so much greater. Because he knew that it would go on growing with every moment, he nerved himself to say,

"All right. What must I do? When do we start?"

"You will find your country not ungrateful, Mr Raynor," Alford rose, and put out his hand in farewell. "Gentlemen, I think we had better leave, now, and let the technical people get on with what they have to do. Good luck, Mr Raynor. May we meet again under happier circumstances."

Half an hour later, in the cellar of the same house, which Raynor now realised was someone's private residence, commandeered for the purpose, he sat in a metal-frame chair under a harsh arc-light while silent but busy technicians fussed around him with clamps and cables and equipment. In front of him and a little to one side stood Sam Severage, making fine adjustments to a screen-projector which writhed and rippled in rainbow hues. The lights began to dim. Somewhere just out of sight someone cursed, patiently, an obstinate motor-generator which stuttered and filled the cellar with drumming noise. Raynor felt the ring on his finger. He felt the creeping numbness spreading from the needle-jab in his neck. Severage was making the screen glow brightly now, and big enough to fill all the world. And he was talking, giving careful and important instructions. But his voice was faint, and fading. Damn that drumming motor! Everything was getting dark, and

far off. Only the swirling colours, and even they were bleaching away in the gloom. Severage ought to speak up—this information was important—Raynor couldn't hear. He couldn't move. He couldn't see. Greyness. Nothing except the thud and shudder of that damnable motor—and the thin piping of that voice.

A clutch on his arm. The piping suddenly louder, female. And the drumming *was* drumming, with a piano battling against the din. Eyes opened, and Raynor saw a smouldering cigarette-end, a beer-wet table-top, a half-empty tankard. Drunk—that insecure unsteadiness—the sense of being there and not-there at the same time—was it drink? Raynor had been drunk before, but never like this. Now it was as if he was a book of many parts, each with precision in its pages but just out of reach. There was an infuriating familiarity about the tune the piano was trying to play. The Siegfried Line. Billy Savage, leading-seaman, somewhat the worse for drink. A pub. A thick and foul atmosphere. That hand on his arm. His wife, Edna. Concern in her pretty face. And, over it all, the taut half-hidden fear of war. Raynor collected enough of himself to slink into a far corner of Billy Savage's mind and hide there, watching.

“Evening, Lieutenant Fremantle, sir.” Billy struggled to stand and show respect. “Didn't expect to see you in here, sir.”

“I'd hoped not to see you, either, Savage,” the keen, tanned face which swam close was disapproving. “Not in that state, anyway. You've had enough, haven't you?”

“Sorry, sir,” Savage sounded hurt. “I'll be all right. It's these bloody people, here, sir. Treat the war like a bloody joke, they do.”

“So it is, to them,” Fremantle smiled, with not a trace of humour. “They don't have to fight it, yet. God knows what they'll do if Jerry starts lashing out with his bombers. Still, let's not be morbid. Your wife, Savage? How d'you do. I suggest you take this man of yours out into the fresh air for a bit and then see that he gets back aboard before midnight—” Savage was dazedly trying to follow the interchange between Fremantle and his wife, with Raynor peeping from his dark corner, wondering what the date was,



wanting a better look at Fremantle's face. And his fingers. The finger-nails in particular, as they carried the symptom-marks. But then—over Fremantle's shoulder there came another face, a girl-woman, black-haired and blue-eyed—and Raynor forgot all about his mission. Without stopping to reckon the consequences, he 'wanted' to look at her again—and Billy Savage stared. The girl smiled, mischievously, winked one lovely eye, and whispered, clearly in spite of the din,

"You have the wrong one."

Then something went out of her face and it became just a prettiness, an impersonal look—Lieutenant Fremantle's wife, or girl-friend, or pick-up, or something. Billy felt a violent headache. Edna took his arm as he reeled. Then came Fremantle's strong grip on the other arm and his voice.

"Come along, then. Fresh air for you, I think." Then the staggering confusion of trying to walk with dignity through a crowded pub where everyone was bent on being gloriously undignified. Savage looked down at that grip on his arm, saw the ring on a finger. A ghostly voice recited in Raynor's ear, "The brown flecks in the white of the eye indicate an advanced stage. So, also, do the parallel lines on the index fingernail."

Another segment of his shattered personality began to recite the formula that would send him further back, and he felt panic, fear. He wanted to cry out "Wait!" There was so much he wanted to know. The date—it must be sometime before the bombing raids on London. And that girl—who was she? But another insistent voice was telling him "Your ego is polarised to tune in on males of the Fremantle line of about your own age. Actual contact will be your own contrivance". Over and around it, Raynor struggled to calculate the leap. From 2003 to 1940—sixty-three years. In futility he realised that it didn't matter who that girl was. His universe went greily formless for a timeless interval. Then a voice came, and sensations.

"I am genuinely sorry, Conway—" a stern but humane voice, tinged with sadness, "—it is quite out of the question." Raynor found himself standing before a desk, in a quiet study, and knew that he was, now, Stephen Conway,

and very much in awe and respect of the speaker. Quickly, he crept into the background of Conway's mind, to watch and wonder. Conway spoke.

"But I love Katherine," he said, determined but timid. "And she loves me. I'm sure of it. Sir George, is there no hope, no hope at all?"

"None whatever." Sir George Fremantle shook his head. "You're a good chap, Conway, but this match is just not on, for you. I have arranged for my daughter's marriage, and you'll just have to accept that. I refuse to discuss the matter further."

Raynor knew, from his inside view of Conway's mind, that Sir George was, indeed, a man to have his own way, and that the matter was closed. But he also knew, with sudden terror, that something was wrong. This Fremantle from whom he now turned and went away, sadly, was an old man. In his fifties at least. The ego-transport field was designed to put him in rapport with a Fremantle of about twenty-five. Something had slipped! A sense of the enormous danger in which he stood came to shake him. If the device could go as wrong as this, what would happen to *him*, to the free-floating ego that was all the reality he knew? Over his panic he was vaguely aware of Conway passing out of the room and into the scented dusk of a garden. There came the rustle and swish of silk, and a white figure appeared out of the flower-shadows to Conway's right. He turned. Light from the open door of the room fell across her face and shoulders.

In that instant, Raynor relegated Conway to second place and all his programme to limbo. He stood transfixed. Here, again, was the girl with the midnight hair and the blue eyes, and a face lovely enough to make the heart ache. The glossy pompadour of her hair stood above a skin of cream and satin, a graceful neck. The light-glow lay like a cape across her naked shoulders, caressing the soft swelling of her bosom where it thrust against the semi-transparent lace of her low bodice. She put out a slim, white-gloved hand.

"Stephen—" she murmured, "there is no need to ask. I see the answer on your face. I'm so sorry for you. But we can still be friends—" Raynor took that offered hand and



forgot Conway utterly, except to damn him once for having let an incomparable creature like this slip from his fingers on the word of a sour old man. He was in love, for the first time in his life. In love, and stunned with the glory of it. He fumbled for her name.

"Kate!" he muttered, the words coming awkwardly. "Take no notice of the old man. Things aren't what they seem—" Then he stopped, in confusion, as she snatched her hand away and cringed from him in fear.

"Have you lost your wits?" her voice was a shaky whisper. Raynor put out a hand, finding it awkward, cursing this strange body and its strange clothing, but determined not to lose this prize.

"Don't be frightened. Things aren't what they seem. It may sound crazy to you, Kate, but I'm not Stephen Conway—" he tried to take her hand, but she cringed further back, her eyes wide. A faintly pervasive scent came to him, of jasmine. And a sense of frustration and hopelessness. How could he explain what he didn't properly understand himself? And what use was it, anyway. This was the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, now.

"You must be mad," she quavered. "I am not your Kate. I am—" and then a curious transformation came over her. It was not a change in any one feature, but a subtle modification of the person, a shimmering glow, and a knowingness. Gone was the cringing fear, and now there was that mischievous smile, the look he had seen before. "I am Jasmine," she said, in a completely different tone, "and you are Peter Raynor, aren't you?" She came close to him, and the perfume was heady, now, completing his confusion.

"How—how did you know that? Who are you?"

"Never mind," she said, impishly. "For the moment. You've got this all wrong, still. This isn't Kate, but Alice, the wife of Norman Fremantle. And he is not the one you seek. Not yet." Raynor stared down at her, at the red mouth that was an open invitation, at the rosy blush on her cheek, the tumultuous swell of her bosom within its fragile confines—and he did what came naturally to him. This was a truly feminine creature, not at all like the hard-shelled aggressively-groomed women of his own time. The kiss made his senses reel.

"Well I'll be damned!" an imperiously high-pitched voice broke the tender moment into fragments. Raynor swung away, knowing instinctively what was coming. One glance at the hawk-like and haughty face of the newcomer confirmed his suspicions. This was the young Fremantle he was tuned to contact.

"I'm sorry," he made Conway say, realising that this was also an outraged husband. "Don't jump to the wrong conclusion."

"You blackguard!" Fremantle came down the garden steps to the lawn. "You damned cad. Smarming round my sister, and making love to my wife behind my back. There's only one way to deal with a swine like you. Put your hands up, damn you!" Raynor backed off. He sensed Conway as a man of peace, a timid person, and he had no wish to interfere, but he felt a stinging resentment for this sneering superiority. Adding fuel to the flames was the knowledge that this supercilious devil was married to that gorgeous girl. But Raynor made the effort to thrust aside his personal involvement, hopeless as it was, and studied the angry face now thrusting at him. The signs were in evidence, just as they had been on the old man. An advanced case of paresis. He would have to plunge further back into the past yet. But how far? Half-engrossed in this question, Raynor was caught unwary. Fremantle swung, a gross, right-handed punch that was telegraphed seconds ahead. If Conway had known anything at all of physical combat he could have walked around it. But that was not in his nature, and he took the blow flush on his cheek-bone and went staggering and sprawling backwards. Conway went down, but it was Peter Raynor who got up, raging and determined. That blow had hurt like the devil, regardless of double identities.

"Get up," Fremantle was urging. "Get up and take your medicine, you bounder." Raynor was only too willing to oblige. Taking complete charge of Conway's form, he blocked the next wild swing, took hold of the wrist which looped near, bent and spun, and Fremantle went sailing through the air, to thump heavily on the turf. After him like a tiger, Raynor knelt across his shoulders, took hold of that same arm, and bent it.



"Now, you silly ass," he growled. "Keep still and behave, or you'll break your arm." Fremantle, utterly outraged, made the ambient air blue with his curses and promises of what he would do to Conway when he got up. Raynor applied pressure, grimly, and the flow of language eventually dwindled. He felt the mystery girl's touch on his arm, and looked up at her.

"You mustn't interfere too much, you know."

"You're very well informed," he said, angrily. "Who the devil are you, anyway?" Then Fremantle gave a convulsive lurch and he had to shift his attention to restraining him. She was right, of course. It wouldn't do to interfere. But, too, he could save himself some trouble. And do Conway a good turn, possibly.

"See here, Fremantle," he said, evenly. "I bear you no ill-will, and I hope you will bear me none. But don't forget this moment, and don't go provoking another one like it. You understand?" Then he looked up to the gorgeous girl again, the scent of jasmine strong in his nostrils. But "she" had gone as mysteriously as she had come, and the girl who stared at him now in fearful amazement, though beautiful, was but a dull shadow of the other. Out of some dim recess in his mind came a ghost voice—a chanted formula—the "need" to plunge yet further into the past. And then formless greyness.

This time, Raynor made a great effort to remain in the grey nothing of between-time long enough to sort his jumbled ideas, but he was helpless to fend off the reach of reality, to shut out the swelling inroads of noise, and smells, and life.

"Harry! Hey there, Harry! Damme, I think the feller's asleep. Will y' give him a nudge there, Alan. Harry, d'ye hear me, man?"

Harry Cockburn dragged himself back from a muzzy doze—Raynor made haste to slip away into the back of his consciousness and be still, to peer and observe—it wouldn't do to make another mistake like the one with Conway. He had to find out something about Harry Cockburn, first.

"Steady with that elbow, Lennox, curse you. Feller can't shut his peepers for a minute without somebody's stirring him, damn it—"

Raynor took hasty stock of the situation. The loud-voiced one was the Honourable Dick Devers, a red-faced youth of some five-and-twenty summers, with a fondness for wine and women. The owner of the elbow was Alan Lennox, of His Majesty's Frigate *Corsair*, presently berthed at Greenwich. And the drink-stupid Harry Cockburn was cousin to Roger Fremantle, and second cousin to one Lady Fremantle, who was, this very day, giving a rout, or party, to which the two were expecting Harry to gain them admittance. Hence the need to stir him awake. So far, Raynor thought, so good. He could leave the mechanics of the thing to time, and devote his burning curiosity to the incredible scene. Student of history as he was, and fond of praising the high adventure of times long gone, he had never imagined it was anything like this. The cold printed word had not carried with it, for instance, noise. Or stench. Or taste.

The coffee-house atmosphere was thick enough to brush aside with the hand, had any one of them chosen to do so. It was a ripe compound of fumes from coarse tobacco, stale sweat and the free-flowing liqueurs being guzzled on all sides. The three companions were hurrying to finish their tankards of what Raynor diagnosed as jamaica rum, thick as syrup, liberally laced with sugar and strong coffee, and flavoured with many spices. Even second-hand as they were, the violent sensations were enough to stun him.

None too soon, the tipsy trio left the coffee-house for the street and the open air. Raynor's relief was short-lived, for the sensations here, though different, were just as nauseating. In desperation he turned from them to a short-range consideration of what was in the mind of his host, and listened to the conversation. The over-riding sensation was of fear. In the air like a miasma lay the haunting terror of Buonaparte, straddling France like a colossus and throwing the shadow of his might across Britain. An echo of the fear came like distant thunder from the burgeoning unrest of Britain's colonies across the Atlantic. The three were well-informed on these matters, and two of them, at least, went in hourly dread of the press-gangs. Lennox expressed it with a fine off-hand irony.

"The sea's my life, Harry, and I'd not have any other.



But I'm not below decks, d'ye see. It makes a difference. If the press-men lay hands on yourself, or Dick, here, I'd have to lash you along with the rest."

"God willing, and my uncle remembers his family feelings, I'll have my commission within the week," Devers muttered, "and that'll be me safe. But what are we to do with you, Harry? Damn your stiff neck, can't you see how vital it is to court her Ladyship's favour? She can preserve your carcass with no more than a word in the right quarter."

"No doubt of that," Cockburn growled, "but I'm damned if I'll strut and snivel for her favours. Ye've plagued me into guesting you into her garden-party, but that's as far as I'll go, so let it rest. If I'm ganged, I'm ganged, and that's an end of it. There's a brougham. Give it a hail, Lennox, ye've got Navy lungs!"

Raynor withdrew his attention from Cockburn and his pride, satisfied that events marched into bringing him close to a Fremantle, and willing to wait for that. He stared at the shifting scene, and marvelled. The sheer, gross crudeness of it all was like a blow. He saw the filth first. It was ankle deep almost everywhere. All at once he conceived a completely new respect for cemented pavements, smooth metalled roads, and the unseen, unsung people who laboured to keep them clean, in his own time. Cobbles, he thought, might sound picturesque, but they jarred abominably. So, too, did the people.

Oh, they made a brave show, he had to grant that much. The men in their square-cut coats, fancy waistcoats, high stocks, knee-breeches, calf-high Hessian boots, bicorne hats—like so many imitation Napoleons. And the women playing slavish variations on the current Grecian mode, with their bosoms and waists high, and their skirt-hems trailing in the dirt. But the stuff of their finery was coarse, and the colours drab and monotonous. And they were a rabble. They pushed, and shoved, and shouted, and swaggered as if they owned the earth. Raynor tempered his scorn with pity as he realised that for every one he saw, ten had died in childhood, and only one in five would see fifty years of age or more. Then, sharpening his vision, he saw the squirming ones, the faceless swarm who dodged

and slid in and out among the "quality", as anonymous as the offal they trod. The poor. There were so many of them!

He tore his fascinated attention away from such things as the clattering carriage delivered them at their destination. In a matter of moments, Cockburn had performed the introduction into what he was sourly pleased to call the "rout", and his companions disappeared quickly among the chattering females. Cockburn was left to do his duty, to pay "his respects" to his hostess and relative. Raynor held himself ready for action as Cockburn crossed the sunlit lawn to an arbour where an old lady held court, surrounded by a froth of fluttering fans and a chorus of chatter. Her high-piled hair was thick with powder, and her apron and bustle were hangovers from an earlier mode, but she wore a dignity that set her apart from the younger women all round. They, simpering and giggling in flimsy muslins caught with ribbons, and hair all in ringlets, gave way to Cockburn as he presented himself, and made a "leg" with poor grace.

"Your servant, m'am. I trust I see you well?"

"Well enough, cousin," she said, coldly. "A pleasure to have you join my little occasion, but little pleasure to you, seemingly. Have you no smile?"

"I leave such as that to the Jolly Roger, ma'am," Cockburn's tone was deliberately offensive. Raynor knew, now, that there was trouble not far away. "Frivolity is more to his taste than mine. I'm surprised that I fail to see him, with all this maidenhood ready to swoon on his words!"

"Mind your tongue," she snapped. "Roger has done with all that, this very day. He is to announce his betrothal to Miss Merricourt within the hour. Let that put an end to your silly rivalry, once for all. Be so good as to go and wish him well, with his beloved. You'll find them beyond the summer-house."

It was an order, and one Cockburn could not disobey, but Raynor felt his bubbling rage. With it came snippets of information. This "Roger" was the Fremantle he sought—at least, one of the right age—but Cockburn's violent anger wasn't going to make things easy. No meek and mild Conway, this, but a sullen and powerful brute of a man.

He recognised Fremantle immediately, for all his braid



and finery and the slim cane he twirled with such an air, but his attention shifted at once to the girl—who stood with her back to Cockburn—who had long, dark tresses—and a poise—an air—so that he knew, even before she turned, that it was the girl he would for ever associate with the scent of jasmine. The flimsy muslin of her dress, caught with silken ribbons to match the hue of her eyes, was wet with rosewater and clung to her shape in the extravagantly daring fashion of the time. It was such a shape as Praxiteles might have chosen to model for his Venus, yet Raynor gave only a sweeping glance to the fleshly form. Instead, he sought that light in her eyes that would tell him of the personality within. And it was there.

“You—again?” he said, over-ruling Cockburn without a thought.

“Again!” she smiled, with mischief-dimples dancing in her cheeks. Raynor put out an impetuous hand to take hers, and winced as a slim cane cut at his wrist.

“Hold hard, cousin!” Fremantle warned. “That hand is mine, now. Ye hear me, Harry? Mine!” Over the momentary anguish of the wrist-tap, Raynor had to laugh. How incredibly ironic it was to leap backwards through time in giant strides, and at each halt to fall in love all over again with someone inevitably promised to another.

“Spare me five minutes,” he said, unthinkingly. “Just five minutes. There are things I need to know—” But Roger was not so easily dismissed. He put a rough hand on Cockburn’s shoulder, and Raynor felt his control slip as sullen anger erupted into violent action at the touch. Cockburn whirled, flailing an arm, sending Roger Fremantle staggering.

“Take your dainty fingers off me!” he snarled. “Save such touches for your dancing partners!” Raynor was helpless against the boiling juices of wrath. He could only fume as Cockburn hunched his shoulders and made ready to grapple his slim and dandified opponent. But Roger was too shrewd to fall into that trap. Instead, his arrogant face dark with rage, he braced his slim cane, jerked at it, and pranced back into action with eighteen inches of keen Toledo steel glittering in the sun, striking swift and sure at Cockburn’s midriff. In his own body, Raynor might just have been able

to parry that treacherous stab. Thickened by Cockburn's rage, and the alcohol in his veins, he could only wince, and share the burning bite of agony as the steel slid in. But Cockburn's animal rage dominated even the death-bite in his vitals, and gave him the power to clamp one hand on the shaft that pierced him, and the other on Fremantle's wrist. It was a strong hand and a death grip. The bones grated and crunched. Roger Fremantle screamed like a woman, and fell to his knees. Cockburn fell with him, spilling his life-blood out on the green turf. Raynor, wrenching in sympathetic agony, struggled to see what was to be seen, fought to keep Cockburn's eyes open long enough—and the Fremantle face was only inches away.

Still the paresis. Still in a complex stage. Not this generation, then, nor the one before it. But the one before that—Raynor strove to think through the gathering darkness of unconsciousness—and saw that lovely face swim close to him, bright with compassion. The scent of jasmine came.

"Peter—" she whispered. "I'll see you again—soon!" and then, like it or not, with all the confusion and the unanswered questions, he fell away in dark pain, and a ghostly chant which drove him on. Delirium—cold steel. Why "cold"? That sword-blade was like liquid fire. Had been like fire. Was—only the memory of a pain. Raynor straightened up, on the stairway, and the candlestick in his hand gave false life to the shadows on the panelling.

"You all right, Master Herbert, sir?" the old man asked, in concern. Raynor stared back into the grizzled face in sudden terror. All his memories seemed blurred, now, and he couldn't be sure what was real. Nor did he know who he was. Lips spoke, facial muscles smiled, limbs firmed and stood—but remotely—by themselves.

"A stumble," he said. "It was a trick of the wind, perhaps. 'Tis a wild night, William."

"To be sure, sir. Inside and out," the old man made what was obviously a jest, and Raynor felt his strange face grin in sympathy, but his panic grew. Who the devil was he this time? And where and when? He went on up the dark and draughty stair while scattered fragments of knowledge swirled just out of focus. A party or gathering of some kind—just ended—the boisterous "goodnights" hung



like dusty echoes in the memory. Outside, the elements conspired to lend an artillery backdrop, with howling wind. The great brass candlestick was heavy in his hand. At the stair top, outside a handsome oak door, the old man paused and bobbed his head.

"I'll bid 'ee good night, Master Herbert, sir. May the wildness within be match to that without, but more enjoyable, like." A cackle, and he had gone back down into the shadows. Raynor turned, uncertainly, and a dancing glimmer to one side drew his eye. There, by the door, was a gilt-framed old mirror, giving back the yellow candle-light. He went to it. One look at the face—his face—and the memory-barrier broke. No mistaking that imperious, beak-nosed countenance, for all its bush of side-whisker and weather-tan. He was Herbert Fremantle. This time, the homing device, the somatotype-resonance, had planted him within the Fremantle genetic line. Presumably there was no near enough male target other than this one. He leaned closer, to peer, and frowned for a moment, making sure. Then, with a sigh, he nodded.

This face, the whites of the eyes and other tell-tale signs, was the one he sought, was clear of the origin of the paresis. This was the latent stage, before mutation and complication. So taken by his quest was he that all trace of Fremantle's personality vanished before the urgency of the idea. Raynor had no fancy for using the needle on himself, but, if it had to be done then he wanted to get it over with, quickly. He reached for the door knob and threw back the heavy oak, shielding the candle as he stepped within. The act drew his attention to the heavy signet ring on his finger, that all-important ring which he had all but forgotten, up to now. Clenching that fist, he shook it in silent triumph and went to stand the candle on a table. By a bed. A bedroom—other candles already lighted—he caught his breath and stared around—then, in speechless wonder at the girl who sat up in the bed. He stared, and shivered, as submerged memories surged to the forefront of consciousness. Memories belonging to Sir Herbert Fremantle, Bart. of the village of Dencroft, on his wedding night—his wedding? And that—that wide-eyed, dark-haired beauty crouched among the high-

heaped pillows and linen, clutching a sheet in modesty to her chin, was Jasmine Ferrers—was Jasmine? Raynor's head reeled as he struggled to overcome the sudden upsurge from this body's proper tenant. Was this Jasmine—the same? Was a sardonic fate playing its last tantalising trick? But no—this girl was a beauty, truly, but there was nothing of that strange knowingness in *her* eyes. Raynor turned away, sat himself on a box-seat. Get it over with, he told himself, prising the heavy ring from his finger. The candle-flame danced, making his task an irritation, but he managed to separate the two cunningly-fitted halves. Out came the tiny flexible syringe and the hair-fine needle. He edged himself round so as to get the light over his shoulder, braced a wrist for the insertion—and a slim white arm came out of the shadow to grip and hold his hand.

“Oh no!” she said, urgently. “You mustn't. That's all wrong!”

“What the devil—?” he glared up, and into eyes which set his pulse leaping. It was the mysterious “she” who had dogged him all the way, and he was thrilled to see her. But why was she interfering, now? “This is the one I want,” he muttered. “You must know that, if you know so much.”

“I know more,” she held on to his wrist, grimly. “You're quite wrong. Believe me. I know!”

“Now look!” he was suddenly irritable. “I've come a long way and a long time, for this. I know what I'm supposed to do. Won't you let me get on with it?” He had to become aware, whether he wanted to or not, that she was quite nude, and utterly heedless of that fact. Coupled with all the other cross-currents and confusions which mottled his mind, he was on edge to get the sampling done and finished. All his energies had been pointed to that, and he wanted it done. The talk could come later. But she tightened her slim fingers on his wrist, her eyes blazing.

“Will you listen, please?” her voice was urgently pleading. “This time-jaunt of yours is known, in my time, only as an event. Details were concealed, allowed to be forgotten. Hence a mystery. Because, again in my time, we know so very much more about Ringer's Paresis than was known to your science. We know that you did what you



did. But we also know that it could not have happened like that."

"Are you explaining, or deliberately trying to confuse me?"

"The original genetic adulteration is sex-linked. It came into the Fremantle line from a woman—somehow. You—that body—is free of it. The blood-sample you are about to take, if you take it, will be meaningless." There was enough conviction in her tone to make him hesitate. She went on, "The record states that you returned, with the precious sample, and your Herbert Fremantle was saved—by a swift analysis and therapy which we know could not possibly have been accurate."

Raynor's head began to pound, and reality, not very solid to begin with, began to flicker. "What do I do, then?" he cried. He felt her grip loosen, but her wrist slid forward, offering itself.

"Take mine. This body is the real culprit. Don't you see? My blood carries the gene you seek. Take mine! You must!"

"Why should I believe you? Who are you, anyway?" He stared at her in anguish, torn between her beauty, her pleading, and his impressed commands. "Who are you? What does it all matter, to you?"

"It matters," she said, simply, "because your Herbert Fremantle is my grandfather. He will live. I am proof of that. And this is the only way it could have happened. Quick, the sample!"

His head spinning, Raynor took her wrist, drew a deep breath to steady his hand, and then—in a matter of moments—the job was done and the precious sample restored to its hiding place within the ring. As the stout band slid back on to his finger he knew a great sense of relief, of achievement. That, alone, was enough to assure him he had done right. Then he looked to where she crouched, nakedly, at the foot of the bed, and an unworthy but natural thought sprang into fire in his mind.

"After all," he said, unsteadily, "I am Herbert Fremantle—you are my bride—and this is my wedding-night. I think—I have loved you from the very first moment, ridiculous as it may seem—"

"Not ridiculous," she whispered, and her whole body flooded a delicate pink. Then she shook her head. "Not ridiculous—dear Peter—but quite impossible. If only—"

"If only what?" he demanded, turning to her. "Can there be barriers, between us?" She put out a long slim arm, to touch his cheek, and sighed.

"Oh yes. Barriers. But it is not as dreadful as it seems. You'll see. I must go—now." She drew back her hand, but he caught at it.

"Must you?"

"Yes. I must. And you must go, too, back to your own time. Peter, we will meet again, I promise. Remember—a girl has two grandfathers!"

Then, like a candle-flame in a puff of wind, "she" was gone, and it was Jasmine Ferrers who crouched and stared at the red spot on her wrist, and the drop of blood which oozed there. Raynor sighed. All at once he felt two centuries old, and weary. He let the personality of Fremantle take charge—and surrendered himself to the swirling grey of transtemporal nullity. The way back was an everlasting fall down a long dark tunnel, until hands held him, strong and expert, tugged at his finger, prodded and investigated, and distant voices murmured among themselves.

"Seems to have done it—badly exhausted—ordeal—absolute rest and quiet—wonder how much he'll remember—?" And then Raynor didn't care any longer. He let go completely, and slid down into the velvet dark of sleep, already forgetting—not caring whether he woke or not.

But he did wake, in a very comfortable, aseptically white bed, with a patient and unimpressed nurse to note his stir, and to tell him to be still while she fetched the doctor. Dr Severage, still red-faced and burly, but kind and gentle.

"You've had a rough time," he said, "and you've given us an anxious moment or two, in turn. But you're out of the wood, now."

"Was the trip—successful?"

"Absolutely. Now—that's enough talk until you've eaten, and got some strength back. Then you'll have to dress. Sir Herbert is waiting for you in the next room, when you're ready."

"In the next room? Where am I?"



Severage chuckled. "That's better. That's normal. You're in the Prime Minister's country house. You've been here a week."

"A week!" Raynor suddenly recalled his employers, his job—but Severage calmed him down with assurances that all was taken care of.

"Diplomatically, of course. This isn't the kind of story we could release. As far as records go, everything will be forgotten. You'd be wise to remember that, Mr Raynor."

"To be honest, I don't remember very much, as it is. It's all very confusing." It was still uncertain and dream-like in his mind, later, when he was taken to meet Sir Herbert. The Prime Minister was gracious, but Raynor could feel the details fading into greater fuzziness the more he tried to recall and retell them.

\* \* \*

Sir Herbert had gone, harried by the endless cares of his office, but leaving instructions that Raynor was to be cared for and treated as an honoured guest. He was free to wander the great house, to admire its rooms, to stand in the arch of a great window and look out at a lovely garden—and wonder why he had this vacant feeling. After-effect, he thought. It'll wear off. In time. What did it matter, anyway? A gentle footfall plucked him from reverie. He turned—and was transfixed.

"My brother asked me to be especially nice to you, Mr Raynor," she said, smiling. "I gather you're a very special guest—" and then, at his stare, she broke off and flushed in embarrassment. "Is something the matter?"

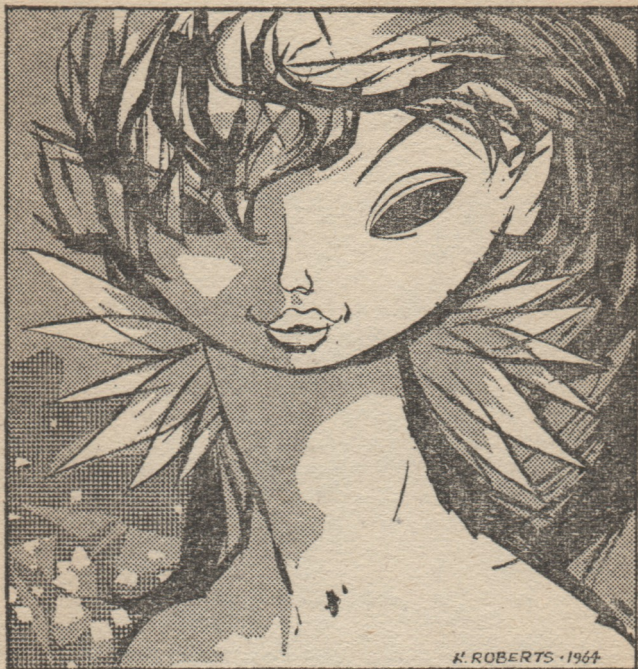
"Not now—" he muttered. "Not now—Jasmine."

"That *is* my name. How did you know. I'm not a public figure." Raynor took her hand, led her to a seat, not caring what the proprieties were.

"Your name is Jasmine. Don't think me mad, but you're going to have a grand-daughter, also called Jasmine. She may try to tell you an odd story about me, so I'd better tell it first. You see, she will be my grand-daughter, too—I'm very happy to say!"

—JOHN RACKHAM

*Another episode in the shameless career of Anita the witch. The illustration is by the author himself.*



# THE JENNIFER

by Keith Roberts

Anita and her Granny moved along by the beach. Anita was wearing a little white lacy top, hipster pants and no shoes. Granny Thompson was dressed in solemn black. A black dress, long and shapeless, a lumpy black coat, thick stockings and black, insecty shoes. Her old felt hat was as ever jammed slantingly on her head and she carried a large and heavy umbrella. Anita capered, cutting circles round the old lady, spurning up the sand in little



plumes as she ran; Granny Thompson tramped stolidly, setting each foot down with suspicion and planting it firmly before taking the next step. Her face was set grimly, her lips compressed into a line and she was a little out of breath.

"Excavators" she pronounced, favouring the cliffs above her with a malevolent glare. "Orter 'ave *excavators* up 'em . . . orl them steps, my legs wunt *tek* it I tell yer. Orlright fer you young uns . . . dancin' round showin' yer belly button" snarled Granny, vindictiveness making her personal. "Never seen nothink *like* it. When I were a gel . . ."

"Oh come on Gran, stop moaning. You're always on . . . it was you that wanted the holiday, whee, isn't it fabulous . . ." Anita accelerated, leaving Granny Thompson in the distance.

The old lady scrambled over a pile of rocks with much of the agility of a mountain goat and plumped down in the shade of the cliffs. "I dunt care 'ow yer goo on" she pronounced to the sand and the rock and anybody who cared to listen, "I ent gooin' no further. Be the death o' me, the gel will . . ." She subsided, mumbling.

Anita was leaning over something way off down the beach. "Gran, there's crabs. They're marvellous!"

"Come away!"

"No Gran, I'm only looking. There's dozens of them . . ."

"*Come away*" blared the old lady, rising in wrath. "Or am I gotta *fetch* yer . . ."

Anita came slowly, scuffing her feet in a hurt sort of fashion. She dropped down beside Granny Thompson and felt how the sun was like a hot spear on her back, pushing her into the sand. She made a variety of luxurious noises then she sat up and frowned. "Gran, you're turning into a scold. You've been getting on to me ever since we came away. An' it was your idea too . . ."

"Wadn't."

"It jolly well was. Just because you won the pools . . ."

"Ar, I did too . . ." The old lady's face began to soften. The subject was still a pet one with her even after six months. "And won nat'ral, that were wot I liked. All

worked out, no spells, no rune-casting. It all 'inged on the one team, yer see. 'They're done it afore' I says to meself, 'And they're on their 'ome ground this time' I says, 'So there ent no reason why——'"

Anita put her face in her hands. "Please Gran, *not now* . . . just enjoy the scenery."

Her Granny glanced up fleetingly at the huge blue dazzle of the sea. "'Ell of a lot o' worter" she pronounced grimly. That seemed to sum up her opinion . . . She went off on another tack. "Orlright fer you ter talk. Gooin' on at yer indeed. Never 'eard nothink like it . . . You're bin orf 'ooks with me ever since we started. Jist acause I wouldn't 'ave nothink ter do wi' that *siv* idea. Sailin' down in *sivs*, very thought on it sets me rheumatics a-goin' . . . 'No me gel' I ses, 'The train fer me or nothink at orl' . . . an' rightly too. Very idea . . ."

"Well, witches *do* sail in sieves. I've read about it."

"Not in my expeerience" snapped the old lady. "And I dunt goo much of a bundle on them there old fangled ways neither. They ent 'ygenic . . . I only ever 'alf believed that one anyways. I dunt reckon there's a spell as 'ud 'old, not fer no time any'ow. Wadn't nuthink ter stop you tryin' . . ."

"I did try. I got one floating on Top Canal, you know I did."

"Yis, an' come 'um in 'Ell of a stew——"

"It was all right till Aggie's nephew opened the lock . . ."

"Molecular tensions" explained Granny a little more kindly. "You 'adn't put enough *be'ind* the spell. Orlright chantin' uvver summat but if yer wants a spell ter *take* yore gotta work it right *inside* . . . I expects things got uvver-stressed when yer got in the race . . ."

"I know I got overstressed. I was nearly drowned."

"Stuff" said the old lady firmly. "Wunt ketch no sympathy orf *me*."

Anita had been digging her arm into the sand, following a little emission moving along a few inches under the surface. She squeaked with triumph, closed her fingers and yanked. The sand-thoughts, that had been all about food and when the tide was coming back, changed corre-



spondingly into a wail of alarm. Anita sat up and opened her fist. The crab waved its claws, located her thumb, took quick revenge and hopped away, scuttling towards Granny's feet. The old lady removed herself with startling speed. "Ehhh . . . git it *orf* . . ."

"No Gran, he's nice . . ."

"Creepy" said Granny Thompson, threatening terrible things with her umbrella. "Nasty, creepy . . ."

Anita scooped up the crab and put it out of harm's way under a rock. "Nasty" said the old lady, calming a little. "Crawlies . . ."

Anita settled down again with her head on her arms. Things were not going too well. And she'd worked hard for this afternoon too, spending most of yesterday implanting alternative ideas in the minds of the hundreds of people who would otherwise have packed the beach. The job had seemed endless. As she lay, she detected a car in the distance full of sticky children and redfaced men with peeling noses and sandwiches and beach pails and towels and transistor radios. Anita turned it hastily into the next bay. She could just as easily have turned it over a cliff, but the sun on her back had made her benevolent. She began to doze.

The callsigns pinged round the rock, echoing soundlessly in the sky and along the hot sand. Anita sat up sharply, pointed ears swivelling. She frowned. There was nothing to see. The VHF continued to sound. Anita put her head on one side. All the codes were new to her . . . She looked at her Granny. The old lady was huddled in blackness, the umbrella spread above her like an incubus. Her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly ajar. She looked like an old grounded bat at the foot of the cliffs. Anita tested cautiously but she was really asleep. Miss Thompson stood up, flicking sand from herself absentmindedly. Whatever was moving was taking bearings on the headland. And there was a Controller too though she was not sure where. She'd heard him clear the newcomer through the three mile limit. Anita began to walk along the beach, trying to gauge where the stranger would make a landfall.

The signals moved in until they were muffled by a great slanting headland. Anita was puzzled until she saw the

cave mouth. It was well hidden under a sloping rock. She wormed her way through into darkness. It was cool inside and she could hear the great wash of the sea. She switched to sonar. Her mind built up a colourless picture of the things ahead of her. She moved forward until she saw daylight again. It was green and suffused. There was a hidden pool. Light from a rock-arch was striking up through the water. The waves boomed loudly inside the cliff.

The mermaid surfaced almost under Anita's nose and there was mutual panic, a quick fluttering of consternation. Both creatures froze, and for some seconds there was a danger the sea-girl would submerge again and streak away. Anita, mouth open, sent cautious friendship-signals but there was no response. The mermaid lay in the water, rising and falling in the backwash of the waves, and Anita stayed crouched on one knee, hands flat on the rock in front of her.

Then she moved to the edge of the water, one limb at a time. She leaned out. The mermaid came toward her across the pool. Their noses touched; they jumped, and their bodies began to quiver all over. Signals raced frantically; two minds found a wavelength mutually agreeable, and locked onto it.

"—beautiful!" Anita bubbled with enthusiasm. "You're absolutely beautiful. Beautiful hair, don't you ever cut it? How do you comb it? Can you make ships sink? How deep can you swim?"

"Who are you?"

"Anita Thompson, from Northamptonshire."

"Where's that?"

"Miles away. There isn't any sea."

"Ugghh! Did you make the beach safe?"

"Yes."

"You've got *legs!*"

"I know. They aren't as nice as your tail."

"I want legs . . ."

"You can get them. I read a story about it. You have to sell your soul . . . our people would probably take it, and they give good discounts. They'd probably let you keep a bit of it for yourself."



"That wouldn't work . . ."

"I could fix it" said Anita proudly, "I'm in the Trade . . ."

"It isn't that, the story's wrong. We don't have souls."

"Oh dear, how awkward . . ."

The mermaid turned about in the water; her hair slid across Anita's hand as she dabbled. It was yards long and green but it didn't feel slimy. It was soft and fine like silk. The mermaid's flesh was green too or bluish, it was hard to tell in the half-light. Her body looked translucent and as if there were little lamps set inside. Her arms were long and slender and so supple that all her movements looked like dancing. Anita chortled. "Are there many of you?"

"Quite a lot. Only we never land now because there are always crowds of people."

"I say, you're phosphorescent! You always like that?"

"Only for one month in the year!" The mermaid rolled in the water, smacking her tail and making gunshot noises, wriggling her shoulders and looping her body. She was as supple and stretchy as a worm.

"Why for only—oh it's all right, I expect I know. I'm glad I don't go like that" said Anita. "It would be jolly awkward . . ."

The mermaid began to boast. "I've got a new hat of anemone petals. An' a sea-coal necklace. I can fetch dolphins and whistle for storms. My sister mated yesterday and she's gone to live in the Gulf of Guinea. And I've got a cousin in the Caribbean, I'm going there for the winter . . ."

"I can work spells too . . . where are your gills?"

"Behind my ears. You can't see them till I'm under water, then they're feathery."

"I want to come and see where you live. I say . . ." Anita sat up. "How far down do you go?"

"About a hundred fathoms usually."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean how far down do you go before you change?"

The talk became technical but very interesting.

Granny's thought boomed round the cave. "*There y'are, yer young varmint . . . Shift yerself, I want ter goo back up . . .*"

"Coming, Gran . . ."

"And change *wavelengths*, will yer? Pipin' round up there, squawkin' like a bat, meks me 'ead goo funny . . ."

The mermaid was wincing. "Who's that, on the Earth?"

"My Granny. She's cross because she's away from home. She's all right really."

"Will you come to see us?"

"I don't know, I can't just now . . ."

"We've got a great city under the water, you'd love it . . ."

"Granny won't let me be . . ."

"The streetlamps are sea-lilies" whispered the mermaid persuasively.

"I'd love to come . . ."

"I'll come back tomorrow, I think I can get you a clearance . . ."

"Do you have Controllars, like we do?"

"We call them Wardens. There's one at Dancing Ledge. I expect you heard him talking me in."

"Are you sure he won't mind about me?"

The mermaid rolled on her back and arched her body so that the water poured off it. "He's nice. He won't mind." Anita started to chuckle. Things weren't so very different in the s——

"ANITA!"

"I've got to go. See you tomorrow. Please don't forget."

"I'm a Dorset mermaid" said the sea-thing. "I'll be here. Some of us aren't so particular about promises. Don't mix me up with those Scottish creatures." The tail boomed, sending spray flying and making Anita spit like a cat. Then the mermaid was gone.

\* \* \*

"Fer the sake of 'Im wot's down under" moaned Granny. "No . . . I kent 'ave you gallivantin' orf everywhere . . . the lock were bad enough, yer nearly got *drowned* in that. An' now yer wants ter go slummockin' orf under orl that worter . . ."

"But Gran the lock, yesterday you said——"

"*Yisdey*" pronounced Granny Thompson firmly, "were *yisdey*. An' I dunt care wot I said anyways. It ent the



same, you'd be drowned fer sure, goin' orf to Americky an' such places . . ."

"I'm not going to America. That's only where her cousin lives."

"You ent goin' *nowheer*. Eh-h-h . . . sea-wotsits." Granny shuddered theatrically. "I dunt 'old with 'em. Creepy crawly nasty things. Like them there crabs, puts shudders up yer ter *look* at 'em, let alone slummocking about with 'em, 'aving 'em crawl orf uvver yer . . ." She shivered again. "Nasty, 'orrible creepies . . ."

"But Gran, she isn't like that at all. She's fabulous. She's got a wonderful face, sort of thin and sharp like a cat, and her hair's green and it's miles long and down below she's nearly like us but not quite, she's got lovely little——"

"NO!" bellowed the elder Thompson. "Once an' fer orf, *no!* Yer kin goo orf an' *talk*, seein' as yer promised, but that's *orf*. Though I dunt esspect *she'll* waste 'er time comin' back. Fish . . . nasty, slummocky things, ent no good fer familiars ner nothink. "Ere today an' gone tomorrer, you orter know that, yore tried with 'em times enough . . ."

But Anita was already running off along the beach. The signal was coming in; her Granny would have heard it too had she not been so full of her own complaints.

\* \* \*

"I can manage gills I think" said Anita. "I suppose I *could* do a tail . . . I won't of course, it wouldn't be polite. I don't know if I can swim deep enough though, it seems an awful long way."

The Jennifer waved her flukes thoughtfully. She was lying on her stomach in shallow water and Anita could see the big curve where hips became tail. "I'll send the Serpent. You'll need a bridle to hold, he goes terrifically fast. It'll have to be tonight though, he's going away in the morning. He's going to some terrible place in the Pacific, to one of the Deeps. It's a sort of call he gets from time to time. We don't understand him, he's so old."

"Are there many serpents?"

"There's only one" said the mermaid, awed. "There's only been one since the start of the world. He was the first thing ever . . . whatever you do you mustn't be rude to him. He's so old . . ."

"Oh, I won't . . . but I can't get away, Granny says no."

"He'll come to Durdle Dore" lisped the sea-girl. "He'll meet you when you swim out. He'll know you're there, and who you are. He knows everything there is . . ."

"Mermaid . . ."

The mermaid rolled over and lolloped into deeper water. "I'm going now before your Grandma calls. I nearly lost my detector stage yesterday. Come if you can." She hung onto a rock and the waves washed up and down showing her breasts. "I've got a scarf of Sargasso weed. And a nautilus shell to wear in my hair when I mate . . ." She submerged, and the undertow took her out to sea.

\* \* \*

It was evening and the water was like a golden shield. Anita wandered disconsolately along the beach, splashing into the sea and back, head hanging. There was no way to do the thing. Her Granny was adamant, and she was the only person Anita couldn't spell. It would have been courting disaster to try . . . She would have to go back soon, she could feel irritable thoughts rapping at her mind with horny knuckles. Granny Thompson was getting restless already.

"Wait a minute though. Was there a way? Anita stopped in her tracks and stood thinking furiously. It might work . . . it *would* work, she was sure of it. But there was no time to lose, not a second. She ran down to the edge of the water, grabbed a double handful of wet sand, then another. She built them into a mound, started to shape it . . . when the work was halfway through she used a quick spell and after that it was easy because the grains themselves were helping her. She finished the simulacrum, stood back, concentrated; the charm 'took' with a pop and the figure sat up jerkily. Its colouring was a little wrong but that was only to be expected:



apart from that it was as like Anita as a twin. She laughed, and the sand-girl opened her eyes. "Hello" she said dreamily, "I know what you want me to do." She got to her feet and tried to walk. The first steps were very jerky but her balance rapidly improved. Anita clapped her hands and a thought brought seaweed whirling out of the water, shredding as it came. It fell round the sand-girl, made little pants, a lacy top . . .

"Thank you" said the double softly. "Shall I go along and see to Granny now before she starts shouting?"

"Yes . . . No, wait a sec. Your hair's all mussy, mine's never like that. Here, let me . . ." She worked deftly. "That's more like it. But you'd better take my comb, don't let yourself get untidy. Now stand still a minute, you're not *quite* right . . ." Anita turned the model sideways-on, backed off and squinted, frowning. "I *thought* so . . . there!" An adjustment happened under the sun-top. "Now keep your tummy in" said Anita anxiously, "and don't run flat-footed, stay on your toes . . . all right, off you go."

"Have fun," said the sand-girl. She turned and trotted along the beach. Anita watched herself for a few moments, admiring the way her hips were swinging. For a rush job, it wasn't bad at all . . . She dusted her hands and walked off in the opposite direction. The first thing was to get to the road.

There was no trouble about a lift. Anita leaned prominently on a bus stop and wagged a slim thumb at the first motor that came along. She didn't even have to throw a spell at it . . . The car dropped her at the tank museum topside of the Lulworths but she soon found another that was going to the coast. She was at Durdle Dore by sunset.

There were still people about but Anita didn't care. She sat by herself, hugging her knees and watching the water. She was suffering the sort of excitement that improves indefinitely with keeping. She could have been picked up three times, by a soldier on furlough from Blandford Camp, by two boys with a cabin cruiser at Weymouth and by a discontented skin diver who'd lost his harpoon, but for once she was deaf and blind. In the afterglow she climbed the clay scree into the bay. It was horseshoe-

shaped and surrounded by tall cliffs. The strata turned over until they entered the water vertically; the stone seemed to be pouring into the sea. In front of her was the Dore itself, fretted through a vast island rock. Beyond it the sea, alive with diamond winkings, with reflections and flashes and restless lozenges of colour, cobalt and turquoise and aquamarine, all the blues with lovely names. The sea boomed, deep echoes hummed round the cliffs. It might have been the surf in hidden caves but Anita knew there was a blue man under the water, beating great blue drums.

She undressed when the bay was dark and the rock window framed a colour so intense it made a halo against the stone. Her clothes were forgotten almost before she had dropped them. She walked into the sea edging round boulders, feeling her toes scrinch in shingle and sand, panting as the water deepened and splashed up her front. Then over a shelving white rock face until the sea slid cool across her shoulders . . . she swam, kicking softly, guiding herself through the corridor till she felt the movement of the real waves outside. She settled into the tireless rhythm that drives a frog. There were no sea-things that swam like that but the frog-stroke served. When she turned the land was dark behind her and a long way off. She trod water and called softly.

"Serpent . . . Serpent . . ."

Perhaps he was waylaid; maybe some asdic finger had prodded him and he'd gone deep to lie under silent routine till the hunt was over. Maybe he'd been too old and wise to listen to the Jennifer . . . Anita called again, louder this time, conscious of all the black water beneath her.

"*Serpent . . .*"

There was a rumbling that grew to a roar, a burst of phosphorescence that looked a mile long, and he was there. Anita soared and dropped in the great waves that rolled back from him. But he was so big, she'd never dreamed he would be as big as that . . . he was like a reef in the night sea, the swell of his back was curving against the sky and all the length of him was alive with rivulets of turquoise light . . . His skin was craggy and knobby, wrinkled and rough, his flat head rose towering, his tail



stretched away for ever. The sea touched him softly, muting itself because he was so old. Anita paddled towards him and the head snaked down till the eyes could see her and those eyes were a yard across, bulging and smooth as black mirrors, and there was everything in them, everything there had ever been in the world. Anita wanted to hug him but he was so huge, so huge . . .

He nuzzled at her and she saw a harness, the great stems of tangle-weed knotted and twisted to make a hand-grip behind his head. She took hold, winding the fibres round elbow and wrist. He rumbled and began to move, circling out from the coast. His speed increased; Anita's hair streamed, elbow and shoulder cut swathes in the sea, water flew yards in the air to fall back twinkling into the huger turbulence of his wake. Anita screamed to him and his head dipped, the surface of the sea rushed past her and there was a void, cold and noisy with bubbling. The monster's body canted; pressure rose, like hands squeezing Anita. She chanted mechanically, drowning a little; at a hundred feet she gasped with relief and began to breathe again. Her gills opened, trailing back from her neck like pink chiffon scarves.

The Serpent's body wagged like a metronome, pulses flowing along it seconds apart. Anita sensed the sea bottom dropping away, peaks and hill-ranges flicking beneath, wide curving valleys of grey silt. Then there was no bottom that she could detect. Instead far below was a pulsing, a greenish glow like city lights seen through a coloured fog. It lit the white throat of the Serpent and his long belly. Reflections sparked in the great dish of his eye. The speed was gone; he was sinking slowly and Anita knew from the surface he would already look frog-small, a speck falling into a hugeness of light . . .

And his voice sounded in her mind like an organ as he began to tell her how the hills were made.

—KEITH ROBERTS

# A CAVE IN THE HILLS

by R. W. Mackelworth

She pitied the poor tired face in the mirror.

How the hell did it get so tired? How the devil could time leave its trademark around the petulant mouth and the sweet blue eyes?

It wasn't necessary to cook a meal or even to open a door. The food, like the fuel and the light was pumped into the house automatically. It came in through a maze of pipes, which lay, like fat, white worms, just below the roadway's immaculate surface. She never thought about how it happened except sometimes to wonder whether, in the endless confusion of pipes, a mistake didn't occasionally occur. Then she shuddered as she remembered that refuse and sewage were also pumped out as the good gifts were pumped in.

Mistakes were impossible. The huge Computers saw to that.

They perceived and they acted, humming in their great, clinical palaces, like infernal tops. A million pulses ran through the linked logic of their electronics and nucleic acids, every minute of every tireless day. The pulses were perfect cohesion, a beautiful chain of dancing thought.

Pressing buttons was out. All she had to do was ask. It was possible to have anything by asking. As long as there was Credit in the Meter then food and drink, or any creature comfort, appeared as soon as requested.

There was even a thing to arrange a burial without the trouble of a Wake.

Yet in material Utopia she was tired.

She was tired, as tired as she might have been if she had run the whole damned system herself. Her fatigue came not from effort but from boredom.

Not that Peter was mean to her. He tried to give her all she had ever wanted. It was a pity that it didn't extend to himself that was all. He had a cheque book mentality. He



reached for his Credit Card with a slickness of draw which might have been envied by any old-fashioned gunman. It was as surely a defence. A defence against the sudden emotional shaft that might upset his grip on his own picture of himself. Cold and cultured, aesthete and yet absurdly practical, he lived in a self-induced fog, into which he disappeared as soon as human contact threatened.

That's why she was bored.

Part of the long day she immersed herself in a bath of visual sensation or floated on waves of sound. The projectors, high in the walls, could create another World with multi-dimensional vision and high fidelity recordings. An addition of smell and subtle warmth could give her a hot, tropical Island or, if she preferred, pine scent and cold crispness could make a mountain in the Alps, for her alone.

A small sip of liquid reduced her critical senses to an orgy of involvement. She was part of the scene, part of the other place which existed in the projectors. Then she could swim in the tropical water, or skim down the Mountain on flying skis, and it cost just a simple thought, a quickly fulfilled wish.

Yet, outside, there were only a million square boxes.

In each square box there was a woman like her. How many were like her? Not all of them. Some had husbands and that made it worthwhile. Others had children, or pets, or parties for other human beings. A few had imaginary responsibilities or perhaps a mania for Bridge.

She had nothing.

She might have had herself but she couldn't be sure. Too much time with the projectors had made her unsure. Not that she was conscious that losing herself was all that bad a loss. Somehow she wasn't as keen on herself as she might have been because, like Peter, she had a pose. Her pose was too good, clean and sin free. She tried to be a well tried saint and, to her dismay, it worked.

Every chance she got she did good in her mind. She blessed herself with innocence and remained faithful, with an almost sickening persistence, to dear, cold, boring Peter. Once or twice it had taken an effort because, in some of

the other square boxes, there were men ; as lonely as herself.

James was the greatest stumbling block on the long road to prudence and purity. He imposed himself on her temptingly, leeringly, good looking. He made suggestions and he rebelled against impotent thinking with indecent thrusts of virile life. Perhaps his wickedness was a pose too and his suggestions a careful plan of fulfilment, like her goodness, but in her inner heart she knew it wasn't. He was sinful.

His sin hooted at her and he wasn't bored, ever.

Reluctantly she switched her mind from the personal appearance he had made, earlier in the day, and concentrated on a pointless tidying about the room. His appearance on the little white screen, connected to the private telephone, had disturbed her considerably. Somehow he seemed to know when her resistance was low just as a dog senses the blessed aura of a distant heat.

His sun-tanned, hard and handsome face, had been too positive, too demanding. Despite her conscious discipline she responded. The response was a warm flood of sensation which overwhelmed her carefully prepared positions, like waters from a broken dam, washing away man-made defences.

He knew how well she was dug in, on the top of her ivory tower. He also knew, given time, that she must come skidding down the sheer flanks of her own self-respect into his grasp. The higher they climbed the further, and quicker, they fell.

Pouting at her own thoughts she began to search for her husband's discarded coat. She felt she had to do some personal service for Peter. It would take her mind off temptation if she took the coat up and put it away in his wardrobe.

She smoothed the immaculate cloth and hung it carefully, seeing that it was zipped properly, and neat on its hanger. There was a slight stiffness about one pocket and almost absent-mindedly she searched it with her delicate fingers. She felt, and removed, the hard plastic card. It was his Credit Card.

Curiously she examined the last entry. The shock came



to a mind unprepared for shocks of that nature. She had heard of things happening, disasters of the first magnitude, with similar effect on the family budget but Peter was so prudent. How had they got into the Red?

Not only in the Red but for such a figure!

She searched the entries. The amounts were constantly increasing. From the Annual Deposit, at the beginning of the year, there had been a flurry of expense, little of which fitted into their usual economic plan for the year.

It occurred to her that the Vision had eaten up more of their money than she had reckoned. Then she thought again. You could have Vision all year and it wouldn't take a tenth of the Entertainment Allowance. Could it be food or heat? She shook her head fiercely. Some silly people had children or other liabilities and they managed to get by. She and Peter used the very minimum merely because they required the minimum.

A sudden suspicion entered her mind. Had Peter been spending heavily on his pet hobbies? There were the old books last year and two paintings this year. What had they cost? She remembered the date he had brought the pictures and checked. The Card showed a considerable entry but not that much.

She began to feel the first undertones of a real terror.

Peter had left a Route Card for her and she looked for his up-to-date position. His work for the day would have finished so she studied the Leisure section and saw he was supposed to be at a Physical Exercise session.

Her voice trembled as she called for the number.

A smooth-faced youngster, obviously representing the P.R.O. Department at the Pleasure Palace, smiled at her unctuously. He didn't speak but waited for her enquiry. However there was a certain awareness about his look which gave the impression that he knew why she had called.

"My husband . . . Peter Strong. Can I speak to him please?"

His well-groomed head nodded in acknowledgement and looked down as if consulting a list. If he had noticed the small pause, between her first words and the name, he betrayed no sign. It took a subtle man to know when a woman was reluctant to admit her allegiance to her chosen

partner. Especially when it was entirely sub-conscious and she resisted it mightily.

When he answered he was short and rather indifferent.

"Your husband is in Debtors."

She was faint. The weakness seemed to grow from her knees until she was a jelly shaking on a plate held in a frightened hand.

"Debtors?"

A mere trace of complacent contempt passed like a clean, upright shadow over his clean, upright face. "Exactly the case, Madam".

"What shall I do?"

Her voice was a hushed whisper.

"Contact Accounts."

The Screen cleared as if it had done a nasty duty and was washing itself clean with indecent haste. Perhaps the young P.R.O. had felt a little regret but it was hardly likely. She felt it was hardly likely anyway. She was desolated.

Her mind churned with confusion. If only she had friends to turn to. All those square boxes round her and no one to talk to . . . except James.

She called Accounts.

The face on the Screen was jovial. It was round, and red with some secret internal effort, just short of an explosion. She had a feeling it was laughter. According to ethics, however, it restrained whatever impulse was moving towards expression and waited her requirement.

"Peter Strong? I was told he was in Debtors." She managed to put urgency into her words and it almost demanded the man's confession. He just had to admit to some mistake, a clerical error.

The smile was real and human. It expanded, until it took the whole screen, and it was warming. Wide brown eyes were opened in incredulous surprise but they too consulted some list.

"Dreadfully sorry, Madam. Positively true I'm afraid. He was committed this morning and of course his present balance was calculated on the Computer."

"How could it happen?"

To the direct appeal from a distraught woman the cosy



face was overwhelmingly compassionate. It wanted to give some tender advice, some help. Instead, being Accounts, it had to take care, and while the eyes shone with fatherly concern the heart was cruel to be kind. "Have you a Joint Account?" The question was interrogative but far from demanding.

She shook her head timidly.

He was so very sorry. The big eyes were near to tears. "I regret, Madam. You understand. It's written into the Charter. We must not reveal the private accounts of our customers." His eyes were hypocritically sorrowful, then just slightly inquisitive. "Unless you had written permission. . . . Power of Attorney . . . anything like that?"

"No." It was a lost little squeak.

The smile was vanishing slowly. The red face turned to one side as if to avoid her pathetic eyes. The voice was almost cold. "I shall have to ask the Abitrator to call on you. You see, your husband will never get out unless we make an arrangement. Maybe you have some cash of your own."

"A little."

"Ah." He pushed out the sound like a bass tuba. "That will help, my dear. All we need is a few other items with a saleable value and your husband will be free."

Her face lit up with hope. Her blue eyes were like forget-me-nots, waiting to be picked. "There are a few pictures and a book or two. They cost a lot I think."

"Excellent." His face was one big chuckle. "All you have to do is work things out with the Arbitrator and perhaps, if you see your way to giving a little personal service and so forth then. . . ."

"Personal service?" She echoed him with a touch of the frightened fawn. The forget-me-nots were startled, as if a hand was indeed about to pick something.

He was helpful, anxious to dispel her worst fears. "Not that kind of service. Oh dear, my poor young lady, the Arbitrator doesn't have any use for that kind of thing. Put that out of your mind entirely."

Her confidence was restored. "I didn't for one moment think you meant that. I assure you it is out of my mind." She thought rather absurdly that Peter had never wanted

it any other way. "I just wanted to ask what I could do. You see I haven't any training. I can't work."

He stared at her as if he had seen her for the first time.

"I can see that." He started suddenly as if his mind had been on the wrong track. "It's just a formality. Don't worry."

"When will he come?"

There was an instant briskness about him as soon as she asked her question. He was like a salesman who had found himself a Contract. "Ten minutes I should think. Just wait for him. I'm afraid there must be no Vision or anything, until you see him. You understand. It would put up the Debit."

She smiled at him but there was nothing positive about the smile. "I'll wait for him then."

He wagged his head jovially just like an old Uncle, who never went further than the odd pinch, and was good for advice, or a penny, here and there. "Right. I'll leave it at that. Thanks for calling." The red face dissolved discreetly into the white of the screen and he was gone.

It was at that point she realised she was really lost. She had never been lost before. There had always been the four walls around her and the floor beneath her feet. The ceiling had protected her from the Stars above. It was frightening to be lost.

It must have been his instinct. James rang just as she was about to slump onto an airbed and into a deep depression. His strong features peered at her from the screen with a wonderful charm.

"Go away!" She was petulant and angry. It made him feel that she was a very small girl and that charm wasn't the best answer, necessarily.

"What's wrong?"

It was the right question. It sparked off the dependence in her. After all he was her only friend.

"They've taken Peter away."

His charm dropped away like a pretty mask. "Where have they taken him?"

"Debtors."

The handsome features were rigid, frozen with something very like fright. Gradually they thawed out and a cautious



query crept into his eyes. "He couldn't have been in the Red."

"He was."

He relaxed visibly and for a moment he nearly cheered up. Then another thought occurred to him. "Did they contact you?"

"They're sending the Arbitrator."

He looked at her with astonishment and wondered at her silly innocence. She dismissed the Arbitrator as if he was a casual caller with nothing more than tea on his mind.

"I'm coming round."

He vanished before she could say anything. Not that she had anything to say. James would be some help possibly. She preferred to leave it to others now. Somehow Peter had slipped into debt. Apart from his self-interested generosity to her he was rather mean. How could it have happened? Cheque book mentality he might have, but he rarely took it outside the house.

The chimes sounded at the main door and she called the code for the day. The doors opened immediately and she heard a heavy tread in the outer room.

Panic seized her again. She took the little flask which held the amber liquid, the precious amber liquid, and drank a deep draught.

He entered the room like an immortal being from Olympus. His face was noble and his body had a graceful strength. Even his walk was more than the mere trudge of a human being. It was as if he was walking on the clouds. Her eyes held onto his divine features, the bright eyes and the silver hair. Here was what she had always wanted, had always hoped for, A man who was worth her purity. Yet, she sensed, he was also a man of passion.

He took a deep breath, as if making up his mind to attempt something risky. "I'm the Arbitrator." He watched her closely.

She heard his vibrant voice with awe.

He settled on the airbed, beside her, and looked at her with delightful interest. Again, his voice touched her deeply, inside her very soul. "The matter of your husband, Mrs. Strong."

"My husband?" Her query had no purpose and it was

as weak as her trembling body. This wonderful man! He had Peter's special quality and he had the other man's passion. What was his name? James. That was it. James was sinful though. This creature had no sin in him.

"Yes. Your husband." He permitted just the inkling of a smile but it unaccountably made his face a radiance. "His debts must have been some surprise to you."

She nodded earnestly.

"I understand you have some books and perhaps a painting or two. I could value these. It might make a difference to your husband."

Suddenly she couldn't see any reason to worry. It was unfaithful, wicked, but she knew that if this man asked her she would let Peter rot. Her ivory tower was crumbling from the base. Her pose was nothing and she knew herself for the first time. She was a hungry, passionate woman with a life to fulfil.

"There might be some papers as well. Possibly valuable papers Mrs. Strong. Can you think where he might have put them? You never know, they might be enough to free him." He must have sensed her change of heart, her rejection of her husband's need. "It's bad in Debtors. It's like a Mediaeval prison and deliberately so. They have to encourage people to discharge their debts. In an affluent Society everyone is paid but God help them if they spend more than their due. They like to encourage the prisoners to raise the money, through relatives and friends, and they apply pressure where it hurts. . . ."

A small spasm of conscience touched her soul but found it full of something else. "Let's get his silly old books and talk about something else." She stared absently at the beautiful man and her tongue skimmed her lips very briefly.

He smiled at her encouragingly.

She found the books easily enough, some half dozen in all, and she found the paintings. Then, with his help, she looked through Peter's desk for the papers, the other valuable asset that was supposed to exist. The Arbitrator seemed oddly anxious about the papers. It made her worry for a moment about her first impression of him. Was he a man of silver, some kind of Saintry seducer? Or was



he altogether different? There was an odd familiarity about his movement, she saw it, even through the dreaming persuasion of the drug. Was he too jerky, too implacable, for a divinity?

The Arbitrator sensed her sudden distrust. He smiled at her encouragingly and restored her confidence. His smile was delightful and its delight increased as he laid his hand on the small bundle he was seeking.

“Are they the papers you wanted?”

He looked down at them and he nodded positively. Diaries, lists of names, all the treasonable matter kept by a revolutionary who couldn't keep his secret in his head, where it belonged. Peter Strong had always been a weak link. He should have been very discreet, a part of the Community in which he lived, and utterly indistinguishable from the sheep around him. Instead he lived up to his name. He had stuck out as a malcontent and made his feelings too clear.

The Administration had watched him. They saw a man who was too intent on the past, too aware of himself as an individual. A potential idealist betraying himself because he has no option but to be an idealist. It was easy to find him and to link him, eventually, to deeper, more shocking kinds of subversion.

The woman was unaware of the chained logic in the Arbitrator's mind. She did not know she had been betrayed by Peter and by her own fear. Peter should have been a good husband and a good citizen. Then, instead of Debtors, he would have comfort eternal, and an endless supply of chaff, both for her and himself.

“I want to talk to you.”

Her lips parted with anticipation. The wonderful face was near hers. Within the space of a few minutes this creature could make her whole again. She could drop her pose of rectitude, abandon Peter, and return to a new reality as a woman.

His eyes were very close to hers and she saw a deep glow which might have been fire in his heart. A beautiful hand touched her hair and it was gentle. “What do you want?” Her voice was tender and hopeful.

The reply was a whisper but a whisper with undertones

of harshness which seemed right to her. It promised a kind of roughness with the sweetness, like cider from the wood. "Your man betrayed the Community. He wasn't happy with the pleasant life provided, with the largesse of the benevolent machines. He thought a scrap of humanity was better than its Masters. So silly and so futile." The glow of his eyes was consuming. "You knew nothing about it did you?"

"I knew nothing."

"And you don't want to know anything."

Through the haze of a new and almost terrifying wish to comply, to be passionate, she shook her lovely head and she saw he had seen her denial and her acceptance.

"You will live a good life in future won't you?"

"Yes, yes, I will. I promise."

It was growing cold in the room and the light was dimming into darkness. It was like an empty cave. It was no better than a cave, a cave in the hills somewhere. The kind of hole in the ground that the malcontents, who had rejected the City, might have found for themselves.

The Credit Meter had stopped ticking away the units and the square box was dead. Until the debts were paid it would remain a useless hulk without any amenity.

She shivered and drew nearer to him.

"Will the books and paintings be enough?"

He lied to her.

James closed the door behind him and with the care a Father has for his child's sleep. The books and the paintings were under his arm and the papers in his pocket. It had all been so very easy. Then he knew she would take the drug, as soon as real trouble threatened her. If she had been a stronger personality he might have risked taking her out of the City but she couldn't have stood the conditions, out there, with the rough bands who lived the life of outcasts.

His conscience had died many years ago, as far as the individual was concerned, but he did feel a qualm about her. Leaving her behind after what he had taken from her. The Administration would take vengeance on her for the books and paintings and the little bundle of papers.



She would take vengeance on herself for the other gift she had made to him so willingly.

Though there was just a chance that it hadn't been such a one-sided business. She might have taken something from him for herself. In an odd fashion he might have released her from bondage. She had always tempted him even when he valued Peter as a comrade.

They would put her in Debtors too unless their much-vaunted sense of justice excluded that. She hadn't a Joint Account with Peter after all. She didn't share his responsibility or guilt. A thought froze his mind. If she didn't go to Debtors she would starve in the empty metal box. No Credit for the rest of the year and no livelihood until it was too late. Then they wouldn't have accepted the books or paintings in payment anyway. They would have burnt them and tried her for keeping illicit propaganda, links with man's independent past.

It was cunning, the fashion of Peter's downfall. They hadn't confronted him at home with his misdeeds, by presenting him with the evidence under his own roof. It was unconstitutional to invade the privacy of a home. Instead they found every reason to fine him and tax him knowing that he didn't dare protest in Court. When he was bankrupt they could search his belongings, for assets, accidentally discovering his books and paintings, and his list of names.

She was just an unfortunate. He had to dispose of the weaker links after all. Man didn't survive through being sentimental. The metal monsters he had created had thrown him out of his own bed. The one consolation being, that he who falls hardest from his bed gets most of the blanket. Now the trick was to teach as many as possible to fight back.

He looked back down the long strip of the roadway.

There was a humming far away and he thought he knew what it meant. He slid round the side of a building and watched carefully. Between the rows of blind, windowless boxes a shining figure was sliding effortlessly along. It was tall and oddly like a man but there was a metallic sheen about its body which betrayed it.

As it drew nearer he saw the metal whip in its belt

and the Book of Law in its hand. There was an indifference about its whole being which was crueller than any kind of human passion. For a moment he felt a pang of deep regret which caused his eyes to prick hotly. Then he flattened himself back against the wall and put the woman out of his mind.

Perhaps, under the influence of the drug, she wouldn't know what was happening. Perhaps she wouldn't resist the pain and the mental pressures. On the other hand the drug might make it worse for her, conjuring up big hells from little hells. In the depth of his soul he knew that he had been nothing like the real Arbitrator.

The thing that was opening her door.

—R. W. MACKELWORTH



# HUNT A WILD DREAM

by D. R. Heywood

Cullen, impatient to be on the move, could hardly bear the slow precise loading of the vehicles.

"*Kipruto*," he shouted angrily to his head boy, "*Watcha Kileli na funga mzungo upesi . . . Pete . . . Frank . . . for god's sake 'chunga' these boys and let's get this Safari on the road.*"

Peter Longden, methodically ticking off each item of equipment against his list, turned towards Frank Witty who was fastening down the bonnet of the three ton truck. "What the hell's wrong with Mac this morning? We weren't intending to start out for another hour yet."

"Hangover perhaps," replied Witty.

"Not Mac, he never drinks that much. . . . Do you think it's this trip to the Nandi District?"

"Why should that bother him? We've hunted buffalo often enough before."

"I don't know." Longden's eyes followed Cullen thoughtfully. "He was like this the last time we went to Nandi."

"I don't remember."

"You must do. It was one of the trips we made just after we first teamed up with him eighteen months ago. . . . The way he carried on, you would have thought that the safari was a complete failure, and yet, we brought back all the animals we went for."

"Yeah! I remember it now; but that was eighteen months ago, he's been alright since then. . . . Come on, let's get them moving."

"I'll be with you as soon as I have finished checking these things. Don't want to leave anything behind."

Witty walked across to the other three tonner. Apart from being an experienced White Hunter, he was also a first class engineer. Transport was his department and he guaranteed their reliability. Cullen's expanding business

had forced him to take on two assistants. Witty and Longden had been his choice. Longden, as an ex Government Service Veterinary Officer turned Hunter had proved invaluable, caring for the captured animals.

Manfred Anthony Cullen, Mac to his friends, was born in Kenya in 1919. From a very inconspicuous beginning, he had made the name Cullen almost a bye word in East Africa. His name, mentioned in any bar or club in the Colony was a guaranteed conversation starter. Certainly nobody spoke about animals without sooner or later referring to Cullen and his farm at Rongai. As perhaps one of the greatest exponents of the 'Bring them back alive' school, his name was known throughout the world as the best source of East African wild life.

On the surface, Cullen was a level headed hunter and farmer, yet, his whole life since early childhood had been cursed by an obsession. An obsession born of the stories that the Wazee, the old men of the tribes, would tell to the African children. Cullen, whose only playmates were African, would sit with the other Watoto, his fear etched sharply on his face, and listen to the strange legends of the Nandi, accepting implicitly the truth of the stories. His favourite was the legend of 'Chemosit,' a devil beast which Cullen later believed was the same mythical creature that the Whites called the Nandi Bear. 'Chemosit' was the cause of Cullen's obsession. His favourite game was to hunt and capture the beast, and some luckless African child, had to suffer the indignity of capture and incarceration in a bamboo cage that the young Cullen had constructed. His dreams followed the same pattern except when they turned into nightmares and he, the hunter, became the hunted. But, even in his moments of terror, when he would find himself trapped in the forest by the foul creature, he would awake and enjoy a savage elation at being face to face with 'Chemosit.'

They were ready. . . . Cullen made a final check then climbed into the driving seat of the Land Rover. He sat for a moment letting his tension die down. As his chest muscles relaxed, he pressed the starter and set off down the farm track to the murram road. The two three tonners



followed, Longden driving the first and Witty bringing up the rear. A close convoy carefully negotiating the pot holes. Turning onto the road, they speeded up. The dust clouds churned up by their wheels soon made them spread out until they were no longer a convoy but three separate entities. Each in turn whipping the placid murram surface of the road into a flaying maelstrom making it impossible for them to stay close together. Their speed soon cooled down the sun-heated driving cabs and as the sweat dried on him, Cullen settled into a more comfortable position for the long drive to Nandi and, he hoped, the fulfilment of his dreams. 'Chemosit' was waiting.

A few miles rough driving brought them to a band of tarmac, knifing across their track, a naked scar dividing the wilderness. Swinging right onto the tarmac, Cullen slowed down, allowing the other vehicles to bunch up, then swiftly accelerated, taking full advantage of the smooth surface. Mile after mile of easy travelling lulled Cullen's senses, until he was scarcely aware of being in control of a vehicle and his mind wandered from one thought to another.

His drowsiness was suddenly shattered by the banshee blast of a klaxon horn almost alongside him. The sleek, blue body of a Chevrolet hurtled past, driven almost frenziedly by an Indian who had the effrontery to wave in passing.

"*Iyei-n Kong*," Cullen screamed after him, reverting subconsciously into the Nandi dialect which was almost more natural to him than English.

The incident, brief as it was, served to remind him of the day eight years before, when, on the same road, as he was driving his parents into Nakuru, an Indian driven 'Studebaker' ploughed head on into his car, killing his mother and father instantly. Cullen himself had a miraculous escape, suffering only severe concussion and a ragged gash below his right eye, which later formed a jagged scar. For days he had lain in the hospital at Nakuru in a feverish coma. When he regained consciousness there was no need for him to ask about his parents. He knew. . . .

The Nandi, from which tribe his father preferred to recruit his labour force, knew of certain signs that warned of death. It is said that 'should a dog climb onto the roof of a house, the head of the house will die.' . . . Two nights before the accident, the family had been awakened by the howling of their dog. They found it on the roof. How it had got there was a complete mystery. . . . Cullen's father, in his ignorance, had only laughed. Cullen, afraid of being ridiculed for his misgivings, laughed with him. . . . The staff of the hospital, surprised that Cullen did not enquire about his parents, were at the same time relieved that they did not have to break the news to him. When their death was finally mentioned to him, he replied in a tone that was almost a prayer and in the Nandi tongue which the nurses could not understand . . . "*Kimaketo! O-pwa O-am.*"

Un-noticed by Cullen, the gradient of the road had been steadily increasing and he became aware that his heavily laden Land Rover was labouring in top gear. Changing down into third gear, he increased speed. . . . For the next few miles, his attention was concentrated on his driving, changing gear frequently whenever necessary. He did not relax again until the road levelled out and he was passing the turnoff to Molo Township. Not far ahead now, were the quarter mile experimental road surfaces, and then the end of the tarmac. From then on it would be murram roads all the way. Hard driving and the inevitable penetrating dust. . . .

By nightfall, tired but satisfied with the day's work, they had made camp which was to act as their centre of operations in the Nandi district. Tents were erected and the 'Mpishi' was preparing a dinner of guinea fowl which Longden had shot earlier.

Witty, the last to get washed and generally cleaned up, finally joined Cullen and Longden who were sprawled in camp chairs beneath a tentless fly sheet which had been erected to serve as a dining area. Moths and other insects swarmed round the hissing Tilley lamp, strategically placed to give sufficient light and at the same time attract the insects away from the dining table.



Longden held out a bottle of Tusker Ale, an inverted glass draped over the top of the bottle. . . . "Here, Frank. . . . Wash the dust out of your throat with that."

"Thanks, I need it." Dropping into the spare chair, he tipped beer into his glass and took a deep draught. . . . "Well, Mac," he continued. "What's the drill for tomorrow?"

Cullen lit a cigarette before answering. "The boys tell me that north of here through the bamboo forest is a plateau and beyond that it's all buffalo country. I've never worked this area before, so it's as new to me as it is to you. I suggest that we spend tomorrow on a recce. See what the country is like, and find some way of getting the trucks round there." He reached down suddenly, slapping at his ankes. "Blasted mosquitoes," he grunted, tucking his trouser bottoms into his socks.

"How many boys are we taking, Mac?" asked Longden, regretfully shaking the last drops from his bottle into his half-filled glass.

"None," Cullen gasped, straightening up.

Witty leaned forward, surprise arching his eyebrows. "None? . . . Why not?"

"Simple," smiled Cullen. "They won't go onto the plateau."

"I'll make the bastards go," said Witty indignantly.

"Not these boys, they've got a thing about this plateau."

"What sort of thing, as you call it?"

"They say the spirits of the dead live there and set fire to the grass on the plateau once every year. It's sacred ground, you'll never get a Nandi to go there."

"Ye Gods," snorted Witty, tossing his head back. "How simple can they get?"

"Simple?" queried Cullen. "Yes, I suppose they are in a way. Superstitious certainly. But then, I've seen you tossing salt over your shoulder."

"That's different."

"Different? . . . Why? . . . We are all superstitious about something or other. They are as much entitled to their beliefs as we are. . . . They believe that a person's soul is embodied in their shadow. After death, the shadow and

consequently the spirit goes underground to live. . . . The 'Ooik' as the spirits of the dead are called, must live somewhere and they obviously think this place is one of their homes. . . . No, Frank, we'll have to count the boys out on this trip."

"Well, Mac," said Longden, "you've certainly picked a cheerful place for us this time. All we need now is the Nandi Bear to make the party complete."

"Don't be bloody ridiculous," snapped Cullen. "You know damned well that there's no such thing."

Longden was taken aback by Cullen's sudden burst of anger, but, staring at him thoughtfully, he decided to keep quiet.

Witty, to break the sudden uncomfortable silence changed the subject quickly. . . . "Where the hell is the '*chacula*'?" he asked of no-one in particular. "I'm starving. . . . Kibet" he shouted into the surrounding darkness, "*Wapi chacula.*"

"*Karibu tiari, Bwana,*" a disembodied voice sang back cheerfully.

Cullen stood up and walked away without speaking.

The others sat quietly. Longden watching the suicidal attack of the moths against the glass of the 'Tilley' lamp. "Methinks he doth protest too much," he quoted quietly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" mumbled Witty.

"I don't know really." He leaned back in his chair. Lit a Clipper cigarette and dropped the box and lighter on the table. . . . "Frank!"

"Yes."

"Have you ever watched Mac when he's talking about the Nandi? . . . He'll explain their beliefs, their customs, ceremonies, way of life, anything about them you want to know. And, he's always calm and sure of himself. But . . . mention the Nandi Bear and he immediately goes off the deep end. . . . You know, he's so damned quick at denying it's existence, I'm beginning to think that he really believes in it."

"Maybe he does Pete, after all, there's plenty of people believe in the Yeti and flying saucers and other such things."

"Do you?"



"Me? . . . No. . . . I'm too much of a sceptic for things like that."

They both looked up as Cullen appeared out of the gloom, walking towards them.

Cullen had gone off alone, annoyed with himself for 'snapping at Pete like that,' and with a sense of guilt about his betrayal of 'Chemosit', the Nandi Bear. Though why he felt guilty, he did not know. Was it because the 'Chemosit' of his dreams did not quite match the description that the Nandi had for it. They said it was half bird, half man that had only one leg and a mouth that glowed like fire in the night. But this was not the 'Chemosit' that he dreamed of. His beast was no freakish bird man, but a monster of power. A devil that possessed the evil of all men, born with a lust to hurt and kill, and it waited, for him. Waited as he had always known it would, until they came face to face. . . .

After their meal, they sat talking together over a final glass of beer before retiring for the night. They planned to be away by first light the following morning, to take full advantage of the twelve hours of daylight.

They were discussing a recent murder in the area that had all the earmarks of a Mau Mau killing.

Cullen, who had paid the usual courtesy calls on the District Officer and local Police Inspector, to inform them that they would be hunting in the area, had the bare details given to him and was now passing the information on to his two colleagues.

"What made them think it was Mau Mau?" asked Witty.

"The mutilations mostly," replied Cullen. "You know, both ankles and wrists practically severed, but I think it was the attack on the man's cattle that has them convinced. He had six in his boma. . . . They were all still alive, but each was slashed across the back of the neck and both hind legs below the hocks."

This is a bit out of the way for Kikuyu isn't it?" Witty hesitated. "Could it have been the Nandi do you think?"

*(To be concluded)*

# Science Fantasy

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