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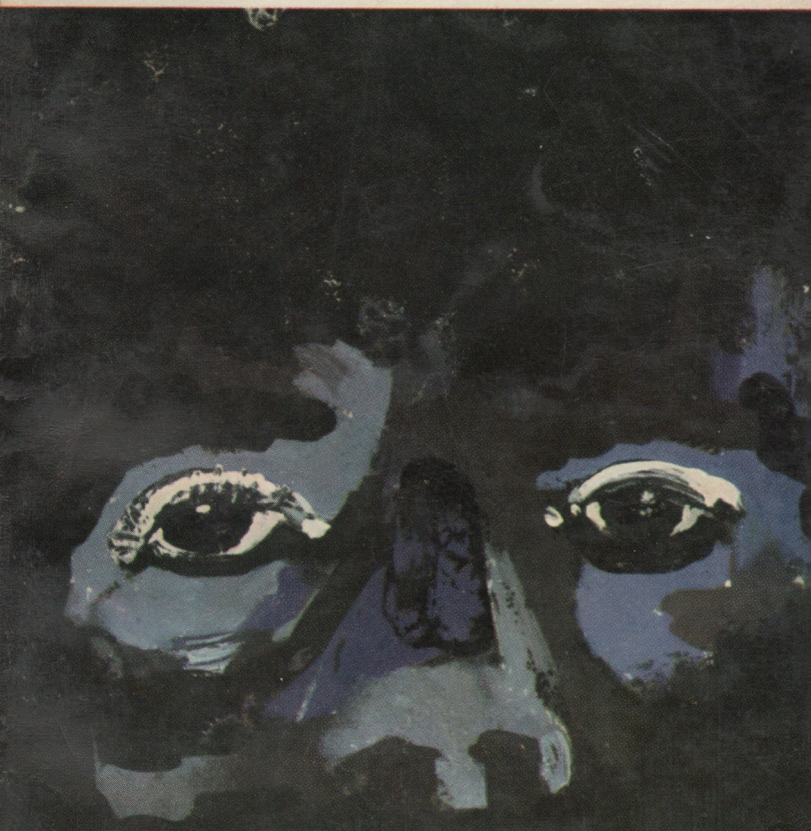
Science Fantasy

A. K. JORGENSSON's
startling story of sex in the future

COMING-OF-AGE DAY



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Contents

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Instead of an Editorial

Non-Stop. *By Brian W. Aldiss.* (*Faber Paper-Covered Edition, 7s. 6d.*)

Nowadays, anyone who wishes can set up as reviewer. It needs only energy and a sense of one's own importance. This is perhaps especially so in the science fiction field, which has always been afflicted by the do-it-yourself mania. With my latest novel, one eager young fan managed to pan it in three different places.

All of which is an excuse for an author to turn and review his own book. It stops others less well-informed from doing it.

So I am able to state categorically that this is a new edition of my first sf novel. Originally, I wrote it as a novelette at about a quarter of its present length. I sent it to Ted Carnell, who said, "It's a marvellous idea, far too good to waste on anything less than a novel. But I'm short of material, so it goes in the next issue. Meanwhile, why not turn it into a novel?" Good idea, I thought.

The novelette appeared in SF17, with vile illustrations, and that is quite a few SFs' ago—indeed, the present editor was then just a carefree lad at Balliol College, scarce dreaming of his great destiny.

With Ted's encouragement, the novel was written and published in April 1958 without a word of the text being altered. That's one of the many virtues of my publisher; while the American publishers, Criterion, insisted on removing a few entirely innocuous passages about Vyann's breasts and so on, Fabers didn't even correct the grammatical error in the dedication.

Later, a cheap paperback edition appeared in this country with a number of misprints and a comic cover, and went into a couple of reprints. This present new edition is beautifully printed without blemish on good paper. I'm delighted to see it, and must admit that I read it through again without too much impatience.

It's about an isolated community, four members of which gradually find out, first, how isolated the com-

munity really is and, second, how isolated it isn't. The American publishers gave away where the community is in one sense by christening their edition "Starship". No doubt hardened sf readers would soon guess this much any way, but a number of other readers found that particular twist something of a revelation.

Plot and story are one; what the characters find out, the reader also discovers. This still seems to me a sound plan, though it is open to the objection voiced by one of Thomas Love Peacock's characters in, I think, "Headlong Hall"; this fellow has been shown round one of those intricate landscaped gardens stuffed with grottoes, hermits, weeping willows, pagodas, and the other marvels that our ancestors enjoyed at the turn of last century, and the proud owner says that he has added to the principles of the picturesque and the beautiful the element of *surprise*; whereupon Mr. Milestone asks in all innocence, "But, sir, what happens when one walks round your garden a second time?"

Well, at least the picturesque and the beautiful are still there in "Non-Stop"—though I must admit that some of the original reviewers couldn't take them in the first place. My thought-sensitive rats and rabbits and moths are a bit much, I suppose, and *The Times Literary Supplement* chap called me a "maniac Beatrix Potter", a label I tried to get the publishers to use in their publicity, without success. On the other hand, Frederick Laws in the *Daily Telegraph* concluded a long and sympathetic review by saying that "The situation is worked out with far less trickery and much more human understanding and entertainment than can be found in the most admired detective stories", and most other professional reviewers seemed to agree. What did the fan reviewers say? Frankly, I forget.

If I had to rewrite the novel now—perish the thought! —I might polish off the ending in less of a hurry, and cut down on some of the picturesque; there would be fewer moustaches hanging over mutants' bunks. I am surer of my audience now, or surer of its intelligence and the indul-

—*continued on page* 48

BOOMERANG

by E. C. Tubb

They found me at last: that was inevitable, a man cannot think of everything at once. They found me and were not gentle but even those cold, supposedly emotionless upholders of the law were curious.

"Marlow, why did you do it?"

I smiled and did not answer.

The officer at the police station asked the same question; the lawyer they briefed for my defence, the doctor who reluctantly treated my bruises, the dour man who brought my food, even the psychiatrist they permitted to visit my cell. To him only I gave the answer, confident that he would understand.

"I hated him."

"Granger?"

"Of course."

"I see." His long, pale face turned even paler. "You hated him and so—"

"I did what had to be done." I smiled at him. "You do understand, don't you?"

He said he did but I knew that he lied. He did not understand, could not understand. He was too staid, had too many censors for hatred to become anything more than an unpleasant emotion.

He did not realize how strong hate could be. To some men it is stronger than fear or love or sex. It grows like a living thing so that everything associated with the object of hatred becomes contaminated and is hated in turn. Granger's wife, his family, his friends, even his house and other possessions.

I had begun by hating Granger. I grew to hate everything connected with him. I had had to act before that hatred had grown to encompass the world on which he lived. I lacked the power to destroy a world.

So I burned his house, poisoned his friends, mutilated his pets and did things to his family which caused certain members of the jury to vomit when they heard the details.

But Granger himself I did not touch. Death, to him, would have been a relief and I hated him too much to be merciful. Let him live—and remember.

For myself I had no fear. There was no death penalty but if there was it wouldn't have mattered. They could kill me if they wished. They could slash my brain with their electronic probes and kill my personality. They could do anything to me they wished and the law permitted and I wouldn't object. No matter what they decided it wouldn't help Granger.

But the court had imagination.

The ship was small, a clumsy cargo carrier hastily improvised to take me where I was to go. Two guards shared my misery and the three-man crew took a fiendish pleasure in crushing me with high-G acceleration, tearing me apart with the nausea of free fall and forgetting to drug me so that I experienced the hell of Transition.

Later, when I had recovered, they left me alone in the padded steel of my cell while we glided across the wastes between the stars.

Time is a peculiar thing. At times it rushes by like a torrent, at others it crawls like a snail. For me, alone in a lightless cell, it seemed to halt, to hang suspended so that at times I screamed and beat my head against the wall merely to convince myself that I was still alive.

And, with the solitude, came the voices.

It took me a long time to realize just what the voices were and even then I never discovered whether it was intended that I should hear them or not. A trick of acoustics, perhaps, a transmitted vibration that, when the circumstances were right, permitted me to overhear the conversations of the others. Not all of them and not all the time, but enough to tell me what was intended and where we were going.

To a planet called Hades a hundred and sixty light years from Earth.

To a rough, newly discovered world on which I was to be dropped and there left to die or survive.

Some of this I had known from the sentence of the court but what I learned from the voices was more than that.

Hades was a terror-world. Hades was a world of rumour and speculation, still under quarantine, mentioned among spacemen with whispers if at all. A freak world of—?

But the voices never discussed detail and it was a long time before their brief references to the 'cargo' brought realization that the 'cargo' was myself.

They amused me, those voices, for what could be worse than death? And, to me, death was nothing. Though, when, without warning, I screamed in the horror of Transition and knew that the journey was nearing its end, I would have preferred to die. It is no accident that drugs are used at such times. No accident either that, for a second time, I was forgotten.

Hate, as I knew, is contagious.

"All right, Marlow!" The door opened and I blinked in the brilliance streaming through the door. "Up and out!"

I stumbled and fell as I left the cell. No one helped me to rise. I staggered along the corridor, my eyes burning from the unaccustomed lighting, then was jerked to a halt by a sally port. The hatch was open, the sunshine outside was brighter even than the lights of the ship. A rope ladder swung down to a clearing beneath.

"Home," said one of the guards. "How do you like it?"

I held on to the edge of the port and waited until I could see. Below me stretched a matted jungle surrounding a small clearing. Mountains raised blue heads on the horizon and the arid sands of a desert showed to the right. I turned and caught a glimpse of what could have been an ocean. The horizon was very close. Hades was a tiny planet.

"The air is thin but you'll breathe," said the guard. "The gravity is low, less than that of Mars, but you'll get used to it." He shoved me towards the rope ladder. "Outside, Marlow, and say hello to your neighbours."

"But—"

"Outside!" The shove grew harder. "Climb down or jump, it's all the same to us."

"If I jump I'll break my legs."

"So?" This time the shove almost threw me clear of the port. I stepped out and gripped the swaying ladder.

"Wait!" Their faces looked down at me. "Don't I get anything? A knife, medical gear, weapons, food?"

"You keep your life, Marlow. Think yourself lucky."

"How long will I keep it without equipment?"

"That's your worry, Marlow." A guard thrust his leg from the sally port, his boot aimed at my face. "Now get moving you—!"

I dropped, letting the rope of the ladder burn my hands, avoiding a broken nose by an inch of space and a split second of time. The ship began to rise before I had reached the ground, lifting on its humming anti-gravity engines, the ladder swaying like a trailing strand of cotton beneath the rounded belly. I fell faster, releasing my hold and falling heavily to the ground. Soft loam and the low gravity saved me from broken bones but even so I was winded and stunned.

When I discovered the sun was dropping towards the horizon the ship had vanished, and I was alone.

It was a long night. There was nothing I could do but sit in the clearing and think. It was not wholly dark—the brilliant stars saw to that—but it was a weak light full of shadows and unknown menace.

At first I sat waiting for death, wishing that it would come, getting impatient when it did not. Then, as the demands of my body registered on my mind, I wished for food, water, the comfort of a fire. Then, because I am a human animal and the instinct of the human animal is to survive, I recognised the challenge for what it was.

The court had decreed the worst punishment it could devise within the letter of the law.

I had been dumped, almost naked and defenceless, on an alien planet, there to die or survive.

Very well, I would accept the challenge. They expected me to die—I would survive. They hated me—I would baffle them with success. And, by so doing, prove who was the stronger.

Dawn came and put the seal on my resolve.

The first necessity was water: I found it in the dew all about me. The second was food: I ate three succulent fruits from a bush. The third was for weapons: I made myself a spear from a spined branch and a club from a knotted growth.

Then my stomach heaved up the poison I had swallowed with the water.

I vomited the chewed fruits and collapsed in a sweating bout of cramped agony, my muscles jerking as if I'd taken strychnine. Insects from my spear and club emerged to cover my flesh with points of fire.

I rolled on the ground until it was night and slept until it was dawn.

The water was not poisoned, only the leaves from which I had licked it and not every leaf exuded poison. The fruits had contained toxins but not all of the fruits were dangerous. The insects made their homes only in certain growths.

It took time to discover all this. It took days of writhing agony and nights of sweating pain before I learned which water could be drunk, which fruits eaten. I lost count of the gambles I took with death. Days and night flowed into one as I used the only testing laboratory I possessed, my own body, to test and taste, to eat and wait, to sample and reject.

And my area of exploration was still confined to the clearing.

Slowly I began to venture further afield. My clothing rotted and was replaced by leaves strung together with vines. I carried a bag of tested fruits over one shoulder, a hollowed gourd of water at my waist. I carried a spear and a short club. I was a civilised man and looked like a savage.

I headed towards the sea.

From the ship I had caught a glimpse of it and it could not be far. By the side of the ocean I would be able to defend myself from the things I had heard humming and blundering through the jungle. I could catch edible fish, perhaps, rig up a still, build a fire and make a shelter.

Dreams, perhaps, but what had I left? I had been incredibly lucky up to now and it was a luck which could not last. I had been thrown back to the primitive and had met the challenge. How long I could continue to meet it rested on chance and my own endeavours.

The jungle surrounded the clearing, the edges withered and stunted as if, at one time, the area had been purified by

flame. It probably had. The investigation ships took no chances and blasted a clearing before landing. This was the one they must have made.

Twenty yards within the jungle I blundered into something soft, yielding and horrible. I tore myself free from the strand and ran back towards the clearing. High above, hidden by the riotous growth, something scrabbled and then fell silent.

I penetrated the jungle at another point and went fifty yards before spotting a hanging strand. I circled it, caught a glimpse of a shimmering web-like thing high in the trees and tried to forget what a low gravity, high rate of revolution, over-oxygenised air and tropical warmth would do for an insect population.

And then I saw the animal.

It was dead, of an unfamiliar shape, but there could be no mistaking the cause of death. The nymphs were still gnawing at its flesh, their mandibles tearing deeper into the hollowed corpse. I thought of wasps and their habits, how they paralysed their victims, laid their eggs on the living flesh which provided food for the new-hatched young. But this animal was as big as a horse, the nymphs as large as rats.

Hades was well-named.

Knowledge is a peculiar thing. Ignorance had given me strength. I had managed to survive only because I had not known of, or recognised, the dangers around me. I had found food, water, clothing of a kind and weapons of a fashion only because I hadn't guessed at the futility of trying to survive at all. I had even planned on reaching the sea but, now I knew what surrounded me, my world had shrunken to the dimensions of the clearing.

And the clearing itself was closing around me.

It was getting harder to find edible food. I had stripped the bushes and had to go further afield and the jungle was thrusting into the open space with the fecund life of the tropics. In a short while there would be no clearing and the things which waited in the trees would rush to fill the empty gap.

I had to reach the sea.

It took planning and time and a screaming awareness of danger. Food and water had to be gathered and saved, weapons readied, protective clothing made as best I could. I gambled again and lost and almost died of a raging fever, shivering all the time and vomiting blood. The episode terrified me, I dared not gamble again. I took up what I had and marched towards the jungle. I entered it, probed my way into it, then halted as sound screamed from above.

I knew that sound; there was none other like it in the universe. It was the sound of a man-made body splitting the air. The sound of a ship of space making a landing.

It was Granger.

I should have expected it. He stood just outside the ship, the pistol in his hand, his eyes widening as they saw me. I slowed my pace, watching his eyes. I had hated him with a hatred so consuming that it had driven me to frenzy. That hatred hadn't died.

"Granger!"

"Marlow!" He stared at me. "Is it really you?"

"Who else did you expect?"

"My God," he said. Then again. "My God!"

"Take me away from here, Granger." I had advanced until I could see the lines of suffering on his face. "Please take me away from here."

"Why should I?" He raised the pistol in his hand. "Stay where you are, Marlow."

I flung the spear.

It was a clumsy weapon and I was unpractised. It turned a little in the air, not much but enough to strike him with the shaft instead of the point. He staggered then recovered, the pistol spouting a shaft of energy towards me. His aim was bad, worse than mine, the bolt missed and blasted a tree to splinters. I had reached the edge of the jungle before he could fire again.

"You came to gloat, didn't you, Granger?" I shouted. "You thought that I was dead." I laughed at him. "Fool, did you think that I was as weak as you? Your wife is dead, your children, your friends, but I'm still alive. I'm alive and I shall stay alive. Remember that, Granger, when you think of the past."

He fired as I knew he would and I heard the thunder of

the shot as it incinerated the jungle. I laughed again from where I had thrown myself, then again as his third shot stabbed the air.

Granger came after me.

A man is a small target; when hidden among undergrowth he is almost invisible. I had experienced the jungle, Granger had not. I showed myself, ducked as he fired, then heard him fire again, this time the blast aimed upwards. One of the strands had obviously caught him. This time he burned his way clear. The next?

I wished I knew how many charges he carried in his gun.

The same thought must have occurred to Granger for he held his fire. I could hear him threshing about, the sounds seeming to die. I laughed, threw a stone at a bush, was rewarded by a flash of fire which, strangely, missed the target I had provided.

"Granger!" I listened for his answer. "Granger, you fool! Given up already?"

I felt a sudden fear. Had he given up, returned to his ship? If I could somehow catch him in the jungle then the ship would be mine and my hate, at last, satiated.

"Marlow!"

He was behind me, the gun is his hand aimed at my feet. I sprang, raced to safety and heard his crashing behind me. Fast as I ran I was wary. The thin strands were hard to see and once one of them caught my arm, ripping skin before I could tear loose.

"Marlow!" The shout held panic. "Marlow, for God's sake!"

I laughed and ran and then, suddenly, I had fallen. I felt the sting and the growing numbness. I looked up at horror and fainted as I felt the slimy wetness on my stomach.

I opened my eyes and looked at Granger.

He stood, the gun poised easily in his hand, his eyes remote as they stared at me.

"You were clever, Marlow," he said evenly. "But not clever enough. I had learned about this place before I came."

I tried to speak, felt my vocal chords move and a whisper

of sound pass my lips. I could not lift my head and look at myself.

"You're caught, Marlow," said Granger. "Caught in your own trap." He raised his head, looked up into the trees. "Can you see that branch? The one with the three fruits growing on it? I know that you can." He lifted the gun, fired, lowered it all in one easy motion. Fire blossomed where the fruits had been.

"I could have killed you at any moment," he said. "Did you honestly believe that I could miss so often?"

I tried to speak again. He listened to my whispers.

"Mercy?" He shook his head. "What is that?"

The paralysis rose higher. Soon I would be able to move only my eyes. Soon not even that.

"Do you know what is going to happen to you?" Granger smiled. "Of course you do. You will live a long time, every second of it a torment of anticipation. Then the eggs will hatch and the anticipation will be over. Then the real torment will begin."

Sweat baded my forehead.

"I could save you," said Granger. "I could remove the eggs, take you back to the ship, cleanse you of the poison. I could even take you back to Earth." He stared into my eyes. "But why should I?"

He left me then, I heard his footsteps rustle away from me and I was left staring up into the lowering trees towards the parent of the things on my stomach. Bitterly I closed my eyes and then found that I could no longer open them.

Locked in the paralysis of my body I could only think and wait.

I would have gone mad but for one thing.

Granger didn't mean it. Granger couldn't mean it. He would leave me awhile and then he would return and save me. Even when I heard the whine of the departing ship I believed that. I had to believe that.

No one could hate me so much.

— E. C. TUBB

My first reactions to this story were—'Great stuff, but of course I can't print it' . . . my next reaction was 'Why on earth not?' It is not the sort of thing usually discussed in science fiction—or anywhere else, for that matter—but if SF is going to grow up perhaps it's time we stopped talking about what is proper for the genre.

COMING-OF-AGE DAY

by A. K. Jorgensson

I was ten and I still had not seen them! You didn't expect to see a woman's unless you were lucky, which a very few boys at my school professed to be. But nearly everyone my age knew what a man's looked like.

But you got some funny answers.

"You're too young," said a squit about half my size, and another very big boy nodded agreement.

"We don't want to do any harm," the big one said, wisely as it turned out. His voice was already breaking, and I think he was on the change.

"We're not going to tell you." There were a number of small knots in the playground that took a secretive line, and whispered with their backs to everybody. I belonged to a loose group of boys who, looking back, I would say were intelligent and sensitive and from better homes. Their interests were academic, or real hobbies. But I was a little contemptuous of their ignorance and softness. And I ended up hanging about behind a group led by a capable boy, or breaking roughly into a fighting gang, having a punch-up and then going to skip with the girls. I tried everything. I was nobody's buddy. But a few groups could expect to rely on me if they needed an extra hand to defend themselves against a rough bunch or to try a good game. "Go and get Rich Andrews," someone would say ; "he'll play."

They got me one day after school for a very secret meeting on the waste plot between the churchyard and the play-

ing fields. Guards were out at the edge of the bushes. We had to enter over the churchyard wall. And we had to crouch to approach the spot, crawling along the bottoms of craters left between bulldozed heaps and tips of earth.

It was a good hide-out behind a solid screen of leaves, deep in the bushes. Churchill was there, so was Edwards and my friend Pete Loss. They had started something, and I saw it was a bit dubious, because Churchill and Gimble were in a little arbour away from the others, and though I could not see much, they had their trousers down.

"What's up?" I asked Pete.

"Oh they're playing sexy-lovers," said Pete.

"Why? What's the idea?"

"D'you know all about it?" he asked. "I don't s'pose you do. Oh, I did it once. It's not much. Old Churchill thinks he's got a better way. It gives him a thrill."

"I don't like it," I said. I was curious and afraid, but hoped I sounded like you should when someone's trying to get one up on you and you're not having any.

"Come on," I urged Pete. "Let's go."

"They want to show you," he said.

"Oh, I know all about that," I lied. "I'm not going to play pansy for that dirty beast Churchill."

It took more urging, but when I made a move Pete came too. The guards tried to stop us, as though they had designs on me. I shouted, "Stop it! I shall shout! Aw, come on; play the game," and they let me go. But they persuaded Pete to stay.

I got away and of course kept quiet. And lost another chance to know all about sex. It was the time for sex-education, of course, and this gave me a fair technical knowhow, but I didn't have the practical experience. I hesitated to muck about and the teachers didn't exactly encourage it: also, my parents were a bit strict. So I left it.

It was after that party in the bushes that controversy arose. Someone said to Churchill:

"You nit. You don't just play about with it. And you don't just get hairy all round. You get something put there at the right age. It's the operation!"

"I don't care about the operation," he said. "You can do this—" and he described masturbation openly enough to

make me feel hot. Miss Darlington was getting close and I was afraid she'd overhear. She had an A.1 pot on her front.

They silenced as she approached, but I heard Elkes say under his breath to Churchill, "Look at their pots! That's where they keep their sex organs. You get outside ones put on your inside ones. Darlie's got a big male thing on hers, it sticks out a mile."

Quite frankly, this horrified me. I had always wondered whether all the hairiness of men came up from the private place and how large the organs grew. But separate adult bathing had come a few years before my first swim, and if they did wear these things on the beach, you couldn't tell them from pot bellies. It sounded like a book I had read which said how pot bellies grew on adolescents now whereas it used to be only old men and middle-aged women. I wondered what lay behind that expression "pot belly." It made me feel funny even to think of it. But it also made me feel sad, just as a fuller sexual awareness did later. You never know which gives more satisfaction—the relief of the sexual act, or the retention of that inner virile feeling when you have refrained for a good while. And there is a sort of dimension that is all power and mind and strength, that the physical conditions don't seem to improve or improve upon.

In the old days, I am told, there used to be more explicit sexual bits in the films. But on television these days, as in the theatre, they are very cagey. I heard one master from the upper school, who is reputed to be a wild unrestrained type, call this a second Victorian Age. According to him, every time we get a queen reigning to a ripe old age, it's nearing the end of the century: and people are afraid the millennium will come at the end of 1999. So what with one thing and another, they are fearfully prudish.

Which is ridiculous, because when the naked torso was the fashion they could not have hidden the pot-bellied things they wear these days.

I asked my father one day what happened when people got pot-bellied.

"You know all about that from school, surely, son."

"Well, no, it's the one thing they've never taught us."

"Why did you want to know? It's not always good to know these things."

"Well, I didn't—I mean, well, the boys at school talk about it in the playground. I'm getting pretty big now, dad, nearly eleven. I ought to know what they mean by now."

"I see. I shall have to talk to your head teacher, Rich, I can see that. Anyway, pot bellies are just when people get fat around the lower part of the abdomen. People eat too much these days."

"Oh . . . Only they said at school it wasn't that. Gluttony is frowned on now, and drinking too much. But people still have—"

"That is enough, Rich. In a year or two you will be grown up enough to be able to understand. In the meantime you have had at least two years of education in biology, and you know all about the primitive sex processes."

I knew when to be quiet. Parents were not so strict in the middle of the twentieth century, so the history books say, and it was a bad thing. I wonder if that is why people are ashamed and hide their sexual excesses now. Do as I say and not as I do, etcetera—unwilling hypocrisy, but they can't help it. But that mention of "primitive" sex, it foxed me, because Edwards asked at school what "primitive" meant, and was told that it referred to an early form before it developed. Well, there are two sorts of development, natural maturation and scientific application, and I do not believe the scientific part has been explained to us yet.

Before I peeped and saw, I had just about worked it out. It was a diffident sort of guess, but I reckon it proves what Socrates said. People may not believe me, but I was on the right lines. It was more than those funny ideas I had as a small boy—that people grew their tails long, or that they carried a little hairy monkey about inside their trousers. I tied it up with the artificial creation of living tissue over twenty years ago. These days they are always coming up with new forms of living tissue: they can give you a new body for an old one in bits or *in toto* nowadays. And they have perfected their methods so much that the so-called artificial one is better than the natural one. After all, they have eliminated all those subtle differences between the chemical product and the equivalent natural one, which was one major advance in many.

Now if you see people lose a leg, as I did once (rather, it had to be removed later) and a few months later they've grown a new one, why not improve on the natural, or primitive, sexual organs? I am beginning to agree with an aunt of mine who, in an episode I won't relate, told me there was no pleasure in sex; the sensation of pleasure was in the mind, not the organ or nerve. Well, what if you did get a better organ? If you're not much of a chap anyway, it would do you no good unless it had a psychological improvement on your confidence.

I have more evidence of this point. The only other clue I had before I was 13 and registered as an adolescent was hearing a conversation between two old men: all they did was complain that the new pot bellies had not solved people's sexual problems after all.

Except the time when I peeped. It was on the beach one day when the sun was very hot and a lot of people were sat perspiring in their many light clothes. All of a sudden a woman began to scream and clutch at the lower part of her body, as if to pull something off. After a while women started gathering round and trying to help. But she was desperate and tore her costume, an enveloping thing, until this sort of huge fleshy roll could be seen clinging to her. It could have been a flabby woman's breast, or a fantastic roll of fat, but this would be a bit too unlikely, I reckon. The woman pulled at it, and it gave and stretched out like a tentacle and—"Get away! You nasty little boy. How dare you peep! Go away." After a screech like that I crawled away.

* * *

Going to the sexiatrist was the call-up day for coming-of-age even more than one's initiation into the forces came through the medical examination. It was with mixed feelings that I faced the ceremony, having had an enjoyable childhood with no great attraction urging me into manhood. I reported at the Centre, and a nurse took my particulars. I signed an agreement that I was prepared to undertake the responsibilities of adulthood; all rather vague, as it was a matter of contracting out to avoid the consequences rather than contracting in. Had I refused, I should have had twenty forms to sign and dozens of conditions written

in in fine print. Either that, I had heard, or I ended up in a harsh institution for the backward.

First a doctor checked my family doctor's assessment of my sexual age. He examined me with that frankness and propriety that scientific control over sexual phenomena demanded, took blood samples and a tiny piece of my skin, looked into my eyes and checked my height, colouring and so on. Most of the time I was modestly allowed to keep my pants on, even though I was stripped of all else, including my watch.

After going through the mass radiography room, the cancer-heat test room and other places, and receiving various boosters against the various plagues, I was sent home, walking out with a curious sense of illness-at-ease, ordinariness and anticlimax.

It took me by surprise to get another Ministry postcard two weeks later, requesting my presence once more at the Sexual Health Centre. This time it was in the afternoon, and the nurse ushered me into the doctor's other surgery with a little more respect. There was a tiny holding of the breath and it made me more expectant.

"Good afternoon, Andrews. Nice to see you again. Still feeling in good health?"

"Yes, sir, thank you." One never admits that one has never felt quite the same since being pumped with inoculatives.

"Ready to have a consex fitted! Now, Andrews, this is a most private matter which I think will explain itself. We are not afraid to be scientific about sex as a subject, but I trust you will keep this to yourself. If you are not completely satisfied—*for any reason whatsoever*—tell no one but come and see me. Is that understood?"

"Yes, doctor."

"I am a sexiatrist, actually, not a doctor. Now come and look in this glass container."

I looked. As I believe it usually does to others, it struck me with a sort of horror to see this thing alive, a collapsed sort of dumpling with ordinary human skin, sitting in its case like a part of a corpse that he been cut off.

"Get used to it," he said. "It's only ordinary flesh. It has a tiny pulse with a primitive sort of heart, and blood and

muscle. And fat. It's just flesh. Alive, of course, but perfectly harmless."

He lifted the lid and touched it. It gave, then formed round his finger. He moulded it like dough or plasticine and it gave way, though it tended to roll back to a certain shapelessness.

"Touch it."

"I couldn't."

"Go on."

He was firm and I obeyed. It had a touch like skin and was warm. It might have been part of someone's fat stomach. I pushed my finger in, and the thing squeezed the finger gently with muscular contractions.

"It's yours," he announced.

I nearly fainted with horror. It strikes everyone that way until they realize how simple, harmless and useful free living tissue can be, and its many healing purposes. It embarrassed me to guess where the "consex" was to be located on my body, and my intuition was uncertain with equally embarrassing ignorance. But one only has to wear a consex a short while to realize how utterly natural it is, and how delightfully pleasant when in active use. It is a boon to lone explorers, astronauts, occupants of remote weather and defence stations, and so.

"Don't worry," said the specialist as I drew back in disgust. "It's no more horrible than the way you came into the world, or the parts each of your parents played in starting the process. In fact, it's cleaner, more foolproof, and efficient, and far more satisfying than a woman. Thank heaven, without them we'd be overrun."

I feared to do anything. He said,

"I'll show you how it works. Don't take it off for at least a week, not for any reason. See me at once if there is any discomfort. Later on, you may remove it for athletics, though you can do most things with it on—swimming for instance. In the toilet it rolls up easily enough. But don't disturb the suction or play around. It clings well if you leave it alone, and it's very comfortable."

He took me into a private cubicle, where I undressed and lay under a soft blanket. Then he brought the thing in on his hand and pulled the blanket back.

I held my breath. It was the worst moment of my life for fear, though not for pain.

"I've stimulated it a bit," he said. "It'll take over for you this time, but every time after that it's up to you to make the first move, or nothing will happen. It's very responsive. Now you must lie here half an hour until I let you go."

He let it rest between my thighs, and it covered all those parts you never see on pictures of nudes except those in classical religious paintings. It was comfortable. It felt pleasant. This first time when the sexiatrist goes out and leaves one alone with one's body and one's consex and one's private thoughts is the crucial one.

It was only pleasant sensation ; I had not been given any warning. So I tolerated it. But at the same time I was disgusted at the smallness of sophisticated adult behaviour. Hell, I thought, they take a lot for granted. But my curiosity overcame my dignity, and I did not rebel.

It was hardly over when I heard a conversation which startled me.

"Do you have a letter from your parents?" the sexiatrist was asking someone.

"No."

"But you still refuse to have an appliance fitted?"

"Yes."

"Well, I agree it is not compulsory. But you'll have to give a very good reason for refusing. And without a letter from a doctor or parent or guardian we may not accept your reasons."

"I'm a conscientious objector."

"On what grounds? Do you realize what you're letting yourself in for by refusing to wear a consex?"

"I don't believe all the claims made for it," he said, but feebly.

"You don't even know them," said the sexiatrist, condescendingly. "I'm quite sure of that. But surely you want to know what it's all about first? Surely the subject fascinates you so that you are interested enough to desire the experience for a while?"

"No, sir. In principle."

"In principle! What do *you* know about it? Tell me. What *do* you know about so vast a subject?"

"I don't believe in the principles the welfare authorities base it on."

"You don't believe in them! You don't believe them despite the fact that the government authorizes me to fit every boy and girl with an appropriate consex as soon as he or she reaches puberty. Every boy and girl in this population of over 80 million wears one—"

"Not *every* boy and girl."

"All but one or two in a million, and those are mostly for health or mixed-sex reasons. They are approved by the R.M.A. and every major health, legal and educational authority in the country. Virtually all religious denominations have welcomed them. But you refuse."

"Welcomed, sir? I don't believe any of them."

"I see. You don't believe that this country is heavily overpopulated. You don't believe that before consexes came out the years of adolescence were years of miserable misfits trying to adjust to a half-baked situation? And that boys slept promiscuously in spurious natural sexual relations, that girls had illegitimate babies sometimes from the earliest years it is possible to conceive, and that mere children contracted serious venereal diseases from these methods.

"You think you can do without all this. And what sort of substitute will you have? Tearing about on a rocket-scooter or getting drunk! Raping a woman or just stealing her handbag! And if and when you grow up . . .

"Did you know that there are ten million bachelors and the same number of spinsters in this country who have never been married nor had a so-called love affair but are sexually wholly satisfied and consummated? Did you?"

"It may have been in the papers, sir."

"Tell me." He spoke kindly and coaxingly for a moment. "Is it because you've picked up some little bad habit? It's very common, nothing to be ashamed of. This thing will help you."

"No, sir."

"Come on now, man of principles. Square with me. Haven't you? Are you sure you've never committed . . . well, self-abuse?"

"What, sir? I—I haven't done anything wrong."

"Come off it, lad. No one has ever never done anything wrong."

"But I haven't, sir."

"Do your parents approve of your attitude?"

"I think so, sir."

"You think so? That's not good enough. Now come on. Be a good chap and let us fit you a consex. It's much nicer than natural sex or any of that. You don't want to be the odd man out, do you?"

"No, sir—"

"Good. All right, then. Nurse, he's accepted after all. Get it out, will you."

"No, I haven't, sir. No!"

"I am an authority on this, lad. You mean to say you still haven't accepted that the government knows what is best for the nation after all I've told you?"

"I haven't, sir, no. It's not the government—"

"You haven't? But I thought just now you said you had."

"I didn't want to be the odd man out ; but I can't wear one of these."

"Then you will be the odd man out, won't you? What d'you mean, you can't? Come into the laboratory and let me show you."

There was silence then for nearly half an hour. Now I know what one of those laboratories looks like, I can imagine the sexiatrist taking him round, telling him to peer into a microscope and see tiny microbes swivelling about in plasma, showing him charts of the amino-acids, the blood-types, the cell-types, the skin-types, etcetera, pulling out samples for quick-fire experiments, and showing him a few easily-digested examples of living tissues artificially made for various purposes. Then the door opened and in they came.

"Well, what did you think of it?"

"Very interesting, sir."

"Impressive, wasn't it? Wasn't it!"

"Yes, sir."

"Now what do you say? It's up to you. You have some idea how it works now, and you're not afraid any longer, I hope."

"No, sir."

"You'll consider it."

"I am considering it, sir."

"Oh, good. Do you think you'll be able to decide now?"

"Oh, yes."

"Good. I'll call the nurse then, shall I?"

No answer. He rang the desk bell.

"You won't refuse us after all that, now, will you?"

"Well . . . Please, sir . . ."

"I'm going to ring your parents."

The nurse came in, dropped my clothes on the bed, and shut the door. I heard the phone click as I slid out of bed, then click again.

"I'll give you one more chance," said the sexiatrist. "In case you're ashamed or anything. Nurse, tell me, do you year a consex?"

"Yes, doctor, I do."

"A male consex?"

"Yes."

"And you like it? It's comfortable, not unhealthy? You can do what you like? You don't feel guilty about it?"

"I love it," she said. "I've never had difficulty with it. It always responds to my lead and never disobeys."

"Thank you. Now, boy, are you satisfied?"

"What happened the first time?" the boy asked the nurse with a mixture of sheepishness and daring.

The nurse said nothing. I wondered if she blushed. The boy said:

"My father called it an artificial prostitute."

"Nonsense, lad. You don't know what you're talking about. They say worse things about holy matrimony, so-called."

"I have religious objections," said the boy. "I can control myself without all this."

"All what? Without all what?" the doctor asked sharply.

"This . . . appliance."

"It's only living flesh," he said. "Look, here's one. See? I touch it. If God hadn't meant this stuff to exist, it wouldn't exist, would it? Now you touch it. Don't your parents wear one?"

"No, sir, they don't."

"Ah! Well, you're quite free to do as *you* please. Don't

be afraid to go against them. As I told you, the authorities have called you up for the purpose of giving you one, and you are protected by the law. We shall support you to the hilt. Your parents don't object to fluoridation, do they? Or antismog in the air?"

"Yes, sir, they do."

"Hmmm."

I heard a muttered "Nut cases" outside my door, and the nurse opened it for the sexiatrist. He strode through, booming.

"Andrews, ah, Andrews, you're a sensible lad. Now you've just become a man and learnt all about it. How d'you like it?"

"All right, sir."

"Feels O.K., doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "very nice," though sneakingly I sympathized with the boy out there. I knew the voice of all the temporal powers was speaking through the sexiatrist, and all the pressures were being brought to bear, but I admired him for resisting.

The sexiatrist knelt and held me.

"Now, sir," he said, "now, Mr. Andrews, would you mind very much if we showed our friend here how nicely the little consex fits? We have to show you how it feeds, too, because it's going to grow and mature right along with you. That's why it's important this lad Topolski has his fitted now."

I detected the tiny note of disdain at the boy's foreign name, and half inclined to retort at the sexiatrist for the one he had used all along.

"He doesn't have to, does he?"

"Now don't you start," said the doctor, and he drew me forward, levering off my pants at the same time.

"What's wrong with that?" asked the sexiatrist showing the consex fitting like a fig-leaf and looking as innocuous as a fold of skin. "I've even thought," he went on, half to himself, half to the young nurse, "that they're far more aesthetic than the bare uni-sex, and this return to clothing oneself at all times and in all places is quite unnecessary. The time will come when things will turn full circle, and we shan't be afraid to go completely nude again."

I saw the point. I began almost to like my consex, even though the sensation it could give was disturbingly overwhelming. But the boy turned away after a cursory examination. He said nothing.

"Well?" asked the big man, and I realized all of a sudden the mental pressure, the semi-mesmeric force of it that I had allowed to ride me, and that this small dark twelve-year-old was bucking. "You don't want a black mark on your book, do you?"

I wondered, What book? I did not know, then, that the State's records kept its finger on this one more aspect of a man's "suitability".

"I do a lot of sport," he said weakly, almost visibly wilting, and looking for somewhere to hide. He must have felt awful, foolish and mixed-up.

"Ah, so that's what it is! Well now, Dearson, the world champion marathon runner, actually wears his running! And all the other athletes have them. They simply take them off and wrap them in a little blanket—like this one—while they're participating. No trouble at all. Now come on, be a good chap. We'll just take your measurements—most of them are compulsory—and leave it to you to come back later and collect your consex. How about that?"

"All right," he said. I saw him stiffening his resistance again to the paternal air, and felt fairly sure the internalized authority would not be strong enough in him to bring him to accepting the consex. But he would have to submit to the tests as required. The sexiatrist would ring his parents later, then he would have to return and sign the many forms, by one of which he would delegate to the Minister of Health responsibility for his sexual welfare—a condition mentally as unacceptable to him and his parents as the consex was physically unacceptable.

I was dressed and dismissed, yet I lingered at the specialist's door waiting vaguely for something. Then the boy gave his address. It was just round the corner from mine.

The fact that we were neighbours does not seem important, perhaps. But it's going to be. I am going round when I have a chance, to ask Topolski the real reason why he refused to put on the "appliance".

— A. K. JORGENSSON

In a recent editorial I complained that science fiction missed a lot because of the absurd insistence—absent in other forms of fiction—that an idea should only be used once. The central idea in this story has been used before although in a completely different way; there is no suggestion of plagiarism and this story is, in my opinion, an important one. I await the storms of criticism.

TEMPTATION FOR THE LEADER

by R. W. Mackelworth

"Look at them!"

Joe Packman looked. On the green lawns, where the public were allowed to wander, faces were turned up into the glare of the sun, arms were thrust towards the sky pointing at the black dot. They were like people caught in a hypnotist's trance. It was almost ridiculous.

Then it wasn't every day they saw a spaceship.

Joe smiled at the President, his customary gravity set aside by wry humour for a brief moment. "Tinker, tailor and the candlestick maker, everyone wants to see the sign from heaven. After all, it might be the start of the new Utopia—on the cheap."

"That's what they think?"

"Something like that."

The President's square face remained sombre. The set of his jaw was a byword for toughness. His eyes held all the sincerity in the world. Yet, he was only a man, able in human affairs—this was extra-curriculum to put it mildly, and even his famous wisdom might be too little to cope with aliens. Especially when the people expected so much to come from the meeting.

"Joe?"

The Secretary of State turned away from the window. It

was rare to hear doubt in the President's voice. He was suddenly very attentive.

"What makes men try for the impossible?"

Packman wrinkled his brow. He wasn't perplexed by the question but rather by the reason for asking it. There was significance in everything the President said. He countered the question neatly. "What made you try for the Presidency?"

The younger man grinned with that amazingly infectious enthusiasm that had made him the best image the party had ever found. "Always the diplomat, Joe, but you have made your point." The grin faded and the big hands were interlaced together like strong strands of whipcord. "There's always a little bit of a bargain in everything we do. It has to be that way, doesn't it?"

"The alternative to a bargain, as far as politics are concerned, would be dictatorship or anarchy. That's what I'm worried about, Joe. When we have to talk to these aliens what will they settle for and how can we be sure they won't take us to the cleaners?"

The Secretary understood the original question now. He remembered a lot of history and he remembered little things. There was the big war and the little quarrels—all long lost in his own past. There was the everyday conflict of personal pain and routing discomfort. They were always present. All through these he had fought and fought hard. If the aliens had conquered space then they knew how to fight too.

"I should think they have our vices and virtues."

The President shook his head with the positive gesture of a man who made destiny out of decision until it was part of all his actions. "Our vices could take them into space, but our virtues are a handicap to big enterprise and they could have dispensed with them."

"Surely compromise is essential to co-operation? I mean one man won't work with another without some give and take. We base our politics on that." The old man was worried by his master's implicit despondency. It was out of character. "They could be our moral superiors. It could be they want to help. After all, they haven't attacked us."

"You know damned well, Joe, we could have been out in

space in force ourselves if one country had worked with another. You can say we are short sighted but I think it's a sort of independence. As for being a kind of saviour you should remember saviours come small and humble. My guess is that these people have drive—the kind of drive you find in a totalitarian system—and in that case their only attempt at a bargain will be sleight of hand at best."

Packman shrugged his eloquent shoulders with a grace that had been hard won over generations of diplomacy. "They may be so far advanced that they have made it by normal evolution."

The President picked up a file from his desk and opened it. He flicked over the type sheets. "Intelligence doesn't agree. The shape, speed and propulsion of the ship are within our own understanding even if we haven't actually built one like it yet. Next, we are sure that it's armed. In fact this isn't the first visit we have had and, on the last few occasions, investigating craft have been quietly wiped out."

"If that's true, why ask to land? Why not force a landing?"

The file was replaced on the wide desk. It lay there, with its secret caption in bright red like a blazing warning. "We think they didn't dare risk it at first but there is something they want and they mean to get it. Their delegation is coming here and we've got to meet them. Public opinion demands courtesy and we must play along. If I'm right it's going to be very hard to demonstrate any duplicity in a way our people will understand."

"You've made up your mind—that could be dangerous."

The President turned his back to the desk, and the file on it, as if he wanted to make up his mind alone and he resented Packman's suggestion that it was already closed to further persuasion.

"Don't worry, Joe. I'll find a way."

"To do what?"

He gazed at the old man thoughtfully.

"To find the truth—that's all."

The public receptions were over. All the nice speeches had been made and the visitor sated with greetings. Now it was time for the real horse trading to begin.

It had to be in secret and only one camera was permitted in the President's private office. Even that was remotely controlled and its record was for posterity only—unless the Party chose otherwise.

Apart from the alien, just two other people were allowed to sit in with the President. One was Joe Packman and the other was a secret service man. He was nameless. He was merely a shadow that falls on the ground when a leader walks by. His face was alert. It was as taut as snapping ice.

The President smiled at the alien.

What did he really want?

It was one thing to be liberal and another to be soft gutted. People wanted you to be all things at once. The tightrope of common sense, stretching between compassion and eternal vigilance, was very narrow indeed.

The face across the desk was tough.

He hadn't classified it yet.

The wide desk before him was bare. It had been presented by someone a century or so ago. Who was it? Never mind? Only the red telephone and its reflection in the high polish broke the flat, mirror surface. The desk was a symbol of office, the burden he carried and for which he had fought.

He recalled the thousand speeches and the infinite manoeuvres in committee and lobby which had put him in power. His career was a tall pyramid. All of it was experience. Yet, at the top the pyramid was a sharp point of decision. Joe had a rude word for it. A mistake, though, inevitably meant the long drop to the bottom and it wasn't so funny.

The alien was smiling back at him.

He knew he had made the Presidency by the sheer impact of his own ability and ambition. How had the alien reached his goal and what was his function?

In his better moments the President felt he was behind the desk because he wanted to get things done, because he loved the people. At other times, especially in the long sleepless hours of an anxious night, he wondered if he was good enough. He wondered if he had deceived himself and the millions who had voted for him.

Was this visitor subject to exultations and doubts?

He felt the warm smile fade from his own face. There was something lacking in the eyes across the desk which had killed the smile. The alien seemed to attempt friendliness as if it was an exercise and not a real emotion.

Of course he had to make allowances. After all he was an alien even though his face and figure fitted the eternal mould. He looked like a man. The differences were so slight that the most fanatical racial purists had found it hard to cry wolf.

Critical eyes had taken a long practised look at him from the second his capsule had touched the ground leaving the ship high above still a black dot in the sky.

The long jaw was noted, a shade too long, definitely, and the nose, which flared abruptly at the nostrils, was a little odd. Particularly they examined the colour of his skin. It was deep green in the bright sunlight and that foxed them. No one on Earth was quite that colour. His hair was too coarse, his legs were too spindly; but what was that? Nothing. Not until he was neatly labelled one way or the other.

What counted was the personality locked in the flesh. The soul of the man. Did it carry the torch of compassion or the cold ice of oppression? The people were hopeful. They wanted him to be good—so for them he was good, a perfect shining angel.

"This is a special moment for both of us."

The President made his voice sound welcome. It was hard to conceal the suspicion that lay underneath like an iceberg.

"My name is Poniard."

A careful, precisely friendly voice but . . .

He heard it there—a pseudo enthusiasm which most men would have missed. Poniard was like the clever salesman, with the right technique and intelligence, but lacking the real warmth of sincerity. This happened—when the product was poorer than the man, or the man had no real regard for his prospect. He was selling—that was it! Not a soldier or a saint but a salesman.

"I did know your name, Mr. Poniard. My aides filled in the picture very well for me." He hesitated, pondering

whether his suspicions were showing or based on some unsuspected personal prejudice he hadn't detected in himself before. Fear of the unknown? No!

The fact that Poniard relayed his voice through the small, black box on his lap, essential for instant translation, made it harder to judge him. Long distance telephone calls created the same problem. The similarity between the box and the red telephone on his desk hadn't escaped him. Both had the same significance. The hot line was an old tradition and a wonderful diplomatic advance but it had its dangers —a risk of misunderstanding.

"I'm informed you have a specific and peaceful mission. In fact I hear you have constantly restated this position. I must say I admire your courage and the skill of your race which made the journey possible."

Poniard nodded his head, apparently missing the implied disbelief in the President's tone. Again his lips moved. The black box spoke the words so instantaneously only a sharp eye could catch the slight delay between lip movement and sound. "We have come especially to you, to your planet, because we have much to offer. Your problems are well understood and we want to analyse them for you. You are aware of the dangers in the years ahead for your people. These can be avoided if you accept our help and guidance."

Poniard managed to convey authority. He seemed to give an impression of a tremendous advantage in age. It impressed the President and once again he felt the old doubt about his own comparative youth and short participation in ultimate power. It had worried him so often, whenever he had to face an elder statesman. He glanced at Joe Packman and, not for the first time, blessed the presence of his white hair and wise, compassionate face.

Joe was watching the alien with the dangerously calm regard of a grandfather watching a stranger talk to a beloved child.

The secret service man, sitting next to Joe, was merely observant. There was no emotional bond. It was just an exacting job. He looked out of place sitting on the gilt and silver chair. It was too delicate. All his reflexes were tuned for instant action and his hand rested on his chest where all could see it. The posture seemed natural but it was

calculated. His hand was only an inch or so from the gun slung under his arm.

The alien wasn't put out by the long pause. He appeared to know the value of silence, as required, in negotiation. Too often men gabbled on and put a bean up their own nose—as the saying went. It was silly to put unnecessary objections in the prospect's mouth or to oversell.

"If we did need help how could you help us?"

Poniard smiled the same smile. It still lacked the essential warmth but his attack was forceful enough. "We have banished disease and hunger. Our economists have evolved the best systems for balance of trade and budget. There is no more war on our planet and the power of the atom has been tamed completely." The thin face was earnest. There was an urge to evangelise in every line of eye, lip and jaw. Or was it a kind of desperation? "Your peoples still suffer. By marshalling your resources and with a moderate effort we can end all that and you will secure all our benefits."

The President assessed the approach rather than the subject. Perhaps he was unfair to Poniard but he knew that benefits were always proffered before the price. First show a need and then desire followed automatically. The cost wasn't so bad once real desire was created.

Poniard was a salesman—of sorts.

If he had had the aura of true sincerity about him what he had to sell would be important. However, instinct clamoured against reason. Big nations helped small nations sometimes, but they expected little in return unless they were on the make. A gift had to be made in the right way. This man was selling, not giving, yet his approach would have made even a gift suspect.

"I don't know if we can afford your help."

The President spoke softly as if he had meant to think the words rather than speak them. Or as if he was a little worried about the record for posterity.

"It calls for a little sacrifice." Poniard shook his head and somehow, for the first time, it was a completely human response. He expressed irritation, in a reasonable manner, with an unreasonable attitude, very well. "Imagine a situation where the worst has happened. Your leaders and the

mechanics of government depend on a fine balance. If the leaders fall then the people fall with them. Suppose, last night, that phone had rung and your enemies were not reassured by what you had to say. Wouldn't the bombs destroy the innocent with the guilty? Wouldn't you be responsible?"

Joe intruded very quietly. "You paint a very clear picture almost as if . . ." He left it unsaid. The end of the sentence hung over them like a vulture.

The President noted that Poniard seemed pleased with Joe's remark, as if he had underlined his point for him, but the alien had hit him where it hurt. The risk he had described was always with him. If the risk could be removed! Then he remembered the causes and was less reassured. "You have put your finger on only part of the problem, Mr. Poniard. The underlying troubles are much more deeply rooted. If we solved the problem of mass destruction by one means how long do you think it would take them to find other means? They are hungry, sick, envious and nervous and everyone is a trigger for some reason."

He fed Poniard the objection deliberately. If he picked it up and turned it to his own advantage then he was a salesman of the worst kind. A sensitive man couldn't overlook the basic truth and pretend his cheap medicine could do the impossible when it was self-evident it could do no such thing. The right kind of man wouldn't try. He would offer what he had, for what it was worth, and admit it wasn't a cure all. There were no ultimate solutions—save perhaps one.

"Very good. I understand that. But if hunger and the rest were removed then your problem is solved, isn't it?"

"You can do that?"

Poniard's face was pitifully reassuring.

"We can!"

It was exactly the answer expected.

Immense help at little cost. It would need a saint to make it stick and if Poniard was that altruistic the matter of cost, even the small matter of cost, wouldn't enter into it. Did a big brother make terms for rescuing his small brother from a hole in the ice? No, the alien was on the

make. He wanted something in exchange for what help he could give. That might have been fair enough if the exchange was fair but the doubt was there. That lack of warmth in his smile and the possibility that lies had already been told were defeating him.

The President's scientists had assured him that the aliens could only be a century or two ahead of their own science. The shape of their spaceship, still hovering in the sky above the city, and the equipment Poniard had brought with him gave the aliens away. Even the small capsule in which he had landed was built on exactly the same lines as their own machines. More to the point it carried weapons with considerable fire power but of almost astonishingly conventional design.

If the visitors were morally superior then they disguised it well. If they were predatory why hadn't they forced a landing and proved their power? There was only one answer. They knew they could be beaten, just as a soldier with the best automatic machine gun could be beaten, by enough arrows. Their landing was bluff—at least in part. They might be desperate. In that case why was Poniard pretending otherwise? Didn't he understand that a shipwrecked man drew everybody's pity?

"Poniard? Your planet—where is it?"

He frowned. The forehead creased into black lines but the total impression was felt rather than seen, a fleeting and mysterious anger that came and went in a second. "We shall talk about that later, if you don't mind. There are visual aids on the big ship showing how we manage things in our own lands. When you agree the ship can join us, we will show you these." He was smiling again, sure he had switched the point of attack successfully. "First we must know your assets and how they are used."

The President was reminded of many an international debate on arms controls. Everyone wanted inspection—of the other man's country. "Why must you know that?"

"Details are important if we are going to help you."

"How do you expect to collect such details?"

"There are computers on the ship. If we link them to your statistical centres then it will save time. All it needs is your agreement."

The President smiled but his humour had a touch of bitterness. "You would need the agreement of a thousand states. It would take at least forever. Your first miracle, Poniard, possibly?"

An expression, which could have been fear, flashed across the ugly face. "Time is too short . . . even a month would be too long and it's essential . . ."

Joe Packman caught his leader's eye. "Essential for whom?" He said nothing more. It wasn't that he was diffident. The old man was as tough as a worn army boot which had seen its time in mud and rain.

The President knew Packman held him in a certain awe. It wasn't all that profound because nothing in politics ever could be so romantic. It was the respect of an old man for wisdom unexpectedly found on younger shoulders. Both of them were afraid it might be a mirage.

He nodded to Packman. Permission to speak was what the old man wanted. Just as long as he kept it short!

"You have a wonderful piece of electronics on your lap, Mr. Poniard. It selects words with care. I like that. There is a wonderful uniformity about machines. Now, my name is Joe Packman and I don't doubt that there are others with the same handle, but tell me this—how many on your planet are called Packman?"

The question seemed futile. The alien obviously thought so. He replied, without looking at the Secretary's face, as if he thought him a fool. "We are all called Poniard. There are no Packmans. I don't understand what your aide is getting at."

The President was puzzled too. A suspicion flashed through his mind that Packman was being funny. He had a reputation for finding relatives in the right places. He dismissed the idea. The Secretary was shrewd and he had his reasons.

"All called Poniard?"

"Yes."

Joe nodded his head slowly. "So like us but so different. Rather totalitarian isn't it, though—everyone with the same name? It should have made for peace, don't you think?"

Poniard's contempt vanished from his face. He appreciated the sly manner in which the old man had stripped a

little of the cover from the picture of his race. "I'm sorry. My machine has been too exact. It translated my name too literally—just as it would label you Earthman it called me Poniard. You understand?"

The President hadn't missed any of the wheat for the chaff. Poniard had tried to cover up his error but he had failed. The old man had laid his hand on the heart of the matter. A planet where everyone had the same name and a translation machine that was too careful with words. Earth was the stuff from which men sprung. It was fruitful and part of both body and soul. It was material but it had a spiritual value. Poniard meant 'dagger' and its derivation was from 'pugnas' which in Latin was a fist. There was no balance in a name like that, just a philosophy.

The alien sensed the doubt that had grown from one stupid, tricky question. He felt an overwhelming hate for the men in the graceful room. His hand trembled. The cold curve of the ceremonial sword wasn't at his side, comforting him. Its power to move minds and stir spirits was as ancient as time but he had known that he shouldn't bring it to the meeting. He might be the only one of his race who was trained to do without it but all the same it made him feel insecure—to be naked of all that mattered.

He had to stem their doubts, quickly.

The President seemed prepared to listen.

"In my ship there is a cure for all ills. Every word we utter is passed direct to the ship. In a short while I could give you a simple formula to end cancer or a method to remove mountains. It only requires a small sacrifice on your part. A few raw materials and a little time."

The square face was touched by a little grin. It was an understanding look. "On this planet we have struggled with cancer for ages. We know only one answer in general."

Poniard's eyebrows formed a query. It was a natural reaction—very human.

"Death."

The frown appeared again.

"Is yours as simple, Poniard?"

"Make an agreement and you will know." It was as if the alien had a sense of humour too.

Packman intruded with skilful grace. "On this planet we

have contracts to prove agreements. Without a contract there is no form in any agreement. Not that we keep agreements anyway, but nevertheless we must have a document to sign—or do we spit on our hands and leave it at that?"

"Allow us to land and send our people into your world."

Packman sighed softly, his old face staid but intelligent. "Here comes the point of sale."

Poniard took his opportunity. "Firstly, as part of our compact we will act as advisers. We will put one of our men in every economic planning centre and hospital. We will show you how to disband your armies without risk. After all, your various nations will trust an outsider rather than a participant. Finally, we will institute research so that you can develop all your peaceful techniques."

The President nodded almost as if he was half convinced. "Then?"

"Nothing at all—apart from a few small things for ourselves."

Packman leaned forward as if he was hard of hearing and his thin lips pouted. "A few small things?"

"Your world is rich in materials. We have much to give in exchange."

"He took him up onto a high mountain."

"Pardon?"

Joe had stripped the words of any pious pretence. He was good at quotes—the right one for the right time. The President and he knew what the aliens wanted now and how they planned to set about it. Take the citadel from inside! What a hope the alien had. Then, they were from a one party, one rule world, where there were leaders and slaves and no real rebellions. Every other Earthman was a rebel. Poniard didn't understand that or he wouldn't have bothered to tempt them.

They wanted a new world to squeeze into their own rigid pattern. Poniard and the few thousand survivors in the ship were hardly more than evil leeches.

Survivors!

How had the perfect system of rule destroyed itself?

"You know I couldn't give my people over to you, even if I wanted to." The President spread his hands on the flat,

shining desk so that Poniard could see them. They were empty . . . and clean. "I rule by their will alone."

Poniard shook his head. He hated hypocrisy. "Peoples are not ruled by their own will. It's nonsense—a stupid paradox. You are lying."

"It's the truth. If I foisted you on the electorate they would find you out in no time. They would sense your lack of sympathy and this is a world where people live on sympathy. They might like your cures and panaceas, if they exist, but the price is too high. Sooner or later they would string you up or, worse still, give you the cold shoulder."

The face darkened. Its colour was as dead as rotting seaweed and the features were foreign—horribly different. Two dark spots appeared on his forehead and they began to swell slowly. His hands stroked his flanks gently as if feeling for something. "My ship can hear us. They know you are bluffing. A leader commands—even here. We have records from the last time . . ."

"The last time?"

Packman was up on his two big feet. He was no longer a careful old man. He was an angry patriarch from the backwoods with an imaginary axe in his hand. In the long run it was bad for debate but for the moment quite admirable. "Not just the planes you shot down, eh? More than that, isn't it? You haven't come from a planet a century or so behind us. You have come from a planet where time has stood still. No progress. No nothing."

The bulges were projecting and sharpening. The chin had grown longer and the nose curved like a sharp beak.

The President was cautious. He knew that Packman had stumbled onto something but it sprang from intuition and it needed explanation. "All right, Joe, simmer down. Poniard knows the score. We don't want him or his crew here."

"Tell him what you are!"

Packman's accusing finger waggled angrily an inch from Poniard's face.

The alien was very ugly now. There was every sign of imminent action in the clawing hands which still groped for the non-existent sword.

A silver gilt chair fell back against the wall as the secret service man leapt to his feet, gun in his hand and aimed at Poniard's middle. He was a ball of tension ready to jump.

"Don't fire!"

The President barked his order like a sergeant on a parade ground. He knew the man was a hair trigger and the slightest change could set him off. His own hands had found the row of cold buttons below the rim of the desk and just in front on his body. He pressed the first.

On a hundred sites rockets stirred and pointed their pencil noses to the sky, seeking out the black dot. They were fully armed and ready to fire.

"I'm going to destroy your ship, Poniard."

The dark face was suddenly blank with surprise. The anger died away unexpectedly as if one emotion had cancelled out another. The features resumed their human shape.

"Why?"

"Because you are a menace." The square face was very candid. "If you had had a chance just now you would have killed me just as your people would kill mine if they were allowed to land."

"How could you tell . . . I didn't draw my sword. I had no sword with me."

"Your face was enough."

Possibly the alien understood at once. He knew he had lost. The truth was very evident and he dimly realized that all the hours he had spent mugging up the books they had stolen had been wasted merely because he lacked something he could never have. This world had subtle undertones. Like the strange flowers with a delicacy beyond conception there was a deep complexity here.

"Don't destroy the ship."

He said it very simply and for the first time he sounded sincere.

The President nodded.

"We are lost, you see. Our tracking devices have broken down—it's been a very long journey. We are short of food and fuel."

"You shall have all the help we can give you. There is only one condition."

"Yes?"

"That you leave at once."

"But the supplies . . . ?"

"They will be waiting for you on the Mare Nostrum—an area on our Moon which is in this state's jurisdiction. I should think they could pick out your sun with the equipment there."

The alien didn't bow or scrape. He stood up and faced the President, his dark eyes glowing with something akin to admiration. A new concept had struck into his mind like a shaft of light. It would unstick his civilisation from the thousand years of stagnation that had held it back.

Sometimes the whole was no greater than its parts.

They would learn the new sociology quickly. It would be learned by order and no nonsense!

"Today, I have learned a new art."

The President bowed his acknowledgment and indicated the door. He had an inkling of what was on Poniard's mind and he wanted to keep the interview firmly in hand.

"Tomorrow . . ."

Packman scowled at Poniard as he left the sentence unfinished. He knew positively what the alien had in his mind.

"Tomorrow we will use it."

Packman frowned at his leader.

"You know he meant they would come back again."

"Yes."

"What did the Chairman say?"

His eyes drifted to the red phone which he had just answered for the first time in his career. "They were worried about the alien. Wanted to know if he was a Marxist. I reassured him. He was convinced—thought I would have shot him, if he had been, rather than send him away."

"Why didn't you?"

"Easy. Now we have something to compete with. All of us. We may have to fight for our lives one day—if they come back."

"We'll win."

The steady eyes gazed at him pondering the statement. "You sound rather sure of yourself. I'm not even sure the

people will forgive me for booting their new white hope back upstairs."

Joe shook his head. "Your instinct was right, Mr. President. You have the talent of the leader for touching the right answer even if it isn't for the right reasons—the right logical reasons anyway. You see, the people will be with you as soon as they see the film record."

"Why."

"When he got angry he changed. It was beyond his control. A natural reaction he couldn't control any more than you can stop an eyelid blinking. Incidentally he didn't blink did he?" Packman didn't wait for an answer. "I come from the backwoods. There are still superstitions there."

The President waited patiently.

"Old Scratch we called him. If I could only have had the pants off Poniard I might have proved it but the horns were really enough. Then I had the feeling he—or rather his kind—had been here before. Last time they found early cultures based on totalitarian systems and slavery."

"Rome rather than Greece?"

"Exactly. This time they found a democracy . . . and a leader. Last time they must have used the same cheap selling trick to more effect because the memory lingers on."

"How?" The square face was puzzled but the eyes were calm and steady. "Unless you mean . . . but that's absurd."

Joe put the small coloured print on the wide desk.

It was Poniard.

"The very devil!"

Packman smiled. "Wait 'til the electors see it."

The President began to smile but it froze on his face. "Suppose he had gone to the other side in the first place. They would have made him at home!"

—R. W. MACKELWORTH

AT LAST, THE TRUE STORY OF FRANKENSTEIN

by Harry Harrison

"Und here, before your very eyes, is the very same monster built by my much admired great-great grandfather, Victor Frankenstein, built by him from pieces of corpses out of the dissecting rooms, stolen parts of bodies freshly buried in the grave, und even chunks of animals from the slaughterhouse. Now look—" The tall-coated man on the platform swung his arm out in a theatrical gesture and the heads of the close packed crowd below swung to follow it. The dusty curtains flapped aside and the monster stood there, illuminated from above by a sickly green light. There was a concerted gasp from the crowd and a shiver of motion.

In the front row, pressed against the rope barrier, Dan Bream mopped his face with a soggy handkerchief and smiled. It wasn't such a bad monster, considering that this was a cheapjack carnival playing the smalltown southern circuit. It had a deadwhite skin, undampened by sweat even in this steambath of a tent, glazed eyes, stitches and seams showing where the face had been patched together, and the two metal plugs projecting from the temples—just like in the movie.

"Raise your right arm!" Victor Frankenstein V commanded, his brusque German accent giving the words a Prussian air of authority. The monster's body did not move, but slowly--with the jerking motion of a badly operating machine—the creature's arm came up to shoulder height and stopped.

"This monster, built from pieces from the dead, cannot die, und if a piece gets too worn out I simply stitch on a

new piece with the secret formula passed down from father to son from my great-great grandfather. It cannot die nor feel pain—as you see—"

This time the gasp was even louder and some of the audience turned away while others watched with eager eyes. The barker had taken a foot long and wickedly sharp needle, and had pushed it firmly through the monster's biceps until it protruded on both sides. No blood stained it and the creature made no motion, as though completely unaware that anything had been done to its flesh.

". . . impervious to pain, extremes of heat and cold, and possessing the strength of ten men . . ."

Behind him the voice droned on, but Dan Bream had had enough. He had seen the performance three times before, which was more than satisfactory for what he needed to know, and if he stayed in the tent another minute he would melt. The exit was close by and he pushed through the gaping, pallid audience and out into the humid dusk. It wasn't much cooler outside. Life borders on the unbearable along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico in August, and Panama City, Florida, was no exception. Dan headed for the nearest air conditioned beer joint and sighed with relief as the chill atmosphere closed around his steaming garments. The beer bottle frosted instantly with condensation as did the heavy glass stein, cold from the freezer. The first big swallow cut a path straight down to his stomach. He took the beer over to one of the straight-backed wooden booths, wiped the table off with a handful of paper napkins and flopped onto the bench. From the inner pocket of his jacket he took some folded sheets of yellow copy paper, now slightly soggy, and spread them before him. After adding some lines to the scribbled notes he stuffed them back into his jacket and took a long pull on his beer.

Dan was halfway through his second bottle when the barker, who called himself Frankenstein the Fifth, came in. His stage personality had vanished along with the frock coat and monocle, and the Prussian haircut now looked like a common crewcut.

"You've got a great act," Dan called out cheerfully, and waved the man over. "Will you join me for a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do," Frankenstein answered in the pure

nasal vowels of New York City, the German accent apparently having disappeared along with the monocle. "And see if they have a Schlitz or a Bud or anything beside the local swamp water."

He settled into the booth while Dan went for the beers, and groaned when he saw the labels on the bottles.

"At least it's cold," he said, shaking salt into his to make it foam, then half drained the stein in a long deep swallow. "I noticed you out there in front of the clems for most of the shows today. Do you like the act—or you a carny buff?"

"It's a good act. I'm a newsman, name's Dan Bream."

"Always pleased to meet the Press, Dan. Publicity is the life of show business, as the man said. I'm Stanley Arnold: call me Stan."

"Then Frankenstein is just your stage name?"

"What else? You act kinda dim for a reporter, are you sure—?" He waved away the Press card that Dan pulled from his breast pocket. "No, I believe you, Dan, but you gotta admit the question was a little on the rube side. I bet you even think that I have a real monster in there!"

"Well, you must admit that he looks authentic. The skin stitched together that way, those plugs in his head—"

"Held on with spirit gum and the embroidery is drawn on with eyebrow pencil. That's show business for you, all illusion. But I'm happy to hear that the act even looked real to an experienced reporter like yourself. What paper did you say you were with?"

"No paper, the news syndicate. I caught your act about six months ago and became interested. Did a little checking when I was in Washington, then followed you down here. You don't really want me to call you Stan, do you? Stein might be closer. After all—Victor Frankenstein *is* the name on your naturalization papers."

"Tell me more," Frankenstein said in a voice suddenly cold and emotionless.

Dan riffled through the yellow sheets. "Yes . . . here it is, from the official records. Frankenstein, Victor—born in Geneva, arrived in the U.S. in 1938, and more of the same."

"The next thing you'll be telling me is that my monster *is* real!" Frankenstein smiled, but only with his mouth.

"I'm betting that it is. No yogi training or hypnotism or such can make a man as indifferent to pain as that thing is —and as terribly strong. I want the whole story, the truth for a change!"

"Do you . . . ?" Frankenstein asked in a cold voice and for a long moment the air filled with tension. Then he laughed and clapped the reporter on the arm. "All right, Dan—I'll give it to you. You are a persistent devil and a good reporter and it is the least you deserve. But first you must get us some more drinks, something a measurable degree stronger than this execrable beer." His New York accent had disappeared as easily as had his German one; he spoke English now with skill and perfection without any recognizable regional accent.

Dan gathered their empty glasses. "It'll have to be beer—this is a dry county."

"Nonsense! This is America, the land that raises its hands in horror at the foreign conception of double-think yet practises it with an efficiency that sets the Old World to shame. Bay County may be officially dry but the law has many itchy palms, and under that counter you will find a reasonable supply of a clear liquid that glories in the name of White Mule and is reputed to have a kick of the same magnitude as its cognate beast. If you are still in doubt you will see a framed federal liquor licence on the far wall, legitimatizing this endeavour in the eyes of the national government. Simply place a five dollar bank note on the bar, say Mountain Dew, and do not expect any change."

When they both had enjoyed their first sips of the corn likker Victor Frankenstein lapsed into a friendly mood.

"Call me Vic, Dan. I want us to be friends. I'm going to tell you a story that few have heard before, a story that is astounding but true. True—mark that word—not a hodge-podge of distortions and half-truths and outright ignorance like that vile book produced by Mary Godwin. Oh how my father ever regretted meeting that woman and, in a moment of weakness, confiding in her the secret of some of his original lines of research . . ."

"Just a minute," Dan broke in. "You mentioned the truth, but I can't swallow this guff. Mary Wollstonecraft

Shelley wrote *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818. Which would make you and your father so old . . ."

"Please, Dan—no interruptions. I mentioned my father's researches, in the plural you will note, all of them devoted to the secrets of life. The Monster, as it has come to be called, was just one of his works. Longevity was what he was interested in, and he did live to a very, very old age, as will I. I will not stretch your credulity any further at this moment by mentioning the year of my birth, but will press on. That Mary Godwin. She and the poet were living together at this period, they had not married as yet, and this permitted my father to hope that Mary might one day find him not unattractive, since he was quite taken by her. Well, you can easily imagine the end. She made notes of everything he told her—then discarded him and used the notes to construct her despicable book. Her errors are legion, listen . . ." He leaned across the booth and once again clapped Dan on the shoulder in a hearty way. It was an intimate gesture that the reporter didn't particularly enjoy, but he didn't complain. Not as long as the other kept talking.

"Firstly she made papa a Swiss; he used to tear his hair out at the thought, since ours is a good old Bavarian family with a noble and ancient lineage. Then she had him attending the University of Ingolstadt in *Ingolstadt*—when every schoolboy knows that it was moved to Landshut in 1800. And father's personality, what crimes she committed there! In this libellous volume he is depicted as a weeping and ineffectual man, when in reality he was a tower of strength and determination. And if this isn't enough, she completely misunderstood the meaning of his experiments. Her jim-crack collection of cast off parts put together to make an artificial man is ludicrous. She was so carried away by the legends of Talos and the Golem that she misinterpreted my father's work and cast it into that ancient mould. Father did not construct an artificial man, he re-activated a *dead* man! That is the measure of his genius! He travelled for years in the darkest reaches of the African jungle, learning the lore of the creation of the zombie. He regularized the knowledge and improved upon it until he had surpassed all of his aboriginal teachers. Raise the dead,

that is what he could do. That was his secret—and how can it be kept a secret in the future, Mr. Dan Bream?"

With these last words Victor Frankenstein's eyes opened wide and an unveiled light seemed to glow in their depths. Dan pulled back instinctively, then relaxed. He was in no danger here in this brightly lit room with men on all sides of them.

"Afraid, Dan? Don't be." Victor smiled and reached out and patted Dan on the shoulder once again.

"What was that?" Dan asked, startled at the tiny brief pain in his shoulder.

"Nothing—nothing but this," Frankenstein smiled again, but the smile had changed subtly and no longer contained any humour. He opened his hand to reveal a small hypodermic needle, its plunger pushed down and its barrel empty.

"Remain seated," he said quietly when Dan started to rise, and Dan's muscles relaxed and he sat back down, horrified.

"What have you done to me?"

"Very little—the injection is harmless. A simple little hypnotic drug, the effect of which wears off in a few hours. But until then you will not have much will of your own. So you will sit and hear me out. Drink some beer though, we don't want you to be thirsty."

Horrified, Dan was a helpless onlooker as, of its own volition, his hand raised and poured a measure of beer down his throat.

"Now concentrate, Dan, think of the significance of my statement. The so-called Frankenstein monster is no stitched up collection of scraps, but a good honest zombie. A dead man who can walk but not talk, obey but not think. Animate—but still dead. Poor old Charley is one, the creature whom you watched going through his act on the platform. But Charley is just about worn out. Since he is dead he cannot replace the body cells that are destroyed during the normal wear and tear of the day. Why the fellow is like an animated pincushion from the act, holes everywhere. His feet—terrible, not a toe left, keep breaking off when he walks too fast. I think it's time to retire

Charley. He has had a long life, and a long death. Stand up, Dan."

In spite of his mind crying *No! No!* Dan rose slowly to his feet.

"Aren't you interested in what Charley used to do before he became a sideshow monster? You should be, Dan. Old Charley was a reporter—just like you. And he ran across what he thought was a good story. Like you, he didn't realize the importance of what he had discovered and talked to me about it. You reporters are a very inquisitive bunch. I must show you my scrapbook, it's simply filled with Press cards. Before you die of course. You wouldn't be able to appreciate it afterwards. Now come along."

Dan walked after him, into the hot night, screaming inside in a haze of terror, yet walking quietly and silently down the street.

— HARRY HARRISON

—*continued from page* 3

gence it has always shown me. But I'd probably muck it up, intellectualise it too much, shuffle it into a different order. That might be a pity. "Non-Stop" tells a good story; in theory, I believe sf should tell a good story—if only by reaction against all the sf that tells no story—but in practice I might get too interested in the mechanics of the writing to consider the reader. And I might try to get further under the skin of the characters, which would be fatal.

No, I was lucky with "Non-Stop". The ideal story-line came along to suit the way I could best write at the time. It may not have netted me the praise that "Greybeard" did, the cash that "Hothouse" did, the opprobrium that "Dark Light Years"—my best-written book—did, but at least it encouraged me, whatever it did to its readers.

—BRIAN W. ALDISS

SULE SKERRY

by Rob Sproat

They said they had come from the Folk Song and Dance Society, and they were collecting the cultural heritage of Northumbria before it was too late. The five of them crammed themselves into one six-year-old Austin Seven and pretended it was cosy; they drove all through the North-East with their notebooks and recording machine, stopping at all manner of towns, cities, hamlets, and farmhouses, from the Wear to the Tyne, and from the high Cheviots to the North Sea. They interviewed anyone even mildly folksy in appearance, as long as he could sing or recite some doggerel supposedly taught him by his illiterate grannie. It being the peak of the Depression in the thirties, unemployment was chronic, and many a sharp-witted Geordie made himself a welcome few bob by contributing to their treasure-house of folk-song and poetry. Percy Hurley, a boilermaker from West Hartlepool, earned himself a place in local legend when he undertook in a Sunderland public house, for ten shillings cash and a round of Newcastle brown for the house, to recite a traditional poem called "How the cunning fox led astray the lambs". Whenever his invention flagged he simply broadened his already broad Geordie accent until it was indecipherable and carried on reciting gibberish, much to the suppressed amusement of his companions. "They fyools frae Lunnon wunna ken nae different," he said, and he was right—they wrote it all down phonetically and went away well satisfied.

So it was that they came to be talking with old Bobby Armstrong in a small country pub a few miles from Lampton. Unlike some of their finds, Bobby was the genuine article. There have been Armstrongs in Northumberland and Durham ever since there have been people there to notice it—many of the best songs of the North-East were written either by or about Armstrongs, and it is said (by the Armstrongs) that all the best singing and playing is done by Armstrongs. Be that as it may, Bobby Armstrong

knew as many traditional songs as anyone north of the Humber.

Bobby was suspicious of strangers, however, especially Southerners with microphones and that, and was unwilling to sing at first. But after they had stood three pints of strong Newcastle, he grudgingly agreed to perform, and got out his accordion. He refused to be drawn about the song, saying only that it was a "very old 'un," but they showed him how to use the microphone and he began to sing.

VERSE ONE

An earthly nurse sits and sings,
And aye she sings, "My lily wean;
And little ken I my bairn's father,
Far less the land where he dwells in."

Thalia Willow was the only daughter of the king of all Northumbria, and was rising eighteen. She was five-foot one inch tall and light and quick, and her hair was straight and fine yellow. She wore only the very finest of linen, and no man other than blood kin had ever been within three feet of her. She had been in love from a distance since the age of nine with Bryan Reed, young Bryan Loughor, the eldest son of Sir John Reed of Loughor Carse; but she had never so much as touched his hand, or any other young man's hand, for that matter. As a matter of fact, Bryan Reed worshipped Thalia Willow from afar, but she herself was not very sure of this, although she had hopes. She was the purest and fairest maiden in all her father's kingdom, and she was frightened out of her mind. And for a very good and tangible reason—she was five months pregnant.

At first, she had simply refused to believe it. She knew herself to be an immaculate and unsullied virgin, she knew she had never lain with any man, therefore she could not possibly be expecting a baby. But after two and then three and four months, she was forced to accept the fact that she was very pregnant indeed. Her mother, who had been looking sideways at her for some weeks, took her aside one day halfway through the fifth month and quietly demanded to know who the father was, and what on earth had possessed her to be doing such a thing. Thalia Willow burst into tears and said she did not know who the father

was. Her mother drew the obvious conclusion, and became very angry. Only after two hours of shouting and weeping did Thalia manage to convince her mother that she was telling the whole truth, and was completely innocent. The pregnancy was real enough; together they calculated that the child must have been conceived in the first week of August, when Thalia was with her grandmother on the North Sea coast. Her grandmother swore terrible oaths that no manner of man had been anywhere near her Thalie; the whole thing was baffling.

Fortunately, Thalia Willow was well loved in the kingdom. Most of the people believed her story almost immediately; the cynical minority were nearly all quickly won over either by her gentle nature or by the less gentle support of her devoted well-wishers. Even young Bryan Loughor, when he had got over his initial shock, came to believe her story, and told her as much on a special visit to the King's Hall. Thalia had the great good fortune to look every bit as innocent as she was; even had she not been innocent (and let there be no misunderstanding, innocent she was) she could probably have carried it off.

Some could not be made to believe her, however. Unluckily, one of these was Sir John Reed of Loughor Carse. He was furious when he heard of his son's visit, and absolutely forbade Bryan Reed to have any more dealings with "yon tainted goods". Young Bryan Loughor refused, and Sir John banished his son to the foreign wars until he should recant. All the people and court were for Thalia and Bryan and against Sir John, but Sir John was a very old and valiant knight, who in his day had fought three dragons and lived and killed scores of obstreperous Scotsmen. Not even the king of all Northumbria could tell him what to do in a matter of this nature.

So Bryan Reed went off to fight his wars, and Thalia Willow retired, heartbroken, to await her confinement. The baby was born in the Spring, a little earlier than expected, but a fine lusty boy for all that. The midwife asked what the boy was to be called.

"What you will," said Thalia Willow, and the boy was named Will.

Her apathy towards the child soon faded. In no time at

all, her son became the centre of her life, and though she still loved Bryan Reed, she pined for him less and less bitterly. Will grew fast and learned to walk and talk very early, although he tended not to use his powers of speech much, except with his mother. He was strong and powerful compared with his playfellows, but there was an awkwardness about a lot of his movements, especially his walk, which somehow managed to give the impression that he was constantly ill at ease. He had his mother's frank and open expression, but with startling vivid green eyes, and his hair was brown, not gold. His affable nature made him well liked—he never once threw a tantrum or acted viciously. Yet he formed no close relationships, except with his mother, and he spent most of his time playing alone. Thalia grew to love him dearly.

Just after his third birthday, they both went to stay with Thalia's grandmother. The old lady was very kind to Will, but did not take to him. "Yon's no earthly child, Thalie," she said on the first night, "he'll bring you sorrow, you wait and see." Thalia smiled politely. She loved her Gran.

The next evening, she took Will down to look at the sea. As soon as he saw it, he was transfixed. He sat down where he stood and gazed wonderingly at the water. He tried to tell Thalia what he felt, but he could not get the words to come, and when it was time to go back, he began to cry for no apparent reason, a thing he never did as a rule. He cried most bitterly all the way home, and refused to be comforted. When at last he managed to stop, he was completely unable to tell Thalia why he had been crying. For the next few days, he seemed very disturbed, and refused to be separated from Thalia for an instant, becoming very agitated whenever she was out of his sight. Thalia comforted him as best she knew how.

VERSE TWO

For he came one night to her bed foot;
And a grumly guest I'm sure was he,
Saying, "Here am I, thy bairn's father,
Although I be not com-e-ly."

For three nights after he first saw the sea, young Will had little sleep, and Thalia Willow was kept awake most

of the time comforting him. By the fourth night, they were both exhausted, and Thalia all but wept for relief when Will fell straightaway into a deep and peaceful sleep. In a matter of minutes she too was fast asleep.

She remembered her dreams that night most vividly for the rest of her life. She dreamed of Will crying at the sea, and her saying helplessly again and again: "Don't cry, Willy, don't cry," and of young Bryan Loughor at war across the sea ; and of her mother shouting when she found out she was pregnant ; but mostly she dreamed of the sea itself. Again and again she saw it ; how great and green it was, and how terrible, and how beautiful, and how majestic. She saw waves and storms and hurricanes ; she saw fine-blown spray make rainbow colours in the sunlight ; she saw reefs and shoals, whales and fishes, great busy harbours and vast wide ocean deserts. She was very frightened by it, and she loved it very much, and it made her want to cry. The last thing she remembered of her dreams was that she no longer wondered why Will had cried, then she woke.

Afterwards, she never had any doubt that she had been awake, and at the time she was quite certain that she was no longer dreaming. From the position of the window's moon-shadow, it must have been about three in the morning. On waking, her head was still full of the sea-dreams, but she knew, even before she thought to look, that she had a guest, and that she had been aroused for this purpose only.

She did not see her visitor immediately ; the room was very dark away from the pool of moonlight which was the first thing she looked at. But as her eyes became accustomed to the deeper shadows, the form of her visitor became plainer, until she could see him clearly. She was stunned and terrified by what she saw. She opened her mouth to scream, but could not.

Now Thalia Willow was exceptionally tall for a woman of her day ; the average Northumbrian man of those times was something under five feet five in height ; one who was five feet nine was almost a freak and six-footers were called giants. Consider her initial shock, then, when the first thing she perceived about her guest was that he stood at least six-foot eight in height, with his head brushing the ceiling! In

stature he was broad and powerful, and must have weighed in the region of twenty stones. Small wonder, then, that Thalia thought herself menaced by the giant to end all giants. But there was worse to follow.

Thalia was frightened enough by the prospect of dealing with an outsize man, but her terror increased as the details of her giant's appearance became clearer. His hair appeared to be light in colour and very short, quite unlike the shoulder-length styles common among the Northumbrians. The same soft, fine hair seemed to cover every visible part of his body—he wore only a whitish tunic, open to the waist. He was dripping wet; he glistened with water all over, and it ran off him to form pools on the floor. His head was massive, even in proportion to his vast body, and very round in shape, blending into a very short and thick neck. At first sight, his wide face appeared to be featureless, then Thalia saw that his mouth was nothing but a tightly closed slit. His eyes likewise seemed to be firmly shut. No nostrils or nose were visible, and he had nothing which could rightly be called ears. Thalia Willow trembled and knew that this was no mortal man who stood so silently at the foot of her bed.

This much was abundantly clear from his looks, but over and above that, there was an air about him such that you knew that he did not belong in the world of men. It was nothing Thalia could pin down, but there was something foreign even about the way he stood, so that you knew he had no place there. Something strange and yet familiar, because you recognised it at once. Thalia thought of Will's awkwardness, and of Gran saying: "Yon's no earthly child, Thalie," and she knew who her visitor was.

"You are my Willy's father," said Thalia Willow.

"I am thy bairn's father," said her giant, without opening his eyes. His voice was loud and yet gentle, and very deep and strange.

Thalia noticed with some surprise that her fear was gone, then she noticed something which surprised her even more. Most of the water on her giant's face came running out of his tightly shut eyes—he was weeping, silently, without the slightest sound. As she watched, he opened his eyes and looked at her, the silver tears still welling up and pouring

down his face. The eyes were enormous when open ; nearly half the face was taken up by them. They were huge and sad and very beautiful, and they shone with a vivid green fire. He looked at her for a few seconds, then bowed his head without speaking. Thalia Willow felt all things at once ; she was sad and frightened and happy at one and the same time. Above all, she felt that she could not bear to see this great giant crying. She went over and touched him on the arm.

"Don't cry," she said, just as she had said earlier to his son, "don't."

He looked at her again, and after that the tears came more slowly. Still he did not speak again. Thalia Willow waited.

"What manner of man are you?" she asked.

VERSE THREE

I am a man upon the land,
I am a silkie on the sea ;
And when I'm far and far frae land,
My home it is in Sule Skerry.

The giant stopped crying and looked once more at Thalia Willow. The great green eyes were very sad.

"I am sorry," he said, "I had to do it ; for I am the last one."

Thalia was puzzled, and started to say something.

"No," he said, "I will speak. I had to do it. I had to have a son, or never another silkie would there have been in Sule Skerry. It was the men who made us few, so their women must bear our sons. But I am sorry. I was greatly sad to take thee like that."

The memory of the surprise pregnancy came flooding back, with all the attendant pain and heartbreak.

"Yes," said Thalia, annoyed by the thought, "how was it that you came to father my Will? I never saw you before this night."

He shook his great head slowly.

"O, it was the easiest thing," he said. "You sleep or wake at my will. That other night, you slept. I am greatly sad. Now you will hate me always, and my son."

"I love my Willy," she cried, "no mother ever had a

better boy. And neither do I hate thee," she added in a softer voice.

He smiled, and Thalia felt the great glow of his happiness.

"That is very good," he said, still smiling. "Now I shall tell thee the answer to thy question."

Thalia had forgotten which question.

"I am no manner of man," he went on. "I may walk as I please on the dry land as men do, but I am no man. I am the last of the silkie, and my place is on the sea."

His voice was proud as he said it, but still gentle and steady.

"We are the oldest people; our time is many times as long as Man's. Even I may remember Sule Skerry as she was when we were yet great."

And Thalia Willow's heart was filled with a deep wonder, for he was a marvellous persuasive talker.

"What kind of a place is it, your Sule Skerry?" she asked. "Is it as fair as my Northumbria?"

"O, it is a fine and bonny place, right enough," he said, chuckling deep in his throat. He picked her up very gently, and placed her on the edge of the bed.

"Come sit thee down," he said, "and I will show thee Sule Skerry in all her former glory."

He knelt before her, smiling, and gazed at her. The great green eyes were very big and lustrous, and before she could get her balance, she toppled over and fell headlong into them.

And it was like nothing she ever saw before or after. They were indeed far and far from the land, and the deepest deeps of the ocean were all around them. Now they travelled on the waves above, now amidst the calmer waters below. How they moved, or how far, or for how long, she could not tell, but it was no mean journey, and all those wonders of the sea she had dreamed before flowed past her. But they were nothing if once you set eyes upon Sule Skerry.

It was in the darkest depths of the ocean, not on the sea bed, but halfway up to the air, in the very middle of the waters. Not one ray of sun or moon had ever penetrated down here, but everywhere was lit by the bright, warm glow

that shone in the silkie's eyes. And there were silkie everywhere, so that Thalia could not tell whether the wonderful glow came from their eyes or from the water itself; but it was the most beautiful sight she ever saw. There was a warmth in it that made every part of you glow with comfort, and more than that, the light seemed to be able to give a great happiness to anyone whom it bathed. Thalia basked in the glow and was overwhelmed with joy and peace.

"It is indeed a fine and bonny place," she told her companion. He seemed very pleased. The great silkie were everywhere; their huge bodies, so ungainly on the land, quick and graceful in the water. There were no buildings—there was no need for them, there was warmth and comfort in plenty. A thought struck Thalia, and she asked her guide why she did not drown, but he just laughed his great gentle laugh. Over and over she told him how beautiful it was and how she loved his Sule Skerry and all the lovely silkie.

"It's bonny enough," he told her, "but it's nothing more than dreams. This is how she was in the old times, when we were many and I was very young."

"Are you then very old?" she asked. He laughed again.

"I've seen six kingdoms fall in your Northumbria," he said, "aye, and I've seen Sule Skerry fall before that."

"No, it mustn't!" she cried. "It couldn't!"

"It fell," he said sadly, "and it was humanfolk that made it to fall."

"Why?" Thalia could not understand. "I cannot think that any man would wish such a thing."

"You are human," he said, "you tell me, for I'm sure we never fathomed it. Listen while I tell you of it. Know you that the silkie eats but very seldom, but when he does, he must go up on the dry land for to find his food. Now when the first men came to your country, they were in great fear of us, and began to kill us when they saw us walking about."

"Oh no!" cried Thalia. "Why should anyone fear gentle folk like you?"

He shrugged.

"We were not as they were, so they feared us. Think on,

were not even you like to die of fright when first you laid eyes on me?"

She was silent.

"Very well," he continued. "They began to slay us. We were gentle, we knew nothing of war, it was not for us to kill. We could not think of it. But we had to go up on the land or die, and when we went up, they slew us, even though we went in the dead of the night. As we grew fewer, they grew bolder, and soon they built a great fleet to sail on the sea, and began to kill us even in the water. They pursued us without mercy to Sule Skerry and did us all to death save a handful. The others have long since died or been slain. I am the last great silkie of Sule Skerry."

"But why have I never heard of this dreadful thing?" asked Thalia.

"There have been six ruling families in Northumbria since then ; it has likely been forgotten. It would be painful to remember a deed which bears so much shame."

His voice was very sad but there was no bitterness in it.

"Come," he said, "and we shall see Sule Skerry as she is today."

All the time he had been talking, they had been bathed in the wonderful glow of Sule Skerry's past ; now it was abruptly cut off. They were plunged into a terrible black darkness, blacker than the darkest midnight, and it became bitingly, numbingly cold. Just as the glow and the warmth had brought joy and happiness, so the dark brought overwhelming loneliness, misery, despair and heartbreak. Thalia was desperately unhappy, and began to cry uncontrollably, like a child.

She awoke, still crying, on the edge of her bed. "Aye," said her silkie, "you may well weep. I have lived a score of your lifetimes in that black place. Perhaps you can see now why I came to you—" he lowered his head—"that other night."

"Yes, I know," she said. "But why did you come to me this night?"

VERSE FOUR

And he had ta'en a purse of gold,
And he had placed it on her knee ;

Saying: "Give to me my little young son
And take thee up thy nurse's fee."

For a long minute he remained looking at the floor without speaking. Then he looked up at her.

"I have come for my little young son," he said, "to come with me and share my Sule Skerry. It will not be as before, but at least there will be the two of us."

"Three of us," said Thalia Willow. "I shall be there too."

He looked as though he might cry again.

"No, that is the hardest of all. You could not live on the sea with us; you are human. That was only dreams before."

He lowered his face again. Slowly, it dawned on her.

"You cannot mean it!" she gasped. "You could not do such a thing! You could never mean to take my boy from his mother. I won't let you!"

"I have watched him. He is a silkie, for all that he has some of your ways with him. He will never be happy on the dry land. Let me take him!"

"No, no!" cried Thalia. "He needs me, he is happy here. You shall not take him from me."

He was near to despair. He fumbled inside his tunic and pulled out an old cloth bag. He dropped it at her feet, and it burst open, spilling out golden coins.

"Here," he said, "here is what you humans prize above all else. I took it from a drowned king's vessel. Take it and give me my son."

"What manner of father are you," she shouted, "to think you can buy a son from his mother?"

She kicked at the little pile of coins. The silver tears were pouring down his cheeks again and he could hardly speak.

"I could easily take him from you," he said. The green eyes were very big, and Thalia was suddenly very weak.

"But I cannot do it. If you will not give him up, he must stay here, and I must go back alone to that black place."

Thalia was infinitely sad for him.

"You may stay here and live with us," she offered.

"No, I thank you for your love, but it cannot be," he

replied sorrowfully. "I am a silkie of the sea, and I cannot bear the dry land for long. But I promise you this, if ever my son is unhappy on the land, and pines for the sea, I shall come and fetch him to live with me."

"And I promise you that I will not let you."

"Alas, I fear that you will be the death of me and my son both," he said, and then he was gone, moving awkwardly yet quickly and quietly.

Thalia picked up the gold pieces and ran after him to the shore. There was no sign of him. She threw the coins one by one as far as she could out to sea.

Back at the house, she lay on the bed and thought of the miserable black emptiness that was Sule Skerry. She cried herself to sleep.

VERSE FIVE

And it shall come to pass on a Summer's day,
When the sun shines bright on every stane,
I'll come and fetch my little young son
And teach him how to swim the faim.

Thalia Willow did not speak of that night to a living soul for years afterwards. She kept Will away from the sea as much as possible, and devoted all her time and energy to his happiness. Since her father the king was very old, and she his only heir, many counselled her to marry and safeguard the kingdom; but no mortal man had ever had any place in her heart except Bryan Reed of Loughor, who was still at the wars; news of his great feats only occasionally reaching Northumbria. Thalia's Will was her whole life.

He continued to grow tall and very strong, but the older he got, the more marked became his resemblance to his unearthly father. Thalia noted this with growing trepidation, for she remembered only too well the silkie's parting promise. She watched uneasily as Will became more and more an outsider with the other children. His elusive air of awkwardness increased all the time; every day, almost, Thalia could see more clearly his father's vast, powerful gentleness and the immense, pained sadness in the shining green eyes. By his ninth year, he was almost as tall as

Thalia and more restless than ever. Although universally loved for his kind and amiable disposition, Will now talked at any length with nobody save his mother, and it was seldom that he had any playmates of his own age. Many times he tried to talk with Thalia about his uneasiness but could not explain himself, because he did not really understand what was wrong, Thalia never having revealed the true nature of his father to him. It was at this time that Bryan Reed came quite suddenly back into both their lives.

Sir John Reed had died at a good old age, and young Bryan Loughor was home from the wars to claim his inheritance. The people gave him a hero's welcome, for his valour had become as legendary as his father's before him. He made triumphant progress through cheering crowds from the moment he disembarked, and the first person he went to see was Thalia Willow. They had not been together for more than a few minutes before they knew their feelings for one another had not changed, and soon all Northumbria was alive with rumours of their romance.

The intervening years had not been kind to either of them, but their new-found love acted like magic on them both. Ten years of death and battles fell away from Bryan in a single week, and all the deepening lines of strain and anxiety melted away from Thalia's forehead. They were seen constantly in each other's company; the whole land saw their love and rejoiced in it. The betrothal of Princess Thalia Willow and the new Sir Bryan Reed was a very popular one.

On top of all this, Bryan and young Will took to each other on sight. Will idolised Bryan, and despite the age gap, they became almost like brothers. Bryan took Will all over the kingdom, teaching him to ride and fence and wrestle, and especially to shoot with the longbow. Although he fought in battle as a mounted knight, Bryan Reed had been famous since his early youth as the finest bowman in all Northumbria. There were few other men strong enough even to string his great black-yew bow, let alone draw it; and his strong arms and steady eye had won him countless prizes in the past. Will surprised him by steadfastly refusing to shoot at any bird or animal, but the boy would practise for hours at a stretch with the small bow

Bryan himself had specially made. In only a few months, he was rivalling his tutor, and could regularly split bulrushes at sixty paces.

All Thalia's fears for him receded ; she no longer thought it necessary to tell Bryan of the boy's parentage. The wedding was fixed for Midsummer Day in Will's tenth year, and Thalia Willow's happiness knew no bounds. Then one day she came upon Will sitting on a rock with his eyes tightly shut, crying to himself, just as she had seen his father do all those years before. The bottom of Thalia Willow's buoyant heart opened, and all the happiness drained out of it.

For a long time, Will would say nothing to her ; then he told her how he had spoken to a giant who came at night out of the sea and who was his father. He told how his father had come to tell him of the life they must lead together on the great ocean, and of all the wonderful and terrible and sad things his father had shown him. He told how he had begged his father to take him then and there, but how at the last moment his father had refused, saying that were he to leave his mother, her heart would surely break from the sorrow and she would die. He told how his father had wept before leaving, but had still refused to take him. He said he was crying for his father's sorrow and the great love he bore him ; but far more for the great love he bore his mother, who would die of a broken heart when he left her, as he surely must, to go to his father in the sea. He said no more, but continued to weep the silver tears.

Then Thalia knew her long struggle was over, and that she had lost it. She thought once of the terrible happiness and loneliness that had been shown to her on that long-ago night, and made a truly great effort. She held her Will very tightly and told him that she loved him very much and knew he loved her too, but that she knew he would never be happy with her on the land. She told him that he must go to his father, who was very lonely in the sea and pined bitterly for his son, and that she would not die broken-hearted, because she would know he was happier in the sea. The weight of all the sorrows of the world lifted from Will and he danced for joy. Thalia wanted to cry, but did

not. She begged him to stay until after she was wed, and to this he readily agreed.

VERSE SIX

And ye shall marry a gunner good,
And a right fine gunner I'm sure he'll be,
And the very first shot that he shall shoot
Shall kill both my young son and me.

Sir Bryan Reed of Loughor Carse and Princess Thalia Willow were duly married on Midsummer Day with great feasting. The old king and queen blessed the match, and everyone prophesied happiness and prosperity for them. They went to live in the Great Hall at Loughor, together with Thalia's son, Will.

Thalia had not been able to tell her awful secret to Bryan; she had tried more than once, but always either the words failed her, or else her courage did. Then one morning, as she knew he must, Will came to her and said it was time for him to go to his father. As soon as Bryan was safely out of the way, she took Will down to the shore, accompanied by a single maidservant.

She told the girl to wait for her in the trees, and went down on to the beach with Will. They parted at high-water mark, and he went down alone to the water's edge. She saw the huge figure come up out of the surf and sweep his beloved son into his arms; she saw, even at that distance, the radiant joy in the great green eyes, and she knew she had done right. Then she could bear it no longer, and ran forward to bid one last, long goodbye to her only son.

The maidservant met Sir Bryan by the sheerest chance as he returned early from a disappointing morning's shooting. She babbled out her story of how a fearful giant had come up out of the sea and was making off with her Lady and Master Willy. He took her at her word, thinking to be better safe than sorry, and rode like the wind for the sea. He thanked heaven he had as soon as he hit the beach. Thalia Willow was up to her ankles in shallow water, gazing out to sea after the giant, who was about forty yards out, although the breakers still only came up to his waist. He was walking out to sea and was carrying Will in the crook of one arm. Bryan was off the horse and aiming

the great bow in one movement. If he shot now and the giant let go of Will, the boy ought to be able to swim ashore, or at least stay afloat till someone could get to him. He took careful aim midway between the huge shoulder-blades and fired.

At the precise instant that he loosed the arrow, Thalia's silkie turned to hold Will up for a last wave to his mother, at the same time waving himself with his other great arm. The long shaft struck Will full in the chest and went straight through to pierce his father's throat; killing the two of them instantaneously and pinning them together for always. Two waving hands fell simultaneously limp, and two lifeless bodies toppled silently into the waves. Together they drifted a very long way out and slowly sank; they were never seen again. Thalia Willow fell unconscious where she stood and lay in the shallow water until her husband picked her up, put her on his horse and carried her home.

And so it was that Sir Bryan Reed of Loughor Carse, who was later to become such a good and wise king, paced the floor of his Great Hall for many weeks, while in another part of the house, his new bride lay alone and cried softly far into the night for her two dear, dead loves; her only boy, Willy, and the last great silkie of Sule Skerry.

Old Bobby finished and put down his accordion. When they had recovered from his astonishing and moving performance, they began to question him; which Armstrong, they joked, wrote that one?

"That 'un's older nor any Armstrong, mister," he said, "an' that maks it dam' ould."

On the drive home, they began to discuss the song's origin. Worship of sea-gods, fertility rites, Danish, Saxon and Viking invaders were freely tossed around, and they felt very learned. Couldn't, someone asked, the song have some reference to an actual series of events similar to the ones it described? Oh no, they said. These old legends were simply crammed with meaning and significance, but it was all so jumbled up that nobody in their right mind could possibly take them literally.

— ROB SPROAT

THE JOBBERS

by Johnny Byrne

Just before he drifted into sleep he felt them moving up his body. He lay still and suddenly wide awake before he turned on the light by his bed. They were so small that at first he didn't see them. There were two of them and both were small enough to fit into his ear. They could have been twins and wore identical clothes, or rather tunics, or maybe even overalls—he couldn't be sure—and then they were so small . . .

He lay down to puzzle this out.

They stopped somewhere on his thigh and looked at each other. They carried very tiny grips. He was about to speak when they suddenly darted up his body, literally dived into his ears and then, in a moment, wormed their way through to his brain. Once inside they moved about and he felt them drop their bags, and made what sounded like a sigh of relief. Although they didn't use words when they spoke, he understood everything they said.

"That was close," one of them said.

The second one nodded and added that it wouldn't look good on the report. The first one didn't agree with this saying that they couldn't really be called botchers as it was the first time they had ever disturbed a subject before installation procedure was completed.

The man on the bed tried to understand what it was all about. "Why have you gone into my head?" he asked.

They moved about, busily inspecting the walls of the brain. "It's time you were scraped," one said. "And possibly drained as well," the other chipped in.

This didn't explain very much and he lay silently thinking about it.

They opened their grips and took some instruments out. One of them fumbled and nudged him with the instrument he was holding. This nudge caused his body to jerk up from the bed in frantic agony. For the first time he realized that whatever it was they intended doing inside his head, it was not going to be very pleasant.

He heard them apologise but by the way they laughed he didn't think they really meant it.

"It's time what was scraped?" he asked finally.

By way of reply one of them reached into his pocket and jerked something into view. It was a business card. It stated that they were representatives of Galactic Resstz Eazze Homes Inc. Short vacs were their speciality and scraping was included in estimate. Their motto: IF IT'S SHARP IT'S US, was written in large letters across the bottom of the card. The Jobbers introduced themselves as El and Pii. Their client, they explained, was anxious to have his vacation.

He felt his body stiffen on the bed. "Tell me more," he said, "what vacation is it you're talking about?"

"This is your first time," said El, who seemed to be in charge, "so it will be a little painful to begin. But don't worry: later, you'll never know it's happened." Pii nodded a little too vigorously to show that he agreed. "Besides," El went on to admonish, "if you slept a little better in your bed at night you wouldn't have had all this worry and bother. Speaking from our point of view I can't tell you how bad it is for business."

"Exactly!" said Pii.

"My name is George Cranly Maker," he blurted out.

"That is of no consequence," replied El sternly.

He tried to stall them. "Where are you from?"

"He means when, not where, surely?" said Pii, turning to El.

"Be quiet you," said El testily, "you know it's not allowed to talk about things like that. Carry on with what you were doing and don't interfere."

"Yes sir," replied Pii meekly, and sounded very young.

"You won't go if I ask you, will you?" he demanded and suddenly shook his head violently from side to side. It had no effect. The suckers they wore on their ankles acted as perfect stabilizers.

"That didn't do you any good," El snapped at him.

"We can be nice or nasty, depends on you," added Pii, "the client will be here soon wanting to get in and you not even scraped yet, never mind drained. Fine mess we'll be in then."

They moved about and began silently to assess the necessary amount of drainage.

"Tell me how I can make you go away?" He started to beg earnestly.

El became professionally brusque. He explained that the client wouldn't be staying long. Draining and scraping hurt at first only. After they were finished with him to-night, he wouldn't see them again. It was only necessary to prepare the way once. After that, their work was finished and the client could come and go as he pleased. And the best thing of all, El assured him, was that he'd never know if a client had been or not.

"How about that for technique?" whispered Pii admiringly.

It was time now to get down to practicalities. He felt them pat him once or twice. They said goodnight. Then they began to work.

* * *

Webber snapped shut the spyhole and went back to make his report to Simms, the duty doctor. He shook his head wonderingly at the noise No. 883 was making. It took a lot of lung power to cut through the padding of the walls in this section of the Institute.

Simms was sitting hunched over a beer in the duty room. "Well, who's making all the racket?" he asked.

"No. 883, Doctor. Seems to be having a bad time of it."

Simms' eyes flicked over the inmate's roster. "But he's in block X. Are you sure?" he said doubtfully.

"Wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. 883 is the one, all right. Shall I fix him?"

Simms mused for a while. It was not good policy to disturb the cells at night. Especially the cells in block X. Made all the other inmates edgy.

"No, I don't think so, Webber," he decided, "not good policy, you know. Let 883 get it off his chest. He'll feel better to-morrow. They always do." He paused, and added softly, "Just listen to that row!"

—JOHNNY BYRNE

OMEGA AND ALPHA

by Robert Cheetham

November 16*th.* I feel like a spawning sturgeon prevented from laying its eggs—a thousand times a thousand words ready to burst from the sac of my imagination, blocked by lack of time. Knowledge is agony. Knowledge of the certainty that I must die before my children, my ideas can be born. I thought once that I might have escaped, that I might have found refuge at least until some of my work was done. It was a foolish, meaningless hope. I have a few days, perhaps weeks longer than most, but even then the spawn will fall in barren, depopulated waters.

The sun ought to be shining, a warm and benevolent radiator, dispensing life and regeneration. Instead, the air is dark and heavy, laden with another kind of radiation. It seems as if there has been an immense volcanic eruption nearby, for the entire sky from horizon to horizon is a speckled suspension of drifting ash. I once saw something like it in Rebaul in New Guinea, but this ash is universal and deadly. I see and even feel the flakes flutter and touch my skin, knowing that each one will bore and burn into me until the toxins eat at my heart. One would be enough, but they come in their millions like the words in me that will never be born.

There is no sun, but the heat is from an airless furnace. Is that natural, or is it the manufactured article? Made in Russia? Or the U.S.A.? Or heaven—or hell? I wish there was a wind. The ash will never clear, but at least the motes would dance. It could be distracting.

November 17*th.* Gregoire came back to camp after an exploratory trip around the island. He seems disappointed because there is no natural source of water. There is plenty of wild fruit—coconuts, mangoes and pawpaws. We won't starve, he says, or even die of thirst. I envy him. His simple mind dwells on the necessity of immediate

survival, incapable of facing the right direction—the point from which death will actually come. I don't really blame him. It's all around him, already in him.

Janice's reaction amazes me. Somehow, she feels hope, a refusal to accept that she will die so soon. Is this always true of women nearing their time of birth? Is it true that no woman will ever believe that her unborn child is dead? Oh, there is life in her—I felt the little beggar kick—but a dying child, like a dying man, is full of death.

November 18th. The beach is a litter of carnage. The high water mark must be two or three feet deep in rotting fish and filth. They come in with every tide, floating, bobbing their white bellies at the leaden sky. Some are washed away to return with following tides, stinking just a little more. There's the drowned body of a man down there, and a manatee—that legendary mermaid of the days of sail. No one has done anything about them, man or mermaid. We have just moved camp nearer the centre of the island to get away from the smell.

Earlier today I broke open a fresh coconut and eased off a piece of its pure, milky meat. As I gazed at it, fine black ash settled on the morsel, spotting and corrupting it with evil. I bit off a piece and chewed it slowly.

November 19th. The Seychelloise in our group are incredible. They seem to contain reserves of cheer that nothing can dampen. Long ago I took it for ignorance; the result of a built-in mental block against any recognition of disaster. Now, I'm not so sure. Perhaps it is a gift, a real gift that allows them to die as they live—with a *joie de vivre* that precludes any sense of doom. Reading back on what I have written since we arrived on the island, I feel perhaps it is me who is at fault, full of self-pity and a personal frustration. I wish I could be more like them. Perhaps I could learn in the time that is left.

November 20th. It rained last night, and it was almost like a renaissance. The sky opened and released its contents in the type of deluge so peculiar to the tropics. It lasted for an hour, and all that time the Seychelloise ran and danced in the open like a mob of excited children. Before I knew it, I was out there with them, throwing back

my head to catch the tainted drops and spreading my arms to feel their softness on the palms of my hands. When it was over I found Janice still in the shelter, her swollen belly covered with a blanket. Her whole attitude is one of protectiveness for the burden she carries and which will so soon emerge lifeless and poisoned into a dying and poisoned world. I felt a sudden upsurge of tenderness and took her in my arms. We lay together like this for a long time while Janice crooned inwardly to the life in her body.

November 21st. I slept late this morning and awoke with the symptoms of a hangover. It was several hours before I managed to shake it off. Not entirely, for even new there is a heaviness on me. Could this be the beginning of a long agony of death? The words are still there, jostling and crying for release. I may not have much more time.

Janice and I went to Mahé just over a year ago. Our own fabricated and accepted excuse was that I could write there, unfettered by the shackles of a high living cost and the necessity of earning a wage. I didn't do much writing, for that siren island lulled me into a false sense of security. Even the presence of a missile tracking station and its bustling, realistic American personnel couldn't destroy the feeling of tranquillity and eternal peace. It seemed to fulfil the real purpose of our flight. Yes, we had run away. We had run from the burgeoning threat of destruction; from the radio, television and newspapers that screamed their menace and counter-menace across the continents. The voices of men had become like the lipless jawings of a skull, promising total annihilation to their enemies—and themselves.

I'll have to go easy on the paraffin. Supplies are running low. Perhaps I should do more of my writing during the daylight hours.

November 22nd. The rain we had two days ago gave only a brief respite from the ash. A light breeze sprang up again this morning and with it came a fine, carboniferous rain. Everything is covered with it. Examining my skin I see that filth has worked its way into the fine grooves of my hands, even where the sweat has tried to wash it

away. My clothes are stinking rags after only a week, but everyone is the same and no one seems to care. One of the Seychelle women came to me this morning and asked for aspirin, as she had a nagging headache. I could have told her I have one as well—that everyone must have one. I couldn't give her a pill as we had brought none with us. I saw she was heavily pregnant.

Gregoire ran back from the beach in a state of wild excitement. He had seen a ship several miles out to sea, steaming furiously on a southerly course. To him it was a sign of life and hope; to me it conjured up the pathetic picture of a few dozen souls in panic, running somewhere —anywhere—to escape a death that already sat and chuckled in the very marrow of their bones.

I don't know how Gregoire can stand going near the beach. Whenever a breeze blows from that direction I have a Gargantuan inner battle not to vomit. The carrion there must be ghastly.

November 23rd. My head aches continuously now and my thoughts are apt to wander.

Janice and I spent that year on Mahé in a kind of unrealistic haze, deliberately cutting off from outside communication. That is easy to do on the Seychelles; the locals have little or no interest in the machinations of international politics. Their area of gossip dealt solely with their environs, and as long as we avoided radios and newspapers, we were safe from unwelcome knowledge. We spent a great deal of time lying on the beaches on the opposite side of the island to the capital town of Victoria, talking of the book I intended to write, planning fishing cruises and, latterly, scheming a golden future for our child.

This head-in-the-sand attitude was hopeless and pathetic but even now, after the event, no alternative presents itself. That year, at least, was one of great happiness for us.

November 24th. It is becoming an enormous effort to pick up my pencil and write. The islanders have lost all their childish humour and spend their time sitting about in little groups, silent and waiting. When I awoke this

morning my chest was raw and bleeding from where I had scratched it in my sleep. The entire surface area of my body has turned an angry pink and itches badly. I have lost the ability to retain any food in my stomach and always throw up immediately after eating. I don't know why I take the trouble—I've lost all sensation of hunger.

Janice lies in the shelter, clasping her abdomen and refusing to answer when I speak. I have tried to get her to move so that I can clean the place out, but she cringes away, staring at me without recognition. I have no strength to help.

Was it just two weeks ago that we lay on that starlit beach on Mahé, gazing at an unpolluted sky and dreaming of an endless future? I wish now that we had stayed and perished with the island instead of running in blind panic to the fishing village. I don't know why we did it, except that in some misty, unaware part of my mind I must have planned against such an event. Instantly I recognised that brilliance in the sky, although its direction was from the other side of the island and its source many hundreds of miles away. Long before it began to dim I was scrambling along the sand, dragging a bewildered, bloated Janice by the hand.

I had often hired Gregoire's boat for cruises through the archipelago and it was to him I now fled. I scarcely remember the fearful, stuttering conversation I had with him, but I do recall manhandling the boat down the beach and the frantic embarkation, with a dozen chattering Seychelloise clambering over the side, treating the whole affair as a joyous, happy adventure. We sailed due East and landed on this island, unnamed and uninhabited, because we could sail no further and survive. My thoughts then were of the tracking station on Mahé and of the fate it would—and did—suffer.

November 26th. Yesterday Janice gave birth to a daughter. A healthy, normal, squalling baby daughter. Oh God, what have we done that this could happen?

November 28th. Janice has come to life. Her rejection of me is complete and I can no longer enter the shelter without her screaming at me to leave, flaring with hatred and fear. She remains crouched, rocking on her buttocks

and moaning to the infant, feeding it the poisons of her breast. Unable to sit still, I walked a little way from the camp to the beach. The sand had completely disappeared beneath wreckage and rotting fish. I don't seem able to smell it any longer and the carnage no longer generates repulsion. It seems I am losing the faculties of my senses. There are two feelings left—pain and relief. The latter is afforded by the ash, drifting still, like down, onto the burning areas of my body. Soothing, gentle, kindly ash.

November 30th. I must have lost a day. I fell asleep on the beach and awake three times. The first in darkness, the second in light and finally in darkness again. A baby is crying in the camp somewhere. Not from Janice's shelter.

I feel very thirsty. Tried to open a coconut but didn't have enough strength. I'll probably die of thirst before the ash gets me. Feeling terribly tired.

November 31st?: December 1st? How many days in November? Thirty days hath

Rained last night. I slept in the open and caught some of it. Wonderful. Big, fat drops were cool on the back of throat and in my eyes. I feel a little stronger.

The others lie still around in the camp. Perhaps some of them are dead. There's a baby with them, very small, very wizened. It looks far too small to be sitting up like that. I looked in Janice's shelter. Place is indescribably filthy. No sign of life from her, but I saw the baby. Two babies here.

December? Why do I keep writing? Can't think any more. Every day I take notebook from the box and write. Put it back again carefully. Every day?

Everybody sleeping. Everybody dead. I am not dead. Animals on the island, small animals thought it was uninhabited. Must stay near box—get rid of words. Sleep a little.

Burning had to go beach lie in water. Get cool not much time. No strength. Crawled beach two animals eating rotten fish. Not animals babies two tiny babies eating rotten fish one white one brown. Crawled back write two human tiny babies eating rotten

—ROBERT CHEETHAM

The Furies, huge armoured wasp-like beings, first make their appearance in the confusion following the Neptune Test, a vast atomic explosion that triggers world-wide chain reactions of earthquakes. Bill Sampson and Jane, an attractive teenager, manage to make their way to the coast across a shattered and disorganised England. They are helped by Neil Connor, lieutenant in charge of a small armoured platoon. Jane escapes but Bill is captured by the enigmatic insects and taken to a camp apparently set up by them to house human refugees. Here he meets Greg, ex art-teacher and amateur speleologist, and Pete, a Cockney girl whose family have been killed by the Furies.

The trio escape, together with an assortment of camp inmates, and strike out across country for the Mendips and Chill Leer, a deep and only partially explored cave system. From their hideout the colony wage a dangerous guerilla war on the creatures that now control England, attacking and burning their greate dome-like nests. With the onset of winter the wasp hordes become inactive; trouble instantly flares up between the resistance groups and the Symbos, humans who have accepted Fury domination. Bill, sickened by pointless killing, decides to make another attempt to reach the Channel Islands, where he still hopes to find Jane. He sets out from Chill Leer but almost instantly runs into an advancing Army group. The car he is driving is fired on, and overturns. Bill loses interest in everything for a considerable time. . . .

THE FURIES

by Keith Roberts

The Third of Three Parts

CHAPTER TWELVE

The void, the time of not-being might have gone a day or a week or a month. As the pain ebbed and flowed the emptiness filled with noise, with jazzing lights, senseless forms and colours. Fever-images jostled me, melting nightmarishly each into each ; Jane and Sek, the Furies, the boat, the burning truck ; rocks rained, my house was falling again, smashing my legs, starting lightning-jabs of pain. I tried to talk to Jane but it was no good, her hair had turned blonde or white and her face was scarred, her hands were like cool velvet but she wouldn't touch me with the velvet, she would only scream kill, kill . . . The words, the noise, seemed to shaft into my body to wake the pain up again

and I was back in the boat and the sea was rising. I tried to row but the dinghy turned into a red car that somersaulted, smashing onto the road. Then the rocks and the house again, over and over . . .

The dreams ebbed into stillness. Sometime, I opened my eyes.

I lay trying to focus them. Above me was a yellow-green texture, vague and meaningless, split with cracks and shadows. The surface seemed to bulge and recede; I put my hand up to steady it but I couldn't reach. I dropped my arm again, felt textures. Roughnesses. A hard edge. I was lying on a . . . bed? Yes, bed, camp-bed . . . The yellowness came from a lamp. It hung in gloom, glaring and hissing like a dim sun. I tried to sit up and didn't make it. I put my hand to my face. There was sweat.

Abruptly, I remembered. The MG. Meeting the armour . . . Something had gone wrong, I'd got to get out. They'd taken me, this was a cell, a jail. Get out before they found I'd come round . . . What did they do with guerrillas, shoot them? I rolled over. The bed tipped and my hand was on rock. I tried to lever myself but there was no strength. I heard footsteps and I was fighting somebody, being forced back, back . . .

A voice. "It's all right," it said. "All right, all right, it's all right . . ."

My vision steadied, multiple images coalesced into solidness. I lay hearing my own hard breathing. I was looking up at Pete. Above her, a rock ceiling. A Tilly lamp hung from a piton wedged in the side wall. This was no cell. This was Chill Leer.

She was wiping my face. I wanted to talk but my mouth was too dry. I caught her hand, gripped it. The fingers were cool. She sat watching me steadily then she turned her head. "Greg," she called, "he's come round."

His bulk seemed to fill the little chamber. He stood smiling at me, eyes bright and pleased over a thick tangle of beard. "Well, Hell, Bill," he said, "I didn't think we'd rear you . . ."

Pete crossed the chamber and fetched water in a glass. I managed to lift myself till I could drink. She held the tumbler to my lips, grinning. "It's the roundabouts and the

swings, dear heart," she said lightly. "Like a ruddy yo-yo, ain't it? First you're up . . . then you're down . . ."

I said shakily, "What . . . happened?"

She rearranged a pillow under my head then stood back and looked at me professionally, arms folded. "You filled yourself in, ducky," she said blithely. "You made a right job of it too. Didn't he, Greg?"

He nodded. "They thought you were dead. So did we. We heard the firing. Managed to draw the bastards . . ."

"There was a nice little party," said Pete. "While they was playin' toy soldiers we nipped down and got you out. Cor, you should ha' seen the old car. Bits everywhere. Pity we didn't take a photo . . ."

I began to realize vaguely what they'd done for me. I wanted to talk, get up and hug Pete, but there was no strength for that either. I shut my eyes again, slept naturally this time . . .

It was a couple of weeks before I was up, longer than that before I could move without a stick. I was lucky to be alive, I'd been pretty badly cut about the legs where I'd been thrown clear of the MG. Pete said it was lucky I'd landed on my head, not on something delicate. She'd done a great job of nursing. I tried to talk to her about it. There was a lot I wanted to tell her but she brushed it off. "That's all right, dear heart," she would say gaily. "All part o' the Peterson home help service . . ."

The caves were echoing with new voices, unfamiliar footsteps. We'd had over a dozen people join us in the past week or so. Most of the old guard came in from time to time to chat ; Owen Jones brought some fancy concoctions he'd made up, Len Dilks a couple of boxes of cigarettes. When I felt more able to cope I asked Greg what had been going on. He frowned and shook his head. Apparently after the squabbling between the settlers and the various roving bands of fighters had flared up the situation had been complicated by the inthrusts of army units from bridgeheads in the east, in Hampshire and Sussex. One such force I'd met. Information was scanty but it seemed a gang calling themselves the Freedom Fighters had holed up not far from us, at Cheddar. They blocked the gorge road both sides of the caves, proclaimed a People's Republic and opened

fire indiscriminately on anything that came near. The armour had gone in and blown the place apart and since that a state of martial law had existed. So far the regular units had not discovered Chill Leer; Greg said we could thank our luck the place was so little known. The colony was lying low; all operations against hibernating wasps had been suspended.

While I'd been out of the picture Greg hadn't been idle. He'd personally booby-trapped half a dozen of the nesting sites on and around the plateau. He told me with a certain relish that under each one was now a buried cache of petrol drums, blasting charges and detonators. Wires led back to chosen spots overlooking the nests. He was certain the Furies would be back; when that happened they were bound to use some at least of the old sites. He planned to set the mines off when the nests got well established. He reckoned there was a chance the brutes could be rattled into leaving the area completely.

The wasps did come back. The events of the previous year repeated themselves. By that time I was fit again, I saw part of the withdrawal. The army got out, leaving a scatter of derelict vehicles. Greg hi-jacked a pair of Mark Two Ferrets, hid them under brushwood about a mile down the coombe. He said they'd be handy for the season's activities though I wasn't so sure. I'd seen more than enough of armour.

By mid-April the Furies were winging about in thousands. Greg was baffled. These weren't hibernators and they couldn't possibly have been bred in such a short time. They appeared literally overnight. The Collectives became furiously active again. Many of them had in fact never stopped working; fields had been ploughed, early crops sown. I couldn't find it in me to blame the farmers though Pete hated them bitterly. After all, they had to eat the same as us. It seemed to me it was we who were the parasites. We were still living off the remnants of the old culture. The farmers were trying to stabilize a new ecology, a balance that included men and insects as working partners.

When I was on my feet again I saw less of Pete. She'd withdrawn into herself once more; she'd sit by the hour, remote and untouchable as a china cat. I wondered if she

was brooding about what she'd told me the day they caught the Queen. I talked about her to Greg one night. We were lounging outside the mouth of the upper cave, watching the sun set over the hills. Greg laughed, leaned his head back against the rock and let his eyes drift shut. He was quiet for a time; then he said softly, "Did she ever tell you about herself? What she was, before all this?"

I nodded. "Once. In a few well-chosen phrases."

"And what did you think?"

I looked at him sharply. "I didn't think anything. I told her it was in the past. In any case I don't care. I don't have that sort of moral sense."

He stayed still, nodding to himself. "Morality. That's about the key to it, I reckon . . ."

"Key to what?"

He didn't answer directly. "When I was a bit younger and a bit crazier I used to think a lot about morality. Heaven and Hell and all that stuff." He laughed. "I reckon I'd have liked to start some sort of new faith. Try a new morality. One that maybe didn't hang on sex. There's more ways to be immoral than hopping into bed with someone you like. Or someone that'll pay you. Could be I'm crazy but it seems to me a prostitute could have morality. Maybe not the Christian sort. But still morality."

"What's that got to do with Pete?"

He said, "Pete has a psychosis this wide." He held up his hands. Then he opened his eyes, looked at me quizzically. "Pete thinks she helped bring the Furies. She thinks they *are* Furies. Come to harass mankind for the sins of the damned. She sets herself among the damned . . ."

I said, "Christ, that's going off the deep end a bit, isn't it?"

He shook his head impatiently. "I can't argue this, Bill, I'm no psychologist. I'm not trying to say that's a conscious thought process in her mind. But she's a deep little girl, complex. Lives on a lot of levels. Don't let the East End small-talk fool you. She should have been punished but she wasn't. So she wants to punish herself, go the way her family went. That's a deathwish."

Phrases went through my mind. 'Kill all the good folk. Do it slow. But leave the pros and the bags and the gutter-

scrapings. They're all right . . .' I said slowly, "So you think she really does want to die?"

He sighed. "A part of her does. Maybe it's dead already. This is a shell, walking, talking . . ." He got up suddenly. "Anyway, what the Hell does it matter? We've all got a deathwish. Else why are we here . . ." He shoved aside the growing strands of fern over the cavemouth and vanished into the dark.

The colony resumed its attacks on the nests. The first sorties were small-scale affairs; little damage was done on either side. Greg's mines were more successful. Five of the six booby-trapped sites were reoccupied. We destroyed the nests with no trouble. Greg devised a time fuse. The thing was simplicity itself: it relied on a candle burning through a length of string. The string controlled a spring-loaded trigger that closed a contact, fired the buried detonators. To heighten what we hoped would be the unnerving effect we set the charges off in daylight. Some of the blasts were quite spectacular. For hours after each explosion the plateau buzzed with angry wasps. They found nothing, of course. The insects must have thought, if they thought at all, that they were fighting ghosts.

Despite Greg's hopes the Mendips were not evacuated. If anything the Fury hordes increased. We soon discovered the reason. To the north, again in a valley sloping down from the massif, the insects had established their biggest nest complex to date. It stretched a mile or more along the coombe; the numbers of domes ran into hundreds and some of them were monstrous affairs, linked to their neighbours and to each other by grotesque tunnel networks that resembled nothing so much as the root systems of giant trees. Greg was sure the place represented the capital of the region. Pete wanted to attack it but the rest of us hung back. Risking our necks was one thing but deliberate suicide was quite another.

By June we had fired the last of the prepared mines and were back to the old business of feinting and raiding. The Ferrets were a big help though we didn't escape without losses. I had some very close calls and so did Greg. Pete seemed to bear a charmed life, maybe it was just because she didn't care.

I remember the time mainly as one of continuous struggle; the struggle to find food, petrol, oil, ammunition, the struggle to stay alive against steadily increasing odds. In July we suffered the first attack against Chill Leer itself. It was surprising the Furies took so long to discover our hideout. I'm inclined to believe they'd known about it for some while. I think if we'd left them alone they wouldn't have troubled us. I don't know how many insects laid siege to the caves but they gave us a fairly hot time. A hundred or more were killed in the first pitch before the rest took the hint and cleared off. After that we were never safe outside without a weapon of some sort. The wasps kept the area under constant surveillance; it made arranging attacks and provision trips a hundred percent more difficult. The upper part of the cave system was manned on a round-the-clock basis as a safeguard against surprise attacks, and one or other of the scout cars was kept nearby in case the Furies made another mass sortie. They never were able to resist armour: the Ferrets drew them like mechanical Pied Pipers.

We moved our attacks farther afield to areas where our activities were not so well known. Even then we had to depend on surprise and on constantly changing our tactics; we soon learned a trick used successfully against one nest could not be safely employed the following night against another fifty miles away. We were beginning to appreciate the intricacies and advantages of the group mind; that old crack of Greg's about 'thinking wasp' was coming more and more true.

In July we started noticing additions to the range of symbiotic human activities. From our observation posts in the hills we watched gangs of symbos, as we'd come to call the wasp-slaves, stringing heavy wire to posts. One such feeder passed within a few miles of Chill Leer. We blew the line apart on principle a dozen times or so but the workers pushed on. Eventually their intention became clear. They were engaged in supplying electric power to the nest complex to the north. There seemed only one inference to be drawn from lighting and heating in the domes. The Furies were planning a round-the-year breeding programme. Once that got started we really would be

through. A short time later somebody discovered parts of the railway system were running again and after that the track sections were surreptitiously loosened every other night. It was a nasty game but we felt we were fighting for our lives.

The tempo of the attacks on Chill Leer was stepped up. It was obvious we had become a major thorn in the side of the Fury culture. I wondered why they didn't mount an all-out drive, besiege the place and starve us into the open. I realized later their efforts must have been split between various bands similar to our own and bases to which the army was still clinging on the eastern mainland.

Jane was never far from my mind through that hectic summer though the chance of getting out to the coast seemed as remote as a dream. I almost caught myself envying the people in the wasp camps. They at least were free to come and go. Road traffic was continuous now; I played with the idea of taking one of our vehicles and driving out openly toward the sea. But I knew it wouldn't work; if the wasps didn't kill me the first symbos I came across would. I'd had some experience of what they thought of guerrillas.

In August we lost Dave.

It was a rotten business. We'd mounted a small attack on a group of nests to the southwest, down on the Somerset plain. Both Ferrets were involved and a handful of people on foot. The thing went off smoothly enough but only one of the cars got back. The other, driven by Dave with Jesse Stokes as gunner, skidded into one of the crevasses that still seamed the countryside. A winter of rain had done little to lessen their depth; on most of them the edges had eroded back a few feet but that was all. As soon as we heard, half a dozen of us loaded some ladder lengths into one of the lorries and headed for the scene of the accident. We reached it after a lot of detouring. The crevasse was massive, looked bottomless. The car was wedged some forty or fifty feet down, both turret and driving hatch rammed into the muck. Greg climbed down to it, spent an hour trying to dig his way in. In the end the thing turned over and plunged another seventy or eighty feet, nearly taking him with it. While we watched

the car fell again, deep into the earth. Rumbling echoed back from the chasm for half a minute or more. Greg climbed slowly back to the surface. He said there'd been no answer to his rappings; the crew were either dead or unconscious. Even if he'd opened the car it would have been an almost impossible job getting them up.

A night or two after that he sent for me. For some time he'd been using one of the side caves in Chill Leer as combined office, workshop and sleeping quarters. I went down to it. One Tilly lamp was burning; it hung from the arched centre of the roof, hissing softly and throwing a greenish glare beneath it. Greg sat just beyond the light, on the only chair the place boasted. With him were Pete, Len Dilks, Jones Kitchen and Maggie. Pete was squatting on the rough bench in one corner of the chamber; the rest were disposed round the floor on a variety of boxes and rugs. The Cockney had something in her hands; I didn't recognise it for a moment, then I saw it was the crossbow. God only knew where she'd dug that up from.

I stopped when I saw the group. I said, "What's this, the gathering of the clans?"

Greg nodded. "Something like that. Find somewhere to put your carcass, Bill: we've got a bit of talking to do."

I sat down between Maggie and Owen. Greg said without preamble, "Seems we've got some dissension in the camp, Bill. I called you down because you're the last of the old guard. We're complete now, what's left of us. I thought you'd want to be in on this."

I said, "What's the trouble anyway?" I had a good idea I already knew.

Maggie was toying with the hem of her jersey, frowning and plucking at the worn wool. She said, "We want out, Bill. Len an' me and Jonesy. We talked it over, like. After poor old Dave . . . well, we just don't want to stop round no more."

I shivered. I hadn't been able to shut out the memory of the black plunge of the scout car into the crevasse. The same thing had so nearly happened to me. I said, "I know what you mean, Maggie. Question is, where do you aim to go?"

She looked uncertain. Len Dilks turned to me, slowly

massaging his ruined left hand. His eyes had always been deepset; now they seemed completely vanished, lost in the darkness of the sockets. He said quietly, "It's like this, whack. Once there was a dozen of us. Fifteen. Now look. I can count us on me fingers. Even me . . ."

"We're not getting anywhere," said Maggie. "We can't win. We know that. We always have, it's just waiting and waiting and being killed in the end, it don't matter what we do."

Pete said bitterly, "That's what you came here for, ducks. Some people ain't ever satisfied . . ."

"Shut up," said Greg evenly. "You can have your say later, Pete. Let's hear Maggie through first." Pete set her lips, held the crossbow out from her body and pulled the trigger. The string cracked against the stave. She began sullenly rewinding it.

Maggie said slowly, "I don't think I've got anything else to say. Except that what Len says is right. Once there were fifteen of us. Now there's six. And we shan't last long now."

There was silence.

She said tensely, "If there was a reason for it, Greg. That's all. If . . . well, you know, if there was some sort of point. But we're through. Finished. The army can't beat the wasps so I know we can't. There just don't seem any point."

"You've said that, ducky . . ."

That from Pete. Greg stared at her. She ignored him.

I said, "You think the same, Owen?"

Jones Kitchen gave his typical shrug. "S-sort of. Doesn't seem a lot of bloody f-future, do there?"

Maggie smoothed her sweater. She'd grown up a lot in the year; she was heavier now, buxom and tough. She said, "Well, we've had enough. All of us. We want out, Greg. Anything's better than this. We were talking about just nippin' off. But we thought well, you know . . . we'd sort of like to tell you. Seemed only right . . ."

He nodded slowly. The light from the Tilly was making his face look drawn. "Thanks for the thought, Maggie. But you don't owe anything. All I've done is have most of you killed."

I said quickly, "I can't agree there. You got us out of that bloody camp. If we'd stayed we might all be dead by now."

He smiled. "No good thinking on what might have happened, Bill. Only on what has . . ."

The crossbow cracked again.

Jones Kitchen said tentatively, "We were wonderin' . . . well, how would it be for you to sort of c-come along, Greg? We all go together, see? The rest o' the folk here . . . well it'd be up to them now, wouldn't it?"

Greg was still smiling. "The idea had crossed my mind. As Bill said though, the question is where to go."

I said, "I think I could put up an idea at least. We go south. To the Isle of Wight or farther out. We know there's organised resistance somewhere. Logically it'll be on islands. Places the Furies can't reach."

Pete laughed abruptly. "Good old Bill. Never gives up, does he?"

Greg said, "He might well be right. I think it's the best alternative."

Maggie said in a smothered voice, "There is another . . ."

He waited.

"Give in," she said. "Go to one of the camps. Or go to the wasps. They need people to work for them. They haven't killed the people in the camps. If they were going to they'd have done it by now . . ."

Greg shook his head. "I told you once, in a camp, what was going to happen. I wasn't far wong. Now listen again.

"That isn't an alternative, not for me at least. The rest of you will make your own decisions. But I say this. We're still in a transitional phase. We've got a lot of skills the wasps need. We can help keep 'em warm, keep 'em fed. Maybe we're indispensable now. But that won't last. Those horny bastards are learning, all the time. They've proved that. When they've learned enough, when they can do without us, when they can plant our crops, drive our vehicles, then . . . ckkkk . . ." He drew a finger across his throat. "End. Finish. They'll kill. They can't afford to keep us round the nests indefinitely. They want us, sure, they want our knowledge. But knowledge is a two-edged sword. It always was. Human knowledge gave us the chance to

shape our environment, order a safer world. It also gave us the fusion bomb. Without which, don't forget, we wouldn't be in the present bloody mess. The wasps are no fools: they'll realize that, as they learn about us, so we're learning about them. And somewhere people will always be working on ways and means of destroying the brutes. I don't know how. A selective virus maybe ; we know enough about germ warfare, we know enough about a lot of nasty things . . . No, when the time comes there'll be a pogrom. It might not be this year or next but it'll happen. That's why I came to the hills. Because this is where the survivors will bolt, when the killing starts again. That's why I'm keeping on fighting. Even if we do have a lost cause."

I said carefully, "Do we have a lost cause, Greg?"

He shrugged. "Who can tell? Not me, certainly. All I've said is we're between the devil and the deep. We haven't got a lot of choice." He looked round at the others. "Well, do we put this thing to a vote or are we no longer a democratic assembly?"

Maggie said stolidly, "I want to go. There might be a chance, down on the Island. Like Bill said . . ."

Len and Owen seconded her. Greg pursed his lips. "Right, that's four against staying. Pete?"

She grinned. I'd expected an outburst but it didn't come. She said lightly, "There'll be wasps down there too I s'pose. Might as well go an' give the little dears a treat . . ."

Greg stood up. "Right, then, I'll go along with the majority. We move out ; the rest can leave or stay. I'll talk to them. But first I've got a proposition. Before we get the Hell out I want to do a worthwhile strike. Leave the wasps something to remember us by. A few miles north of here is a ruddy city. I reckon it's so damn big they won't be expecting us to try for it. I want it flattened. I've thought it through and I think we can get away with it. There'll be one Hell of a roughhouse afterwards but there've been roughhouses before and we lived through the rest. After the row dies down we'll go. By that time operations on this plateau will have become virtually impossible anyway so we'll be doing no good by staying. What do you reckon?"

I looked round the circle of faces and knew nobody was

going to say no. We'd do it all right. Just one more job . . . In the silence, Pete started rewinding the crossbow again. I watched her gloomily. The stave flexed, became an arc. There was a ringing snap. The steel, overstressed, broke across the centre. The pieces clattered on the floor.

Pete sat with the stock in her lap, staring wide-eyed. Then she laughed and threw the thing across the cave. She said, "Oh well, it was a nice life. Or didn't anybody notice . . ."

* * *

I stood on a high point of ground and watched the petrol tanker labour toward me up the slope. The going here was tricky, the earth crisscrossed with small cracks and gullies. Pete and Greg were walking by the lorry's wheels, fetching it along with quick, tense waves of their hands. I listened uneasily to the whine of the engine. I could imagine the panting clatter carrying for miles. The diesel was noisy; there had been no way of quietening her. We could only hope the sound wouldn't reach over the bluff ahead to the wasp city.

We were committed now to the big strike. Behind me, silhouetted against a sky full of light from a rising moon, stood three Land Rovers. Their windscreens had been replaced with lattices of iron bars. The crews were huddled together on the grass a few yards away, smoking and talking. Beyond, the ground sloped abruptly to the coombe that held the great nest. I stepped forward to where I could see the domes. They were ringed with catwalks, presumably for the use of the symbos; service lamps gleamed here and there on the curving walls of pulp. The place looked like an old refinery gone haywire. I checked my watch. Soon—in half an hour, if things went to schedule—Hell would start popping down there.

This was the most complex plan we'd ever tried. Somewhere away to the north the one remaining Ferret was waiting with a couple of lorries. Through the coombe a road ran nearly due North between the nests. That was the way the decoys would come. The attack would consist of two parts. The scout car would push forward on its own, try to get as close in among the nests as possible.

Then the lorries would start diversionary fires on the northern edge of the site. We hoped the wasps would be fooled into thinking our whole strength was concentrated on the plain ; the flames should make it look as if the sortie had gone wrong. While the Furies were busy the tanker would be pumping petrol down the hill, right on top of the domes. How long we'd have before we were detected was anybody's guess. Greg had reckoned three or four minutes at the outside. When we were spotted we were to throw our grenades and get out the best way we could. We would leave a huge conflagration ; Greg hoped most of the attackers would die in the flames or be unable to gain enough height to fly over them. So did the rest of us . . .

We'd had a far from easy trip across country. The Rovers had gone through with no bother but there had been times when I'd thought the tanker wasn't going to make it. We'd had to detour widely ; behind us, a half mile away, was one of the biggest crevasses any of us had ever seen. It meandered through the hills, slashing the massif apart for over five miles. We'd recced the route in daylight some half a dozen times but even so following the great chasm had been tricky work. The moonlight had helped. Greg had chosen a fine night as being essential for moving the vehicles over the rough ; he also felt the unlikely weather would catch the Furies off their guard. In that he seemed to have been right, there were no flying sentries anywhere over the city.

The lorry reached the crest of the hill, revved massively as it backed into position. The sound seemed to blat back from the other side of the coombe. If the Furies hadn't heard that they must have gone stone deaf . . . I peered down the hill again but nothing was moving. The insects had grown complacent in the days of their dominion.

The engine stopped at last. Len got down from the cab and began coupling the delivery pipes to the cocks at the tail of the truck. With everything ready and the pipes laid out down the hill we crouched round under the bonnet of the diesel and lit cigarettes. I felt a regular shaking start deep inside my body. I always had the jitters before a raid. I wondered if the others felt the same.

My watch read twenty minutes to go. Greg leaned back

against the fender of the lorry, blew smoke slowly. "Everybody sure what to do?"

Len nodded. "Start pumpin' soon as the wasps go for the decoys. The rest's straightforward. We light up when the wasps come fer us, then get out. It's a ruddy cinch . . ."

Greg chuckled. "Glad you think so . . . You OK, Bill?"

"I'm fine."

He laughed again. "You liar, you're nearly as scared as I am . . ."

There was a thick rumble. The hill stirred almost imperceptibly. The noise came again, louder. That time the shock was heavier, a distinct, sharp jar. The grumbling died away, seemed to recede north in great dim washes of sound. I'd broken out in sweat. The primeval voice of the earthquakes had been silent a good many months now.

Pete stubbed her cigarette viciously. She said, "That's just what we need, that'll wake the bleeders if nothing else does . . ."

Greg was turning uneasily, listening for movements, the boom of wings. Everything stayed quiet. The diesel ticked as it cooled. Above us the moon, high and serene, washed the sky with light. I remembered the noise of the first 'quake, the one that had wrecked my house. The cellar, Sek and Jane. But Jane was miles away, across the sea. I stamped the fag out and got up. If I lived through this raid that was where I was going. Out across the sea. Nothing was going to stop me, not any more.

At five minutes to zero we were finally in position, lying staring into the coombe. The scout car appeared almost dead on time. I saw the headlamps far off, swerving and jazzing. They lit the far sides of the great domes, showed the gantries and eerie suspended tunnels in sharp silhouette. There was a distant rattle of gunfire.

The city was slow to react. When it did the effect was indescribable. Insects smoked up in thousands, whirled hundreds of feet high in the moonlight, filled the air like the ash pall over a volcano. For long moments the whole mass hung undecided; then the lorry lights appeared and simultaneously fires sprang up along the far side of the nest area.

If there had been any doubt remaining in the group mind of the Furies that resolved it. The whole bellowing canopy of them seemed to fall away from us as they plunged at the attackers. I saw the lights turn back; I could only hope the decoys made it: there was nothing we could do to help them now. The cocks on the tanker were already open, petrol streaming across the hill. I waited, gripping the grass. The flood must have reached the southernmost domes by now. What was happening to the Furies: were they all dazed . . . Greg was standing tensely a few feet in front of me, staring down. I saw him look back at the tanker. Still nothing. The moonlight on the domes, the fires beyond nearly smothered now, the huge cloud of wasps milling northwards over the plain . . .

Suddenly the air round us was filled with booming. Greg yelled; bombs went down from half a dozen points, burst on the round roofs below. Flames ran over the domes, rivulets of yellow light. Then the petrol caught.

I was half blinded. It seemed the whole hillside had blown up. There was fire everywhere, licking at the sky. I saw Furies turning over in the air, plunging into the inferno. Then I was running for the cars.

Blasts of heat whipped back at me. I dived into the nearest Rover, Pete and Greg bundled in alongside. I accelerated down over a sweep of grass. The car was swaying and bucking, I could hardly hold the wheel. Behind me the night was stained with red.

We'd all realized our mistake before we reached the great crevasse. Rising ahead of us was what looked like an immense, wavering black and yellow curtain, flat, out of scale, lit by the flames. Furies by the thousand, climbing to cut us off. The huge vent must have been packed with nests, deep down where our scouts hadn't spotted them. We were caught in a pincers, we'd never get through.

Pete screamed something, I don't know what. Then the mirror lit white, there was the yelling of a hooter. I yanked the wheel instinctively, felt the Rover heel, crash back straight. The tanker passed with a bare six feet to spare, heading down the slope flat out with the hoses leaping behind it like demented snakes. I just had time to realize

the lorry was never going to miss the crevasse. At that speed it couldn't turn.

It made no attempt to.

On the edge of the gulf it hit a ridge that threw it all eight wheels in the air. For a split second the huge machine hung impossibly, poised on its nose like a kid's toy, then it fell forward. There was a moment of silence and blackness then a thudding roar that shook the ground, punched up through the Rover's wheels. The crevasse lit for hundreds of yards with an orange glare. All the insects still below ground must have been annihilated; the host above were blown sideways, twitched out of the air by the blast.

It was all confused, Len may have jumped. But if he did I didn't see him. I just didn't see him . . .

The Furies were hard behind us by the time we reached Chill Leer. Two of the Rovers came through. I don't know what happened to the third: I never saw it again. We ran up the hillside to the cave. The base party was already outside, blazing away at the diving wasps. We practically fell down the first pitch, rammed the gate in place across the bottom of it. The obstacle didn't stop the insects. They reached the top, folded their wings and fell like stones. The impact of the bodies on the grating started to split it apart; those Furies that survived the drop began instantly chipping at the bars with their boltcutter jaws. We blew them to pieces as they landed but more came down and more until the gate was bulging, the bottom of the pitch a writhing mass of black and yellow armour. While we were keeping busy the brutes came through the swallets.

They were in amongst us before we knew what had happened. The gratings hadn't held them, they must have torn them out wholesale. The place became a chaos. The one Tilly lamp was knocked from its hook by the beating of the huge wings. It sailed across the cave, hit the wall and exploded with a roar. Something snagged my ankle, I stumbled in the dark and a shotgun went off next my face. Somebody started to scream in agony.

The cave was full of smoke, I couldn't breathe. I was trying to fight my way to where I'd last seen Pete. Something cannoned into me. I shoved my hand out, felt the coldness of chitin, twitched away. A torch flashed, showed

me heartshaped masks, a swirl of bodies. Pete was crouched against the rockwall. I grabbed her wrist and ran. Down the passage to the second pitch, a torch ahead now and the noise behind, the booming and the shrieks. Pete was panting, trying to wrench away from me. I found the ladder somehow, shoved her onto it and followed her down, moving as fast as I could in blackness. Halfway to the bottom I nearly fell off the rungs. Somebody was climbing after me, they stepped on my fingers. Something brushed past, landed with a crash like a boulder falling. Then booming was loud again overhead. The wasps were following. The attack had finally enraged their patience, this was the time of truth. They were going to take us now, keep on till they did.

I reached bottom and Greg hit the scree beside me a few seconds ahead of the Furies. There were torches stored below the pitch, I grabbed two, shoved one in Pete's hand. In front of us a voice was calling. We ran through the great hall, the torch beams scattering off the crystal pillars of the place. We tackled the third climb with the wasps close behind.

Four of us reached the syphon; Greg, Pete, myself and Owen Jones. Furies were bellowing in the third pitch. Somehow the little Welshman had carried a shotgun down with him but that was the only weapon we had. We'd never fight the insects with one gun, and hampered by the dark.

There was no argument. There was only one answer and we all knew what it was. We would have to swim for it. If the submerged tunnel section was short we would have interposed a barrier not even the Furies could get through. If it was long . . . well, one death was as good as another.

Pete went first. She swam out to the arched mouth of the trap, kicked her heels up and dived. Then Owen. I followed; I saw torchlight glinting on the water, heard Greg's shout and the confused noise as the Furies burst into the vault. Then iciness and blackness closed over my head.

I've never been a strong swimmer and the closeness of the rack walls hampered my movements. After the first half dozen strokes I badly wanted to breathe. I held on,

counting. Ten, eleven, twelve. Thirteen, fourteen . . . Just two more, another one . . . It was useless, the rock still hemmed me in. There was a roaring, I saw bursts of light. I expelled the air and instantly I was drowning. I lashed out in panic, my head struck a projecting sill then I was floating upwards. I broke surface and dog-paddled, coughing from the water in my lungs. I felt my arm caught, I was pulled forward. My hands touched something, I heaved and I was out of the water, lying choking and spitting on a rocky ledge. Round me the darkness was Stygian, the silence that of a tomb.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time I was able to take an interest in things again Greg was through the syphon. Owen had brought a torch with him, rammed in the pocket of his trousers ; it wouldn't work at first but after a lot of fumbling he managed to coax a yellow gleam from it. We saw the ledge on which we'd landed was some forty feet long by eight or ten broad. It sloped down toward the water ; beside it the stream flowed silently, its level a bare two inches below the lip of rock. The cave roof was invisible except on our right where it dipped to the syphon. It seemed the passage widened farther on into another hall ; the feeble light of the torch showed the opposite rockwall curving away, and when we shouted the noise woke a choir of echoes.

The torch soon began to dim ; the Welshman switched it off to save the batteries. We huddled together in blackness, listening for splashings from the syphon. None came. We had no means of telling time ; Greg was wearing a watch but it had stopped, its cover glass full of water. I wondered how long we would have to stay where we were and how the Furies would react to our disappearance. Would they presume us drowned or would they wait with that cat-patience of theirs till hunger drove us back through the tunnel? We discussed what to do in strained voices. I asked Greg what he thought but he refused to comment. This decision would have to be ours, he was through.

The disaster had hit him hard. He blamed himself bitterly for the destruction of the colony. I tried to remind him of

his own arguments; he'd convinced me at least more than once that the way we'd chosen to live had been the only possible one. But he wouldn't hear me out. "Don't tell me about logic, Bill," he said thickly. "It's too late for that . . . I guess I'm just a bloody hypocrite anyway, maybe I knew it all along. You were the logical ones. Maggie was right, the only sane thing to do was stay in the camps and take a chance with the rest. I didn't talk logic with you, I chopped it. I'm not a logical man."

"But when—"

He said savagely, "Ever read John of Gaunt's speech, son? 'This royal throne of kings,' etcetera . . . It's a great bit of jingoism, it'll stir the heart of any schoolboy. I guess you'll find my answer in that. What mattered to me was that this was England, this was happening in England. Maybe there wasn't much of it left to be proud of. Not so many green fields to babble over . . . We'd developed it, raped it, built it damn near out of existence. But it was still our own place, it was all we had . . .

"I used to have a vision of the whole country with nests. From Scotland across the Pennines, across Wales and the Midlands, through the South, through Dorset and Somerset right to the sea. Just nests, a porridge of them, bellowing and booming everywhere, the black and yellow of the wasps. Not a land any more: a scrap tip. A slum. A nursery for the horny bastards to grow fat in. That could still happen and that was what I wanted to stop. It was just emotion, I was trying to keep a bit of the old country clean, that was all . . ."

Pete said with surprising gentleness, "Did you ever ask anybody, Greg, why they was keepin' on? They might have told you just the same. You didn't have to twist no arms, they knew what they was doing . . ."

He made an impatient noise. "It's no good, Pete, I don't have the image any more. I think I'm blind . . ."

I sensed her move against him. Then, "Turn it up, dear heart," she said lightly. "You're giving auntie the jerks . . ."

There was silence.

I still dream about that silence. I thought I knew what quietness was. Sit on a Dorset hill on a calm day in autumn and there'll be a silence you can listen to. But it isn't the

same. There are still sounds, tiny and far-off ; susurrations, breathings from machines and animals and men and the sea. The silence of the caves was total. When I was a kid I used to try and imagine outer space and it was always the silence I thought of first, the dead nothingness of the gulfs beyond the planets. Now I think I know what it would be like. Like the heart of Chill Leer . . .

I lay listening to the electric singing of the blood in my head. After a time it seemed my ears were microphones, sensitive and incredible like the machines they use to hear the preening of a moth, the sounds a raindrop makes running down glass. The microphones strained but there was nothing to record. My mind began to supply the deficiency ; I heard shouts, echoings, ghosts of our own voices maybe, back from some thousand-mile trip to earth's core. And another noise, steady and thick, a muffled thudding like a drum beating counterpoint to some melody played outside the senses.

But that was for real. It took me minutes to identify it ; I was lying with my head against Pete's breast, I could hear the beating of her heart.

Sometime, Greg started talking again. He was back in control of himself ; he used his voice to fight the silence, break it up before it crept into our bodies as surely as the cold and sent us scatty. He told how the caves had been formed. How the hills had come shouldering up from an old sea, slowly, slow, with the rain working inside them all the time, carving its passages deeper as the rock bulged above the water table. He talked about the stalactites edging and inching to touch the floor, growing through the ages till they seemed not so much products of stone and rain as the glassy fossils of time itself. The hills were forever, and the caves were as old as the hills. They once underpaved the camps of Rome and they were there before that and before, when the great red deer moved in the mist and there were no men. Here for once we could touch the eternal. Recorded history was nothing to the life of Chill Leer ; all civilisation, jetplanes and longboats, pyramids and comptometers, was a bright flash against the abyss of geologic time, one tick of a clock whose pendulum was the earth, whose face was the sun . . .

I slept while he was talking. And woke, dozed, slept again. Time had already lost its meaning for me. I tried to think about the colony, recall faces, but it was nearly impossible. Len and Dave, Julie and Maggie belonged already in some cardboard pageant that had hardly left an impression on the senses. They had no life so their deaths were meaningless. There was no fear now; the Furies might or might not be waiting but they weren't real either. They were part of the charade I'd watched, painted devils on a backdrop miles away.

Pete was real because I could touch her, feel the movements of her breathing. She edged away once, went to the side of the shelf to drink. It sounded as if she lapped like a cat. I called her until she came back; she put her arm over my shoulders and I took her wrist and pulled myself close to her again.

We stayed in the caves a thousand years. Intellectually I knew the time was measurable in hours but emotionally, subjectively, I lived through a millennium. Surely nothing would wait that long for us, not even the Furies. If it hadn't been for Pete I think I might have lost all hold on reality, slipped into the water and drifted down till if there was a Hell my body found it. I verbalized the fear. Once Greg laughed. He reminded me of what was so hard to believe, the fact that we were still above sea level. Far from sinking to Hades I'd probably be flushed unromantically into the Bristol Channel by the next heavy rain. I was grateful to him for that, it helped me stay on the rails.

We held out as long as we could but the time came when we all knew we were reaching our limit. We were suffering from hunger and we were nearly too stiff to move. We spent some while stamping up and down the rockshelf beating our arms to get the blood flowing again, then Owen set the torch down near the syphon so that the beam slanted across the water. The light was even dimmer than before, and fading as we watched it. We couldn't afford to hang about.

Greg insisted on going first. He told us to wait for some sign from him; if there were still Furies in the outer cave he'd dive again and swim back; if the wasps had gone he

would try and float a rope through to us. Pete called across as he slid into the water. "Good luck mate . . ." He grinned at her, raised his arm; then he was gone, stroking powerfully under the arch of rock and out of sight. We put the torch off and sat waiting again in darkness. Nothing happened; the stream flowed quietly, invisible at our feet, the rockwalls echoed back our unsteady breathing.

It seemed like an hour. Probably it was only a quarter of that. Then I couldn't stand it any more. I said, "OK, Owen, he must have got some trouble. Shine the lamp, I'll go take a look."

They argued with me but I'd made my mind up: if I didn't try to swim out soon I'd never find the guts to do it at all. If there had been Furies Greg would have been back by now, he must be having difficulty fixing the rope. I eased myself into the water, shuddering again at the coldness of it, edged across to the tunnel mouth and dived.

The second time was worse than the first. I thought I knew roughly the number of strokes it would take to get through but as soon as I entered the submerged section I could feel the current pushing me back. It wasn't strong but I had a sudden fear I was making no headway, just threshing round in the same spot. I struck out harder, grazed my knuckles on rock. I opened my eyes but there was nothing ahead, no light. Halfway through I was fighting the idea that I was trapped in a huge, cold womb.

I surfaced at the other end of the syphon. I'm still not sure how I did it. I hung on to the side, blearily surprised at the torch that was shining in my face. I spoke a couple of times before I realized Greg wasn't holding the light. It was propped on a rock, nobody was near it.

I hauled myself out of the water, lay for a moment panting. The cave was silent. I walked across and picked the torch up. I called questioningly and started swinging the beam.

I can't remember feeling any emotion when I saw Greg. Just a blankness. It didn't make sense, it was as if I'd been given an equation with only one answer and that was crazy. He was lying on his back a few feet from the water. On top of him, gripping with its legs, was a Fury. He'd torn the creature's huge eyes apart, his fingers were still bedded

in the pulp behind the lenses. The front of his shirt was bloody, and he was dead.

I can guess what happened. When he got through the trap he found the place was quiet. He climbed out of the stream, lit the torch to guide the rest of us. The Fury made no sound, didn't warn him with the booming of its wings. It just fell on him from some cranny in the roof, fell silently like a stone . . .

Maybe Greg did send some people to their deaths. It isn't up to me to judge him, I only know this. His own end end was harder, and lonelier, than all the rest. Nobody to help him. Just the darkness round about, the torchlight, the silent cave; his breath rattling, his boots scraping rock. And the machine-thing on top of him, snapping and nibbling at his chest . . .

I was still kneeling staring when the others came through the syphon. Nobody said much, we were too shocked. We just stood in a group and looked at Greg. Then we pulled the dead Fury aside and started, silently, to build a cairn of stones over his body. When we'd finished and the mound was four feet tall, I stood back. I still felt dazed, as though I was acting in some vast dim tragedy I barely understood. I said slowly, "He . . . had great feeling for the caves. You could tell by how he spoke about them. I think he'd prefer to be here of all places . . ."

There was silence. I said, "Does anybody . . . Is there anything else we can do?"

Jones Kitchen stood with his head down, hands clasped in front of him. When he started speaking his voice barely raised the echoes of the place.

"The L-Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He l-leadeth me beside the still waters . . ."

We waited till he'd finished. Then he looked round. "T'wasn't maybe appropriate," he said tonelessly. "But t'was all I could r-remember . . ."

Pete gripped his shoulder. "It was all right, Jonesy," she said. "You done it all right. But it was only words, wasn't it? You couldn't help that. It didn't mean nothing . . ." She looked back at me, eyes bright. "It's funny y'know.

It don't ever seem enough. Just sayin' words. Like somethin' big ought to happen. Some big ceremony . . ."

She got her ceremony.

The noise began as a thick rumble, nearly too low-pitched to hear. I felt it in the rock under my feet. It seemed to rush upward through the deep passages of the caves ; then it burst round us, a bellowing that filled the air solid and shook it. Rocks slipped and crashed down. Pete was staring open-mouthed ; I felt my back hair lifting, I couldn't speak. The sound died off, came again, a monstrous black drumming ; the fissure by the waterfall split, a bore lashed down the stream to the syphon. Water swirled round our legs, flooded up into the cave.

That broke the spell. I yelled "Earthquake . . ." I grabbed Pete's wrist and bolted, Owen Jones alongside me with the torch. Across the cave to the first pitch, scrambling among the stones, round us now a howling as if the cavern was a throat sounding up the rage of the Pit. We got to the top of the ladder and ran across the great hall, stumbling through drifts of fallen calcite. The second ladder was swaying and twitching ; the whole place was tearing itself apart. We climbed as fast as we could, Owen, Pete then myself. But it seemed time was slowed ; my movements had the underwater sluggishness of nightmare. The torch beam swung crazily, I saw one of the huge pillars shatter and fall. Stone fragments stung my cheek ; then I was at the top, clawing at vibrating rock, and Pete was yanking my arm. "Come on . . . Bill, *come on* . . ."

The Welshman was still in front, the light jigging in the tunnel. The air was thick. The drumming, the shriek of shifting stone, I couldn't think . . . Something blundered against me and Pete screamed. I saw the Fury, jinked and it was behind but there were others. The high levels were full of them, I could hear the booming now mixed with the noise of the 'quake.

There was daylight ahead. I was crossing the main cave, not knowing how I'd got there. Bodies were lying about but there was no time to look. The insects were close behind, Owen was already on the last ladder. I shoved Pete ahead of me, tangled with the remains of the grating, wrenched clear and followed her, my face level with her

heels. My arms were a burning pain now; the ladder was surging about; I was banged against rock. The hill was shaking, the pitch was choked with dust. I started to cough, looked down and there was a Fury, climbing in the haze, swinging from side to side in the confined space. Others milling below it. I kicked out, driving the insect back down, yelled to hurry, but nobody could have heard. Then there was a crack that penetrated even the noise of the 'quake. I looked up and saw an avalanche coming at my head.

Pete and I were just beneath the overhanging lip of the pitch. That saved us. We clung to the ladder. There was another crash, a tearing yell. Jones Kitchen fell past me, legs and arms flailing. He landed atop the Furies and the whole struggling mass was blotted out by boulders. A stone bounded off my hand, half numbed the arm; I kept my grip of the ladder somehow, edged up until I could hold Pete between the rungs and myself. Something hit her in the side; I didn't see it but I heard the thud. She yelped, the ladder swung more violently than ever; then the 'quake ended as quickly as it had started. The rumbling died to a hoarse groan and there was silence.

I looked down, shaking. The pitch was filled with rubble to within a few feet of the top, there could be nothing alive under it. Pete was holding the ladder and gasping. Her face was half turned to me, her cheek was wet with sweat. I felt a clawing of panic. "Pete, are you hurt . . ."

She nodded, biting her lip.

"Where . . . ?"

She tried to rub her side. "Broke me bleedin' ribs. Christ . . ."

I said urgently, "You've got to climb. Before there's another shake. We've got to get out . . ."

"Can't . . ."

"Pete, *please* . . ."

She moved painfully then, hand over hand. It was a long time before we got to the top of the pitch. She rolled over on the rock of the upper cave, lay swearing and hugging her middle. I half carried her out to the hill. Once clear of the cavemouth the reaction got me. I sat down on the grass and put my head on my arms. Pete lay on her face for a minute or two, then she levered herself up and started trying

to be sick. I scrambled across and held her, praying she wouldn't vomit blood. She didn't ; there was nearly nothing to come at all. When the spasm was over I looked at her side. Bruises were showing already and she was in a lot of pain. It seemed she was right, she had damaged a rib. But it was vital to get away from the caves. Except for a knife Pete was carrying on her belt we were unarmed, and at any moment the sky could fill with wasps. If that happened we would be through.

I stood up shakily. It was early evening ; we'd been in Chill Leer the better part of twenty hours. Below in the road the two Rovers were standing where we'd left them. Nothing moved nearby ; the hillside lay quiet and golden in the sunlight.

I helped Pete down to the cars, trying to cause her as little pain as possible. We reached the nearer of the Rovers. She leaned against it panting and trying to wipe her face. I opened the door and eased her inside, then turned and looked back. A faint haze of dust still hung above the cavemouth. Somewhere under the hill, deep in the blackness and stillness, Greg Douglas was lying in as weird and splendid tomb as a man could imagine. And Jones Kitchen, and a dozen more. The quiet of the place would never be broken now. Maybe not for another million years . . . I shuddered, got into the Rover and started up. There was something absurdly reassuring and homely about the bark of the engine. I let the brake off and coasted away, not thinking about wasps. I was just glad to be clear of the caves, and still alive.

The mood didn't last. Commonsense came back and I realized I was running a big risk. It was against logic to assume the Furies had deserted the massif after the determination they'd shown the night before. They would be on the lookout for survivors from the colony. Any vehicle moving in the area would be liable to be attacked on sight. And we were on a major road: we could run into a patrol any moment. I started watching anxiously for side turnings.

I found one six or eight miles from Chill Leer, swung right into a narrow lane. It proved a good choice ; within minutes the main road was out of sight and I was moving over desolate country with no sign either of houses or the

domes of the Furies. The road surface soon worsened ; Pete gripped the dash, trying to steady herself against jolts. I dropped speed to a crawl, picking my way. It was near sunset when I reached a straggle of cottages. There weren't more than a dozen, not enough to be called a village ; it was hard to see why they were there at all, stuck out in the wilds like that. I stopped the car and listened. I was sure the place was deserted: I'd developed a sixth sense for that sort of thing. I had a quick look round but there was nobody about. I helped Pete inside the first house. Getting in was easy enough ; the front door had been smashed, it hung drunkenly from one hinge.

The place only boasted a couple of downstairs rooms. In one of them was an old couch. I settled Pete on that and left her while I hid the Rover. One of the cottages had a round lean-to garage built onto it, I drove the Rover inside it out of sight. Then I went foraging. I didn't have much luck ; the houses had all been searched destructively ; any edibles had been taken. I did find a can of condensed milk and a half of cheap brandy, shoved out of sight in a sink cupboard. I took them back to Pete, knocked a hole in the tin with a stone, poured a little of the milk into a cup. I topped it up with spirit and gave it to her ; I had no idea whether I was doing right or wrong but it seemed to ease her. She was half asleep, or half unconscious ; I felt she would be better upstairs on one of the beds but she didn't want to move. I found some blankets, made her strip her wet shirt and jeans and wrapped her as well as I could. I managed to get a fire going in the kitchen grate, sat half the night drying Pete's clothes and mine in front of it. Toward dawn I slept, laying back in an ancient, comfortable chair. I woke to the booming of Furies. I'd been living in dread of the noise so long my body reacted to it automatically, awake or asleep. A dozen of the monsters passed low overhead but they ignored the house. I thanked God the fire was out, and that I'd hidden the Rover.

Finding food worried me for a time. There were hares and rabbits round about and a few chickens but they'd gone wild. I couldn't get near them. I searched the cottages again from end to end, found something I'd missed before: a couple of yards of thick elastic, the sort that is still used

for catapults. I made one ; it was crude but it worked. I'd never been much of a shot as a kid but it was a case of having to learn fast. I managed finally to knock over a leveret. It took me another couple of hours to prepare it and stew it. I'd found salt, and there were carrots growing wild in one of the gardens. I stirred them in with the meat and the result wasn't too bad at all. I did the cooking at the far end of the hamlet ; I was determined if the Furies smelled it and hunted me out they wouldn't take Pete as well. She was still very sick ; I had to coax her to eat, then she only took a couple of mouthfuls. I gave her the rest of the brandy and prepared for the second night, nailing the broken door in place as well as I could. I spent most of the time awake ; I heard no Furies but a dog pack was howling somewhere close. I listened uneasily but the animals didn't come into sight and eventually the noise faded away.

We stayed in hiding five days. By the morning of the fifth Pete said she was well enough to travel. I doubted it but she was insistent ; if we were going on, the sooner we started the better. She seemed as keen to leave the mainland as I was. Privately I was afraid all she wanted was to get where there were wasps again, start fighting all over. She'd been spared twice but she would never give up, she'd keep on until the Furies destroyed her.

Toward nightfall I brought the Rover down to the house. I'd found Pete an old sweater ; I had to help her into it: she couldn't lift her arms higher than her shoulders. Her side was badly discoloured. I wondered if binding it would help ; we tried, using strips torn from a sheet, but the effort caused her so much pain we had to stop. I put her into the Rover and drove away, hoping to find a road that would take me to the coast.

The next two days were bad. The land to the south of the Mendips was thick with nests and symbo traffic was continuous. It was impossible to use the main roads. I was forced eastwards ; I travelled mostly after dark, detouring and backing to avoid crevasses, circling round both nest areas and human towns. By the second night I was miles off my intended course and well into Dorset, but I knew the ground ahead of me. Most of the coastline of the country is guarded by hills. To seaward of them is a string of

towns; Bridport in the west, Weymouth, Swanage; and Barford, where I'd set out such a long time back looking for Jane. Inland to the east are tracts of heath, sour and flat. A lot of it used to be Army ground, tank training areas and gunnery ranges. I'd nearly reached the wasteland, and my hopes were beginning to rise, when the Rover unaccountably blew a tyre. And we carried no spare.

I drove on the rim for half a mile but it was hopeless; I couldn't hold the car straight and the jolting was hurting Pete. We'd be better on foot. We got out, left the car on the side of the road and started walking. When dawn caught up with us we were out on the great heath, the Purbecks showing ahead of us blue and vague, nothing round about for miles but heather and scrubby grass. We carried on for an hour, moving slowly. By then it was getting hot; there had been no rain for days, and the sun still beat from a cloudless sky. We stopped in the shade of a straggle of bushes. I'd brought a bottle of water from the Rover: we shared it, then pushed on again. After another hour the hills seemed no closer and Pete admitted she couldn't go on much longer. We holed up again, finding what cover we could. About midday Pete shook me out of a doze. I sat up and rubbed my face, wished we hadn't finished the water. I said, "What is it, love?"

She was looking back fixedly the way we'd come. She didn't answer, just raised her hand and pointed. I stared, screwing my eyes up. The horizon was shimmering with heat haze; for a minute I couldn't see a thing. Then I made out bright dots rising and falling, hovering over the grass. Furies. They were strung out in line right and left, as far as I could see.

Pete licked her mouth and grinned. She said bitterly, "That's our lot then, Bill, there the little dears are. I thought they was being slow . . ."

I was still staring at the wasps. They seemed to be beating, exploring every nook and cranny, but they weren't using their intelligence. If they were really after us, if they knew who we were and that we were on the heath, why the Devil didn't they quarter it from the air: they'd finish us easily that way . . . I said, "Maybe it's nothing to do with us, just some crazy game of their own."

She shook her head. "They found the car. We should have hidden it. They're onto us all right, you better get out . . ."

"What the Hell do you think you're going to do?"

She took the knife from her belt. "I can get one of 'em . . . go on, Bill, while you got the chance . . ."

The wasps were closer now. Their progress was slow, but it was inexorable. Odds were they'd spot us as soon as we moved but we couldn't just sit and wait. And I was tired of heroics. I pulled Pete up by the wrist. She started banging at my fingers with the hand that held the knife. "What're you doin' . . . Bill damn an' blast you, *let go. . . .*"

"Don't be a bloody little fool. And put that thing away before you hurt somebody . . ."

She squirmed, pulling back, leaning her weight against me. *"No . . ."*

I yelled at her. "Do what you're told . . ." I didn't expect her to obey me but she did. We headed away from the cordon. There was no cover, the Furies must have seen us. But they didn't fly: why wouldn't they fly?

We kept going most of the afternoon, resting when we had to, watching the endless dance of the insects behind us. Whenever we lay down I thought Pete wasn't going to get up again but she always managed to. At times I thought we were gaining on the wasps, at others they would encroach suddenly, close the gap to a quarter of a mile. And then we'd try to hurry. Pete didn't complain, and she had no breath now to argue. Her lips were set, somehow her face looked frozen, a cat-mask that couldn't show feelings. As the day wore on it seemed she found fresh energy. There was no coaxing now ; she was moving as fast as I was, faster, pushing her body to its limit of endurance, giving it all the pain it could take before it found a release in death. This was her Way of the Cross. She was deliberately choosing the worst path for herself, jumping gullies, forcing her way through bushes. Once when I stumbled she yanked at me and tried to laugh. I wanted her to slow, stop again, do anything but what she was doing to herself but she wouldn't listen. Not any more.

The heath. It reached away for miles, dry, russet-purple, empty vibrating with heat, a background to hopelessness.

There was no sound except the noise of our breathing, no movements but the dancing of the mirage, the rising and bobbing of the cordon behind us. My tongue started to feel like it was too big for my mouth, my head was pounding. In front the hills were higher, more solid, but the heath still stretched round us, bright, flat, uncaring . . . And the Furies were closer now, I could hear their booming dully through the noise of the blood in my ears. I kept moving but it was futile. We'd been anachronisms from the start, outlaws in an alien culture. The only way was to kill us, get us both, just let it happen quickly . . .

There was a road. It arrowed away each side of us. Beyond it bushes and scrub ; then the heath again, pulsing with sunlight. We crossed the macadam, staggering a little, fell into cover on the far side, lay trying to get our breath. Pete was the first to move. She got to her knees ; then she started to laugh. In front of us was another cordon. The wasps were close enough to see the brilliance of their markings, the silver haze of wings. I spun round. The first line was closing fast to cut us off.

Pete stayed where she was, kneeling upright. She'd pulled her shirt open across her breasts, her hair was in her eyes, she was running sweat. She glared from me to the wasps and back. "Bastards," she said. "*Bastards* . . . They didn't need to fly, Bill. It was more fun like this, it was slower . . ."

I heard the noise of an engine.

The truck rolled toward us out of the endless brilliance. It was old and dilapidated ; its cab was square and high ; its sides were extended by tall wooden racks that swayed as it moved. It left behind a faint trail of blue fume that hung in the air. The lorry stopped opposite us and its driver climbed down. He was short and ruddy faced, dressed in shabby trousers and sweater. He stood looking round, then he shouted. "If you'm anywhere about, show yourselves. Where are ye?"

We'd shrunk back behind the bushes. Pete stood up quickly. The knife was in her hand again. She said, "We're here, mate. What's it to you?"

He ran across to us. "Come on for Christ's sake, we ain't got but a minute . . ."

I followed him dazedly. The wasp lines were very close. He was already dropping the tailboard of the truck; I picked Pete up and swung her aboard, scrambled after her. There were a pile of sacks, a heap of straw, an old tarpaulin. I huddled under it, pulled Pete after me. Before we were out of sight the truck was moving again. I lay panting with my arm round the girl's shoulders. Minutes afterwards I realized we'd got clear.

We couldn't tell where we were headed. I sensed once we were climbing a steep gradient; minutes later we coasted down a hill. I crawled to the side of the truck. Pete edged up alongside me. There was a gap in the boards an inch or so wide. I craned my neck; we'd left the heath already, I saw cottages, a rolling hillscape. Some time later the lorry stopped. It was stuffy under the tarp and airless, but we kept still while more sacks were loaded aboard. When we moved off I went back to the peephole. We were crossing some sort of compound; in the background were domes surrounded by catwalks and gantries. We passed a bay where trucks were being piled with produce; the loading area was protected by a roof of the same scaly paper the wasps used for their nests. This was the Fury economy in full blast. After we left the camp there were three or four more stops. Each time, sacks were off-loaded. From their weight and awkwardness they could have contained crude sugar. More driving, then Pete yanked my elbow. She was crowing, pointing through the loophole. A dazzling shield heaved up between the hills, showed its blue vastness and sank again out of my line of sight. We'd reached the sea.

A few minutes later we halted and the driver came round, climbed into the back of the lorry. I sat up, blinking. We were on a high, empty road. To our left, beyond a sweep of downland, was the ocean. The driver pointed. "That's ye're way, straight down to the water. This is far as I dare take thee . . ."

I jumped down and Pete let me lift her off the truck. I'd got used to doing little things like that. She'd said once in a wilder moment that whereas I used to think wasp, now I thought rib. The driver closed the tailboard, dropped the keeper pins into their sockets. He said, "You

were the pair they wanted, weren't ee? The ones that burned their town?"

"How the Hell did you know—?"

He grunted. "I knowed. And they doos, too." He put a canvas bag in my hand. "That ain't much, but t'will keep thee goin' . . . Sea's thy only chance, there's soldiers out there, we sees planes odd times. But God knows where ye'll find a boat."

I said impulsively, "Can't you come with us?"

He stopped still. Then shook his head. "Tain't possible, cocker. I got a wife and kids in one o' they bloody camps . . ."

Pete took my arm. I said, "Is there a . . . message, anybody you know over there? What's your name?"

He looked at me very straight, a burly, ruddy little man with bright blue eyes like the sea. "We don't have no names now," he said stolidly. "Just tell 'em I helped thee. Say we ain't all dogs in Dorset . . ." He ran back round the lorry, started up, leaned out of the cab. "Get off the road, they patrols it . . ." He let in the clutch and the truck rumbled away.

We walked across the down. As we descended the horizon rose until the sea ahead looked like an endless blue hill, marked with the bursting white of waves. A breeze blew up off the water, strong and cool. We reached a steeper path, irregular steps weathered in the rock; at the bottom we stopped for breath. We were in an amphitheatre. Cliffs rose on three sides, rough and weathered, seamed with cracks. There was the entrance to what looked like an old quarry. Left and right were headlands, weed-covered rocks showed beneath them. The sea was still some thirty feet below us, falling and rising round long ledges of stone. It was a gaunt, dangerous place, a spot where no boat could ever try to land.

We rested for a time, then moved west, splashing among the tumble of rocks. A squadron of Furies appeared in the sun haze, boomed past some twenty feet above the waves. Their jackets looked very smart and bright against the blue. We dropped flat until they were by us. Half a mile away they did a strange thing. They broke the tight vics in which they were flying and made themselves first

into a hollow square, then an equal-sided triangle. The formation drove upwards till it was lost in distance. We stared at each other but there was no explaining what we'd seen. We carried on walking.

There was a bigger bay, and another beyond that. But no boats. Finally we came in sight of a nest; it was built out over the sea, the domes clinging to the cliffs like limpets. Above it Furies were flying in hundreds, their armour glinting in the sun.

We went back the way we had come. By the time we reached our starting point it was dusk and a mist was coming in, muting the noise of the sea. We walked to the quarry, edged inside. It was a mournful place. Water splashed and banged intermittently, forming puddles and rivulets that ran toward the entrance, lost themselves in banks of shale. Here and there the flat roof was supported by dry stone pillars. Behind the biggest of them was a niche; we climbed into it and opened the bag I'd been given. There was a bottle of water, a couple of rough loaves, cheese and home-made butter. And miraculously, rolling tobacco, papers and matches. We shared the food, made a couple of cigarettes and smoked them. By the time we'd finished, the cranny was velvet dark and the quarry mouth showed ragged and blue. We made ourselves as comfortable as we could, leaned our backs against the rock and settled down for the night.

I slept fitfully, troubled by a recurrent dream. Whenever I dozed it came back. I saw a Fury, resting on a pile of rocks. It looked a perfect insect but somehow I knew that under the shell it was a machine, a thing of gears and cams and spangled golden oil. In the dream, the Fury heard or saw something that was invisible to me. It sat up alertly, relays closed and opened, cogs clicked; the puppy face turned, the eyes stared . . . That was all, over and over. I woke at dawn, bitterly, full of the knowledge that you can't fight machines. I eased Pete's head off my shoulder and walked to the entrance of the quarry. Outside, the Furies were waiting.

There were six of them, squatting in a half circle on the stones. Behind them the sea moved sluggishly, invisible in a void of mist. Water droplets stood thickly on the insects

armour and wings. For a time I thought they were dead, they were so still. Then the sun broke through, brightened the rockwall over my head. I saw the wings quiver and start to pump.

I wasn't as scared as I'd thought I would be. Maybe I was just too tired to care any more. I was sorry, because of Pete. Somehow I should have done better. I went back quietly and woke her. She was vague for a few minutes, until I made her understand what had happened. She sat for a time staring dully. Then she smiled. "They was bound to do us sooner or later," she said gently. "Just one o' them things, ain't it?" She hugged me; she was shivering, I held her till she was warmer and the trembling had stopped. She pushed herself away, tidied her shirt, twitched the hair out of her eyes. Then she took my hand again and we walked out to the wasps.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Furies rose when they saw us together. Pete shut her eyes and stiffened. The leading insect hung booming in front of my face; then, deliberately, it flew away. The wasps hovered in a cluster over the cliff path, watching back at us impassively. There was no doubt about what they wanted. We were not to be killed instantly, we had to climb the way we had descended the evening before.

There was nothing to do but obey. I worked my way upward, helping Pete over the steeper places. Halfway to the top of the cliff I stopped and looked back. I could hear the long sighing of the sea but round us the mist was still thick, hiding all but the stones and grass. We seemed to be suspended in a silver ball of light. My brain felt as if it might spin, the suddenness of the reprieve had left me nearly unable to think. I couldn't see what the Furies intended doing with us. They surely wouldn't intern us again: we were proved hard cases. We might of course be on our way to a formal execution but that didn't figure either; creatures that don't emote waste no time on ceremony.

We climbed the down, stopping frequently to rest our legs. The wasps flew round us in thirty or forty yards circles, ragged shadows against the paler grey of the sky.

When we moved on they bunched ahead, showing us the path to take. We reached the road and something loomed in the mist. A little van, driving door standing open. Nobody inside. We walked up to it, stood baffled. "Get in," it said tonelessly. "You will not be harmed . . ."

I jumped away a yard. The words were repeated with the same disinterest. I edged back ; on the bench seat was a tape recorder, one of those portable jobs that run off batteries or accumulators. Nothing was near it but I saw the reels move. The message came again.

Pete looked at me blankly. I was fast losing any sense of wonder ; I got into the van, pushing her in front of me. As I started up the guides moved off. I nosed after them. The road turned inland ; a few miles farther on a lane showed on the right. The Furies swung into it and I followed.

The mist had nearly dispersed, and the sky was a clear ice-blue, by the time we reached our destination. I stopped the van and stared. In front of us was a city, the biggest nest area I'd ever seen. It covered the top of a high, swelling down, spilled across the nearer slope towards us. How far it extended out of sight I could only guess. The sun touched the endless domes with gold, picked out the scales and shingles, the striations that ran like primitive patterns through the pulp. The nearer nests were big but they were dwarfed by those beyond. Topping them all was an edifice that must have been two hundred or more feet high. Round it on level after level fibrous tunnels looped and branched, striped, ganglionated, pierced by soaring lattices or girders. It was like a great animal, it was like a machine, it thundered with the life of more Furies than I had ever seen. The swarm towered hundreds of yards into the sky ; inside its swirling mass I saw shapes, triangles and momentary cubes, rhomboids that melted into squares and circles. It was like a cosmic math lesson gone haywire.

The recorder was still yapping. I let the clutch in, a mechanical action, and drove between the outlying nests, one guide still hanging close above the bonnet.

There were beaten roads in the complex but they turned and twisted, I lost all sense of direction. Somewhere in the din a hooter was blaring ; men by the dozen were

scurrying about, there were cars, lorries, whole shanty villages half hidden under sloping planes of woodpulp. We passed an m/t section, a dim cave lit by service lamps in heavy wellglasses. Then another, open to the pathway, where a dozen men were hauling something that looked like a huge heating unit along on an improvised trolley. As the van wound deeper into the complex the overlapping of tunnels and catwalks darkened the daylight to a brownish gloom. I saw loading bays stacked with sugar and grain, once a workshop where women were assembling lengths of scaffold tube into complex shapes. The air was full of the smell of the Furies themselves, musky and thick as incense.

The guide-wasp finally dropped to the ground beside an arched entrance in a pulp wall. We got out of the car. Beside the portal two Furies, half as big again as usual, stood stiffly like sentries. I half expected their antennae to brush forward in salute. I looked up; the wall curved above me like a bulging headland. We had reached the central dome.

I stepped through the archway with Pete close behind me. The inside of the nest was stiflingly hot and the smell was intensified. It had a heady quality that seemed to get into the blood, fuzzing up thought. And the walls of the dome distorted and magnified the noise from above till it sounded like half a dozen huge organs playing together but playing no tune, just pitches that swayed and shifted round the threshold of audibility.

I edged down an earth slope, feeling Pete's fingers on my arm. There was light but it was confused and brown; that and the roaring made it seem as if we were swimming underwater, lost in a sepia ocean. I made out objects, senseless at first and vague. In front of me was what looked like a monstrous, tiered wedding cake or the campanile at Pisa. It stretched upward till it vanished in gloom. Each layer was four feet or more thick and supported from the next by innumerable squat pillars. The whole thing was laced with steel girders and round the edges of the tiers ran looms of cable, strung haphazardly with glowing electric elements suspended every few feet. The light reflected redly from thousands of roughly made cells but it was only when I saw the protruding heads of the grubs that

I realized I was looking at the side of a colossal brood comb.

The guide was watching us quizzically, running off a few steps and turning to see if we were following. I moved forward, stepping carefully. We were on a gallery that ran round inside the next wall; to our right an excavation like a bomb crater housed the roots of the comb. The place must once have been a whirl of activity but now it was nearly deserted; the nurses had left to join the aerial dance over the city. I saw odd wasps wandering aimlessly, making no attempt to feed their charges. Many of the larvae had lost their grip and fallen from the cells, lay throbbing like yard-long white sacks. I peered over the edge of the hole; below were heaving drifts of grubs. I shuddered, and didn't look again. Halfway round the circumference of the dome a metal stairway rose into darkness. The guide-wasp boomed up it and we followed. We found ourselves in one of the tunnel systems.

In places the walls were very thin and some process had rendered the pulp translucent; through it flowed a creamy-brown light. The complex had been designed for flying traffic, not humans; the way was full of twists and swellings, we tripped over brightly coloured girders, there were queer levels and drops and sometimes whole floor sections gave and swayed as we walked on them, bringing me out in sweat. My head was whirling again; there was nothing for the mind or hands to grasp: it seemed, as we climbed through those dry arteries we were skewed out of reality into some mad, unknown dimension. We passed a Fury, curled up in a side chamber. It was slashing and crunching busily; I saw with no sense of surprise that it was eating itself, tail first, with apparent relish. Its abdomen was curved under it, gripped in one of the great pairs of legs; the mandibles rasped, tearing aside sections of chitin, chopping into the pinkish quivering flesh beneath. The mask lifted for a moment and stared; Pete turned away, pressed the back of her hand across her mouth. I put my arm round her waist and we moved on.

We hadn't much farther to go. Another passage, a steep, scrambling climb and the guide-wasp dropped and stayed still. We went forward alone.

The chamber was high and airy, filled with the dim roaring of the swarm. Pulp windows, veined and textured like rich stained glass, reached from floor to vaulted roof, making a golden cartwheel of light. At the far end of the place a pulp ledge was built out from the wall on a level with our heads. It was some moments before I saw the Queen. She was resting on the ledge as if on a dais; below her, on a raised nub in the floor, stood a tapedeck like the one in the van. It looked incongruously bright and modern. As I watched the spools moved. "Come closer," said the speaker. "You will not be harmed . . ."

Pete was trembling, whether from fear or suppressed hatred I couldn't tell. I walked forward. I wasn't conscious of speaking but I heard my own voice. It said, "Why did you bring us here . . . ?" I knew now I was dreaming. Maybe I died alongside Greg in the caves with a Fury pecking at my throat; this was the death fantasy, immense and vague.

The wasp quivered. The recorder clicked, the spools started again. "Listen carefully," said the dead voice. "There is much for you to learn, and our time is short." It was then I first heard the story of the beings that had called themselves the Keepers, and of the colossal hoax they had perpetrated on mankind. How they had studied our planet, compared its life phyla; how they had built the first bodies painfully, molecule by molecule, built them from nothingness, from water and air. "Your activities have been a great inconvenience to us," said the tapedeck finally. "In all, you have caused the deaths of many thousands of individuals. But in so doing you have retained independence of action and thought. Now that our day is ending you will be suitable for the purpose we have in mind . . ."

An idea that had been picking at the roots of my brain shaped itself. I remembered the attack on the great nest. The plan had been crazy from the start: if the Furies had been normal we wouldn't have got near . . . And the mindless behaviour of the cordon, the crazy aerobatics, the wasp we'd seen destroying itself. I clenched my hands, and there was hope in the dream.

"We are suffering a racial regression," said the recorder

complacently. "You would term it madness though it is not madness as you conceive it. We understand you have been experimenting with methods of communication intended to supplant your primitive system of vocal chords. We realize that the concept of the group mind is known to you. We would recommend that you discontinue work of this nature; for organisms of higher intelligence telepathy has serious disadvantages."

I was staring at the spools, still trying to decide whether the machine was talking or the Fury. I missed some of what was said, made myself concentrate on the words again.

". . . development was rapid, and our colonisation totally successful. Unfortunately we were compelled in the interests of survival to attempt mastery of disciplines foreign to the nature we had assumed. We achieved a great deal—" The Queen rotated her head and appeared to look round the chamber. "But the pace was too severe. We had so constituted ourselves as to be unable to grasp the mechanical principles on which your culture depends; and our transmutation was not reversible. We understood that finally we would be destroyed by your bombs and planes and tanks. We needed guns and weapons of our own, and the machines to produce them. Machines that we could operate . . . Those of our number most closely engaged in the study have suffered the regression to which we have referred. The effect is spreading. Soon we shall be incapable of coherent action."

Pete had edged away from me. She was grinning up at the wasp. "There's a little dear," she said huskily. "Keep it happy, Bill, I can nearly reach it from here . . ." I couldn't answer her. I was wrestling with the huge absurdity of the concept I'd been given. I could see now the fatal drawback of the group mind. If one individual was a genius, the race became a superspecies. But if one went mad . . .

"Precisely," said the recorder. "Which is why—"

I interrupted it harshly. The reels stopped for me. "You said you were eternal beings. With all knowledge. It doesn't add up. You chose the sort of brains you wanted, the brains that could dominate the earth. And yet you knew you'd have to deal with machines . . ."

The Fury stayed still, watching with her huge jewelled eyes. And it seemed the answer came stealing into my mind, insidiously, of its own accord. My lips shaped words. *"When did you come . . . ?"*

The wasp trembled. "It is difficult for us to answer you. Time does not manifest itself to us in the way you understand. To us, our birth was the work of what you would call an hour. But many of your seasons passed while we were absorbed. When we first observed you there were no machines. Vespasian was ruler of Rome . . ."

Pete twisted round. "It's lies, Bill, it's a trick—"

I reached her just before she got the knife. Her wrists were slippery with sweat, I had a job to hold her. We wrestled silently; the chamber swayed, ripples of stress ran along the fibre floor. I changed my grip and Pete ducked her head, bit like a cat. I wrenched at her belt, the knife landed point down, stuck quivering. I swung her round and shoved. She hit the wall, slid down it. I knew I'd hurt her and I didn't care. I yelled, "You're too late, Pete, the fighting's over, it's through . . ." I didn't have to grope for words, they were all ready formed. "You wanted to die. In the caves, and out on the heath. You wanted to be a martyr, you wanted to go out with a band. But it didn't work. Because you weren't big enough, Pete, not many of us are . . ." I grabbed her wrists, shook her to make her listen. "You told yourself you brought the Furies, you killed your father and mother and your family, you had to die to make up for it. But that wasn't the reason, you were lying in your teeth. I'll tell you the reason. You were sorry for yourself. You were sorry before the wasps ever came. You were sorry for what you'd turned into, you were sorry for the way you had to live. You were sorry, and you just wanted an excuse."

I put the knife in her hand and shut her fingers round the handle. "Now go on. Now do it. *Kill yourself, because the Romans conquered Gaul . . .*"

There was silence except for the booming from outside. Pete sat woodenly, looking at the knife. She lifted it, held it in front of her chest; then her arm sank back as if the blade had got too heavy for her. The thing dropped to the floor. I waited, still breathing hard. Then I helped her up.

She offered no resistance, just towed after me like an automaton. I looked up at the Queen, and the tapedeck resumed as if nothing had happened. "It is up to you, the next most highly organised species on this planet, to reclaim your territory. We wish this to be accomplished with all possible speed."

I can't remember whether I spoke the thought or not. "But you hated us. You killed us by the million. Why should you hand it all back now . . . ?"

The reels stopped, hesitated, moved again. The tape was nearing its end. "Your distrust is rooted in the confused part of your mind that you term the emotions. We killed because the presence of your species constituted a threat to the species we had become. We neither hate nor fear." There was no emotion in the voice, it was the contempt beneath the phrases that lashed and stung. "Our philosophy suggests that the present purpose of Creation is the continuation of Life, regardless of phylum or species. Life is rare in your Galaxy, and it is Life itself that is precious. This we knew before your sun coughed out its planets.

"I am the paramount Queen of the West, and this is what you would term our capital. Our decision has been made, and it is irreversible. You are granted safe conduct to the coast. To the south are islands so far unsubjugated by us. Your reorganisation must come from there. Convey our message. It will be some seasons before help can reach you from other sources. You would be wise to undertake an extensive breeding programme. In this country your numbers are now down to roughly two million." The Queen arched her body and I saw the sting unsheath; it lay gleaming beneath her chin. I swallowed. "Can we be sure of your safe conduct?"

The recorder clicked. "Your question is not understood."

I said, "There are a lot of wasps between here and the coast. We can't speak to them all . . ."

The spools turned for the last time. "Your mind is fallible," said the machine coldly. "*You have spoken to them all . . . now go . . .*" The sting slid into the joint between head and thorax, and the insect's abdomen began to throb.

* * *

On our way to the open air we had to pass the great comb

again. Jury lamps were rigged here and there and a score or more workers were hurrying along the lines of cells, hauling the grubs out and dispatching them with quick snaps of their jaws. The radiators had been turned off; the whole vast machine that was a nest was running down, grinding to a halt. I climbed into the comparative brightness outside the dome, still pulling Pete along. The van was where I had left it. I started up and got out. Thousands of Furies lined the road; they hung above it like a succession of quivering triumphal arches. As we moved underneath them Pete started to laugh. I couldn't stop her. She was still giggling when I pulled up in Barford Regis, some ten miles along the coast.

I got out of the car. I was within a few yards of the place where Sek had been killed. The town was deserted; everything was as I remembered it: the armour, the quay, the boats tied up alongside. But a winter of exposure had left most of them useless. Some had sunk at their moorings, the rest were waterlogged, their engines rusty and seized. It was a bad anticlimax. I spent the rest of the day trying to find a cruiser that was still seaworthy but it was no good. Pete sat silently, watching me; I couldn't get across to her, she wouldn't speak. When evening came I broke into a waterfront cottage, made up a place for her to sleep. She lay down silently, refusing what food I'd managed to find. I got a chair and put my feet up. I lay back watching the light fade, thinking over what I'd heard and seen. I wondered how the Furies had worked the trick with the recorders. The wasps used telepathy to control the symbos; farmers planted and reaped, engineers designed, lorry drivers drove simply because they knew they had to, their movements were proscribed and death was the reward for disobedience. But the tapedecks were real, there was nothing hallucinatory about them. I've talked to electronic experts since and they haven't been able to help me; but somehow I don't find the idea of those prerecorded answers too incredible. To the Keepers future and past were the same, those words had been written since what for want of a better term we call the beginning of time . . .

I slept at nightfall. Hours later some small noise roused me and I sat up. The room was still, and flooded with

moonlight. Outside I could hear the restless wash and heave of the sea. Pete was awake, lying staring at the ceiling. I went over to her and she turned her head. I said quietly, "How do you feel?"

She shrugged. There was a long silence. Then she said, "All right, mate. How should I feel?"

I sat on the edge of the bed, ran a hand through my hair. It was about six months overdue for cutting. "Pete, I'm sorry. About what I said. It was a lousy thing to say . . ."

She made a little noise halfway between a laugh and a sniff. "That's all right. Home truths never hurt anybody, did they?"

I shook my head. "It wasn't true—"

She interrupted me. "It was all right. Yeah, it was right enough. Don't spoil it . . ."

"Pete . . ."

"What?"

I hesitated. What did I want to say? That we'd come a long way together, now it was through? Make a few platitudes about Greg and the rest giving their lives so we could start all over? I reached down and pushed the hair out of her eyes, dropped my hand to the side of her throat. She felt smooth, and warm. I said, "You're a crazy girl. I never shall understand you."

She curled her fingers round mine. "Not much to understand, is there? You said most of it already . . ." She was quiet again. Then she said, "It's funny y'know . . ."

"What's funny?"

She said, "The first time I . . . well, the thing that put me on the streets. I bin thinkin' about it. Funny, the way things come back. No reason for it sometimes."

"You shouldn't be thinking about it now. It doesn't matter anyway. Try and rest."

She ignored me. "I wadn't no age. Fifteen, sixteen, can't remember. I'd been goin' with him a few months. Nice bloke. Ordinary sort o' bloke, but he was . . . all right. We was talkin' about saving up, getting married an' all that. I reckon we might have done it too."

"So what went wrong?"

"He had to go in the Army. Got real cut up about it. He din't reckon they'd take him. But they did."

She was still gripping my hand, rubbing the knuckles absently with her thumb. "It was the night before he had to go off. We'd bin round a bit, bin to the old flicks. He was real cut up. 'I wanted you,' he says. 'I din't want to wait no two years or three, I wanted you,' he says. Then he started cryin'. Christ, poor old Col . . . He weren't no age, see? Neither on us were . . ."

I said, "Confessions of a streetwalker. Pete, I've heard all this before. You're still taking yourself apart like a picture puzzle, why don't you stop?"

She shook her head. Her hair moved against my hand. "I'm not confessin', mate. Nothing to confess." She paused. "I saw a film once on the box. They were talkin' to all these kids. Tarts. Like I were. Askin' 'em about it, why they done it, that sort o' thing. They couldn't none of 'em say. It were just the way they lived, that were all."

"Do you know why you did it?"

She said, "Yeah, I know. Only I couldn't see it before. I done it 'cause I liked it. It was all right, for a time. It was a good life, I met some nice blokes. Sounds funny, don't it? But I did. I was high class. Good at me job . . ."

"Why didn't you marry the boy?"

"Don't know. Not really. I was sorry for him. That was why I done it, I was tryin' to help . . . It din't matter to me, not the way it did to him. But I reckon that were the wrong way to start. You can't start out like that feelin' sorry for a bloke . . ."

"Well, God, you can't blame yourself. Not if you felt like that."

She said flatly, "I can . . ."

"Why?"

" 'Cause it wadn't no help. Not to either on us. It wadn't no good, it never is first time. And he was goin' away in the morning . . . After that, it din't matter. I hadn't got nothin' to lose no more. And two years was a long while . . ."

I said, "Pete, whatever you've done, you've hurt yourself more than anybody else. You've got no call to be sorry."

She laughed. "That's me all right, Bill. Soft. I reckon I was sorry for 'em all . . ."

I said, "You will come away, won't you? When we've found a boat?"

"There aren't no boats."

"I'll get one."

She said listlessly, "Not a lot o' point now, is there?"

"I want you to come."

She sighed. "All right, Bill, I'll come. Make you feel better?"

"A bit."

She squeezed my fingers. "Just watch it, mate. I might start bein' sorry for you . . ."

I let her sleep before I disengaged my hand. I dozed again myself. Next time I woke the sun was up. I sat wondering why I was feeling so good, then I remembered the nightmare was over. I went to the door of the cottage. The air was crystal clear, the sea brilliant and still. Out over the Channel, blue in the distance, hung a congregation of monstrous shapes. Triangles, cubes . . . And another, repeated over and over as far as I could see. The looped cross, the ankh, the life symbol of the old Pharaohs. A deep booming just reached the land, vague and evocative as the midsummer hum.

Pete was still asleep, tawny hair mussed up. I roused her. She knuckled her eyes, yawned herself awake. Then she followed me outside quietly. Halfway along the quay, by the edge of the water, stood a solitary old man. His clothes were ragged, he was painfully thin, his face was half covered by a silver stubble of beard. One hand was raised, pointing over the sea. I could hear his voice rising and falling; as we got nearer I made out the words.

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird . . ."

Pete put her arm round his shoulders, grinned down at him. "Take it easy, dad," she said gently. "It's all right . . ."

I was staring out over the water. Far off, tiny and brilliant in the sunlight, was a helicopter. It was edging toward the mainland, moving cautiously, trailing a saucer of greenish foam. I started to shout, and wave my arms.

The old man seemed to become aware of us for the first time. "Come out of her, my people," he said quaveringly. "That ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues . . ." His arm was up again, pointing at

the Furies. "For her sins have reached unto Heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities . . ."

The chopper was close now, nearly overhead, the engine noise slamming back from the housefronts. The down-draught tore at my clothes, whipped Pete's hair round her face. I saw the ladder descending and the hoist. We got the old man into it, followed him. I pushed Pete ahead of me. I was buffeted and deafened; then I was aboard, and the hatch was closed. The machine spun on its tail, circled, and fell away toward the open sea.

The winchman dogged the trap shut and straightened up, a blonde boy wearing Fleet Air Arm insignia on a civilian sweater. "Where the Devil did you spring from, haven't picked anybody off the mainland for months . . . And what the Hell's got into the ruddy wasps . . . ?"

We were overtaken by a glittering triangle a hundred yards on each side. It swung away, its base nearly brushing the wavetips. I had to shout over the noise of the engine. "They're crazy . . ." I tried to explain what had happened. I don't know whether I was believed or not. We skirted the Isle of Wight, long since overrun, and headed for the Channel Islands. We kept low. "Daren't fly at any altitude," explained the airman. "Bastards dive into the rotor if they get half a chance . . ." Another half hour or more of racing sea and Guernsey showed up ahead. We landed on a pad built out over the water. The pilot killed his engine and the whick-whick-whick of the blades stopped at last. I got down feeling stiff and the boy helped Pete out elaborately. She smiled at him like a duchess.

It was queer to see traffic and pedestrians moving normally. There were Army vehicles everywhere, we'd been met by a jeep and an ambulance. I turned to the winchman. "We've got to get to your C.O. Can you fix it?"

He looked doubtful. "Actually we're a dual command, Navy and Army. Job to know who is the ruddy boss half the time . . . The big white chief's on Jersey anyway, I think you'd better see our chap. We've got a sort of organisation set up for refugees . . ."

I fumed but I had to give in. I got in the jeep with Pete and we moved off. Twenty yards away I was yelling to stop. The MP who was driving us braked, looking surprised. I

ran across the pontoon. A collection of small craft was tied up alongside. One biggish cabin cruiser stood out from the rest. She was painted blue-grey all over, decks, brasswork, everything, with a big stark number seventeen on her side, but I knew her. On her bow the raised letters of her name were still readable. She was *Enchantress*.

Staff HQ for the island was in a big hotel just off the seafront. We were hurried in, made to give our names a dozen times over. Orderlies and MP's chivvied us from desk to desk. I started wondering how long it would be before I hit one of the brass bound so-and-so's between the eyes. Then we were left alone in a room with two or three shabby chairs, a table piled with magazines. I picked one up. Some ersatz Army production called the *Island Gazette*. I leafed through the Varityped pages, sneered over one or two bad cartoons and chucked it down again. Finally another messenger arrived. The Rehabilitation Controller would see us at once.

We took a lift, stepped out into officer country. We were hustled through an anteroom, the orderly opened a door, closed it again behind us. I saw a wide desk, a bank of telephones. A man in a worn, neatly pressed uniform sitting writing. He looked up as we came in, and started to smile. I said, "Good God . . ." and walked forward in a daze.

He came round the desk and gripped my hand. He said, "Over a year ago, on the Plain . . . Last I saw of you, you were nose down in a ditch with a topload of bloody wasps. Never expected to see you again . . ."

I nodded. "I could say the same for you, Neil . . ."

There were lines on his face that hadn't been there before, and his hair was greying prematurely. He saw me looking at his sleeve and laughed. "Nothing like a nice brisk war to speed the old promotion . . . Well, grab a bloody chair. What've you been doing with yourself, old boy, you look like Tarzan of the Apes . . ."

For a moment I'd nearly forgotten Pete. She was still standing by the door, looking a little lost. I went to her and took her arm. "This is ex-lieutenant Connor, love. Remember, I told you about him . . ."

She caught Neil looking her up and down. She was scruffier than I was; long hair, beaten-up shirt and jeans. "Sorry I din't have time to powder me nose," she said. "But one way an' another, we've bin a bit busy . . ."

I described our meeting with the Queen as briefly as I could. Neil heard me in silence. As I finished one of the phones rang shrilly. A report from a spotter aircraft. Off Saint Alban's Head the Furies were throwing themselves into the sea in millions. There was a carpet of them, floating on the waves.

Neil put the handset down and sat for a moment watching me. Then he picked it up again. He said, "Bradley, get onto the old man, will you? Yes, immediately . . . What? I don't care what he's doing, tell him it's the biggest thing since they beached the bloody Ark . . ."

The wires were hot within minutes. A staff conference was fixed for fourteen hundred hours. Neil warned us after that we'd probably be flying to Jersey. Then he called in a stenographer. He said crisply, "Right, both of you. Start again from the beginning. Better have it cut and dried; to a large extent this is going to be your party . . ."

It took another hour and several cups of coffee to get out of us all he wanted to know. Then he told us something of what had been happening in the islands. After the first panic the civilian population had settled down well under the military, and a combined force had been organised from what units had managed to leave the mainland. Most of their effort had been directed to feeding themselves and the Islanders though they'd done what they could to hit back at the wasps, flying reconnaissance and mounting the odd sortie against coastal nests. They had a couple of destroyers still operational and a pack of helicopters but supplies had been too short for anything like a real offensive. They had almost no bombs and ammunition and very little fuel. It had in fact been a unit from the Channel Island Command that had brushed with us near Chill Leer the previous winter. "The human situation's chaotic all over the mainland," said Neil broodingly. He got up and walked to the window, stood staring down. "Rehabilitation's going to be a major problem I'm afraid, even without the wasps . . ." He turned, looked at Pete

quickly then back to me. "What happened to the girl, Jane was it? The girl you were looking after?"

I stared. "But she's here. I got her on a boat, she's here somewhere . . ."

He narrowed his eyes. "How do you know, old boy?"

"Because I saw it. The boat. On my way in. *Enchantress*. You've got her in camouflage . . . number seventeen."

He pressed the intercom. "Connie, get me the file on Auxiliary Seventeen, will you? Make it snappy." He lit a cigarette. "Minor part of my job. We've kept records on all the stuff we took over in case we ever got a chance to hand it back."

A girl came in, laid a slim folder on the desk. He skimmed through it, frowning. Then he put it down, spread his hands flat on the cover. He said, "She's a good boat. One of our best. Done over two dozen provision runs to France." He looked up suddenly. "She was found drifting about ten miles out. Nobody aboard. I'm sorry . . ."

I felt Pete's hand on my arm.

* * *

We walked along a beach of fine white sand. To our left was a small headland; the sun was setting behind it, turning the miles of water to a glittering cloth of gold. It had been a hectic day on the islands; an advance unit had already established a beachhead in Dorset, they reported the coast was nearly clear of wasps and many of the domes were burning as the symbos took their revenge. Pete and I had heard our report read over and over, been questioned across half a dozen conference tables. We were due to go back to the mainland again sometime that night; the Army were drafting in everybody they could lay their hands on for the first tidying-up operations. We'd managed to escape for half an hour; we moved slowly, savouring the quietness. Now I had time to think, Jane was haunting me. I said, "I can't imagine what happened to her. If . . . if the wasps got to her there'd have been signs. She must have been taken off, she couldn't just have vanished . . ."

Pete didn't answer. A car pulled up on the road behind us; I heard the door open and slam, the faint swish of footsteps. I looked round. There was a WRAC driver, a

dark, pretty girl, smartly uniformed. She said, "Major Connor's compliments, sir, and are you ready to embark?"

I nodded. "Thanks, we'll come at once . . ." I took Pete's arm and turned for the staff car. She stopped suddenly and wrenched away. I said, "Hey what's the matter?"

She wouldn't look at me. "You go on, Bill. I'm not comin' . . ."

"What?"

She said, "You jus' . . . keep looking for that girl o' yours. You'll find her. Like you said, she ain't dead. I expect they picked her up, some boat picked her up. That was what happened, p'raps she's in France . . ."

"Pete, what the Hell are you talking about?"

She was trying to walk but she wasn't getting far because I was holding her back. She said wildly, "Anyway, I wouldn't be no good to you. Silly idea, don't know what got into me . . . Be a joke, wouldn't it? Right joke, scarred ole Granny, tell the kids how we beat the wasps up. And anyway I done that bloke, killed him. Don't forget I done that bloke . . ."

"Pete," I said. "Pete, *shut up* . . ." I don't know how it happened but she was in my arms and I was kissing her hair, her cheek, the long scar. And she was crying. The first tears I'd ever seen from her ; they matted her eyelashes, ran down her throat. I didn't think she'd ever stop. The WRAC had turned away ; I held Pete until she was quiet. It took a long time. Over her head I could see the ocean, the distant horizon. On the horizon, nearly invisible, a line of dark dots. The boats of the third wave, heading out to the mainland. And beyond them, tiny and faint, a darker shadow against the northern sky. The ghost of a looped cross.

I've thought a lot about Jane. She obviously didn't land on the Isle of Wight. She didn't lose her head ; she held off carefully, saw wasps, changed course for the Channel Islands. There would be maps somewhere aboard *Enchantress*, she was quite cool enough to navigate by them. But she never made it. Was it like Pete said, a Navy vessel saw her and took her off, left the cruiser to drift? Or did a lone Fury, miles too far from land, spot the boat, and turn lazily against the blue, and dive . . . For a time I was certain

I'd see Jane again; there'd be a knock on the door and a graceful woman would be standing there, and it would be her. But now I'm not so sure. What happened to her is a mystery only the sea could answer.

And the Furies of course. They knew . . .

I've turned into something I never thought I'd be. A farmer. Many of the survivors did the same; God knows there was enough spare land, and every yard that could be cultivated was valuable. Pete and I live on the Mendips, not very far from the site of buried Chill Leer. The agricultural people gave us a lot of help when we were getting started but even so we had to learn as we went along and the first two or three years were pretty hectic. But we've got things better organised now, we're even managing to show a profit; last year our figures were well up to the area norm. The Mendips have come into their own again; most of the great urban centres and the manufacturing belts of the Midlands are still unapproachable but the hills have taken over: they're supplying the new economy with what they've always supplied, time out of mind—milk and cheese, wool, butter, strawberries; coal and lead and calamine. It's four years now since the last Fury died and the population of England is still hanging round the two million mark, but we shall make out. After all there weren't many more of us in the time of the first Elizabeth. People everywhere are starting over, picking up the reins. This year we managed some small-scale exporting to France and the Low Countries, and last summer two ships slid into Plymouth flying the Stars and Stripes . . .

When the newly constituted Department of Records approached me to write this book I was uncertain about a lot of aspects. I was going to leave Pete out altogether but after the passing of the Act of Amnesty, designed to cover cases like hers, she insisted I put everything down just as it happened. I'm glad I did. It was a lot of work but I think it was worth it; at the very least, it fulfilled an ambition of mine.

I've got one other. I want to wall off the shattered mouth of Chill Leer and set in a plaque giving the names of the people who lived and died there. I'd like them to be remembered, for a little while at least. I can't do it yet,

concrete still isn't plentiful enough to waste pouring it in holes in the ground. We'd have to get an authorisation from the Southwestern Supply Board and so far that hasn't been forthcoming. Pete says that Dear Heart talks a load of mush, but she's working on it as hard as I am.

Several of the great steelframe domes have been preserved as national monuments, among them the one we visited. The pogrom that followed the death of the wasps was nearly universal but prompt and farsighted action by the military saved a handful of nests for study. I'm glad of that; there'll be something left to remind us of what happened during one short, hectic summer when our drum-banging species was fetched unceremoniously to its knees. For space is an endless Hell, and who's to know what other entities might float down on us, try to take up maybe where the Keepers had to leave off?

I don't think though that the wasps will ever be wholly forgotten. In an odd way they're more alive to us now than ever before. They've passed back into folklore, but they're still the bogeys that haunt our worst dreams. They're the things that rattle doors on nights of wind, the faces that watch half-seen from the deepest woods. Gales boom in our chimneys, and we hear the noise of giant wings . . . We're still fighting for establishment, our towns are small, the roads between them bad, we barricade our houses after dark. We don't know yet what form our New World is going to take; but we know whatever we build from the wreckage of a culture, in some way it's got to be better: we've got to try a little harder to justify what could be the finest intelligence left in our Galaxy. The Keepers still haunt the conscience of mankind; I think in the end they justified the name we gave them so lightly. To us, they were the Furies.

THE END

— KEITH ROBERTS

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