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Science Fantasy

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SCIENCE FANTASY

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Contents

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Editorial . . . . . Kyril Bonfiglioli

A number of people have written to me recently for details of British Science Fiction Association membership and of the various conventions being held this year. Here they are:

The permanent address of the Hon. Secretary of the BSFA is 77, College Road North, Blundell Sands, Liverpool 23. All enquiries may be made to that address except those concerning the British Convention, which should be addressed to Mr. K. M. P. Cheslin, 18, New Farm Road, Stourbridge, Worcs., who is Chairman of the Association and Chairman and Treasurer of the Convention. The British Convention will be held this year at the Midland Hotel, Birmingham, over the Easter weekend; the Guest of Honour is Harry Harrison and the registration fee is 5s. (payable to Mr. Cheslin)—so even if you are doubtful whether you can attend there is no great risk attached to registering!

The three chief attractions of the BSFA are the yearly Convention, the splendid postal lending library they run and their lively journal VECTOR, which no-one interested in science fiction can afford to neglect.

This year's World Science Fiction Convention—the 23rd in the series—is being held in London, as it was in 1957, so British writers and enthusiasts will again be able to attend without stowing away on Boeings. The *venue* is the Mount Royal Hotel, London, W.1, which is offering special room-rates for Convention members. The attendance fee is a guinea or three dollars; you can join the Convention for only 15s. and pay the balance if and when you turn up—this entitles you to bulletins, voting papers, etc., without actually attending. The Agent is Mr. Bill Evans, Box 86, Mt. Rainier, Maryland, U.S.A., but Miss Ella Parker of 43, William Dunbar House, Albert Road, London, N.W.6, will, I understand, handle all normal enquiries for Britain. With a fine sense of fitness the Guest of Honour is also to be British—Brian W. Aldiss who, by the way, tells me with great sighs of release that his travel book on Jugoslavia is at last in the final draft stage and that he will soon be

turning his helm once again towards the undialectical shores of science fiction.

* * *

Mention of VECTOR reminds me of a project I recently thought of: there must be well over a score of good amateur "fanzines" published in this country now and some of these must want more subscribers. If the editors or publishers would care to send me title, address, subscription rates and brief description I would be happy to print, in an early issue, a page of "fanzine" facts to help them get in touch with potential subscribers in their own areas and elsewhere. No charge, of course. Editors in the United States are welcome to send details in if they too would like to acquire English subscribers.

* * *

I am continually tempted to embark, in these editorials, on one of those long dreary discussions about what Science Fiction really is, whether there is such a *genre* etc. I have succeeded in the past in fighting against this temptation and hope to continue to do so but there really is a strange idiosyncracy about this particular kind of fiction which continually invites speculation. The only parallel which has any validity is with the detective novel which also had its fixed conventions and rules, its fanatical enthusiasts, its pseudonymous part-time writers and its lovers of the pure and early vintages. But there the resemblance ceases: no 'tec story reader would have thought of running an amateur magazine for other enthusiasts, no editor would have bothered to discuss the nature of the medium in his magazine, certainly no World Congress of detective story writers and readers would have been held every year for twenty three years. What *is* the peculiar charm, where lies the importance, real or imagined, of this kind of story? Letters, please?

* * *

Many of the people who have asked for a letter page (absent this month only because of lack of interesting material) also often ask for story-ratings. I am afraid that I positively decline to use story space on this particular fea-

ture, because I do not believe it either useful or accurate. To discourage or encourage writers on the basis of a poll taken from those readers who can be bothered to write and tell me their opinions is manifestly unfair to say the least. If two hundred readers each month commented on each story this would still not be a fair sample: it would be some 80 per cent of the letter-writers but only 1.4 per cent or thereabouts of the whole readership and would tell us nothing about those readers who never write. The only way to get a fair rating for stories would be to pay a market-research firm to take proper random samples from the readership and this would be absurdly expensive. In short, sorry—no story-ratings.

—KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

THE IMPOSSIBLE SMILE

by Jael Cracken

The first of two parts

June 1st, 2020: Norwich, Capital of the British Republics. A sports car growled through the empty streets. Pouring rain was turning the evening green as the car ran slowly up the hill towards the barracks. Beside the driver, a nervous man in a blue mac consulted his wrist watch every two seconds. He swallowed continually, peering out at the curtain of rain, muttering when the great barrack wall loomed into view.

The barracks, after some hasty redecoration, had been converted into a palace-fortress for Jim Bull, Our Beloved Leader of the State. Behind the plaster of one of the newly decorated rooms, a man crouched. The room was a bathroom belonging to the Leader's suite, and the man was armed.

For forty-two hours the armed man had waited in his two-foot-wide hiding place. He had dozed without daring to sleep, afraid of breaking through the wafer of plaster before him. He had provisions, a luminous watch—and his gun. He heard someone enter the bathroom.

Fixing his right eye to a hair-thin crack, he watched and waited. The man in the bathroom was out of his line of vision as yet; by the sound of it, he was undressing. Grinning his strange grin, the assassin twitched his leg muscles to exercise them. Soon, praise be, he'd need to move fast.

The man in the bathroom went over to the shower, presenting his bare back to the plaster wall; as he turned on the shower, he presented his profile. This was it! For this second the forty-two hours had been endured.

The assassin pushed aside the flimsy plaster and fired three times. Jim Bull, ex-spacehand, ex-firebrand, fell dead, head under the tepid spray. The water began to turn gravy-coloured as it drained away.

Still clutching his gun, the killer slid sideways in his recess to an old lift shaft. He jumped twelve feet onto a carefully planted mattress, and was on the ground floor. He flung back the folding lift door whose rusty padlock had been previously attended to, and emerged into a stone corridor at the back of the barrack block.

A soldier in shirt sleeves a few yards down the corridor turned and boggled as the killer flung open a window and jumped into the wet evening. Belatedly, the soldier called, "Hey!"

The killer ran round a wash-house, cursing his cramped legs, skirted the deserted cookhouse, dodged the swill bins and doubled into the closed way leading to the gym. Two sergeants were approaching him.

They stared in surprise. But the killer wore Army uniform with corporal's stripes. He winked at them as he passed. The sergeants continued to walk slowly on.

He bolted into the open again at the gym, turned left at the NAAFI, jumped the low hedge into the officers' quarters and swerved behind the bike shed.

Now he was in the small laundry square, the laundry standing silent at this late hour. Ahead was what was popularly known as Snoggers' Exit, a narrow wooden gate in the high barracks wall. A sentry stood at the gate.

The fugitive stopped, took aim and, as the sentry hastily raised his light machine-gun, fired. He was running again before the sentry hit the stones. Sounds of whistles far behind spurred him on.

The wooden gate splintered and fell open, before he got to it. Outside on the hill track, the sports car stood. The driver, who had broken down the gate, was already jumping back into his seat. The nervous man in the mac held a back door open for the killer; directly he had scrambled in, the nervous man followed. The car was already on the move again.

They bucked down the track at sixty, skirting the high walls of the barracks. They slowed to turn down a slope, slipping and crashing through wet bracken, and curved among sparse trees. In a clearing they accelerated again, licked past a ruined bandstand and onto a gravelled road.

Rain was falling more heavily when, two minutes later, they swerved sharply left and climbed again. This track curved among pines and brought them suddenly into a chalk pit, once used as a small arms range.

In the middle of the range, a light passenger-type spaceship waited, its single port open.

The killer broke from the car and ran across to the ship. He climbed in, ascending the narrow companionway. The pilot, swivelling in his seat, held a levelled revolver until he got a good look at the newcomer's face; then he dropped it and turned to the controls.

"Take off in one minute forty-five seconds," he said. "Strap yourself in quickly."

Stratton Hall was a big, eighteenth century building a few miles from Norwich. Across the weed-infested courtyard stood a small stable. A horse and rider approached it over the hummocky turf, moving quietly through the downpour. At the stable door, the rider dismounted and led Nicky into the dry. As he did so, he broke off the mental union with the animal; instantly, the wild, wordless chiaroscuros of his vision disappeared, and he was back in his own senses.

The feeling of refreshment left Conrad Wyvern. At once, the memory of his sister's death returned to him. He rubbed Nicky down less thoroughly than usual, watered him and turned to go.

He had ridden bare-back from East Hingham, as always. As always, he had taken the overland route, avoiding roads, so that Nicky could go unshod. He himself went with no shoes or weapon, and a piece of rope securing his trousers. The Flyspies which covered the country were good at detecting metal, and Wyvern kept his journeys to East Hingham as secret as possible.

It was eleven o'clock, Treble Summertime, as he peered out of the stable, and already growing dark. The rain fell steadily; the harvests would be ruined, turning sour on the stalk. Squinting up at the west gable of the house, Wyvern could see the Flyspy attached to the Hall resting in its recharge cradle, its double vane idle. Even as he looked,

the rotors moved and it climbed pot-bellied out of its metal nest, circling the building like a tired barn-owl after mice.

The Flyspies were one of the few new inventions of the ill-financed Republics. At that, thought Wyvern, they weren't much good. Certainly, they detected any moving metal, but that was something easily circumvented, as he had proved, to his own satisfaction. Their television eye was poor—useless in this light—and he walked over to the rear of the Hall with no effort at concealment, although the machine hovered fairly near.

He slipped quietly in and went up what had been the servants' staircase to his own rooms to change his clothes. As he did so, he chewed over the evening's events.

The disused railway station at East Hingham had established itself as a Black Market. You could buy anything there from a box of safety matches (for ten shillings) to a ticket on a moon-bound ship (no upper price limit). Wyvern's sister Lucie was one of the organisers. Surreptitiously, the place thrived; the Republic, desperately short of manpower after the Fourth War, left it unmolested.

But when Wyvern had got there this evening, the station was a shambles.

He found an old woman dying in the ticket office. As he gave her a drink of water, she rendered him a broken account of the raid.

"They—Our Leader's soldiers—drove down in trucks," she said. "They surrounded the place. Anyone who ran out got shot. Then they came in—very rough! Interrogated us—asked us all questions, you know. I was only after a blanket, if I could get one. I thought it might be cheaper at this time of year."

"What about Lucie?"

"Your sister was rounded up with the other organisers, sir. They were cross-questioned too, and stood against the far wall. Later, they were hustled out, into a lorry, I think. But she passed a note to someone. It must have been for you."

"Who did she pass it to?" Wyvern asked urgently.

"A little more water, please. It was to . . . I can't think

. . . It was to Birdie Byers, who kept the post office—when there was a post. But I think he was shot. We was all shot, sir. Oh—if you'd seen . . . They weren't meant to shoot. The officer called out to stop. But they were young chaps—crazy. Crazy! All crazy. I'll never forget . . ."

She interrupted herself with a burst of coughing, which turned to weeping. Five minutes later she was mercifully dead.

Wyvern searched grimly for Byers, the old postmaster. He found him at last some yards down the railway line in the direction of Stratton. The old man lay dead, face down in a clump of docks. In his hand was clutched a note. It read: CON—THEY ARE AFTER TELEPATHS FOR BIG BERT. YOU MUST LEAVE. LOVE EVER, LUCE.

Conrad crushed it, tears in his eyes, knowing he would never see his sister again.

The message was fairly clear to him. Big Bert was Bert the Brain, the giant electronic computer situated in the British Republics Sector on the Moon. He could guess why Our Beloved Leader and his gang of thugs should want a telepath for it: he had heard the state secrets which turned into ugly public rumours . . .

The message told Wyvern something else. It told him that his sister remembered he had the freak power. When they were small children together he had once revealed the secret to her. The indescribable blending of egos had terrified them both; Wyvern never repeated the experiment, and neither of them ever referred to it again. Yet she had not forgotten.

And when Jim Bull's Gestapo got to work on her—would she not, perhaps under narcotics, give up her secret? If she did so, Wyvern would be a doomed man.

Lucie was right: he must go. But where? America, now more rigidly isolationist than ever before, licking its terrible internal wounds? Russia, where rumour said anarchy prevailed? The new state of Indasia, hostile to the rest of the world? Turkey, the crackpot state which had risen by virtue of the general collapse? The still-warring African republics?

Wyvern towelled himself down, thinking hard. Telepaths

were as rare as total eclipses; no doubt the State would like the aid of one. Wyvern had willingly revealed his wild talent to no human but Lucie. He kept it shut away in a tight compartment. For if he tried to "read people's minds" (as popular parlance inexactly put it), the people would be instantly as aware of his mental presence as if he were shouting. And although his power was of limited range, it flowed out in all directions, so that he was unable to confine it quietly to one desired receiver.

The power had been erratic throughout childhood; with puberty it had come into real being. But Wyvern kept it locked away during the hopeless years of war and devastation. Only occasionally, as with Nicky, had he ventured to use it, and then with a feeling of guilt, as if he had an unearned gift.

Of course, there had been the man in London . . . Wyvern had been on leave just before the capital was obliterated. A drunk had barged into him down Praed Street. In a moment of anger, the drunk's mind had opened: the two stood locked in that overpowering union—and then both shut off abruptly. Yet Wyvern knew if he ever met that man again, the recognition would be mutual.

Most of Praed Street must have sensed that strange meeting; but then a crickeytip droned overhead, and everything else was forgotten in a general dive for shelter.

Still bothered by that memory, Wyvern hung his damp clothes over a line and began to dry his hair.

There was a loud rapping at his door. For a moment he had forgotten he was not alone in Stratton Hall. Instinctively he tensed, then relaxed. Not so soon . . .

"Come in," he said.

It was Plunkett, one of his pupils on the course he ran here.

"Sir, come into the rec, quick!" Plunkett said. "They've just announced it on the telly—OBL's had his chips!"

OBL was an irreverent way of referring to Jim Bull, Our Beloved Leader.

Wyvern followed the youngster downstairs at a run. His government job was to teach relays of twelve young men the essentials of his own invention, cruxtistics, the science

of three-di mathematical aerial lodgements, first established in space and later adapted to stratospheric fighting. He enjoyed the task, even if it was for a loathed régime, for the squads of eager young men, changing every five weeks, brought life to the decaying house, with its peeling paint and its two ancient servants.

It had been Plunkett, for instance, who had invented the Flyspy-baiter. He had trapped birds and tied tinfoil to their legs; when released, they had flown off and attracted the miniature gyro after them, televising frantically and signalling to HQ for help.

Plunkett led the way to the rec room. The other eleven youths were clustered round the ill-coloured tellyscreen. They called excitedly to their instructor.

On the screen, men marching. Wyvern found time to wonder how often he had seen almost identical shots—how often, over years and years of war, armistice and betrayed peace; it seemed a miracle there were still men to march. These now, lean and shabby, paraded beneath the angular front of the capital's city hall, with its asymmetrical clock tower.

"Our on-the-spot newsreel shows you crack troops pouring into the capital for the funeral of Our Beloved Leader, to be held tomorrow. The assassin is expected to be apprehended at any minute; there is nobody in the whole Republic who would not gladly be his executioner!"

The metallic voice stopped. There were more scenes from other parts of the inhabitable country: York, Glasgow, Hull. Shouting, marching, shows of mourning, the dipping of banners.

"And now we give you a personal message from Colonel H," the unseen commentator said. "Friends, Colonel H!—Head of the New Police, Chief Nursemaid of State, Our Late Beloved Leader's Closest Friend!"

Colonel H lowered into the cameras. Aping the old Prussian style, his hair was clipped to a short stubble, so that it looked now as if it stood on end with his fury. His features were small, almost pinched, their niggardliness emphasised by two heavy bars of dark eyebrow and a pro-

truding jaw. He was less popular generally than Jim Bull, but more feared.

"Republicans!" he began, as one who should say "curs", "Our Beloved Leader has been killed—raped of his life by bloody brutes. We have all lost a friend! We have all lost our best friend! By allowing him to die we have betrayed him and his high ideals. We must suffer! We must scourge ourselves! We *shall* suffer—and we *shall* be scourged! We have been too easy, and the time for easiness is not yet, not while there are still maniacs among us.

"I shall take over temporary leadership until a new Beloved Leader is elected by republican methods. I mean to make tight the chinks in our security curtain. The way will be hard, republicans, but I know you will suffer gladly for the sake of truth.

"Meanwhile, it makes me happy to announce that the two murderers of Our Late Beloved Leader have just been apprehended by our splendid New Police. Here they are for you all to view—and *loathe*. Their punishment will be announced later."

The scowling visage faded.

On the screen, a bullet-riddled sports car lay overturned near a roadside garage. A motley crowd of soldiers and civilians jostled round it. An officer stood on top of a tank, bellowing his lungs out through a megaphone. Nobody paid him any attention. It was pouring with grey rain.

The camera panned between the crowd. Two terrified men stood against the overturned car. One, the driver, silently hugged a shattered arm; the other, a small fellow in a blue mac, stood to attention and wept.

"These are the blood-crazed, reactionary killers!" screamed the commentator.

"Crikey!" Plunkett exclaimed, "they don't look capable of passing dud cheques!"

"Stand by for shots from the British Republics Sector of the Moon!" the commentator said.

The familiar domes like great cloches faded in. Utilitarian architecture, ventilation towers, mobs of people surging back and forth, waving sticks, shaking fists.

"These true republicans demonstrate their loyalty to the

new Leader, Colonel H," cried the commentator. "They savagely mourn the grave loss of Our Late Beloved Leader!"

"They don't, you know," a youngster of Wyvern's party exclaimed. "I reckon they are *rioting*!"

It certainly looked as if that was the case. The colony had scant respect for any Earth authority, but Jim Bull had been an old spacer, and as such his word had always carried some weight. The sound track was cut in, and the viewers heard an ugly roaring. And then, for Wyvern, the miracle happened. The camera swooped into close-up, facing a swirling knot of people. In the background, a girl passed, taking no notice of the agitators.

And her thoughts came over clearly to Wyvern!

She was a telepath! He glanced quickly at the other twelve viewers, but they obviously noticed nothing. Somehow, over the ether, her thoughts had been filtered out for all but another telepath: and her thoughts were in turmoil.

Wyvern watched her almost incredulously, his eyes strained to the reproduction of her figure. And she was thinking, in profound anxiety, "Got to follow him. 108, JJ Lane: that's his destination. Heavens, I'm sending—must stop!"

That was all; but with the thought "I" came, vaguely, her name: Eileen something—Eileen South, it had seemed to Wyvern.

She ceased sending. In a moment, she disappeared behind a pillar. The camera lost her. Wyvern forced himself to begin breathing again.

Who the "him" was Eileen South had to follow, he could not grasp; but floating behind the pronoun had been another phrase in her mind; "the impossible smile".

Of one thing he was sure. He had to get to Luna—he had to find Eileen South; she was his kind.

II

Around the factories and the quaint housing estates—dating back to the fifties of the previous century and al-

ready in decay—which fringed the capital of the Republic, a clutter of prefabricated buildings had gathered like rubbish along the high tide mark of a beach. Refugees and traders from London and the shattered Midlands accumulated here in all the wild disorder of an oriental bazaar.

It was to this region that Wyvern drove in his shooting brake the next morning. He had a small collection of canvases under his arm—a Dufy, two Paul Nashes and a Sutherland, the last of his father's fine collection. Wyvern knew of no other way to raise the required money for a lunar ticket quickly. In this quarter, they bought anything —at their own price.

After half an hour, Wyvern emerged with five thousand, five hundred pounds in greasy tenners; it was about a half of what the Dufy alone was worth. But it bought a ticket on the moonship *Aqualung*, leaving at midday the next day.

That gave him twenty-four hours to wait. He just hoped he would still be at liberty when the time came. But the officials at Thorpe spaceport had seemed casual enough: his passport had been checked, his papers examined, and not a word said. He drove home in a state of modest triumph.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, soon after he had got back to Stratton, he was arrested by the New Police.

At four-thirty, after a bumpy lorry-ride which he spent handcuffed to the frame of the lorry, he found himself back in Norwich again.

The New Police had taken over a big department store on one corner of the market square; it swarmed with activity. Still handcuffed, Wyvern was taken through a side door up to the second floor and left with a Captain Runton, who nodded to him in abstracted fashion and continued to direct some builders working there.

This floor was still being converted to police use. Once, it had been a spacious restaurant; now, flimsy partitions were transforming it into a nest of tiny offices.

"Let's see, what are you here for?" the Captain asked Wyvern mildly.

"It's no good asking me: I don't know," Wyvern said, truthfully.

"You don't *what*?"

"Know, I don't know," Wyvern said.

"Sorry, there's so much banging here! You have to watch these fellows or they down tools. I think they suspect they are not going to get paid for this job."

A swinging plank narrowly missed his ear. He ducked under a partition frame.

"Now," he shouted, above a fresh outburst of hammering. "We've found in practice that the quickest thing for everyone is for you to confess at once, without mucking about."

"Confess what?"

"The *crime*."

"What crime?"

"What *what*? Oh, what crime? Why man, the crime for which you were brought here."

"You'll have to tell me what it is first," Wyvern said grimly.

"Oh hell, I suppose I'll have to take you down and look at your bloody papers," Captain Runton said sourly. "It won't pay you to be unco-operative, you know."

He bellowed to the workmen to keep hard at it and led the way to a lift. They descended to the basement and Runton pushed Wyvern into his room; cocking his leg up on the edge of a desk, Runton read carefully through the ill-typed report someone had left on his pad.

Wyvern looked round. Tarnished mirrors greeted him, and glass-fronted cupboards with cracked glass, containing cardboard boxes and big rubber bouncing balls for children. He saw little wooden spades, yachting caps, a dusty poster saying 'The Glorious Norfolk Broads'. Nothing very frightening: he wondered why he felt frightened.

The captain of police was looking at him.

"So you're Conrad Wyvern, one of the inventors of cruxtistics?" he said.

"Is that why I've been arrested?"

Runton went and sat heavily down in the room's only

chair. His behind was running to fat and his hair thinning. It was a wonder how he did it on the lean rations. No doubt he had lost his family and spent long evenings feeling sorry for himself, drinking. He looked the typical man of his age: comfortless, unlovable.

"Why do you suddenly want to go to the Moon, Mr Wyvern?" he asked.

"There's nothing sudden about it," Wyvern said. "I've been planning this trip for some time."

"Why?"

"Oh—a change."

"A change from what?"

"From routine."

"You don't like routine?"

"Yes, but I just want a change."

"You realise you do an important job, Mr Wyvern?"

"Of course. I thought a change—"

"The government doesn't like to lose its important men."

"I booked return, didn't I? I'll be back in four days, before the next course starts at Stratton."

"The government doesn't like to lose its important men even for four days."

"It's getting choosy, isn't it?" Wyvern asked. He could feel his temper rising.

"These are bad days, Mr Wyvern."

"Need we make them worse?"

"You can still hear that bloody banging, even from here." Runton sighed deeply. He picked up the phone.

"The Palace," he said, not without a trace of irony. After a pause, he said, "Get me Colonel H." After another pause, "I'm Captain Runton, late of Leicester; he'll remember." Later, "Yes, I'll settle for his secretary."

Finally he was put through.

"Hello? Captain Runton here . . . Good. Look, we have Conrad Wyvern here . . . Yes, that's him. He is being rather impolite in answer to polite questions . . . Yes . . . May I bring him over to you? . . . Well, for one thing, we have the decorators in here, making a lot of noise, and for another I hoped I might perhaps have the great pleasure of

—er, possibly meeting Colonel H again . . . Oh yes, yes, I'm sure he must be . . Yes, well another thing was, I hear you have a marvellous new Inquisitor up there, eh? . . . No, oh no, sir, that was a mild joke merely. I'm sorry. I naturally meant Questioner . . . Thank you."

Runton hung up, puffing out his cheeks. Somebody at the other end of the line evidently did not love him.

"Come on, Wyvern," he said heavily. "We're going over to see the big chiefs at the barracks."

It took ten minutes to drive, in a commandeered Post Office van, up to the barracks where Our Beloved Leader had been shot. It took a further twenty to get inside, by which time Captain Runton was more nervous than his captive.

Aside from his own preoccupations, Wyvern was intrigued by the Captain. The man was plainly using him as an excuse to ingratiate himself with the powers-that-be. He seemed to have nothing specific against Wyvern ; the mere fact that Wyvern was someone of importance made him worth hanging on to. All of which might be very well for Runton, but was uncomfortable for Wyvern.

And now, no doubt, Runton was reflecting that if he had come on a wild-goose chase he would get, not congratulations, but a kick in the well-padded seat of his pants. And *that* would make him unscrupulous about getting something pinned on Wyvern. Just what would happen seemed suddenly in the hands of chance ; one thing Wyvern sincerely hoped: that the State's inter-departmental communications were poor, and that these people did not know his sister had been arrested at East Hingham.

That question at least was partly answered when they were finally allowed out of the guard room, and Runton grumbled, "There's a lot of reorganisation needed here—everyone lives in watertight compartments. No government department knows what the next one is up to. You can't get anything done."

The barracks swarmed with soldiers and police. Tanks were drawn up in the old drill square.

"I'd better take your handcuffs off," Runton said. "They look a bit ostentatious in here. And for God's sake don't

try anything, or I'll shoot you down and swear blind you were OBL's murderer."

"I thought they'd already caught the killers?" Wyvern asked, mildly surprised.

"Hold your tongue while you've got the chance," Runton said in a sharp burst of savagery.

They passed together into the main building, where an armed guard met them and escorted them upstairs. The guards' hobnails clattered loudly up the stone steps. A clock at the top said nearly six. "Eighteen hours before my ship goes," Wyvern thought grimly.

They were pushed through a door on which, in still wet paint, was the legend "Col. H & Sec." Inside, the first thing that caught Wyvern's eye was the pot of white paint itself. It stood nearly empty on a desk, the brush in it. Someone had been doing over the window casement with it, and the room stank of paint.

"Same old Republican muddle," Wyvern thought, but the man in the room, Colonel H's secretary, gave him other ideas.

The secretary was a man in his late fifties, as thin and neat as a picked chicken bone. His uniform was spotless, his white hair impeccably parted. His eyes were fish cold.

"Oh—er, we've an appointment with Colonel H," said Runton, plainly distressed at lack of clue to rank on the secretary's uniform.

"Are you Conrad Wyvern?" the secretary asked Wyvern.

"I am."

"*You* have an appointment with Colonel H," the secretary said. "Thank you for bringing him, Captain. Have you his report there? Thank you, splendid. We will keep you no longer."

He accepted the report and waited for Runton to shamble backwards out of the room, without once removing his gaze from Wyvern. The latter, to his chagrin, found himself fidgeting and looking down. He decided to defend by attack.

"I am hoping to receive an official apology for the way I've been treated," he said. "I was handcuffed and brought here on the very flimsiest of pretexts."

"Our junior officers make up in enthusiasm what they lack in manners," the secretary said.

"Is that supposed to be an apology?"

The secretary stood up.

"No, it damn well isn't," he said. "The State does not apologise. We brought you here to cross-examine you, not kiss you better. The Republic is in its early days—we can't afford to be sentimental. Don't you know, the road to success is paved with bruised egos like yours. If you feel badly about all this, it's obviously because you are out of sympathy with us. Why are you out of sympathy with us, Wyvern?"

"I don't think—" Wyvern said, then lapsed into silence. It was hardly an answerable question.

"You are an important man, Wyvern—or you could be. You should be a member of the Party, Wyvern. Why aren't you a member of the Party, Wyvern?" He used the name as if it were a dirty word.

"I'm busy—teaching your young men."

"And?"

"Well, it's a full-time job."

"You get four or five days break between each course, don't you?"

"I have to organise things—administration, rations . . ."

"Oh? But it has to wait if you fancy a flip to Luna, eh?"

"Can you tell me how long it will be before the Colonel is ready to see me?" Wyvern asked pointedly. "Perhaps you would care to continue painting your office?"

The secretary reached out and struck him across the cheek. Then he turned, going by a side door into the adjoining room. It slammed behind him, hard.

By now, Wyvern was slightly rattled; he even contemplated stepping into the corridor and trying to make a break for it. But a slight scrape of an army boot and a mutter of conversation outside the room told him the corridor was guarded.

Devoutly, Wyvern wished he could use his hidden power to find just what these people intended of him; but that was impossible; he could no more commune with this

secretary without his being aware of it than he could dance with him.

The secretary returned accompanying a sturdy man with wide shoulders and small features. He looked more plebeian in the flesh than over TV, but was unmistakably Colonel H. He held a juicy pat of butter in one hand and ate it with a teaspoon.

"Loot!" he explained to Wyvern. "First fresh butter I've tasted for months. There are *some* advantages in having OBL out of the way." He chuckled and sucked the spoon greedily.

The secretary frowned.

"Sir, may I know why I have been brought here in this undignified way?" Wyvern asked urgently. "If I've broken any laws, please tell me."

A slip of butter fell onto the secretary's desk.

"We've none of us got any dignity these days," Colonel H said. "We gave up our right to dignity when we dropped the first fusion bombs. Oh, I know it's easy for me to theorise . . . Look here, Wyvern, we can't let you go to the Moon. How do we know you're not planning to nip off to the American Sector as soon as you get there? We've got to have you here, teaching our boys cruxtistics, or whatever it is."

"Why should you think I was planning to leave the Republic?" Wyvern asked.

Colonel H laughed.

"We can't trust *anyone*," he said. "It's going to be tough in Britain this next decade, and those who can't face the prospect will betray us. A hungry man will cut his brother's throat for a crust of bread. I've just had word of a round-up of profiteers at a place called East Hingham—the list of prisoners should be in at any minute. Those sort of people, they're swindling someone, they only deserve shooting."

He lapsed into moody silence and dug into his pat of butter.

"If only there was some way of *really knowing* what people are thinking inside here." The colonel thumped his stubbly skull. "Really knowing . . . And there is a way, if we could only get at it."

"I don't think that idea is something we should discuss with a suspect," the secretary said primly.

"Why not?" the colonel asked. Then he laughed, "You see, I was thinking of sending him down into the cellars to see our new inquisitor—and he ought to know what it's all about first."

At that, the secretary laughed too, and wet his lips.

"You better tell him about it," the colonel said. He licked the last of the butter off the paper, dropped the paper into a wastepaper basket and slipped the spoon into a pocket of his tunic.

"It won't take long," the secretary said crisply. "You have heard of Big Bert, Wyvern. It is the largest computer in existence, except for Fall Guy, the American computer on Luna. For a number of years, for lack of adequate staff, Big Bert has lain practically idle, yet it is potentially the Republic's greatest weapon. You see, Bert has latent mind-reading abilities. Once he is taught, we, the State, will be able to know what any citizen is thinking!"

Wyvern's hands had gone damp. He rested them lightly on the desk.

"When—when is he going to be taught?" he asked. His voice sounded unreal in his ears.

"That's the snag!" Colonel H exclaimed. "Only a telepath knows what this telepathy stunt really is. We've got to get our hands on a telepath—as soon as possible."

"Actually, we *had* one," the secretary said. "A fellow called Grisewood volunteered. But there are *surgical* difficulties—which have now been overcome—in coupling these freaks to the machine. Grisewood died. Now we want another of his ilk. You don't happen to know any telepathic persons running round loose, Wyvern, do you?"

Were they playing with him? Did they know all the time?

Wyvern said: "I wouldn't know one if I saw one."

Colonel H went over to the door. "Big Bert seems to think that telepathy is a sort of side product of intelligence—you wouldn't get it in an idiot, for instance. So we're checking on anyone who isn't imbecile. We are starting a

republic-wide drive very shortly. You'd better be checked now you're here, Wyvern."

He turned, his finger on the door handle, and looked at Wyvern. In his eyes was a terrible kind of excitement; Wyvern recognised it: it was blood lust. He knew then his life and reputation were mere straws to these men.

"Is this justice?" he said.

"My dear man, of course not," the secretary said, his voice expressing incredulity at such a naïve question. "We are only police, and as such our concern is with the law, not with justice. For justice you must go to the government —*if* you can get there!"

"You *are* the government!" Wyvern said.

"Good God, not yet!" Colonel H said. "OBL only died the day before yesterday. Give us a week!"

He uttered his meaningless laugh again, and opened the door.

"Corporal, take this civilian down to Parrodyce in the cellars," he called.

A corporal and a private marched in at once.

"Parrodyce is our new Inquisitor," the secretary whispered to Wyvern, conspiratorially. "You'll find he's hot stuff!"

Wyvern was seized and marched into the corridor. He did not struggle; it seemed useless. The mentality of the captive had descended suddenly upon him, a resignation blind to life.

They clumped downstairs, and then down two underground flights, and then along a corridor, and then through a locked steel door and down another corridor. And as they moved more deeply into the stronghold, paradoxically, a hope began to grow in Wyvern. This Inquisitor, Parrodyce, however cruel his methods were, would have no more understanding of telepathy than anyone else; he would not know what to look for; he would fail; Wyvern would be released.

The corporal pushed Wyvern into a tiny room. "Strip," he ordered, and stood watching interestedly while Wyvern did so.

"Let's have your kit," he said.

Wyvern handed it over. Protesting would do him no good. Yet in his pocket went his health certificate, passport, identity and ticket for the *Aqualung*.

"How long am I likely to be down here?" he asked the corporal.

"Let's have your watch too. That depends on you."

"I've got to be out tomorrow."

"Have you now? I'd better tell the chap who makes the coffins to get busy, then, hadn't I?"

He disappeared, leaving the private on guard. In two minutes he was back. Signalling to Wyvern, he led him through a swing door. It was hot in here, and there was a smell of antiseptic and ether about.

"This is where they operate," the corporal said in a hushed voice. "They do some terrible things in here."

A man in a white coat passed them, wheeling a patient along on a trolley. The corporal gaped.

"Did you see *that*?" he whispered. "The poor fellow has had his lower jaw removed! How long do you think he'll live like that?"

Without hanging about for an answer, he pushed Wyvern through another door, remaining outside himself and bolting the door. Wyvern found he was alone with a nurse.

"I must warn you that any show whatsoever of violence, or any raising of the voice in shouting or screaming will be dealt with very firmly indeed," she said, in the voice of one repeating a lesson. "Now come and have a shower. This way."

"I don't need a shower," he said.

"Come and have a shower," she said. "You're filthy. Mr Parrodyce is funny about people who stink."

The shower was nothing. True, for a few seconds Wyvern, twisting in pain against the cubicle wall, thought he was being scalded to death; but then it was over, and the cold soused him back to a grim sanity. Someone, presumably, was just getting his hand in.

"Now you look quite a healthy pink," said the nurse sociably.

She shackled his hands behind his back on a pair of long-chained cuffs, and led him into another room. Wyvern

noticed the walls and door were very thick ; the room itself would be quite soundproof.

It was furnished with steel cupboards, a big chair like a dentist's, with gas cylinders attached, and a light table at which a plump man sat, his hands folded on the table top. His spectacles flashed as he looked up at Wyvern.

"This is Mr Parrodyce," the nurse said, and left the room.

"I've got to kill this devil," Wyvern thought. He had never felt that way about anybody before ; the emotion came on a wave of revulsion that shocked him with its strength.

Yet Parrodyce had not touched him. He had merely come round the table, looked, and gone back and sat down, putting his hands back on the table top. Now he sat there, his hands trembling slightly.

And Wyvern hated him.

Also, he had suddenly realised that the power to kill might well lie within his mind. The shock of ego-union which everyone called telepathy was formidable ; driven steel-tipped with hate into an unprepared brain, it should prove fatal, or at least cause insanity. And that would be nice, thought Wyvern.

"What shall I do to you first?" Parrodyce asked.

Suddenly, it was as if Wyvern had already suffered all this in another existence. For was this not, he asked himself, the nightmare which had afflicted every generation since the first World War: to be delivered into the hands of a merciless enemy ; to feel one's precious life at a burnt-out end ; to know that all the bright things in the world were absolutely nothing against the privilege of not having to bear pain?

But Parrodyce turned his broad back and went over to a steel cabinet.

"This is my kingdom down here," he said abstractedly, rummaging in a drawer. "I can do what I like ; I am encouraged to do what I like. They are pleased when I do what I like—provided I get information for them. And I generally *do* get it: by advanced, clinical methods. I

sometimes think I was born with a silver hypodermic in my hand."

He laughed, and turned. There was a silver hypodermic in his hand.

Wyvern started to run round the other side of the table. A section of the floor instantly sank eighteen inches; unavoidably, he tripped into the pit so formed, and fell. He barked his shins painfully and—his hands being secured behind his back—caught his head hard on the floor. Parrodyce was upon him before his vision cleared; the needle was sliding into the sinews of his left arm.

"There!" Parrodyce exclaimed. "Now get up."

Carefully Wyvern stood up. His heart beat furiously as he searched himself for the first indications of harm the drug might produce. He was all right now, and now, but in a minute, in twenty seconds—?

"What have you pumped into me?" he gasped.

"Oh,—I think I will not tell you; it is better your mind should not be at rest. Get on this chair here."

He sat in the dentist's chair, and was secured by steel bands which clamped round his throat and ankles. Parrodyce went back to his cabinets, glancing at his wrist watch as he did so.

"Just wait for that injection to take effect," he said, "and then we'll start the questioning, and see how much of a potential mind-reader you are."

Wyvern watched the plump man's nonchalance, thinking, "He's acting a part to me; here I am helpless, yet he finds it necessary to put up some sort of a front. Is it just to scare me?"

With the same careful nonchalance, Parrodyce flipped on a slow-moving tape of dance music, an import from Turkey. He sat with his chin in his hands, listening to someone else's nostalgia.

"What if it's spring, if you're not embraceable?
I feel no joy, joy is untraceable;
Don't even hear the birds, hear only your parting words:
'Life goes on; no one's Irreplaceable'."

Like the drowsy beat of the music, giddiness swept over Wyvern in spasms. He was away from reality now, a mere ball of sensation expanding and contracting rhythmically from infinite size to a pinpoint, each heartbeat a rush to become either an atom or a universe: yet all the while the silent concrete room bellowed in his ears.

And now the Inquisitor was leaning over him. Wyvern saw him as a fish might see a corpse dangled bulge-eyed over its rippling pool. The corpse's mouth was opening and shutting; it seemed to be saying "Irreplaceable", but every syllable was followed by the gurgle in Wyvern's tympanum: "Irgugregugplagugcegugagugbull, irgugregug-gugplagugcegugagugbull."

The human mind, like the body, has its strange, secret reserves. Among the madness and noise there was a split second when Wyvern was entirely in possession of himself. In that moment, he acted upon his earlier decision to kill Parrodyce. He opened at full blast the telepathic trap of his mind, pouring out loathing to the utmost of his strength —and was met with a counter-surge of telepathic force!

On the instant of ego-union between them, Wyvern learnt much; he *knew*, for instance, as unmistakably as one recognises a brother, that Parrodyce was the drunken telepath he had bumped into years ago in London; and then he dropped deep into unconsciousness.

III

Eugene Parrodyce talked rapidly.

Sweat stood out on his forehead, like grease on a bit of dirty vellum. As he spoke, he held a bitter-tasting beaker of liquid to Wyvern's lips, letting it slop down his chin while he concentrated on what he was saying. With the sense of urgency harrying him, he had not unlocked the bands round Wyvern's throat and ankles; but instead of standing over him, he now knelt before him.

"Open up again, Wyvern," he whispered. "For heaven's sake open your mind up again, and let me in. Why're you closed down on me? You know it's dangerous to be talking to you like this—for all I know, they've got secret micro-

phones about the place, although they may be too disorganised to have thought of it yet. But H might come in. He came down here once before. If you'd only open up again for a second, we'd get everything cleared up between us—more than we'll ever be able to do by talking."

"Shut up!" Wyvern said.

The bitter liquid cleared the fire in his body.

"Release my hands and neck, and let me sit up," he said.

"You—you won't try anything stupid, will you?"

"Keep my ankles locked if you're afraid I'm going to murder you."

Abjectly, muttering apologies, Parrodyce released the chafed wrists and neck from their bands; he left the ankles locked, as Wyvern had suggested. And talk burst from him again.

"We must communicate, Wyvern! Be sensible! We're the only ones who have this gift—this great gift. You must let me in: I've so much to say and explain . . ."

"Shut up!" Wyvern said. "I won't open my mind to you again. I'd be sick if I did. You're a walking cess-pit."

"Oh, it's easy to insult me now, now you know my secret—"

"Parrodyce—you had me here unconscious. *Why didn't you kill me then*?"

The plump man didn't answer. He shook his head helplessly, his eyes fixed on Wyvern's, tears blurring his gaze. He was trying to break through Wyvern's shield. Wyvern could feel him like a blind man padding behind locked mental doors.

"Stop it!" he said. "You aren't coming in. I won't have you. You're too foul, Parrodyce!"

"Yes, yes, I am foul," the other agreed eagerly. "But can't you see we are brothers really in this. You've got to help me get out of here. You've—"

"Oh no," Wyvern said. "You've got to help *me* get out of here. And first of all there are several things I want to know."

"Let's connect—then you can know everything!"

"Question and answer will do me, you dog! How did you get this job?"

Parrodyce knelt back wretchedly. He wrung his hands as if he were washing them; Wyvern had read of this gesture but had never before seen it actually performed. On top of everything else he had suffered, this man's sudden transformation had considerably shaken him. From a torturer, Parrodyce had turned into a sobbing wreck: Wyvern had regained consciousness to find the creature slobbering round his neck.

"A telepath is an ideal inquisitor," Parrodyce was saying now. "Don't you see, when I had someone shut up safe in here—so that nobody outside could feel what I was doing—I could explore his mind when he was drugged and read every secret he had. When they came round, even if they were allowed to get away alive, they didn't know what had happened to them. And—and I always delivered the goods to H. I couldn't fail. And I didn't dare fail—"

"But *why* did you do it?"

"I—I—Let me into your mind! I'll explain then."

"You filthy vampire! No, I won't let you in," Wyvern said. And Wyvern had no need for explanation. Their second of ego-union had given him the real truth: Parrodyce was a pathological coward; full of fear himself, he could only exist on the fear of others.

Yet it was not so much this shameless exhibition of fear which revolted Wyvern. Rather, it was to find that a fellow telepath had slipped so far from everything regarded as decent in human conduct. Isolated from others of his kind, Wyvern had vaguely imagined that a telepathic community (supposing such a thing should ever exist or had existed) would be free from vice; given such a powerful instrument of understanding, surely it would always consider the feelings of its fellows which it could learn so easily? Now he saw the fallacy of his assumption; telepathy was a gift which lay in its place alongside all the other human traits, good or bad. There could no more be a true brotherhood of telepaths than there could be a true brotherhood of man.

"Get these bands off my legs," Wyvern ordered. "You're going to let me go free out of here."

"No! Oh no, I can't let you go now I've found you!"

"Wait! Colonel H's little pal told me there was another telepath. What was his name—Grimslade? What did you do to him?"

"You mean Grisewood? I never got near enough to him to communicate . . . Don't remind me of him—he died horribly, when they tried to couple him to Big Bert. That must be the worst pain of all; I pray I never come to that!"

"Get these shackles off me!" Wyvern said.

Tears ran from Parrodyce's eyes. His spectacles misted. He fumbled at the locks by Wyvern's ankles. When they were undone, he lay helplessly where he was at the foot of the chair.

"You're going to betray me to H! You're going to betray me," he muttered, over and over again.

"If I betrayed you, I'd betray myself," Wyvern said in a hard voice. He was testing out his legs; they just held him. Parrodyce, too, got slowly to his feet.

"That's right," he said thoughtfully. "If you betray me you betray yourself."

He mended visibly. Some degree of colour returned to his face. He could see there was hope for himself.

"I can get you safely out of here by just giving the word," he said. "I'll do it at once."

He turned and went slowly back to his cabinets. He began to speak into a concealed phone in something like his old manner. When he finished, he pushed the phone back and came and put his hand on Wyvern's arm.

"I'm in control of myself again now," he said. "It was the shock of finding another telepath at last. I must have a drink. Let me give you one, too. They only allow me a stingy bit each day, or I try to drown my sorrows."

Wyvern curtly refused the drink when it was offered. Parrodyce drank it off and poured himself another.

"I'm kept down here," he said. "My life's pure misery, Wyvern, I swear it is. They've given me an assistant just recently, a fellow called Joe Rakister. The company's good for me—it's just someone to talk to, you know. I've become quite fond of Rakister, in my own way, you know. But all the while I'm afraid he's really one of H's men,

sent to spy on me. I'm getting a bag of nerves, Wyvern; I *never* used to be like this, even during the Fourth War. I suppose it's the feed-back effect of the torture. I don't get any pleasure out of it. At least—well, I'm sorry afterwards. Sick, you know. In my dreams they come back and do all the things to me I've done to them."

His hand started quivering. He put the glass down, biting his lip, and suddenly swung round to confront Wyvern.

"For God's sake do something for me," he begged.

"What?"

"If you ever get the chance—I want you to communicate with me. Oh, I know what it must be like for you: free-diving in a cesspool . . . But you've got to find what I've got wrong with me, Wyvern. You've got to go down and find it, and try and put it right. It must be something buried right down in my id, I don't know what: something someone did to me when I was a kid in a pram, perhaps. Psychiatrists can't do anything. But *you* could! You're telepathic, Wyvern! You could put me straight again, Wyvern."

Yes, Parrodyce was right. He was just one of the bits of horrible mess man had infested his world with. If you could, you put it right; even if it did no ultimate good, the gesture satisfied you yourself. And that was something.

"If I get the chance, I will, Parrodyce," Wyvern said. "Now I want to go."

Parrodyce thanked him hopelessly, and handed him over to the nurse.

"I spoke to H's secretary," were Parrodyce's last words. "You'll be allowed out the main gate."

He went back into his silent torture chamber, polishing his spectacles and shaking his head.

The nurse handed Wyvern over to the corporal. The corporal gave him his clothes and watched him dress.

"Not a mark on you, except that bruised shin," he exclaimed wonderingly.

"Where are my belongings?" Wyvern asked.

"*Just* going to get them. In a hurry, aren't you?"

He produced them in an old toffee tin. Wyvern looked rapidly through them; everything was there except two

items: the ticket to Luna and his passport. He looked sharply up at the corporal.

"Something missing?" the latter asked. "This was the Colonel's secretary's orders. He told me to give you this."

He produced a grubby envelope from a tunic pocket. It contained the Luna ticket and the passport, torn to tiny shreds.

A private soldier led Wyvern upstairs and out across the barrack square. It was dark and still raining. Wyvern had no coat, but he scarcely noticed the wet. With a minimum of formality, he was let through the gate into freedom: they had ceased to be interested in him.

He had no option but to walk home, exhausted as he felt. Before dawn, the rain ceased. The sun rose behind cloud. The country was fine and still, trees bending in luxuriant summer growth, dripping moisture into the ground. Grass blades shimmered like harmless spears. The birds rejoiced in the new daylight.

At last Stratton Hall was in sight. It would be empty now, except for the two old servants, as empty as Wyvern felt. He had no hope. Somewhere, thousands of miles away, was a girl he might have loved. Now he would never get to her. There was nowhere else to go, nothing else to do.

A car engine sounded behind him as he turned into the drive gates. Instinctively, he flinched. Had they come to get him back again already? Perhaps he shouldn't have returned here at all; he could have lost his identity and become one of the many nomads who tramped the countryside.

But the driver of the car wore no uniform. He pulled up in a spray of mud and called out, "Is this place Stratton Hall?" He looked about eighty, but his voice was young and sharp.

"Yes."

"You just going in? Well I'm Government Mail. Give this to Mr Conrad Wyvern for me, and spare me half a mile."

He was off. Wyvern looked blankly at the green envelope. He stuffed it in a damp pocket and trudged up the drive. A side door had been carelessly left open. The ser-

vants seemed to be still asleep; even the Flyspy was not stirring in its metal nest.

Wyvern sank wearily onto his bed before opening the envelope and reading its contents. Then he sat recalling the discontented voice of Captain Runton saying: "There's a lot of reorganisation needed here—everyone lives in watertight compartments. No government department knows what the next one is up to." He began to smile. Then he began to laugh. He laughed helplessly, stupidly, until he was out of breath.

He had just received a government warrant to report to the Ss *Aqualung* at 1200 hours on that date for service on Luna. The warrant overrode any such formalities as passports or tickets.

IV

For the first part of the brief journey to the moon, Wyvern slept. Even when he felt himself again, he hardly left his tiny cabin.

The ship was almost full, despite many reports of trouble in the British Republics Sector following the death of Our Beloved Leader, for most of the passengers were on official business, and so could not make cancellations even if they wished it. They had stood about uneasily at Thorpe Field before take-off, grey little people making small British jokes about having to get away from the rain at all costs; Wyvern avoided them, purposely arriving late and keeping to himself.

A painful attempt at pre-Republican luxury had been aimed at aboard. There was a selection of drinks at the bar; perfumes were on sale; a bookstall sold something besides the eternal grey-paged numbers of 'On', the official magazine of the régime. Wyvern bought a modern Turkish novel. Turkey alone, neutral during two atomic wars, maintained something of an international culture. Haven of refugees from all over the globe, it produced a stream of literature and teleplays in all languages. Istanbul was again "the incomparable city", as it had been over a thousand years ago.

The novel cheered Wyvern. It was technically competent, humorous and absolutely superficial; its characters moved gaily through their paces in a non-political setting. It all served to restore Wyvern's equilibrium, as it was meant to do. It also directed his thoughts to Eileen South.

She did not know of Conrad Wyvern's existence; he had never met her. Yet such were their natures that he felt he knew her better than an ordinary man might know his own wife. He had caught the essence of her as surely as a grape traps the essence of the sun.

He would find her. In the circumscribed environments of the moon, and with his powers, that would not be too difficult. And then? Then they might perhaps escape together to the American Sector; thanks be to goodness there was nothing like an extradition order these days, with international law a thing of the past.

It was possible that the New Police might have radioed ahead to have him arrested on landing; if they wished, they could have it done—lack of passport would be adequate reason, were one even needed. But they had, as far as Wyvern knew, nothing definite against him; the tearing up of the ticket had been no more than a spiteful gesture. No doubt, Wyvern thought ruefully, his Dufy probably hung on H's secretary's wall by now.

A man called Head, from Government Warfare, greeted Wyvern when he left the *Aqualung*. He shook hands respectfully. Wyvern was still a free citizen, as far as the term free applied at all these days. The *Aqualung* had landed on the chill expanse of field outside the huddled domes of the British Luna community. Through the ports, the strange city was visible, stewing in sunlight. They transferred from the ship straight into a buggy, which crawled into the vast maw of one of the airlocks. There they underwent the tedious process of decontamination: no infections were allowed to enter the closed system of the Sector, where they might circulate all too easily.

Head apologised a hundred times for the lengthy delay.

At last they were officially cleared and allowed to pass into the dome proper.

They drove to a civil servant's hotel on a laner, a small

vehicle running on a monorail among the lanes, as the narrow avenues of the British Sector were called. The hotel accommodation was adequate, although utilitarian, like everything else up here. Head apologised for it all, taking the blame for the entire economic framework upon his own narrow shoulders.

"And I shall call for you punctually tomorrow morning, Mr Wyvern," he said, smiling deferentially. "There will be a busy day ahead of us then, I dare surmise, so I will leave you now to get what I trust will be an excellent night's rest. The bed looks at least comfortable, and no doubt you are fatigued by your journey. The water should be on at this time of the evening."

After more profuse expressions of solicitude for Wyvern's comfort, Head left.

His amiable talk of mornings and evenings had been a mere convention: it would be sunlight for the next week, and the cloche-like domes had up their polarscreens.

As soon as he was alone, restlessness seized Wyvern. Eileen was somewhere near, perhaps within a mile. He shaved, changed his suit and went downstairs. There were few people about, mostly male and as grey and official-looking as the people on the ship. One brightly dressed woman walked elegantly into the bar; she was possibly Turkish. A synthetic orchestra was playing the "Atomics" from Dinkuhl's Managerial Suite.

Wyvern carefully studied a map of the British Sector framed in the foyer. The name "JJ Lane" roused his heart excitedly: that was the name of the lane to which Eileen had been going. He went and ordered a dinner in better spirits.

The meal was simple: soup, a choice of two main dishes, a sweet, ice cream and something labelled coffee which was obviously and unsuccessfully synthetic. The only touch of the exotic was a Martian sauce served with the creamed fish; the new colony had begun to export something other than fissionables. With the present state of world affairs, food was scarcer than uranium.

Once he had eaten, Wyvern went determinedly to bed. But no sooner was the light out and the window polared,

than restlessness seized him. Tomorrow might be too late, he thought. Suppose the New Police arrived in the night? He got up and dressed, his fingers suddenly frantic with haste.

As far as Wyvern could tell, he left the hotel unobserved.

The distance to JJ Lane was short, and he decided to walk there. The British Sector had been planned with mathematical precision even before the first lunar landings, in the days of the First H-War; the thoroughfares running East-West were called "Walks", and numbered; the thoroughfares running North-South were called "Lanes", and designated by the letters of the alphabet, which had to stand doubled after the first twenty-six Lanes, to adhere to the plan.

Unfortunately, some British muddle-headedness had crept into the design. Where the German and American Sectors adhered with mathematical precision to their planners' blueprints, the British had succumbed to a traditional love of crooked lanes. JJ, in fact, out on the periphery, actually cut Five Walk in two places. The plan had been further botched by additions on the wrong side of town, so that Wyvern's hotel, for example, stood in Minus Nine. Despite these complications, it was only ten minutes before he turned into JJ.

Eileen South had been going to follow someone to 108. As he too moved in that direction, Wyvern ran over in his mind all he knew of this business. To begin with, something must greatly have surprised her to break through her guard and make her radiate for a moment. There had been no hint in her thought of having met another telepath, which surely would have emerged if she had done. And that indicated that whoever she was going to follow—a non-telepath—had been radiating very strongly to get through. Whoever he was, Eileen's thought showed he was a stranger to her, and something about him evoked in her mind that curious phrase: "the impossible smile".

Of a sudden, Wyvern found himself needing to know much more about this stranger to whose house he was going. The stranger was the only link with Eileen; and the

stranger had a secret disturbing him powerfully enough to radiate to Eileen accidentally, although her power was shut down.

Wyvern knew this feeling well. If he opened his own mind to become aware of the minds about him, those minds would be as aware of him as he of them; they would be wireless receivers picking up his broadcast. Yet when his mind was closed, he still retained an abnormal sensitivity which might be agitated by agitation about him. The troubledness would loom up to him like buildings swimming on oil in a dense fog: some town halls, most merely suburban villas, one perhaps a cathedral of worry.

As he came into JJ, Wyvern met a growing mob of people. They were a rough-looking lot, although quiet enough at present, their attention fixed on a haggard man who was addressing them. Wyvern caught something of what he was saying.

". . . this skinflint régime. And things aren't going to get any better, friends. No! They're going to get worse—and they're going to go on getting worse. It was bad enough with Jim Bull in control. He was a black-hearted rogue! But he was an old spacer! You don't need me to remind you he was with Wattleton on the third Venus expedition; it was Jim Bull coaxed the old *Elizabeth* home. He knew what it was like up here.

"Now Jim Bull's dead. And I tell you this for nothing, friends—if any of the Earthbound pack that is squabbling for his empty seat now gets a whip-hand over us, we may as well go straight round to the Bureau and draw our death certificates—and I'll be in front of the queue!"

There was a roar of approval, but on the whole they sounded peaceable enough.

JJ was not a savoury quarter. It had lodgings and snuff palaces and a blue cinema, and even one of the gadarenes beloved by spacemen on the search for orgies, thriving among the many tiny shops. 108 was an "earth shop", the lunar version of a pawnbroker's, so called because here were stocked all the innumerable little articles in daily use but manufactured only on the home planet. Over the shop was a small flat. A descriptive word out of an ancient

thriller crossed Wyvern's mind: seedy. This shop, this flat, was seedy.

He pushed open the shop door and went in.

The place was poky and ill-stocked. If you thumped your fist on the counter, you would crack the veneer—but some irate customer had thought of that already. In a cubicle at the back, the proprietor slouched over a telephone. He did not look up when Wyvern entered.

Somewhere out of sight, a man in soft shoes ran heavily down a staircase, burst open a door and let it slam behind him.

Still the proprietor did not move.

"I want some service," Wyvern said sharply. "Are you asleep?"

Still no movement.

"Listen, I want to buy some informa—" Wyvern's voice died as he saw the deep stain on the man's tunic in the region of his stomach. He pushed up the flap of the counter and went round.

The fellow was dead, although still warm and still bleeding. He peered into eternity with a fixed, mercenary stare. His call to the exchange had never gone through, and he was beyond needing it now. The lunar ground had no worms; this stabbed body would keep for ever in its coffin.

And did this mean the only link with Eileen South was broken? Wyvern's thoughts twisted unhappily.

Then he remembered hearing a man running downstairs; that could have been the murderer of the proprietor.

He pulled open a flimsy side door and backstairs were revealed. After a second's hesitation, he ran up them three at a time. At the top were two doors, one open. Wyvern entered at the double.

A man lay on a bed dying. He was curled up clutching at dirty blankets, with a heavy knife in his ribs. In his agony, he rolled on to his back, driving the knife further home. He sighed wearily and seemed to relax.

On his face, an impossible smile stretched from ear to ear.

Wyvern knelt by the side of the bed. This man was no newcomer to violence. He looked every inch a thug. Old scars stretched from either end of his mouth right up his cheekbones, giving him, even in the midst of pain, that look of ghastly hilarity. He was clearly beyond help and fading fast. He rolled convulsively over again, burying his face in the bedding.

Here was the link with Eileen South. There was only one thing Wyvern could do, loath as he was to do it. He opened up his mind and entered into ego-union with the dying man . . .

A garble of voices, beating like rain on a roof. A welter of regret, cruel as frightened fangs. Fear, foamlike. Anger. Vindictiveness, blasphemy, pain: shutters banging in December's storm. Memory. Stupidity, the sparse lanterns going out in the medieval alleys of his mind. Warped ways. And, even now, even yet, hope.

Hopes like bats, pain like a driving sleet seemed to batter against Wyvern's face, blinding his psychic sense.

On all sides of him, three-dimensionally as it appeared, crowded scenes from the man's past life, scudding by, falling out of darkness into more darkness. The backgrounds were mainly of an appalling drabness, the faces in the foreground often twisted into hatred; here a girl's countenance smiled like a lamp, there envy burned in a rival's face; everywhere callousness, besottedness, a life run to seed. Wyvern sank grimly through the sediment.

He was hopelessly lost in the labyrinth, walled up in night while fifty movie projectors played fifty different films on him. And the projectors faltered and dimmed. He had to be quick: the man with the impossible smile was dying.

The patterned mists cleared for a moment. Something came clearly through from the man, his identity and his latest crime:

'I, George Dorgen, killed Jim Bull, Our Beloved Leader.'

It came not in words but pictures, a cramped figure on a deadly mission, breaking through a bathroom wall, shooting a man in his shower. Then it all burst like a

bubble and Dorgen was lying on this very bed; he had fled to the Moon, he thought himself safe, and then the man with the knife and the soft shoes entered the bedroom . . .

Then that bubble of memory also burst, burst into the garish colour of pain. It flowed round, over, through Wyvern, drowning him, bearing him seven seas down in another's futility. It bore him Everest-deep, changing its hues, fading and cooling. It carried him where no lungs could live, and then it was going, gargling away into a whirlpool down the hole in the universe where all life goes. It broke foaming over Wyvern's head, pouring away like a mill-race, tearing to take him with it, sucking at his body, whipping about his legs, screaming as it slid over the bare nerve-ends of Dorgen's ocean-mind-bed.

The last drop drained. The little universe collapsed with one inexorable implosion. Dorgen was dead.

For a long time, clutching his pebble of extraordinary information, Wyvern slumped against the rickety bed. He was vitiated. His body had no strength: his eyes would not open: his mind was dead. There was only the memory of a killer who slayed an innocent man downstairs to come up here and kill another killer; and that killer had killed Jim Bull, the killer.

Kill, kill, kill. Wyvern feebly resolved never to use his mental power again, unless . . .

Suddenly he remembered Eileen South. As far as he could tell in the chaos of Dorgen's mind, the man had no knowledge of her at all, her identity or her whereabouts. But the mere thought of Eileen revived Wyvern. After a while, he picked himself up off the floor.

It came to him decisively that he must get away from it all. Life was too foul, too complicated. He must get to the American Sector, or Turksdome, anywhere.

He came weakly out on to the landing.

Two men in the uniform of the New Police stood shoulder to shoulder at the bottom of the stairs. Revolvers were clasped in their fists.

"Come on down quietly," said one of them, "or we'll blow your guts out."

The stairs creaked one by one as he trod on them, obeying.

The next three hours were full of uniforms and questions.

After his first interrogation at Police Headquarters, Wyvern was put into an ordinary cell. That interrogation was made by a police sergeant with a man in plain clothes looking on. Then he was taken from the cell and questioned again, this time by a police captain and two men in plain clothes, after which he was taken to a special box-like cell.

The back wall of this cell was fitted with a steel bench. When the door of the cell closed it was so shaped that the prisoner was forced to sit on the bench; there was no room to do anything else. The wall was of glass and, Wyvern estimated, every bit of two feet thick. He sat in his pillory like a fish in an aquarium.

He had been sitting there for about an hour when a man entered the bare room on the other side of the glass. The man was sleek and blank and neat and had a brown beard. He advanced to the glass and said, "Your cell is wired for sound so that we can talk comfortably. You will talk, I will listen. Your case is very serious."

His voice was clipped; he did indeed make it sound serious.

Hell's bells, it is serious, Wyvern thought. I'm spending all my time recently being browbeaten by big and little autocrats. If I ever get out of here, I shall suffer from persecution complex for the rest of my days.

"I've told your people my story twice," he said aloud. "I omitted nothing. That fat police sergeant will give you a copy of my statement."

The beard made no comment.

"A customer went into the earth shop and found the proprietor dead, stabbed," the beard said stonily. "Police were called. They heard a movement in the room above. You appeared. You were arrested. In the room you had just vacated, another body was found. Our weapon experts say the same blade did both jobs. Obviously, you are

Number One suspect. I think it worth your while to tell your story again."

"It's all circumstantial," Wyvern snapped. "Do I have to tell you people your business? Why haven't you taken my fingerprints? Take them at once and compare them with the ones on the knife. You'll find I never even touched it. I've told you who I am, I've told you what I'm doing on Luna—ring through and check with the government at once. I demand it!"

The beard let this outburst die on the hot air.

"I think it worth your while to tell your story again," he repeated.

Wyvern sighed. Then he capitulated and said what he had said before. With certain simplifications, he told only the truth. His motive for entering the shop he had altered, to avoid any mention of Eileen; he merely made himself out to be a tourist in search of local colour who had accidentally stumbled on a corpse, etc., etc. And another alteration had come at the end of the story.

It became obvious to Wyvern as he recounted the discovery of Dorgen that he was getting entangled in a political murder; indeed, it was being pinned on him for reasons best known to the police. There was one obvious way to extricate himself, and he took it. He had to describe the real murderer, as he had been reflected in Dorgen's dying mind. Once that murderer was caught, he, Wyvern, was cleared.

And so he said—and found himself now saying it for the third time, "Dorgen could still talk when I reached him. He was able to describe the killer as a tall fellow with a square face, blue jowls, small black moustache, black bushy eyebrows, hair black with a prominent streak of white in it. Hairy hands and arms."

"Dorgen told you this before he died?" the neat man with the beard asked.

"I just said he did," Wyvern said. His voice rasped; they would not, surely, be on the alert for telepaths up here. His story was perfectly convincing.

"With his dying breath," Wyvern added, "Dorgen said, 'I killed Our Beloved Leader'."

The beard took a precise step or two in each direction, running a fingernail lightly along the thick glass as he walked.

"Now may I go?" Wyvern asked. "I have been detained quite long enough already, it seems to me. You know where to contact me if you wish."

"It is not as easy as that," the beard said. "Nothing is easy in this world, Wyvern. Men behave foolishly. We are not, for example, at all happy about some aspects of your story. Everything is very complicated; you must be kept here a little longer yet."

He turned to go, adding, "You may congratulate yourself at least on having a front seat while history is in the making."

"I never had a seat I hated more."

The other left without comment.

Almost as soon as he had gone, the light in the outer compartment went out. A bright bulb out of reach above Wyvern's head was now the only source of illumination, and it so shone on to the glass before his eyes that he could hardly see into the other part of the room beyond the glass. Once, he thought someone slipped in and observed him, but could not be sure.

The light threw considerable heat on to his head and neck. Cramp crawled and tingled in his legs. Disquiet increased with discomfort. He just hoped this infernal delay meant they were combing the Sector for Dorgen's slayer; but he could not help reading more sinister motives into this custody.

At least they had no reason to suspect him of powers of ego-union—he hoped. To have that discovered would involve him in a nasty fate. He recalled, as he sat waiting, the thing Parrodyce had said when they were talking about H's projected coupling of another telepath to Big Bert: "That must be the worst pain of all; I pray I never come to it."

If they *did* find out about Wyvern, it would be remarkably convenient for them. The monster computer was only a hundred yards away, in the centre of the British Sector!

Wyvern's reveries were interrupted by the opening of a

grill behind his head. A basin full of patent cereal and condensed milk was thrust in upon him. He ate and dozed. Broken fantasias on Dorgen's past sleezed through his sleep.

He came suddenly back to full consciousness, and sat bolt upright, his blood racing heavily. Beyond the glass, the shadowy forms of Colonel H and his secretary were watching him! Involuntarily, Wyvern was reminded of the ghosts which haunted Julius Caesar before his death.

The urge was strong to speak to them, to try and establish communication, to render them human, but he fought it down and stayed silent, wondering what horrible coincidence had brought them to the scene at this time. He had thought them still on Earh.

H's small features were drawn closer together than ever, as if all the venom of him concentrated itself towards the end of his nose. He came forward at last and pressed his hands against the glass.

"What did Dorgen say to you?" he asked in a terrible voice.

"He told me he killed Our Beloved Leader," Wyvern said.

When H spoke again, his words charged Wyvern full of understanding and fear; he realised for the first time the meaning of that impossible smile carved onto Dorgen's face; he realised how it had made him betray himself into a future too ghastly to contemplate; for H said, "You are a telepath, Wyvern! That cur Dorgen was *dumb*: he had his tongue cut out twenty years ago."

—To be concluded

THE MIDDLE EARTH

by Keith Roberts

It was strange how Anita knew instantly that the young man was a ghost. He looked solid enough but there was no doubt at all that he wasn't real. Anita was interested; ghosts are not very common. She dropped down beside him on the grass. "Hello," she said cheerfully.

He turned and stared in amazement. "Good Lord!" he said. "You can see me. I mean . . . well, you can see me!"

Anita laughed. "Why shouldn't I be able to see you?"

He frowned. "Well, because . . . you know, because of what I am. But you aren't a normal girl, are you?"

"No," said Anita briefly.

There was silence between them for a time. The Fynebrook chuckled; they were sitting beside it, where an overhanging willow cast a pleasant shade. Weed swayed in the current; a fish darted upstream; beside the bank a patch of whirligig beetles danced like demented pearls. Anita studied the ghost covertly. He was rather nice; he had long dark hair that hung over one eye, he was wearing a doggy sort of sports jacket with a quietly checked shirt and neat tapered slacks. He made her think of moonlight nights and MG's and the smell of tobacco. "I'm Anita," she announced. "Who are you?"

He was very well-spoken and his voice was quiet. He said, "David Fox-Gardiner. Or at least I *used* to be David Fox-Gardiner. I haven't got a name at all of course now. I'm just a sort of clerking error." He looked up and smiled. His eyes were brown and they were full of pain.

Anita hesitated. Ghosts can be very difficult to deal with. She said, "Why are you here? I mean, is there any real reason . . ."

"No." David was staring at the water again. "I'm not haunting the place or anything stupid like that. In fact the place is rather haunting me." He pointed upstream then

down. "Do you realize there are fourteen voles in this brook between the bend up there and that big alder tree? Seven holes in this bank, curiously enough, and seven in the other. And two small pike . . . oh, and there's an otter. I didn't think there were any otters near here but I suppose one dies and learns . . . and there are about two dozen hedgehogs and thirty-eight bats, nine species of dragonfly, two kingfishers . . ."

"You've been here a long time," said Anita softly.

"Not really. A couple of weeks . . . but there's a lot of Time in two weeks, when you're not sort of sleeping or anything."

"Yes. I know."

David pointed to the gable of a house just visible amongst distant trees. "To be perfectly frank I'm here to be close to that place. It doesn't do any good but at least it's *something*. I mean, it's better than just wandering about. That's totally aimless."

Anita shaded her eyes with her hand. "That's the Dog and Pheasant at Brington. Do you—did you know someone there?"

"Yes. Margaret Davis. Her people keep the pub. Do you know her?"

"I'm not sure . . . is she sort of tall and blonde and rather nice?"

"Yes . . ."

"Then I do. She's sweet."

"We were going to be married."

Anita said, "Oh dear . . . oh, that was bad luck. Would you like to tell me about it?"

The ghost shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. And what there is is rather sordid and very stupid indeed. When we got engaged I wanted to celebrate so I went on the booze with some friends. We all got pretty stinking. It was just one of those things, we didn't mean to have such a terrific jag. And then I tried to drive home. I was coming across the Plain—I used to live in Wiltshire, in Amesbury—and it was a gorgeous sort of night and there was the road stretching out in front and I thought I'd see if I could get the old motor flat out."

Anita nodded. She knew the feeling well. "Was that how you got killed?"

"Yes. Thank God I didn't have anyone with me. I made a fearful mess of old Lottie . . . that was the car. Rolled her. I died almost instantly." He banged his knee in sudden rage. "Oh what a silly, clottish thing to do . . ."

"It was very bad luck," said Anita. "Terribly hard. Where are you buried?"

"In the village. I was sorry about my parents. It was rotten seeing how upset they were and not being able to tell them I was all right. Of course I *wasn't* all right. I'm not all right now. I'm about as wrong as a thing can be."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"I shouldn't think so for a minute. Could you exorcise me?"

"NO! And in any case I wouldn't if I could. That's cruel . . . I should have to call you a sooty spirit from Tartarus and all sorts of stuff like that and . . . well, you're not . . ."

David smiled. He put his hand out and for a moment it looked as if he was going to lay it over hers, then he changed his mind and drew back. He said, "It's nice to have someone to talk to anyway, even for a few minutes."

"Did you come back all this way because of Margaret?"

"Yes. It took me a little while to find out how to do it. You know, how to move about. I came as soon as I could. In a way I wish I'd never come back at all. Poor Margaret, she cried for days. She isn't really over it yet. I think that's almost the worst part of being dead. Knowing you've hurt so many people, and not being able to do anything about it. The rest's all right I suppose. It's just dull. Like when I was in the army. Having to sit around all day with nothing in particular to do."

Anita changed the subject slightly. "What sort of motor did you have?"

"Austin-Healey three thousand. She was a jolly nice car. She isn't any more though. They've got her in a scrap place in Salisbury. She's written off, they're selling her in bits and pieces. And it wasn't necessary, I went over and had a look at her and her chassis isn't twisted, she's not half as badly damaged as she seems."

"If it would make you feel any better," said Anita, "I'd go down there and buy her. I don't like things being knocked apart either."

"It wouldn't do any good," said David hollowly. "She's nearly stripped already. There isn't very much left of her. When you think of it though, there isn't much left of anything. Not even me."

Anita was watching him narrowly. "You poor thing," she said suddenly. "You still want her, don't you?" She didn't mean the car.

David put his face in his hands.

"This is awful," said Anita. "I've never heard anything like it!" Her whole attention was engaged now. "You've been sitting here watching the fish in the brook and the bats and dragonflies and you can't move away and all the time . . . Oh, that must be awful . . ." She felt her eyes begin to sting. Humans can usually do something about their circumstances but ghosts suffer huge disadvantages. "I could try and speed up your clearance," said Anita. She knew his papers couldn't have been in order otherwise he would have been shipped out directly without any time for moping.

"I don't *want* to be cleared," said David. "I don't know what I do want. I want my car but it's all wrecked. I want to be alive again but it isn't possible. Could you put the clock back?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't be a scrap of good. You'd only be killed again when it came forward . . . You could still go to her you know, if you're really desperate."

David took his hands away. His face looked awful. He said, "I know. But it wouldn't be the thing to do, would it? I mean . . ." He hesitated. "It just wouldn't be cricket, would it . . . ?"

Anita shook her head. She said softly, "A ghost once loved a lady fair . . . Yes, I think I can understand."

"So there isn't an answer," said David a little wildly. "I'll just sit here and count vole-holes and watch the water go by and I suppose everything will come right in the end. Only there isn't an end really, not any more . . . You'd better run along now, Anita, I'm sure you've got a lot of

more interesting things to do. Thank you for speaking to me."

Anita stayed where she was, lost in thought. She said suddenly, "Would I do instead?"

"What?"

"Instead of Margaret . . ."

"You don't know what you're saying!"

Anita pushed off one sandal and dipped her foot in the brook. There was long weed trailing on the surface of the water. She stirred it, enjoying the sensation. She said, "I'm quite good really. Of course if I'm just not your type . . ."

"I wouldn't think of it . . ."

Anita could be very delicate when she chose. "I know it wouldn't be the same," she said gently. "I just thought it might take your mind off things for a while. I'm sorry."

David swung round. "It isn't that, honestly. I think you're . . . well, rather nice. But don't you see, it wouldn't be fair on you either. You know, the touch of cold dead flesh and all that . . ." He sniffed his jacket sleeve and looked more doleful than ever. "Fusty," he explained with an apologetic smile.

Anita shuddered. "I see what you mean . . . I don't suppose it would really work. We should both be uncomfortable . . . But I must do something, David. I can't just leave you here being . . . rained on, an' blown about by the wind . . . I wouldn't rest, not now I know about you."

"Well, there isn't anything you *can* do."

Anita stood up. "I can try. I'm going to see our Controller."

"He won't help."

"He jolly well will, he's got to. He looks after all the Dark Things in the county, he's bound to be responsible for ghosts." She began to walk away. "Try not to be too lonely," she called. "I'll go and see him as soon as I can. Promise . . ."

* * *

"So that's the whole story, Controller," said Anita simply. "An' I came along to you to—"

"Gee-six," said the Controller furiously to the empty air. "I told you area *gee-six*, you can't cross to Leicestershire . . . No, I *won't* clear you. You know the rules as

well as I do, twenty-four hours' notice for a county boundary . . . What? I don't *care* what you think Ducky, over and *out* . . ." He muttered to himself. "Old days, old days, it was always better in the old days. That's all I hear, whining about the old days . . . let 'em all Timeshift, see if *I* care. By Golly . . . Cee-kay-nine-four-zero-fifty, you are cleared for Huntingdon, happy landings . . . Come in oh-fife-four . . ."

Anita sighed hopelessly and crossed her legs. She had been talking for nearly half an hour and she had only just got round to telling him what she wanted. The evening air was chaotic with messages, and most of them were passing through this room. Anita's mess of senses detected a roar of silent conversation. She unravelled a strand and followed it.

"Four pun *ten*?" snarled Granny Thompson. "Fer that great mangy brute o' yourn? Om 'ired better familiars than 'e'll *ever* be fer thirty bob a week Aggie, an' well you *knows* it . . ."

The Controller was an odd-looking young man with jet-black, oiled-down hair and angry ginger eyes. His desk took up what little space was left among the amplifiers that lined the room. They covered the walls nearly to head height, their grey facias alive with little red and blue lamps. Anita knew that between the conventional aerials on the roof of the place were other arrays, odd little things like silver chrysanthemums. The signals that poured from them would never be traced . . . "Controller," she said, "You just don't understand."

He pushed the 'phones back from his ears and looked at her as if she had just that moment walked in. "Sorry, Ducky," he said. "Not my department. He'll have to do like the rest of 'em. Wait for his clearance."

"But he can't do that . . ."

"*Gee-six*," roared the Controller in sudden passion. "By the Green, if I have to report you . . ." He swung his feet up on the desk and propped his chair dangerously on its back two legs. "No, by Golly," he said to Anita, "definitely nothing to do with me. I'll send a report down but don't expect—don't *do* that!" Behind him his popsy was watching smokily and chewing a nail. He contrived to reach up

and slap her wrist without overbalancing himself. "Trouble with you people," he snarled, "you seem to think we've got time to burn. What you don't appreciate, what nobody appreciates, is *we've* all got businesses to run." He waved his hand at the amplifiers. "Half of this stuff *is* radio mains and it don't look after itself, by Golly it don't. Stop it . . ." Another slap. "Now you just run along, Ducky, I'll get the report off . . ."

Anita thought vindictively that she should have brought Granny Thompson along. The old lady would have settled this character within minutes . . . She spread her hands. "But that'll take years. And David told me, he met somebody who got mislaid in the eighteenth century and he's *still* wandering about . . ."

"If you don't stop," shouted the Controller to his popsy, "I'll tie your hands behind your *back* . . . Kay-nine-oh-seven, your bearing is Green, repeat Green, fife-zero . . . height three-fife-zero, airspeed forty knots, crosswind of . . . three-zero, hold your course and speed . . ." That evidently to a high-flying familiar.

"Please, Controller—"

"Errors," roared the young man. "Mistakes. Mislayings. Errata. Nothing but *errata*." He opened his hot-brown eyes wide then screwed them up again as if he was in pain. "As well as running a relay service, as well as pandering to the slightest whim of every bumbling idiot in thirty covens, I have to start progress-chasing every fouled up crossover in the district. Try again, Ducky," he finished offensively. "Uncle is busy . . ."

Anita had taken two whole hours over her hair and she was wearing a brand new white dress with matching accessories. She'd thought she couldn't lose . . . She hitched another six inches of leg into view but the Controller merely sneered. "He's lonely," said Anita in a last bid. "And the rain falls on him, and the wind blows through him, and he hasn't got anybody. And he's hopelessly in love . . ."

"I," bellowed the Controller, "am hopelessly in love. Hopelessly in love with peace and quiet . . . I am also lonely, I am also depressed; and odd though it will pro-

bably seem, when the rain falls on me I get *soaked* . . ." He slapped the popsy's wrist. "*Will* you stop . . ."

Anita lost her temper. She stood up violently; his heels were poised on the very edge of the desk and the transmitted shock was disastrous. "Well, I shall just have to find somebody who *can* help him," shouted Anita. "Somebody who knows what they're doing. Somebody who isn't a loudmouthed *nit* . . ."

The young man was still getting up, assisted by the popsy. He said dazedly, "You can't say a thing like that. Not to *me* . . . I'm the Northamptonshire Controller . . ."

"Controller?" shrieked Anita in a voice like a buzz-saw hitting a knot. "You couldn't control a sick headache. You couldn't control a riot in a cathouse . . ."

The popsy jumped as if she had been stung, and began to chew furiously.

The Controller looked shattered. The chair had been set to rights; he collapsed into it. "You can't walk in and say that," he moaned. "It just isn't done . . ."

Anita pressed her advantage. "But I *did* walk in, and I *did* say it, and now I'm walking *out* again, and you can report me to just who you like. And don't forget to say what I called you because if you don't *I will* . . ." She reached the door and flung a final insult. "And all I know is, if you're as good at radio mains as you are at your proper job, I'm glad we've got a *transistor* . . ."

"All right," hollered the Controller, beaten. "All right, all right." He saw what the popsy was doing and slapped her wrist. He hauled books from a shelf. Three vast tomes. He threw them in different directions. One hit Anita in the middle; the impact drove her backwards. "We'll all look," swore the Controller, lilac with rage. "We'll *all* go through the files. We'll find him a mate on the proper energy-level. Then we'll put them *both* through the keyhole (trade term for hyperspace) and that'll be the *end* of it. Then we'll all sit round and invent reasons why I shouldn't be *fired* for exceeding my authority . . ."

Anita began to purr. "Why, Controller," she said sweetly, "I always *knew* you'd help . . ."

The room became busy with turning pages. "How about this one?" asked the popsy, displaying unexpected energy.

"Died eighteen seventy-three, age twenty-one . . . still in limbo, some error on her death certificate . . . a bit before his time but she's got a pretty good figure."

Anita looked at an ancient Daguerrotype. "She's very sweet but she wouldn't really be suitable. He loves cars and things like that, it would drive him *crazy* having to explain everything to her."

"Nineteen forty," said the Controller, pushing across a photograph. "Killed in a riding accident. More his type I should think. She's still held up waiting for a cee-thirteen. People down under lost her entire file . . ."

Anita frowned. "I don't really think so . . ." A live girl with buck teeth and pimples might take refuge in simply being homely or a good cook but for a ghost that was out of the question.

"How about this?"

"This," was quite a peach; the picture attached to the filing card showed a blonde girl in a fluffy party dress. The Controller shrugged. "OK by me . . ." The popsy's hand strayed to her mouth and he smacked her wrist absent-mindedly. He was thumbing through a small black pocket-book. He stopped, peered, checked a reference number and swore. "She was cleared yesterday. Shouldn't be in the file . . ."

Anita clicked her fingers in disgust, skimmed through yet more pages. She stopped. Oh, but this was it. This was most decidedly the one. What a beautiful girl . . . she hadn't known there were so many attractive ghosts available. She said, "How long has this one been . . . er . . ."

"About a month. She's still nearly fresh. Devil of a mix-up there, if you'll excuse the irreverence . . ."

"What a shame," cooed Anita, smoothing the photograph. "Look at her little bobbed nose . . . Poor little thing, how did it happen?"

The Controller slapped the 'phones back over his ears. "She died of a fever," he warbled tunelessly, "and no one could save her . . ." The popsy began to chew and Anita knocked her hand away. "She'll be the very thing. Can you send for her, Controller?"

"Huntingdon Department Nine?" said the Controller, "hold the ether, I have a call for you . . . you don't *send*

for ghosts, Ducky, you *drive* 'em where you want them to go. Most of 'em have lost what small wit they possessed anyway, read your Homer . . . I'll get her to you if you set up the crossover."

"I will. When do you want it to be?"

"Wilco," said the Controller. "Go ahead caller, you're through . . ."

"It'll have to be done properly or we shall have two of them mooning about the Fyne-brook and I don't think I could stand that. She's probably got an earth-lover as well . . ."

"Fife-four-oh-fife," said the Controller, "you are not, repeat *not*, cleared for landing. Keep in the stack there *please* . . ."

Anita banged the book. "It's like a *madhouse* . . ."

"It *is* a madhouse," howled the Controller, incensed beyond all reason. "That's just what it *is* . . ."

"*But when will you send her*? I've got to know for the spell . . ."

"Off peak hours," roared the Controller. "Oh-four-hundred tomorrow. Transfer oh-four-thirty at the outside."

Anita gulped, grabbed for handbag and gloves. "I shall have to run, I've got masses to do . . . thank you, Controller, thank you very much . . ."

"Don't *thank* me," swore the servant of Hell, "just don't come *back* . . ."

"Oh I won't . . . goodbye . . ."

The door slammed behind Anita. Through it floated a last shout. "For *God's* sake, girl, don't *chew* . . . remember the Venus de Milo . . ."

Anita pursued a double-decker bus for a hundred yards down the street, put on an appalling burst of speed and caught it as it slowed for a corner. She landed aboard to the delight of its passengers and the fury of its conductor . . .

* * *

The fields by the Fyne-brook were black and wet with dew and mist was floating waist-high, making a setting fit for ghosts and prowling things. Anita crouched over a cauldron hastily improvised from half an oildrum and a

blowlamp. She was wearing her spellraising trousers and her heaviest sweater. She shook powders into the pot, and various shrivelled odds and ends. There were small rumblings and concussions. Anita's eyes shone in the dark like twin moons; this particular spell had affected her strangely. It was a nasty affair that had to do with all manner of unpleasantnesses, wormsblood and henbane and gall. And there were mandrakes; Anita had had to plug her ears while she prepared them, they shrieked so as they were being minced . . . "Sing me ye owls nothing but songs of death," she muttered; and again, shivering and quoting all over the place, "Damned spirits all, that in crossways and floods have burial . . ."

Somewhere a car's tyres screamed in agony and Anita knew without looking up that David was there with her. The mist rolled round, making shapes like figures that got halfway solid and then gave up again. "Anita," whispered the ghost, "what are you doing?"

She shuddered, and wiped her hands on her jeans. "Quiet, please. Just wait an' see . . ."

"No, no," said the Controller, oddly gentle. "Over here, you silly thing . . ."

It came walking out of the mist. It was prettier than its photograph but very pale . . . David caught his nonexistent breath. "Who . . . who's this? Anita, *what are you doing*?"

"Where am I?" That from the newcomer, dazedly. "It's dark, I can't see . . . is anybody there . . . ?"

The cauldron fumed; the glow lit the branches of the willow. The Fyne-brook chuckled in blackness. "She's like me," said David, astonished. "Anita . . ."

"Peace," groaned Anita. "The charm's wound up . . ."

"Zero minus one minute," said the Controller remotely. "Counting now. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven, fifty-six . . ."

Anita made shooing movements with her hands; she couldn't speak. She listened to the voices in the mist.

"But I didn't think there was anybody else like me anywhere . . . I was so scared, you don't know . . . And then

I was sort of pulled, it was like being blown along on a wind . . ."

"Anita did it," said David. "She's terribly sweet. We shall both be all right now. Anita, this is Susan Martin . . ."

"Hello, Anita!"

"Hail and farewell," muttered the witch. She was quivering all over. Suddenly there was tension. A church clock was chiming.

"Fife, four, three, two, one, NOW . . ."

The last part of the spell "took" with a crash that jarred everything. David shouted; then a huge noise began, a screeching like a thousand klaxons playing at once. There was light, vast and flaring; in it shadows writhed, there were new dimensions. Two Planes touched, grinding and bumping like ships in a storm, like cogs that had never been designed to mesh. Anita pointed into the brilliance. "Quick, David, while it's open. That's your *way through* . . ." She put her hands to her temples. "Quick, please go quickly, I can't stand much of this . . ."

"Anita . . ."

"Cast-off," said the Controller, clinically calm. He was doing his job now, and doing it well.

The Parallel Universe began to disengage, grumbling and seething. The ghosts sprinted and scrambled, hair and clothes blowing wild. The light dimmed; voices like morning winds reached Anita. "Thank you . . . Anita, *thank you* . . ."

She began to run in the light of earth-dawn, a grey shadow under a sky bright and raw as cut lead. "Poor David," she shouted hysterically. "Smelling of soil and talking gear-ratios . . . You won't have to count kingfishers any more now . . ." She reached Foxhanger as the farm animals began to stir. "O cocks are crowing on merry middle earth," whimpered Anita, tears shining on her face. She burst into the cottage, ran up to her room and cried herself unconscious. She slept all through the day; nothing Granny Thompson did could rouse her. She was out for nearly twelve hours, but when she finally woke the clamour of the ghost kingdoms had gone from her mind.

—KEITH ROBERTS

HOUSEL

by Alan Burns

I classify people as animals. For instance I rate myself as a fat tabby, looking out of one eye corner to see what's happening. My secretary I describe as a French poodle, liking cosseting and fuss, but very conscious on which side her bread is buttered. The girl she showed in to me on that particular morning I classed as a mouse: demure, sleek, and hard up as the church variety.

"Miss Wynne-Thrope," I said, looking at my secretary's immaculate laserscript on the introductory card. "You wish my services?" In the classification section of the card was the letter "C" which justified my feelings concerning her financial status. At the back of my mind the term "indigent gentlefolk" floated about, Miss Wynne-Thrope was obviously seeking a charity repair to her housel unit.

"It's rather difficult," she began.

"Perhaps I'd better tell you something before you start," I said. "All reputable housel repairers take a quota of charity cases each month, and so far I haven't filled my quota and the month ends tomorrow. Consider not that I'm offering you charity, consider it's a service."

"Thank you," she answered, "there was a time when you would have been summoned by us. Now there's only me left and the State Basic Pay doesn't run to much more than maintenance."

"I take it you've no trade—no, in any case everyone has to be a specialist to get any of the few posts going. Suppose you tell me what the trouble is."

"It's our housel unit, it's making the house feel sinister and frightening. But may I give you some background? My great grandfather got in on the ground floor of satellite communications. We were very wealthy and we lived up to it. Then in my grandfather's time they began experimenting on strain-radio and he didn't have sense enough to put our money into that. The blow came in my father's time, the bottom dropped out of the satellite company, we had to sell things to live, so with almost the last of his

money he had a housel unit installed; it gave the house something of its former atmosphere, but now even that's going wrong."

"You aren't—"

"A foolish old maid?" she asked.

"Miss Wynne-Thrope," I told her severely, "I wasn't going to say anything of the sort. You probably aren't even as old as I am and I'm only thirty-six. What I was going to ask is if you have a nervous disposition."

"I don't think so, why?"

"Because a housel unit would tend to magnify such a thing, especially if it was franky."

"Franky?"

"Acting up—we took the word from Frankenstein, a creature that destroyed its creator. A housel unit is just a very subtle kind of mental amplifier. We all have impressions of what we'd like a place we live in to be; the housel unit has a tape of our feelings and plays them back, so that a flat becomes a palace, or in some cases a palace becomes a flat. Now if you happen to be lonely and afraid then obviously you'll get that back off the housel with interest, but before that occurs you have to be very lonely and very afraid."

"Is there any way of checking that?"

"I was going to suggest it. I've a tapping cap unit, that will feed in a sort of horror situation to your mind and measure your index of reaction to it."

"I'm willing." I got up from my seat and rolled the unit out from its corner. As I adjusted the cap on her head I felt her hair. I thought it was the nicest softest hair I had ever felt. I warned myself against emotional attachments with customers and got on with the test. Larry Simpkins, who does the "Meeting with Horror" programme on the Independent Trivvy, is one of my friends, and he'd run me up some test strips for various tapping cap assays; the horror one was quite something. I dropped it into the unit slot and watched the needle on the chart. Miss Wynne-Thrope may have been a mouse, but she was a brave little mouse and only passed out when I gave her the maximum

charge. I removed the cap when she fainted and poured her a stiff brandy.

"That-was-really-something," she gasped, in between sips at the spirit. "How'd I do?"

"You can forget about being a foolish old maid," I said, "next time there's a man-eating tiger on the loose I'll tell the zoo to send for you." I glanced at my watch. "I'll have to have a look at your unit," I told her, "but not until after lunch. Could I persuade you to be my guest?"

"I don't usually accept invitations on short notice," she answered, then fiercely she said. "I can't afford pride, can I?"

"I don't know. But any time you would do me the honour of dining with me I'd be very obliged."

"Then I accept your invitation, Mr Devlin."

"Good," I smiled, "and if you would step down one tread more from your pedestal I have a first name, and it's Philip."

"You're a dirty tradesman—Philip."

"Thank you, Milady."

She smiled at that and said, "On Sundays friends of my own class call me Linette."

* * *

Madrigal Road where Linette lived was part of an old section of Novcaster that had been left until the city council raised more money for the planned rebuilding. The house stood in its own grounds, and during the drive out after lunch I had learnt that Linette paid no rates, since the house was on the list to be pulled down, but she was allowed to live there until that took place, when other accommodation would be given her. I knew what that meant—a room in a Charity Home. She was better living in the house as long as she could. I looked at the front door with interest.

"Why, it's a cylinder lock," I said, "I thought that the last of those had been replaced by the Puska-Prox type years since."

"Personal Static Charge Proximity locks come under the list of things not affordable, Philip," she remarked. "It's coupled to the housel switch, but let's go in."

"Hold it," I said, "I don't want the housel turned on just yet. I want to see the house as it is, so that I can check it against the housel impressions."

"How will we get in then?" she asked.

"Magnetic manipulation," I answered. "I'll break the coupling between the lock and the switch." I brought out my pocket magnekit and taking out the power handle I fitted a bit on that I thought would do the trick. I looked into the shadowscope on the power handle, saw the arrangement of the switchgear inside the lock and went to work, presently there was a tiny cracking sound from inside the lock and I saw that the couple was broken.

"You can open up," I told Linette. She did so, and I could see she was rather ashamed of the empty hall and its bare boards. Once it must have been a fine place, but time and neglect had done it no good.

"Not very nice," she said.

"Neither is a strain transistor," I answered, "but it's the potentiality that counts. This could be a good family house, for someone not keen on flats. But now that I know what the place is like I can turn on the housel unit." I picked at the lock with my tools and presently bared the control wires. I connected them with a metal bridge and, turning, I saw that the unit was on. The original housel unit had been invented by a Father Ignatius Hegarty, parish priest of a miserable district not far from London Central Spaceport. The good Father had a hobby, electronics, and deciding that he would try to improve the acoustics of his rather run-down church with the aid of an amplifying system, he put one together out of parts he had bought from a space-surplus stores. Now it subsequently turned out that some of the parts had been rather violently irradiated, but in any case, when the system was used for the first time, to the gratified congregation it seemed as if their poor surroundings had changed to those of a great cathedral, which illusion lasted while the unit was turned on. The good Father sternly quashed the cries of "Miracle" and examined the system. It seemed that the irradiated parts he had used were acting as a mental amplifier. In envisaging the acoustics of a vast church he had uncon-

sciously pictured such a place. These impressions had been picked up by the unit discreetly mounted below the pulpit, and hurled out to give a complete illusion to everyone present. Father Hegarty named the unit a housel, since it gave out a sort of spiritual glow to everyone as if they had been houselled by receiving the communion. The experts took it from there. The Father got a new church and the Vatican held the patents. The labour of housel owners thinking to give impressions was eliminated by the use of tape strips. It was perhaps as well that Father Hegarty died before he could see what general use would be made of his discovery. Certain sleasy clubs have installed housels, and the reports of fellow repairers who were unlucky enough to be called to service the units have resulted in an automatic calling of the police, should any unit be found which publicly emits a depraved or obscene emanation.

The illusion given out by Linette's housel turned the bleak hall into a place of rich velvets and thick carpeting. Instead of empty rooms, vistas through various doors showed elegant furnishings, and the desolate gardens of before were places of flowers and immaculate topiary.

"It makes a difference doesn't it?" said Linette.

"Yes," I agreed slowly, "but I'm waiting for it to start being menacing. I take it that the feeling is there all the time?"

"Yes, but strangely enough it isn't here now." She looked distressed. "I swear it was really there."

"I'm not doubting what you say. Where's the unit installed?"

"In the attics, the front one. I don't know if you noticed the roof skylight as you came up the drive, but that was it."

"Well, let's go and see then, shall we?" On the first floor landing I shook my head violently. Do that, and if the unit is weak you will temporarily see things as they really are. There was no letting up of the illusion, it was a good unit. We came at last to the attics. I tried the door of the front attic but it wouldn't budge. I decided to shut off the unit so I looked for the wires but couldn't see any. The

only thing to do was to go back downstairs. Linette said she would wait for me. So I returned to the hall and took away the bridge connecting the wires. I was at the foot of the bare bleak stairs when I heard Linette scream—at least I assumed it was her—and I raced up two at a time. She looked pale and shaken.

"What happened?" I asked.

"That was just the trouble," she answered, "there was only a feeling of extreme terror. I'd never felt anything like it before. I think perhaps I don't need your services, I'd better ask to see a psychiatrist."

"You can do, but I'm going to look at your unit first." I went to the attic door and was just putting my magnetic opener together when there came the smell. It was just indescribable, a foetid foul odour that almost made me lose my dinner.

"Right," I addressed the door savagely, "you've over-reached yourself this time. Stink-bombs are for school-boys." Fighting to keep from retching I attacked the lock and was surprised to see what type it was.

"I thought you said you couldn't afford a Puska-Prox lock, Linette," I remarked, "Ugh, let's get downstairs before I'm sick." The smell was gone as soon as we left the attic floor but I went out of the house with her and sat in my car for a while. I remembered the first aid kit had stimulant in it for emergencies, and I dispensed a double brandy for each of us.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Well, obviously we aren't expected to go into the front attic. Are you interested in model planes?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said are you interested in model planes?"

"I don't know," she answered curiously, "should I be?"

"Might be useful. It's a hobby of mine, especially radio-controlled ones."

"I don't really see what it has to do with—" Then she looked upwards at the roof. "You mean to look in through the skylight using a television scanner."

"And a recording device. Well, let's go then."

At my flat I picked up the gear I needed, called my

office to see if anything urgent had come in which meant I would have to put off my investigation, and having been assured that the rest of the afternoon was free I headed back to the house with Linette.

"Just a point," I asked her as we turned into the drive once more, "how long has there been this trouble with the unit?"

"I don't know exactly, about three or four months I think. I'd have borne it without complaint because all I needed to do was to stay out of the house, but I exhausted all the art galleries, museums and libraries when I was younger, and in my state window-shopping is frustrating."

"I can imagine that," I agreed, stopping the engine and pressing the button that opened the boot. I got out and started unpacking equipment. Naturally I had chosen a model helicopter for the purpose of looking into the skylight, and fortunately I had an old-fashioned type driven by an electric motor, relatively quiet compared to the whine of the jet-units put in so many models. The scanner weighed next to nothing, being only the size of a pencil, I clipped it in place, checked that the radio-control, trivvy pickup, and the recorder were all working and then sent the little machine up, watching the viewing screen all the time. In seconds it was over the skylight and showed nothing, then suddenly it swooped down on us, heading for my equipment. If it had been a model jet it might have wrecked it, but as it was I caught it, killed the motor from the outside switch and was just about to put it away when round the corner of the house wriggled a roaring fire-breathing monster. I dived for the car and pushed home a switch on the dash.

"Let it come," I said sourly, "I've put up an enchanted screen." Linette looked at me.

"I saw no pentacle," she remarked with a faint smile. "But the dragon's gone."

"I turned on a housel canceller," I explained, "it's a field of interference. Now and then a housel unit gets stuck in the 'on' position. Then its field has to be cancelled so it can be located and put right. So I have the apparatus built into my car. It gives a circle of protection of about fifty yards diameter."

"But the dragon was only an illusion."

"If you can see it and hear it then it isn't an illusion. Our minds work in mysterious ways. Someone gets told they're to be slightly burnt in the interests of science, then they're touched in a place they can't see with a block of ice and almost always a blister will develop. I'm not taking any chances of getting scorched, illusion or not. I'm packing up and getting out, your housel can have the field, I concede defeat." Linette looked disappointed in me, but she gave a hand to put my gear away in the boot. I looked into the model as I was dismantling it. There was apparently nothing wrong with it, yet it had been taken over completely. Whoever or whatever was in the attic evidently didn't lack for power. I started the car and swung out on to the road. Well away from the house I said.

"Now I can decide what to do next."

"You mean you don't give up? I'm glad. For a moment I thought cruel things."

"No doubt, but I think whatever it is in the attic it can read our minds, and generate appropriate illusions. I generated one in my turn, that I was given up. In any case it's getting on, my office hours end at five and I charge special rates for overtime."

"Could I ask a favour then," she enquired, "I don't fancy going back to the house tonight. Drop me off at a Charity Residence Hall."

"I dislike Charity Halls," I said to her, "I've some friends who live in the same residence complex as I do who've just lost a grown-up daughter who got married and went south. They'll put you up until I've fixed your housel one way or another."

I drove to the office, saw that everything was locked up for the night, called up my relieving Housel Repairer to advise him that I'd be occupied for a day or two on a case so he could take anything small that came in and drove Linette out to the complex. My friends the Rutters gladly took Linette in, promised to send her round so she could dine with me in the complex restaurant, and then chased me away. I changed quickly, giving myself half an hour with my text-books. They didn't yield much but I

found what I wanted in the latest issue of one of the trade journals. It was a report on the use of housels by the United Nations Policing Command as battle simulators, using specially prepared tapes to implement the mental emanations of those taking part, the whole being much less costly than using blanks, thunderflashes and the other impedimenta of the battle course. But the units used were big, carried on thirty-foot hovertrucks, with towed power units, and that was with everything miniaturised down to the limit. It was interesting, but what I was looking for had to be something very much smaller. I put my books away and went down to the restaurant.

The Rutters had turned out a chic little mouse for me. We had a drink or two in the bar and then went in for dinner. Linette's childhood training made her an interesting conversationalist over a meal, especially when the surroundings and food were several cuts above what comes in return for a State Basic food check. We went out into the restaurant garden for coffee and liqueurs. We sipped in silence for a minute or two and then Linette said.

"There's something I have to say to you, Philip. I ought to have said it earlier, but I wasn't really certain. I think that you are taking more than a professional interest in me and my franky housel."

"It's possible," I agreed.

"Then I have to tell you this. I, I'm already promised to someone."

"Can I say that I don't think much of anyone who would leave his girl alone when she needs him most?"

"It isn't that. Look, Philip, I was with my father when he died, and in his will I was left the house as long as I didn't go into the front attic, and a small amount of jewellery which had belonged to my mother. There was the instruction that the jewellery was to be worn by me on my wedding day, when I married a man who was to claim me in three years."

"It sounds fairy-taleish," I mused, "any evidence that it wasn't just a dying man's fantasy?"

"There is another three months of the three years to

run. I've kept myself going on hope. That's why I was pleased in a way that you couldn't open the attic door. Of course I know in any case I've only the use of the house until the council get around to demolishing it, but that won't be for at least a year."

"And you've a franky housel. It seems to me that your young man won't want to be bothered with that when he arrives, so I'll go ahead and fix it, attic door or not, and until then you're guesting with the Rutters. By the way, thanks for the honesty."

"I don't like hurting people, Philip."

"I don't hurt easily, anyone with a secretary like mine quickly developes a tough hide. Well, if you've had enough suppose we do the town. I'd hate your intended to find you socially unconscious."

So we did the town, and at two in the morning I deposited a very sleepy mouse to be fussed over and put to bed by her hostess. I went back to my own flat and sat for a while at my bedroom window, looking out over the complex and wondering whether I liked Linette as much as she thought I did. Of course she would be nice to have around I knew, and my trade was booming and promised even better things, such as a specialised service in housel reconstruction. I had plenty to offer any girl. I yawned and went to bed.

* * *

I slept late the next morning, and over a breakfast of toast and grapefruit juice I began sketching out the circuitry that I thought I should put together in addition to my normal equipment. I was very conscious, of course, that I wasn't merely dealing with a franky housel, so before going to my workshop I loaded up my Beldam, though for all I knew it might be something not amenable to drugged darts. Still the Beldam is the only weapon a citizen is allowed to carry without official sanction, a neat little dart thrower not much bigger than a laserstylo, and after all, who wants to carry around the two pounds weight of a velogun, even if its slug is an instant killer no matter where it hits the victim? I was just putting the box of Beldam clips away when Linette asked over the door-

com if she could come in. I called "yes" which automatically opened the flat door, and bright and sparkling she entered. I asked conventionally about good sleeps and hangovers, was assured that she had had the first and not the second, and then she saw the Beldam in my hand. Two eyebrows went up in a query, so I said:

"I'm taking your case seriously. I've some work to do for it. By all means stay if you like, but don't bother me."

"Can I straighten your flat? It looks as untidy as a man's can be. Mrs Rutter chased me out when I asked to help her with the chores."

"Certainly, if you wish. You'll find all you need in the cleaning cupboard in the kitchen and there's the call if you need anything over and above that." I went into my workshop and shut the door. Fortunately circuit sections come prefabricated. I'd hate to try and put an R.F. amplifier into a cube the size of a matchhead, for instance, and my construction was merely a matter of cutting off a section of printed assembly tape and pressing the various units here and there on it. I cut a cardboard sheet up into a rough helmet shape, daubed it with quickset and cut it to shape once the plastic had hardened. Then I remembered that Linette would be along with me so I called her in and made a plastic helmet to fit her. That done I began the installing of circuitry in the helmets. I was building a housel canceller into each, with a field area just large enough to protect the body. I finished the helmets and then just to test their ruggedness I kicked each up and down the shop quite seriously: they stood it. Next came the construction of a Puska-Prox lock-picker. Now the Puska-Prox unit is alleged to be unpickable, and since the unit is also the door and the frame thereof, entry by anyone whose Personal Static Charge is not coded into the lock setting is, in theory, impossible. But as fast as a new lock is devised a way of picking it is evolved. As a housel repairer I had a police clearance for making Puska-Prox picking units, but before I could begin construction I had to complete a form and get it countersigned by the owner of the Puska-Prox, in this case, Linette. She wasn't keen, but she did sign, and I used the fax unit on the call to transmit a copy to the local police who gave me their

assent. The basis of a picking unit is simply the construction of a static generator covering all the frequencies of human generated static. The Personal Static Charge is not a very well understood thing. Like electricity it is glibly defined. P.S.C. is the totality of the currents transmitted by nerves as they perform their function, it begins with birth and ceases with death. Q.E.D. . . . It was known almost as long as radio, the howls of reaction as someone touched certain parts of one of the old short-wave receivers was due to P.S.C. But whatever it may not be, it is a wonderful means of identification, since like fingerprints no two people have it alike. The Law can't go through a crowd checking fingerprints, but a patrol car can carry a P.S.C. detector, and a wanted person, whose P.S.C. is known, may as well step forward and be arrested when one of the cars with the little dish antennae is anywhere near. I finally had the unit finished and came out into the flat to find Linette busy thawing freezpaks for a lunch for two.

We left for her house after our meal. We entered the drive cautiously but nothing happened. We put on the helmets, switched on and boldly entered the house. It was very ordinary, only Linette suddenly pointed to the stairs: there was a set of naked footprints on the bare stairs, coming down and going up.

"The thing in the attic," I said, trying to be cheerful, but my voice echoing hollowly on account of the helmet. "Well, shall we go up and meet it?" I moved the picklock into my left hand and took the Beldam in my right. We went up slowly, and I never felt more nervous or afraid in my life. I didn't like the idea of bare feet on a stairway in an old house, the least that their owner could have done was to put on a pair of carpet slippers, and they were such big feet as well. One thing I did notice was that the steps began to get more uncertain as the feet had climbed up towards the attic, and then on the very top floor there was the faintest imprint as if something had fallen flat on its face. But the attic door was in front of me, I pushed on it and found it still locked. Then I smelt a horrible sickening stench, but this time I was prepared, and handed Linette a set of nose plugs and took a pair for

myself. Suddenly I realised that the smell must be genuine since I was wearing a housel cancelling unit. I turned on my picklock and went to work on the door. In seconds I heard the almost imperceptible click as the holding bolts drew back. I put down the picklock and clutching my Beldam I eased the door open and looked down on civilisation at war, frightfully at war over the hideous ruins of a body. At least it looked like a civilisation of incredibly small size. All round the rent and charred corpse were tiny flickers of light. What had once been a bare floor looked more like a section of countryside, covered with a sort of greenish mould, and here and there were what looked like coins, but which might have been cities, joined to one another by silvery threads, possibly communications. In the corner of the room stood a round thing, perhaps two feet across. The only familiar item in the room was a housel unit on the side remote from the door, and even that was very much altered, with several very unusual transmitting aerials attached to it. I took a risk then, called to Linette to stand back and pulled off my helmet. For a moment there was nothing, and then a series of impressions rushed into my mind, coupled with a screaming fear. I staggered back and pulled the door shut.

"Get out," I remember shouting, "get out quickly." Linette helped me downstairs and into my car. She took her place at the controls and when things became clearer I was lying on a couch in my flat and a doctor was saying to her that I ought to be moved to hospital.

"Don't bother," I croaked, "I just got an excess charge of housel emanation. Leave a prescription for some sleepy pills, or I'll have nightmares tonight that will make me a candidate for the nut ward. I'll be all right by tomorrow." He went away after writing a prescription and Linette took a seat beside the couch.

"Like to tell me what happened?" she asked. I sat up on the couch and tried to marshal my thoughts. It was like editing a film. I knew what had been pile-driven into my mind, but making a coherent tale was something different. I played for a little time.

"Pour me a brandy," I said, "and better pour one for yourself, you'll need it," I attempted to smile, "more than me perhaps." She did as she was told. I took a few sips and swirled it around the balloon glass.

"All right," I began, "I've played for all the time you'll give me so here goes. Everything has intelligence of one sort or another. That's true, from the greatest down to the least, especially the small things. Biotechs try to make out that a thing like an amoeba is a purely mechanical device sympathetic to various stimuli. I believed that myself; now I'm not so sure. Anyway can you imagine an intelligent bacterium? I don't mean in the sense of what we call intelligence, because that's human-oriented, but with a larger sense of purpose, of what it needs to establish a suitable environment for its existence. Anyway, having considered that, consider a world populated by such bacteria. By our standards it might only be a fair-sized rock; to them it was a great big planet with everything they needed, including a means of moving through space."

"The ball-shaped thing in the attic corner," she said almost inaudibly.

"Yes," I agreed and went on. "I wish they had told me how they propelled it, it would be worth something to the space propulsion companies. But it went wrong in space and needed repairing. Parts had to be fabricated, and that meant materials had to be found." I felt a little better and got up. I looked out of the window at the rest of the complex. "They were near our world," I went on. "They thought that it was Eldorado, everything they needed, they could take us over."

"But they didn't," she said.

"How could they know?" I went on almost to myself. "Microscopic plants and animals, all the little things that we always forget were our protectors, and found the Lorae, which is what the aliens call themselves, were tasty dishes to them. Oh certainly the Lorae fought, formidably, but no matter what weapons you have, you can't kill uncounted millions of foes if you are limited in number. Your father's garden was a battleground that makes all

the conflict areas of history look like children's playing fields."

"Our garden," she faltered, "they landed there?"

"Yes, late one night. Your father found their world the next day." I took a long pull at the brandy and continued. "That night was, literally, centuries long to them; their lifespan is measured in minutes, I think. Now no reflection on your father, but towards the end of his life he went a little strange—"

"Spare nothing, Philip," she told me firmly, "the way our fortunes collapsed with the end of satellite communication would have unhinged stronger men than my father. Tell me, was I there at the time?"

"I don't think so. The time of arrival of the Lorae world wasn't very definite. I gather it was roughly four years ago."

"My last holiday," she said with a wry smile.

"Probably you were away then. However a group of Lorae entered your father's body when he was inspecting the curious thing that had arrived in his garden overnight. I said your father was strange; the Lorae got the message through to him that they needed help badly, so your father offered them protection of a sort. He gave them the use of the front attic, which wasn't occupied, and all sorts of scrap metal. They're fairly good engineers and learnt how to build a Puska-Prox lock for the attic door from his mind." I paused and said after a moment. "The magnitude of that task is terrific if you consider it. It's rather like our civil engineers building a dam several hundred miles in height. Anyway they built it. But that wasn't enough; they made a selective housel so that in some way you were made to be uninterested in the attic. So the Lorae had a breathing space and a nice big area to develop. Now in their own funny way they're able to be grateful, so they had words, if that's the term, with your father as to how they could repay him. What do you suppose your father asked for?"

"Money?" she asked. I shook my head.

"He was cleverer than that," I continued. "He wanted the means of getting money and security for you."

"He was a good father," she said choking back tears.

"He was," I agreed, passing her a man-sized handkerchief instead of the scrap of lace she was dabbing at her eyes with.

"Go on," she invited, attempting to smile, "I'm all right now."

"I said the Lorae were fairly good engineers, but they were master biologists. I suppose, being so small they could learn the secrets of life without the difficulties we have. Well, they had materials at hand, and your father supplied anything they didn't have enough of. I read somewhere that the value of the materials in a human body is only a few shillings—"

"You mean they tried to build—"

"Tried? They succeeded a hundred per cent. They built what amounted to a God, and," I said soberly, "God is not mocked: that was their downfall."

"I don't understand," she enquired, "tell me what happened."

"About three or four months since, they completed their creation. He had to be exercised, fed, and in general put through his paces. He redesigned the housel unit and could do several tricks like reading thoughts—all very useful," I grinned crookedly, "to the potential husband of an eligible young spinster."

"Oh no," she cried, "they didn't mean I should marry a . . . a . . . thing."

"I pass no judgment," I said, "but from what I know I think their creation was as much alive and sentient as any man. We'll never know, however. But to go on. As I said he had to be taken out of the room now and then, and while you would never see the Lorae, you could hardly fail to notice a naked man."

"The f-footprints?"

"Yes, but there weren't any before because he cleaned them away after him. So you had to be driven out of the house on odd occasions . . . what easier than to fix the housel unit? I think the Lorae underestimated the resoluteness of the patrician daughter of a rather weak father. You went out, but only as far as a housel repairer, and came back to the house with death incarnate."

"But you're normal, aren't you?" she asked.

"Pretty much. But you see since we repairers deal with a lot of rather 'hot' stuff tiny mutations occur to the bacteria and viruses that we carry like overyone. It isn't serious to us, but to the Lorae it was deadly. I don't know which of the various mutated strains in me did the trick, but since it was something that drove the Lorae mad it must have been a virus. I came to the house with you and they picked it up from me. I don't know how I spread it, possibly I breathed it out, or left it on the parts I touched. Anyway, next time they took their creation out it happened. The Lorae in his system were first infected, and that disorganised him completely. Whether it was his own idea to get back to the attic, or whether it was an urge to destruction on the part of the mad Lorae in his system, I've no idea. The sane Lorae slew him and began to destroy the body to kill the mad ones. There was most ferocious civil war, and the sane Lorae realised that Earth had nothing more for them. They had repaired their drive long since; they took their planet, or will have by now, and I rather fancy that they'll have destroyed your house before they go." Linette got up and looked out at the darkening sky. Absently she said:

"Who will believe us if we tell them?"

"No one."

"So I've nothing now except my State Basic. No house, no prospect of someone who would come along and restore my fortunes. There doesn't seem much to live for any longer." I jumped her before she got to the window. Fiercely she struggled, but I held her long enough to knock her out. I hated what I had to do then. I brought a coil of plastic insulation tubing from my workshop and, carrying her into the spare bedroom of the flat, I tied her firmly to the bed, as comfortably as I could. Slowly she recovered. At last she said.

"Why am I tied up?"

"You tried to kill yourself, remember?"

"You're sending for a psychiatrist?" I shook my head.

"No, because in a way it wasn't you. There were two

things the sane Lorae finished their message with. One was the fact that we were both certain to be infected with the mad ones of their race, and the other was a way of killing Lorae, to end that infection."

"I was under control?" she asked, looking sick.

"Yes. Not control of the physical part of you, but the mental part, sometimes the more effective. You just felt an overpowering grief, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—" and a mad rage to kill her blazed in my mind. But fortunately I had drunk what amounted to two double brandies and that dulled the edge of the emotion.

"Build the machine," I muttered, and staggered out of the bedroom towards my workshop. It was fortunate I was a housel repairman. Spending all my time as I did fixing various kinds of instruments, putting out all the gamut of human emotions and illusions, I had acquired a considerable tolerance, and so, as the Lorae in my body did their worst, I set to work putting prefabricated parts together. If there had been any delicate soldering to do I wouldn't have succeeded. I itched and shivered as imaginary things crawled over my skin. Alternate shocks of grief and joy slammed through my mind, and all the nasty things that, like everyone, I had pushed into the subconscious, were hauled out and laid foetid and horrible for me to shudder at. At last I had finished. It was a sloppy and unsatisfactory piece of work but it was done. I plugged a battery unit in and turned it on. A whine of reaction keened up into inaudibility, and inside me I felt something akin to the snapping of an elastic band. I shook myself like a dog who has been swimming, and found I was all me once more. I looked at the gadget I had made, decided that it was safe to pick it up, and headed for the bedroom. Fortunately the flat was fully soundproofed like all the others in the complex, or the next door neighbours would have thought murder was being done, for Linette's screams were truly heart-rending as the Lorae played on her mind. I went into the room and switched on the unit. At once her shrieks stopped and she fainted. I left it running as I untied her, then I went to the little bar in the living room,

had a stiff drink myself and made one for Linette. She was just coming to as I re-entered the bedroom.

"Philip," she whimpered, "they hurt me so." I sat her up, put my arm round her shoulders and held the glass to her lips.

"It's all right now," I said. "They're gone and no one need ever know if you don't wish it."

"No one would believe it anyway," she said with a faint smile. Then with her old force she asked:

"How is it I always seem to end up being consoled by you for something or other?"

"Force of habit," I assured her. Then resolutely I went on. "Let's forget it, shall we? You go down to the Rutters and get ready, and we'll paint Novcaster a bright red."

"And tomorrow?"

"You've all the world to look at. The Lorae killing unit will probably prove to be a more effective bacterial destructive instrument than any we have. I'll see that you have the patent rights and there's pretty certain to be very good royalties. You won't want for money."

"And the other part?" she enquired, "someone to share my life with?"

"You'll find someone—that is if you want to aim higher than a dirty tradesman."

"And if I don't?"

"Why then I shall very formally ask you if you would consider marrying me."

"Of course," she smiled, "that would depend on whether or not you have a good housel here."

"Shall I turn it on?" I asked. She nodded so I went over to the control. I have always been fond of company, and I particularly like children. My flat dinned with the noise of twitch music; the voices of children at play echoed with the noise of the female head of the household demanding silence. Linette shook her head.

"She doesn't sound a bit like me," she said, "but I daresay you can make a new tape."

—ALAN BURNS

VASHTI

by Thomas Burnett Swann

CHAPTER ONE

The Red Land

His mind and memories were those of a young man, but his face and body belonged to a child of six. He was small and smooth and as bright as the sunbirds which flicker like will-o-the-wisps through the forests of the Black Continent. His eyes were the green of young acorns, his lips were the red of poppy buds, and his hair seemed woven of honey strained from a comb and spun into supple strands. Noble ladies liked to caress and fondle him and feed him sugared dates, but when he began to recite the songs of Sappho or the theorems of Pythagoras, they dropped their hands and muttered incantations as if he were an evil-working Jinn. His name was Ianiskos, the "Little Healer." At least, that was the name which the Greeks had given him before he came to Persia to serve in the court of Xerxes, the king. Now, he was sharing a banquet with the king and four courtiers in the royal palace at Susa. The king and his courtiers were a little drunk, but Xerxes, though ruler of a hundred and twenty-seven provinces stretching from Ethiopia to India and including Egypt and Babylonia, was the simplest of men, a warrior and not a despot, and he lacked the elegant perversity of kings in Thebes or Babylon. Drink made him frank and confiding, never cruel and lecherous.

Ianiskos himself was not in the least intoxicated. He had joined the others in drinking the juice of the potent haoma plant, but like all concoctions from plants, whether wine from grapes or beer from barley, it merely sharpened his senses and his sense of apartness and confirmed him as a wistful observer instead of a joyful participant. Heartily he wished to be drunk with these boisterous, boyish, and engaging young men—wished to be warrior with warriors,

roisterer with roisterers—and not a dwarf, a seeming child with a young man's heart and mind. He drew his paenula or hooded cloak more closely around his body to hide the diminutive limbs and the curly child's hair, while the others, stripped to their waists, sweated on ivory couches and dined merrily in the Greek manner.

The king, seeing Ianiskos' face and forgetting that dwarfs, even if straight of limb and bright of countenance, do not like to be mistaken for children, leaned to his couch and plucked him, surprised but unprotesting, into his lap. It was an act of kindness, however crude, the act of a man who had no children and wanted them because he was lonely in his kingliness and because, quite simply, he happened to like children. His beloved queen, Vashti, had proved as barren as the red desert of her Nabataean countrymen, and one of the courtiers now at the banquet, a Kurd by the name of Haman, had whispered to friends that Xerxes ought to replace her with a Kurdish princess who, plump and fruitful, was sure to produce an heir.

"Little Healer," said Xerxes. "Tomorrow when I wake with a pain in my head, you shall bring me a soothing potion of herbs." The king smelled of sandarac and leather: the sandarac applied by a slave from a ewer of hollowed agate, the leather lingering from his afternoon ride around the unwalled platform which held the palace and its garden of deer, hibiscus and palms. No perfume could quite eradicate the smell of the dedicated horsemen.

"Of honey and willow bark, my lord." It was true that Ianiskos possessed an extraordinary knowledge of plants: that he knew the seasons of their growth and decline, and which had been blessed to heal by Ahura-Mazda or blasted to harm by the devil-god, Ahriman. At the moment, however, it was hard to think of remedies. He crouched, tense and uncomfortable, in the arms of the man he loved as a king, as a comrade, but certainly not as a father.

"Ah, I forgot, I forgot," said Xerxes. "You don't like to be held like a child." He returned the dwarf to his couch as one might return a wax doll to its bed of straw,

and looked at him with puzzled affection. "I think it's you who need the potions. To get some growth on you, Little Healer. Then you could ride to the hunt with me."

"But I don't need to be tall to hunt with you," Ianiskos cried. "I can ride on one of your Caspian ponies!" Impulsively he sprang from his couch and clasped the hand of his king, raising the warm, damp fingers to his lips. The gesture came from his heart; he was no fawning servitor, but a loyal subject and devoted friend to Xerxes, who, like his grandfather, Cyrus the Great, and his father, Darius, had never ceased to be a faithful devotee of Ahura-Mazda and Mithras and a staunch believer in the old precept that a man should ride well, shoot straight, and speak the truth. Ianiskos himself was not a Persian. He had grown up (grown up? No, he had grown but not in height) in the Greek city of Sicyon, but he preferred the Persians to the Greeks and loved their king as he had loved no other man. Tyrants and killers, the Persians were sometimes called, but far from being dark, mysterious, and Oriental, they were tawny of hair, sunburned but not swarthy, and much less subtle and calculating than the Greeks.

"If the king had a son of his own," suggested Haman, "he could leave our Little Healer to his duties of healing." The king had captured the Kurd, a blue-eyed prince with hair the colour of clay, in the desert to the north and, respecting his courage, taken him into his army and eventually raised him to the rank of general and courtier. In return, Haman loved him with the adoration of a soldier for the sun-bright Mithras, lord of hosts, and, loving him, resented others who loved him, mistrusted Ianiskos, and displayed a frank hostility to Queen Vashti. Among his own people, women were mere chattels, good for work and childbearing, little more—even the plump princess he envisaged as Xerxes' second bride—while Vashti, he saw, was permitted the liberties of those vaunted Cretan queens who, according to legend, had ruled equally with their husbands, sailed with their fleets beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and meted life and death to generals and courtiers. Possibly, too, Haman was secretly attracted

to Vashti and, unable to possess her, he wished to remove her as a provocation.

The king sighed in perplexity. His lion-coloured beard, full and braided, wavered in the light of an alabaster candelabra with seven branches which represented the seven Amesha Spentas, the Immortal Ones of the Zoroastrian faith.

"But Vashti is—" he began.

"Barren. Have you ever thought why she is barren?" Haoma had loosened Haman's tongue; he pursued the dangerous subject with neither tact nor caution.

The king, silent, shrank against the frog-shaped cushions of his couch, as if for protection against the disagreeable subject. An iridescent magpie chattered and swore in a cage of black marble. A fretted ivory screen shimmered in the light of the candelabra and, reflected, writhed in the blue and red marble of the floor like a jungle of anemones under the sea. The Hall of Many Marbles, the room was called: a little room in a very large palace, intimate and comfortable and roofed with cedar boughs from Lebanon. But there was small comfort in Haman's words.

"You found her in the desert near the rock-girt valley of Petra. That is, your soldiers found her and brought her back to you. She claimed to be a princess of the Nabataeans, the nomads who live in the limestone caves which they stole from the Edomites. But she is fair of skin, while the Nabataeans are dark, and she is beautiful beyond all women. Where did she get her beauty? Where did she really come from, Xerxes?"

"Petra, she always said. She was riding out with her people in search of a new copper mine."

"But why did she let herself be captured so easily? And suppose she *did* come from Petra. In spite of your famous cavalry, you've never been able to enter the valley. I don't need to remind you that the cliffs are impassable except for a single gorge, which is guarded by the Nabataean Watchers. But how do you know that the rulers of Petra are also Nabataeans? How do you know they are not"—he paused, less for dramatic effect, it seemed, than because it really pained him to speak so terrible a word—"*Jinns*?"

In the hush which followed the accusation, Ianiskos could hear the dropping of wax from the candles and the neigh of the white unicorn in the queen's garden. A servant appeared with a tray of turquoise goblets and, hearing the word flung at him like a curse, dropped the tray and fled to the sanctuary of the kitchen. The Jinns were a race who served the devil-god, Ahriman. Their appearance varied; sometimes hairy and hunched, they walked like bears or clambered through trees like monkeys. Sometimes erect like men, they built towns, rode horses, and planted crops, but retained, nonetheless a bestial characteristic—hooves, horns, or a tail. The Greek Satyrs were one of the tribes of Jinn.

"A Jinn," repeated the astonished Xerxes. "But Vashti is kind and loving and—"

"And barren. So are Jinns. Kind and loving until they get what they want—a kingdom, for example. Barren always, at least with mortal husbands. Have you ever seen the queen completely without her robes?"

The question struck Ianiskos as both foolish and impudent; he awaited a regal oath to silence this presumptuous, red-haired barbarian. What youthful husband, a king at that, has never observed his wife without her robes? Yet Xerxes hesitated. At last, with the frankness of a slightly drunk man among trusted comrades, he said:

"No. She has given herself in love to me many times. But never in the fullness of her beauty. I have seen her breasts. I have placed a pearl in the acorn-cup of her navel. I have stroked the swan-like arch of her back. But never have I touched or seen the base of her spine. Always something withholds my gaze or my fingers. A hand, a coverlet, the fold of her night-dress. I had come to think that she bore some dreadful scar and I did not wish to embarrass her by questions."

"Suppose she does bear a scar. Suppose that your queen from the Red Land was born with a tail, which physicians or spells were able to remove . . ."

Ianiskos gasped. The room was warm with candles and sweating bodies, but fear pricked him like cold feline feet. If the queen were a Jinn, exposure could mean her exile

or even her death. He could not imagine a palace without the radiance of her, the sweetness and the mystery. He did not want his king to harm his queen. Then, too, he was honest enough to admit that concern for the queen was also concern for himself. Did he not possess, at the base of his own spine, the neat, mysterious oval of a scar? Did his veins not run with blood as green as the jade from the land of the Yellow Men? Not for the first time must he ask himself the question: Am I also a Jinn?

He turned accusingly to Haman. "How do you know that Nabataean women don't conceal themselves out of modesty? It may be their hips they are hiding instead of scars. You can't call the queen a Jinn just because she doesn't disport herself like a priestess of Ishtar!"

Haman laughed and caught Ianiskos by his wrists, as a father might catch a child who contested his authority.

"Little Healer," he said. "What do you know about such things? Your mind is stuffed with poetry and philosophy, Homer and Hesiod and Sappho—the Tenth Muse, do you call her? I am a simple soldier from the hills. But I know about evil. I know about Jinns."

The king released Ianiskos from Haman's grip. "What he says is true, my little friend. You are a healer of evil, not a perpetrator. My ancestors, like Haman's, lived in the hills. Hands would reach up from a stream and drag a man and his horse right down into the current. At night, there were Peris that came in the shape of women and sucked a sleeper's blood. If such a being were loose in my palace now, even if she were my own queen, I would have to know, I would have to take steps to protect my people." He seemed abruptly tired and not in the least drunk. His lion-coloured beard could not conceal his pallor. He placed his hand on Ianiskos' head and looked at him sadly and apologetically and at all with the look of the world's most powerful king. In a bronze basin resting beside his couch, he spun a ball emblazoned with winged genii, and a musical but piercing chime peeled through the room.

Almost instantly the slave who had dropped the tray returned with empty hands and apologetic eyes. Xerxes'

slaves did not fear his wrath; only his disappointment. Their eagerness to serve him sprang from love.

Xerxes' words came with difficulty. "Summon the queen Vashti from the feast of the women. Let her come prepared to show herself to my friends in the fullness of her beauty and without the concealment of robes."

The crowning of a queen is a time of pomp and spectacle; of offerings to Atar, the Immortal Fire; Apo, who guards the sweet waters; and especially Anahita, the lady of fecundity and gentle childbirth; of processions through the cherry orchards of the countryside and the hibiscus gardens of the palace. But the fall of a queen may be encompassed in the few words which a king dictates to his scribe for recording on a stone tablet or a scroll of lambskin. Such was the fall of Vashti, the queen from the Red Land, who refused to show herself to her husband's guests.

Ianiskos, carrying an agate cup of honey, milk, and crushed willow bark, called at her apartments after he had heard the order for her banishment. The queen's attendant, a Nubian sent to her by the Pharaoh of Egypt, told him that Vashti was sorrowing in her garden.

"My lady is stricken," she said, and large, silver tears pearled her black cheeks.

He walked into the garden. A multitude of fountains whispered the air with coolness, and yew trees mingled with the fountains like gnarled old men in a company of agile maidens. In the midst of the trees, pillars of sandalwood supported an airy pavilion, a purple canopy billowing silken walls. But beneath the canopy the chairs with the feet of a deer were empty and poised, it seemed, to scamper into the trees and lose themselves among the living deer which shared the garden with the queen and her unicorn.

He found the queen on a bench surrounded by those red and white hibiscuses which Aramaic writers called the Rose of Sharon. The white unicorn had come to share her sorrow. He raised his head to receive the caresses of the Little Healer, who brushed his mane and wondered if his sparkling horn were of diamond, as the children of the

town believed, or merely of quartz, as Haman had told the king.

"He is fearful of other men," said Vashti. "My husband and Haman and even the slaves. But not of you. Remember a year ago when you first came to us, how he nibbled sesame cakes from your hand?"

Ianiskos remembered every detail of his coming, and the much less happy time before he had come. Five years ago in Greek Sicyon, looking exactly as now he looked, a child of six, he had wakened as if from a long fever, before which he remembered nothing. A swarthy slaver, smelling of olive oil and as moist as the underbelly of a dolphin, was flaunting him in the air like a piece of merchandise, which, in fact, he was, and before he could take his eyes from the small golden crocodiles which swayed from the man's ears, he was sold to a wealthy old philosopher with a lavender himation thrown around his shoulders and caught at his throat by a jade dove. Ianiskos was more than happy to exchange the crocodiles for the dove. Where the slaver had found him no one knew, but the philosopher, who was childless and recently a widower, had been struck by his beauty and bought him to rear as a son. When the boy grew rapidly to adult intelligence and began to reveal a marvellous intuitive knowledge of plants, but retained a child's body, his master wondered if he were not a benign daimon or genius and eventually gave him his freedom and a small house, an herb garden, and an olive grove. In Sicyon, Ianiskos began to be celebrated as a healer. The poor and the wealthy came to him from all of the Peloponnesus, and he healed them with willow bark, wintergreen, the seeds of the meadow saffron, or one of a hundred other botanical remedies. There was no plant which he did not know, by property if not by name. At length the people mistook him for one of the descendants of the physician god, Asklepius, and wanted to raise a temple in his honour. Ianiskos refused. He did not want to be worshipped. He wanted to worship. When agents from Xerxes arrived at Sicyon and engaged the city's artists and architects to build a palace at Persepolis, Ianiskos returned with them to Persia. Not only did he

wish to escape the adulation of the Sicyonians, but a vague yet magnetic memory, as faded as a dream after an abrupt awakening, and quite as haunting, compelled him to Persia. A dream of what? Of burning suns and cutting winds, of red cliffs and a red, misshapen beast that crouched and coiled and—that was all. That was the limit of his memory. He could not remember the nature of the beast or the country in which it had lived. When he thought of his dream, he was hungry and did not know for what he hungered, whether rarest delicacy or deadliest poison. At any rate, he was now the Healer in Xerxes' court.

At the moment and always, Vashti seemed to him one of the gold and ivory statues which the Greeks called chryselephantine, gold of hair, ivory of skin. The image-worshipping Greeks would have taken her for Demeter and honoured her with statues and temples. The Persians, who, loyal to the teaching of the noble Zoroaster, scorned images and built no temples except to enclose the fires of Ahura-Mazda, had paid her homage as the great queen of a great kingdom. No longer. Once she refused to answer the summons of the world's most powerful king, Xerxes had no choice but to divorce her. Love, respect, compassion could not affect his decision. The discipline of his many-provinced empire could brook no disobedience.

"Ianiskos," she said. "For once, I fear, you can bring no drink to ease my hurt." But she took the cup from his hand and sipped the heavy, healing beverage. "Come," she said, and drew him beside her among the hibiscuses, which crouched above them, he thought, no longer beautiful but rather like spiders before they jump.

"Tomorrow I am going away," she confessed. "Returning to Petra."

Her quiet admission lashed him like a thong. He knew for the first time that he loved her as more than a queen. But a dwarf who speaks of love is at best pathetic, at worst ludicrous.

"Alone?" he gasped.

"With one attendant."

"It is a long and dangerous journey. There are thieves and wild beasts along the way, and Jinns"—the forbidden

name escaped his lips. "You must let me come with you." His words tumbled over each other like the pieces from the king's gaming board when struck by a clumsy hand.

She did not smile as if to say, "What protection can a child of six give to a woman?" She appeared to consider his suggestion. "No," she said at last. "I learned to ride swiftly in the desert, and Mara, my Nubian, is almost as swift. Thieves and beasts will not be a threat to us. I think you should stay with Xerxes. Who would soothe his headaches when he has drunk too much or studied the stone tablets in the royal archives? Besides, he has such a need to be loved, and you are very dear to him. But Ianiskos," she added, "if it ever happens that you must leave his court—for example, if he marches against your people, the Greeks—then you may come to me in Petra. When you do come, perhaps we shall find that we are much alike."

"Couldn't you have shown yourself to the king?" he cried. "To your own husband and his closest friends? We would not have shamed you with our stares."

"I could not show myself even to the king."

Is it true then, he thought, that the queen and I are Jinns? Perhaps evil grows in us like mushrooms in a dark cave and leads us unknowingly to work mischief on behalf of Ahriman.

She rose to her feet and her silken cloak, yellow with the dye of a hundred saffron crocuses, rippled around her body like grain in a wind-stirred field. It was no wonder that he always expected her to be carrying wheat or pomegranates in her arms. Impulsively he reached to embrace her, but his head came only to her breasts.

She held him as a mother holds her child, but without condescension, and the fragrance of her, not only of myrrh but of barley and pink buds and newly ploughed earth, intoxicated him as wine and haoma intoxicated other men.

"They call you Little Healer," she said. "To me, you are very tall. May Mithras guard your days with his burning arrows, and the star-god Tishtar your sleep."

The next day he learned from Haman that the king had sent riders to overtake the queen and bring her back to

stand trial by the court magi. If they found her to be a Jinn—

"You know," said Haman with the barbarous merriment of a young warrior recalling his first battle, "queens have been killed before. Hanged, beheaded, boiled in oil. There was even that strumpet of the Israelites, who fell out of a window and the dogs licked her blood. Jezebel, wasn't it?"

Ianiskos was hardly tall enough to reach Haman's elbow. But if he was doomed to look like a child, then he would fight like a child. He kicked him in the shin. The astonished courtier yelped like one of those dogs which had licked the blood of Jezebel, and Ianiskos, triumphant instead of penitent, fled from the palace.

In the royal stables, he asked the groom to saddle a Caspian pony, a small, shaggy beast appropriate to his size (though Haman had often laughed that a dog would suit him best), and, descending the ramp from the palace, he followed the great highway which led from Susa to walled Babylon and diminished beyond the Tigris to disappear in the deserts of Arabaya. People stared at him as he passed the library whose cyclopean walls, encrusted with griffins and bulls of enamelled tile, held the famous scrolls of Assur-bani-pal, and then the Tower of Silence, where the dead were exposed to the tearing beaks of vultures. Children waved to him in the street. Some he had healed, but he did not have time to pause and talk to them. Finally, one of them barred his path, a sturdy, green-eyed boy who had been a stunted weakling till Ianiskos had fed him lemons and carrots.

"Little Healer," he cried. "Stop and play knucklebones with us!"

Ianiskos shook his head. "I am on a quest, Smerdis."

"Where are you going?"

"To the Red Land."

CHAPTER TWO

The Weeping Giant

Riding only by day, he could not hope to overtake the swift horses of the queen and the men whom Xerxes had

sent to capture her; he had to ride by day and also part of the night. He had not had time to collect the necessities of travel, but under his robe he wore a leather pouch of shekels and, passing the caravan of a Jewish merchant, one on the ancient race whom the Babylonians had carried into bondage and Cyrus had liberated, he bought a flask of water and a basket of dried fruit. Whenever he reached a town, he renewed his supplies and questioned the merchants in Persian or Aramaic, the two principal languages of the empire. Had a noble lady, riding a white horse and accompanied by a black slave, passed through the streets? Yes, a day ahead of him. Hardly pausing to rest and buy provisions, she had galloped out of the town like the restless wind-god, Vayu. A veil had hidden her face, but not her royal bearing, her hands like ivory. And as for the slave, she was black as the pit of hell! What of the king's officers? Close on her trail and riding as if they were being chased by Ahriman instead of chasing the queen.

In the countryside, the farmers gathered around him and asked why so small a child should be bent on so earnest a quest. They plied him with milk, dried apples, and crushed terebinth, and offered him shelter in their wattle huts, but he always chose to sleep in a cave or under a bush and avoid the risk of capture and forcible adoption into a family ("That *baby* riding alone?" he had overheard. "By Mithras, we'll keep him with us until his parents come looking for him").

Leaving the hills of Susa, he entered the rich valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, with its reed-bordered canals, its fields of alfalfa, and its groves of fig and coconut trees. He skirted the old metropolis of Babylon, the supposedly unconquerable city captured by Cyrus the Great when he drained the river which served as one of its walls; and then, crossing the Tigris in a flat-bottomed boat aswarm with camels and sheep, he left the valley behind him and entered the deserts of Arabaya. Day after day, the brown and yellow cliffs, the wind-rutted dunes of the vulture and the jackal reddened as if the rivers of the sunset had inundated their parched fastnesses; and wearily, hopefully, he approached the country of his queen. He had ridden for

more than a month, and somehow his child's limbs had sustained him through the ride.

He paused, in the afternoon of the thirty-second day, to stare at the rose, crimson, and lavender cliffs which girdled Vashti's Petra. To his sun-burned, wind-raw eyes, they loomed like the painted palaces of the old Cretan sea-kings, with sea-blue walls and columns as red as cinnebar; loomed like the famous ziggurat at Babylon, square of base, flanked by ramps, pyramidal-topped, thrusting seven stories and seven colours as if to storm the sky.

Palaces and ziggurats? Hardly. The desert traveller sees the mirage of his dreams, and Ianiskos, self-exiled from cities, saw what he had lost. Only mountains confronted him, and they held not sprawling cities but a single, primitive town of black tents and rock-cut tombs. Impassible and eerily forbidding, they began to look, the haunt of lizards and hawks and other creatures that cling to beetling walls or ride above them on currents of air. Now, he must find the Sik or gorge through which he would ride beneath the levelled bows of the Watchers to enter Petra and join his queen—if Xerxes' men had not preceded him.

Thirst, like a furry caterpillar, rasped his throat. Weariness numbed his legs (such little legs for so long a quest!). His flask was as dry as a rock in the sun. It was not surprising that Tychon, his pony, had shrunk to the size of a large dog. They must rest and drink. The desert of the Red Land, in spite of its parching winds, was not so barren as the infamous Sea of Sand beyond the Nile. Here, at least, there were lichens and stunted bushes, and not infrequently a green oasis gouged in the russet earth. He scanned the cliffs and felt the presence of greenery beyond the range of his eyes; something, neither sight nor scent, stirred his blood.

As he guided his pony toward the guessed oasis, his head nodded with the weight of sleeplessness. Long rides, little rest . . . Wind voices, Jinn voices, goading, threatening, coaxing . . . Always, the sun blazing his never-blinking Cyclops-eye. Mithras, did they sometimes call him? No, he was a devil god, Ahriman surely. Sun and wind, sun and wind and sand . . .

He opened his eyes to tamarisk trees, red of bark as if they had drunk their colour from the cliffs, but green of leaf like the young olive trees of Attica, with slender branches shaped like the rods or barsoms of the Zoroastrian magi. Behind the trees, water tumbled with the music of bells and lyres. He dismounted and whispered in Tychon's ear:

"We shall drink, and then we shall find the queen. She will give you a feast of alfalfa, and touch your muzzle with her cool hand, and make you forget the sun." He led him twistingly through rocks and thickets of tamarisk, aflutter with orange-spotted grackles, and found an impetuous stream which carried the melted snow from the grey mountains behind the cliffs of Petra. Trees, and the sweet mysterious voices of the water: he thought of the queen, and the lines of a song, sung by the guards at Susa, came to him:

Vashti of the Red Land,
Vashti of the ivory hand . . .

Then he heard the sound, a low keening like the cry of a wounded wolf. He parted a greenness of branches and found the weeper lying beside the stream, a giant of a man—he must have been seven feet—in the black robes and headdress of a desert nomad. He was weeping bitterly and pressing his face against the grassy earth as if to staunch his tears. Ianiskos knelt beside him and, though he knew the risk of surprising a stranger in the desert, spoke to him:

"My friend, are you in pain? Perhaps I can help you."

The stranger sprang to his feet, drawing a knife, and Ianiskos saw that he was not a man but a boy of perhaps fourteen, a young giant with sun-burned skin and a hillock of hair spilling from his headdress. He wore neither sandals nor boots, but his robe was caught at his waist by a costly leather girdle resembling those of Xerxes' officers and emblazoned with copper animals—bulls, elephants, and camels. Ianiskos, who knew what it meant to be a dwarf, concealed his surprise at confronting a giant.

The boy bristled defiance and clutched his dagger, a wooden hilt with a jagged blade of bone.

"Are you hurt?" Ianiskos repeated without any show of alarm. The low huskiness of his voice, incongruously but pleasantly emerging from a child's body, had charmed both children and animals at Susa, and the young giant relaxed his hostility and allowed the dagger to fall to his side. Furtively he wiped a tear on the very soiled edge of his robe.

"It's my horse that's hurt," he said in a curiously accented but recognizable form of Aramaic. He emphasized the first and the last word of the sentence, and dropped the middle words to a musical whisper. "I think he is going to die." He pointed down the stream, where a black stallion lay so mute with pain that Ianiskos had failed to notice him. Except for his open, agonized eyes, he might have been sleeping or dead. His leg bore a recent wound, raw, open, infested with buzzing blue flies. Ianiskos knelt on the ground beside him.

"Yes, it is a bad wound," he said, "but perhaps we can find a remedy."

"A remedy?" cried the boy. His big head looked young and handsome beneath its grime and dust. His hair and eyes were as black as the wing of a vulture, but softened by a curious sweetness which played over his face like the light of a lantern. "Magic, you mean?"

"You might call it green magic," said Ianiskos, who was already searching the ground for one of those healing plants which grew in the most unlikely places. Except for the driest desert, no part of the countryside lacked medicinal seeds, leaves or roots. How else could wounded animals heal themselves?

"Here," he cried, pointing triumphantly to a clover-like plant which the Greeks called Moly and which Odysseus was said to have eaten to immunize himself against the enchantments of Circe. Whether or not its powers were actually sorcerous, Moly both soothed and healed a normal wound. He crushed the leaves in his hands and applied them like a salve.

Unmoving, the animal watched him with mournful eyes. Already numbed by the pain in his leg, he did not seem to feel Ianiskos' hand.

"He is going to die," said the giant, his voice quivering with a new onslaught of tears. "There's nothing you can do for him."

"It takes a little time even for magic," Ianiskos consoled him, wishing to be a man whose fatherly arm might encircle and comfort the boy. It was always the same when he met an engaging child. He wanted to be his parent but usually ended by becoming his playmate.

The boy caught his hand. "Did you see? He blinked his eyes, and—"

The horse stirred; his breathing grew deep and regular. He shook his head, and his mane rippled like a black silk tent in the wind. Then, with slow ungainliness growing into grace, he rose to his feet and began to drink from the stream.

The boy threw his arms around the animal and kissed him noisily on his mane. Then he swept Ianiskos off the ground and kissed him on the forehead with the wet expansiveness of a hunting dog.

"You saved his life," he cried, returning his benefactor, now somewhat breathless, to the ground. "That makes us friends, you know. My father used to say that one friend in the desert is equal to twenty camels. My name is Tir. What's yours?"

"Ianiskos."

"I never heard such a name. It isn't Persian or Kurd or Scythian." The boy looked at him curiously. "Where *do* you come from?"

"From Susa. I have been riding for nearly a month."

"I didn't see you ride up to the oasis. I didn't hear you either." It was almost an accusation.

"You weren't listening. You were worried about your horse."

"I think," said Tir stubbornly, "that you came from much further than Susa." He looked up at the sky. "You don't talk like a child at all. Not like my cousins. There is something—well, golden, about you—like a comet."

In Zoroastrian theology, stars were beneficent servants of Ahura-Mazda, but comets and meteors were the malefi-

cent "worm-stars", the weapons hurled by Ahriman and his demon followers. But the boy apparently intended a rare compliment.

"You are right, I am not a child," said Ianiskos. "It's just that I stopped growing a long time ago."

Tir nodded with understanding, as if he often met dwarfs who had stopped growing at the age of six. "Of course. Now you must come back with me to the Tribe and share our supper. You shall be our *guest*." In the desert, Ianiskos knew, the lowliest visitor, once accepted as a guest, was honoured like a prince. But hunger must wait until he had found his queen.

"I am on a quest," he explained. "I am looking for Queen Vashti."

Tir did not press him for an explanation. "Ah, but she is my queen too. She passed only this morning, bound for Petra. My sister, Ashi, and I met her in the desert with her slave, who looked like a big ripe olive—the sun must have cooked her on the journey. We led them up to our cave to refresh themselves. She invited us to come to Petra with her. But we didn't want to live in a town. We like our cave, even if we do have to eat lizards in the winter. Still, she was *very* beautiful and kind—like a field of grain in the sun—and she promised to come and visit us again."

"Were there men following her?"

Tir flushed and averted his face. "None that I saw." Then, quickly: "We will take you to Vashti tomorrow. Tonight, you shall dine in our cave, just as she did."

"Will you wait for me while I bathe?" he asked. With Vashti safe in Petra, the prospect of supper with friends and a long, sound sleep was irresistible.

"Bathe?" repeated the boy in astonishment. "But you already look as clean as a cat!"

Ianiskos laughed and stripped his hooded robe and his loin cloth, both of them frayed and faded from having been washed repeatedly and hung on bushes to dry, and backed into the stream to hide the scar at the base of his spine. He did not want to be branded as a Jinn and lose both his friend and his invitation to supper! The rocks

were smooth beneath his feet, and the current assuaged his limbs of weariness and baking suns. As he gulped the cold waters, he splashed buoyantly with the prospect of comradeship. Yielding to an impulse, he slapped the stream with his palm and showered Tir on the bank.

Tir's face darkened. He was not sure if he was being teased or insulted. "Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"It's a kind of game," Ianiskos explained. "A way of saying that I want you to enjoy the water with me."

Tir doubtfully removed his robe and, perhaps for the first time in his life, immersed himself in the stream. At first he huddled near the bank, clutching his arms and shivering and looking down apprehensively into the depths. He has never learned to swim, thought Ianiskos, but the water is safe and shallow, even if swift. He took the boy's hand and led him to the middle of the stream.

"See," he said, "it isn't deep at all. It comes to my neck but only to your waist."

Tir ducked him so quickly that Ianiskos mistook the boy for one of those crafty water spirits described by Xerxes, and struggled to the surface ready to do battle with a web-footed monster, only to find the grinning face of his friend, who caught him in the mouth with a streamer of water propelled by his big hand. They thrashed about in the current like two bear cubs, or rather, in view of their respective sizes, a cub and its father, and then, exhausted and happy, climbed onto the bank. Tir looked at Ianiskos' body and doubled with laughter.

"You are so smooth," he said. "So pink, and so very *little*. All over."

"And you are so big," said Ianiskos, not resenting, for once, a reference to his size, and pleased that he still looked smooth after weeks in the desert instead of emaciated like his pony. "We ought to become Fravashis and enter each other's bodies to see what it feels like to be the opposite."

"No," said Tir. "I think you would want to keep my body. Yours is prettier but mine is better for riding and fighting and"—he gave a conspiratorial wink—"*women*." Suddenly he looked down at himself and barked with

alarm. In the stream, his skin had lost a layer of dirt and turned from the brown of mud to the tan of cow's hide.

"I have faded," he groaned.

"It will come back," Ianiskos promised. "Very soon, I suspect."

They mounted their animals, which were nibbling tamarisk leaves, and Ianiskos guided his pony into a walk behind Tir's horse. He felt, for the first time since the flight of the queen, as careless and free as the stream in which he had bathed. She was safe among her people; he would find her tomorrow. Today, he had found a friend; in the easy way of a child—a real child—he was going home with him to share a meal. He felt not six nor twenty-six, but ageless, removed from time, and he loved the giant ahead of him, whose feet, swaying in his stirrups, resembled canoes separated by a water-spout, and whose heart seemed to match their size.

In the bushes at the edge of the oasis, an object glinted yellowly in the sun of the late afternoon. He slowed his pony and peered into the undergrowth. Metal it surely was—the tip of a sword?—and there, further among the bushes, was it not a round felt hat like those of Xerxes' officers?

"Tir," he said "Wait a moment. There's something in the grass."

But Tir had spurred his horse. "It's the sun on a rock," he called over his shoulder. "Don't dismount. I saw a viper there this morning."

He rode alongside of Tir. "You had a fight, didn't you? With Persians."

"Yes."

Desperately he wanted to give the boy a chance to justify himself. "Did—did you fight them to help the queen?"

Tir grinned at him. "I should have known better than to try to fool *you*. The queen and the ripe olive had left our cave and headed for the Sik when two soldiers rode after them. I rode after the soldiers."

"Alone?"

"Yes. I took them by surprise. They were tired from

their long journey. I killed one with a stone. The other I dragged to the ground and stabbed—after he had wounded my horse. The queen never saw the fight. She had already entered the Sik." He hesitated. "I didn't want their swords. They were evil things. One of them had hurt my horse. But I took a belt. Are you angry, I—Ianiskos?" He pronounced the Greek name with difficulty. "I knew they meant to do the queen harm. She had stayed such a little while in the cave, and then she rode away as if she were frightened of something."

"No, of course I'm not angry. Only if you had killed them for no reason. They would have taken the queen prisoner."

"I'm glad you understand. I wouldn't want to kill you too. I would almost rather kill my horse." He did not ask the crime with which the queen was charged. Perhaps he knew.

CHAPTER THREE

The Star-God

They veered from the stream to climb an ocherous hill and then, descending the far side, threaded their way through a maze of camel-shaped stones to the mouth of a cave.

"I had better go first," said Tir. "My sister might stab you if you surprised her. You know how skittish women are. Or," he added cheerfully, "the cousins might cook you. They are always hungry, and you do look good to eat. Sweet like a piglet."

"Ashi," the boy called, and a girl appeared in the mouth of the cave. Frowning, she balanced in her hands a partially plucked bustard, tonight's supper, thought Ianiskos with a sudden loss of appetite. Ashi was a girl of twelve and, like her brother, something of a giant. Her face and body were full and growing maternal. She looked as if she would bear innumerable children and suckle them from endlessly flowing breasts. Her tumultuous hair resembled a raven's feathers, and her eyes were large, black, ancient, and faintly slanted like those on the frescoed walls

of Etruscan tombs. They seemed to be searching; to probe and penetrate until they saw truths and presences invisible to other eyes. When she looked at Ianiskos, she looked *into* him, and he felt as if her large fingers were groping through his brain.

"I found him at the stream and brought him home to you," said Tir proudly, as though Ianiskos were a present. "He isn't really a child. He knows magic and he saved my horse."

Before Ianiskos could greet the girl, she had snatched him from his pony to examine at arms' length.

"Nasu, Al, Indra," she called to her three cousins, who thronged to her summons with the clatter of braying camels. The children's names, Ianiskos noted, had been borrowed from notorious demons in the retinue of Ahriman. In Susa, such names were spoken only as oaths. But his sight of the cousins dispelled his fears. Though almost as tall as Ashi, they looked about ten; they were triplets and, to Ianiskos, utterly indistinguishable. Hair, the red of a radish, was heaped on their heads like piles of mown alfalfa; their eyes resembled large green olives; and their skin held a constellation of freckles. Because of their shapeless robes, only their giggles identified them as girls.

At last Ashi deposited him on the ground, and the cousins converged, chattering, to investigate. There was nothing rude about their investigation. They neither poked nor prodded, they simply looked at him with disarming smiles and deluged him with questions to which they did not seem to expect answers.

"I had a swim with Tir," he managed at last. "He invited me to have supper with you."

"Swim!" cried the cousins in unison, and one of them (who was missing her teeth) continued unbelievingly, "Tir doesn't like water. Neither do we."

Tir was indignant. "Now I do," he said. "Though," he added, "it did fade me. But Ianiskos says I will brown again."

"Do you think it would wash away my freckles?" the toothless cousin asked.

"Our guest must be hungry," said Ashi, obviously annoyed at having to share Ianiskos with the cousins. She

captured his arm with the grip of a friendly ape and led him into the cave. He caught her exchanging a look of triumph with Tir. She liked her present.

The cave consisted of two large chambers cut from the limestone hill. It was, in fact, an artificial cave, a tomb dug by the Edomites before the coming of the Nabataeans. The outer chamber sheltered the children's animals, and Ianiskos' pony was introduced to the company of three horses, a goat, and a one-eared pig to enjoy the hay which was liberally sprinkled over the floor along with equally liberal sprinklings of manure.

The walls of the inner chamber had been smoothed and painted with ravens, and the floor had been scooped into several long furrows to receive the mummies of the dead, but the mummies had disappeared, either stolen by thieves for their jewellery or removed by the children, who had filled the furrows with straw for sleeping. A small fire burned on a clay hearth, blackening the roof and obscuring the birds on the walls. The furniture was sparse and simple: five wooden stools and a crude table of tamarisk wood, together with a stone-wheeled wagon which seemed to serve as a chest and held a clutter of saddles, sandals, weapons, and other oddments. A pile of firewood sprawled behind the wagon.

The bustard, tenderized with olive oil, garnished with sesame seeds, and roasted over the fire, proved to be edible if not delectable, and Ianiskos noticed that the children ate sparingly to increase his own portion. He was also served goat's milk, dates, and a white, flaky substance which Ashi called manna and which, she explained, grew during the night and had to be picked at dawn. He recognized a form of lichen. Throughout the meal, the cousins insisted on plying him with tidbits from their own wooden plates—a gizzard, a bit of skin, the tip of a wing. They seemed to expect him to take the food with his lips directly from their fingers, as a fledgling receives worms, and he did his best to keep the juices from dribbling down his chin.

When the last bone on the last plate had been picked to the white cleanliness of a sea-washed shell, Ashi raised her hand to silence the Tribe.

"It is time," she said, "for the Stone. Tir, will you fetch it for us?"

Tir leaped from his stool and fished among the oddments in the wagon. The others followed his movements with expectation, as if they stood on the deck of a fishing boat and watched a diver exploring for sunken riches. The treasure he netted was a box of lapis lazuli which glittered so bluely and smokily in the firelight that Ianiskos imagined himself in the palace at Susa, and Xerxes receiving a gift from the king of Lydia.

"It belonged to our father," said Ashi, opening the box. "But what it holds has always been ours." She displayed a brownish stone, drab and shapeless, which might have been found in a stream or turned aside by a plough. But Ashi's fingers trembled with its touch, and the cousins passed it among them as if it were fragile glass from the blowers of Phoenicia. The third cousin prepared to hand it to Ianiskos, who held out his hands and tried to look awed and admiring, but Ashi forestalled him and reclaimed the stone.

"He already knows what it's like," she reproved the cousin. She gazed at the stone until strange fires flickered among its depressions, as if she had summoned them from its secret heart. Or perhaps the firelight had lent a reflected brilliance. When she spoke, her voice seemed to come from the shaft of a well. She recited a Zoroastrian invocation to the four stars which guarded the night sky against the machinations of Ahriman:

Star of the west,
    Vanand,
Star of the south,
    Sataves,
Star of the north,
    Haptok Ring,
Star of the East,
    Lordly, laughing Tishtar,
Hearken unto our prayer
    And come to us
On swift and dancing sandals.

"The stone, you see, fell from the sky," Ashi explained, herself again, immediate and matter of fact. "That was after our parents had been killed in the sandstorm. Before they were killed, we lived in the Sea of Grass far to the north. But the Scythians drove us out—called us Cyclops and shot arrows at our wagons—and we had to flee to the south, just our two families and our animals, looking for a place to pitch our tents. Then came the sandstorm. Tir, the cousins, and I were in one wagon, our parents in the other. The other was buried and we never even found it. That's why, a little later, we were glad to find the stone. We watched it fall, cooled it with dirt, and brought it back to our tent to put in the box. Of course it is a piece of star. Otherwise, it wouldn't have glowed so brightly as it fell. We have always believed that Tishtar, the Starry Boy, sent it to us as a sign that all was well with our parents. You know, he can see everything from his high palace, and he was probably telling us that he had seen our parents make their way safely across the bridge Chinvat and enter paradise." She paused and looked at Tir and the cousins. "But now it seems the stone was another kind of sign as well. That Tishtar was coming to visit us."

"When is he coming?" asked Ianiskos, hoping the answer was not the one he feared.

The cousins smiled with delicious conspiracy. "He *has* come." Then they burst into laughter.

"Sly little god," cried Ashi, seizing him in her arms. She smelled of grass and woodsmoke. "We know who you are! You have come from the sky, and you are very welcome!" She hugged and patted him, like a young mother who has lost and unexpectedly found her child. The cousins watched with envy; they too would like to fondle their god, but such was Ashi's authority that they did not dare to interrupt her. Tir, however, was not so patient. He took Ianiskos' hand and pressed it reverently against his cheek.

"No wonder you healed my horse," he said.

He would have to disappoint them, Ianiskos thought, these giant, lonely children who had lost their parents and wanted to find a god, these children he had so quickly learned to love, and he searched his brain for a way to

lessen their hurt. Once he had found the queen, he could return to them with gifts. But now he must disillusion them.

"I wish I *were* a god," he said. "But Tishtar is a boy of fifteen. Remember the words of the *Zend Avesta*:

> With the body of a young man,
> Fifteen years of age and shining,
> Clear of eye, and tall, and sturdy,
> Full of strength, and very skilful . . .

Can that be a dwarf like me?"

"At least you are shining and clear of eye," said Tir. "If you aren't Tishtar, who are you then?"

"I don't know. I came to Persia from Sicyon in Greece. Before Greece I don't remember anything."

"You *do* know you are not really a child. You told me so yourself. Tishtar has many avatars—a white horse with yellow ears—a white bull. Why not a child as well? Where else could you find your golden hair except in a star?"

It was no use to protest. They drowned his cries with a chorus of "Hush, little god," and hurried to clear the wagon and make a bed for him. Tenderly Ashi arranged him in a mound of straw and laid the box beside him.

"No, put it in his lap," said Tir. "Let him be opening it as if it were his Rain Box. He's scattering his sweet waters to the thirsty plants and horses."

"Now we must bring him sacrifices," said Ashi. "Our rarest possessions."

"I will give him my sandals," cried one of the cousins.

"And my wax doll, the one that Mother gave me," cried another.

"And I will give him my knife," said Tir.

"But Tir, *that* isn't your rarest possession," said Ashi sternly.

Tir lowered his head in shame. "My horse then," he said. He might have been saying, "The heart from my breast."

"A star god has no use for a horse," Ianiskos said

quickly. "Or sandals or a doll. He wants your love and your hospitality, which you have given in full measure."

The children looked at him with pleased astonishment.

"You don't want my horse?" asked Tir. "Not even to ride between the stars and visit your friends, Vanand and Sataves?"

"I want him to remain with the master he loves." He added: "Even if I *were* Tishtar, I wouldn't know what to feed him in the sky."

"You know," said Tir, "I think it is rather beautiful having a god of our own. The great Zoroaster taught that the only true god was Ahura-Mazda, and all the others were mere angels serving in his army against the demons of Ahriman. Angels are all very well, but a bit—well, *respectable*. They won't go swimming with you without any clothes, though I can't think why, since I don't imagine they have anything to hide! And certainly you can't have water-fights with them."

While Tir was speaking, the cousins had held a grudging silence. Now, they clamoured to share in their new god.

"He's our god too," cried the cousin without any teeth, and one by one they knelt beside the wagon to receive his blessing for the night. On each bowed, radish-coloured head, he laid his hand. He might have been granting to each of them a rich and populous province, so earnestly did they kneel. Touching the last head, he felt, hidden in the mountainous hair, two stiff horns . . .

He lay in his straw and listened to the heavy breathing of the children, who slept between him and the chamber of the animals. Excitement and a long day had exhausted them. Soon, he would creep between their beds, saddle his pony, and ride in search of the Sik which led to Petra. He dared not enter the Sik until daylight, when the Nabataean archers could identify him as a lone and harmless rider. At the same time, he dared not remain in the cave. He did not doubt that the children meant to keep him. Children or Jinns? No matter. He dreaded departure without good-bye.

"Are you warm, little god?" Ashi asked suddenly, lean-

ing over the side of the wagon. He had not heard her rise from the straw. "The desert nights are very cold. But then, I expect, so are the nights in the sky. I have seen you in the East so many times and thought how lonely you looked!" She stooped to kiss his cheek.

Perhaps, with the others asleep, he could explain to her why he was not a god.

"Ashi," he said. "I have told you that I remember nothing before I came to Greece. But I am quite sure that I have never been a god. If I had, wouldn't I remember the sky, the black gulfs and the flaring, golden palaces? Otherwise, what is the use of being a god? What I *do* remember is red cliffs and hot winds, almost as if I had seen this very country when I was a child. But certainly I have never seen a star."

She looked at him searchingly—the dying firelight revealed the question in her face—and took his hand, engulfing his fingers in a massive but gentle hold.

"Perhaps you were not a god when you first came to us," she said. "But we have dreamed you into one, and that is much the same. As long as you stay with us, we will keep you a god. That is why you must never leave us and return to what you were."

"But I have to find the queen!"

"The queen has a whole people to love. What does she need with one little god who has forgotten his star? But to us you are distance and brightness and where our parents have gone."

After she had left him and returned to her bed, he listened for a long time until her breathing grew deep and muffled. He emerged from his straw like a mouse leaving his nest and slipped to the floor. The wooden wagon creaked with his small weight but the sleepers did not stir. In the glow of embers, he distinguished their quiet forms, sunk in the straw as town children sink into woollen coverlets. In spite of the risk, he knelt beside Ashi and kissed her hair.

"Good-bye, giant girl," he whispered under his breath. "Good-bye, sweet mother."

Kneeling then by the boy, he laid his hand as lightly as

a moonbeam on his hair and, even as he felt the pointed hardness of a horn, whispered:

"Some day, Tir, we shall swim together again."

Sad with leaving, he looked at them for the last time. Xerxes had once accused him: "Your heart is like a moth. It is always looking for another fire in which to burn its wings." And Vashti had answered: "One day, I think, it will become a phoenix, which rises doubly beautiful from its own ashes."

In the chamber of the animals, he found his pony but not his saddle. Well, he could cling to Tychon's mane and keep his place. As he led him out of the cave, he did not have to caution him to stealth. The little beast was as quiet as a deer, though the one-eared pig stirred to a fitful grunt behind them. They threaded their way among the menagerie of moonlit rocks, which resembled the crowded court of a caravanserai where camels await the return of their masters.

Tomorrow he would find the queen. Tomorrow he would speak to her about the children. Tomorrow—

The hands which jerked him from Tychon were as rough and sudden as branches. He writhed in their grip, kicking and swinging his fists, but finally gasped into silence. The pony stopped in his tracks and, seeing the plight of his master, turned in readiness to bite the attacker. But Tir was striding stormily back to the cave, and Ianiskos managed a cry of warning to his pony: he did not want him to feel Tir's back-breaking wrath.

They were waiting for him in the cave, Ashi and the three cousins, seated around the newly rekindled fire. He saw a tear on Ashi's cheek.

"It was wicked of you to leave us," she accused him. "You didn't even say good-bye. If Tir hadn't heard the pig, we wouldn't have known you were gone."

"I wanted to find the queen," he said simply. "I felt that you wouldn't have let me go tomorrow."

"That was for us to decide. After all, it was Tir who found you. Now you will stay with us *always*."

Tir, meanwhile, had gone to the rear of the cave. From the pile of firewood, he selected the stoutest branches and

fastened them over the wagon with the help of leather thongs. Iron nails, though plentiful in the towns, were still unknown in the desert.

"He is building your tabernacle," said Ashi proudly. "The Israelites carry their god in a golden tabernacle, and yours is merely wood. But then, you are not a very powerful god are you? At least the wood will keep you inside."

"If I am a god as you say," he cried, "what is to keep me from blasting all of you with lightning?"

Ashi smiled sadly. "If you are a god, you must go ahead and blast us. We would rather be killed by a true, heavenly god than let a pretend-one leave us without a good-bye."

Once in the wagon, he watched helplessly while Tir secured the last branches and left him in a doorless prison whose only light filtered through cracks in the roof. He looked up through the cracks at the staring faces of the three cousins, who looked down at him as if he were a deer or a bear cub caught in a trap. He could not stand without striking his head. A tabernacle? No, a cage. He resembled the captive magpie which Xerxes kept in his palace.

Somehow, he fell asleep, and the faces leered at him in his dream, their freckles like drops of blood, their teeth transformed into fangs, and their horns like antlers sprouting from their skulls.

He awoke to the smell of cheese and the sound of milk sloshing in clay vessels. He heard the voices of the children, subdued, almost sad; he heard Tir and the cousins leave the cave and Ashi remind them to fetch water from the stream and cut some wood for the fire. He heard her bustling through the cave, as if it were a real house which had to be cleaned for the return of the master.

"Ashi," he called. "I am very hungry." He wondered how she could feed him in his doorless cage.

She solved the problem by slipping some thin slices of cheese through the cracks of the roof. He caught them eagerly in his hands.

"And thirsty," he added.

"Tir has gone to fetch water."

"Some milk then?"

He held his mouth to a crack; grudgingly she poured a few drops from a vessel shaped like a fish.

"Ashi! Tir!" The voice came from the mouth of the cave; a woman's voice.

Ashi dropped her container and drenched his hair with milk which spewed through the cracks. He felt the wagon lurch as she seized the tongue and pushed him toward the rear of the cave. Blackness enfolded him as if a blanket had been thrown across the roof.

Again, the voice, musical but commanding: "Ashi, Tir!"

"Vashti," he cried. "I am in the wagon!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Beast

They rode from the cave, Ianiskos following the queen and followed by her three escorts, black-robed Nabataeans who bowed their heads and hunched like brooding vultures astride their mounts. Tir and the cousins had returned from the stream and joined Ashi; silent, the children watched the silent departure of their god and the queen who yesterday had been their guest. When Ashi had freed Ianiskos from his cage, Vashti had neither questioned nor reproved the girl; it was enough that a queen had withheld her smile.

Ianiskos raised his hand in a futile gesture of farewell.

Ashi replied scornfully: "Go, little god who is no longer a god. We have undreamed you."

He could find no words with which to answer the failure of her dream, and somehow, few words with which to greet the queen for whom he had searched and who had searched for him.

"They are very lonely," he said. "They have such a need for gods, but Mithras and Ahura-Mazda are only names to them—too remote and perfect. It is little gods they need. Friends and playmates."

He saw that her face held the hardness of ivory as well as the whiteness. Robes enclosed her as dusky wrappings enclose the jewel-encrusted mummy of a Pharaoh. Yet she wore no veil. It was strangely disquieting to see the face of a woman in the desert. She had ridden from Susa muffled with robes and sorrow, but the desert, it seemed, had both freed and hardened her, as the sun bakes a crust on the sand, and the wind toughens a tree to hold its leaves and bend without breaking.

"Lonely?" she said. "So is the scorpion. Do you pity him?" Her voice sank to a whisper, seductive, consciously alluring. "The desert has been kind to you, my dear. Your face is like a sunflower. Yesterday my watchers saw you come to the oasis. This morning I grew concerned and rode to find you. I found the tracks of your pony and followed them to the cave of the children."

"Did you find the bodies of your pursuers?"

"Yes. I have ordered them to be exposed on the rocks. The vultures here are quick and plentiful." She spoke of the men, lately her husband's officers, as if they were beasts of burden, expendable and not to be mourned.

"The children are very wicked," she continued. "They would have kept you in their cage until you died."

"They felt that I had wronged them. I was their guest, and I left in the night without good-bye. It was love which made them cruel."

"In the name of love, many cruelties are done."

"It is better to be cruel for love than for hate."

"You are too indulgent. They will have to be punished. I can hardly allow them to roam the country working mischief. I shall put them to work in Petra." She swept back her hood and allowed her hair to fall like cascading coins around her shoulders; almost, he could hear the clink and jingle of shekels. The gesture seemed calculated to dazzle him. Dwarf that he was, he had always felt mocked by the conscious wiles of a woman.

"You will make them slaves?" he cried, remembering the market in Sicyon and the oily slaver with earrings like crocodiles.

"Slaves, servants, call them what you like. There are

tombs to be cut in the rocks, irrigation ditches to be dug from the river. Giants should be useful in Petra."

He reined his pony. "I will not be party to enslaving the children." Truly he could believe the charges against her.

"They are Jinns," she spat, as if she had read his thought and wished to turn his suspicion to the children. "They are horned and twisted. Ahriman's brood. In the Sea of Grasses, their parents were thieves and cannibals who preyed on the Scythian nomads."

"They are children," he said. "If Ahriman loves them, he is not the devil men think."

"And you, Ianiskos? How can you love them after they caged you?"

"Most of us, I think, build cages for one another, and without the excuse of childish loneliness. Yes, Vashti, I love them."

He was not prepared for the further change in the queen. Long ago in the Bay of Aegina, a child then in years as well as body, he had seen a statue fished from a sunken ship, a galley sunk by pirates. Green and cold it had looked, with sightless eyes. Patiently a fisherman had removed the sea's disfigurements with a sponge, until the mouth had curved into a smile, the cheeks had reddened with a very human blush, and the eyes had blued to the colour of cornflowers on a hillside in Arcadia. It was such a change which he saw in the queen, but instantaneous and blinding: marble warmed to flesh.

"My dear, my dear," she cried, holding her hand to him like a cornucopia bestowing grapes and pomegranates. "You are truly the man I had hoped. But I had to be sure, you see. I had to probe your heart, even at the cost of seeming a woman of stone. Did you really think I would hurt those sad, lost children? It is true that they are Jinns. For that very reason, they need and deserve our help. We will go to them, you and I, but first I must show you a truth about yourself."

By now they had reached the mouth of the Sik, and he followed her gaze up the sides of the sheer and ruddy cliffs. Aloof, impenetrable, unclimbable they seemed, but then, as the smooth trunk of a tree may erupt with mites,

so the blank cliffs erupted with Nabataean Watchers. Armies had reeled before their well-aimed arrows. Now, they dipped their bows in simple, moving tribute to their queen, who smiled and raised her hand in a greeting and a benediction, as if she were flashing a gift of love to them across the sun-washed air.

The answering voice of the Watchers was less a cry than a song:

"Vashti!"

They followed the course of the Sik beside a stream of azure fish and between tall cliffs as close together in places as columns supporting the pediment of a temple. Startled from thickets of oleander, crested bulbuls flashed their red-spotted tails like showers of sparks, but a greater burning waited in the valley. To Ianiskos, it was as if he had stepped from a darkened house into a sunrise.

"We call it the valley of the sun," said Vashti. "Of his rising at dawn and his rest at night, and no one is sure if he paints the cliffs with his own liquid rays, or borrows his rays from the painted cliffs."

It seemed to Ianiskos that he stood like a phoenix in the heart of a fire which encompassed all brightnesses: the fire of sandalwood from the hearth of a temple; moon-foam shading from silver to amber to orange like the moon as it waxes to fullness; stars, strewn in a Milky Way without extinguishing their separate twinklings; blue-white phosphorus from the wake of a galley on a night sea; the flashing bronze mirrors of a pharos on a dangerous headland. Many burnings, many brightnesses; one fire, encompassing and purifying. Atar, the Immortal Flame.

Slowly, reluctantly, he drew his eyes from the burning ramparts to look at the valley which they engirdled but did not consume: blue where the river called Wady Moussa arched through tamarisk groves and tents like inverted poppies; white where the hill called Al Habi rang with the rustlings of a thousand pigeons, and whiter than snow where unicorns waded in the shallows of the river or grazed along the banks, their horns glinting like burnished scimi-

tars, the last and loveliest of all the valley's fires. In a little while, he thought, I will pasture my pony with the unicorns. As in the garden at Susa, I will hold out my hand to receive the soft entreaty of their muzzles. A valley of unicorns! Vashti's valley. It is she who has whistled them from the snow fields of the north where, almost beyond memory, the ancestors of the Persians began the migration which led them to the warm hills of the south.

"I could never show my valley to Xerxes," said the queen. "He would have used it as an arsenal instead of an asylum. He is only a child, you see, in a man's body. A dear and barbarous child."

"While I am a man in a child's body."

"And now it is time, I think."

"Time?"

"For the truth I promised to show you."

"I am not yet to enter the valley?"

"Not yet." To their Nabataean escorts she said: "Return, my friends, to your tents."

They looked at him intently, as if for the last time. There was unexpected kindness in those sharp, weathered faces, and—was he mistaken?—distress.

Dismounting, she sent her horse with the Nabataeans.

He rested his cheek against his pony's head. "Go with them, Tychon," he whispered. "And wait for me."

She saw his concern for the animal. "He will graze with the unicorns. They are fond of ponies. They treat them like their own colts. Come now, my dear."

He followed her up a stairway cut into the side of the cliff, and high above the ground they entered the mouth of a tomb through a wide Egyptian pylon chiselled from the rock. He heard before he saw the occupants, whoever, whatever they were, and when, in the shadows far to the rear, he discerned their faint, twisting outlines, he thought that Vashti had brought him to a cave of serpents. But no, the rope-like objects which swayed and dipped like adders were the necks of birds; he saw their tremendous wings folded into the shadows; their hooked beaks and hooded eyes. He was less afraid than awed. Vultures were blessed by the gods. He had seen them perform their grisly but

indispensable ritual in the Towers of Silence. Death and decay were the works of Ahriman. Ahura-Mazda sent vultures to cleanse and purify.

Vashti clapped her hands; the birds recognized her and dragged their awkward bodies toward the light, carrying —what? Two silken harnesses such as the Babylonian acrobats wore when they swung through the air in the games of Marduk—glittering frameworks to hold their bodies as if in an upright chair.

"Step through the holes and draw it around your thighs as you would a loin cloth," she explained. "You will notice that six strands are attached to the waist. The birds will take them in their claws. You will hang suspended in the air like a tarpon in a net. You need have no fear. They would rather be bitten by scorpions than let you fall. These are no ordinary birds, you see—they are blessed by Ahura-Mazda. Let them precede you through the door."

When the last bird had lumbered into the air, Vashti emerged from the door and stood on the open porch at the head of the stairs. One by one the birds approached her, toiling, it seemed, to maintain their flight, but skilfully catching the cords, one to a bird, which she flung to their talons and plucking her into the air. For Ianiskos, four of the cords sufficed to bear his weight.

The strands tightened until they threatened to snap; the folds of the harness constricted around his loins. At first, his carriers lurched and dipped toward the ground, the river, and the tamarisk groves. The sound of wings was a surf which boomed in his ears. Then, screaming as if their wings would be torn from their bodies, they laboured up and up with him, past the level of the tomb, upward still, gaining ease and momentum, masters at last of their burden and the air which, lately treacherous, now sustained them. He watched the unicorns watching him from their pasturage, horns dwindling from scimitars to knives to pins which flashed and faded into disenchantment.

Now they were labouring over the tallest cliffs, whose crags reared deadly points like the upraised lances of a marching host, but the birds, no longer fighting to climb the air, manoeuvred with grace and skill. Nimble warriors dodging the thrust of spears, they settled among the cliffs

and circled a small field no larger than a race course for chariots and carpeted with red-flowering heather.

When his feet touched ground, Ianiskos began to run to keep pace with the birds, his sandals crackling the hard undergrowth of stems and stones. The silk strands, released by the birds, fluttered after him like banners from the chariot of a victorious general. Gasping, he fell to his knees and ground his hands gratefully in the heather. He fell like Antaeus, the giant who, battered by Hercules, regained his strength whenever he touched the earth.

The queen towered above him, a black obelisk. He looked up at her dark robes and beyond her at the ten vultures which repeated the blackness of her robes and hunched on the field in silent weariness: bent, misshapen, and loyal. Beyond the birds, he saw the hollowed rock of an altar from which the tip of a flame wrinkled like the tongue of an ox, and a pool which was scooped in the heather like a Titan's urn. A sacred area, he judged: fire and water for purification, a rock for sacrifice.

She led him to the pool and removed his hooded robe and the loin cloth which clung pathetically about his child's waist. He trembled with shame that she should look upon his nakedness, his littleness, the scar at the base of his spine, but she seemed to look upon him only as an object in a ritual whose meaning he could not guess. She bathed his hands and feet in the pool, her fingers chill with the water and frozen, he felt, beyond awareness of what they touched. From the foot of the altar, she lifted a vessel of banded chalcedony and raised to his lips a yellow, astringent liquid. Gomez, he thought, shuddering: the urine of a bull blessed by the priests of Zoroaster. She recited an ancient conjuration from the *Zend Avesta*, anathema to demons:

"When corn grows the demons start in dismay; when the sprouts are out, the demons cough; when the stalks are seen, the demon shed tears; when the ears are out, the demons take to their heels; in the house where the corn is turned into flour, the demons are smitten:

It seems as if it turned
Red hot iron in their jaws
When corn is stored in plenty."

Then, tenderly, lovingly, she lifted him in her arms, and it seemed to him that the trance had left her eyes; that she acted against her will to complete the ritual. She bore him, at once a mother with a child and a priest with a sacrifice, into a forest of petrified trees, hard, grey, breaking the light as if they were bars in a prison: a forest with blue lizards in place of birds, where scorpions rattled their deadly tails from the branchless trunks and the wind wailed as if out of loneliness for leaves. And then, the trees of stone fell away to a round, grassless clearing which held the Tree.

Once, in the Gulf of Corinth, he had dived with the children of murex fishers and found a sea anemone attached to a ridge of coral. A flower, he had thought, pretty and harmless, its tendrils swayed by the current. But the flower was a beast, and the tendrils were tentacles which, before his eyes, lashed to encircle a fish and draw it hungrily to a hidden mouth. The Tree was such a beast, but swollen to the size of a round-built merchant ship. The writhing branches, moist and red as the flesh of a bull, surrounded a cavernous mouth which opened and shut, opened and shut like a huge, blinking eye. Its sound was that of sandals crossing a bog: a foot sinking and rising in the slime, the slush of water filling the empty print. And its stench was of rotten leaves and long decayed flesh, of plants and animals swallowed by quicksand and later disgorged in shapeless gobbets.

At last, irrevocably, in spite of her conjuration against the demons, he knew that the queen was a Jinn; that she meant to feed him to the Tree. Her many faces had beguiled and baffled him; her final face confronted him now. She had bathed and purified him for the sacrifice, as the priests of Babylon prepared young children for the flames of Marduk, dressing them in silk and velvet from the East and combing their tresses with combs of agate and amber.

He could not move to escape from the cage of her arms. His limbs had wilted like the petals of a flower with a broken stem. The cup of gomez, no doubt, had contained an opiate—not poppy nor hemlock nor wolf's-bane, for Vashti knew that no plant could intoxicate or drug him,

but perhaps a soporific powder from stones or shells. The dream which had let him to Persia and finally to Petra, the dream of the red desert and the writhing beast, had been both a phantom to lure him and a presentiment of his own inescapable doom.

His eyes frozen in openness, he stared at Vashti and the coils of the Tree reflected in her white, translucent skin. How had he ever mistaken her for a woman? She was perfect like a lamp of beaten gold or a screen of fretted ivory; perfect with the handiwork of gods—or devils.

Her face was flushed and exultant: a shadow of roses on snow.

"For love," she said, and the branches leaned to her like the paws of an obedient animal to lift him, hushed in horror, to the parted mouth of the Tree.

"For love . . ."

A bud enclosed in a winter-stripped branch has no foretaste of sun. The weight of wood is a many-sided vise. The only sounds are the distant thunder of crashing ice, the groanings of branches bowed with snow. The cold is a smothering owl with damp feathers.

Then, sunlight . . . A blow to the eyes, an inundation of the body in liquid fire; a disintegration into the orange turbulence at the heart of a volcano. Even the wooden night, the smothering owl, is remembered as not, after all, intolerable . . .

But the sea sustains as well as drowns and heat revives as well as burns . . . Float now, drift now, swash in amber waters . . . He lies in the moment, without memory, without anticipation. Night returns but not with cold. Day but not with burning. It is good in the sun. It is good without the sun. Rest . . . dream . . . grow.

Around him, the scarlet wilderness moves in rhythmic pulsations, billowing, bubbling, subsiding, and athwart that redness of leaves a single golden flower uplifts the stalk which encloses his body like a hard cocoon, and the petals which surround his face like the rays of Ahura-Mazda's crown. He stares at the sky and the great flower

of the sun. I have borrowed my gold, he thinks, from my father in the sky. I will lift my petals in obeisance to him and hold my face in the shower of his sweet effusions. But ten black vultures wheel in my father's light and shadow me with their wings.

Memory falls on him like a weighted net. Xerxes. Vashti. The children in the cave. The sacrifice.

He thinks: Prometheus bound to the rock . . . the gathering of vultures . . . the slow, endless turning of the world.

"A long time," she was saying. "A long time. Every day I have come with my birds. And when at last I saw your face in the flower, I wanted to climb among those crimson limbs and cut you free. But I had to wait until your flower had shed its petals and the Tree had laid you at my feet."

"Rise to me, Ianiskos," she was saying. "I will give you my hand, and you shall give me the wonder of your awakening."

But her hand was a cord which stretched him on the wrack, a tong which dragged him into vivid coals.

"There is fire in my blood," he screamed.

"Fire is life," she said. "Flames climb upward to the gods. Rise to me, Ianiskos." She held his shoulders between her steadying hands.

Struggling out of pain like a dreamer out of a poppied trance, he stared down at her and knew that he was tall. The limbs which had been so dwarfed: what stalwartness now rippled in their long, roseate length? In the legs like columns, the shoulders princely of width, the litheness of thighs enshrining the emblem of his belated manhood?

He looked at the Tree, and the red beast of his dream and his resurrection lay limp and bereft, delivered of its golden flower, and he touched the tired limbs as one might touch a beloved animal, a pony or a unicorn with a white, uplifted muzzle.

"The Tree goes with you," she smiled. "Its ichor flows in your veins. I will tell you a story. In the old days, when cruel Assyria sprawled like a pyramid across the land which is now Persia, the archangel Zoroaster was sent by Ahura-Mazda to live among men. He was born,

as the legends tell, from the stalk and flower of the Gaokerena Tree, the great haoma which grows from the 'furthest cliff in the furthest land.' This cliff, this land, this tree. The master spread his light from the Sea of Grass to the hills of Pasargadae, from the Salt Desert to the Nisayan Pastures, and then he died and returned to paradise, and the followers of Ahriman waxed powerful in his absence and spawned corruption and night. Some were Jinns; some were men perverted by Jinns; but all were dedicated followers of the devil god and militant to do his mischief. They stirred discord between the sons of Cyrus and provoked a civil war. When Cyrus' son-in-law, Darius, ascended the throne, they possessed him to fling his armies against the Greeks at Thermopylae and Marathon. The laughter of Ahriman was loud in the thunder of carnage.

"Once again, the Tree bore fruit. It was my mission to marry Xerxes and turn him from the madness which had driven his father. Yet the very sign of my birth—the scar where the life-giving ichor of the Tree had flowed into my body—would one day become the means of my fall. As you know, when Xerxes summoned me to his banquet, I could not answer the summons. I knew that his friends would take me for a Jinn and Haman would demand my death. But that was later. At the time of which I am speaking, I had not yet become the queen.

"You also were conceived by the Tree, but the devil-worshippers learned of your coming birth. The eagles which serve them told of a boy's face in the petals, beautiful and golden.

" 'Tear him from his flower,' the birds were told. 'Bring him to us for sacrifice to Ahriman.'

"They returned to the Tree. They tore you from the yellow petals. But even though a child, you must have fought their talons and struggled to free yourself. Exhausted, they must have fallen to the ground at the foot of the cliffs, where the guards of a passing caravan found you, unharmed, and stole you into slavery.

"I myself at the time was living in Petra. It was part of my mission to turn the Nabataeans from their dark rites

—their sacrifices to the bloody god, Dusares, another name for Ahriman—while waiting to fulfil my destiny as the queen of Persia. After the attack of the eagles, I visited the Tree. I saw the stalk from which you had been so cruelly torn. But I did not know of your escape until, after five years, you came to the palace at Susa. The curious gold of your hair—the wisdom of a man in the body of a small boy: Were you in truth the lost child of the Tree? I tried to discourage you from following me into the desert, knowing that if you *were* the child, you were sure to follow me in spite of all my dissuasions. As, in fact, you did. And when you wished to forgive the Jinns who had put you in a cage, I knew that only the messenger of Ahura-Mazda could practise such forgiveness. I returned you to the Tree for the manhood which the birds had denied you."

"Manhood?" he echoed. "Indeed, the Tree has given me a man's body, but I feel like a child in my heart. Weak and ignorant. You say the gods have sent me. What can I do to serve them?"

"In Susa," she said, "Xerxes has taken a bride, the Jewish Esther. No woman now can turn him from his madness to conquer Greece, but Esther will be a strong and loving wife." He caught the pain in her words. "Our mission no longer lies with the king. But there are other ways to war with evil. Not even a Jinn is so black of heart that he has no room for stars."

"The children," he cried. "There is light already in their big hearts! Can we help them to let it shine?"

"They will not be our duty," she smiled. "They will be our love."

"Our only love?" he asked wistfully. "The gods may have sent me to be a messenger, and the Tree may be my parent, but remember, I lived in the court at Susa. I'm afraid I learned some human longings."

"Love," she smiled, "has as many branches as the Gaokerena Tree, which has given you the body of a man and which hardly intends you to practise the austerities of a Buddhist monk. Look at me, my dear. What do you see?"

"A field abundant with grain. A goldenness of sheaves."

"Yet a field without any rain becomes a desert." She clapped her hands and the circling vultures descended from the sky. "It is time, Ianiskos. Again, it is time."

"Vashti," he said, "it was the Greeks who called me Ianiskos. What was my earlier name?"

"In the sky, we called you Tishtar."

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TIMMY AND THE ANGEL

by Philip Wordley

Ever since the soaking Bonfire Night when he had lit a sodden bonfire by just thinking at it, Timmy had known he was different. He was therefore not in the least surprised at the sudden appearance in his bedroom of a seven foot being in luminescent evening dress who gazed benignly at him through a shimmering haze of light that could have come from no natural source on Earth.

Timmy sized up the situation quickly. Even for a normal seven-year-old, the stranger would have presented no problem.

"You're an angel," he said.

The shining one bowed slightly. "I have been called that," he conceded.

"Do you often show yourself like this?" asked Timmy. He never believed in the round-about approach.

The angel was taken a little aback. A trifle more awe and abashment were to be expected, even from a boy who could light fires by telekinesis. "Occasionally," he said, and materialized a lighted cigarette out of nowhere. He spoilt the performance by coughing and spluttering over it. Timmy was not impressed. He thought a tumbler of water out of the bathroom, and the visitor sipped it gratefully.

"I bet you give people a shock, popping up like this," observed Timmy when the angel had recovered. He had grown unconsciously to accept that he was not "people" and that nothing ever struck him as untoward.

The angel tried another cigarette. This time he was much more successful. "Not really," he said, "I only appear to those who believe in the supernatural."

"You mean children," said Timmy. After all, adults *talked* a lot about psychic phenomena, but *knowing* they existed was a gift reserved for the very young. Or to people like Timmy at any age.

"Why yes," said the angel, more at ease. This one, at long last, seemed to be the genuine article. He relaxed, as if in his own common room, and talked to Timmy as to an equal.

"Children," he said, "are infinitely more receptive to psychic influence than are adults of any degree of intelligence. It is a talent which dims with the increasing pressure of a mundane environment. Most regrettable." And he sighed. His cigarette blew out in a shower of sparks and he dematerialized it absently.

"It's a pity people ever grow up," remarked Timmy, putting into seven words what the angel had thought needed thirty.

"A great pity," replied the vision, disconcerted. Timmy had made his point. He decided to open up with his big guns. "Strictly speaking, of course, we are not really angels at all," he told his young audience. He got the reaction he expected. Gratified, he proceeded.

"We are actually natives of Soreb, the sixth planet in the system of Spar, which is one of the cluster of suns in a galaxy many light-years removed from your outermost star." And he paused to let that sink in. Again, he was not disappointed. For the first time in his life, Timmy was staggered.

"You mean there are other solar systems?" he gasped. Not an acute observation, you might think, but Timmy had only just completed a survey of his own system, and the public library had run out of information about *that* long before he started using telepathy to help him. And after all, he was only seven, and there are limits.

"Bless you, yes," beamed the angel. Now he knew Timmy's fallibility, he could really unbend, show affection even. Even an angel (or someone with an angel's powers) has vanity.

"Well, blow me," said Timmy, and floated the whole house about six feet up.

"Don't *do* that," said the angel, in some alarm, putting it back. "You might wake everyone up."

"I won't," said Timmy, "they're used to it."

The angel had to accept this. He sat down on a still

trembling basket chair and continued. He switched from verbal speech to thoughts, now, since it was easier for him, there was no real need for words with Timmy, and in any case the cigarettes had made this throat sore. After a while they didn't even bother to sit facing each other except when necessary to the conversation.

"We on Soreb," thought the angel, "are rather disturbed."

"Wait a minute," came Timmy's mind, "how is it you on Soreb look exactly like us? The atmosphere can't be identical—or can it? And then there's the gravity. How big is your planet?"

The angel seemed a bit uncomfortable. "Well, actually," he hinted, "we don't look like you. Not quite. Not in the least, in fact. These bodies we assume on Earth are exact replicas of the human frame, made up by our technicians, perfect to the last detail—well, almost. We have to have them, otherwise we couldn't live on your planet at all."

Timmy nodded. That was reasonable. But there was something he wanted to know. In many ways he was very human, and young humans are curious. So he asked. The angel showed him: a searing mental picture that sent Timmy's senses back on their heels and caused a minor seismic tremor down the length of the street.

"Like that?" asked Timmy aloud.

"Like that," said the angel, gravely. "Was it too much of a shock?"

"Well," came back Timmy's shaky thought, "I was expecting something like that. But do you—do you really need so many eyes?"

"Quite necessary, I'm afraid," replied the angel rather curtly. After all, on Soreb, he was regarded as very handsome. Why, there were those females at the eve-of-departure party who—he broke off that line of thought abruptly. Timmy was looking rather puzzled.

"Well," went on Timmy after an awkward pause, "Now I know what you're really like. Why are you here?" And he turned to face the angel just to reassure himself that his guest was still comfortingly human. "You started to say you were disturbed about something."

"Yes, of course," said the angel. He got down to business. "As I was saying, we're very disturbed about you humans."

Timmy jumped up, and just stopped the walls from flying away by reflex. He was proud to be human—well, almost human. There was such a thing as racial pride, after all. He just managed, in time to save embarrassment, to kill at birth the thought, "Well, at least we don't look like *them*!" That would have been too childish. All the same, he was annoyed, and he let the angel know.

"I'm sorry if I offend you," said the angel earnestly, and Timmy sat down, mollified. "But I must be honest. This is of vital importance to the whole universe, Earth included."

"Why are you telling *me*, then?" asked Timmy, affected in spite of himself by the utter seriousness he could sense in his visitor's mind. "Why don't you see someone who's important—like the Prime Minister or the President of the U.S.A. or——"

"The last two heads of state we approached had heart attacks," revealed the angel worriedly, "and on recovery both absolutely refused to disclose what they had seen. So we soon gave that up."

"But why me?" asked Timmy, and then he saw the answer himself.

"Exactly," said the angel, pleased that he had got through, "We needed to contact someone who both believed in us and was able to co-operate with us at global level. Well, we could get the belief, all right: any child of your age would accept us right away. But where were we going to find a child who could influence the world?"

Timmy gaped at him. "You're not asking *me* to put the world right, are you?" he asked, aloud again. Outside, a homecoming reveller became airborne on a silent shockwave and reached home before his wife. He never forgave her.

"That," said the angel, brushing plaster from his dinner suit and mentally replacing the wallpaper, "is what I am here for."

Well, reflected Timmy, there's no point in wasting time

with false modesty. He thinks I can help him. So I must be able to. "All right, then," he said briskly, "What can I do?"

"It's like this," said the angel. "In the last two hundred years or so your race has developed at a rate which has staggered the rest of the intelligent members of the universe. From steam power in the early 1800's you have come to the point of perfecting a nuclear drive which brings inter-galactic travel within your grasp. You have already mastered your own system, explored and tried to colonise your neighbour planets, you have solved the problem of lift-off from any world with antigrav-motors—"

"We have?" asked Timmy. There were still some gaps in his knowledge.

"And now," continued the angel, warming to his subject, "you want the rest of the universe for your own. Not content with your sun, your stars, you must be for ever driving onward and outward, seeking new stars, new suns, new worlds to conquer."

"The pioneering spirit," murmured Timmy. "We've always had it."

"Yes," said the angel, and his voice was like a hot sword, "and what else have you? Ambition, greed, covetousness, lust, treachery and the urge to slaughter whether circumstances demand it or not." He had forgotten Timmy now, forgotten everything of his surroundings. He stood and looked deep-eyed across a galaxy and a half for support. And it came. Across the black fastnesses of space, spanning the giddy gulf of light-years, came roaring, in a mighty blast that filled the crevices between the stars, one great, concerted thought ; one vast cosmic consensus. Man was not ready for the Universe. He had reached the threshold by sheer backbreaking effort, but he was still a savage and worse. He represented a force which let loose on the rest of creation, would tear stars from their courses and dim suns with the smoke of battle. Blood would stink throughout the galaxies, and races which had learnt peace when man was learning war would fall, or would revert to savagery. Children with two eyes and children with many eyes would grow stunted and depraved. Disease

would increase with despair, and over it all the leprous wraith of hate would rise, with all created things spilling mangled from its maw.

The thought hit Timmy like a tidal wave, smashing his complacence, ageing him to the age of those races who desired nothing but prosperity and peace. He stood on the rim of the solar system and looked with loathing at what he saw. Then the darkness closed in. He was only a little child, and he had seen Man face to face.

When he opened his eyes, the angel was bending over him, and there was anxiety in his face and in his thoughts. In showing the possible hurt humanity could cause, he had hurt someone else. Timmy gathered, from scattered fragments that seeped into his still half-conscious mind, that it really mattered to his denizen of another world whether he, Timmy, were hurt or not. He saw love, reaching out to grasp and heal the bruises. And as they healed, he wondered why the angel cared. Then he stopped wondering. There was work to do, and he had to know how to do it.

"Are you all right now?" asked the angel. "You put over every street-light in the town."

"Yes thanks, I'm fine now," said Timmy, struggling up off the bed. "Are they—are *we*—really as bad as all that?" He looked into the town, asleep now, into the minds of the comfortably snoozing businessman, the butcher with a nagging wife, the policeman walking down the High Street, the boy whose girl had walked out on him, the councillor counting votes in his sleep. He raised the thoughts he found there to world power level, saw each urge and resentment multiplied tenfold by the power to give it free play, and he shuddered. He had his answer.

"Not all of you," said the angel. "There are millions we would welcome into our homes, but they are not the ones who would come. Man has centuries to learn yet, before he can take his place in a unified universe. We are awaiting for him, and his time will come. But not yet. Dear God, not yet!" He broke off and gestured round the room.

"What do you see on the walls, Timmy?"

"On the walls?" Timmy tore his mind across the gulf

which seemed to divide this thought from the last. "Why, plaster and wallpaper."

"Exactly!" said the angel. "And under that, brick and breeze block. Your furniture is wood, your windows breakable glass, your houses have changed little in shape in a hundred years. In that time, man has reached the stars. Do you see now, Timmy? The *real* things of life, the comforts, the public health, the civil engineering, have gone by the board. The minds, the materials, have gone to getting off this planet, out of this system to building more efficient ships, more effective weapons. Can you see where it will end, Timmy?"

Timmy could see too clearly.

"Well," he said, "I'm ready. What can I do?"

. . . . .

Natterdown Research Station stood aloof in a fold of the Cumberland Dales, fifteen million pounds worth of steel, polyvynil and concrete stuck starkly on the rolling heather-clad slopes which on a dark dawn like this swirled trackless off to the horizon like blue-grey mists. There was a track, indeed, but it was too dark to see it; and in any case Timmy was keeping clear of it.

Contrary to the popular belief fostered by centuries of novelists that to be a child prodigy you had to be frail and skinny, Timmy was rugged and stubbornly healthy. Although, had he wished, he need never have walked anywhere, he liked doing it, and his chunky legs were brown below his shorts as he tramped over the spongy heather towards the broody monstrosity at the summit. The angel, having teleported with him to the foot of the slopes, was now lying in the bracken, though no-one was about anyway. The sight of a seven-foot luminous being blithely approaching the installation at 4.30 a.m. would have been enough to send the armed guards' trigger-fingers into a permanent twitch. Timmy wished his companion could have been with him; but when, as the angel said, the yearly-increasing radiation concentration in Earth atmosphere produced such a spectacular effect on the synthetic body and the clothes concealing it, there was nothing much that could be done. Timmy must go it alone.

Timmy would vastly have preferred to teleport himself directly into the building, but the angel had been adamant. Those guards had pretty quick reflexes, he reasoned, otherwise they wouldn't be guards; and if Timmy, however small and innocent, suddenly burgeoned in the middle of the reactor house, reflexes might be faster than compassion; and if he were to work on their minds, it was essential to do it before they filled him with bullets. And he might not be that fast.

The sight of a grubby little boy ploughing through the heather roused no feelings other than concern, as the angel had predicted. The guard who came to the gates had kiddies of his own, and if someone else's child wandered up to him, hopelessly lost and far from home, he was not the man to turn him away. He opened the gates and let in history.

The other guard (there were only two at a time on watch) was offering Timmy some pocket-warm chocolate when he planted into both their minds the impression they were receiving an important personage from the Ministry of Science. They immediately stood to attention and one of them peeled off and 'phoned the Senior Scientific Officer on the internal hookup.

No man is terribly happy to be whipped out of bed before 5 a.m. for any reason, much less a full inspection of his stewardship. He demanded to speak to the V.I.P. before leaving his flat.

It was the first time Timmy had tried hypnotic implanting over the 'phone, and he was mildly pleased to find he could do it at all. The Senior Scientist came over so fast he still had his pyjama bottoms on, but he never knew it.

Just what the visiting personage looked like the Senior Scientist was never quite able to say. Timmy's idea of what a Ministry Official should look like was rather vague. Questioned afterwards, he was at first positive that he had been skilfully questioned on the functioning of the plant, the priority work under way, the maximum power of the reactor, and the cost of running per kilowatt—year, by a tall dark gentleman of medium height, with a pale face and grey hair, clean shaven with a Guards moustache, young

of middle age, with a decided paunch and a lean spare figure, wearing pinstripes, a military uniform, a boiler-suit, empty handed, with an umbrella and brief-case, and perhaps (one mental slip when the angel's mind came too close to Timmy's) he may even have worn a phosphorescent dinner jacket. But on second thoughts he was not too sure of any part of this description. He did remember, though, that he had shown his visitor into the reactor-room.

Timmy stood in front of the maze of panels, and his mind wilted. "Steady, lad," came the angel's thought, crisp as the morning breeze over the Dales. "This is it."

Timmy gathered himself. Suspending the animation of the Senior Scientist in full spate was not easy, but he did it. Then he sent his mind behind the panels through the mysteries of printed circuit and transistor and wandered deep into the quiet back-stage heart of the switchboard.

He wandered, deftly but marvelling, through the wonderland of wiring, the complex of armature, cable-casing, photo-electric cell and electro-cybernetic linkup. He analysed, dismantled and resynthesised. When he had finished the auto-jigs in the workshop were still capable of functioning, but they would not turn out rocket-parts, spaceship panels, nose-cones and motor-housings. That was for certain.

Hexing the reactor was a little more difficult. The cobalt core had pupped many times over, and its pups were slumbering quietly in the damped-down drives of a thousand dormant missiles, scout-ships and Galactic cruisers on the station airfield 250 shielded feet below surface. Timmy clothed his mind in the main cobalt cylinder, and hexed the lot. When the nuclear drives were next brought into play, something interesting would happen. Timmy smiled into the face of God, and God smiled back. The angel's mental laughter caromed around Timmy's inner ears as he saw the sheer beauty of what had been arranged.

Now for the final step. Using the whole station as a control, Timmy bent his head and transmitted as never before. Sweat stood out on his temples and his face puck-

ered. But it was happening. The pattern of the reorganised plant was spreading, duplicating itself in other plants throughout the country. And thence throughout the world. As Timmy's knees buckled under the strain, the swords of Earth were turned to ploughshares.

And as Timmy slid down the wall of the reactor room, and lay prone alongside the still-suspended scientist, there came into the minds of everyone, everywhere, a thought. Not a peace—that would take centuries. Rather a thought that perhaps they had been neglecting something in their drive to the stars; that perhaps home comforts mattered more for the moment, and that when the world was fed and clothed and educated as such a highly civilised world should be, then perhaps it would be time to lift from off a fulfilled planet and spread what they had achieved to the four corners of space. And why not? Man had the brains to conquer, he had also the brains to build. Then (with a little shy vanity) he would have something to show the rest of the universe, and they would not need fusion—bombs to make them see it. It would take time (how long, no-one realised). But it would come.

. . . . .

The angel had to fetch Timmy out, finally. They lay on the heather and slowly Timmy brought back his thoughts, lighter now, for their load had been spread a long way that night. The angel worked gently, delicately, until, pale but intact, Timmy sat up and asked the question he had meant to ask before.

"Why me? You're better at this than I am. Couldn't you have done the same thing?"

The angel smiled, "Yes, I could. We could have done it centuries ago. But we are all under a higher Control, and that Control forbids any race of beings however well-meaning, to organise the thoughts of any other beings. If He had intended that to happen, He would have done it Himself from the beginning. Man had to provide his own solution if he were to remain man. Others, from God downwards, could advise, but only man could say how he could walk, and where. That is why we needed you, Timmy. This is your earth, not ours."

Timmy was quiet. He shut his eyes and saw the count-down of experimental rockets, saw them taking off, flattening out, then, their nose-cones adjusted to pinhead accuracy, streaking a few yards above unclaimed scrub and scorching it away, emitting a subsonic alarm signal that moved out the wild life for miles ahead, while in their wake came other ships, zooming over the cleared stubble and ploughing with controlled jets a furrow straight as a gyroscope could make it. He saw missiles of colossal payload nose-diving into the unheard-of springs under the desert's dust and rocket blanket, and he saw water gushing out at armour-piercing pressure. He saw India fed, Egypt and Kuwait cool meadows under the cedars, and men with plenty working for their lives to keep that plenty.

And he laughed when he saw the expressions on the technicians' faces when they inspected the workshops and found their million-pound giants tenderly and efficiently laying better, more economical and ever more abundant refrigerators, while a twenty-eight-bank computer fussed over the problem of the non-wash saucepan.

"Gosh, I'm glad you came," he muttered, and went to sleep.

Avron, ambassador to Earth, smiled lovingly at the little boy by his side. "It won't be long now, Emily," he whispered, and a lark stood off from the sun-touched bracken and sang like a seraph.

"Timmy," whispered the angel, and the lark fell silent to hear him. "Timmy, let me take you home."

"Tell me a story," insisted Timmy. He was very tired, all little boy now.

"Very well," said Avron. "Once there was a prince from a far-off land. He came to this land to help kill a dragon. And he met—"

"He met a princess, of course," said Timmy. The lark started to sing again.

"Yes," said Avron, "he met a princess. She was lovelier than the sun, and as soon as they met, they loved each other. The prince married her; then when they had been married only a few days, he was suddenly called back to

his kingdom. His councillors had thought of a new way of killing the dragon." He paused. The lark went on singing and the sun kept rising.

"He kissed his princess, and set off with speed. But he should have remembered that an hour in his own land was a year in Earth time."

"Einstein," said Timmy. He was wide awake now.

"So when the prince returned, he found he had been away nearly eight years. The princess had waited, loving him all the time. She had given him a son, but before he could return she had gone on a sea trip and been drowned."

"I live with my grandmother," said Timmy. He was gripping Avron's arm.

"Still she waited, in spirit now," continued Avron. The lark came and perched on his shoulder. "At last the prince came back. His sorrow was great. But one quiet evening he found his princess, and she led him to the one who could kill the dragon. And he knew the boy for his.

"The boy killed the dragon, and the prince said to him, 'We are going now, your mother and I, to my own land, a land that is perfect as Earth will one day be. And when we are there, we will never rest until all Earth's dragons are dead and the boundaries can be taken down. Will you come with us? You are our son, and we love you.' And the boy—" He stopped, and the lark was still.

"And the boy said nothing, because there was no need for words," said Timmy in a clear voice. "And he took the prince's hand, and they—"

And they left the world on a shaft of sunlight, the three of them. And after they were gone, every tabby cat in the neighbourhood had fine fat kittens, and the sun shone non-stop for thirty-two days.

And nights, of course.

PHILIP H. WORDLEY

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COMPACT
SF

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"Housel"
KEITH ROBERTS'
"The Middle Earth"
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