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New Writings in SF:6

SF 6

New Writings in SF
Edited by
John Carnell
Featuring
The Inner Wheel
by Keith Roberts

The sixth volume of *New Writings in SF* begins with Keith Roberts' long novelette *The Inner Wheel*, the rather grim story of a man enmeshed in the web of a *gestalt* mind. Robert Presslie, too, has written a macabre tale. In *The Day Before Never* he writes of vengeance against an alien domination. Ernest Hill's *Atrophy* and William Spencer's *Horizontal Man* both take the reader into the far future and present some interesting ideas on man's development. In *The Seekers* by E. C. Tubb we read of a strange illusion on an uninhibited planet. John Rackham, too, writes of a new planet, this time from a colonisation point of view and finally in John Baxter's *The Hands* we have a grisly little story that will make many readers shudder.

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FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

IT has been the policy in this series of *New Writings In S-F* to make the contents of each book as wide and varied as possible and this sixth volume proves no exception. Seven new science fiction stories, never before published, run the gamut of illusion, fear, alien invasion, empathy, immortality, the far future and the human mind.

In this latter category, Keith Roberts' long novelette, "The Inner Wheel", is outstanding. Not for many years has there has been such a powerful story of a *gestalt* mind. (*Gestalt*: A shape or structure which as an object of perception, forms a specific whole and has properties which cannot be completely deduced from a knowledge of the property of its parts.—*The Readers' Digest Encyclopaedic Dictionary*.) The story itself explains the complexity of the definition, but here are a few thoughts on the subject.

Have you ever been thinking or speaking of someone whom you have not seen for a long time, when the telephone or doorbell rings or you walk round a corner—and there they are! Or received a letter days afterwards? (You could have been thinking about them at the time they were actually writing the letter to you.) Telepathy? Clairvoyance? Empathy? Some people are more "sensitive" to the phenomenon than others. Whatever it is, it is a form of mental communication and we know very little about it, *if anything at all*. It is even possible that somewhere along the evolutional tree of Mankind we managed to lose some of these developing mental powers, just as our sense of smell has deteriorated and our teeth become a liability rather than an asset, and our eyesight requires artificial aids.

Despite the fact that we now know the constituent parts of the human brain, can measure it, probe it, operate upon it, electrically stimulate it and even analyse some of its aberrations, this fantastic piece of biological machinery is still largely a mystery and we are not at all sure of its capabilities. *It may be that the psi powers are developing, not diminishing,* but, if so, we have a long way to go before we can understand them.

"The Inner Wheel" starts simply enough, with a compulsive instinct to visit one place, but soon moves inexorably onward to a webwork of fascinating intrigue. It presupposes that *homo superior* may eventually be a mental giant rather than a physical one in the years to come.

The shorter stories form a well-balanced *potpourri* wherein there is something for everyone, depending upon your favourite type of story. Leaning towards the macabre is Robert Presslie's "The Day Before Never", a story of vengeance against an oppressive alien domination, but with unexpected results, while John Baxter's bizarre plot, "The Hands", will make most readers shudder a little. Those who enjoy stories of the far future can first dip into the different prospects visualized in Ernest Hill's "Atrophy", depicting a benevolent Big Brother attitude of regimentation, or William Spencer's new idea on the prospect of immortality and its soul-crushing ennui in "Horizontal Man", while those who prefer interplanetary travel can first take a look at E. C. Tubb's "The Seekers" or John Rackham's "Advantage". They all depict a wide variety of possibilities in the near and distant future.

It has been said that anything Man can visualize is possible—in this series we can sit back and read about those possibilities, as entertainment.

JOHN CARNELL

August 1965

THE INNER WHEEL

by

KEITH ROBERTS

This is a rather grim story of compulsion—of one man trapped in a web of innocuous circumstances deliberately shaped by a mind not quite of this world, yet the world itself is exactly the same. Or is it?

The voices are in a void. The void has no colour. Neither is it dark.

There are formless Shapes in the void. There are soundless Noises. There are swirlings and pressures, twistings and squeezings. The voices fill the gaps between nothingness. The voices are impatient. "Where? they ask "Where . . . ?"

"I told you where . . ."

"See for us and tell again. . . . Where is he . . . ?"

"Getting on a train. . . ."

"Tell us what you see. . . . Where is the train . . . ?"

"In a station, where do you think . . . ?"

There are hammers and whips and pincers.

"WHERE IS THE TRAIN?"

"T-Tanbridge. Please, THE STATION IS TANBRIDGE——"

There are flickerings. "Gently," say the voices. "Gently, tell us what you see. . . ."

"I . . . there are roses. The platforms are covered with them. The . . . train is green. The sky is very bright blue. Everything is quiet, nobody moving about. The coach stands in its bay. I see the sunlight lying across it and on the platforms. It lies in s-squares on the platforms, on the footbridge. There is a breeze now. A piece of paper blows and skips, the roses sway. I hear the little thorny sound of leaves scratching together. Please, no more. . . ."

Somewhere there might be giggling. Somewhere there might be rage. "Tell us about him. . . ."

A lens moves, seeing but unseen, examining textures of glass and wood and leaves. The station is haunted in the hot, still afternoon.

"He is . . . sitting in the train. In the front seat just behind the driver's cab. He is . . . tall. He is . . . dark, his hair is dark and rather long. It hangs across one eye. His face is thin, his eyes are very blue. His hands look . . . strong. Well-

kept, bony. Square nails, white halfmoons where the cuticle is pushed back. He uses a good aftershave——"

The giggling again. "You like him . . ."

"Leave me alone——"

Jostlings. "See . . . we want to see. . . ." The not-colours swirl.

"No——"

". . . despatched in accordance with your order of the twenty-third. . . ."

"I'M TRYING TO WORK——"

"Gently. . . ."

"Leave me then. Leave me, I'll *tell* you. . . ."

"Good," say the voices. "Good. Tell us what you see. . . ."

"He's . . . taking out his cigarettes. Lighting one. Flicking the match in the holder. The m-motorman is coming now. He gets in, starts the engines. Puts the . . . handle thing on that works the brakes. . . ."

"No," say the voices. "No, no. . . . See for us, see deep. . . ."

"No——"

Awfulness. The un-shapes scramble and pulse. "Deep," say the voices. "See deep. . . ."

"I shall . . . be sick. . . ."

"DEEP!'

The camera, the lens, floating close and closer. Somewhere inside the train inside the man inside the eyes are other pictures for it, closed each within each like a nest of mirages. The pictures twinkle, fade and strengthen and fade again, reduce themselves to glimmering node-points, swell. . . . Someone somewhere bites lips inside until they are salt. Only the voice is calm; it speaks from the grey place the other side of terror. It husks and limps, feeling shared pain.

"I . . . see the rain. It bounces on pavements, pours along gutters. I see houses. Rows of houses. Their bricks are bright with the rain. I see a church, or a chapel. . . . All round . . . oh it's a chapel, chapel of a c-cemetery. The . . . houses all round like a high grey wall in the rain. . . . The . . . men walking, the thing they are pushing doesn't make a

noise because the trolley has rubber tyres.... The ... people are coming now. Their shoulders are bent in the rain. They say, *"It always rains on days like this...."* I see the f-flowers, the rain is on the flowers, on their petals. The earth is dark because of the rain. I see the ... coffin, going down into the grave——"

"Gently," say the voices. And "Gently, gently...."

"I see the houses again. One house. The people are inside and the great whispering cars have gone.... The rain cries against the windows like a thing shut out wanting to get in, and the people don't know what to say to each other, what to say to *him*.... An old lady is making tea, there are sandwiches all ready, but *he* can't eat, he knows the bread is full of flesh—PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME SEE ANY MORE——"

"Enough," say the voices. "Gently, enough.... We know he's coming now, he's nearly here. It's enough...." And the camera, the eye, withdraws itself silently, folding in, closing, shutting away....

"... to our order number cee five, oh eight six...."

The voices are in a void. The void has no colour. Neither is it dark....

"In a fiercely mourning house in a crooked year...."

Jimmy Strong lay back in the seat, blew smoke, regarded the Hush Puppies that terminated his slimly trousered legs. The rhythm of the line of poetry pattered in his mind, stressed by the carriage wheels that rang now *fiercely*-mourn-*fiercely*-mourn over the rail joints. A great artist had strung those syllables together some time before he died of ... was it eighteen Scotches, in a New York bar? Jimmy shook his head slightly, eyes vague. Before, the words had just been angry, lovely sounds; now he knew what they meant.

Ahead the branch line stretched into sunhaze. A little halt swam into sight, platforms wreathed again with roses, standards and climbers that exploded like silent fireworks against the thick blue of the sky. He saw lampstandards wreathed to their tops with the brightness, fresh paintwork on railings and trellises, glowing flower beds edged with

whitewashed stones. The train brakes came on in a series of diminishing whooshes, the coach breathed to a stop and the driver turned off his engines.

Jimmy stroked ash from his cigarette into the tray, sat feeling the sun strike through glass to burn his cheek. Footsteps ticked somewhere, faded into silence. Above the carriage a wooden bridge spanned the single track; in front the rails curved slightly to the right and vanished between low mounded hills. Somewhere out there a town Jimmy had never seen *existed* in four o'clock drowsiness. He asked himself, *will it be any good? Will it be a place I can stay in for a while?* He told himself, *somehow it's crazy, but you're a man on the run. Can you stop running there?*

Running. There are times when the mind balks, hits a fact it can't take, throws up an equation that gives a batty answer. Then maybe the deep, the thinking part of you whimpers and arches back into stasis and after a time of that any course of action seems good. So you start to run. You're not running *to* anywhere, just *away* from where you are. You're an electric puppet; the impossibility rides there on your shoulder while your motor nerves twitch and your body takes you away and away....

A problem like an equation is made up of elements. You can take them singly, it's trying to fit them all together that makes your skull sing. Jimmy remembered an element. The Studio, back in Town. Light filtering through inadequate windows, littered drawing boards, filing cabinets topheavy with drifts of paper and card. The yellowing fluorescents, their tubes flyblown; flexes, Sellotaped here and there to the edges of desks, that fed tired Anglepoise lamps from a Medusa confusion. It was a place where you could work and work and see your dreams give up and curl at the edges and realize the ad game was a machine, a bloody machine that sorted the heavyweight souls from the middleweight, and the middleweight from the lightweight. ... The man who sat at your elbow, painting in the shine on endless successions of bright green lawnmowers, had been a *Prix de Rome*. Maybe he'd had dreams too, once....

An element, an aspect of existence. Farther back, buried deeper in the impossible matrix of Time, were others. His father.... Only the image of him was fading, losing itself under a rippling and a hotness, the glaring hopeful hopeless time people call adolescence. Strong rubbed his face. Adolescence is the time you want freedom. You take it, snatch it, eat it maybe before the folk round you grab it back. Nobody can help you. Not then. Least of all a tired old man trying to come to terms with life....

So he'd shucked his father off and gone to London to learn how to be a Great Artist with capital letters, and maybe there'd been times over the years when he'd thought the old devil wasn't too bad after all, one day he'd just breeze back home and say Hi.... But the day had never come. Instead there was a telegram. It told him, the thing he'd planned on doing, it wouldn't get done now. It told him he'd run out of tomorrows....

Jimmy stubbed the cigarette and lit another. A coach cleared the line ahead; a signal dropped its smoky-amber arm, the driver pulled back jerkily on the Deadman's. The carriage began to gather speed. Moved out into the sunlight, nosed among the hills.

Jimmy told himself, the old man had had it good in those last years. Better than he'd ever realized. He'd made the grade, in his own way; even got his name up over the gate of the yard in faded swaggering letters. *"John Strong, Scrap Dealer"*. And underneath, a motto, a legend. *"Everything has its price."* ...

Elements in a random equation. Strong nodded to himself bitterly, in the bright train. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah...."

He tried to remember the rain, visualize the sky outside, the carriage grey, the windows streaked with spots. Suddenly, the exercise was impossible. Like remembering a pain, trying to work out after it had gone why you threshed and rolled and felt like dying. But that was a defence mechanism. Maybe this was as well. *Dear God protect me from the dullness and the rain....*

It had rained at the funeral. And afterwards. The morning after; Jimmy sitting in a little cluttered office, the man

in front of him hemming and coughing and seeming as dusty and yellowed as the shelves of files that lined the walls. Jimmy listened to the voice again scratching its way from fact to monstrous fact while the rain pattered soft against the glass. Death duties of course, he understood a large amount would be lost. The affairs were confused, some little time would be needed.... But the money that had been left for him, the money he'd known nothing about ... yes, a fairly substantial amount by any standards....

Jimmy licked his lips, beginning to sense the sheer size of the problem his father had left him by dying alone like that. He said, "How much ... ?" He knew his voice was unsteady, knew too that whatever he said that would be misunderstood. And the stranger had steepled his fingers, winced to drive his glasses back up his nose, looked at him with eyes that held every expression and no expression.

"Immediately.... Well I would say, Mr. Strong ... in round figures you understand, in very broad figures ... *Twelve thousand pounds....*"

The driver touched a control and the train hooted; a long double note full somehow with the sensation of summer evenings, like the chuckle of water, the sound of a lawnmower. Jimmy shook his head again. His father had been what he never would be; a businessman. They'd told him, one of the strangers had told him after the funeral, they thought old Strong had gone crazy when he bought that ancient halftrack. Old Kraut job it was, streaked with rust; they'd dug it out of some rotting stockpile down in the Channel Islands. Then John had bought another and another, snapping them up where he could find them, even bringing them in from the Continent. Forty quid here, fifty there, a hundred, two.... Bren carriers, ancient beaten-up scout cars, lorries, Command trucks; German, British, American.... If it was old, and smashed, and had fought in the war, John Strong would buy. Because everything has a price.... Light tanks, sidearms, steel helmets, badges, flamethrowers.... And it had paid off. Jimmy sensed. Twelve thousand for a big outfit wants to make a film, say they

need the props and you're the only man they can come to. You can make that in a week.... You've got to know the ropes of course and get to the right boys and slip tenners to odd people for not being in such and such a place at such and such a time; but these things can be arranged....

He stubbed a cigarette and caught himself lighting another almost instantly. He asked himself, angrily, *could I help being born the sort of person I am with the sort of mind I've got? Slow to hate, slower to love, the brain forges relationships like links of a chain, slow, slow ... but when the job's done, when the links are made, they're good for the only part of eternity that interests me, my lifetime....* He told himself, *my father was like that. He was a West country man, he might forget, but he could never forgive. Ten years of silence while he made the money he couldn't give me when I was young and silly and wanted to cut a dash. That's what the wallet in my pocket says. That's what the new chequebook is telling me. The world owes you a living, my son.... So out thee can go, and live like a rich little king....*

He pushed his forehead against his clenched hands. *I didn't mean it* he thought. *We none of us mean what we do....*

The hand was shaking his sleeve gently, insistently. He looked up startled. The old lady's eyes searched his face, changing in quick shifts of focus and direction. "Are you all right?" she said. "Are you quite *all right* ... ?"

"Er ... yeah. Thanks...." He made his mouth smile. "Just maybe a little tired. Long journey.... Thanks for asking."

"*Ahh....*" She sat back across the aisle, seeming relieved. Looked out through the window then back to him quickly, birdlike. Nodded, smiled, bobbed her silver head. "Ah yes.... And are you travelling to the end of the line?"

"Yes," he said. "Place called Warwell-on-Starr."

Sharply, "Then you don't know Warwell?"

"No, I've ... never been there. I reckoned I might stay a while," he said, "If I liked it...."

She simpered. "Oh, you will.... You'll *love* Warwell,

everybody does. It's a *nice* town. Such a *nice* little town. . . ."

"Yeah," said Jimmy carefully. "Er . . . yeah. . . ."

He sat back trying to think. The image that had flickered across his mind just then; the river, the trees, the flint church tower nestling. . . . But he'd never seen the place he was going to, he knew nothing about it. He decided, it won't be anything like that. There'll be brutal acres of rail sidings, scrubby pink little Developments marching in all directions. Ten to one I shall loathe the dump. . . .

Queer though, this feeling of unreality; a detached half-awareness, a dream state in which visions and imaginings could be as real as the touchable things round him. It was as if shapes jostled at the edges of his mind, brightnesses brighter than the sky, shadows that mocked at sunlight. He shrugged. These were effects of heightened perception, of jangling nerves that now mercifully were beginning to ease. For days past, life had been like a cine film shown on some huge screen. Too big, too close, too detailed. He'd wanted to pull back, get out from under, but he couldn't. . . .

Warwell. Why the Devil had he run here, anyway? His father's accountant had talked about the place, but he knew somehow the name had been in his mind before that. When? When had it started, what had triggered it? He'd wanted somewhere quiet, somewhere he could go to and be alone and think and chew at his problem, but why had one name seemed to stand out from every map he opened? Warwell, a place on a river he'd never seen. . . .

For a time the rails had been winding through the low hills; round the last of the bends the way straightened and Jimmy saw how the little bridges appeared each under each like images in two opposed mirrors. Beneath the last of them the coach stopped again and there were the lamp-standards once more, hidden to their tops by creepers that rioted the length of the diminutive station. The branch line was certainly damned pretty; somehow even the waywardness of it, the curving and wriggling of the tracks,

soothed like a balm. As though a world was being shut away behind each grassy shoulder of the hills; as if ahead, islanded, was all that was sweet and real. Jimmy stubbed the cigarette half smoked. *There can be,* he told himself, *no sense of homecoming. Not to a place you've never seen....* He glanced sideways at the old lady, expecting another comment, but she stayed quiet. She was sitting staring in front of her, half-smile fossilized on her face as though she could already see the *nice* town ahead.

Jimmy told himself, it could just be.... Could be I've met a whole series of nice, interesting, interested people one after the other. A ticket clerk, a porter at Tanbridge where I changed on to the branch; an old lady on a train. All interested to hear I was going to Warwell; all keen to tell me, it's a *nice* little town. Sometimes life's like that, pointless coincidences get themselves strung together like beads....

The coach was moving again. There was a river, curving away broad and silver through water meadows. The train wheels boomed on a bridge. Jimmy leaned forward again, frowning, grappling at something that refused to come out into the light ... and sat quite still, feeling icy cold. Ahead, the town made itself. More hills closed off a vista of black and white houses, steep wavy roofs. *There was the river, swinging back to cross in front of Warwell like a moat. There were trees. There was a church, flint-built and nestling.*

The station was an amber box enclosing dim areas of platform. The coach glided into coolness, wheezed, stopped where the rails stopped as suddenly and startlingly as life. Strong lifted his bags, felt the sharp rectangle of the ticket dig into his right palm. Somehow he felt out of breath and stiff, as if he was ending some huge dangerous odyssey. He passed through the barrier, turned back to see the coach bulking against the light. Beside him a girl with good legs and burning-red hair spoke suddenly. "Heard you talking on the train," she said cheekily. "Hope you enjoy your stay. It's such a *nice* little town...." Turned while Jimmy was staring, and clicked away.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah." He walked out of the station, into a sunlit square. He saw a garage, doors standing open; a taxi rank, a man lounging, reading a newspaper. A few yards away the river slid cool and green and hung with willows, filling the air with some cool suggestion of presence that was more subtle than scent. Across the street a towering ugly-pretty pile of waterside Gothic proclaimed itself the *George Hotel.* Jimmy walked towards it, swinging his grip, feeling the sun burn on the side of his neck. From the town beyond came a buzz of sound; cars, voices; *somewhere a Wheel turned slow, unseen and unheard, its rim as big as a valley.*

Two

The voices chirrup in the deep coolness of night, while the river glides black past the houses and the church. "Wrong," say the voices. "Wrong, all wrong. . . . He's wrong for us, who brought him here . . . ?"

"I . . . I didn't know. . . ."

"Wrong," say the voices. "Wrong, wrong. . . ." There is anger, and a squirm of giggling. There are brightnesses like flames. They burn, but there is no heat. There are other things. . . .

"PLEASE . . . NO, PLEASE. . . ."

Laughter. A chase, an airy game of tag. The Devil takes the hindmost. "Wrong," shout the voices. "He is wrong, you were wrong. . . ." There is a soundless sound of screaming. There is a writhing, a gasping, a wanting to die. There is a catching, a touching, a hating. . . . Then, suddenly, there is quiet. Dawn touches the river with a ghostly massiveness of light. The light has no colour. Bats hunt across the greyness like the shadows of dead leaves; island trees hang impossibly still in a world of water and air. The Starr is a mirror now a thousand miles deep, a quicksilver slash reaching to Earth's core.

And part of Warwell sleeps. . . .

This is a nice town. Go ahead and ask anybody in the

street, they'll tell you straight out. It's a *nice* town. Friendly, these people. And quiet. The town's quiet. Nothing ever happens, not to Warwell-on-Starr. Nothing ever has. Nothing ever will.

It's an old town. Built on a cross, so it has its North Street and its South, its West and East. East Street runs down to the river, because here that flows south and north. Bottom of East Street is the church. It looks over the traffic lights and the big curlicued lamp standard at the crossroads, towards the Town Hall. West Street runs up by the Town Hall, climbing into the hills. East and West Streets together make the shopping centre. There's a Smiths and a Boots and a Timothy Whites on the corner and it's all very homely. Very *nice*. There's some industry here, not too much; in the main, Warwell is a Typical Market Town. There's a little cinema that runs evenings, and they use the church hall sometimes as a theatre. And once a year the Steam Fair comes, in the meadows by the Starr. It's a sort of local convention, the shopkeepers look forward to it. There's a Chess Club and an Athletic Club, a Youth Club and a W.I. There's an Archery Society (Bowmen of Starr) and a Cricket Club. They play matches summer evenings on a little ground with elm trees round it, back of the *Bull Hotel* on the outskirts of town, and there are stories about great bats lifting deliveries into the Starr, but nothing like that ever happens now. The traffic bypasses Warwell. There's a little police station with a sergeant and a constable, there's a vet and a couple of doctors and . . . oh Hell, all sorts of stuff. It's a *nice* town. . . .

Jimmy lay on his back on the bed. Beside him on a chair was a saucer with ash and cigarette butts. One hand moved slowly, trailing smoke, from mouth to saucer and back. His knees were drawn up and he held a notebook resting against his legs. In the centre of the page, growing in curly lettering from a mass of doodles, was the motto: "This is a *nice* town."

Jimmy sighed and shook his head very slowly, asked himself silently just what in Hell was the matter. Warwell hadn't disappointed; quite to the contrary. He liked the

place, it was a n—— Go on, say it. It was a nice little town. After a while the niceness ate into the bone, decaying it maybe. He frowned. The dreams? They were nothing. Erotic symbolism, psychosomatic disorder ... maybe he'd got a complex because he'd never killed his brother. Never had a brother to kill.... He shrugged, still lying prone. His state of mind must be attributable to his odd situation. Plenty of money, no ties, time to burn.... He was completely at rest; it seldom happened, and never to the young.

Maybe he'd dream again tonight. The dream was always the same. Always vague, impossible to grasp afterwards; a thing of sensation only, an affair of mounting pressures that rose and rose to wake him once nearly screaming. After that the pressures eased but he still knew of their existence the way you can know of something in a dream without seeing or hearing. The Wheel, as he thought of it, was the central part of the nightmare; and he himself was at the centre of the Wheel, on or in its hub, sensing it move, feeling the thunder of it in his long bones. The Wheel so massive that size itself seemed an indecent, foul thing. And somehow too the hub was Warwell, its houses and its church. But the Wheel was useless; it moved, it ground, but it ground nothing. Its turning was aimless, the threat of it was simply in its *being*....

He got off the bed. The room was small, stuck up under the decorated eaves of the *George* just below where a terracotta dragon glared down into Station Square. The bedsitter was all in one; at the far side in an alcove was a sink, beside it the tiny gas cooker. Facing them, the door to the toilet. A chair, a folding table; the bed took up most of the space that was left. But there had been no point in burning money, and the garret had a good view. Jimmy walked to the window, stood looking out absently. Below him was the long roof of the station, beyond it the river and the water meadows. Farther off again the hills, the distant blue cloth of trees.

He told himself, *maybe you were wrong to come here and bury yourself away. Maybe you should have gone*

back to Town with your problem and your worry. Maybe he should have talked to Roley.

He nearly laughed. Ask Roley what to do with twelve thousand quid.... Roley would have told him. He could see him now, hear him almost. "Buy a Phantom One old boy, and half a dozen whores...." Yes, and kill yourself with an overdose of Mammon. On your father's money.... Jimmy reached quietly for his cigarettes. Roley's mouth would have mocked, but not his eyes, pale blue, warm-cold, watching out above a tangle of beard. Roley would have understood....

He told himself, *Roley would love this town. All the niceness that's loose here, it would be like a challenge to him. He'd get through it somehow to what really drives the place....*

Drives?

Funny idea. Nothing drives Warwell. Warwell has no drive, no reason for being. Warwell *is*, that's all. It has its own inbuilt, bright sparrow-perkiness; the people come and go, sleep and wake up, eat and talk and laugh. They're just born friendly, all of them. Why move, there's everything here. You get bored, you can get a little job; some day you'll have to anyway because the money will run low, any money runs low. But right here there'd be no problem. Here you've got friends, a lot of them. You've been here a month and it seems already you know half the town, it's like you'd lived in Warwell all your life. But that's the sort of place it is. *Nice....*

Jimmy stubbed the cigarette, gave in to himself angrily and lit it again. He felt like a detective trying to solve a crime that hasn't been committed. There was everything for him in Warwell. The Wheel——

He told himself irritably, stop that for God's sake. Your point of view comes from your strange circumstances, you feel floating, dissociated, because that's just exactly what you are. No worries, no living to earn for a long, long while. He wondered, was he still being too selfish? Should he form an association with somebody, anybody? Easy enough to do....

He went back and lay on the bed again, pillowing his head on one arm, watching up at the quiet blankness of the ceiling. He pulled his lip slowly with his teeth. *One problem I can define,* he thought. *The twelve thousand. How to use it well? How make up for the years it took out of the old man's life, the loneliness, the anger?* He told himself, *the answer's here. Always here, where I am, because the problem rides with me. I tried running, wasn't any good....*

And Warwell? It's crazy, but the town has a problem too. Maybe if I can find it, crack it, I'll find it's all tied up with me. So somewhere, someplace, I have to find the answer to some question, I don't know what the question is, but when I see it I'll recognize it, know what to do. See what? See the Wheel. The thing that drives this town....

You're crazy, Strong. Take yourself off, let the tide surge you around some more....

A month in a strange town. Somewhere, in all the not-happenings, the men not there on all the stairs, is the key to a question I have to decode before I can even ask it. There is no wrongness here, just not-rightness. There's a world of difference between them. There must be a question, and an answer to it. I must find question and answer before I go because somehow I know it's important to me, to what I've become, to do that....

He gave himself up, angrily, to analysis. Covering ground well covered before, letting scenes and sights swim out of his subconscious, flare and drop back. Like the little bridges swimming into sight from the train, falling away behind. Calmly and quietly, the way life was lived in Warwell-on-Starr. But that goes for all life, any life. Life is a walking shadow, a poor player that flits and struts his—oh, go to Hell....

I can look up Warwell in a gazetteer, find it on a map. It's here, it exists, it's solid like any other town. Its buildings are stone and brick, its people are flesh and blood, they have shadows. I can read its population, six thousand. Read it's a market town, no heavy industry, used to be a centre

of the wool trade. It's an urban district, returned a Conservative member at the last election....

But that doesn't help me. It doesn't stop the strangeness, doesn't check the soundless noise of the Wheel....

Weren't dreams symbols? Twisted maybe out of all recognition, but still shadows sprung from something heard, seen.... This was how the mind talked to itself, in imagery that clothed its own secret fears....

Then take an incident, any incident. Let's start again.

The dog. Yes, she'd do. He was walking of an evening, following the slow course of the Starr. There'd been cabin cruisers tied up at the river bank, voices chuckling across the water. Night was coming, bluely; and it had crossed his mind that a man rambling alone like that could use a dog for company. No sooner the thought than the act; she'd come, flickering in the dusk, a long, slim hound, dark-eyed and fast. But she was no Were-thing, she'd come up close to let him touch her, she was real enough. He'd wondered about her, she was good blood and there was no name tag on her collar. She'd followed him a mile, two, circling and dancing, then she'd melted back into the dark. He hadn't seen her before, or since....

Take the people at the *Horseshoes*. It was a strange pub to him; he'd gone into the bar, found the place deserted. He remembered standing and downing his pint and wishing more or less vaguely for talk, for friendliness, some conversation to stimulate. And they'd come. A dozen of them, ordinary enough blokes, but queerly fascinating, each in a different way. They'd talked; about the river and the town, about cars and dogs and the last war. The fighting in the Western Desert, and going up through Germany with the Eighth. Inconsequential stuff, but just what he needed. One of them had produced a pocket chess set later on, given him a startlingly good game. He'd turned down a couple of supper invites, with some difficulty. Who were those folk? Where were they? He'd never seen them again.

And then the *Green Dragon* affair. That was the best of all. Take that one through stage by stage, relive it. Because

somewhere, somewhere, there just *might* be something you missed. Get it all, get the fine detail. . . .

He was walking up West Street on a Saturday night. Last Saturday, just under a week ago. He'd done a round of pubs, the *Horseshoes*, the *Bell*, the *Royal Sovereign*. He was just a little canned, and just a little melancholy. It was nine o'clock and turning dusk; most of the shopfronts were lit and the neon signs, cars parked on the grid outside the Town Hall, people strolling, alone like himself or arm in arm. The cinema doors were open and there was a little do on at the church hall, loads of cars. Down by the Starr the lamps on the bridge were reflecting long wobbling streaks into the water and there was a smell of some blossom on the air, jasmine he thought. He got to the *Green Dragon* on the waterfront, there was a dance. He went in, downed a couple of Scotches, saw the g——

Steady. Get an impression of the room, might be something there.

The dance floor was low-lit, the boards shining amber. There was a shuffling of feet, just audible under the band. Mirror bowl was working, making the brown people dancing look like animals caught undersea in a jewelled net. The girl was sitting on her own. Get the picture. Colour of hair. Its brownness, the way the light caught it. Little black dress. *That* little black dress. . . . The glass of Chartreuse in front of her. Colour? Clear light green. Like her eyes.

They danced, just a little. Then drove. She had a little MG. Model TF, colour maroon. Slight blow in exhaust, get all details right. . . . They circled the valley, as if running on the rim of a wheel. It was a fine night, cloudless and with a high moon. They stopped up in the hills to hear things chirring in the air, the calling of owls. He remembered the girl-smell of her. Not the scent. She had no scent, but something from her still filled the car, marking the cockpit as a special place.

The woods in the valley were like moonlit hessian. He watched down at them, mouth drying. Hearing her moving, little scraping sounds of fabric. "You can have me if you

want," she said. "I'm very good, and I do like you. . . ." One breast was uncovered already and she was wriggling, trying to work the dress farther down. . . .

He stubbed the cigarette and got up, prowled back to the window. He said "Oh, no. . . . Oh, no no no. . . ." Too easy, the schoolboy's dream of home. She'd been so . . . nice about it, everybody was so bloody nice about everything, the world was just too smooth. He pulled a face at the distant view of hills. What was her name? Liz, Liz Baron. . . . Like the dog, like the chess player, she'd just edged into his life when needed and he hadn't seen her since. She came, she made herself bare for him, she slipped quietly away. No yelling, no recriminations. There was a *flow*, like the bridges flowing past the train. . . .

He rubbed his hand across his face, in the high hotel room. One day, one hour, he'd crack the smooth skin of Warwell, see a little of the brightness that lay beneath. Something would happen, some time, some where, that wasn't *nice*. And then he'd have his key, the first piece of the puzzle. He said to himself, this could be important. This could matter very much. He picked his jacket up, slung it across his shoulder and went out to find a bar.

THREE

NEXT day he bought a car.

She was blue and low and nearly new and he fell in love with the cobby line of her, and when he'd done he had exactly eleven thousand and sixty-five quid left to his name, but it was worth it. The insurance shocked and upset him, but he could afford it; he signed forms and wrote cheques, and by lunchtime the thing was done. He drove away from the showroom and circuited the town, then over the river bridge and up the dual carriageway beyond, pushing the ton, feeling the world was a sweet place. And back to the *George* to park the glitter temporarily in the hotel yard. (Virginia creeper hung down from the roofs, setting off the icy car beautifully, but there was no key there.) He thought, maybe if I keep piling perfection on

perfection all the blacks will turn to white and positive to negative, there'll be one whacking big imperfection to sink my teeth in, or one that'll sink its teeth in me. . . .

Imperfection. . . .

He took the Triumph out of town that evening, up West Street and the hill beyond. The hill she flung away behind her, away and down. He drove across Sanford Common to Gallowridge, turned off through the little village there, left a crackle of exhaust behind him, climbing again to How Beacon. Five or six miles out from Warwell, on the rim of the Whee—shut up, dammit—was a little pub, the *Goat and Compasses.* (God Encompasseth Us . . . we hope.) Sixteenth century, so old it was nothing to look at. Stone-flagged floors, great fireplace with the ingle-nooks set each side, fireback glinting with blacking, decorated with cast sheaves of corn. No bars, just white-scrubbed tables set about and they bring the beer in from the kitchen, beer comes from the woo—— Girl, running—— Beer from the *wood*——

Foot clamped to brake pedal and the TR4 swinging and throwing up gravel, lane too narrow, hedges spinning past, she was running head down to meet him and he was moving too quick he couldn't stop. *God please*——

The thud, solid and hard. Then quiet. His hands holding the wheel, vibrating with shock. Then letting go the rim, having to make himself let go. Finding the catch, opening the door, no sensation of metal under the fingers. Throat dry like a sandy tube, unswallowing. Wasn't walking, it was just his feet. He floated.

She was kneeling in front of the bonnet holding her arm. Her hair was hanging and never was there such a still silent road, and her breath was scraping in the silence like a file on wood.

The car was nosed into the bank, there were scorings, grass and clods thrown up. He'd steered into the bank. No, his hands had steered into the bank. But he hadn't hit her. He'd stopped just . . . so, an arm's breadth. The thud hadn't been . . . her. He told himself, the bank. The bank not . . . her. . . .

He was trying to lift her, turn her wrist. Expecting gravel-rash, not what he saw. The skin furrowed, curling back at the elbow from startled sheet-white flesh that grew pinpoints of red. The brightness coalesced, ran together in thickening trickles; the arm wept blood silently, fast. She pulled it away like she was ashamed of it. Her knee was hurt too, grit sticking to the graze. He put his arm down to pull her up and she was wet. Thin jumper, wet across the back. "Running," she said. "I . . . sorry. . . ."

"Here," he said. "Here. . . ." (Moment of seeing and knowing he'd killed her, sitting before his lazy foot would move, they called it r-e-a-c-t-i-o-n t-i-m-e. . . .) The car engine was ticking as it cooled.

She was leaning on the bonnet and gasping, propping herself by her behind, blood ran across her leg and somehow he knew brilliantly just how she was feeling. Sort of dumb pain in the knee and stiffness spreading up to the shoulder from where she'd torn her elbow. He was asking where he could take her and she was shaking her head, trying to push hair back from her eyes, No, no. . . .

"You're wet," he said absurdly. "Look, all wet .. here. . . ." He was opening the car door. (*Imperfection. . . . Who runs themselves wet on a still summer night . . . ?*)

She tried to push away, brightness splashed his shoe. Jeeze, he thought, Jeeze, there just can't be an Awkward Pause, not now. . . . The thought galvanized him, he made her sit in, slide across from the wheel. Awkwardly, everything awkward. . . . Was a towel, he'd shopped in the afternoon, hadn't taken the things out of the car. Couple of shirts, hand towel. God, her arm. . . . Put the towel in her hand, helped her wrap loosely. "For your skirt," he said. Skirt was a pretty little denim hipster, marked already. . . . He got in the car, started up, pulled the bonnet out of the muck. Moment of panic, something would clank down there and he wouldn't be able to drive. . . . But the Triumph was OK.

Back the way he'd come, moving fast. He had to find a place to turn then he really motored with the girl lying, looking white. The hospital sign, he remembered seeing

it.... Place was off the road, stood back a hundred yards behind trees. Little old house, new low wing built on, he'd have called it a cottage hospital, but it probably wasn't called that now, probably was some Unit or other. He swung up to the front of it, ran round to lean on the porch bell. They were very good. Accident ... yes, yes, of course, take her arm.... No it's all right now, have a seat Mr.... er....

"Strong," he said. Croaked. And I hope to God there isn't dirt on my nearside front.... No, she's with me, it's all right.... No, it didn't happen on the road, she fell.... Why the need to cover for myself and her? *Because he told himself with terrible clarity, because of the Wheel. Because then for a moment it showed itself, just the rim filthy and shrieking, shoving up out of the soil. Until it ground back into the quiet...*

Twenty yards away from him through a pair of open doors six perky men were being given supper, cheeking at the nurse with the trolley. The scene was brightly lit, a vignette set against the softly blueing dusk of the corridor. When the lights came on he saw other vignettes. A tall vase of red flowers on an occasional table. A copper jug in an alcove. A stack of magazines, *Field* and *Lady*. The whole of experience was for him now a series of glowing unconnected pictures against a dark backdrop. Like the images he had always imagined filtering through the compound eye of an insect.

When they brought her back to him she was chalk-pale. Sister was lined and bucktoothed and very lovable right now. "Best take her straight home," she said. "Straight home...." And Jimmy agreed. Yes, of course, tetanus, of course one couldn't be too careful, she'd had a shot, now she must be taken straight home.... The arm was bandaged, neatly and whitely, the leg they hadn't bothered with, it was just wiped. He put his arm round her waist. She was still wet, he could smell the sweat now mixed with the otherworld tang of the dressing. Leave it a couple of days he was told, and straight to her doctor if anything goes wrong.... "Yes," he said. "Yes. I'll see to her, she'll be

all right. And thank you, Sister, very much indeed . . . Yes, yes of course. . . ." And finally he could drive away into the night.

She said, "I'm awfully sorry. . . ." They were on the road, her hair was moving in the breeze, he was driving back to Warwell gently, mind busy. "I must have put you about," she said. "It was very kind. . . ."

He was just beginning to realize again that he hadn't killed her. "I wasn't going anywhere," he said. "What's your name?"

". . . Anne Nielson." First the pause, then she didn't ask him his.

"What were you doing, Anne? You came so quick, I couldn't do a thing. . . ."

"I was running." She shuddered. "You hit the bank, if you hadn't hit the bank. . . ."

Leave it, leave it. . . . "Where do you live?"

"In Warwell.'

"I'll take you home."

"It doesn't matter. . . ."

"Oh, now really," he said. "Please. . ."

She's nearly blonde. Older than she looks. Running. Warwell. Six miles, seven. . . . Not from Warwell, couldn't have run from Warwell. . . .

"Please," she said. "Something silly. I'd like a drink. . . ."

"What?"

She said "Nice long double Scotch. That's all. . . ." Her hand was on his sleeve.

He whipped the TR4 on to the hard standing outside the *Dog and Badger*. Nice little pub, he'd been there once before. "Anne," he said. "This is all wrong."

"Please. That is if you d-don't mind. I'm all right now, it was just the shock."

So women are tougher than men. He opened the door, helped her out. She flicked her hair. "God, I'm a mess. . . ."

Conventional remarks the order of the day. The fear had gone, she was female again. Had been a frightened child. So had he. . . . He ordered the Scotch, with misgivings. Waited for her. She'd excused herself to get tidy. He thought, she's

tall. Taller than I realized. The saloon was empty, he stood looking at the sporting prints on the walls. The pub was quiet; once a car passed, moving fast, then there was silence again while she didn't come and didn't come and didn't come.

He went to the side door, looked out. Lamp in the road showed him a wicket gate swinging. He walked back into the bar, closing the door behind him. Waited half an hour before he admitted he'd been taken for a sucker. He realized then the true direction of the misgivings and felt nearly happy. Obscurely, he seemed to be back on familiar ground. "Ah," Roley used to say, "The thrust and parry of Sex; the feint, the quick *riposte* . . . the posturings, the lunges. . . ." Jimmy knew all about sex. (He was seventeen and feeling the cold, she was all of twenty and the more she took off the fatter she got, get stripped she said, and he said I am stripped and she giggled and did something that made him screech, sex, *pshaw*. . . .) He poured the Scotch into a potted palm. He simply wasn't inventive enough; Dali once cut his finger on a glass and filled the glass with the blood and put in one real and one imitation cherry, set the apparatus on a table and asked everybody to watch it then stole quietly away, but all he could do with his Scotch was pour it into a potted palm. Jimmy recognized the fact that he was becoming too cynical, finished the beer, got into the TR4 and drove home.

He paced the little hotel room, from sink to bed and back. An hour, two, telling himself of all things she's just twelve months too old to wear a hipster, but isn't she sweet; then he became aware, oddly, of the quietness in the town, the one oblong of light showing from under the tall eaves. He put the light off, pulled collar and tie und——

Down in the square a car engine started, wound up high in second. He ran back to the window, saw the bulk of the motor and the white fan of headlights swinging out the top of Station Road. Listened to the noise fade in the night.

No connection, he told himself. None. He pulled collar and tie undone, lay on the bed, lit a cigarette. Watched the

pink reflection of it on the ceiling. All problems were soluble, including the present one. And he had a name to work on, presuming the name was correct.

Don't presume though. Not a thing. Work from the facts. Anne, running. Wet through. She hadn't seen the car. Damn it to Hell, she hadn't seen the road.... She was running or staggering along the road, head down. Where had she come from? No way of telling. What was she running from? From nothing. Empty fields, sunlight.

He imagined himself lacing up and projecting a mental film. The last few seconds when he already thought he'd killed her, the action recorded dispassionately by the camera of eyes and brain. He saw himself straining to hold the car, the girl stumbling at the bonnet....

Two images melted. He'd been to a coursing meet, just once. Seen the hare hit the wire and bounce back squalling, right under the dogs. He remembered its movements. Disorganized, spastic almost. Anne, running. Yeah, something had been there. Something that could hurt her worse than her poor scraped arm....

Queer to be thinking like this, in terms of Anne. Her pain, her fright. Everything in terms of Anne. It was like she fitted into a gap already there in his consciousness. But that was crazy, he'd only seen her a few minutes, she'd been sweating, scared half to death. Scared of him, he told himself. Why?

Find her again then.

How? Population of Warwell was six thousand, nearer seven with the new estates. And she didn't live in Warwell, something told him she'd lied there, the answer had come too pat. Work in Warwell then maybe? What as, clerk, typist, shopgirl? Get a classified, start ringing the firms. "Excuse me, but do you have a Miss Nielson working for you?" Oh, go to Hell, and pick a few needles from haystacks on the way.... His mind turned slowly, tiring itself with thinking. The car that had passed the *Dog and Badger*. He knew it had picked her up, a hundred yards or so down the road. Just how in Hell had she fixed that runout? No answer. Never would be, till he found her again. The

Wheel, the thing that ran this town. It wasn't going to give itself away. It was too big, it was too subtle.... Above all look how it covered itself, it was too scared....

He found he was sweating in the dark. He wondered if he was going crazy. He'd always been a little mad, it was the artist in him. All artists were mad, everybody knew that. So most of them went mad quietly to fit the image, at heart they were conformists.

The car that had taken Anne away. The same car had circled back, mysterious and quiet, sat humped in Station Square watching up at his light....

Strong, you're rambling. There's no proof of that, not even a basis for assumption. Your nerves are shot, you're getting the jumps. All this talk of a Wheel. Hallucination, vision ... more like simple nuttiness. He told himself nobody has robbed a bank, nobody has done a murder, gunned their pal down in the street. All they've done is run a clean, quiet, friendly little town. And maybe make a girl bolt across a field....

They? Who were *they?* The people who'd hunted Anne maybe, the people in the car....

It was no use. *They* were there and the Wheel, grinding in his subconscious. He could feel it, it was almost like the building shook with it. What would it do, now he'd seen it move? The Wheel was for grinding, grinding....

Anne....

He slept; and the dream came.

Not like any dream he'd ever had. Not like the dreams of the Wheel. Their horror lay in their vagueness; this one was clear and bright and pitilessly precise. He was standing on a station platform. He looked round slowly, recognized Tanbridge. The little wooden footway over the tracks, the banks of roses. But the tracks were rusty now, they gleamed in the stark light orange-pink and shocking as dissected veins; and the roses were dying, they thrust out from their trellises like black spiky skeletons. The sun was shining, but it held no warmth, it was like the pale orb of a half eclipse. And the light was fading slowly from the sky.

He became aware by degrees of a huge sense of desolation. It swamped him, bore down till it felt like a weight across his back. He could barely force his feet to move. He dragged himself across the platform, over the bridge. Wood broke and crumbled under his heels. He touched the flowers and they crumbled too, dropped into flakes that a wind picked up, tossed into the sky like black snow. There was a railbus waiting, and a ... sort of motorman. He made himself get aboard, fighting revulsion at every step; and the car was so old, the seats of it were blackened and brittle, its wood was dull, splotched over with mildew. Even the mirrors had grown continents of green and ginger spots. He heard the buzzer and the answer from the cab; he thought the coach would never move, but it did, creaking and moaning. Out past a dead signalbox, into the hopeless light.

On the road the little bridges had fallen, they shoved up stumps like decayed teeth. The train cried, but there was nothing pleasant in the sound, the hoarseness of it whirled up and away like the last noise on a dying planet. There were people by the track, first ones and twos then more then a great dim crowd of them pushing forward, jostling, holding out their arms. He saw folk he knew. His parents, people from Town, old Roley; but the faces were transformed, the skulls seemed to glow and smirk through the flesh. They shouted and mouthed, but the carriage couldn't stop; and it seemed that as it moved darkness followed it, pulled like a skirt to swallow the throng. The coach reached Warwell with a final bang and groan; Jimmy touched the door, it crumbled sickeningly in his hands. He walked through what was left of the barrier. Dust blew in swirls, and ancient brown leaves of paper. He looked back, but it seemed already centuries had passed, the train had rotted on the rails, spread rust round it and out along the tracks like the stain of a haemorrhage. A glower of light showed behind it, horizon burning silver, zenith of the sky dark, dark...

He tried to hurry into the square. Roofs and houses had fallen, trees stood stark, the river had gone, left the bare

cracked mud of its bed. He thought he was the only living creature on earth, but he was wrong, there was Anne. She stood on the steps of the *George Hotel*, in her jumper and denim skirt. The wind gusted round her, lifted her hair; when it blew from the building the old dying stench of the place came with it, like Victorian sweat. He was walking, pushing with feet made of lead, but now the square was a mile across and there was no sense of progress. She cried to him, high and piping, a gull-noise shredded by the wind. Tried to move, stumbled and fell on the path. And his car was there, the bright TR4, standing by the kerb. As he stared the rust ran along her like a wave, a dark shadow visible to the eye. Burst through the bright skin in patches that joined and spread like fingers. She sagged, tyres wheezing; her axles broke, she came down on her sump and sagged again. Gear clusters rolled, the box walls no longer able to hold them; the little wheels ran flashing, browning as they went, fizzing away to dust, to nothingness, to blow along the wind. He gasped, fighting for breath. Three steps more, another yard.... He could nearly reach Anne, he was on his knees stretching his arms. Their fingers met, gripped ... and the Change, the huge Age that was romping through the world, caught her. He saw her shrinking, fullness sagging, clothes loosening round old limbs that were withering, twisting.... He was screaming, but there was no sound. Crying, feeling the tears on his face burned by the desiccating wind. She was a rag, a hank of hair.... Then cloth and flesh fell away, bone showed, browned, blackened, crumbled.... He scrambled forward madly, clutching, tatters flew in the sky, the wind yowled and mooed; skeletons of hounds coursed the brown wound of the river, their bone-voices boomed into dark and there was nothing, the buildings empty shells, no Anne, just dust, dust, dust, dust....

He sat up on the bed wet and shivering with shock. His throat was full; he staggered to the basin, retched. Then again and again till there was nothing left to come, but still his stomach churned and the stink was in his nose, sweet like old flesh, ancient bone. His vision sparked in darkness,

he slipped, landed on his knees, weaved his head from side to side. The sickness passed enough to let him get up, sprawl across the bed. Then the bed moved. There was a roaring in his ears; it was the Wheel, churning . . . he tried to scream again and there was no sound, just Power, Power, more Power than he could have dreamed. . . .

The noise faded and he was still. A last thought stirred in his mind. *This was why she ran. . . .*

Four

THE lorries woke him, clattering in Station Square in the early dawn. He mumbled and rolled over, lay for a time trying not to remember. Then he got up and padded to the window, stared down, rubbing his face. The drags stood rattling, cab doors ajar; there was shouting, blue diesel fumes jetted from the exhaust stacks. Each vehicle was pulling a road train of trailers, their loads bulky under lashed-down tarpaulins. It took Jimmy a minute or longer to realize what was happening. The steam fair was arriving.

He leaned on the sill. He'd been looking forward to the fair. He'd intended buying some sketching gear, turning back into an artist for a few days before he moved out of Warwell. But the night before had changed all that. The flavour of the dream persisted; images came in front of his eyes, he saw skeletons riding Gallopers and Switchbacks, swaying on the cakewalks, jiggling to the noise of a calliope. He rubbed his face again violently and the pictures faded. The lorries moved off, but he couldn't sleep any more.

He sat on the edge of the bed and smoked till he'd finished the packet. Then he shaved, changed out of his rumpled clothes. Spent a couple of hours walking by the river where he could see the town in the distance, the clustering of the houses. His head throbbed, his eyes felt heavy. The air was clear and keen, but didn't it carry some faint tang? Just a hint, an evanescent suggestion, but it was enough. To Jimmy it seemed the very wind blew from some place of corruption and oldness.

He ate no breakfast. The black mood persisted; he found himself hating Warwell and its inhabitants, everything about the place. He went to the car, meaning to drive out somewhere, clear his head with speed. He couldn't touch her; some part of his mind knew if he lifted the bonnet the rust would be there, a red well of it, waiting to strike through and burn.... On the front seat was a smudge of dried blood. He set his face and turned away, walking aimlessly.

Watching the skeletons. Talking and laughing, shopping, eating. Drinking coffee in the Tudor Room and the Buttery, cleaning windows, driving cars, sitting in buses, pushing prams. Other skeletons lay in the perambulators, little gristly things that mewed and writhed.... He sat on a seat outside the Town Hall, wiped his forehead, saw sweat on his hand. He clenched his fists; he was trembling, he asked himself what's the matter with me, have I flipped my lid, gone crazy ... ? It was all he could do to stop himself yelling, telling the people didn't they realize, didn't they know they were all bone and slime, they were getting older, they were *dying*.... He put his face in his hands, tried to stop the shaking. Feeling the traffic grind and grind like one great Wheel, seeing the fish eyes roll, hearing the bird-gabble of skulls, tongues clacking inside the bone.... He felt he was going to pass out again, or vomit on the path.

God, he'd never felt like this, not since ... *when?* His mind groped for a parallel, looking for a reason in a swirl of insanity. Warwell, the river and the valley, church spire and Town Hall cupola thrust up from a writhing of goblins and demons, a mediaeval maggot-heap.... Away from the Starr he knew the world was *good*, there were grass and trees and high quiet roads. He had to get away.... He was halfway to his hotel, scurrying to pack his bags and pay his bill, when he realized. Knew suddenly and with complete sureness that he wasn't going crazy.

He leaned on a wall, gasping. Shoppers stared, edged past. He wasn't conscious of them. *Nature imitates art*, he thought. Subject for a college thesis. *Nature imitates art*....

SEE THE FILM OF MOULIN ROUGE. THEN RIDE BACK TO

YOUR DIGS ON A LONDON TRANSPORT BUS. SEE THE WOMEN AND MEN, THE TURN OF A WRIST, TILT OF A NOSE JUST SO.... LAUTREC FOLK, ALL OF THEM. YOU'RE SOAKED IN A WAY OF SEEING, YOU LOOK THROUGH SOMEBODY ELSE'S EYES....

Quick now, think. For God's sake, *think*.... The skulls, the bones, the flaring light.... Something Germanic, *Die Brücker*, the Blue Riders? No, older than that, farther back.... Holbein? No, not Holbein at all, *Bosch*....

By God, that as it. Old Hieronymus, the Adamite. The *Millennium*. Incarnation of all evil, writhing and pallid ... he'd studied it once for a holiday task, reached the stage where he could look through the painter's eyes, see the world and its people as the master had seen it all those years ago. *Now he was seeing it again*....

A chain of logic had completed itself without his direction. The fantasies that had swamped him, rose bowers that had glowed, sweet organic nestling of river against town; these things he had been *shown*, as now he was seeing their obverse. Somebody, *something*, had tried to lull him with women and talk and drink and beauty, bright canvases all of them dangled in front of his face; and it hadn't worked, he'd gone on searching and prodding and peering as maybe an artist will, as Roley would have done, and he'd touched the makers of the dreams and they were frightened. He'd touched them through Anne.

Crazy, his brain yelled at him, *crazy, crazy*.... But it was too late. He could feel now the strange will pushing, insisting, making a living canvas out of Warwell. And the rage came, dulling his mind to impressed thought. He told himself, *they* were doing this. The people who'd taken Anne away, the people who ran this town, made horror and impossible beauty and used them like weapons. Whoever they were, they'd half killed him last night. And worse; they'd destroyed Anne, stripped her to the bone, rotted every cell and tendon of her. Shown him, mercilessly, the things no man should see. And now, *they'd given themselves away*....

The noise that had swamped him receded. He straightened up with an effort, stared round the bright town. Saw

the shops, sunlight, the four crossing roads. Valley cupping streets and houses like a grassy hand. The town was finite; so was the enemy within. And it was a child he told himself, that fears a painted devil....

He started to walk. It was like wading against a hot river that pressed relentlessly. Suddenly he was very tired; there were weights on his back, on his legs and arms, he couldn't drag himself another yard, not another step.... He countered the fresh attack with the image of Anne. Anne alive, full of blood and electricity, with a woman's body that could make sweat and tears and milk. He told himself, *Anne was not dead.* Convinced himself somehow that if ... *they* could drive him out then she would die, in his mind, and that death would be final. He moved against the pressure, holding the thought and the picture of Anne, wanting Anne and holding the rage. Peering into shops, offices, into garages, through walls that seemed half transparent. Not feeling the sun, not hearing the gabbling. Somewhere was the enemy, impossible but real. Keep sending, he thought. Keep sending till I come.... *They* responded, stepping up their force.

If you're real, if you're human, pray for yourself. Because when I find you I'll break your bones, I'll pull you joint from joint....

Laughter echoing, the little town ringing with it, the noise vaunting up like cracked bells in the sky....

SHOW YOURSELVES....

Searching and circling endlessly. Every house, every street. Walking, staring, feeling. No sense of time; in dreams time ceases to matter. *Find them,* he told himself. *Because they're here....* Odd times he thought what he was hunting had stopped bothering to hide itself; it made a shape ahead of him in the air, it was a pressure, a noise, a hotness and coldness joined. He saw the Town Hall through a golden haze, and the river and the church. He said to the sky, *show yourselves* ... but it was hopeless. *They* were in the town, owning it and exulting, but they had no focus. Never would have, until they chose. He asked himself, *How many of the people here, the vacant faces playing*

chess and making love, felt what I felt and were drawn and then lulled and fed like cows? Lunchtime came and passed, offices emptied and refilled. *Vacant and harmless,* he told himself. *Like cows.* And the sun moved. The wind played in the trees. The river flowed.

How long can you keep a rage in concert tune? Not for ever, the effort would kill. And they *know that. I'm burning, bleeding off strength, but I have to keep on now. If I give in the skeletons will come back and all the rest and I'll forget I'm watching somebody else's pictures and then God help me, God help me indeed. . . .*

They were laughing again now, tickling and prodding, squeezing out the last of the anger. He stood blinking and seeing the Town Hall clock. The hands marked a quarter after five. He knew suddenly he was through. His legs ached, his feet felt like they were blistered raw and he'd found nothing, no Anne; the ghosts still babbled, the skeletons walked mantled with flesh as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. . . . But no praying please, there is nothing to listen. *Move ghost, ghost yourself, in our little shadow world of the river and the town here in old Warwell. Soon, you'll leave. . . .*

He turned away, helplessly; and *they* were with him again, skipping and taunting. *Why give up so soon? Here, along this street here . . . or that one over there, perhaps what you're looking for is there. . . .*

He moved dumbly, mind blocked with fatigue, not able now to raise even the image of Anne. He'd forgotten what she looked like. The Pied Piper drew him gently, away from town centre where the offices were emptying at the end of the day, the buses pulling in and drawing off. . . .

He turned back into Hell and noise. Dragons burned on rooftops, streets shone bright with blood. He was swearing at himself for a fool. He'd been led round and about all day long, *they* had let him use himself up. Now for just a little while he had to swim against the tide, go where *they* didn't want him to be, he'd forgotten why.

He saw her through fire and din, glimpsed the white scut of the bandage. She was boarding a bus outside the Town

Hall. He started to run back to the *George* to get his car. The car was rust, would fall to bits under his hands.... Yes, he said impatiently, he knew that. He got in the Triumph still knowing it, started up and gunned her across the yard and under the arch. She didn't come apart.

He caught the bus as it slowed for the brow of West Hill. Steady now he told himself, *steady*. Hang back, stay in sight, sooner or later she has to get off.... The air round the car seemed nearly thick with rage, but *they* couldn't touch him now.

The lane opened on the left, there were houses set back a couple of hundred yards. He saw her leave the bus and slammed the Triumph forward, terrified now of losing her. Must take her by speed, he knew she'd run.... He raised dust skidding into the lane. She was fifty yards away, looking back already. He accelerated, hit the anchors, came over the top of the door. She was scampering now and he was running head down, the houses were close and he'd never moved so fast, but the gap wasn't narrowing. He was back in nightmare; the enemy were throwing everything they had, he felt his flesh pierce in holes and boil away, the wind bite among his bones. And every step was a century long and he'd touch her and she'd shrivel like in the dream and he couldn't take that again, not again....

She was down on the verge, he nearly fell across her. Shoe in her hand swinging, spike heel coming at his face; he ducked and got her wrist and she was strong, she rolled over and back and arched her body, hissing like a cat. He banged her arm at the bank and again harder, her fingers uncurled, the shoe rolled in the ditch. Then he was kneeling, still holding her wrist, breath coming harsh and her hair across his face, she was panting and the wind and terror had gone. He wanted to tell her she hadn't shrivelled, hadn't died, that she had blood and sweat, but there were no words. "In the dream," he said thickly. "Dream...."

She stared and he saw the tears coming, then, "I know.... It's all right...." and impossibly she was in his arms, he was holding her and she was holding him back and moving against him, texture of wool and hair and

smell of being close, he was rubbing her hair and damn it to Hell she wasn't even pretty, lines across her cheeks from not getting enough sleep and the hair over ears nearly starting to be grey. "Anne," he said, "Anne. . . ." Damn it to Hell and gone, he'd thought he was chasing a bit of tinsel, but that wasn't Anne. . . .

He pushed away. He said, "Your shoe went in the ditch. . . ." And "Here. . . ." Finding a handkerchief. "You've got a snotty nose. . . ."

Trying to laugh. "I . . . sorry," she said. "Thank . . ."

"Keep still. . . ." He'd reached the shoe out of the ditch, she was standing, he was holding her ankle. Just the start of her, at the foot, was wonderful. "They gave up," he said. "Went away. . . ."

"No. . . ." She was shaking her head, she nearly wasn't wearing any makeup, her eyes were grey and sea-wet. "They're waiting," she said. "It's you that has to go."

His hand was holding her waist, steering her. *Not to lose her again.* . . . He listened to his voice make words. "They sent me a girl Elizabeth. But I didn't want her. . . ."

"You mustn't s——"

"When you're an artist," he said. "Crossgrained by nature, just can't take what's . . . given. Mind. . . . Have to make your own shapes from what you see. . . ."

"You're not making sense I don't know what you mean. . . ."

But you're walking. Towards the car. I'm making you do that, I'm stronger than they are. . . . He'd done a hundred hours thinking in the last few minutes. He said, "I know about *them*, you see. Isn't secret, not any more."

"You're a . . . liar. . . ."

"Anne," he said. "Anne, I *know*. . . ." Firmly, nearly believing it himself. Knowing if he frightened her now she'd run again and this time he wouldn't catch her. "I know about them. And you. Anne, don't you want to break out of this stinking town, don't you want a life of your own any more?"

"The shoe," she said. "It wasn't . . . I didn't mean . . ."

Keep pushing. The fragments come, and they make a

sort of sense. He hugged her gently, trying to stop her wanting to run away. He said, "I'll show you how much I know. *They* . . . heard me. A long way away. They wanted me here. But afterwards . . . I wasn't right. They sent the girl and the dog and the man who played chess. Maybe they made everything, they . . . made the car be where I should see it. But it wasn't any good. So they sent . . . *last night. . . .*"

"*No——*"

He went way out on a crazy limb. "*I lost a father,*" he said. "*I thought my mind was going to explode. What happened to you, Anne, how did they hear you——*"

She started to panic again. She was trying to fight him. "*Go away,*" she said. "*Go away go away go away——*"

He shook her, having to shout. "I can't. I'm in too deep——"

"You don't know what it's like," she said. "Oh, God," she said, she was crying badly, trying to hide her face. "*Oh, God——*"

He was sitting with her in the car, his arm was round her shoulders. He gave her a cigarette, "Listen," he said, dry-mouthed. "I found you again, didn't I? When *they* didn't want me to?"

She nodded dumbly. He took her hand, rubbed the knuckles. "Then trust me. I know what I want, I'm crazy, have a wonderful life. . . ."

"They'll kill you. . . ."

"Then I'll rise on the third day, Anne, I *believe.* People, us . . . I believe in . . . oh, Hell, everything, *they* can't stop us. Don't you want to get free again, not even try?"

"Can't." She banged the car dash miserably. "*Can't, can't. . . .*"

"Not by running," he said. *Still the crazy pattern, fitting. . . .* He said, "You can't run from *them.* That's what they like, isn't it? For you to try to run. You were running last night——"

"*No——*"

"Anne," he said. "I've got to meet them."

"No!" She choked on the word that time, made a noise

like a bad gearchange. Puffed at the cigarette, hand shaking. "It'll be Paul," she said. "Next time, it'll be *Paul*.... Last night was only Albert, he has the sort of ... Gothic sense...."

"What does Paul do?"

Shuddering. "He makes ... things...."

"Were they why you were running?"

She nodded mutely. Cat had got her tongue.

"They can't hurt you."

The nodding again, furiously.

"What can they do to you?"

"*Things*," she said. "*Things* ..."

Don't let the rage start, not again. A man in a rage can't think. And you need to think, by God how you need to think.... Two names, he told himself. *Paul, Albert.* He nearly knew what he was fighting. "Anne," he said. "Can you shut them out?"

"S-sometimes...."

"Tonight's a special time," he said. "Please, Anne, be ordinary. I want to take you out, I've got a lot of talking to do...." This was the only way, soon he could draw *them* into the open. Then he would ... see what he had to do. He said, "It's about this pub...."

"Pub...."

"Down in the West Country," he said. "Long way off from here."

Crazy how a problem can drag on for years then unsnarl itself in an instant of time. He'd said to himself once, I find an answer to Warwell I find an answer to everything else. He'd been right. He asked himself, what if my father didn't hate at all? Then all the long years would be an act of faith, a blessing, not a curse. "To thine own self be true...." Aloud he said, "Anne, if you're the ... person I think you are, you'll understand this. There was an old man once, wanted his son in business with him. Wanted to put *'and Son'* over the gate, was all. I said something that ... cut him apart. Afterwards, the money, I ... didn't understand. I'd turned into a smart little Townie, I didn't understand...."

"B——"

"I never stood up to anything," he said. "Not till today. Just ducked out and thought I was being smart. Dad knew that. Just wanted me to wake up, that was all. . . ." A pause; then, "He'd have liked you," he said. "Very much. . . ."

"Jimmy, the pub——"

"Oh," he said. "That. . . . It all worked itself out, sort of came clear. But you have to be married or they won't give you a li——"

"What?"

"Married," he said. "Oh, I am being patient. For a start I kept thinking it was crazy, love at first sight and all that mush, but it isn't love of course, you live through that pretty early on. Need's a different thing, rotten business, can't do much about it. I'm sorry for your friends, they don't stand much of a chance——"

"WHAT?" she said, "WHAT?" and he thought, Christ, it'll be the shoe again, but that won't be too bad this time because it'll only be her rage driving it. "I can see you now," he said. "Standing back ot the bar cheeking the locals. . . ."

"Jimmy. . . ."

It sank in, second time. "Oh," he said, "She knows the fellow's name all along. Nice little espionage service they have down here, not bad for the sticks. Congratulations, my dear, now it's a hard life but very rewarding——"

"What——"

"The pub, gosh, I shall have to spell it out for you. Up with the lark and all that and scrubbing the loos before you can have your supper, but it's very rewarding, human contact you know, invaluable to the artist, write a book about it. Seven days a week, but you get the afternoons free and we'll have a glass roof in the snug for the pigeons to land on——"

"Jimmy, *please*——"

"Geraniums," he said. "Now my maternal G-Granny was a great one for geraniums, you keep the soil loosened round the roots or you have to be careful not to loosen the

soil round the roots or something like that, but they're great for outside the pub. Windowboxes, very fetching, snap up the tourist trade. And there's Roley of course, did I tell you about Roley?"

"A——"

"Guy I used to work with," he said. "*Prix de Rome*. We had a pact. First one to get a pub gives the other a month's free beer. Now Roley can smell free beer from about a hundred and fifty miles, so that'll be OK, but I can send him a letter *poste restante* just in case. You'll like him, he's great, he'll turn up in something twenty feet long with rivets down the bonnet and the first thing he'll do is ask you to go to bed with him, but not to worry, he says that to all the g——"

"You're . . . mad," she said, struggling. He kissed her on the mouth; he nearly couldn't help it, she was whipping her head about, turned straight into it. Then he couldn't stop, he had to kiss her eyes, her hair . . .

She lay still, like a toy with a busted spring. Eyes shut in pain, tears still squeezing out under the lids. The tears were salt, he could taste them. "Anne," he said, "I know I'm mad. But not as mad . . . as this town." He lifted the hem of her skirt, gently. Her legs were straight and smooth and there was no mark, no sign of a graze. "*They* saved you from the car," he said. "But they threw you too hard, they had to do it hard. . . ." He touched the bandage on her arm. He asked, "Did you have to keep wearing it? Was there somebody might have noticed?"

No answer.

"Why did they mend you?" he said. "Were you bothering them?" He shook her suddenly, trying to make her react. "Don't you see I can't stop now . . . ?" He swallowed. "Anne, will you trust me?"

Again the silence. "I can't leave you here," he said. "For . . . *them* to perform . . . indignities . . . on your body." Then very quietly, "Do I make myself clear?"

She spoke bitterly, not opening her eyes. "Dignity, indignity. . . . Do you understand about dignity, Jimmy? Do you think you do?"

He tidied her skirt. "Darling," he said. "Last night they ... opened your grave, I don't know how else to say it. I ... didn't know about them, Anne. Like you said, I was lying. But I know this. For what they did ... I'll choke them...."

Her voice sounded suddenly remote. "I had a twin sister," she said. "The thing that killed her, they could cure it now." She licked her mouth. "I guess," she said, "I guess I shouted pretty loud. Afterwards ... I couldn't get away. My parents don't know where I am. I changed my name."

"We'll go see them," he said. "Soon, now...."

She looked at him, finally. Deep tiredness in her eyes. She said "I'll take that drink I missed out on. Were you very mad...?"

He drove her home. A whole hundred yards.

FIVE

They weren't by the river. *They* weren't out on the roads. *They* weren't anywhere, no place he drove. Anne sat beside him tensed up and waiting, he hadn't fooled her, she knew what he was doing. There was something in this town, something he loathed, and she was his key to it. He felt crazy, now. He'd driven up the hill that afternoon, come back down with a wife; it was a prodigy, against the natural ordering of things. He waited for other miracles. They didn't come.

There was a temptation to run, just turn the nose of the car at the open road and shove the throttle. But it was no good; whatever this thing was, it was too big to hide from. He knew that instinctively. He looked across at Anne. How much did he know about her, truly? Everything, he told himself. Everything and nothing. She'd come to Warwell, settled in a shared room over a country pub, got herself a job as secretary to a firm that marketed radio spares. That was all she'd told him and he knew she'd say no more. She couldn't, because she was involved more deeply than he. She was part of the thing that had hounded him.

She was sitting stiffly, hair blowing out. She was wearing a sweet summer dress. She held the bandaged arm blatantly somehow, like a badge. *They* had done that to her, and worse. Run her wet, ridden her like a horse. Jimmy gripped the wheel, tried to squeeze the impression of his hate into metal.

They were waiting at the *Dog and Badger*.

He saw the lights of the pub showing ahead against the evening blue of the sky, felt Anne tense as soon as the place came in sight. A car was parked in the little pull-in; he drove alongside, sat and looked it over. Jaguar, XK150. Saloon, black. He remembered the howl of an engine the night before. And the car that had wound up passing the *George*. The big car. XK? Could be. . . .

He set the brake, turned his engine off, walked to the passenger door. Anne got out, stood pressing herself against him and vibrating. He didn't need to ask. *They* were inside.

He walked towards the saloon door, stopped. Said quietly, "All of them?"

"No. . . ." Shivering. "Two. . ."

He smiled. "Let's go in then. We came for a drink, remember?"

"*Jimmy, listen. . . .*"

"It's OK, Anne," he said. His fingers found her damp ones, curled round them. "It's OK. . . ."

"The Little One," she said. "Mind the Little One, she throws things. . . ."

"Interesting. Got a temper on her, has she?"

"No!" Violently. "No, *she throws things. . . .*"

The bar was quiet, just like the night before. The sporting prints hung on the walls, the counter glassware shone. He stopped just inside the door, and stared. *They* stared back. The two of them. *She* was small and cute. Little skirt pulled far too high, curly short hair, eyes of baby blue. Red horseshoe of mouth, smiling. *He* was dark, hair black and wavy, oiled till it glinted. Wide-set strange eyes, flat, hot-brown. No expression there at all.

Anne walked in behind Strong, hesitated. A pause; then the Little One lifted her arm. Snapped her fingers.

The girl moved past Jimmy like a sleepwalker. Stopped beside *them,* stood and turned. The three faces watched and somehow they were the same. God, they were the same. . . .

He got her wrist roughly, pulled. Anything to break that trilogy. . . . She came to him and he could hear her panting in the quiet room. He rang the bar bell for service, someone came. He didn't see who. He opened his mouth, but it was the Little One who spoke. "A large beer," she said sweetly. "And a Scotch. Double. The one the lady didn't have last night."

He paid for the drinks. He couldn't take his eyes off *them.* "Anne," he said. "Who are your friends?"

"Hazel . . ." She was swaying, he was scared she was going to fall. "Hazel, Johnny. . . ."

"Uh-huh," he said, nodding. "Hazel, Johnny. . . ." He made himself look back to her. "Drink your drink, poppet. Then go sit in the car. *My car. . . .*"

She didn't move.

There was danger here, he could feel it shift and coil and raise his back hair. He could fight what he could see, but he wanted her out again first. "Anne," he said sharply. *"Do as you're told. . . ."* She picked the glass up, lips pale. Swallowed jerkily, coughed, touched her mouth, looked at him in pain, walked out. He heard the door close behind her then the click of the latch on the Triumph. His ears seemed preternaturally sharp. He took a breath. "Hazel," he said quietly. "It's rude to snap fingers. Nobody ever told you?"

No answer. Just the staring, innocent and intense. And the smile curving, curving, it would touch her ears. The cat was looking at the cream. . . .

He drank his beer, eyes watching over the rim of the tankard. *What would they do, pull a knife, a gun . . . ? Nothing, you fool, nothing like that. Nothing you could understand. . . .* He finished the pint, walked forward, stepping carefully on his toes. His body felt light, balanced. He leaned on the table in front of *them,* resting his knuckles. And still there was the smile, same smile now on two heads. The rage was back, furring his throat; he made him-

self be calm. "We came in," he said. "We had our drinks, nobody stopped us. Nobody did a thing. Now we're leaving. Anybody going to object?"

Silence. The smiling silence.

"Don't click fingers," he said. "Not at Anne. *I* don't like it." He picked the Little One's hand up from where it lay on bright Formica. Was an ordinary little hand, nails bitten down. He twined his fingers and twisted, slowly closed his grip. He'd always had powerful wrists. Hazel rose slightly in the chair, arcing her body, smiling still. "Do you want to be broken?" he said. "Or you Johnny, do you want to be pulled apart? No? Then get off my back. Get right, right off. As of now. . . ." He stepped away, sidled to the door. "That was a promise," he said. "Not a threat. I don't threaten." He closed the door on the smiles. Got into the TR4 and found he was shaking. He reached across, took Anne's wrist, pressed. "It was all right," he said. "Don't worry, it was *all right*. . . ."

It was late that night before he dropped the girl at her lodgings. He drove back down to Warwell feeling better than he had in weeks, stopped in the carpark in the middle of town. It was past midnight, the yard gates at the *George* would be shut; he'd been with his Anne a long time, talking and dreaming and watching the moon. He got out of the car. He'd leave her where she was, she'd come to no harm. He pulled the cover across the cockpit, clicked the studs in place, fastened the zip. Then he straightened up, looked round. The town was utterly quiet; the moon was still high, riding a clear sky. The central area of the carpark was brightly lit, round it the pointed shadows of buildings were inky black. He started to walk across the open space, heading for the gates.

He stopped. The noise. . . . It had sounded loud in the silence. A shuffling, scraping. Not a footstep. He looked behind him and to each side. Nothing. He felt the hair prickle again on his neck. Wished he'd brought his car torch with him, but it was back at the *George*. The sound came again.

Very deliberately, he took his handkerchief from his pocket. He wound it into a ball, gripped it in his fist. In the mob the boys had used pullthrough weights, but the hankie would have to serve. He pushed pennies between the knuckles, wadding them against the cloth. He looked round him again, slowly. . . . And there was the noise, in front and to his right.

He turned back and stared. About twenty yards away, lying in the moonlight, was a plank. Three or four feet long, six inches broad by a couple thick. A moment before, it hadn't been there.

He extended one foot carefully. Felt the toes touch the ground, took a step. As he moved so did the plank. It rose on end, hung swaying slightly. It was between him and the gate.

"Uh-huh," said Strong. "Yeah. . . ." And started to walk.

A long time back when he was a tiny kid there was a dog he had to pass on the way from school. He remembered now how he'd edge by the place where the thing lived, walking on the opposite side of the road. Sometimes the dog would come, with a pattering rush. Sometimes not. But always as he walked he could sense without looking the open garden gate. Feel the presence of it like a hot breeze against the skin. The sensation was there now. He kept his eyes ahead, stepped past where the plank hung and rocked in moonlight.

He felt it move. Saw the quick flash of it from the tail of his eye, ducked. The wind from it lifted his hair. It spun back; he jinked, started to run. Wasn't quick enough. The end of the wood thudded into his chest, it felt like the blow had stopped his heart.

The Little One. . . . The Little One throws things. . . .

He doubled again knowing he couldn't win. Couldn't fight . . . this. A blow across the back fetched him to his knees. It came again, over the base of the spine. And again, *bang*, into his ribs.

Bang. . . .

Bang, bang. . . .

His breath was sobbing. There was a huge sickness, there were stars, flashings, *Anne, please. . . .* Car was close now,

he was fumbling at the cockpit cover. Something sailed past. A clang on metal; he grabbed, there was a wrenching, his palm tore agonizingly. He was in the car fighting with the ignition, key wouldn't fit, wouldn't turn, wrong key. . . . He saw the missile swooping end-on, jerked his head back behind the screen, flung his hands up . . . the last blow blotted out the carpark and the moon.

A paleness, filtering between his eyelids. He opened them fractionally, felt how his brain, photo-sensitive, reacted to light with pain. He lay still while the throbbing eased. Then he sat up. The pain came back, exploding downward into his body. Ribs, hips. . . . He groaned, put a hand to his face. A scraping, and more pain. He saw dimly the flesh on the palm was ragged, splinters were showing. He shut his eyes again, squeezed, opened them, waited while gliding images fused. The roofs of buildings showed in dawn light, the tall hogs-back of the cinema. White ice glitter in front of him was the broken edge of the windshield, glass was strewn across the bonnet of the car, in her cockpit. He swore uselessly and looked round. No sign of the plank.

His jaw felt nearly broken. He fumbled with the rear view mirror, turned it till he could see. Cheek and chin were grazed; the plank would have smashed his face, it had missed when he jerked his head. Blood had run down his neck in an untidy stripe, spread a brown finger-shaped stain into the collar of his shirt. He put his head in his hands, sat still awhile. Felt a little steadier, groped for his cigarettes.

The man was standing beside him before he realized. He felt the aura, half turned, saw the dark blue of the uniform, froze, still holding the match. He tried to speak. His mouth felt like it was full of felt. "I . . ." he said. "I . . . a stone. Afterwards . . . didn't feel so good. . . ."

"I see, sir. . . ." The policeman had his thumbs hooked in his pocket flaps, he was rocking gently on his heels. "This your car, sir?"

"I . . . yes. . . ."

"Made a bit of a mess of it haven't you? Got your licence with you by any chance?"

He stared up, trapped, and saw the eyes. Long somehow, like the eyes of a cat. Almond-shaped and hazel. His throat worked as he swallowed. The eyes, and the face.... He'd seen the face before. Three times. He licked his mouth. "I'll ... go," he said. "Go. I ... had enough, officer. Don't want any more...."

He'd done the right thing. The man stepped away, strange eyes dancing. "Yes, sir, I should if I were you. I'm just walking round the block now. When I get back ... don't be here, will you?" He turned on his heel and moved off.

The cigarette smoke tasted bitter. Jimmy threw the cigarette away, switched on the ignition. His hand shook when he touched the key. He revved the engine, brushed remnants of glass from the windscreen edge, drove out of the park. His mind was blank.

The town was still sleeping and quiet. He turned left at the traffic lights, crossed the Starr. Saw the fairground way off, rides jacketed with green tarpaulins. He reached the dual carriageway and opened up a little, heading for Midhampton ten miles away.

The airblast from the broken screen cleared his head; when he reached the town he could think again. He found a carpark with toilets open, washed his face, picked the worst of the splinters from his hand. There was a sweater in the car, he put it on. It had a polo neck that hid the marks on his shirt. He went back to the washroom mirror. His face was pale and the grazes showed brightly, but it was the best he could do. He went looking for a garage.

He'd been anticipating trouble of some sort, he was carrying fifty quid in his wallet for emergencies. He found a Standard-Triumph agency, hung round till they opened, told them a tale and left them working on the TR4. He got himself breakfast; he didn't feel like food, but he thought he ought to eat. They had trouble locating a spare screen, it was mid-afternoon before they were through. He filled his tank, paid them and took the car out on to the road Turned the bonnet north for Warwell.

It was like the dream repeating again. Same lane, wind-

ing between tall hedges; the same girl moving along it. She was walking listlessly, head down, jacket over her shoulder and handbag swinging. He'd pulled the car out of sight in a gateway, she was abreast of it before she saw him. She stopped and put a hand to her throat. Her mouth opened and shut but right then she was bad at making noises.

"Yeah," he said. "And on the third day, he rose again. Only I couldn't wait. Sorry, Anne. . . ."

She tried to run then, but he was too quick, he'd been expecting that. He caught her wrist, spun; she thumped on the grass bank, her hair flew across her face. "You know," he said, "I must like this sort of life. Great when the pain goes off. . . ."

She was wriggling. "Please, Jimmy . . . *hurting* . . ."

"Yeah," he said. "I know. . . ."

"They let you . . . let you g-get away. . . ."

"But now they want me. They know, don't they, they know I'm back, you just told them. . . ."

"Jimmy. . . ."

"Didn't you?" He was bending her wrist. *"Didn't you tell them, Anne?"*

"Hurting," she said "Please. . . . Hurting, *please*. . . ." She was trying to squirm round her arm.

"I'll break it. . . ."

"I can't stop them. . . ." She was nearly screaming. "They're . . . inside, all th' time . . . they . . . make me walk, talk, do . . . things . . . can't . . . hold them out, I *can't*. . . ."

"Who are they. . . ."

She started to whimper.

"It's OK," he said. "Anne don't, it's OK, please don't, it's OK. . . ." He let her go and she rolled away from him, lay curled up with her shoulders working. "They . . . want you," she said. "I've got to tell you."

He lifted her, gently. "Anne," he said. "Who are they?"

She hung her head and panted. "They're . . . everybody. Paul, and John T-Taverner from the *Bull* . . . And David, Johnny, the Round Table . . . Hazel, Maureen, they're in the Inner Wheel . . ." She looked up, eyes tear-bright. "You

were best with the women," she said. "You knew about them all the time. . . ."

He stayed quiet, letting the words sink in. The imagery of the dreams, the thing his brain had tried to tell him. Phrases heard or seen, cast back as monstrous parables. . . . He swore, very softly. "God," he said. "Isn't there a thing in this town that's clean . . . ?" Then he picked her up the rest of the way and started leading her towards the car. "Anne, I think you'd better tell me now. Everything you know. . . ."

Six

THE house looked upstream from the tip of a little wooded island; he'd seen it many times on evening walks, a bone face peering along the Starr. The sun was setting now in a blaze of orange, sheets of colour flooding across the river. The house was silhouetted; lights burned in some of the windows, they shone pale against the glow. On the far bank the steam fair rumbled, organ sounds drifted across the river and the scents of electricity and crushed grass. A metalled drive wound to the bank. There was an open space, cars were parked. Among them a black XK.

There was a spidery bridge. He walked across it holding Anne by the wrist. Their footsteps sounded loud in the quiet. The door of the house was unlatched; the girl opened it and stepped inside. He followed her into a cool hall. White and blue tiles covered the floor, there was a carved Swiss umbrella stand, a bowl of flowers. A faint lavender scent pervaded the place.

He felt hollow now, somewhere inside him anger and fear were mixed. He climbed a stairway; a stag's head watched down mournfully from the landing. Anne stopped outside a door. From inside Strong heard a hum of voices; and there was something else, a tenseness, a strangeness that touched him like a warm breeze prickling his scalp. The questing power of *their* minds. . . .

The girl was swallowing, twisting her hands. He squeezed her elbow and opened the door. She walked

through and he followed her, stood while the door closed itself behind him. He saw a white room, tall windows burning with the sunset light. Grouped chairs, a polished table. Faces watched him; and there was quiet.

These were no Rotarians. He saw Johnny at the back there and the Little One, next to them a man who'd served him petrol at the Central. The landlord of the *Bull*, the policeman who had checked him that morning. A porter, a little old lady; a girl with good legs and burning-red hair. . . .

He knew them all from what she'd told him. In the timeless time while he stared and they watched back he heard her voice again, hurt and stumbling, as she sat in the car.

"Paul's the . . . leader, if there is a leader. Paul owns the house, the big house on the island. It's Paul that makes the . . . the things, the things that run. . . ."

"It's all right," he had said. "Go on."

"He's an . . . accountant, he's quite well off. They're all . . . different, they all do different things. Don's a policeman and there's Albert, he's Albrecht really, he's half German, he works in a b-bank, he's the one who can make things . . . rot, die, he makes the dreams. . . . And Gerry sends them, Gerry and Maureen. Gerry's an electrician, Maureen works in the t-telephone exchange. . . ."

"Then you're all telepaths," he said.

"We're all . . . different." She was still crying, not wiping at the tears. They fell steadily, splashing her wrists, running down her throat. Somehow it was like watching somebody bleed. "Different?" he said.

"Yes. . . . The Little One, Hazel, she's the . . . hands. . . ."

"She hates me."

"No. . . ."

"Tried to kill me. She wants me dead. . . ."

"No," she said. "She . . . doesn't care what happens to you, Jimmy. As long as it's funny. . . ."

"Johnny runs a television shop, he helps her. . . ." She started to pant again. "Jimmy, I was . . . seeing for them. In the carpark. I couldn't help it, they'd got hold of me, all of them——"

"In the carpark," he said. "It's all right now, stop. . . ."

"I'm their ... eyes," she said. "Oh, can't you see how useless it is Jimmy, they won't let me go. They can't. . . ."

"Softly," he said. "Anne, how did they all come here? How could it have happened?"

"I ... don't know. I know about you and me, but the others. . . . It's a sort of drift, one comes and another and ... we can just tell. . . ."

"You thought I was one, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said. "No . . . oh, I don't know . . . Paul said to ... give you things, anything. Make you happy. Afterwards, when we couldn't ... speak to you. He said it was best. But it didn't work. . . ."

"Paul's a smart cookie," he said. "Give a man everything, that's the way to stop him thinking. It rots him . . . I'm just too crossgrained, old Roley would have been the same. Still a few of us about."

"It knew you knew about it," she said. "It was watching you, all the time. . . ."

"It?"

"There aren't any words," she said desperately. "Not to ... say what it's like. It, us, the whole thing. . . ."

"The *Gestalt,*" he said. "The Wheel. I was dreaming about a Wheel."

"Yes. . . ." Biting her lip, hands fluttering. "Like a . . . person, eyes and brain and ... legs and arms, the whole lot sort of adding up like an Indian statue. . . . You could feel it, Jimmy, I knew you could, I knew it wouldn't work when they tried to ... make you like everybody else, I t-tried to say . . . Jimmy that's what's so important, it's like ... well an animal somehow, I mean it isn't people, not just us. . . ."

"I know," he said softly. "It's all right Anne, don't cry any more. I know. It's the Wheel. . . ."

He walked forward across the carpet. It seemed it was time for an extravagant gesture, something crazy. This was a thing you read about, laughed over, a thing that could never happen. It was the impossible, walking and talking. It had happened, here.

He smiled and clicked his heels, bowed stiffly from the waist. He said "*Homo Superior*, I presume. . . ."

The river glided, the sky turned from orange to summer night blue. Bats moved over the island, a heron came in to land, stood for a while by the bank like an old stone imitation of a bird. Jimmy Strong talked. He described his life, and the chain of events that had brought him to Warwell. *They* listened, and watched. *They* fetched him whisky, a bottle of smooth Glen Grant, and a glass, and everything was very civilized. "Go on," said the man called Paul time and again. "Go on. . . ."

Paul. Lined pink tortoise-face below wavy silver hair, well-cut suit in a brown pinstripe. Paul had dignity. When Jimmy finally ended he leaned back and pulled at his chin, nodding. "I see," he said. "Yes, I see. . . ."

A long wait. Then the accountant started to speak again, musingly. "There have been others like you," he said. "Sometimes I think our . . . skills are latent in every thinking brain." He smiled thinly, not in humour. "A few have managed to integrate themselves with us. As you can see. The rest. . . . We have managed to make them content."

"Great," said Strong brutally. "Keep a man on the nest till his knees start to bend, feed him beer till it comes out of his ears. . . . I just love," he said, "your public spirit. . . ."

From somewhere, a giggle.

Jimmy felt the quick choking rise of rage, kept his eyes from the corner where the Little One sat watching him blue and rapturous. Fought the impulse he had to take her by the throat and squeeze and watch the eyes change at last with the knowledge of death.

Paul shook his head. "No," he said carefully. "That has not been our way. It mustn't be yours." On the table in front of him was a bone paperknife; he picked it up and toyed with it, turning it in his fingers. "Mr. Strong," he said, "you will not be appeased. Yet you are not one of us. What are we to do with you?"

Jimmy looked across to where Anne was sitting mute, hands gripped between her knees and eyes on the carpet. He said coldly, "You'll do nothing with me. You have

nothing to do with me." He reached his proposition. "Miss Nielson. She's had enough. I want to buy her out."

A silence that deepened. Then, "I see," said Paul again blandly. He steepled his finger and peered at Jimmy. There was no reading his eyes. "Mr. Strong, your . . . manner has at least the virtue of honesty. I must try to match your forthrightness." For an instant his tongue touched and moistened his lips. *"How much is she worth to you?"*

Useless to barter. Jimmy knew in this room his brain was clear glass; the answer that had formed there had already been read. He listened to his own voice speaking steadily. It said, "All I've got."

Still the charade. "How much is that?"

Sharp intake of breath from Anne. Jimmy swallowed. "Eleven thousand," he said. "And the car. Call it eleven five." He asked himself, *Pop, have I done it right? Is this a good way to spend your life?* The quietness inside him was its own answer. The words were out now, and he still didn't care. . . .

The snigger came again. Paul glanced behind him and the noise stopped. He turned back to Jimmy. He said vaguely, "How payable?"

"Any charity you care to name. Come gentlemen, you own the bloody town. These things can be arranged. . . ."

"Eleven thousand pounds," said Paul. His eyes focused, he shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry," he said. "She belongs with us."

"But she hates your guts. . . ."

"An over-dramatization, I think," said the accountant mildly. "Anne?"

No answer.

"Anne!"

She jumped like she'd been stung. "Paul I . . . yes. . . ."

Jimmy was on his feet and glaring. "Whatever you did," he said gently, "Don't do it again. . . ."

Silence.

Anne said miserably "I can't be b-bargained for Jimmy. I'm not a horse."

"What were you doing to her?" asked Strong. "The

night I nearly killed her?" The Little One spoke up chirpily. "We wanted to do a little job," she said. "Johnny and me. But she was naughty. . . ."

The rage in Jimmy was misting his sight. "So you sicked Big Brother on her," he said. "Because she wouldn't help you stir dirt." He rounded on Paul. *"Call that belonging?"*

"Mr. Strong. . . ."

"Paul," he said. "You're an intelligent man. So ask yourself, to keep an . . . organism alive, does a grown man have to crawl? To *that* . . .?" He pointed. His voice rose, riding the other down. "There's something you haven't realized," he said. "Any of you. Something I'll tell you right now. You're sick, you know that?" He stared round the circle of faces. "The brain is sick. Sick with this . . . rubbish jolting into it. You're divided against yourselves. And you know what that means to a mind? They call it schizophrenia. Yeah, that's what you've got. The first *Gestalt* brain in the history of the world is going round the bloody twist——"

Surging. The rage, the roar of the Wheel, threats, of oldness and death and things worse. He closed his eyes, rocked. Anne had her face in her hands. "That's enough," said Paul sharply. "All of you, *that's enough*. . . ."

Silence, through all dimensions.

The older man got up and walked round to Jimmy. Put a hand on his shoulder, steered him away from the table and across the room. "Listen," he said, "and try to understand. In what we do, we have no choice. Mr. Strong, if I laid a pocket knife on the table there and put eleven thousand pounds in your hand, would you allow me to pick out your eyes?"

Jimmy was silent.

"We have done nothing wrong," said the accountant. "Understand that. We do nothing but exist. Now think what that means. Try to imagine yourself the only one of your species. Perhaps there has never been another unit like ours, or ever will be again. Mr. Strong, *we did not ask to be born.* Yet we . . . came into being, in an environment that was never meant for us. A hostile world."

"Don't chop logic," said Jimmy viciously. "You own this town. You drive it, you shape it——"

Paul shook his head, and he was sweating. "We own nothing. We . . . direct certain aspects of life in Warwell. We have to. And believe me, for us it is very simple. We could do much more. Warwell is our . . . home, our shell if you can think of it in that way. And I swear to you, nothing but good has come from that domination. . . ."

Jimmy was staring out the window, seeing and not seeing the distant lights of the fair. The noise of the rides reached the house thinly. He said tonelessly "There's blood on your hands."

"No, Mr. Strong. Not yet——"

He brushed the man's arm away, turned to stare into the faded blue eyes. "Paul," he said. "This I believe. You're a good man. Or maybe you were once before this . . . thing got hold of you. I'm sorry for you, because you're in deadly trouble." He raised his voice to include the others in the room. "Give in," he said. "Get to a . . . hospital, somewhere they could understand you, help you. You're needed; there's no power like yours in the world."

He read their answer in the silence.

"OK," he said. "Now I'll tell you this. I don't hate easily; but I hate for a long, long time. And I'm defying you. Get off my back. Go to Hell where you belong, get out of my way. . . ." He shoved past Paul, went to Anne. Said simply "You coming?"

She lifted a ravaged face. Shook her head wordlessly.

"Uh-huh," said Strong. "OK. . . ." He walked across the room, opened the door, looked back at Paul. "You know what you're doing," he said. "I don't have to spell it out for you. And I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm taking that girl out of this. I don't know how. I don't care. But I'm taking her if I have to break all these bastards down one by one. You're not a corrupt man," he said. "Not yet. But you will be. Because evil is a stain that spreads." He turned away. "I'll talk to you when you've cleaned your house. . . ."

The doorhandle was snatched out of his hand. The door

smashed shut; he pulled at it briefly and knew no force he could raise would open it.

Across the room, Paul's face looked grey. Behind him the Little One smiled a blue china smile. Anne had turned away, she was covering her face again. Suddenly his body needed her, but he couldn't move. A barrier seemed to have built itself in front of him; he could feel the heat and nearness of it, though there was nothing he could see.

Paul walked back to the table, stood leaning on his knuckles. "I don't think you fully understand your position," he said. His voice shook slightly; he moistened his lips again with the tip of his tongue. "As I said, we exist; and Warwell is the . . . fortress we have built for ourselves. What our true function may be we don't know. Perhaps we are a random particle in a random universe, and have no purpose. But we wait, and we hope. Sometimes, we pray.

"Mr. Strong, we are a living organism. Like any other breathing creature we defend ourselves if attacked. We fear mutilation, we fear death. *You must not threaten us. . . .*

"There is no blood on our hands. Your somewhat theatrical phrase can have no meaning for us. We are neither good nor evil. We exist, we endure. If you force us, we shall kill. . . ."

Silence in the room, total and absolute. The light, the bright threat speading from face to face now the thing was finally said. In the quiet, a ride at the fairground hooted. *Whup . . . whup-whup-whup. . . .*

"You cannot fight us," said the accountant. "We could break your bones where you stand, we could burst your heart. You cannot warn others of our existence; to try would be to fail, and we should know." He looked back towards the window. His lips were set; he was the judge pronouncing sentence. "You must not stay," he said finally. "You have till the fair leaves at the end of the week. You will not be molested. Should you remain beyond that time you will be destroyed."

Jimmy tried to make his brain work. "Anne," he said. "Anne. . . ."

She quivered but she wouldn't look at him.

"No," said Paul. "No more. Leave now, please. I'm sorry. . . ."

The door opened for him. He stepped through and down the darkened stairs. He carried with him one last impression. A pair of bright blue eyes, the smiling red horseshoe of a mouth.

SEVEN

STRONG wiped his face, felt the sweat on his forehead mingle with the rain. Looked up at the blind grey sky. He was unshaven, eyes dark rimmed from lack of sleep. The drizzle soaked the shoulders of his mac, ran down inside the collar. He didn't notice it.

Round him were the massive rides of the fair. Water beaded painted woods, spread dark fingers across tight-stretched sheets of tarpaulin. He reached the Switchback, leaned his hands on the curved wall of the machine. Above him, over the chin-high tarps, gargoyle faces peered. Golden cats and cockerels, motionless in the dead light, eyes bright and painted, blue like the eyes of china dolls. The rain made a faint hissing, nearly inaudible; and it was Saturday morning.

He hung his head. *Paul,* he thought for the thousandth time, *Paul.* . . . Can you ask a man to gouge his eyes out, cut off his hands? Can you expect him to do it . . . ? Now they'll punish Anne, he thought. As they punished her before. . . . They'll hunt her again, send unspeakable things to hop across the fields, snuggle in her bed. . . . Paul doesn't understand, he thought. Paul's detached, remote. And then, Paul does understand. But how can you ask a man to cut off his hands. . . .

Saturday morning. He groaned, hanging his head, wanting Anne, the warmth of her, her young-old face. His time was nearly out. At midnight, with the chiming of the church clock, the fair lights would snap off, the rides run down in darkness. Then *they* would come for him. Not Paul; but Johnny and the Little One, they'd come. And

afterwards, they'd make his Anne dance to a tune. Afterwards? No, before. They'd start tonight, they'd show him what they could do.

He saw Paul's face again in his mind, old tortoise eyes wary, mouth pursed saying no, no.... The *Gestalt* was not evil, but it was sick. Sick of a pair of china eyes, a horseshoe smile....

"*Gestalt,*" he said, and banged his fists on wood. "*Gestalt, Gestalt....*" His life was tied now to Anne, the brain was his enemy. Unbreakable, undefeatable. How to fight it.... For every perfection a fault, he told himself. For every strength, a weakness. Find the flaw. Use *Gestalt* against itself, somehow there's a way. Kill the brain, poison it maybe. Poison it? How, with what....

He lifted his head, wet hair dangling. Round the sides of the great ride, baroque cowboys galloped; under his hands, an Indian was plunging from his horse. The head was thrown back impossibly, a round hole in the forehead spewed a thin stream of blood. The face was contorted, mouth stretched with pain....

Jimmy's eyes widened, slowly. He stood and stared a very long time, hands now slack at his sides. Then he turned and walked rapidly away, purposive now that he knew what he had to do.

East Street, on a fine June night. The rain cleared away, the air warm. Turquoise streaks still showing in the western sky, silhouetting the church. Solitary balloon floating a quarter mile up, somebody stabbing at it with the silver finger of a searchlight. Shopfronts blazing in town, crowds jostling down and back from the river. Noise of the fair coming across the water, hootings and the music of the rides.

Strong pushed along crowded paths seeing the traffic, saloons balked and bad-tempered, open cars moving with their toploads of youngsters or cruising slow, hunting for pickups. Seeing the endless people, kids with faces candy-floss-sticky cradling coconuts and dolls, girls in blouses and skirts and tight jeans and summer frocks, faces laughing,

kiss-me-quick hats perched on their heads and papiermâché sombreros, the boyos with their plaid shirts and jeans, leather jackets, Norton and Matchless studded across the shoulders and crossed bones and skulls, the ton-up Joes....

Searching all the time, hunting till he saw her. Boyo on either side of her and she arm in arm, the pickups laughing and burly, sporting black cock-combs of hair, she in step, body wriggling and being a whore's body, only the eyes desperate, bolting like the eyes of the hare.... She saw him and there was pain, but she couldn't stop. She passed on down the street, throwing her head back, laughter peeling from her, heigh-ho come to the fair....

He huddled in the doorway of a shop, brain spinning. Watching the crowd that seemed now to surge forward and back dizzyingly, faces like foam flecks on a sea. *They* were close, he knew they were close. They were in her body controlling it, pulling the wires that made the marionette step and prance. The punishment, the fun, had started....

He saw them. Johnny cutting a dash in fawn tapered slacks, white shirt framing Gigolo-darkness. Turning and laughing now, showing his teeth and braying. The Little One in a froth of summer dress, hanging on his arm and smiling, always she must smile.... He stepped into the crush behind her praying she wouldn't turn then *knowing* she wouldn't turn. Knowing incredulously that she'd nearly forgotten him already. *She doesn't care what happens to you, Jimmy ... as long as it's funny....*

His hands made themselves into balls of bone. He said through his teeth, "It'll be funny...."

The *Green Dragon* was nearly deserted, the serious drinking hadn't started yet. The river terrace nestling by the bridge arch was empty. Water chuckled against stone piers, the noise of the fair came loud across the Starr. Jimmy edged forward, keeping to shadows. *They* were standing together by the steps down to the landing stage. She holding his arm and looking out across the river, smiling he knew, smiling....

He said quietly, "Johnny...."

He whirled, and Strong hit him. All the rage, all the hate exploding from a point and that point in his fist, at the end of an arm that swung, cracked. . . .

Perfect timing. No sense of impact, but the body flung itself back, thudded against the bridge. Then the rock spun at Jimmy's head, missed, half numbed his shoulder. Iron chair rose from the terrace and whirled at him, he knocked it aside and ducked knowing others would come and stones and bricks, converging on him as a centre. Watch the Little One, she throws things. . . .

He reached her in two strides and she tried to bolt, but she wasn't quick enough, it was *one . . . two . . .* for himself, for the beating, for *Anne*. Her body wrapped itself round the blows, *"Ip,"* she said, *"Ip. . . ."* And he'd got Johnny's arm, he was twisting it high behind his back, hauling him up by the wrist. *"Where is she. . . ?"* said Strong. *"Where is she . . . ?"*

"Eeehh . . . Yeehh. . . ."

"C'mon boy, *where . . . ?"*

Raspberry dribble on the chin and spilling down the shirt, teeth bared, thin high noise coming between them. Strong twisted again and the Little One started to scream.

"Fair . . ." said Johnny. Gritted. *"Fair. . . ."*

"Where, in the fair . . . ?"

"Bastard. . . ."

Twist, and feel the bones flex. . . . "Where . . . ?"

"Gallopers. . . . The b-big ride. . . ."

"Good boy, what's she doing . . . ?"

"With the . . . boys. . . ."

"What happens, Johnny? What happens now?"

"Fun. . . ." He was wheezing. "Then afterwards . . . the real fun. . . ."

It was possible to see red, everything in bright flat sheets of colour. "Johnny," said Strong. "You're going to have a very bad night. . . ." He heaved his victim at the flight of steps. And as he shoved, *pulled . . .*

Sharp high cracking of bones and the body crashing, arm flying out loose. Then there were two of them down there both holding an arm, both rolling and shrieking. *Gestalt. . . .*

Jimmy ran across the bridge, flung himself into the traffic. A skidding, close noise of a hooter. . . . He fended off a bonnet with his hands and there was a crash, a grinding. *Good,* he thought *good,* confuse the issue. . . . Then the fair was ahead, the brightness and noise. Floating haze of faces orange-lit, jostling and shoving, hands grabbing. Thunder from the Switchback and the Scenics, rich din of organs, smack and clang of shooting galleries, shrieks of Laughing Sailors. Somebody yelled at Jimmy, punched his back. He ducked, swerved, saw Anne. She was reeling, holding her arm. He reached her and clung. People were staring, he shoved his way through them. She was gritting her teeth and moaning. "Jimmy, what . . . what'd you d-do . . . ?"

"Broke all your good right arms," he said. His breath was sobbing, the lights were spinning in front of his eyes. "I . . . sorry," she said. "Pass out. . . ." He yelled at her, "You *can't.* . . ." Then, "Just a little way. . . . Just a little way Anne, *come on.* . . ."

They were clear of the fair. He had the car parked close, he bundled her into it, started up, bucked his way across rough grass. Out back of the fair was a lane, he burst the paling by it and the hedge, wallowed, got away. Anne was clinging to the dash one-handed, the other arm lay in her lap uselessly. Halfway to Midhampton she was still whimpering. God, he thought, what range does this thing have. . . . He was in the outskirts of town and swinging round the first rotary when she sat up and yelped with relief. He shouted to her, "What happened . . . ?"

"They put him out. . . ." Her eyes were wide now, terrified. "Jimmy, they'll take us. You can't get away. . . ."

"Great," he said. "Hold them out, Anne, you *must*——"

"Trying . . ." She was rocking in the seat again, there was sweat on her face. "The car," she said. "Don. . . . The police will stop the car, he'll make them. . . ."

"Damn the bloody car. . . ." There was the main line station ahead, he swung across the forecourt, braked with a squeal, jumped the door.

"Jimmy . . ."

He slapped her bottom. "Move, Anne, run. . . ."

"You can't——"

He yelled at her. "I know. I can't win. I can never bloody win, I'm used to it...." He grabbed her wrist. He was panting again. "Knew it would happen.... They'd send you to the fair...."

"How ...?"

"Heard them make their minds up," he said. "It was starting, after all that. It was in me, it grows...."

"But you c-could ... be a part. Jimmy, you could——"

"Of that ...?" He bellowed at her. *"That ...?"*

She was shuddering. "You hurt the Little One. She'll kill you...."

"Paul won't let her. Anne, we've got to try...." Hammering on the ticket office window. "West Coast Pullman," he said. "Got it all worked out. Ten minutes...." But this was British Railways, the train would be late. The trains were always late. It was part of a pattern of craziness.

Anne was stamping like a hound. "Hurry," she said. "Please...."

"Been rung in," he said. "Six minutes.... Anne, it's OK, we'll make our own *Gestalt.*" They'd told him platform ten; there was a tunnel, he took the steps at a run still holding her arm. The suitcases in his hand were bumping his knee. "Jimmy," she said. "What..."

"What?"

"Cases...."

He gasped. "Luggage. For the hotel. Keep your hand in your pocket, you haven't got a ring...."

"Jimmy...."

"No more. *Hurry...."*

Cool here, under the tracks. The tunnel stretching ahead, their footsteps clattering. Long lines of lamps glowing yellow, looms of dirty cable on the painted brick walls. She was running, trusting him, eyes screwed shut. They'd make it, they'd ma——

She wrenched away. He clutched at her, she swerved. Moving fast, throwing her legs out, running the way women don't run. She passed the last flight of platform

steps. He followed her but she was too quick. There was a barrier, waist high. He took it on the run and the top bar cocked up as he jumped, caught his foot, sent him smashing down, rolling over and over. *Contact*, he thought, *contact. Anne....*

The Little One raging, using Anne's eyes at last, holding her body, making it run. He staggered up. He was in a loading area, dim-lit. Goods lifts to one side, piles of parcels. A flight of steps. He leaped up them into the open air.

A siding. Acres of rail, shining. Ahead he saw a white moth still running. He forced his legs to move again, heart hammering. Across the tracks skidding and slipping, barking his shins on steel.

Station buildings were behind him now, he could see the lit face of the clock tower. He staggered on again seeing signal eyes glaring miles off, reflecting green and red streaks down the rails. He glimpsed Anne again and the train, the lit numberplate on the loco sailing out of the night. He heard the noise of it, the long double scream of the horns, then it was passing, blowing him back from its hugeness. Thunder-rhythm of the waggons, *wrench-bang wrench-bang wrench-bang wrench-bang* loud then softer, the red lamp on the guards van receding, swaying away down the line...

"Anne!"

She was lying huddled, wind moving her dress.

"ANNE!"

He reached her. Her arms.... Wrists clamped to the sleepers, a foot from the steel. *The wrists had hands on them....*

He took his jacket off, put it round her, lifted her inside it. She was shaking, she held her hands out in front of her. "That far," she said. "That far. *Not on the rails....*"

"Anne...."

She looked at him. Tear marks showed on her face. "Jimmy," she said. "*They've gone...*"

He started to walk back down the tracks, holding her, not letting her stumble, feeling a wonder grow inside him.

The Wheel, the thing that ran a town; somehow at last it had stemmed its own sickness. It was brooding now, thinking, searching for purpose and sanity. Some day, some place, he knew it would send for him again. He felt a huge thanksgiving and a hope in the presence of the Thing that for a need had blinded itself. No, it wasn't human, not the *Gestalt* brain; for in the end, when it had found itself, it had chosen mercy....

When it called, he hoped he would be ready.

HORIZONTAL MAN

by

WILLIAM SPENCER

Given immortality, how would Man cope with the enforced necessity of thinking forever? Author William Spencer presents a novel idea of the twilight of humanity.

TIMON put out a claw and selected "surfing". His environment shivered, rippled and began to change.

As if through blurring grey jelly he saw the sub-tropical beach with its long sweep of curving sand beginning to appear. The shoreline struggled into view, decked with a white skein of surf. The sand grew rapidly yellower, the sea bluer.

In a matter of moments the illusion was complete. It was no longer an illusion, but a new order of reality which enfolded Timon, and drew him into itself.

He found himself standing on the sand, holding his tall, lightweight surfboard at his side. He felt his lungs filling with the health-giving tang of the sea. His chest heaved gratefully on the salty breeze, which pressed against his tanned flesh almost like a solid wall, solid at least as the creaking well-filled sail of a skimboat. The sand glowed warmly under his bare feet.

Timon stood tall and erect, sensing the strength in his muscular, toughened limbs. He stepped forward decisively into the seething foam of the shallows. With powerful strokes he paddled his board easily seawards, negotiating the curling heavy rush of the breakers. Soon he was positioned far out, where he could catch the big wave as it came, growling like some angry sea-beast, to leap forward and dash itself on the shore.

He knew intimately that wave. Knew how its crest heaved, grew feathery, and began to smoke with descending spume. Knew the exact moment at which to launch himself forward, paddling desperately at first until the moment of triumph when he could stand erect and feel the board shuddering and trembling as it plunged through the water under his taut, keen feet. He knew also those other moments at which it was too early or too late, when the

big wave would toss him contemptuously aside, or smash down on him like tons of crushing shale.

He had ridden that same wave a million times.

Now he knew it with the exactitude with which one gets to know any recording. How, in a piece of music, one knows, and comes to anticipate with tedium, the exact moment at which the flautist is forced to snatch his aching breath, or the horn-player just manages to retrieve a false note in the complex labyrinth of his instrument.

Even as he rode the wave with masterly elan, weaving in crisply elegant movements across the track of the wave, his body poised on the board with the utmost nonchalance—even as he felt the surge of satisfaction in his strong young limbs—Timon felt also a corresponding inner wave of tedium, of infinite tedium.

A million times was too many times.

Though the recording contained many variant channels, many different chains of cause and effect, which could be explored and experimented with, ultimately one got to know them all. If *A*, then *B*, then *C* . . . as far as *N*. On the other hand, if *A′*, then *B′*, then *C′* . . . to *N′* If A^n . . . Timon's brain churned wearily, while his elegant body pirouetted on the surfboard, with the ease born of endless practice.

There was a symphony of delightful sensory impressions, a warm glow of endocrine gratification, all built into the multichannel recording. Timon felt all this, as he had felt it so many times before. But at the centre of the illusion there was still the real Timon. At the centre, Timon knew himself as he really was: a bag of decrepit self-hatred, a bundle of senile pessimism and ennui.

He would have liked to switch the whole thing off. Any escape from the facile, superficial syrup of the recording would have been welcome. It was sugary, sickly, completely trivial, he thought. But trapped as he was within the quasi-reality of the recording, it was impossible for him to reach the controls and escape. Once selected, the whole tedious thing had to run its course along the pre-empted

channel. Or if you preferred to think about it that way, along the pre-destined, fated line.

So it was only after scores of accomplished passes with the surfboard that Timon recognized with relief the sensation of pleasant weariness suffusing healthily through his sunbronzed limbs. He steered the surfboard into the shallows, leaped lightly from it, and gathered it into his arms.

Without a halt in his movements he continued to run forward splashily through the last few yards of water, and up the beach until he reached the point where he flung himself flat on his back in the warm sand, his arms and legs flung wide.

He breathed deeply and easily, while the seawater ran in little warm rivulets from his chest, and dried out in a thin white powder of salt under the scorching sun.

The gusts of warm breeze came desultorily over his delighted flesh; the sun rode through the few wisps of scudding cloud in triumphant splendour; the surf continued to boom relentlessly on the shore.

At last, unbelievably, the scene faded, greying out from his sense channels, and leaving him back in the recording control room. He was himself again.

Timon gibbered and snuffled with pleasure. His shrivelled, shrunken body trembled, almost writhing with satisfaction, on the pillowy, contoured couch that supported his frail spine.

He peered forward with the twin visual receptors which cunning surgery had recessed into his eye sockets. They gave only a dim, monochromatic rendering of his surroundings. But that scarcely mattered. He could see clearly enough for all practical purposes the control with its glowing indicator lamps, arched in a semicircle around his couch. The thousands of tabs and buttons enabled Timon to select any recording he wished from the enormous repertoire of the machine. The controls were all conveniently disposed within easy reach of the plastic claw with which his one remaining arm terminated.

Timon viewed with some distaste the thick ropelike duct which was connected to him somewhere in the region of

the navel, and which supplied all the sustenance that his feeble body required. Outside his range of vision was the flexible cable entering the top of his head, which provided the rich flood of sensory data that went into the illusory world created in his mind by the recordings.

Timon looked eagerly to see if the indicator lamp was alight above the sleep selector button. His lips trembled in a voiceless muttering when he found that it was still unlit. Just to be sure that he was registering the impression correctly, he pushed the sleep button sharply several times, but no answering wave of oblivion rose from the depths of the machine to give release to his tired brain. A high-pitched gibbering came from the shapeless lower face of Timon. The slit of his mouth dribbled.

The machine was programmed so that sleep could not be selected more frequently than at twenty-four hour intervals.

Timon consulted the time-sphere. Five more hours to go. It seemed to him like a grey waste of horror that he had to navigate through; a grey heaving unlit sea of unthinkable boredom.

His claw hovered indecisively as he cast about the control-bank for a recording which, though infinitely tedious, would be less hideously unpalatable than some of the more unbearably hackneyed ones.

He muttered incoherently as he considered the whole bank of recordings labelled "WOMEN". These were some of the more well-worn tracks. There were close on a thousand of them, all very beautiful in their different ways: blondes, brunettes, redheads; French, Japanese, German, Italian girls —even, for good measure, an Eskimo female. Perhaps to a younger man they might have been enticing; but unfortunately he knew them all too well; knew intimately all their little ways.

He decided that he couldn't possibly bring himself to face one of them at the moment.

What on earth was he to select? The indecision was beginning to make him feel quite ill.

To make matters worse, a warning light began to wink

rhythmically on the console. Beneath it was the single word: "RANDOM!"

Timon knew well enough what that meant. If he failed to make a selection manually in the next two minutes, the machine would choose a recording for him. A random number generator inside the labyrinthine works would click into action and come up with a reference number: the corresponding recording would then be foisted upon him, whether he liked it or not.

At all costs this had to be avoided, thought Timon. Impulsively, he twitched forward and struck with his claw the tab marked "4-DIMENSIONAL CHESS: POLYOVSKI".

In a few moments the recording was establishing itself around him: the huge luminous contest hall, a hemispherical windowless dome, glowed round him on all sides. Then his particular opponent gelled into view, seated opposite him. Polyovski was a rather humourless, bearded Russian, who played a good game, in spite of his somewhat irritating habit of leaning forward and clicking his fingernail against his large shining front teeth when things were going against him.

The chance indicator above the twin globes of the clocks showed that Timon had drawn Negative in the first game, and thus had the first move. He bent forward intently over the huge shining crystal within which the game was played, studying its complex internal planes from first one angle and then another. As one shifted one's viewpoint in relation to the crystal, there were sudden discontinuous changes in the apparent line-up of the inner geometry—the inevitable distortions caused by representing a 4-dimensional chess board within the limits of 3-dimensional space.

Timon of course was entirely familiar with the board, and with the disposition of the electronic charges which served as men. He was running over in his mind the hundreds of thousands of opening moves, the various combinations and gambits, all of them dreadfully familiar. He knew exactly the reply which Polyovski would make to any one of them.

Timon rubbed his handsome chin. One game is as good

as another, he told himself. Perhaps the 3A–463–P22 Attack had as many interesting variations as any.

He reached forward an elegantly manicured hand, which had just enough nervous intellectual strength to prove the virility as well as the intelligence of its owner. With his fingertip he touched one of the sensitive nodes of the crystal. Instantly the coloured points of light within the crystal changed their alignment. He glanced across at Polyovski's hooded, brooding eyes, but his opponent's face was already abstracted in the contemplation of an answering move.

Timon stifled a yawn.

Sure enough Polyovski replied with predictable conformism, advancing his upper left inner oblique positive charge one quantum.

Timon sighed. Why on earth didn't the sober Russian go crazy just once in a while, and do something that was not in the book?

But perhaps his own game was not free from the taint of dullness? A glint of amusement came into Timon's grey eyes as he conceived the utterly unorthodox third lower right inner traverse. But even as he made the move, he saw that Polyovski evinced not the smallest ripple of surprise, not the slightest twitch of a shaggy eyebrow.

Then Timon remembered: two centuries earlier they had spent several months working out every possible variation of that particular move. No wonder his opponent had failed to register the hoped-for amazement.

In a few moments, the whole pattern clicked back into place in Timon's brain. The whole system of variations following from that particular gambit, or unorthodoxy, came welling back clearly. It was only a matter of . . .

Without delay, without haste, Timon's hand reached forward to reply to his opponent's further move. He saw his next series of moves clearly laid out in his mind, and his hand went forward to signal the first of them to the crystal. . . .

Even as he did so, Timon felt the wave of ennui gripping him remorselessly by the throat.

The unflickering luminosity of the silent contest hall continued to beat down on Timon's head, on his profusion of curly chestnut hair, and on the black frizzled hair and bushy beard of the big Russian, as their heads bent over the game.

There was no sound except for a light shuffle of the feet as one of them leaned forward or changed his position slightly. The light, the silence, did not change. But Timon found himself abstracted from what was going on in the big hall. A part of his mind was engaged in the game, a part of him still wanted to win, and win in the series of aesthetically pleasing forcing moves that was characteristic of his best play. His hands still moved to touch the nodes of the crystal where necessary. But it was really only a tiny part of his mind that was so engaged.

The rest of his mind was a grey aching vacuum—a painful void which, trapped as he was within the illusion of the chess game and the contest hall, he could only partially bring into focus.

The game dragged on with unbelievable slowness. It seemed like an eternity in limbo before Timon found himself back once more on his padded couch, back in his own shrivelled, wizened, but authentic form. He gasped and wheezed with a kind of relief. He gulped on the sensation of genuine senility and real fatigue.

Fatigue! But there were still another two hours to go before he could successfully operate the sleep switch. His mind and power of decision seemed to go, as he contemplated those further two hours. He chawed restlessly on the prospect of them, gnawing away at them in his mind as a rat gnaws at a piece of stale crust. He did not see the winking "RANDOM!" bulb, until those last foggy moments when he realized that he was being pitchforked, without option, into some unidentified experience.

He was slotted inexorably into the groove of another recording. What was it to be . . . ?

Timon blinked briefly as he adjusted his eyes to the submarine gloom of the night-club. The tables were dimly lit, but a sharp light flooded the stage in the centre of the cavernous interior.

Timon looked round at the elegant audience; the men in evening dress, the women in chic little gowns. His own partner, a honey-blonde of splendid proportions, was wearing a dress that in the semi-darkness seemed to flash like a million sharp little jewels whenever she moved. She glanced at him warmly, pursed her tender lips in the shape of a kiss, and fondly squeezed his hand under the table. Timon drew his hand away quickly, smiling faintly and endeavouring to conceal his boredom.

The audience were toying with their drinks, and exchanging desultory small talk among themselves, but nevertheless there was an air of expectancy as the light on the stage grew steadily more intense. Timon knew what was coming.

In a few moments, expectation was fulfilled. The poly-stereophonics blared an introductory theme, and a pink cloud drifted slowly on to the stage. On an authoritative chord, the cloud dissolved and revealed a troupe of girl dancers.

The plumes of their headdresses tossed like the manes of prancing horses. The girls writhed to the sinuous electronic melodies. Their lithe bodies were supple under a film of irridescent dust, which threw back like hoar-frost the shining spotlights.

Timon watched listlessly as the girls were transformed by the coloured lights from acid-green sylphs into electric-blue harpies. It was all very cultural. But not even the warm and cuddlesome rose-pink finale was able to arouse much interest in his exhausted brain.

Timon glanced again at his partner, and saw her bland face grow sultry and thoughtful as the male dancers came on and the music grew more vigorous in its rhythms. She looked quickly at him under long blonde eyelashes which reminded Timon of some bovine animal. She evidently wanted to know that he was enjoying the entertainment as much as she was.

The girl performers, with the arrival of the men, threw themselves into the dance with renewed energy, and were achieving the most extraordinary postures.

Timom sipped his drink. Absinthe laced with mescalin, he seemed to remember that it was. The blend was good, very good. The air in the night-club was getting warmer and thicker. It seemed to Timon that the revolving coloured lights were beginning to rotate inside his head.

He put down his glass and looked again at the girl beside him, appraisingly. She was really quite a peach. That ample, but perfectly poised bosom. Those broad, experienced hips. Her bare arms, resting on the table, tapered in the subtlest modulation of smooth curves from shoulder to wrist. Perhaps it was the drink, but Timon began to feel a flicker of unwonted interest.

In another moment he would suggest that they went back to his flat together....

He took a long, lazy, voluptuous gulp of his drink. Visions of shapely, sprawling, cavorting limbs, and of the profound softness of the big bed, passed fondly through his mind.

The dance now seemed to be developing into something very like an orgy. The lights were flickering and whirling. Timon had one eye on the glittering stage, the other on his tempting and amenable partner.

The scene on the stage now exploded in an abandoned finale, and with a final flourish on the sub-drums, the dancers whirled outwards with the swift scintillations of a bursting firework. One of the girls came rushing towards Timon and leaped breathlessly into his lap. Timon gazed at the taut shining girl, slim as an eel, and his fuddled brain sent a nerve signal to his hand to paw at her delectable torso. But nothing happened. His hand refused to act; and Timon realized that he had taken one long sip too many of the insidious drink.

The rainbow lights began to spin fiercely in his brain, creating endless abstract patterns of pure colour, into which intruded, occasionally, a glimpse of more earthy female beauty.

Timon was dimly aware that he had lost contact with the night-club. He was launched on a chemically induced

dream in which, paradoxically, he was aware that he was dreaming. He knew that the drug-provoked fantasy would last now until this final episode of the day ended and it was time to sleep.

Even in his delirium, Timon felt the strange pull of the idea of sleep. It was supremely desirable.

But the dream went on and on, for an immeasurable length of time, it seemed. Countless images of weird beauty or unspeakable horror passed before his closed eyes, and were forgotten as they came and went. It seemed to Timon, watching the succession of phantasms, that the whole range of possible experience was flickering before his consciousness.

He had reached the shores of what was ultimately possible for his mind. He realized now, finally, that there was nothing more for him to experience.

As Timon contemplated the final limits of his existence, the phantasms slowly cleared. . . .

He was back again, once more himself, in the grey half-light of the control room. He lay on the couch, before the console with its banked rows of selectors.

Timon looked at the controls, and at the glowing spherical clock, and knew that it was time to press the sleep selector. He also knew that simply to press it was not enough.

Of what use was it, to sleep for a mere eight hours, and then wake up again, and begin again the round of tedious and familiar recording sequences?

He strained his dim eyes to see clearly the sleep button. He gathered the shreds of his senile force together, reached out a skinny, trembling arm, and searched and probed with his slender claw.

The claw skidded on the shiny surface of the panel, failing to find a purchase. Timon persisted, summoning the last dregs of his energy for a supreme effort. Suddenly the claw jammed itself in the panel, and would not move.

For an instant Timon panicked; then he sighed with satisfaction, realizing that he had achieved his goal. Through oncoming waves of profound drowsiness, he saw

his claw firmly fixed into the panel, locking the sleep button permanently in the "on" position.

The Surveillance Centre, at the hub of the vast concourse of recording control rooms, was a place of undisturbed calm.

Machines whirred slowly about their diverse duties at an unvarying speed. Nothing could halt or accelerate their methodical, unhurried activity.

Certainly not the flashing red light, winking insistently, on Panel 23....

For the moment, it could and would be ignored. This was, after all, only one red light among the many flickering signals which had to be watched and dealt with.

At length Machine Z–137 rolled slowly forward, grumbling a little in its whining servomechanisms, and identified the source of the trouble. Complex 23 Timon. Sleep selector locked on.

The Machine's computer flickered briefly. The fault was a commonplace one, and the remedy was routine. No need for an immediate consultation at higher level. The usual report, filed in due course, would cover this one. But first, to attend to the little local difficulty.

The Machine rumbled down an aisle between racks of heavy shelving loaded with assorted recording gear. Not much more than halfway down, it turned sharply left into the narrow runway between adjacent racks. Then the Machine began to scan up and down the shelves for the appropriate identification tag. Its antennae flickered over the racks like a braille reader; its hydraulic legs lengthened or shortened absurdly as it consulted high or low shelves.

Now the Machine had found what it was looking for. It reached up and slowly slid a heavy memory drum from the rack, cradling the drum carefully in its manipulators. Then it made the leisurely journey back to the Surveillance Centre and, crossing the floor, went down the long corridor that led to Complex 23

When it reached the control room of the Complex, the double doors opened automatically. The Machine spared

only a brief glance at Timon's slumped, inert figure on the dimly-lit couch.

Moving round behind the arc of the control console, the Machine carefully placed the memory drum on a low table. Then it moved forward to check over all the internal monitor circuits, looking for possible neural damage.

Only when it was satisfied on this score did the Machine crack open the inner housing. One by one the multiple pick-up heads were clicked aside, exposing the grey, finely-etched surface of the old worn memory drum already inside the complex. Patiently the Machine worked to ease out the worn memory drum. The label on the end read Universe 23c.

Depositing the old memory drum on the table, it picked up the new drum, labelled Universe 23d, and slid this gently into the empty mountings. After checking that the new drum spun freely on its bearings, the Machine clicked the pick-up heads back into position around it.

It was the work of only a few moments, then, for the Machine to free Timon's claw from the sleep selector button.

The time-sequencer had been re-set, so there was no delay. The Machine paused for a few moments, watching Timon's chest heaving like one newly awakened from a slumber as deep as death. It observed his visual receptors click open once more.

Satisfied, the Machine turned and, without looking back, moved out through the double doors and whirred quietly away down the corridor.

THE DAY BEFORE NEVER

by

ROBERT PRESSLIE

Defeated, subjugated, almost exterminated, yet there is a force in some men which will drive them to any lengths in order to find a means of retaliation and revenge.

THE DAY BEFORE NEVER

YESTERDAY was a quiet day. I didn't kill anyone and nobody killed me. Not even a try. Almost like old times. Hard to remember there used to be a world where you could meet a stranger without throwing anything more offensive than a smile at him. Apart from wars, of course. There is something about a war that repeals the Commandments, a lobotomy of the conscience that syrups the distaste of killing. Any other time it takes a special kind of man to be able to kill without compunction; to terminate the span of another human without the slightest urge to puke, either in the gullet or in the mind. This talent is mine. Not inborn. Not deliberately achieved. Thrust on me? That depends. Depends on whether it is possible to compel anyone to do something he inherently abhors. So maybe I am wrong: maybe I had this talent all the time and it took a special set of circumstances to bring it to flower.

Anyhow, there were twenty-four hours of innocence behind me. Or thirty hours if we are going to be precise about it. Thirty hours at the wheel of the red Berlinetta. One thousand miles in thirty hours.

If people ever get back to a state of affairs where they can pursue trivialities like erecting statues somebody should propose they perpetuate the memory of Enzo Ferrari. You can't punish many cars the way I had the Berlinetta. It was reckoned to be the finest sports car made. I'm not arguing. Six hundred miles through Poland; from Krakow to Warsaw and from Warsaw to Kaliningrad on the other side of the border. Then nearly four hundred miles through Russia from Kaliningrad to Riga. Almost nonstop.

On and under the seat at my right there was enough canned, processed or freeze-dried food to eliminate the

necessity for stopping to beat the hell out of somebody to steal their supper. The only stops I had made were to refuel the Berlinetta at abandoned petrol stations. One of the few things I can still feel proud about is my skill in unlocking the pumps with a paper clip and warm spittle.

Sometimes the stations are not abandoned. There is still the odd idiot who hasn't got his values sorted out. It stares him in the face that sooner or later he must lose his prized possessions or his life. He still lives in yesterday, hasn't got himself adjusted. So he gets blasted and he dies because he couldn't adjust.

But the idiots are getting fewer and fewer. Nobody got in my way this part of the trip. I didn't kill anyone because I didn't meet anyone. One thousand miles without the sight of another human. Mostly because I used the main trunk roads and nobody in their right senses travels along them on foot. And a lot of countryside this far north was pretty bleak and thinly populated at the best of times. Which this isn't. And every time there was a town or village sign-posted up ahead I had made a deliberate detour. The easiest way to avoid trouble is just that. Avoid it.

When I stopped to think about it—and it surprised even me that I still did—I was always faced with the conclusion that if I was not the most unpopular man alive then I was definitely on everybody's short list of candidates. Understandable. You can't do what I've done, what I've *had* to do, without setting yourself up as public enemy number two. Number one being the Barbarians of course. But hating them is a lot less futile than hating me. Them, you can do nothing about. Me, you could shoot, knife, strangle or otherwise dispose of. Provided I didn't shoot, knife, etcetera, first. Which I have been able to do so far.

The last stretch of road—between Jelgava and Riga—was reeling off under the Berlinetta's wheels. This was the final lap of a long, long journey that had started a long, long time ago. And this was the moment, the last but most critical moment for alertness. This was one town I couldn't skirt. Any more than I had been able to skirt Milan or Belgrade.

The drill for self-preservation gets more automatic with practice. Make sure the road ahead is straight and clear. Grip the wheel firmly with one hand. Send the other scrabbling around you. Get the precise location of every weapon. The faithful Smith and Wesson first. The Magnum naturally. Holds one more shot than the .38 and gives you the choice of two sizes of cartridge when ammo is hard to come by. Then the rifles. The Schmeisser machine carbine for when you aren't too fussy who gets hit and the Russian Tokarev for those special shots at a distant target. Grenades? Check. Bombs? Take your pick: plastic, magnetic, smoke. All there. Snuggle the right foot under the seat, trace out the curve of the sixty-pound bow, hear the clink of the aluminium arrows. Then the furtive touch of your own fingers at your own crotch. You keep your most secret weapon in your most secret place. A Baby Browning. Absolutely useless unless you are close enough to spit between the eyes where you have marked your target. But undetectable at the same range. A woman's weapon really. Significant you should keep it there? You wonder. And from wondering about the gun you begin wondering about women. About all the women you haven't had lately. But you can't afford the erotic distraction. So you get both hands back on the wheel and both eyes flicking along the street. For the road has become a street. The first street of the town you were visiting. In this case Riga.

Mnemographic recall on Riga: population 400,000. That's what the book said. Visible population: nil. Which is the liar? The book or the eyes? Experience says it has to be both. The book was printed before the advent of the Barbarians taught people it didn't pay to congregate. And even if the streets looked empty to me I had sallied through sufficient other streets to know I had more scrutineers than the rows of blank windows would suggest. No doubt either about whether the looks I was getting were hostile or otherwise. There was no otherwise to consider. Geographically this was part of Russia. But to bank on the legendary stolid Russian nature making the locals indifferent? Suicide. Anyhow it was Latvian before it was Russian; and Swedish

before that; and it was Polish before the Swedes captured it. Throw in the paradox that the city was more German than anything else and you get what? You get the common denominator that they hate your guts whatever the race or creed and you had better not relax.

The Berlinetta responded to the nervous pressure of my foot, carried me racing out of these newer parts of Riga across the upper bridge on the Dvina and into the old city where the buildings look more German than they do in Germany.

Fear gets suspended by the oddest things. Just for a minute I lost hold of conscious vigilance—although I long ago learned that the body does its own sentry work at these moments—and I remembered how often I had come across this before. I'm talking about the way residual national colonies or ghettos are always much more typically nationalistic than the mother country.

Due west now. Still no sign of life. But the testaments of death abounded. For one more time I cursed the Barbarians and their abominable glazers. There were immense vacant lots where they had used their bigger glazers to reduce whole streets of houses to a ghastly flux of molten stone and flesh. A flux that had hardened after flowing so that the wheel of the Berlinetta jumped in response to every corrugation that overlaid the surface of the road. This was what made it easy to hate the Barbarians. Their utterly ruthless killings and their insensible destruction of property. Maybe my emotions are not yet altogether calloused. Maybe the Barbarians are right: an enemy is an enemy, and if part of it chooses to hide in buildings with fine old ringing names like the Castle of the Knights of the Sword and the House of the Blackheads it is just too bad. All I could find of the castle was an amorphous glazed blob, streaked with greys and browns like a massive lump of Swedish glass. When I passed the House of the Blackheads it was almost entire.

Almost. A group of humans had been caught as they had sidled round one of the corners. Now they were smeared there for eternity. Or until the Barbarians decided to raze

the building completely. Some were fused shallow reliefs on the ancient stone. Others hadn't been so lucky. Not for them the quick, unfelt death. The glazer beams—powered by God-knows-what—had caught them in motion. The terrible grimace on an oldster's face told the agonies of every minute of life he had left to him after an arm and a leg had been fluidly bonded to the house. There was half a torso here, a grisly fraction there. The worst I saw before I passed the building was the girl. About fourteen or fifteen to judge by the nubile breasts laid bare by a glazer's freakish heat. If it hadn't been for the breasts I would never have known it was a girl who hung against the wall, headless, suspended only by the strips of flesh-and-silicon compound that stretched upwards from her shoulders.

On. Drive on. Drive on and forget.

No. Don't forget. Just don't let hatred refreshed be a weapon against yourself. Don't let it dull your vigilance or in any way interfere with the intricate web of intrigue you have spun. You will be picking up the final thread soon. Wait. Be patient. All the murders you have committed, all the vilification you have brought on yourself because you couldn't disclose your objective will be erased when you knit in the last thread and the enemy is reduced to lifeless dust.

It is involuntary, this ejaculation of adrenalin. You mean to keep your emotions at a subliminal level, but you can't control your glands. The needle was flickering on a suicidal hundred when a change in the character of the streets made me glance down.

The houses were less dense. Older. I eased my foot off the pedal before I missed my target. None too soon. Another couple of seconds and I would have swept past the long, low, one-storeyed decrepit arrangement of masonry that proclaimed itself in faded letters to be an inn. It looked more like a string of stables that had been converted from equine to human stowage. Later I found this idle guess was correct.

The inn and the Berlinetta, battered and filthy as it was, were as compatible as two feet in the same sock. The sight

of the car would have made the most incurious of men stop and wonder. So I swung the wheel and tucked the sportster round the back of the building.

Before getting out I stuffed my pockets with an assortment of artillery. Theoretically this place was safe. But you never can tell. The other thing I remembered to do was indulge in a few moments of pre-disembarkation callisthenics. More than once after a long drive I had fallen flat on my face due to cramp. That had been in open country. I couldn't afford to take the same chance here.

The inn was no example of modern architecture, but at least it was a tribute to the way men used to build. There was no bell. The door was locked. When I pounded my knuckles on it there was only a flat padding sound as if the vibrations of my knock had been disseminated through four or five inches of timber. I switched from hand to foot.

For a moment it was a question of who would shoot first. The old man who creaked the door open might have been harmless enough in himself. Which was more than could be said about the shotgun he had aimed at my belly. Reaction, as always, outpaced the threat. I swung the Schmeisser sideways, spun the shotgun out of his hands and into the doorway. Maybe I should have stopped there. I can only blame habit for planting the boot that had kicked at the door into his groin. It struck me as illogical that he should scream. A young man and I could have understood it. But him? Then I was jumping over his body and spewing the room with death.

Nobody was around to die. I hauled the old man to his feet, held him in front of me while I made for the racked bottles. He roused when he had half a bottle of brandy inside him. He had to. Or drown.

"Who's here besides you?"

He coughed. Tried his voice. Vomited. Tried again. "My wife and my daughter. Are you *him*?"

"Don't be stupid." I cuffed him. "Don't even give me that much recognition. I'm a passer-by. I want accommodation. What can you offer?"

He was scared to hell, but he got hold of himself and went into the proscribed routine. "It is a small place, sir. We can give a traveller refreshment and no more. It is many years since we were able to offer accommodation."

"It looks big enough to me. Surely you have a room."

"Nothing. We are too far out of the city to receive many callers. It became uneconomical to operate as a guest house. The beds and furniture are gone. Some of the rooms are used for storage. The rest are empty—except for mildew and dampness."

"*You've* got a room."

"With only one bed. I would gladly give it up to you. But my wife——"

"What about your wife?"

"An invalid. For many years. She cannot leave the bed."

"She could if I kicked her out. What else? Your daughter —where does she sleep?"

"She has a room."

"Put her into yours. You can all sleep together."

He shook his head. "It's the disease. My wife has great pain. She needs the whole bed. Even I have to sleep on the floor." He anticipated my next suggestion. "And it is not possible for my daughter to do the same. There are no more mattresses or bedclothes. Unless——"

I followed the script and finished the sentence. "Unless I bundle up with your daughter."

He hung his head. It could have been a nod or it could have been a gesture of shame.

Maybe I should have done the same. But shame was just one more emotion the coming of the Barbarians had diluted. This was the situation and I was stuck with it. A charade on a dirty joke. With me as the principal actor.

"I'll bring some food from the car," I told the old man.

"We have enough to go round. Nothing elaborate. But enough."

"I prefer what comes out of a can. I know it isn't doctored."

The inn-keeper blinked. "You are quite safe here."

"I've heard that before."

I tipped the brandy bottle, drained what was left in it into myself. "We'll see about food later. I'm too tired to be hungry right now. Show me my room."

He shuffled out of the bar. Anyone watching us would have been hard pressed to tell which of us was the elder. I couldn't lift my feet any higher than he could. I hadn't been exaggerating when I had said I was tired.

After twice ducking under low-hung beams in the connecting corridor we stopped at the door the old man indicated. I gave him back the shotgun.

"Don't be tempted," I warned. "I want four hours' rest. This is to make sure I get it. If anybody—or anything—looks like interrupting, use it. As for you—the door will be locked. And I sleep lightly, tired or not. If I hear the slightest sound I'll rake the door with this Schmeisser. You wouldn't stand a chance. Understood?"

It wasn't necessary to wait for an answer. The old man was still gripping himself where he had been kicked. Our introduction would keep him scared for a considerable time. Maybe later he would start wondering how expendable he was and whether he would come out of this alive. He wouldn't need too much calculation to arrive at the only possible conclusion. Hence the warning. But he would be harmless for a while. He wasn't the only one who could calculate. This balancing of fear against the instinct for self-preservation was a familiar equation. The factor I knew and he didn't was that I didn't intend to spend anything like as much as four hours in bed with his daughter.

She sat on the edge of the bed. Her face, pretty enough—not that it mattered—was arranged in an expression of wary anticipation. But she sat quite loosely and I guessed the look she wore was more for the old man's benefit than mine. I gave her full marks for professionalism: few people in her situation would have been so relaxed. And her eyes ran me over with the fluent efficiency of an accountant vetting a suspect balance sheet.

"The wrong responses," she said, "and you'll leave this

room faster than you entered it. I'd have to go with you and we'd both be in finely shredded pieces, but the thought of it doesn't worry me."

"I'll try to remember that."

"That's good. Anything else?"

"Just that I have a very good and a very long memory. How do you find me?"

"Same way I would find anything. By looking."

"And do you always find what you're looking for?"

"I find what needs to be found."

We both grinned. Without giving anything away to unseen ears we had established our identities. This was the girl I had been sent to meet. The girl who knew where the big bomb was hidden. She was the last of a long chain of Finders. Some of them were Finders of people—people with special talents I had made use of. Some of them had dug out the information I had needed. A few, like this one, had been Finders of places and things hidden in places.

"I'm Elke," she said. "I suppose it's a waste of time asking your name."

"The less you know the less you can tell if you ever get caught."

She was still smiling. "I thought people like you had ways of making sure nobody talked. You know—*tchk*!" She drew a finger across her throat.

"You don't sound too scared at the prospect."

She shrugged. "What's so good about living? Life expectancy is the interval between now and the moment a Barb decides you're in his way." She squirmed her bottom on the bed and said, "Excuse me."

When she was resting all her weight on one cheek she prised her fingers between herself and the bedcovers. Slowly, but with sure deliberation, she drew out a contrivance that looked like a shallow metal jar with its lid not quite properly screwed down.

"Simple but nasty," she said. "It's got a fifty-pound spring between the top and the bottom. If you hadn't said the right words I only had to shift my weight a little. End of you and me." She lifted two side clips and pressed them

down to anchor the two parts of the bomb together. "Now," she said. "Let's talk." A real professional, as I had already classed her. You would have thought I was back in England and my hostess had just poured the afternoon tea.

"It's safe? What about the old man and his wife?"

"Them! They're only part of the set-up. They're not my parents, of course. In fact they're not even married. They didn't meet until I got word of your coming. This place is his but his real wife died more than twenty years ago. The woman is really an invalid—we try to use part truths to give an image of total truth. But they're just . . . actors, you could say."

"Like us?"

"Except that they're only bit players. They're safe. I saw to that. Got them so scared that he pussyfoots around and she daren't leave the bed if she could. They think I've got the whole place booby-trapped."

"And have you?"

"I'll tell you later. You gave me the right passwords. But the real you could be dead and you could be a Barb wearing his human make-up kit. It's up to you. Maybe early morning is a funny time to be going to bed, but the sooner you get stripped off and into bed with me the sooner I'll know you really are a Memory and not a Barb."

"If I don't come up to expectations?"

"That'll be when you find out about the booby-traps."

"You know," I said as I started to strip off, "this identification business isn't foolproof. I've been thirty hours on the road. I could get myself killed just because I was too tired to function."

She laughed. "Why do you think I got this job? I used to be in another line of business. In Berlin. A business that happens to provide the qualifications needed for this one. With me, mister, nobody is too tired to function. I guarantee it."

The least she could have done was turn her head. I guess it didn't occur to her that some men are modest. Even at the moments when modesty would appear to be uncalled for. She watched until I was skin naked.

"You certainly look human," she conceded. "Very much so if you don't mind a compliment. But I've heard they can fake even that. There's only one thing they can't fake." She did that womanish contortion that allows them to undo a full length back zipper in one movement.

"You're pretty human yourself," I returned the compliment.

She crooked a coquettish finger. "Let's see if you are or aren't."

Precisely one hour and fifteen minutes later she woke me as I had asked. We got dressed immediately. Nothing to do with modesty now. Modesty was a forgotten luxury. But there's something about being naked that makes you feel defenceless. You can be armed to the teeth as they say, but without your clothes you can't convince yourself you're not more vulnerable than you would be dressed. And we were vulnerable enough as it was without being psychologically hampered in any way.

"How long have we got?" I asked the girl.

"Not long. They're generally out and about around eight every morning. It's almost that now."

"Where do they hang out?"

"In the university. Took the building over soon after they landed. You know what I mean by soon?"

"I know. As long as it took them to destroy every source of electricity with an orgy of mass atrocities thrown in just to hammer home the impression of how futile it would be to organize any resistance. You seem to have fared better than some cities I've seen. If it wasn't that I've learned how thorough they are I would have been surprised to find them this far north. Cold seems to be the only thing that gets them."

Elke said, "January and February, when the estuary was iced over, they never left the university. That's how I managed to dig up the information you want."

"Even then," I admired, "it couldn't have been easy. Their Eyes are everywhere."

She nodded. "We were worried about them at first." She

didn't explain, but I guessed she meant the local resistance group. "We couldn't understand how they worked. The Barbs had robbed us of electrical power; we couldn't communicate, we couldn't fabricate. And, as you well know, any sort of transmission—radio, television, what-have-you —is lethal to them after a few minutes' exposure. So we couldn't tally this with the Eyes. Not until we found they were alive."

I executed my party piece as a Memory. "Uni-functional laboratory grown protoplasm. Non-sentient. Capable only of aerial motion, pseudo-ocular observation and of reporting its findings to its masters by what Montilla of Madrid believed to have been telepathic means."

"Believed? Past tense? One of yours?"

"Montilla? No. *They* got him. Inevitable. He couldn't dissect the Eyes quick enough. Not before they reported he was taking hostile action. Got to admire him. He must have known what would happen."

"Oh, sure. Everybody's a hero."

I could have asked about the flat cynicism in her voice. But I didn't have to. There was nothing especially heroic about fighting for your very existence. Maybe you could say not everybody did it, but then the world always was made up of those who accept the boot of oppression on the neck and those who kick back. And because the kickers brought down even sterner oppression they were no more loved than the enemy. Elke and myself, we were kickers. We were two out of many. Or if you took it globally we were two out of a very small proportion of the human race.

We survived—and most of us had a pitifully ephemeral span—by one simple stratagem: we licked the boot of oppression. We were latter day stool pigeons. Finks incorporated. What the Barbarians couldn't discover with their Eyes they got from us. An Eye can't see into a man's mind and read the insurrection bubbling there. We could. And did. Which is the reason they let me use a car, steal petrol and food, carry weapons, scour the globe for potential rebels.

So far I had been lucky. They pulled their spies in regularly for questioning. For questioning read inquisition. Nobody told them lies. Extreme pain has this effect. Monstrous inflictions on the body and the mental agony of watching your body melt away under the beams of their modified lasers. Hence glazers. You talk. Oh, yes, you talk. There's a man inside you who thought he had self-respect and would tell them nothing. You know that even if you blab your end off you're still going to end up as two kilos of vitreous slag. But you talk.

Insurance is the thing. You get in first. Survival of the fastest. You make your contact. Get your information. Then destroy your informant. They can't ask questions of a dead man. Trust no one. Except a corpse. And we all know this. So we even hate each other.

"Well," said Elke, "if you didn't kill Montilla, you would have. Lucky for me that this is the end of the line. I suppose if it hadn't been, if you had had another stage to go, you would have removed me too?"

"Naturally."

"No regrets?"

"When did *you* last have regrets? Anyhow, you were telling me about the Eyes."

"Simple. Aerosol flykillers. Don't ask me why, but it works."

"The propellant gas. It's a fairly universal weapon. Some use hair sprays. Perfumes sometimes. That's how they found it was the propellant and not the other constituents. Of course it's only a matter of time before an Eye manages to report back before its protoplasm curdles. Then . . ."

She laughed. "Stop worrying. It's too late now. For the Barbs. Or is it? When's the big bang?"

"Tonight."

"Then we're safe."

"Probably. You found the right location?"

"Sorry?"

"The bomb. We know the area is well seeded with bombs and missile warheads laid down by the Russians, ready to be used in the event of hostilities. Not the sort of

hostility that turned up, of course. We also know that most of them were far from being in a state of readiness. They were simply being stored. These it would take a team of scientists to prepare for use. But there were two—it might have been three—laid down in this region, precisely sited some half a mile deep near a weak spot in the crust; they were primed, fully wired to long-life storage cells, set to detonate at the touch of a button."

"I found one."

"How far from here?"

"No distance at all. Right here. In the cellar. Not the bomb, of course. The activating panel."

I grinned. Couldn't stop the silly grin relaxing the taut muscles of my face. I made the most of it. I think if I hadn't grinned I would have wept. After months, months, months of seeming helplessness it was good—so damn, damn good—to find something going right at last.

The girl said, "I thought you'd be pleased. That's why I said we should be safe now. There's no danger of them catching you in the open. It's almost over, isn't it?"

"Almost. If it works. And it should. Fabricci did the calculations. The late Fabricci. I wish——"

The next few minutes were mine. Nobody's business but mine. Enough to say she understood. Her reactions were womanly. Just right. Not as a lover. Motherly. The mammary offering. We never grow up completely. Men. Women do. Maybe they're adults at birth.

"When you said it was nearly over—I know you meant the Barbarians. Getting rid of them. But I was thinking of the other things. Like having to kill people like Fabricci. People who were part of the scheme. People whose skills we couldn't have done without. It . . . well, was it necessary?"

"You know it was."

"I suppose. Damn them! Damn the Barbarians! So few of them really, but how well they did their job of crushing us. Rascak in Belgrade—another good man I had to dispose of—he had the best way of putting it. He said it was like a

disease. A virus infection. Relative to the body it invades the virus is infinitesimally small. But because it is mindless and ruthless it can kill. If it doesn't kill it lays the body low. So low that the body can only muster its defences in slow growing progression. Like us. And sometimes the body, like us again, has to kill part of itself to cut off the infection."

She spoke softly, consoling. "It's over. It's over now."

I got my spine back. Stood up. "Not quite. For you maybe. I've still got work to do. Let's go."

On the way to the cellar I waggled the Schmeisser at the old man. Just to remind him. But the menace was not the same as before.

The cellar was spotlessly clean. The walls had been covered with white formica panelling. The floor was vinyl tiled. The control board, considering the complexity of its function, was a masterpiece of miniaturized simplicity.

"Can you understand it?" the girl asked.

"Not in the slightest. I'm no scientist. But I don't have to understand it. Like we were saying about the body—it fights its invaders by conscripting many different cells with specialized functions. Phagocytes, leucocytes, cells that produce antitoxins, cells that manufacture coagulants—so it is with us. I'm a specialist. As you are. And Fabricci and all the others. You have a way of finding things. Fabricci was our finest mathematician. Rascak knew atomics. Me—I've got a freak memory. My job was to trot the globe, pick the brains of the other experts and file their combined talents in my memory. But there is very little of what I was told that I could honestly say I understood."

"Suppose you had been killed along the way? It seems strange to put so much reliance on one man."

"There you have one of the reasons I had to be so uncaring when I killed. I *had* to get here. I'm not the only one. I don't know the exact number of Memories but I do know—or I trust—that at the precise moment tonight there will be a sufficient number of them to set off the reaction we want. It was one of my countrymen who conceived the plan originally. Gerald Blackmore. You've heard

of him? No, probably not. A biologist. Working with the Atomic Research Authority. A lucky combination. Since we had no dead Barbarians to work on and absolutely no hope of using a live one, he had to work entirely from little bits of reported data. Like they can't stand cold. Or that radio waves can kill them. Or that noise makes them angry. Blackmore put all the data into a pot and cooked up the theory that we could destroy them once and for all by resonance. But the effect he asked for seemed impossible to produce. Fifty thousand megatons equivalent. And all of it to be triggered simultaneously from eighteen specifically located places. So a team of freaks was assembled. While others like yourself were doing other jobs, we had to collect and co-ordinate all the information available. Actually we've budgeted for ten thousand megatons over the top. Somebody's bound to be not where he should be tonight."

It wasn't cold in the cellar yet the girl shivered. "Wouldn't it be terrible? Suppose less of them arrived at their stations than you hoped for?"

"We'll just have to wait and see. Don't think about it. Now you'd better leave me. The time settings on this thing have to be very precise. I must have no distractions."

She went reluctantly, claiming she felt useless. I had to take my turn as consoler. Told her she had done all that was required of her and the rest was up to me. Got the impression she wasn't altogether satisfied with this, but insisted she left.

Having a built-in mnemographic image of the world time clock helped in making the settings. Base time was taken on Hamilton, Bermuda. Four hours down on GMT. That made the big bang due at 11.13 here in Riga. Margin of error plus or minus two minutes. Checked with my Ingersoll. Flipped the three switches that brought in the nicads, watched the meters register a satisfactory surge. Set the bomb's clock for ten hours, twelve minutes run-down. Pushed home the red button. Now, and only now, could I say it was Safe. Nothing could stop the bomb now.

Nothing to do but wait. Sweat it out. Went upstairs and spent the afternoon and evening getting a calculated degree of mild intoxication. Thought I deserved it.

Around ten-thirty we stopped kidding ourselves that we were relaxed. Even the glorious stew that Elke had contrived to produce out of my stock of cans hadn't helped. There was absolutely nothing to do downstairs, nothing to see. But downstairs we went.

It didn't seem possible in these clinical surroundings with their silence and with nothing in motion except the sweep hand of the clock that destiny was in the making.

"Will it be all right?" the girl asked. "For us? The explosion, I mean. All the explosions."

"You'll hardly know it happened. If all goes well and the lot goes up, the whole sixty thousand megatons, the most you'll feel will be an eight minute tremor that will barely tickle your feet. Nothing as big as an earthquake. This is only a man-made thing. We can't begin to compete with natural forces in magnitude."

"Then how is everybody so sure it will shift the Barbarians?"

"They're not. Only Blackmore was sure. We just have to believe him. Every bomb is sited at an existing fault in the crust. This doesn't mean the globe is going to crack apart. What the faults will do is send the subterranean vibrations out and across the world instead of being localized near each explosion. If Blackmore is right the optimum resonance will occur one minute after detonation and will last for four minutes. Long enough, he said, to granulate the bones of the Barbarians. Less than quarter of an hour and we'll know how right he was."

She lapsed into silence. Then the silence worried her and she said, nervously, "Quiet, isn't it?"

Agreed. But could not think of anything worth saying to break the quietness. Didn't want to either. Preoccupied with fascination of sudden heightening of perception. Discovered it's true—you really can hear your own heart beating.

Seven minutes.

Cellar was warm. Very. Could feel the sodden halfmoons of my shirt clinging to armpits. Not Elke, though. Frowning, but didn't appear to be physically disturbed.

One minute. My skin came alive. I swear it. Became a separate entity from me. A thing with a fear of its own. I believe that if a flea had adopted me my skin would have shrunk off the underlying flesh in terror.

Stupidly I wanted the sweep hand to halt in its inexorable orbit round the face of the clock. Then it passed the zenith with mechanical disdain and was on the last circuit it would ever make.

Tiny erector muscles wrenched body hairs to the perpendicular. I was furred. A ciliated motionless breathless lump of expectancy.

For all of fifteen seconds after the clock should have stopped I remained motionless and stupid. I knew it was fifteen seconds. I was watching. The revelation of the impossible had me tied in knots.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. No stoppage of the clock. No sudden surge on the meters. No tremble underfoot.

Animation boiled into being. A fleeting notion that somewhere along the line I had made a mistake was discarded without consideration. The only mistake was in leaning the Schmeisser against the cellar wall. But I had the knife in my belt.

"You bitch. You treacherous bitch." And I hadn't finished the first short sentence before I was already carving criss-cross up and down her face and chest. No quick despatch for this one.

"You sold us out," I screamed. "For once they didn't kill an informer. Because they had to get me."

She had her hands over her face, trying to protect it. I couldn't actually make out the words she was mouthing, but I gathered she was putting up a big denial. I wasn't particular. If I couldn't get her face, her body would do. The dress came apart at the neck, slashed horizontally by the knife. It flopped to her waist. The blade followed through to the skin. And I stepped back in disbelief.

Like the dress, the skin was unsupported at the neck. It

slumped down, dragged by the weight of the spurious breasts. And where bleeding flesh should have been revealed there was a horny mottled epidermis, the colour of early morning sputum.

The knife clattered to the floor and the Schmeisser was in my hand instead.

She pushed her arms out full length. As if arms could stop bullets. She—he, she, it—called out. "No. I'm not. Please listen."

"Listen to what? More lies? You're getting very clever, you Barbarians. And I was dense. I thought our system was foolproof. Our man–woman method of identification couldn't be faked, I thought, because you couldn't imitate all the functions of a man. But I overlooked the possibility that it was far easier to make a fully functioning copy of a woman."

"Yes," she agreed. "Yes and no. I deceived you, but not in the way you think. It wasn't my fault your plan went wrong. Nobody has more reason than I—than us—for seeing your plan succeed."

Deaf to her words and blind to the truth I squeezed the trigger. Kept my finger crooked until the magazine was empty and the thing was shredded. A shattered alien thing so well endowed with life that even the tattered fragments still twitched.

"You people," said the voice at my back, "are immensely vain. Your vanity leads you into so many mistakes."

The last time I had seen the old man he had carried an ancient shotgun and had watered at the eyes with fright. Now the eyes were dry and malicious. Carried death in them. Mine. The shotgun had been replaced by a glazer.

"You should have listened to that," he said. He pointed to the mess on the floor. "It would have told you about your vanity. It would have laid bare your conceit that yours was the one and only world we had acquired."

The threat of death doesn't weaken curiosity. I asked: "She really was trying to help?"

"By replacing your real contact. The one we removed

while you were still half a continent away. They are a race like yours. Sentimental and emotional. And they have the same stubbornness, the same foolish bent for trying to fight the inevitable."

He fired at my feet. I fainted. I came to, swayed on the stumps of my legs where they formed a glutinous unity with the floor, and fainted again. Repeated the process four times before I could dig the Indian trick of detachment out of my memory.

The stuff that was me and vinyl plastic and concrete had solidified by this time.

And I was alone.

I am alone. I am alone and a long time dying.

He should have stayed. I would have talked. Through pain or through pride. Better he left. He'll have to learn the hard way the things I could have told him. Only proves that conceit is universal. He thought killing me was the end of it.

Maybe it is. Certainly it is. For now. We failed. Miserably. Glad I didn't talk. Didn't tell him how we are. How I hope we still are.

Bending forward is impossible. Find, though, that if I take it slowly I can fold at the knees without too much agony. Trick will be to drop my hands behind me at the right moment. Mustn't let my tibia off the vertical.

It won't be soon. Too much organization required. But the day will come. Another day. Another time when another fanatic like me will try to trigger another weapon.

Passed out again. Didn't get the hands quite right. One leg has snapped off at the stump. Bleeding. Must look like octogenarian lowering himself on the bedpan. Trying to get all my weight shifted to one hand. To get the other free.

Find it strange that only now, when it's all over and all the pressure is off, I can think kindly of the human race. Verdict: pretty good. There's a word . . .

Mind hazy. Remember it now. Indomitable. That's the word. Indomitable. Riddled with a thousand weaknesses. Yet indomitable.

Made it. Haunched and balanced on left hand. Three more inches and the right hand will reach the knife I dropped. A one-man final gesture. I was intended to die slowly. So it must be otherwise. If they can't do a simple thing like that right then I have hopes. Great hopes. For tomorrow.

THE HANDS

by

JOHN BAXTER

There have been many fine stories concerning aliens taking over human beings, but Australian writer John Baxter adds the grisliest touch yet in this return from a far star.

THE HANDS

THEY let Vitti go first because he was the one with two heads, and it seemed to the rest that if there was to be anything of sympathy or honour or love for them, then Vitti should have the first and best of it. After he had walked down the ramp, they followed him. Sloane with his third and fourth legs folded like the furled wings of a butterfly on his back; Tanizaki, still quiet, unreadable, Asiatic, despite the bulge inside his belly that made him look like a woman eight months gone with child; and the rest of them. Seven earth men who had been tortured by the Outsiders.

When the crowd saw Vitti, they shouted, because that was what they had gathered there to do. Ten thousand sets of lungs emptied themselves in one automatic, unthinking cry. The sound was a wave breaking over them, a torrent of sound that made them want to fall on the ground and wait for its passing. But there was only one shout. By the time the cry was half over, the people had seen Vitti and the rest of them, and when their lungs were empty they had neither the will nor the ability to draw them full for another shout. There were some who did; a few standing at the back. But their shouts were like the cries of sea birds along the edge of the ocean. From the others, there was no sound but the susurrus of whispers like the melting of sea foam after a wave has receded. Nobody had anything to say. At that moment, Alfred Binns realized for the first time that he was a monster.

In the anteroom at headquarters, Binns stood at the window, looking down on the city. The streets were empty now. As he watched, a family of three—mother, father and one small boy—hurried across the square below him and disappeared into the subway entrance. They must have

been the last, because no more people moved anywhere on the wide, clean streets. Binns had almost forgotten that nobody lived in the cities any more. Thousands had come to see them arrive, but now the show was over and they were going back to their homes, leaving the city to those who had to live there.

"Nobody left at all?" Farmer said. Nobody else had spoken.

"You're listening again," Binns said without turning. "You promised you wouldn't."

"I can't help it," Farmer said. He looked down at the bulge on his chest where the other brain had grown. Through the soft clear skin he could see the grey convolutions and the ebb of blood through vein and tissue. "It's growing up."

"You and Tanizaki ought to get together," somebody said. It was safe now, though at the beginning of the trip back Hiro had been sensitive about his huge belly where the second set of intestines had grown. There had been fights, as if violence could wipe it all away, but after a few weeks they had learned.

A man came into the anteroom. He worked very hard at not being embarrassed and for a while he almost succeeded. But Farmer was more than a normal man could take. His eyes went glassy and he turned away for a moment. When he looked back his gaze was directed over their heads.

"Would you like to follow me?" he said.

They went with him along the corridor to where the debriefing was to take place. The light was soft and there were no shadows. They were all glad of that; the one thing more horrible to each man than his deformed body was his grotesque dancing shadow.

"Disgusting," the general said. "Barbaric. Inhuman." He was very pale.

"Not really," Binns said politely. "They aren't like us, you know."

A colonel shook his head in bewilderment. "Incredible," he said.

"Not really," Binns said again.

"Do you feel any pain at all?" the doctor asked gently. "When you move them, I mean."

Binns clenched one of the hands that grew from the centre of his chest.

"None at all," he said. "If I make a fist four or five times I feel a sort of shortness of breath, but that's probably because the chest muscles seem to work the hands as well as my lungs."

The doctor made a note in a small neat hand.

"May I examine it?" he said.

His reverent manner was irritating. Everybody spoke in whispers. Any sort of revulsion would be better than this. When the doctor reached out, Binns grabbed his outstretched hand and shook it vigorously. The doctor screamed.

After the medical examinations they were brought back to the big room again for more questioning. Everybody was very quiet and very understanding. Binns still wished they could be a little less reverent. It made him feel different and this disturbed him. On Huxley, he had never felt different, and even when they left Huxley Kolo had made them feel that there was nothing wrong in having another arm or leg or some extra organs. He almost wished that Kolo was back with them. When he had been there, the group had been complete. Now, it was wrong, out of balance. Something was missing.

The questioners continued to be understanding. Their queries were always quiet and considerate. Only the politicians showed any signs of impatience.

"And you never tried to escape?" one of them asked sharply.

"Yes, we tried," Sloane said. "Once—no, twice. Then we gave up. It just wasn't possible to escape."

"It's always possible," another man said, but not very loudly.

On Binns's chest the two hands stirred, the fingertips brushing each other restlessly.

"The people on Huxley aren't like us," Binns said. "They look like us—sometimes—but otherwise they're completely different. You don't know how it is. You can't understand . . ."

"The fingers," Vitti said. Only his right head spoke. The effect was odd. When one mouth spoke, you expected the other to speak also, but it never did. Even though Farmer had its brain, one expected some sort of reaction. Binns wondered if the two brains thought on separate tracks. He had never asked Vitti. It didn't seem the right thing to do.

"Yes, the fingers," Dixon said. "Kolo had a thing he used to do with his fingers that made us . . . made us . . ."

The handless arms that grew from his shoulders below his own moved to gesture, then stopped as he realized the lack of hands made it meaningless.

"He snapped them," Binns said. "Not like ordinary snapping. Sort of quick and hollow. When he did that, we just had to do whatever he told us."

The general snapped his fingers twice. "Like that?"

"No," Vitti said. "Kolo was the only one who could do it."

"Other than this, no other pressure was placed on you?"

"Well, we couldn't leave the city," Sloane said. "Otherwise, we could do most things. We weren't locked up or anything."

There was silence in the big room for a moment.

"Well," said one of the psychiatrists, "how did they . . ."

He stopped, conscious of the quiet. Nobody had wanted to ask the question. Now that he had started, there was nothing to do but continue.

"How did they make you . . . I mean . . ."

"You mean how did they change us?" Binns said.

"Yes."

Sloane laughed. "They didn't make us," he said. "We did it ourselves."

"Things are different on Huxley," Vitti said. "Up there, this is normal. Everybody can grow and change to suit

themselves. If you want to be a foot taller . . . well, you just grow a foot taller. Physically, they aren't very different to us. This is just a sort . . . well, a sort of trick they've learned. They taught it to us."

"But why did you grow these . . . appendages?"

"We don't know," Binns said. "Kolo just snapped his fingers and . . ." He shrugged. There was nothing else to be said.

It was quieter down by the sea. There was no sound but the wind and the gurgle of water. Binns wished there were still beaches, but the city had long ago engulfed the sea's edge and even its shallows. He stood on the farthest lip of the city, looking down at the pylons that disappeared into the grey water. There were no particular thoughts in his mind, but those that were there moved silent and separately, like fish in a pool. This above all was the curious thing; that he had no two thoughts that went together. His mind seemed limitless and the thoughts like pet fish suddenly emptied into an ocean. Ever since he had left Huxley, it had been like this. The collision of this thought with another might have sparked an explosion of fear, but the meeting never occurred. It joined the rest of the ideas that swam quietly about in his mind.

There was rain on his face, or perhaps spray. He looked up and felt the hard drops sting his skin. His clothes were wet. It must have been raining for a long time while he was standing there by the sea. The cold needles of water stung the tender skin of his new hands. With his own hands he groped in his pocket and slipped on the cover they had given him. The hands rubbed themselves together for a moment, then clasped inside the darkness of the hood. Binns could sense them there, holding each other. It was a pleasant feeling.

He stood by the water a moment longer, watching the waves lap at the pillars, staring down, trying to follow with his eyes their long dive to the floor of the ocean. Sometimes he almost thought he saw all the way down, right to the silt at the bottom, but he knew that was only

an illusion. Yet an illusion hardly less real than his other thoughts. It was easy to believe that he could see down through all those yards of water; as easy as to believe in Huxley, or the hands on his chest. No thought had any real permanence. They were all vague and shadowy. He felt nothing sharply, with real emotion. He seemed always to be watching pictures of thoughts rather than the thoughts themselves. It came to him, as slowly as did all his thoughts now, that perhaps the things he thought were not of his own creation.

Nonsense, a voice said inside his mind.

But it could be true. The idea was not terrifying. He no longer had the ability to be terrified. But it was disturbing. For the first time since he had arrived back, a real emotion stung him. He was grateful for the stimulus. He turned quickly from the sea. Too quickly. The man watching him had time only to hide part of his body behind a pylon before he was seen. Binns didn't show any sign of recognition. He had expected to be followed, and was glad in a way that he had been. It meant there was somebody near; somebody he could talk to.

He hunched his cloak about him against the rain and walked quickly up the sloping ramp towards the pylon until he was beside it. Then he stopped.

"I'd like to talk to you."

There was no sound for a moment. Then the man came out from behind the pillar. He was young and very thin—gawky, Binns thought. His face and hair were soaked with rain. The wet hair clung to his skull as if the rain had softened it, making it liquid and transparent. Binns could imagine him hiding behind the pylon, pressed against it, his hands flattened against the metal, the rain falling steadily on his face.

"Are you following me?"

The boy reached into his pocket and took out a small metal emblem. Binns knew it well.

"I was assigned to see you were safe."

"Why don't you walk along with me? There's no point in dodging around corners."

He started walking. After a few steps, the boy followed, then fell in beside him. The rain drove at their backs and they both hunched forward to keep the cold water from the back of their necks. Together, in step, they walked up the long ramp towards the city.

"You're very young for this sort of work."

"Twenty-two. Age doesn't matter really." His voice was very young though. It hardly seemed that a boy like this would know what age meant.

"What's your name?"

"Teris."

"Nothing else?"

"I'm a ward."

A ward. That explained a lot. Brought up by the State for employment by the State. No wonder he was so young. Binns tried an experiment.

"Are they following the others too?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

Interesting. He had expected something like that.

Then he stopped walking, very suddenly.

Why had he asked that question? Why "conduct an experiment"? He had no reason to. It was not the sort of thing he normally did.

Teris was watching him.

"What's wrong?"

Binns shook his head. "I feel . . . odd. I'm wondering why I asked you that."

"Will I call headquarters?"

No! Not Headquarters!

"No. Don't bother."

He started walking again. Teris fell in beside him, but Binns could feel him looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Inside the hood on his chest, the hands were stirring slightly.

They were at the top of the ramp now. A narrow street ran along the edge of the sea, swinging in a wide circle around the curve of the city. There were a few vehicles going by, but the rain kept most people inside. For a moment Binns watched the cars pass with a sound like

ripping silk. Patches of oil flowed on the grey road, flashing false and faded rainbows.

"Do you want to go to your home?" Teris asked.

"No." Binns looked around. "Is there a park?"

"A park?" Teris glanced at the street indicators. "There's one about half a mile away. Or Central Park, of course."

"The nearest one will do." He looked around and saw a wide street leading off the avenue at a sharp angle. There were no cars on it that he could see.

"Up there, isn't it?"

Teris looked at him sharply.

"How did you know that?"

Careful.

"I lived here for a long time, remember. Before you were born, I imagine."

He stepped off the kerb and crossed the street.

They walked together for a few blocks.

"I'm making you nervous," Binns said.

"No."

"I can tell. It's the hands, isn't it?"

Teris didn't answer. *Typical,* the other voice in his head commented. He wondered about the voice, but without real interest. It was not his problem.

"I can't help it, you know. They just grew on me."

No answer. Their feet made twin clatterings on the wet footpath. The rain fell softly, like snow. They were the only people on the street.

"I was told not to discuss the matter with you," Teris said.

"Aren't you interested at all. I don't mind talking about it."

The boy's face was set, partly in embarrassment.

"I have my instructions."

Give it up. Try something else.

"Very well. If you don't want to talk . . . Ah, this is the park, isn't it?"

The park took up a whole block. It was a huge field of grass, with a few trees and a pavilion built in antique style. The grass was clean and smooth, like a carpet. They

crossed the street and stood at the edge of the grass. There was a control post near them. All they had to do was press the button and the rain would stop, the sun would come out, the birds would sing. But nobody had pushed the button on any of the control posts around the perimeter of the park. It was empty.

Teris moved towards the post.

"No," Binns said quickly. "I prefer the rain."

Teris looked at him suspiciously.

"It doesn't rain on Huxley," Binns said.

This seemed to satisfy him.

Binns walked on to the grass. It was very wet and spongy. He could feel the water in the brown soil. Under the grass, the earth was dark and deep and wet. Idly he took off the hood that covered his second pair of hands. They moved more easily now, rubbing their fingertips together and spreading their palms to weigh the damp air. He looked out across the park. On the far verge he could see movement, awkward halting movement. There were people over there. Six people, to be exact.

"Teris."

The boy walked up behind him. He could hear his feet on the turf making a soft squishing noise. He was very close now, just by his right shoulder.

Binns turned quickly. He grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him suddenly in against his body. As they touched, the other two hands grabbed the loose cloth of the boy's cloak. Binns's hands went to his throat.

It didn't take very long, and nobody saw it. For a moment the limp body hung pressed against Binns, the boy's dead eyes staring into his. Only after a moment did the hands release their grip and let the body slump to the grass.

The others were coming towards him across the park, but Binns didn't look at them. He was looking at the hands. They were no longer his to control. They had held on to Teris's body long after his own hands had let go, long after he had willed them to relax their grip. It seemed to him that their clutch was a sort of grim triumph. Now they

were moving quickly and intelligently without any orders from him. He watched the right one curl, the fingers bending in, the thumb extending, thumb and forefinger touching. There was the sound of fingers snapping. An odd hollow sound, but one that Binns knew well.

The others heard it too, and stopped. Each looked at the burden he carried with him. Farmer at the brain under his skin, Vitti at his other head, Tanizaki at his huge belly. Binns looked at his hands. Where the wrists met the skin of his chest, there was a sort of inflammation. It hurt. The skin was beginning to crack. Tanizaki fell to the ground, clutching his body. The fingers snapped again. Binns fell to his knees. The others were already on the ground. The rain was falling once more, but they didn't notice, as under its still soft touch they gave birth to their master

THE SEEKERS

by

E. C. TUBB

It was a simple enough thing they found on the surface of the uninhabited planet, yet it became the key to their inner desires. Reality or illusion?

THE head was becoming too Byzantine in the exaggerated torment of the face. Intalgo leaned back, frowning as he studied his work. The torment belonged, certainly, the portrait was that of a man on a cross. Any man on any cross and from what he knew crucifixion was a most agonizing form of death. But he *really* knew so little. He had never seen the face of a crucified man and the work lacked that certain conviction which only experience could provide. Disconsolately he leaned farther back and closed his eyes.

Around him the control room whispered its muted, mechanical lullaby.

He heard it just beneath the level of his consciousness. It was a sound so familiar that, to him, it was silence, but, if the whisper should break, should falter, he would be immediately aware. But the whisper did not change. The ship hummed its smooth way across the void at a pace which left light crawling far behind. A mechanical bullet aimed at a distant star. Another star, another planet, another step on the path of total domination.

Intalgo abruptly opened his eyes, staring at the portrait as if at an enemy, hoping to capture the missing ingredient by sheer surprise. How did a man die on a cross? There would be the constriction of the chest, the pressure on the lungs, the terrible strain. Surely the head would fall forward or, no, the head would have to be thrown back in order to straighten the throat. But in that case the chin would be more prominent. And what about cyanosis?

The artist sighed and reached for his pigments. He wished that Delray was awake. The doctor should know.

Delray was fighting. He strode through barbarous halls, the sword in his hand red with blood, his near-naked body

dappled with ruby flecks. He came to the hall with the throne and halted, eyes narrowed against the leaping glare of giant flambeaux. The light dimmed, and from the shadows, something advanced.

It was anthropomorphic and obscene. It yammered a challenge and he roared an answer, springing forward, the sword firm in his hand. Then it was a blur of cut and thrust and vicious slashing. Spurting blood filled the air with its familiar reek. And, above all, was the mad, red, exhilaration of the battle.

The thing died. The hall threw back the echoes of his footsteps as he marched to the throne. He tensed as something moved beside it, relaxing as the woman came towards him. She was tall, proud, her mouth a ruby smear. Blonde hair trailed the floor at her feet. White flesh gleamed in the dancing light.

He laughed and heard the sword tinkle at his feet. He reached towards her and laughed again as a dagger flashed in her hand. Contemptuously he knocked it aside and clamped his hands on warm, struggling flesh. His blood thrilled with the lust for conquest.

He opened his eyes and stared at the satin finish of the ceiling.

He swore and rose and swore again as his forehead hit the edge of the cap. A hell of a time for the thing to break down. His instinct was to hit out and he slammed his hand against the warm metal, furious at the disturbance of his favourite dream. A tell-tale lit with a cold, green glow and he arrested the movement of his hand poised for a second blow. Grumbling, he thrust his head into the field of the cap. The spool must be broken or the selector at fault, but he could fix neither. Malchus would have to do that.

The engineer sat cross-legged before the quiescent bulk of the power unit. The side-edges of his naked feet rested on the metal of the floor, the tips of his supporting fingers touched it to either side. His eyes were closed, but he was not asleep.

He sensed the vibration of the metal, the path of in-

candescent particles within the pile, extrapolating from observable data to the logical conclusion. There was a tiny hesitancy from one of the turbines. It was almost nothing but the slight imbalance would hinder the path of the gases, deflecting them a trifle to one side. There would be excessive erosion on a certain spot and a rise in temperature. The extra heat would affect the bore of a pipe and create a minor bottleneck. Pressure would tend to build.

Eventually a repair and adjustment would have to be made.

But not now. Not for a long time yet. They would have time to finish this tour before things reached the point where to ignore the trouble would be to court disaster. Then he would oversee the work and guide the rebuilding.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a smile.

To build!

Feldman could never appreciate the beauty of the thought. But the navigator was not an engineer.

Feldman was the man who sent the ship lunging at invisible targets, who checked the radiation of suns and the atmosphere of planets, who lived by the lines of a spectroscope and the immutable laws of science. He worshipped the cold beauty of an equation. He was writing a book.

It was a work of love, a hobby, and would be published, if at all, under a pseudonym. He would not risk the sneers of his contemporaries. He wrote:

> The greatest foreseeable problem of heterosexual crews, the strains and frustrations of thwarted sexual desire, have apparently been overcome by use of the dream-cap in which paradoxical dreams are encouraged with the consequent release of physical strain by the superimposition of erotic and exotic stimuli. A choice of dream-sequences is provided by varied tapes and, it is to be assumed, the synthetic world so provided compensates for the boredom of space flight and the lack of congenial

company. By congenial I mean female and not incompatable types. Choice of crew-members is carefully governed both from the view-point of dual-attributes and . . .

He was wandering. He lifted the pen and sucked thoughtfully at the tip. The book was to be about the sexual tensions and problems in space, but, for some reason, he constantly veered from the subject. Now, for example, he was about to laud the Pentarch for their wisdom in crew-selection when, of course, it wasn't really wisdom at all but plain common sense. He really must stick to the point.

And yet——?

Was it really wise to write the book at all? A man in his position couldn't be too careful, and if the book were published and a whisper of the true identity of the author should leak out——?

He frowned and moved his hand to the release. A pressure and the surface was blank. Almost at once he regretted the total erasure—he should have printed it at least if only to make corrections. He could always destroy the thing before they landed. But perhaps if he tried a different approach?

The pen touched the surface and left a scrawl of thin lines. Hastily he jabbed the erase button again. He was sweating. He hadn't really meant to write that at all.

Intalgo took a smear of pigment on the tip of his thumb and wiped it beneath the staring eyes. He brushed a thin line at the corners of the mouth and touched the contour of a lip. Leaning back he looked at the result.

He frowned his disappointment. He had tried to portray resignation, acceptance, fortitude, the whole overlaid with a patina of pain. Instead he had added a new emotion. Now the face held hate.

He reached towards the erase then halted the movement of his hand. Was he so wrong? Wouldn't a man so tormented have cause to hate his tormentors? He had tried to picture an ideal and so had tried to achieve the impossible. Art could not deny reality.

Irritably he rose and paced the control room, wondering at his sombre thoughts. Death, torment, the ultimate in pain—why did his hands insist on creating such things? And why did that face hold a haunting tinge of familiarity?

Musing, he stared at his creation while around him the control room hummed its satisfaction. The hum gave the answer. The control room was too empty—something was missing. Something which, subconsciously, he had tried to replace.

The Pentarch had flung the ship like a challenging hand towards the stars. But now that hand was maimed.

The captain was dead.

Intalgo had loved that lonely man. Beneath the cold exterior he had sensed a warm personality and an imagination almost equal to his own. No artist, the captain, but a trained manipulator of men. But he had once likened the stars to camp fires burning in the fields of eternity and Intalgo could forgive many things to a man who had held thoughts of such poetic slant.

But he found it hard to forgive the manner of his death.

Such a man should not have died in such a fashion. For him was the noble ending, the song of trumpets, the heroic passing. Not a sharp edge drawn across a naked throat in the silence of his lonely watch. Often the artist wondered what had driven him to take his life. Had he, too, been crucified on the cross of duty and inclination?

Was that his face which looked back from the painted sheet?

Intalgo stared at it with sharpened interest, but it was not the captain. It was not anyone he knew and yet . . .

He sat, musing, looking at the painted face, remembering the dead.

They had often talked during the long, silent hours between the stars. They had talked of death and of life and the purpose of existence. They had talked of what they did and why they did it.

And the captain had shown his fear.

"Out here," he'd said, "we're irritating intruders, rats scuttling among the granary of the stars. What may we find? Other, older races perhaps? Strange ways and strange customs and mysteries which we lack the mental equipment to solve. And yet we go on. We have no choice but to go on."

Then he would laugh without humour and his eyes would grow bleak.

"One day we will find something beyond us and, when we do, God help our ignorance."

He had not waited for that day to come.

They landed on a planet which drowsed beneath the ruddy glare of a dying sun. The ship was an alien harshness on a rolling plain of yellow dust. An enigmatic cube thrust its squat ebony finger towards the sky. It was the only sign of life the world possessed and it was old. Old beyond their limited imagination.

But they landed to stamp the seal of the Pentarch on a new acquisition of Man.

"We must be armed," said Delray.

"No need—the entire planet is dead," said Feldman.

"I must get into that building," said Malchus.

Intalgo said nothing—a recorder should not speak. But in the log he wrote:

> Inertia caused normal landing precautions to be taken, but from habit, not from a sense of responsibility. Neither is willing to take the orders of another—each claiming that he has equal right. I am watching the corrosive effects of Democracy and, while it is fascinating in its unexpected nuances of individualism, it can lead only to chaos. These journeys last too long.

Too long—and yet it was as easy to continue as to return and the Pentarch was stern when it came to dealing with failure. More than stern when it dealt with disobedience. Intalgo sighed and closed the log and went to breathe the alien air.

The place had a timeless, dreamlike quality as if a segment of creation had been frozen so that there could be no change, no alteration, no newness or passing away. The air was heavy, stagnant, flattering the echoes of their conversation. Like ants the three others wended their way to the titanic bulk of the mysterious building. They walked with arrogance but without harmony. They were individuals, not a team.

Intalgo sighed again. Now the challenging hand was more than maimed—it was clawing itself apart.

Malchus found it first. It was almost buried in the yellow dust and he kicked it free then squatted, looking at it.

It was the part of a machine.

It was tooled and finished in a way he had never seen before but, now that he saw it, the reason was obvious. It glinted and shone with the rainbow pattern of refracted light and the scored surface was designed to eliminate friction. The eddy currents generated when the machine was in operation would keep the surfaces an atom apart.

It was—it must be—the central bearing of an engine which was—it could only be—the drive unit of a . . .

He blinked and settled himself more comfortably and concentrated his attention.

A pipe would run from there and meet a shaft which had to run from there and the junction would have to be—there! Then that hollow must hold a swivel-drive leading to . . .

He sat immersed in the joys of construction.

Feldman found it next.

He snorted at the engineer then stooped as he saw what rested on the sand. Squatting, he looked at it.

It was crystallized truth.

It was a model so intricate and yet so plain that it was as easy to read as a book. There was the basic structure of the atom and there were the logical extensions of the formulae propounded by Einstein and there—if he looked very close—were the equations of the three-body problem and those surely must appertain to time itself so that . . .

Feldman sighed with intellectual satisfaction and settled himself for his greater concentration.

Delray found it next.

He came shouting over to the others and glared at what rested between them.

It was naked satiation.

It was the euphoria of combat, the thrill of physical violence, the tease of mental struggle. It was his own deep, dark heritage of type and it opened before him like a flower within whose petals was to be found all he had ever sought. He sank into it and into an eternal enervating dream.

Intalgo found it the last of all.

He stood murmuring into the recorder, his eyes fastened on the three, distant shapes, frozen in a fresco of bone and flesh and pulsating blood. Around him the air hung like many folds of scented silk.

"They have not moved for hours and are obviously unaware of any form of physical discomfort. The thing is divided between them, but it must be some kind of snare. The builders of this monolith must have devised means to protect it from intruders such as ourselves. In a short while I will go across to them and try to restore their senses and recall their responsibility."

He hesitated, then switched off the instrument.

There was really nothing more he could say.

Say, but not think. The dead words of the dead captain came to him as he walked across the plain of yellow dust to where his companions sat in frozen concentration.

Rats scurrying among the granary of the stars.

Rats!

The Pentarch would not be amused, but he knew now why he had depicted Man as being suspended from a cross. Man with his own face. Man, tormented in his eternal search for . . .

He saw what the others had found.

It was pure art.

It was the thing he had sought all his life and it held so

great a joy that he felt tears sting his eyes and overwhelming emotion fill his heart.

Sitting he stared at it.

Man lives by his search for Heaven. This thing was Heaven—for all of them.

They could never leave it.

ATROPHY

by

ERNEST HILL

Take automation to its logical conclusion and what kind of work is there left for mankind to do—except press a few buttons? But what happens to the worker when the machines go wrong?

ATROPHY

THERE was a tweet in the upper register and the blues were blurred. Either the blues were blurred or his eyes were still clouded with an opaque residue of sleep. Or the angle. The Tilt. His hand slipped languidly from under the fibre-glass coverlet, pressed, and the set-right register moved forward a notch. Two notches. Better. Some Tilt. The feet should be slightly higher than the head, the body at an angle of five degrees to the horizontal. The angle of relaxation. Certainly the blues were now bluer but the tweet was still pronounced. Either actually an electronic distortion or subjectively, a jangle discordant with a brain rhythm surge. The programme was a bore anyway. Or was it? He had hardly noticed the programme. Only the tweet and the register. All programmes were a bore if it came to that. Why watch? No reason at all. He activated his alpha rhythm and the set switched itself into a dead thing of ten foot screen and chromium suspended from the ceiling.

A doze. Thank God it was Wednesday. Every Monday morning you think Wednesday will never come. But it does. It does. Today. Eleven o'clock. A doze and a twiddle of the alpha rhythm around the tea-maker relay. Tea. A bath. Another nap. Perhaps a stimulator and a walk round the park. Tea and a tranquillizer and the evening programme. A retina and receptivity stimulator.

"Elvin!"

Perhaps something more active. A game of gin rummy with anyone gin-rummy minded enough to play. A space cruise in the activated planetarium. Lay back and let the stars slip by. Later perhaps a night-club in an atmosphere of nudity and mild narcotics. An erotic film, lips a-quiver and bared navel nerve-ends on the sensor pads.

"Elvin!"

No. Eroticism was a bore. Stimulation. Stimulation.

Stimulation. No one ever did anything very much. Electronically—not actually. A bore. It was all there in the sensor pads. Why carry it farther? One always thought one would. Why? Why go through the emotional upset and possible degradation of a first-hand affair that never approached the poignancy of the sensors? Much better a taste-bud stimulant and a bottle or two of anything at all. No need for expense or the fatigue of selection. Although——? The red fluid. It would be fun one day to try a sip or two of the pale red stuff with unactivated taste-buds. A real experiment. What would it taste like? Vinegar, probably with a dash of meths. Who cared? Taste was subjective like first degree sex in the safety of the second-hand. Like alcoholism.

"Elvin!"

Taste-buds. Yes. Tea. A taste-bud stimulant and a cup of tea. Relax. Activate the alpha rhythm. Two-beat-one. The tea-twiddler. Might as well be water, of course. But it was tea—or something like it. Did one really save effort with the alpha rhythm twiddle? The effort of activation almost equalled the effort of knob-depression. Oh, well! The makers knew best!

"Elvin!"

Oh, God! She's there. Standing by the bed, arms akimbo and tired eyes contemptuous. Why doesn't she go away? Or sleep? Or twiddle her brain rhythm round the dish-washer. Or activate the waste-incinerator. Or something.

"Get up!" she said.

"Why?" he asked. "For goodness sake, why? It's Wednesday. I've had a hard week. Leave me alone."

She threw back the fibre-glass. Switched off the temperature regular with a flick of scarcely conscious brain rhythm surge. Two-beat-two.

"You'll atrophy," she said. "That's why!"

Of course he wouldn't atrophy. He had been thinking consciously and logically of all sorts of things. What to do. When to do it. You don't think consciously and logically if you atrophy. You slip into a sort of dreamy torpor and the State knocks on the door in a white coat. Rather pleasant

to be taken away by the State. No need to plan the day. To think. To dream.

Gavin had atrophied. They jolted his reception every ten minutes through the electrodes in each temple. He still couldn't differentiate between dreams and waking. Couldn't think. But his receptivity quotient registered green lights at every impulse and that was something. Nasty.

"I won't atrophy," he said.

"You haven't used IT for weeks," she snapped. "You're half-comatose already."

"I'm not!" He protested.

"Quite apart from that—there's the bonus."

She was right, of course. He had fallen well behind schedule and it was only eight weeks till Christmas. Forty shopping days. Forty thinking days.

"All right," he said, "I'll have an hour with IT this afternoon."

"Start now!"

He was a little bit afraid of her. The only thing in life that meant very much to him. Positive impact. Standing there with tired eyes, but clear. Steady hands. Tranquil without tranquillizers. Stimulating without stimulants. Cold. Hostile. Scornful. Beautiful with her breasts bare and the white line of clavicle showing where her ribs ended and shoulder began.

"All right," he said, as the water boiled and gurgled over the injected tea-bag. "A bowl of Munchies and I'll give IT two hours."

She tossed her head and turned on her heel in the co-ordinated impatience of departure.

"Meryl," he asked, plaintively, "kiss me!"

She glanced at the dials of the sexometer. Her eyes were cold.

"There's another two days yet!"

"I mean," he said, "just—kiss me!"

She brushed his lips with hers in a fleeting sporadic condescension of nut-shell texture. He sighed. Two days before the sexometer buzzed. "Thursday–Friday" he counted on his fingers.

IT was a cool, green, pastel shade of dials and lights and buttons. There were no alpha rhythm relays. IT stimulated activity. IT's buttons were manually depressed. Elvin checked the cards. 132 to qualify for standard bonus. 144 with a minimum of 24 IT-Approvals for 25% INCREMENT. All IT-Approvals over 48 qualified for bonus-and-half. The maximum. So far, he had 96 cards and 2 Approvals. Meryl was right. He must think. Now. Or atrophy. Puffing a cheroot as an aid to concentration, he sat between the chromium rails, donned the head-piece with encephalic sensors and activated the "On" button with a thin, white finger. IT's green light glowed.

"No smoking! No narcotics! No stimulation!" IT ordered.

Elvin stubbed the cheroot. His hand trembled. Think! Stick to the formula! Choose a subject for thought—unrewarding. Unconnected with work or sex. Develop the unrewarding thought to its final conclusion. Look for IT-Approval.

"Damn the Unions," he thought. "They should never have agreed to a minimum of 132 per annum for standard bonus. Ridiculously high. How many thinking days were there in a year? Not as many as all that." A red light glowed and IT's Thought-interruption registered as a "Phit! Phit! Phit!"

He depressed the "Correction" knob.

"Random thinking must be corrected. State proposition and articulate!" IT ordered.

"I haven't started yet," he protested.

"Think!" IT ordered.

"Damn the Unions," he thought. "And the management. They don't have to do this. IT is only for the Workers."

"Phit! Phit! Phit! A proposition containing an expletive is a random digression!"

"Give me a chance," he complained. "I haven't thought of a proposition yet!"

"Think!" The red light glowed.

He was about to answer "Rats!" But this was probably

an expletive and a double correction would automatically register non-Approval on this, his 97th card.

"Cats!" he said, in a moment of inspiration.

To his surprise, the red light transfused into green. It glowed brightly.

"Go ahead!"

"Cats" was as good a subject as any. Simple really.

"A cat," he said, "is a small furry creature with four legs, a head at one end and a tail at the other."

"Phit! Phit! Phit!"

"What is it now!" He depressed the "Correction" button. How many corrections was this? How many did IT allow? He had forgotten.

"Description is correct, but mode of expression borders on to the facetious. Generic term for four-legged creatures required."

"Quadrupeds!"

The green light glowed brightly. He was pleased that IT approved. Must do better.

"A cat is a quadruped, furry and with a tail. It catches mice."

The green light did not waver. What else did cats do?

"It drinks milk and sleeps by the fire."

"Phit! Phit! Phit!"

"Bother!" He depressed the button.

"A cat cannot drink milk while it is asleep by the fire. Define the intervals!"

"When it is hungry it feeds. When it is thirsty it drinks milk. It sleeps a great deal when it is neither hungry nor thirsty."

Green. Who would have thought that there was so much to think about cats? But was there enough to say? Barely twenty seconds had elapsed and the thought process must last for ten minutes to qualify for the "completion" stamp, even with Approval. What else?

"They are cuddly things." The green was less bright. Probably the mode of expression had earned distaste. Was there a better word for "cuddly"? He wanted IT to think well of him. Quite apart from the bonus.

"They accept affection!" Much brighter.

"The ancient Egyptians worshipped them as gods." Interruption.

"All cats, or some cats?"

"Tabbies, I think." Green. Twenty-five per cent Approval.

"Cats were originally wild. They lived by hunting. They were fierce. Modern cats have a much better life."

"Phit! Phit! Phit!"

"Why?"

IT was being really cantankerous today. Just when he was getting into his stride and really thinking about cats IT interrupted him with this unnecessary interrogative. Why? Well, why did they have a better life?"

"They are happier," he said.

"Why?"

Must avoid expletives. Must avoid non-Approval. Argue with IT, by all means but never let IT rile you. That was emotional disturbance and non-approved.

"A wild cat was sometimes hungry. It hunted in all weathers, in rain and snow, to bring back to its litter raw, uncooked game, mice and moor-hen chicks and moles. A modern cat sits by the warm-air vent and has good processed food fed to it."

"Well?" IT asked.

"So the modern cat is happier."

"Phit! Phit! Phit!"

"Isn't it?" he asked, plaintively.

"Think!" IT ordered.

His thought-train had reached a dead end. Of course it was happier if things were done for it. It was self-evident. Why do when one can have done? True? Wasn't it? Stick to the formula. If in doubt, dismiss preconceived ideas from the mind and live in the thought train. It said so in the instructions. Get inside your subject. Imagine yourself a cat.

"A cat is a hunter. It is happier hunting!"

That was it. Green light glowing. Of course. Odd that to do should be more happiness provoking than to be done to.

"In the wild state, it felt pleasure and satisfaction in the

achievement of killing and feeding. In the modern state it sleeps. Why? Because it is bored."

An electronic note. *Spring*! IT-Approval. Pleasure and satisfaction in achievement. A stamped card. Ninety-seven cards and 3 Approvals. He felt like a hunting cat.

"Meryl! Meryl! I've got an Approval!"

"About time too!"

If only she had shared his elation, lived with him, thought with him. If only she had said "That was good, Elvin!" Why should she? It wasn't much really. Nothing to hoist a flag about. Just 3 Approvals in a year.

"I wish," he thought, "I wish she would help me."

The week-end passed slowly. One ate. One drank. One went to the Sensories. A mildly erotic adventure story set among potted palms with a south sea island back-cloth. The sensory fear of the hunted, bullets whining down the companionway, cold water splash of a ship-wreck, tired hands blistered on the oars. The salty, warm breath of the south seas' sun-ray and brine-exuder. Meryl had hardly spoken as they hovered to the doors, found their seats and set the suction pads tingling around their navels. His soft, white fingers curled around the image of the oar, grasping, pulling in time to the back-bending of the seamen before and behind. Splash! Tug! Out! Heave!

Oddly enough, as the torrid kiss of palm-filtered moonlight enchantment was answered by the trembling soft lip parting of desire's response, he was conscious of a mental rejection. Rejection, not of satiation, addiction, boredom, but a strange dissatisfaction with subjectivity and a desire to do. To tear off the pads and clasp Meryl to him, then and there. Useless, of course. Her lips would not part and respond and tremble with a warm quiver of fulsome surrender. They would freeze into a thin line of dry, coriaceous rejection. Better far the subjective. The warm wind from the sea rippling the filmy texture of the diaphanous sari-like garment slipping from the south-sea shoulder. The flash of the southern moon on a coruscating safety-pin. He slipped back into subjection.

Thursday. Friday. The buzz of the sexometer in the early hours. Co-incidental with the cyclic rhythms. Electronics infallible. The maker's guarantee was proof incontrovertible of infallibility. There was no other proof. The inert, submissive, unresponsive compliance of the body gave no indication of its rhythm apices. Meryl yawned.

He was almost glad when it was again Monday. Three sessions with IT and 2 more IT-Approvals over the weekend had elated him with a half-formed wish to do. Even the brain rhythm twiddle round the starter relay, three-beat-four, was action. The motors hummed, the Aeolus 125 rose on its cushion of dust-laying mist ejection and swept down the wide service road into the arterial air-stream. In ten minutes he was parked on the third tier of the No. 19 hangar and was gliding through the travelator tunnel into No. 1 control. Work again. An anxiety surge. A tranquillizer. Why? There was no cause for concern. The control looked the same as ever. Little lights flashing. Batteries of buttons twinkling in the fluorescent lighting. Igor yawning and ready to go. Amphetamine mist emission.

"Morning," he said. An attempt at animation. Igor's dull eyes met his for a moment, uncomprehending. Opaque. He nodded slightly. Put on his hat. Tossed back a stimulator, collected his iron ration dispenser and disappeared, drooping like a tired peony, down the travelator. Elvin took his place at the panels. The two lines of lights flickering on the semi-circular half cartridge from arm length left to arm length right and arm length above and below.

A 1,2,3,4. A 4,5,6,7. A 11,10,9,8. Miss one. A 19,18,17. Bs synchronous. 1005 hours. They should reverse in a moment or two. A 4,3,2,1. An inspiration to alertness. Bs still synchronous thank goodness. A 16,17,18,19. A 2,3,4.

Where was A 1? A 1 had not functioned. A red light over A 1. Reactor chamber. Reactor wild. Check Foreman informed. Check reactor doors closed—A 2. Hose nozzles functioning. Alarm. Fire brigade. Radiation disposal squad. Military. Police. Defence organizations alerted. He glanced at the Foreman. All under control. The "Foreman Acti-

vated" light glowing. All systems responding. Alert! The videophone buzzed. Waldorf, the fire chief, of course.

"Say!" he shouted. "This an A or a B?"

"It's all right," Elvin told him. "It's an A."

"You might have let me know," Waldorf grumbled. "No sense in us all breaking our necks, is there?"

"Sorry," Elvin apologized, "I was just going to see you up." Physicists contacted. Management informed. Evacuation under way. Radiation quotient—10 milliPennies.

For ten minutes Elvin sat in an agony of concentration, checking the light sequences against the Foreman's indicators. There would be an intentional error somewhere. There always was. A 18 dead. Foreman checked. 19,20,21—still activated. Foreman approved. 35 – 35. 36 – 36. 37 – 37. 41 dead. He had it! He had it! Foreman checked 41 live. He stabbed his finger on the "Management alert" button. Dubois, the Personnel Director, pale and podgy-faced, appeared on the screen.

"Faulty Foreman, sir!" Elvin stammered. "A 41 dead. Foreman checked live. Ackled on full sequence but no ackle on 41."

"OK, Elvin, good work! Re-activate!" The image faded and Dubois settled comfortably back on the couch under a dome of lights and knobs and micro-screens. To concentrate. To Personnel Control. Dubois was a Thinker.

Elvin lit a cheroot, vastly pleased with himself. "Good work!" Personnel had said. He, Elvin, had done good work. Dubois had said so. A very fine face, had Dubois. What was the rest of him like? Short and tubby probably. Curved back, shaped to the couch. Great responsibility. Dubois was a Thinker.

Elvin pressed the "Re-activate" and the lights travelled in their usual sequence. Buzz! Waldorf appeared on the video.

"All over?" he asked, amiably enough.

"All over!" Elvin told him.

"Lot of flapdoodle!" Waldorf grumbled. "One of these days, you chaps will have a B and we shall forget to come. Then you'll all look silly."

"I don't dream these things up," Elvin explained, wearily. "They happen to me just the same as to you. I only work here."

"You know it's an A." Waldorf complained. "Why not reactivate and leave us in peace?"

"And lose my bonus?" Elvin asked sarcastically.

"What do you make in that fortress, anyway?" Waldorf was curious.

"Make?"

"Well, you must make something!"

Elvin supposed that they did. After all, everyone made something or other. Or did something. Like despatch along the residence supply tubes. Or broke things down. What did they make? Someone had told him once, long ago, at his first interview. Fresh from Tech and with some interest outside the Specialities. Zirconium something. What did one make with zirconium?

"Well?" Waldorf probed.

"Zirconiums," he said.

"Oh!" Waldorf was satisfied Obviously, if they made zirconiums, zirconiums were used for something or other. His interest faded and he returned to his fire-floats.

No more As. Thank goodness, no Bs. He had read of Bs. In the headlines. No one ever read farther than the headlines. There was a B every now and again in the headlines. Once there had been a B 1. Somewhere. A reactor wild. It had sounded quite frightening. An operator running over the routine formulae, but knowing that it was really it. A B! Imagine a B 1 and a faulty Foreman. A non-ackle like the A 41. What exactly would happen? What in fact was a wild reactor? He shuddered. He had no idea. Only the routine light sequences. Foreman checks and the knowledge that the rescue services were automatically contacted, even on an A. Only the warning news flash on the public screens was withheld until the B. Contact was made, but the vocal tape was non-ackled. Panic avoidance.

It had been quite a day. He was glad when Gallen, his relief appeared promptly at 1600 on the travelator, yawning, puppet-like, half comatose.

"We had an A!"

Gallen nodded abstractedly and settled at the panels, his eyes blinking in synchronous relation to the nictating lights. Elvin left. Poor old Gallen! He would certainly atrophy. Even constant sequence change and A alarms could not hold his attention much longer. Had Dubois noticed? On the Workers' Welfare Monitor? Probably. Oh, well! None of his business, anyway. Home and tell Meryl about the A. Excited. Animated for once. Surely that would please Meryl. It was what she had always wanted. Life. A flicker of interest in the eyes. Conversation. About something.

The lift swept him up to the 27th floor. Home. The pad. Empty. The positive emptiness of nothing that had been something. Or very nearly.

> My dear Elvin [he read]. I cannot stand it any longer. The daze. The monotony. The dreary waiting for the sexometer to buzz. I don't suppose you will notice I have gone. Not for some days at least. It buzzes again tomorrow at 1815 hours. But when your disinterested eyes finally, by accident, light upon this note, I shall be far away. I hope happier. As happy as anyone can be in this dead, weary world. I have left you for a Thinker.

He had never felt such emotion before. Only once, vaguely, long ago, with Carmine. He had responded dutifully to the buzz. With animation almost. He had been younger then. He had kissed her quite passionately and there had been a dead thing beneath him. Carmine had atrophied. He sat, rocking his body, his face in his hands. A strange wetness oozed between his fingers. He looked at his hands. They were wet. Tears. Streaming down his cheeks. He had forgotten tears. Even the motion of the sensors had never triggered such a response. The simulation of sensor weeping was subjective. You felt the weeping but the tears were dry and latent in their ducts.

His hand stopped over the tranquillizer dispenser. He didn't want to be tranquillized. In this, the hour of his

agony, he wanted to feel, to sense the vivid ache of his loneliness. To cry. To feel the salt rush of the tears on his cheeks. To know that it was he who was there, feeling, weeping, lonely, alone.

"Nothing else meant anything," he thought. "Only Meryl. This pad is an empty box. A coffin. A casket for the ashes of what had been just a little more than an ash itself. A something."

No escape. Nothing to do. No dead-eyed woman to take her place. Four dead eyes between four dead walls. A new sexometer tuned to a new rhythm. No. Never. But what else could he do? Narcotics and the sensories, bud-stimulants and the pale red fluid?

"I'm so lonely," he groaned. Lonely. Lonely. Lonely. An empty bed at an angle of five degrees to the horizontal. Taste bud tea and the programmes. There was no one to whom he could talk. There was no one who could generate a flicker of interest in his problems, smaller and less poignant than the problems of the programmes. No one at all.

There was IT. The respect proferred to the wiser, the cleverer, the great. To these one turned in times of trouble. It was not IT's function, of course. Comment on emotional outpourings. But somehow, IT understood. A great IT. A greater IT than any of the other ten million ITs in ten million other Workers' pads.

"Work!" said IT.

That was the answer, of course. Work. He had really enjoyed the A alarm, the responsibility, real responsibility, even if only simulated real. The happening of something. But how did one work? At what? His shift was 1000 till 1600 hours. Fourteen hours to wait. To wait, sleepless and weeping. Swop with the night shift? Oppel! 2200 till 0400 hours. Oppel was only slightly comatose. He would listen to reason and agree. Elvin saw him up on the video. Oppel, disturbed at his programme viewing was hostile, testy, unforthcoming and conventional.

"You can't swop shifts," he said. "You are conditioned to 1000 till 1600. Your efficiency is impaired if you change sequence and rhythms."

"Please!" Elvin begged. "Just this once as a favour. We can both do the job well enough, conditioned or not."

"Why?" Oppel asked.

"Meryl's left me," Elvin's lip quivered.

"It happens," Oppel's eyes strayed back to his screen. They lost focus.

"Please, Oppel!"

"I'd miss my programmes and see yours. I don't know your programmes."

"I'll do your shift as well as mine and you can watch both."

"Twelve hours in a day!"

"It's all right. I could do it. No one would know. I'll press your button instead of mine."

"Oh! All right!"

"Thanks Oppel!" But Oppel had already faded. Elvin could only hope that he would remember. The habit of 2200 till 0400 is hard to break. He would forget and press in at the 2200 tweet.

But Oppel apparently did remember. There was no Oppel on the travelator. Punctually on the tweet of 2200, Elvin stepped from the tunnel, nodded vacantly to the evening shift, who passed from sight without a glance of non-recognition. One Worker was very like another.

It was a long, dull shift. The lights moved in their accustomed sequence change, electronic notes sounded at intervals, demanding the register of presence, assimilation, response. He coped. He ackled. Nothing, apart from the sign-on button, demanded registration of personality and that had been simple. A depression of the "Oppel". No As. No Bs.

0400 came far too soon. It was surprising how quickly time passed in the necessity of application. He could not face the return home. To the empty pad. To the pad where Meryl was not. At the tweet of 0400, he begged Oppel's relief to let him do the morning shift. The relief was 75% comatose and gave no trouble. Elvin turned him about, put his hat in his hand and his iron ration dispenser under his arm and guided him back to the travelator. He returned, believing it was 1000.

The morning passed uneventfully. 1000 tweeted and he at last pressed his own "Elvin" button. He was himself again. Dubois had not noticed, if he ever used the Welfare Monitor. He was punctual on his own shift. One face was the same as another. Stay alert and the day would have passed. Twenty-four hours between him and the jolt of last night's emotion. Time to assess. To re-assess. To think. Whether to fight back somehow, or slip into the comatose and quietly atrophy.

Stay alert! A stimulator!

A 1,2,3,4. A 8,7,6,5. Miss one. A 13,14,15,16. Below the A lights, the Bs flashed in synchronous unison. A/B 17,18,19,20. "I love her." A/B 24,23,22,21. "Meryl come back to me!" 36,37,38,39. "I won't atrophy, Meryl, I promise I won't atrophy." 48,47,46,45. "Come back to me, Meryl!" Reverse the sequence and back. A 2,3,4. A 8,7,6,5. "Meryl come back. . . ." What was that? The A 1 missed. The B 1 missed. Warning red over A and B. A B 1? Reactor wild? It couldn't be, not now on his shift. Tiredness and the stimulator? He rubbed his eyes. The red lights still glowed. My God! It was a B 1. Inform the Foreman. Foreman activated. Check reactors closed—B 2. Reactor doors still open. The Foreman! Activate B 2! Oh no! The Foreman didn't ackle on B 2. A faulty Foreman!

He screamed at the Foreman, "Ackle B 2!" The Foreman had missed. B 2 still red. Hose nozzles functioning. Alarm. Fire brigade. Radiation disposal squad. Military. Police. Defence organizations alerted. All in order. Reactor doors still open.

"What do I do?" he screamed at the Foreman. What should he do? Routine. Inform management. Dubois. No—not Dubois, it wouldn't be Dubois this time. This wasn't a personnel job. This was it. This was a real B 1. Whose face was that on the screen. A physicist? An electronics director? None of his business.

"Sir! B 1 alarm. Foreman faulty. B 2 check missed!"

The face on the screen raised dull unseeing eyes, holding for a moment a glimmer of partial animation before the thick lids fell and the flaccid mouth parted in a sigh of

uncomprehending weariness, sagged and dropped open. A trickle of saliva glistened on the chin.

"He's atrophied!"

This Thinker, this minion of management—he's atrophied! It couldn't be. Not a Thinker. Or could it? What was this vacant, drooling shell, this vacuous inanity? A Thinker who had thought. Once, for a while—how long ago? Years of flawless automation, years of waiting for the fault that never came, the fault that should claim the focus of a thought. Years since a B of any sort, a B 1, perhaps, never. And the Thinkers had no IT. IT was for the Workers. A device of Management and Unions to stimulate some animation in the ceaseless checking of the automated flow. To stave off atrophy.

What was he doing, thinking and speculating on the atrophy of a physicist, an automotive engineer, whatever the Thinker was or had been? A faulty Foreman, a wild reactor, reactor doors open and himself—a Worker. Who cared? What was a wild reactor and why should the doors be shut? He was a Worker, why should he care? He did care. The evacuation! My God! Had the message gone out? He had heard no message from the faulty Foreman, from that flashing expanse of non-ackle. What was the message? Evacuate an area of ten miles radius with all speed. Anti-radiation precautions to be taken in a fifty mile radius. The disposal squads could not warn everyone—it must go out on the screens. Radiation level? Radiation level 120 milliPennies. God what a lot of milliPennies. Whatever milliPennies were. The message had got to go out. The A was flashing on the Foreman check but the B was dead. Damn the Foreman! Think, Elvin, think!

Long ago at the Tech, what had they said about manual? There was always a manual somewhere. What did a manual look like? What would it look like? What did it do, or what did you do to it? Something to speak into, like a toy microphone, somewhere under cameras for the visual. Where? Where else but on the Foreman? He ran to the Foreman, to the maze of lights and knobs and buttons, relays and microscreens. Somewhere there must be a device

that called for the grasp of a hand. A lever switch. In all his life, he had never pulled a switch. And there it was. There they all were. A lever switch, a tag marked "Manual" and a microphone. For a moment, he hesitated. For a Worker to question the Foreman was unthinkable. Only management could override the Foreman and Management never did. To tinker with a Foreman was worse than sacrilege. No one ever tinkered with a Foreman.

"But," he thought, "he's faulty. He didn't ackle. And the Management has atrophied."

A hundred thousand people like himself in nearby pads and a radiation level of 120 milliPennies. He shuddered.

He pulled the lever and the Foreman died. Not a light flashed, not a needle quivered. The control room was empty, silent, a tomb with a dead Foreman and a half-dead Worker. Manual as never before. What now? A message must go out. He picked up the microphone and the cameras swivelled their focus on him. That much ackled.

"1, 2, 3, 4." He tested. "1, 2, 3, 4," boomed from the videoscreens. He saw himself in every corner of the room. White and pasty-faced, limp sagging shoulders, insubstantial knees. A yellow boiler-suited, anti-radiation clad Worker like any other. A Worker who had just killed a Foreman.

"Emergency!" He shouted. "Wild reactor at No. 129. Map Reference H67. B 346. Radiation level 120 milliPennies. It is urgent that an area of ten miles in radius from 129 should be evacuated immediately. Anti-radiation precautions should be taken in an area of fifty miles radius. Your anti-radiation squads in the area will advise you. This is Elvin speaking—a Worker in the control. The Management has atrophied."

Waldorf was on the video demanding to know if it was an A. Probably the disposal and evacuation squads were taking their time. none caring, none knowing that this was it.

"It's a B!" he shouted.

Waldorf's cheeks blanched visibly as he rummaged for his anti-rad helmet. "My leggings!" he moaned. "I've come without my leggings. We all have!"

"Your legs will drop off," Elvin told him tersely and returned to the microphone. It was imperative to broadcast continually. Many of the Workers and perhaps Thinkers too, would be comatose. Only constant repetition would reach them. Over and over again on the screens until it registered. Till some semblance of urgency rubbed off.

"This is Elvin, Worker in 129, map reference H67. B 346 . . ."

For how long he continued to broadcast, he never knew. Time lost its meaning in the exhilaration of doing. He had repeated his message at least a hundred times before he became aware of a figure standing by the travelator, watching him. A short spare man in the antique dress of a pre-automotive age. Black coat, black trousers with white stripes, a bowler hat. An umbrella. Elvin recognized at once the symbol of Higher Management. A common figure on the programmes, but rarely seen in life itself. Higher Management in person!

"Sir!" he said.

"You are Elvin?" the Higher Management asked quietly.

"Yes, sir!"

"I am the Managing Director."

He had heard of Managing Directors. They were unbelievably important, very near to the top. Higher than High. Much higher than Dubois. He trembled.

"Tell me what happened." Elvin was near to tears. The strain of thinking, of acting and now of cross-question was damping his last feeble rhythm to an intermittent flutter.

"There was B 1. The reactor doors stayed open—B 2. The Foreman missed the check. The A linked with the screens but the B missed the ackle."

"So you found the manual and killed the Foreman?"

"Did I do right, sir?"

"Sit down, Elvin." The Managing Director steered him to the chair with the ferrule of his umbrella. "As it happens you did not do right. There was no B 1. The fault was a moth settling on a relay in the alarm circuits, unfortunately also affecting the radiation readings. But the Foreman

was certainly faulty and the Management, as I have since ascertained, was indeed comatose."

"Then it was all for nothing?" Elvin began to sob.

"No, Elvin. It was not for nothing. You thought. I am amazed to find a Thinker among my Workers. Not only this company, but the entire outside world has far too few Thinkers left. Too few to waste them here in the control room. There will be a new job for you tomorrow, Elvin. You have watched your last light sequence."

"As a Thinker?" Elvin breathed.

"You are now Management," the Managing Director directed. "Tomorrow, you will report to me. Tomorrow you will continue thinking."

He patted Elvin on the shoulder with his umbrella and disappeared down the travelator. 1600 tweeted and Elvin's relief arrived with two Thinkers to tinker with the Foreman.

"All quiet?" asked the relief.

"All quiet," Elvin told him, a song in his heart and a dizzy surge in his alpha rhythm. He ran to the travelator, eyes animated, eager to go. Home to the pad. A Thinker! Management!

"A Thinker! Management!" He told himself over and over again the cycle of the day's happenings. The B 1. His thought processes. His killing of the Foreman. His broadcast. The Higher Management. He couldn't wait to get home. To tell Meryl.

Meryl. Suddenly the elation died within him. There was no Meryl. No one at all to tell. What use to see up his fellow travellers on the video, pour out his excitement into their dull ears and meet the uncomprehending stares of their inanimate eyes? No. There was no one to tell. No one who could generate a flickering ten seconds interest to share his programme from real life, live with him the drama of a B 1, a faulty Foreman and an avuncular Higher Management.

His eyes were tired again as he reached the pad door, twiddled his alpha rhythm around the lock code relay. 17 beat 3.

There was a ripple of fabric inside, the undulation of nylon tights, a swift pert bobbing of breasts and Meryl's arms were around his neck.

"Elvin! I heard you! You thought!"

"Yes," he said, dazed and giddy. "I think I did."

"Elvin, I've come back to you!"

She led him to the bed at an angle of five degrees to the horizontal and supported him as he sagged on to the fibreglass. Her kiss was the warm, soft, salty tremble of the south seas under the potted palms. It was urgent. Demanding. He turned his head and looked at the dials.

"There's another two hours . . ." he said.

"Damn the sexometer," she whispered. "I know my own rhythms best." It was good to be a Thinker.

ADVANTAGE

by

JOHN RACKHAM

Caddas had an unusual affliction—he mentally suffered other people's accidents before they happened! A useful gift on a construction site—until his one weakness was exposed.

ADVANTAGE

COLONEL JACK BARCLAY awoke that morning with a foul taste in his mouth and a strong sense of impending doom. The combination had become a familiar one over recent months and he made himself ignore it. "Precognition," he told himself harshly, "is not for me. Let's leave that to the one who specializes in it." To the orderly-robot which brought him his pre-breakfast draught of protein-vitamin fluid he said, "Defer rousing Mr. Caddas for thirty minutes. He has had a bad night."

The terminal phrase was superfluous, meaning nothing to the robot, but one so easily got into the habit of talking to the things as if they were humanly intelligent. And it was true, in any case. Barclay had heard Rikki moaning and whimpering most of the night, tossing in nightmare on his narrow bunk in the annexe. The knowledge added slightly to his sense of doom, so that he had to make an extra effort to reject it. Dressed for the day and feeling fractionally better after his unappetizing cocktail, he stalked into the living room of his quarters, settled to his breakfast, and switched on his master read-out screen. The sour thought struck him, as it had done many times before, that given a minor change or two he might be any ordinary businessman, back home on Earth, reading the world news over breakfast. The figures and symbols which slid up over the screen in shimmering green were, in fact, world news. A world in the making. To his trained eye the information was easier to read than any bold headlines, and left a considerable part of his mind free for private thoughts.

General State and Progress, Unit Three, corrected as of midnight last night and compared with similar data for Units One to Five. Estimating roughly, he judged Unit Three to be about one week ahead of anyone else. His own Unit. Colonel Jack Barclay in command. The knowledge gave him some satisfaction. All five units were hitting a

hard-driving schedule, as was right and proper. And his was away out in front of all the others, which was exactly as he wanted it to be. His grouch began to sweeten a little. These were hard facts. In the face of them, impressions of doom had to take their proper place as not worthy of consideration.

At the back of his mind he was able to stand off and review the big picture dispassionately. It was one he had lived through many times before. It began, always, with the simple directive. "Planet Such-and-Such, having been passed as suitable for colonization, is now transferred to the jurisdiction of the Colonization Pre-Settlement Section." There would follow the classification coding and specific recommendations as to number and type. So far as Barclay was concerned, this much was academic. Where he came in was when it came to allocation of materials, men and programmes, and a fully equipped expedition was despatched to the planet in question to get on with the hard work.

This was his seventh such operation. This was Planet Oloron, classified as suitable for five prototype Settlement Units, to be devoted mainly to Agronomy, secondary ore and chemical extractions, and with an eye to later developments as a Cultural and Recreational Centre. Thus the task was explicitly set out. Five Units, each one a precise square mile of surface, to be hewn from the wilderness and transformed into an area where eager colonists, in groups of one thousand at a time, would be able to set their feet, have a safe breathing space, and then set away to build a life, a future, a civilization. Five Units, five technical squads, and five colonels each intent on outdoing the others in performance in order to earn himself a star. Standards were high, competition fierce, and the rewards considerable. It was the reward, the thought of it, that kept Barclay driving hard. He was able to look back with grim satisfaction on an unbroken row of seven stars, but he chose rather to look ahead. Just one more step ahead. One more star, and it was virtually certain that he would be kicked upstairs.

His head went back fractionally as he thought of it,

thought of the huge mother ship up there, hanging in its stationary orbit 23,000 miles out. Up there, to sit and watch and issue *remote* orders, or advice, and every once in a while to slip a grudging word of commendation and praise. Up there, out of this ceaseless rat-race of driving and supervising and carrying the load of responsibility. This morning more than ever he felt that almost frightening need to make that last jump. It *had* to be right, this time!

A cue-light winked at him from the right-hand top-corner of the screen. He touched a switch and the spot grew into a quadrant, showing the impassive green dome of the robot-clerk of Central-Com.

"Awaiting your clearance, ready to transmit data-state to HQ."

"Very well. I'm finished inspecting it. Data approved and clear," he cancelled the call and the data in the same movement, then buttoned for his Executive Aide, watching the screen yield him a side-view of a face held out to the ministrations of an orderly-robot wielding a depilator. Major Dannard, catching the glow of the screen from the corner of his eye, halted the robot with a sign and swung round.

"Good morning, sir."

"Morning, Dannard. Just finished checking the state. No serious complaints, but I would like to see the Med. Centre structure pushing along just a bit faster. And the Perimeter Screen detail seems to be lagging. A bit of ginger needed there."

"Yes, sir!" Dannard's endorsement was immediate and unquestioning, his smile a careful blend of respect and pride. "We're doing very well, otherwise, wouldn't you say, sir?"

"We're a week ahead, yes. And we stay that way. No easing off to rest on laurels. We ought to be able to wrap up Stage Three by tonight."

"Tonight?" Dannard was caught into a moment of surprise, but wiped it away in favour of absolute agreement. "If you say so, sir."

"I do say so. Major constructions complete by tonight.

Commence interior fitting-out first thing tomorrow." He cut the picture with a finger and turned to eye the forlorn figure of Richard Caddas. As always, the sight tore at his emotions, rubbing them raw. "Forlorn" fitted Caddas as adequately as any one of half a dozen other deprecatory adjectives would have done. He looked lost, unhappy, like a small, soft-eyed puppy inviting concern. His thin frame drooped, making a mockery of his uniform. The Colonization Arm was military only in structure, not in function, and no one, least of all Barclay, expected machine-like discipline. But you could at least expect a man to stand up and look like a man. He swallowed the blistering reproof that hovered on his tongue, controlled his own hard and weather-worn features, and struggled to be sympathetic.

"Good morning, Rikki. Nightmares again?"

"I feel a wreck." Caddas slumped into his chair, scowling as the serving robot brought his regular breakfast of heavily sweetened fruit-juices and meal-mush. "I don't remember any dreams, thank God. That would be too much."

Barclay wrested his gaze from the distasteful meal, thinking he had never loathed anyone quite as much as he did this futile weakling opposite him. And yet he had to be patient, polite, even affectionate, against all his instincts. "Not much longer," he said. "We're nearing the end of this one, lad. And, with any kind of justice at all, this is the last one. One more commendation and I shall be out of field-work altogether. A desk-job for me, and a comfortable sinecure for you. No more worries. No more bad nights."

"It's all right for you," Caddas grumbled petulantly. "You can live on prospects and forget the present. I can't. I'm drenched in it. If I so much as tried to imagine what lies in store, just for today, I wouldn't be able to bear it. You don't *know* what it's like!"

It was an old cry, and Barclay retorted to it in kind, mouthing the phrases almost without thinking. "Of course I know, lad. I'm the only one who does know. Don't I do everything I can to make it easy for you? Why, if it wasn't for me you'd have been grabbed by the psycho-technicians

long ago, with their drugs and exercises and shocks, trying to cure you."

"But there's nothing wrong with me!" Caddas insisted, his feeble face twitching at the picture conjured up. "Why won't they believe that, Jack? Why is that no one will believe I'm just sensitive?"

"I believe it, Rikki. And I'll look after you. Now just get on with your breakfast. I've a lot to do today." Barclay pushed away from the table and went to stare, without seeing, at a huge wall-chart. Phrase and counter-phrase had come as easily and meaninglessly as a ritual, and yet, after five years of it, there was still the disgust. There was plenty wrong with Caddas, enough to have kept the psycho-technicians curious for months, but Barclay wanted him as he was, needed him as he was, repulsive habits and everything. Because without Rikki Caddas, and his idiosyncrasies, he, Jack Barclay, was a pushful nobody.

The mismatched pair went out into a bright sun-warmed morning, as were all mornings on Oloron. This would be a sub-tropical paradise some day, Barclay mused, programming the ground-car for the Medical Centre as his first objective. A pleasant place to live, for anyone lucky enough to have nothing to do but enjoy life, but for Barclay and the squad under him it was just one more job to fight, a thousand decisions to make every day, something to get done with as quickly as possible. The planet's name had been rapidly neologized into "Oh, roll on!" a name which set the tone precisely.

The ground-car lifted, swooped round in a tight arc, and pointed itself along a plastic-surfaced highway towards the starkly unlovely squareness of the almost-finished Medical Centre. Glassite windows threw back the sun's light. Lieutenant Caddas moaned suddenly.

"My arm. Jack, my arm! It hurts!"

"Which arm?" Barclay demanded.

"Right arm. Shoulder, now. And my head!"

Barclay used a precious second to assure himself there was no visible cause for the distress, then slid into a time-worn routine.

'A name, Rikki. Give me a name."

"Cross. Cross a field. Crushing. Falling down. It hurts!"

"All right, lad. Bite your teeth on it while I stop it." Barclay snatched up the microphone from the car's dashboard, thumbed it. "Lieutenant Crossfield! This is Colonel Barclay. Hear me. Stop and check!"

It was a standard code-call which got an immediate response from the maze of construction ahead. A siren wailed a warning. Constructor-robots froze. There was the dying hum of power-starved motors. Barclay's needle-sharp eyes raked the scene. He found the imminent disaster just seconds faster than the lieutenant in charge. High up there, his arm crooked round a T-girder, an engineer clung and leaned to take a transit-sight across the top of the building. Unknown to him, a robot-controlled hoist was in the act of laying a second T-girder alongside the first, its detectors masked by the load it carried. In twenty seconds that clinging arm, shoulder and head would have been mashed to strawberry pulp.

Barclay waited while Lieutenant Crossfield served out a blistering reproof, and an abashed technical sergeant acknowledged it. Then he lifted a hand to return Crossfield's salute, cutting short the red-faced apology.

"Your good fortune I happened to be handy, Lieutenant. You'll have Major Dannard along soon to check on progress. We should complete Stage Three today. But not *that* way!" He made a thin smile and swung the car round, setting its controls for the power-plant area.

"All right now, Rikki?"

"The pain's all gone." Caddas smiled in spaniel gratitude. "You fixed it for me. You always do. You're so understanding."

"The hell I am!" Barclay mused as the car slid into speed. "I'll never understand how you do it, nor am I sure I want to. Just so long as I know *what* you can do, and can use it." They hummed past a clanking, groaning trench-digger which plodded through the swirl of fumes from its own operations, fusing and stamping the earth back over the conduits it had just laid. Ahead lay the three glittering

golden hemispheres of the power-plant centre. This section of the unit-complex was going well and Barclay was bent on nothing more than a token visit, just to let everyone know he was on the job. His mind, free of tension for the moment, flicked back to just such a moment as this, on another planet, long ago. Five years ago.

Youthful, pushful and ambitious, newly-made Captain Barclay, with a photostat directive in his hand and rage in his mind. Storming into the construction-control central office, hell-bent on finding the slip-wit who had prepared this damn silly directive. An insult to intelligence, it was. Run up by a fool. Why, the basic errors were so obvious a child could see them. What the hell? And he had found a child, in the thin disguise of a very new sub-lieutenant, cringing before the computer panel. Weeping! It was that last item that had stopped Barclay in his tracks. He had never seen a man cry before. The halt had given young Caddas just time enough to explain that he "knew" the programme-stats were going to come out wrong, but what could *he* do? He was just the button-pusher. Other people fed in the command-data. Intrigued, Barclay had asked him if he also knew which of the choice-point inserts was "wrong". That had been more fantastic still. Caddas had indicated one input-section, had immediately confessed that he knew nothing about it, at all, but that he "knew" it was creating all the distress.

Barclay could shiver now, as he recalled what he had done then. He had rested the machine. None of his business. He had withdrawn the card-group indicated. Also none of his business. He had had the good fortune to be able to see, immediately, a simple error—a card slipped into the stack upside down—and was able to rectify it. Caddas, given the backbone, could have done as much himself. But what was more important, what had riveted Barclay's attention, was the way in which Caddas had lost his distress the moment that error was put right. The change was as sudden, and as inexplicable, as faith-healing. The rest was history, a history of hard work, trial and error, confirmation, and the realization that Barclay had

found, here, a goose that would lay him all the golden eggs he could ever want, if only he was handled properly.

Caddas stirred and shivered by his side. "I've really got 'em today," he mumbled. "Now I feel a sort of prickling sensation all over!"

"You what!?" Barclay whirled on him, then made his voice behave. "A needle-tickle feeling, all over?"

"That's right. D'you think it's a chill or something?"

"We'll see." Barclay reached for the microphone again, feeling a chill all his own. This could be a tricky one. Radiation-hazard, but not yet. His mind raced, gambling with shadowy, half-understood values. Not leakage, or he would have had the warning long ago. Not gradual, but sudden. Somebody was about to do something he shouldn't. "Give me a name, Rikki. A name?"

"Marks. Markers. Something like that. Scratch-marks. Itching . . ." Caddas was muttering to himself now and fidgeting about in his seat. Barclay looked up and either side at the towering hemispheres, thumbed the microphone.

"Major Yoslif?"

"Colonel?" The reply was instant and crisp. Barclay swept the scene, scanning the clutter of cranes and block-buildings, and saw a yellow helmet, a hand upraised. He wheeled the ground-car by manual to come alongside the major, who stared in attentive curiosity.

"You have a Marks, Markers, Marcus—someone with a name like that employed here?"

Yoslif frowned, then nodded. "Sergeant-technician Marcus, yes."

"Good! Have him stop whatever he is doing, at once, and join us in your office. At once!"

"Sir!" Yoslif swung away, lifting his left wrist to his mouth and speaking into the microphone there. Barclay spun the car again to bring it to a halt outside the planning-control shack. Without advertising it, he watched Caddas closely, intensely, and was shakingly relieved to see the mumbling stop. The petulantly untidy figure sat up, brushing away the drooping lock of brown hair that fell persistently over one eye.

"It's gone, now," he said. "It must have been that juice this morning. There wasn't nearly enough sugar in it. You'll have to fix that robot, Jack. I'm sure it's not programmed properly."

"I'll have it seen to as soon as we get back for lunch, Rikki. Now come along, and bring your recorder." To himself, Barclay added, "At least try to *look* like a secretary." Not for the first time, it occurred to him to wonder just what his command thought about Lieutenant Caddas. It must surely be obvious, even to the dullest, that the man was absolutely useless for anything practical. Mess-room gossip, he mused sourly, must range all the way from hints of nepotism to the extremes of obscenity, but never in a thousand years would any of them come near to guessing the truth.

Major Yoslif stood bolt erect by his own desk and masked his feelings. "May I know why the Colonel wishes to see this Sergeant Marcus?"

"I'm hoping he'll tell us that when he arrives. Ah, this ought to be the man. Prompt, if nothing else."

Marcus, large and red-faced, squared up to the desk and made a rough salute. "You wanted to see me, Colonel, sir?"

"Tell me, sergeant, exactly what you were about to do when you were sent for?" Marcus furrowed his red face into folds of bewilderment, then dug in a cross-pocket for a crackling paper diagram.

"My section, sir, deals with internal sensors, thermocouples, counter-points. I was taking a squad of four, to enter Coolant Conduit Three-B and install . . ."

"Let's have the chart down here," Barclay indicated the desk-top and lent a hand to hold down one curling corner. Marcus jabbed with a thick finger, tracing the outline of the conduit and coming to rest on the access-door.

"In there, sir."

"You're not wearing a dosimeter."

"No, sir," the sergeant was patient. "That conduit is from Reactor Three. It's dead cold, sir. Nothing in there yet."

"You're quite sure?"

Major Yoslif intervened, leaning over. "That's correct, Colonel. Reactor Three will not be needed to go critical until . . ."

"Are you quite sure that conduit *is* from Reactor Three?"

Yoslif frowned, peered closer, traced the diagram back with a finger. Marcus objected, after a moment.

"Not that one, sir. Look, there's the figure. C.C. 3–B, right there. This is the pipe we . . ." his stubby finger traced back, and his thick voice choked off suddenly.

"Quite so!" Barclay sat back and sighed. "The lettering stands between two pipe-diagrams. It could easily be read as either. But one is cold, and the other is not. You were about to open a functioning conduit line, Marcus." It would have been pointless to say more, for the burly sergeant-technician had slumped into a shapeless heap on the floor. Yoslif's hard-planed face was grey.

"An understandable error, Colonel."

"Understandable, yes, but deadly, nevertheless. I want tighter control, Major. No more of this. I can't be at your elbow all the time. You must learn to anticipate possible troubles. We're ahead of schedule, but that does not mean we can tolerate carelessness. Come, Rikki."

Back in the car again, Barclay glanced at his watch and fought off the growing sense of weight on his shoulders, the weight of his own legend. The more he demonstrated his superhuman efficiency, his uncanny knack of being able to smell trouble, the more his underlings were awed, impressed and unconsciously willing to let him go on pulling them out of one careless mess after another. He set the car skimming back to control HQ and lunch, and realized that he was trembling. This couldn't go on much longer. This *had* to be the last time.

An orderly-robot laid a communication-flimsy by his plate as he joined his staff-heads for lunch. He made his hand be steady as he took it up to read. The news was bad, but not a disaster, merely an irritation. He said as much as he passed the message across to Dannard by his side.

"As if we didn't already have enough to worry about. Your concern mainly, Dannard."

"Observers!" the major grumbled, casting his quick eye over the words. "Expect and entertain, hah! HQ can certainly get a lot into a little space. Partial paralysis for a couple of days, at least, while we stop to explain everything, and then another day or two to get back into the swing."

"No!" Barclay sharpened his voice. "I've had observers before, but not with you as my second. Perhaps I'd better explain. To everyone!" He rapped with a spoon for quiet, cast a hard eye over his assembled staff-chiefs.

"Gentlemen! We are pawns in the hands of a body known as the Appropriations Committee for Colonization and Re-Settlement. They provide the funds. We do the work. From time to time they send watchbirds to see how their funds are being spent. A party of observers is descending upon us today, this afternoon. Not just us. All Units. So far, so fair. Now let me tell you how the Committee thinks, because this influences the attitude of the watchers." Barclay paused to arrange his words. In moments like these he was completely at ease and confident. Analysis came easily to him. Difficulties came when he had to convert reasoning into action, because it was then that he stumbled over the irrationality of other people.

"If we fall behind what they think is a proper schedule, then we are wasting time, hence money. If we get ahead of that same schedule, then we are overdoing something, hence wasting money in some other way. If we beat their schedule, and at the same time conclusively demonstrate that we are within our budget, then we are cutting corners, or cheating in some way. In short, they are right, always. We are wrong, always. And they are out to find whatever it is we are trying to hide. That's their attitude." He scanned the faces, saw wry and understanding grins begin to spread, and permitted himself a thin smile of understanding.

"You take my point, I see. Now there is only one way to deal with a situation like this. The other Units may be

making special arrangements to fawn on their observers. That's up to them. We will do nothing like that. We will carry on exactly as always. We are a crack Unit, and we know it. We have nothing to hide. If you are asked, you will answer rational questions as briefly as possible. Be civil, but be brief. If they show any signs of getting in the way, usher them out. Again, be civil, but firm. We've a job to do and we're going to do it. I want them to see us doing it. In the event of any difficulty, get in touch with me, at once. That's all, thank you." He shifted his gaze to Surgeon-Captain Willerby and changed his tone.

"About your interiors, Willerby. I think you should be all ready to start setting up your therapy-rooms tomorrow. . . ."

Major Dannard lingered after the others had quit the meal-table. His dog-like devotion was almost as repellent as Rikki's, Barclay thought. "He thinks me a superman, and so I might be, with my backside in a chair, talking. But without Rikki it's just talk."

"You really want us to take a tough line with the observer group, *sir?*"

"It's the only way, Dannard. I've had 'em before. The more you try to humour them, the more suspicious they get. How many have we been assigned, anyway? Does it say?"

"Three, I think." Dannard peered at the flimsy. "Yes. Unit Three—General Powley, Citizen Wake, and D. Honey, Miss. A woman?"

"That's not too uncommon. There's a certain class of female, Dannard, for whom the very thought of an isolated community of hard-working men, out on a frontier, has a dreadful fascination. Two classes, rather. One's the sympathetic, mothering kind. I needn't describe the other. Either is a pain in the neck. You'd better make her your special care. Let the other two make their own way. I fancy Accountancy Section will draw them like a magnet. I shall be out taking a look at the perimeter screens. I'd like to feel sure they are all in first-class order." He spoke to Dannard, but his attention was on Caddas, still gorging

himself on the last of the sweet cakes. Rikki would sometimes respond to a hint like this, would raise some meaningless objection to a suggested plan. But not this time. Barclay concealed a sigh of relief. It looked as if he could count on a quiet afternoon at least.

The quiet time ended at four-thirty. Barclay came back from his tour of the perimeter screens feeling unusually content. Oloron boasted a fair number of predators, all of them big enough to be bothersome to a man, and it was a comfort to know that a secure fence of muscle-knotting power ringed the Settlement area and was in first-class working order. The squads responsible were assembling their equipment and would be following him within the hour. He could count on that many more useful hands on site, from tomorrow. Plus the double gain of not needing to post sentries, and the psychological effect of added security. As the ground-car slid to a stop before the executive mess-hall he felt easier in mind than he had done since the first ground had been broken. Dannard met him in the entrance, his manner unusually buoyant.

"The observer team asked to have a private table set, sir, to one side, and would like you to join them. Is it all right?"

"I suppose so. They'd want to talk to me naturally. Any snags?"

"Not that I've heard."

"All right." Barclay bent a patient eye on Lieutenant Caddas, who had snored shamelessly throughout the afternoon's drive, and looked no more than half-awake now. "Smarten up just a bit, Rikki, please," he said. "We're meeting influential guests!"

"I suggest Lieutenant Caddas ought to join us at the main table," Dannard made his tone polite, but there was no hiding the undercurrent of disapproval in it. Barclay ignored him, waiting silently as the drooping Caddas did futile things to his hair and collar and put on a look of childish impatience. Dannard more than anyone could not understand his idol's odd concern for this utterly useless person. In arguments with his peers he chose to maintain

the belief that Caddas was some sort of poor relation whom Barclay had sworn to protect, but in his own mind he regarded the "secretary" as a leech and bloodsucker, someone who had some kind of "hold" on the colonel. In his more fanciful moments he saw himself somehow "getting rid of" Caddas, and thus earning his colonel's gratitude. Barclay suspected something of the kind, but ignored it. He led the way into the mess-hall and to the little table over by the window.

"General Powley——" he nodded to a small white-haired man with a keen eye, "Citizen Wake——" this a large florid man wreathed in an aura of wealth, "and Miss——" his voice failed him as he saw her, properly, for the first time.

"Miss Dahlia Honey," she supplied, with a nod and a bright smile. "I think we've met, Colonel. A long time ago."

Barclay kept his face straight, although it hung in front of a blank for a moment. Then he recovered enough to introduce "My secretary, Lieutenant Caddas. Sorry if I've kept you waiting."

"Fine organization, Colonel." Powley produced a surprisingly deep voice. "Most impressed. You run a taut unit, sir."

"Thank you, General, I try to. I imagine you could teach me a trick or two, though, if you wanted to. I've seen your name in the records, surely?" It was a flat lie. Barclay hadn't so much as heard the name before that morning. But as an opening gambit it was absolutely safe. Powley swelled visibly. Barclay shifted his attention to the Citizen, who was less fulsome.

"Remarkable accident record," he murmured. "One expects a certain percentage of error, you know. Human fallibility, and all that. But your unit seems to be immune, or almost. How d'you account for it?"

"Very simply." The platitudes came to Barclay's mouth without conscious effort. "I have a rule which I impress on all my staff. Do it right. Be sure it's right, even if it means taking longer and double checking. Because it means you

won't have it to do over again. And that, in the long run, is a lot faster." It *was* a platitude, but it was unanswerable, and Barclay knew it. So did Citizen Wake, after a moment or two of thought. The conversation drifted, became general, and Barclay was able to soothe the turmoil that had come from being confronted with a ghost from his own past, the very solid flesh-and-blood ghost who now sat by his right hand, murmuring to Rikki. Dahlia Honey she called herself now. She had been Dally Hawk the last time he'd seen her. A newshound with a devastating knack of seeming to be transparently honest and sincere while turning her victims inside out with ease. A dangerous woman. Already, as he could hear, she had Rikki telling her all about his perpetual sufferings and tribulations.

"Now that we've seen the accounts," Wake was declaring, "my chief interest, naturally, is in the welfare of the people who are going to live here. I'd like to see the living quarters."

"Dwelling-units," Barclay corrected politely. "Of course. And you, sir?"

"I'd got my eye on the feeding centre. Nothing keeps a man's spirit up like good food. You can face a lot of hardship with a good meal inside."

"Quite so. Very well, Major Dannard can see to that, as soon as you feel ready."

"Today?" Wake sounded surprised. "You run a long working day, then?"

Barclay smiled, knowing well that Wake was more accustomed to a day which began at nine and ended at noon, with only token labour to fill even that short interval. "We work seven to seven," he exclaimed. "Sun-up to sundown, in old-fashioned terms."

"What d'you give your men for recreation?" Powley demanded. Barclay smiled again. Here it was refreshing to be able to tell the plain truth.

"Nothing at all, sir. Work hard, and save their play for when the job is complete. They are free to do what they wish, of course, but most of them find enough in a chat, a sit and relax, and then bed. I've had no complaints. I find it

gives them incentive to work, and something to look forward to."

He saw them off with Dannard, then sat again. Dahlia Honey seemed not to notice that her companions had gone about their business.

". . . all working so hard, so relentlessly, it's rather overpowering. And you must work as hard as anybody, as your'e so close to the colonel all the time. I'm sure you don't get nearly enough rest." Her voice invited confidence. Barclay curled a lip as he heard the indecision in Rikki's reply.

"Well . . . it's true, I don't sleep very well. Oh, I hate this field work, really. Always in knock-up cabins, no real comforts, everything crude and unfinished. I hate it!"

"What a shame! But surely the medical people can give you something for your insomnia?"

"I hate doctors, too. Can't bear them. They're so inquisitive, all the time. Wanting to cure me!"

"Cure you? Of what?"

"That's just the point." Caddas was shrilly emphatic. "There's nothing at all the matter with me. I'm sensitive, that's all. I worry about things. I have nightmares, often. And I worry a lot about things that could go wrong. There are so many things that can go wrong, Miss Honey, you'd never believe. But Jack takes care of everything. I tell him, you see, and he fixes it. And there's really nothing wrong with me at all."

"Jack? Oh, you mean Colonel Barclay?"

"Myself." Barclay decided to intervene, and Miss Honey's head came round in a guilty jerk. "Shall we adjourn to my quarters? The rob-servs are waiting to clear." He seized the moment when Miss Honey needed to powder her nose.

"Watch it!" he warned. "Every word you say is being engraved on a highly-trained memory-pad."

"I like her." Caddas was sullen. "She's friendly and understanding."

"Of course. That's her job. She used to be a newshound, and she knows her stuff. But she is also on the side of the top brass. Be careful how you reveal to her your 'peculiari-

ties'. That's the way the psycho-boys work. They encourage you to talk, and before you know where you are"—he snapped his fingers and Caddas winced—"there's the straitjacket. And the needles."

"She wouldn't!"

"I wouldn't bet on it, lad." Barclay deliberately held back from over-emphasis, not wanting to prick rebellion. Rikki looked undecided. Miss Honey came hurrying back, smiling her apologies. Barclay felt the first chill touch of fear. As Dally Hawk she had been neither beautiful nor pretty, and now as Miss Dahlia Honey, age had not improved her looks, but she still had that odd quality of radiant charm that seemed to reach out and lay hands on the person she smiled at. "And before you know where you are," he mused, "you're in a judo lock, and helpless." A dangerous woman.

"You're an oddly mismatched pair," she declared, settling into a chair and making no secret of her curiosity. "I'm fascinated. You always were a lone-wolf type, Jack. Hard driving, ruthless, efficient, with no tolerance for any human weaknesses. And yet here you are teamed up with Rikki." She shifted her smile to Caddas, cementing the familiarity of such short acquaintance. "He's hardly the type for this kind of project, let alone the sort of person to work so closely with you. Especially as a secretary!" She emphasized the last word. "Isn't that rather archaic? I mean, you have dictatype facilities, and full data-retrieval by computer. What in sanity d'you need a secretary for?"

"Rikki pulls his weight." Barclay was guarded but positive. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Caddas found his tongue. "You two know each other well?"

"Very well," she nodded, her smile taking a slight edge. "It's a long time ago, now, but Jack was just as single-minded then as he is now. No time for troublesome encumbrances or distractions. He was on the way up. I was no more than an incident to him."

"That is so completely a reversal of the truth that it's almost funny." Barclay kept his temper. "You were Dally

Hawk, then. A name. A somebody. To you, other people's feelings were the raw material of success-sensation stories, material to be ripped up and put together again according to your ideas of what the public wanted to read. So far as I can see, you've grown a little older, but nothing else has changed. About you, that is. But I don't tear as easily as I used to. And you're wasting your time on him. . . ."

A shrill bleat at his wrist cut him short. He lifted the speaker to his ear at once, pressing a switch.

"Barclay here. What?"

"Number Three Dining Block. Condition is red, repeat red!" He was on his feet and hurrying before the repeat was spoken, out of the door and into the ground-car, cancelling the automatics with a rough hand, seizing the manual controls, driving his foot to the floor. The car whined into speed and fled along the highway to the dining centre so swiftly that he had barely time to get the stark outlines of the situation through his radio before the reality was before him. A milling crowd folded back out of the way as he swooped the car to a halt at the entrance of Dining Block Three. A spidery framework of steel towered five stories high, supporting a robot-roofer which had been in the process of spraying foam-concrete to finish the flat roof. The delivery pipe, as thick through as a man's body, had split under the three hundred pounds per square inch pressure. A fan of grey-white slurry spouted from the split, was still spouting.

"Shut the damned thing off!" Barclay yelled, almost falling out of his car, then, seeing the lead-footed paralysis that had taken the gang, he put his chin down and charged for the base of the tower, gagging on the stink of the ammoniacal liquid which carried the slurry. The edge of the spray twitched at his arm as he reached, craning to one side and found the trip-master. Pumps wailed into silence. The spray dwindled, became a slipping drip. Barclay drew back, whirled to find someone to bawl out, and saw where the side-fanning spray had built a mound in the corner nook of the entrance. Intuition told him the rest of it, but he asked, just to be sure.

"Who's under that lot?"

"The two observers, sir. And Major Dannard. They were just standing there——" Barclay ran, the foam-crete on his sleeve already hard and cracking away. Quick-drying stuff. Speed was essential. But that was as far as his mind would take him. His feet were heavy as he realized that he had not the ghost of a notion what to do next. This was the first, in a long time, of emergencies that happened without warning, with no time to work out a plan. The blunt tip of the mound was some nine feet high, and tapered out so far at the foot that he had to fall on it to get close enough to beat with his fist. The grey-white stuff was soggy-hard already.

"Dannard! Dannard! Can you hear me?" He knocked aside his cap and pressed his head against the stuff.

"Colonel!" the reply was very faint, but clear. "All right, so far. Not much time. Get crowbars, lever the stuff away—from walls—before it sticks——"

"All right!" Barclay flung himself away from the potential tomb and spun on the gaping men. "Pinch-bars!" he rapped. "Three of you. One either side, one on top. Quickly, damn you!" He stepped clear as three men came forward to do as he said. He swept the crowd. "Two more. Ease it away from the ground. You!" He pinned with a finger one man in a yellow helmet. "Get medical emergency. You, a truck and hoist. You, get solvent. Any air-picks available? Yes? Get three and stand by." The men with the crowbars were straining and heaving in futile disorder. He yelled at them, got them to understand, gave a co-ordinating shout. They strained together. Again. Once more, and the lumpy mass shuddered and inched away from the walls.

Five minutes later it rested uneasily on the ground, held by wide-apart grapples, while men with pneumatic picks prodded it gingerly. The trapped men lay face down on it like fruit in a slab of cake, quite motionless, but alive. Barclay stood back, wiping the sweat from his face with a sodden handkerchief. Behind him the medical car clanged to a halt and white-coated men poured out to take over. He

found his cap, dusted it off, picked a few remaining lumps from his sleeve, and met Willerby's eye.

"No real harm done," he muttered.

"Except to their egos," Willerby said understandingly. "We'll do what we can. Leave it to us."

Barclay turned away, found the officer in charge waiting by his elbow.

"Lieutenant Miller, sir."

"Where the hell were you?"

"On the roof, sir, monitoring the spray. I'm sorry, sir."

"The time for that is past, Miller. Better get a patch slapped on that pipe, fast as you can, and get on——" Barclay halted himself at the look on Miller's face, his sensitivities at needle-pitch now. "You don't agree? Come on, man, say it! What would you rather do?"

"New pipe, sir. We have spares all ready. A split indicates wear and weakness. Patch it and it'll only go again, in another place."

"Right. Good. Very well, do it your way, but quickly. Let's not make this unfortunate affair an excuse for wasting time. Carry on!"

He climbed back into his ground-car, his mind seething with bitter thoughts. This would have to happen now, of all times. It wasn't until he was actually mounting the steps to his quarters that something else struck him, with all the force of a physical blow. An emergency, a danger, and not so much as a murmur from Caddas! He flung into the room, surprising Caddas and Dahlia in affectionate rapport on his settee. They spread apart rapidly, but he had no time to waste on minor matters. He riveted Caddas with a glare.

"Where the hell were you?" he demanded grimly. "Two observers and Major Dannard were almost killed by a pipe-burst. Smothered in foam-crete. They were alive when I left, but the final verdict isn't in yet. What happened to you?" Caddas stared up at him in stunned blankness for a moment, then his weak face blanched, he made a strangled moan, and slid senseless to the floor. Dahlia went down to

her knees, her sympathetic hands reaching for Caddas. Her blue eyes were like flames as she glared up.

"What the devil was that for, Jack? You trying to frighten the poor man to death? You know he's not strong! Rikki!" she cradled the limp head in her lap, patted white cheeks. "Rikki dear, come on. It's all right now. You're quite safe with me. Come on."

Barclay stared down at the sight, blistering comments seething to his tongue, only to be knotted and held back as the impossibility of his position became clear to him. He knew that Caddas had failed him, but he was the only one who knew, or would believe. Flinging his cap in a corner he stalked through the room to his office, slamming the door after him.

Willerby came through on the visor-phone within half an hour, his call dragging Barclay out of a morass of gloom.

"Prognosis favourable, sir. Apparently they all had the instinctive sense to cover their faces while there was time, or they might have suffocated. Shock, indignity, and their clothing a total write-off. I'm indenting for replacement clothing immediately, of course. Apart from that, a few scratches, bruises and a blister or two from the solvent about covers it. They were very fortunate, and I've told 'em so. They'll be fit to travel by tomorrow."

"Travel? Oh, of course, they'll want to go back to HQ. And talk!"

"It shouldn't be too bad, sir. Dannard has laid it on strongly that the whole affair was an unpredictable misfortune, and that it was very promptly handled. After all, he was caught too. I think they'll forgive us."

"That's great!" Barclay snarled. "They might let us off, but we can wave good-bye to our star rating."

Willerby shrugged. "You can't win 'em all, sir. Accidents will happen, no matter what you do. It was just one of those things."

Barclay put his hand to the switch, but the surgeon-captain had an after-thought. "About Lieutenant Caddas, sir——"

"Eh? What about him?"

"When I first saw him I thought it was just a simple case of nervous breakdown due to shock. It takes some people like that. But there are one or two symptoms I don't care for at all. Out of my field, I'm afraid, and I haven't the facilities here . . ."

"What the hell are you blethering about, man? Who told you Rikki was in need of your attention?"

"Miss Honey called for medical service almost half an hour ago. We have him here and under heavy sedation. He appears to be mentally disturbed to the point where I can no longer hold myself responsible. . . ."

Barclay cancelled the call, lurched up from his desk and ran out to scramble into his car once more. The late afternoon sunlight laid a blood-red mantle over his world, a world that was disintegrating about his head. The surgeon-captain met him on the steps of the Medical Centre. Willerby was nervous but determined.

"It's pointless to go in there, sir. He's unconscious and will be until tomorrow. Perhaps I put it a bit strongly on the visor. I was forgetting how close you two are."

"So close it never occurred to you to call me before pumping him full of drugs?" Barclay was savage, and Willerby paled.

"I know my job," he said pointedly. "It was obvious to me, as it must have been to anyone, that Caddas was on the point of total collapse. He's been living on his nerves for weeks. Physically, he's a wreck. Mentally, I don't know. As I said, it's not my field. But I'll stake my right arm and my reputation that he's not normal. Not now, at any rate."

"Eccentric. It's nothing more than that. As for his physical condition, you must be mistaken. Why, he hasn't had a day's illness in the five years I've had him working for me! A good night's sleep and he'll be right as ever in the morning."

"You'll have to let me be the judge of that," Willerby declared, and there was finality in his tone. Barclay stifled his rage, knowing there was nothing more to be said along that line.

"And Miss Honey?"

"She's by his bedside. Remarkable woman, that. Should have been a nurse. She has the touch for it."

"Is there somewhere I can talk to her? Alone? I want to find out just what is going on here."

"Certainly. If you'll step in here, sir, and wait a moment, I'll send her along. Nothing more she can do tonight, anyway."

"She's done enough, all right," Barclay agreed, but it was to himself. The years he had schemed and contrived to keep Rikki out of the hands of the medical men, all destroyed in an instant. Bitter words were all ready on his tongue, but the look on her face as she came in killed them. She sank into the seat opposite him as if weary to death, and the radiance had gone out of her, to be replaced by a different glow, one he could find no name for.

"You know," she said, and even her voice was weary, "I always knew you were a heartless devil, Jack. You'd drive yourself and everyone else into the ground to get what you'd set your mind on. I knew it. That's why I had to drop you, all those years ago. I had my ambitions, I'll admit, but they never lay over other people's bodies. That poor boy in there has been driven until . . ."

"That poor boy, for your information, is only three years younger than I am, is about your own age!"

"I know. He told me. And yet he has the ways and outlook of a youth. Didn't it ever occur to you to wonder why?"

"I know he's retarded, if that's what you mean. The psycho-technicians will dream up a whole string of fancy names for the condition, if ever they get him into their hands, but it's nothing more than that. He's harmless, and pretty helpless, without me. D'you think I've taken care of him for the last five years without knowing that much?"

"Taken care of him?"

"That's what I said. He has been very well looked after. If he told you such a lot about himself he ought to have told you that much."

"You've used him," she retorted. "Driven him until he's on the point of collapse. You call that 'taking care'?"

"Driven him?" Barclay gave a barking laugh. "Ask anyone. Don't take my word. He doesn't do a stroke, hasn't turned a laboured hand in all the time he's been with me. The only sweat he's known has been from fear, out of his own fantasies. He has no duties. He is constantly with me, dependent on me. Without my support he wouldn't last five minutes. Driven him!?"

"Why do you need him, then?"

"That's my business. Why does one feel compassionate to a cripple?" The shot was a wild one, but it scored. He saw her face, and followed it up instantly. "That's what has got you, isn't it? Compassion. Your maternal instincts. You want to mother him."

"And what's wrong with that?" She went on the defensive. "Just because you've never needed affection you'd deny it to him. That's why he's retarded, and immature. He needs affection and understanding."

"He does? Are you sure? That it's *his* need, I mean? Or is it that you are looking for something to coddle, to nurse, to mother!?"

She rose to her feet, her face twisted with emotion. "You know, all the time we were talking this afternoon, Rikki and I, it was so obvious. Every time your name was mentioned he had a violent, almost physical, sense of being smothered. What d'you think, Jack? Would he rather be mothered—or smothered? I think we'll just wait until tomorrow and let him decide."

"Decide what?"

"Whether he stays with you, or comes with me when I leave." That lifted him to his feet, but she went on unheeding. "You can't keep him here, you know. You said yourself he has no duties, nothing to do. His position, as a *secretary* is ridiculous. And his condition—why, he'd never pass any physical test for field work, and you know it. If he wants to leave, you can't stop him."

Barclay thought very fast indeed. What she had said was absolutely true as far as it went. Willerby had seen enough

to make him suspicious. He could be silenced, but this woman was a different proposition. Once she talked the long deception would be in shreds. She had to be stopped. Barclay was fighting for all he valued, and no thrust was too rough to be withheld.

"You *have* gone soft," he said. "You'd take Rikki with you? As what? Your ward? Or your lover?"

"You would think of something like that!"

"You'd better think of it, too, because it's what everyone else will think. And then you'd have to keep him. D'you think you can?"

"I'm not poor . . ."

"I don't mean in that way," he interrupted harshly. "I dare say you would be able to keep him like a pet, in a cage, fed and watered regularly. But could you keep him—from other women? You're not the only one with the mothering instinct, you know." He watched the pain and indecision on her face, and chose his next blow with careful timing. "Not that it will ever arise. You've dropped him into the hands of the medicos. That's something I've been sheltering him from for years. You heard him say he's afraid of doctors. *You* care for him so much that you delivered him into their hands the moment my back was turned. As of this moment, I can get him back. Willerby is under my command. But once let him lift off this planet, and the medicos have got him. To play with. To try their tricks on. Do you think you'd ever see him again? Do you think he's going to love you when he wakes in the morning and finds out where he is, and that *you* put him here?"

"But he was ill! Unconscious! What else could I do?"

"You could leave him alone. Just that. Leave him alone. Clear out. Stick to your job. Let me handle this. I can get him out of here in the morning, and talk him back into an acceptance of my concern for him. If you only leave him alone there's a chance the damage can be repaired."

"Does he mean that much? To you?"

"It's not that!" Barclay was brusque. "I told you you wouldn't understand. I can take care of him, protect him from life. I can do that a lot more efficiently if this project

goes through successfully. Dally, I need just one more commendation, one more star, and I can count on elevation. Give me that, and I can, and will, take Rikki out of this for good. I can do it. You can't You *can* help to make it possible. When you and your colleagues go back to make your report, a word from you might make all the difference. Say it, and Rikki's future is safe and assured, with me. Say the other thing, let your maternal emotions sway you, and you'll break him. And you'll do yourself no good at all. You think about it."

He went away and left her at that, to drive back to his own quarters and do some thinking of his own. Without knowing it, she had given him one more rare clue to the way Rikki's sensitivity worked. Whenever the conversation had turned to himself, Barclay, the boy had felt smothered. He had, in fact, known what was going to happen. Had it not been for Dally's pernicious presence, that accident would never have happened. It would have been averted. But she had focused the lad's mind on something else. Barclay ground his teeth in impotent rage. The damned interfering bitch.

Then he fell to wondering whether he had managed to sway her, and he had doubts. He couldn't afford them now. He reached for the buttons, got the Medical Centre, and the orderly in charge.

"Inform me the moment Lieutenant Caddas regains consciousness. No one else is to see him until I do, is that clear?"

With that much assurance he sought his bed, there to rehearse various arguments he would put to Rikki in the morning. And there would be Willerby to persuade. And perhaps a word or two might help with the two observers. So many angles, all to be handled just right. Sleep was a long time coming.

The buzz came at six, half-an-hour before general reveille, but the spare severe form of Willerby was there at the bedside when Barclay arrived. The surgeon-captain's face was grave, but he stood aside willingly enough.

"Rikki! How d'you feel, lad?" Barclay had no need to

feign anxiety. The weak face was puckered into near-panic and gleaming with fear-sweat.

"What am I doing here, with him? Why did you send me here?"

"I didn't, believe me. It was that woman, Miss Honey."

"I don't believe you." Caddas sat up. "She wouldn't. She's kind."

"I don't doubt it. But she's just like all the rest. She thinks there is something wrong with you. You had a little black-out yesterday. You've had them before. But I wasn't there. I turned my back on you for just a moment. I'm damned sorry about that, believe me. But there it is, it's done. Before I knew anything about it, she'd called in the medicos, and here you are. But not to worry. We'll soon have you out of here, now that you're fit again."

"What have they done to me, Jack?" Caddas moved gingerly, trying his arms and legs, throwing back the covers.

"So far as I know, nothing except give you something to make you sleep. How d'you feel? All right?" He spun and stepped to where Willerby stood and glowered. "That's all you did, wasn't it? Sedation?"

"That's all. Colonel, I shall protest this. I'm the medical authority. This is my province, my responsibility."

"You yourself said this was outside your field. I'll take full responsibility. You attend to your other patients. Lieutenant Caddas comes with me, and let's hear no more about it."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that." Willerby had an almost frightened grin on his lean face now. "You see, I took the liberty of requesting a berth for Lieutenant Caddas in the shuttle ship that will be coming to retrieve the observers. A message had to be sent, if only to account for their accident, and to ask for special facilities. I thought it advisable——" He broke off, quailing under Barclay's glare.

"*You* thought it advisable? *You* sent a message, without my authority?"

"Major Dannard authorized it, in your stead. He agreed with me——"

"Dannard! The shambling idiot! By God, Willerby, I'll break the pair of you for this! You dressed, Rikki? Good. Come on. This is a sick man, Willerby? Take a good look. And then go and take very good care of your real patients. Do the best you can for them, because they might well be the last you'll attend for a long while. You'll be swilling out latrines when I'm done with you. As for Dannard——! I'll get to him, later. Come on, Rikki!"

Back in his quarters, while Caddas slurped at his breakfast and expressed himself thankful to be safe, Barclay tried to raise the HQ ship in the hope of averting Willerby's arrangements, but he was too late. The shuttle ship was already manned and slipping into her ejection lock. He swore at that. Willerby must have made his cry an urgent one. He put through a discreet call to the Medical Centre again and managed to raise Major Dannard. On the screen Dannard looked little the worse apart from ointment stains and a raw patch on one cheek-bone. Barclay masked his icy fury under a chill smile.

"Glad to see you looking fit again, Major. I hear you've been busy?"

"Sir?" Dannard blinked, then made an apologetic shrug. "About the ship you mean, sir? Yes, I did make a signal for it to come ahead of schedule."

"Mind telling me why?"

"Well, sir, after talking to General Powley and Citizen Wake, and them agreeing there was no point in being a hindrance—I mean, they're hardly in shape for any further inspections, and they've seen enough to be very highly impressed. Very impressed," Dannard repeated, savouring the words. "So far as they are concerned, it's another 'red' for us. And they are keen to get out of the way and let us get on. And our facilities are limited, as yet. And you were asleep, sir!"

"I see! And the third member of the team? Miss Honey?"

"I consulted her, sir. She didn't raise any objection. Said she'd seen all that was necessary. And once we can get

them away out of it, we can go full speed ahead again. I know that's what you want, sir."

Barclay wanted to rage at him, to shout, "What about you and Willerby, and your damned plot to get rid of Rikki, too? You snivelling half-wit, what about that?" But he swallowed the words, kept his frozen smile.

"Very well, Major. It all seems to have turned out very well. I'll want to see you, later. Advise General Powley and Citizen Wake that I shall be at the field to see them off." He cancelled the picture and sat a while, breathing hard. Then he spun to see that Caddas had heard every word.

"Learn a lesson, lad," he said harshly. "You can't get it any more clearly than that. Bear it in mind. When we go to see that shuttle off, remember that if it wasn't for me, you'd be on it, under observation. You're safe this time. I can deal with Dannard, and Willerby, never fear. But I can't deal with outsiders, with people like Dahlia Honey. I can only warn you not to trust her, or anyone like her."

Caddas was sullen, almost defiant. "I *like* her. She's kind. She seemed to understand me."

"That's her job. You're just one of a crowd to her. Inside a week she will be turning her professional charms on someone else, leading him to talk about himself. And when she's got as much as she wants, she'll drop him, just as she's dropping you. You heard Dannard. The shuttle will be grounded in an hour, and the observers will be leaving. They've got all they want. They are done with us. And she's included. Don't forget that. She's just an observer." Caddas screwed up his face as if he was about to cry, and Barclay had to turn away from the sight. He levered up his read-out screen, and stared at it. "You'll forget about her," he said. "You'll see."

"I can't!" Caddas wailed. "Every time you say bad things about her my head hurts and I feel sick all over. But when you stop it, and I think of her smiling, I feel all right again."

"You're still a bit upset," Barclay soothed mechanically "You'd better go and lie down for a bit. I shan't be making my rounds for half-an-hour yet. I'll call you." Alone, he

glared at the blank read-out screen and struggled to deny the hideous thought that tried to insert itself into his mind. Damn that woman! Then, getting a grip on himself, he buttoned for data, and the screen came alive with glowing green figures and diagrams. This much, at least, was solid comfort. All the other Units were virtually at a standstill, showing only minimum gains over yesterday, but Unit Three ran up a steady advance on all sectors. Even that disastrous pipe burst had done nothing more than to dent the curve a trifle. "A bit of bad luck," he mused, "but promptly and efficiently dealt with." But then the train of thought ran away by itself and tangled into an ugly knot.

He, the super-efficient Jack Barclay, had made a flat-footed blunder there, saved only by the instinctive know-how of the man on the job. He had given a wrong order. And he hadn't known what to do about the trapped men, either. In the pinch he had been saved by Dannard's wit. Without that there might have been a real disaster. Two men dead, possibly. Had it not been for Dannard——! And Willerby, with professional skill and wit, had taken the sting out of the situation even further, had turned it to an advantage. Yet Barclay had committed himself to breaking those two men. Sweat broke out on him as he was driven to realize, to admit to himself that he wasn't even of average competence, alone. Take away Rikki Caddas and his freakish gifts, and what was left? He flung the idea away savagely. He *had* Rikki, still, and he was going to keep him. *Had* to keep him!

The routine morning round had to be a short one, so he chose to devote most of it to the two sprawling manufactor-centres, as they were located handily near the landing-field. The immensely complex and massive converters, capable of synthesizing almost any material in bulk quantities, given the raw resources, had been standing patiently in moth-ball shrouds for just this moment. Now, uncovered and bright, they were to be hauled into the buildings designed to take them, and there linked stage by stage into production lines. Barclay toured at a respectful distance, with Caddas lolling by his side, showing no signs

of distress whatever. The task appeared to be going along smoothly. Barclay's "doom" feeling was on the retreat as a distant drumming overhead warned him of the approaching shuttle. Not wishing to appear too free, he waited until the stammer had grown to a roar and then choked off as the ship drifted down to a landing. Then he leaned forward and programmed the car to take him to the field. "That's it," he thought. "End of an incident." On manual control he tooled the car close in to the foot of the gangway and climbed out, just in time to catch the hobbling observers dismounting from the medical car.

"Citizen Wake, General Powley, please accept my profound apologies that such a thing should have happened to mar your visit, and my sincere gratitude that you appear to have escaped so lightly."

"Quite all right, Colonel. Quite all right." Powley spoke from a cross-mask of bandages, but sounded cheerful. "Accidents will happen to the best of us. Have to thank you and your staff for being so efficient. Could have been a lot worse. Won't forget it, I assure you." He hobbled on to let Wake add a word.

"Most impressed, Colonel. We owe you our lives!"

Barclay was gratified, and a trifle bewildered, until Dannard moved close to his side and murmured, "Signal just through from Unit One. Observer badly mangled. Got involved with a road-maker. Condition critical. I let our guests see it, by accident." Barclay grinned, then cut it off abruptly.

"Where's the third, Miss Honey?"

"She's aboard long ago. Couldn't wait."

Barclay turned away to hide his satisfaction, and saw Caddas getting out of the car. The lieutenant was shivering, his face chalk-white, and he was barely able to stand.

"Rikki!" Barclay was at his side in a single step. "What's the matter, lad? What is it?"

"I feel awful. All empty and cold, and I want to be sick." This did not fit any crisis Barclay could think of, so he pressed into the next stage immediately, urgently.

"Can you give me a name, Rikki? A name?"

"Honey. Lovely sweet honey . . ."

Barclay cursed under his breath. His communicator bleated, on his wrist, but he ignored it, reaching to take Caddas by a shoulder and shaking him roughly.

"Get her out of your mind, you fool!"

"I can't!" Caddas wrenched away with surprising strength, throwing off the grip and glaring his defiance. "I can't forget her. She's going away and leaving me behind!"

Barclay choked on unspeakable words. The bleat came again from his wrist, insistently. He snatched it to his mouth.

"Barclay here. What?"

"Number Two manufactor-centre. Haulage breakdown. Two men trapped. The condition is black, repeat black." Even as the miniature voice said it, he heard the "disaster" siren begin to wail, thinly, in the distance, the first time it had sounded on this project. Quite suddenly his rage went away, leaving him dulled and impassive. He stared at Caddas, who was still casting pathetic eyes up the gangway. There was no doubting the awful truth, now. The goose would lay no more golden eggs.

"Go on," he muttered, his voice empty of feeling. "Go on up there to her. There's a berth for you." Caddas shambled away and up the gangway without a word or a backward glance. Under his breath Barclay said, "You're no good to me any more, Rikki. She's welcome to you."

The gangway began to rumble and lift up and away. The distant siren wailed again. Dannard shifted uneasily, touched Barclay's arm.

"You've done the best thing, sir, in my opinion. Now we can really get on with the job, and no hindrances at all. Shall I drive, sir?"

Barclay turned on him, too empty even to be angry. "You bloody fool!" he said, very quietly. "You bloody fool!"

New Writings in SF is a new departure in the science fiction field, bringing for the first time to lovers of the genre, new stories written specially for the series by well-known as well as new authors.

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