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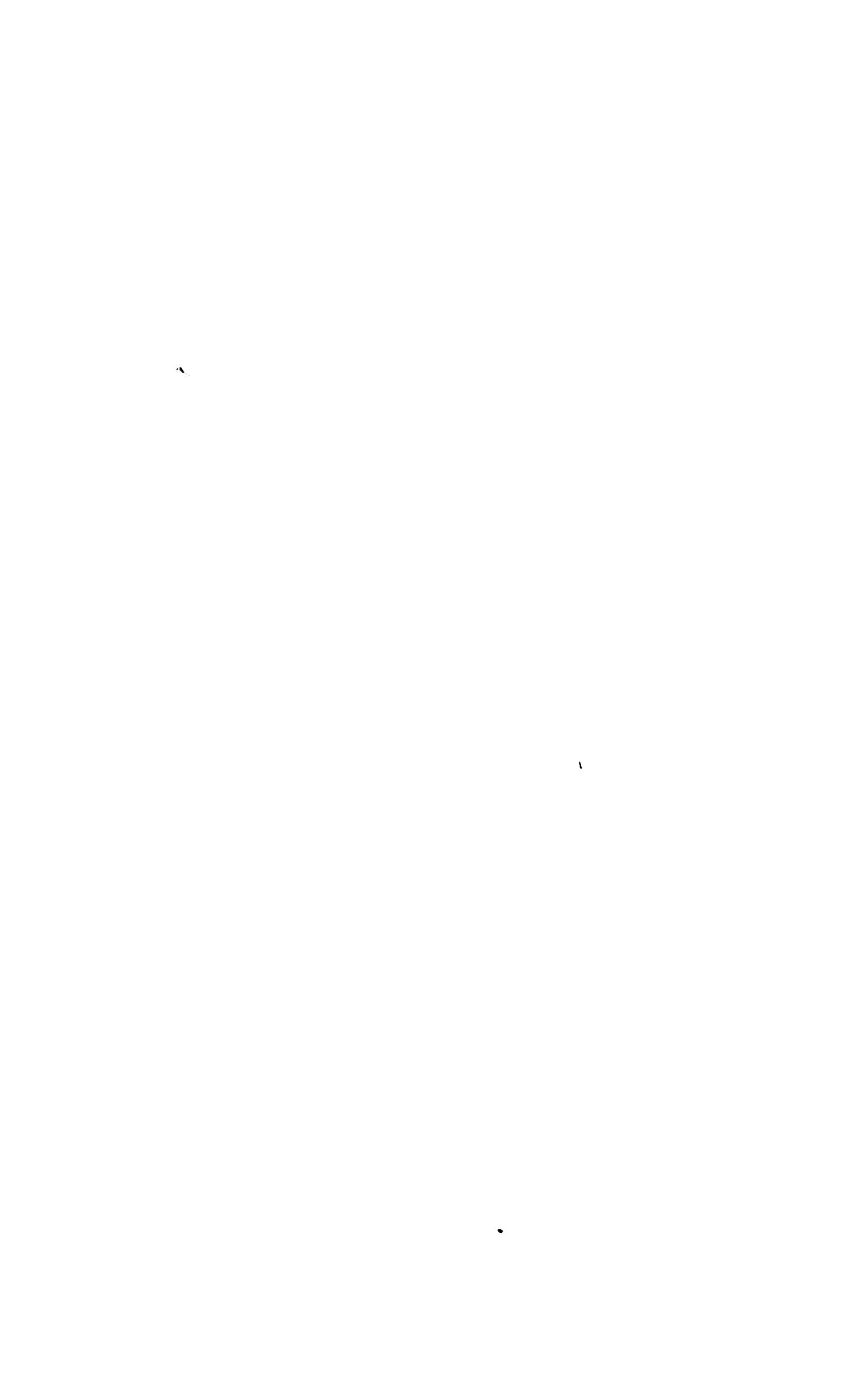
New Writings in SF-7

# SF 7

New Writings in SF  
Edited by  
John Carnell  
Featuring  
Invader  
by James White

Douglas R. Mason: The Man Who Missed The Ferry  
Robert Presslie: The Night Of The Seventh Finger  
John Rankine: Six Cubed Plus One  
William F. Temple: Coco-Talk  
R. W. Mackelworth: A Touch Of Immortality  
Keith Roberts: Manscarer





James White, an exciting and original writer, opens the seventh volume of *New Writings in SF* with a hitherto unexplored aspect of inter-galactic travel. His story *Invader* is set in a gigantic space hospital where almost anyone—or anything—can receive treatment. *Six Cubed Plus One* by John Rankine investigates the dangers of misalignment in a computer. William F. Temple's *Coco-Talk* deals with the upside-down customs on an inhabited Venus, and *A Touch of Immortality* by R. W. Mackelworth explores some strange theories about man's search for immortality. In Douglas R. Mason's *The Man Who Missed The Ferry* we have an unusual account of what could only be called a 'modern miracle'. Robert Presslie has written a time-travel story in *The Night of The Seventh Finger* and finally Keith Robert's *Manscarer* deals with the dilemma of artists and creative people in a scientist's world.

Also edited by JOHN CARNELL

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—1

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—2

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WEIRD SHADOWS FROM BEYOND

and published by CORGI BOOKS



EDITED BY  
JOHN CARNELL  
NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—7



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NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—7

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## FOREWORD

*by*

JOHN CARNELL

FIRST the world began to shrink as the speed of communications and transport spanning the globe increased at a prodigious rate. Now the Solar System is spiralling in upon us as unmanned probes push out to the Moon, Venus, Mars and circumnavigating the sun. Soon (in terms of cosmic time) our own galaxy may well be within our reach as the inventiveness of Man uncovers more and more scientific secrets—it may well be that the solution to the present impossibility of faster-than-light star drive or of warping a spaceship through dimensional time will be found in a simple mathematical equation discovered by our descendants in a few hundred years.

In the meantime, science fiction brings these exciting possibilities into closer perspective. In particular, the stories in each volume of *New Writings in S-F* are planned to encompass as many imaginative journeys within the realm of plausibility as possible.

Take, for instance, the background hypothesis of James White's novelette "Invader" in this seventh volume. The author presupposes that in the distant future Man has attained the star drive and found a wide range of intelligent entities "out there"; then he envisages a gigantic spaceship hospital equipped and staffed to handle practically every type of human and alien intelligence, of all shapes and sizes. The possibilities are limitless. In fact, Mr. White has already written and had published a whole series of short stories and a novel (*Star Surgeon*) about his "Sector General"

hospital with such great success that I asked him to create a new series for *New Writings in S-F*.

There is also the welcome return to the British scene of William F. Temple who has been writing S-F since 1938 and had an early novel, *Four Sided Triangle*, made into a film long before the genre was fashionable on the silver screen. His "Coco-Talk" is a diplomatic story set on Venus, a planet now in some doubt as to habitability by human beings since the 1964 American probe recorded high surface temperatures inferring a hot storm-tossed world—but until we are sure (by landing there or surfacing a probe) Venus is still within the realm of plausibility.

Of the remaining five stories, any one could well be an outstanding favourite, depending upon individual preference. Douglas Mason's modern miracle of the man who walked on water is suspenseful as well as being packed with tension and pathos; Robert Presslie's unusual time-travelling story written from the angle of pop idols and teenagers is a welcome modern relief from the usual theme; R. W. Mackelworth's ideas in the search for immortality produce some fascinating twists and turns; while John Rankine produces a strangely-compelling story of a computer in a modern setting in "Six Cubed Plus One".

The most unusual story, however, is Keith Roberts' "*Manscarer*", which at times seems to have touches of madness in it—and is intended to! In a highly mechanized world of the future, when England at least is one huge city, just where would the artists and creative individuals go to pursue their dream worlds of reality? And what would they do with their creative time?

Whether it is down to Earth or out in the depths of galactic space, this volume of *New Writings in S-F* endeavours to give you a good cross-section of the probabilities of the future.

JOHN CARNELL

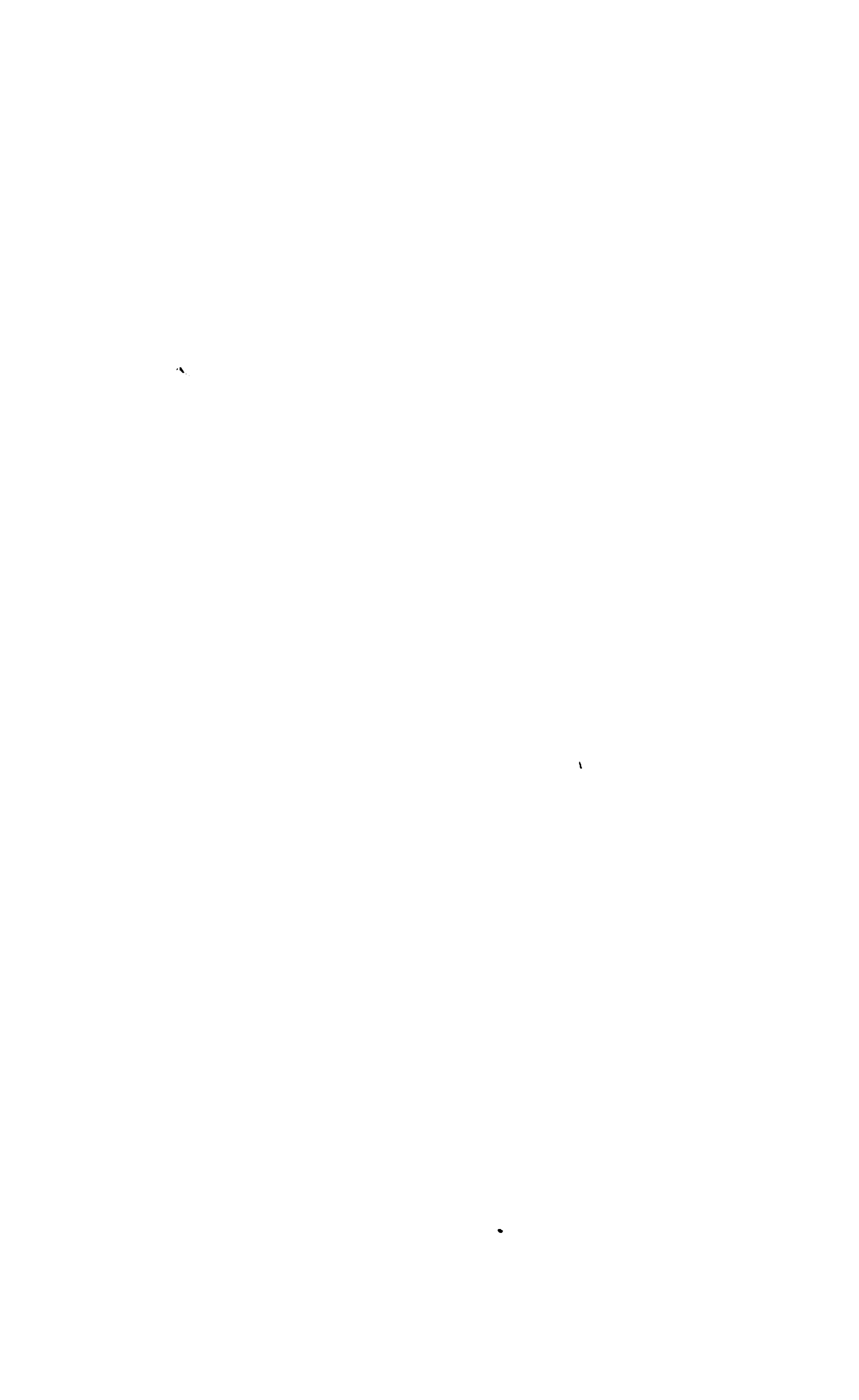
November 1965

# INVADER

by

JAMES WHITE

*Introducing to thousands of new readers the vast complex of the galactic Sector General Hospital in space, where every type of sentient life can be hospitalized—and where the doctors and nurses are as strange and bizarre as the patients.*





## INVADER

### ONE

FAR out on the Galactic Rim, where star systems were widely scattered and the darkness nearly absolute, the tremendous structure which was Sector Twelve General Hospital hung in space. Inside its three hundred and eighty-four levels were reproduced the environments of all the intelligent life-forms known to the Galactic Federation, a biological spectrum ranging from the ultra-frigid methane species through the more normal oxygen- and chlorine-breathing types up to the exotic beings who existed by the direct conversion of hard radiation. In addition to the patients, whose number and physiological classification was a constant variable, there was a medical and maintenance staff who were composed of sixty-odd differing life-forms with sixty different sets of mannerisms, body odours and ways of looking at life.

The staff of Sector General was an extremely able, dedicated, but not always serious group of people who were fanatically tolerant of all forms of intelligent life—had this not been so they could never have served in such a multi-environment hospital in the first place. They prided themselves that no case was too big, too small or too hopeless, and their facilities and professional reputation were second to none. It was unthinkable that one of their number should be guilty of nearly killing a patient through sheer carelessness.

“Obviously the thought isn’t unthinkable,” O’Mara, the Chief Psychologist, said drily. “I’m thinking it, reluctantly, and you are also thinking it—if only momentarily. Far

worse, Mannen himself is convinced of his own guilt. This leaves me with no choice but to——”

“No!” said Conway, strong emotion overriding his usual respect for authority. “Mannen is one of the best Seniors we have—you know that! He wouldn’t . . . I mean, he isn’t the type to . . . He’s . . .”

“A good friend of yours,” O’Mara finished for him, smiling. When Conway did not reply he went on, “My liking for Mannen may not equal yours, but my professional knowledge of him is much more detailed and objective. So much so that two days ago I would not have believed him capable of such a thing. Now, dammit, uncharacteristic behaviour bothers me. . . .”

Conway could understand that. As Chief Psychologist, O’Mara’s prime concern was the smooth and efficient running of the hospital’s medical staff, but keeping so many different and potentially antagonistic life-forms working in harmony was a big job whose limits, like those of O’Mara’s authority, were difficult to define. Given even the highest qualities of tolerance and mutual respect in its personnel, there were still occasions when friction occurred.

Potentially dangerous situations arose through ignorance or misunderstanding, or a being could develop a xenophobic neurosis which might affect its efficiency, mental stability, or both. An Earth-human doctor, for instance, who had a subconscious fear of spiders would not be able to bring to bear on one of the insectile Cinrusskin patients the proper degree of clinical detachment necessary for its treatment. It was O’Mara’s duty to detect and eradicate such trouble, or to remove the potentially troublesome individuals. This guarding against wrong, unhealthy or intolerant thinking was a duty which he performed with such zeal that Conway had heard him likened to a latter-day Torquemada.

Now it looked as if this paragon of psychologists had

been something less than alert. In psychology there were no effects without prior cause and O'Mara must now be thinking that he had missed some small but vital warning signal—a slightly uncharacteristic word or expression or display of temper, perhaps—which should have warned him of trouble developing for Senior Physician Mannen.

The psychologist sat back and fixed Conway with a pair of grey eyes which saw so much and which opened into a mind so keenly analytical that together they gave O'Mara what amounted to a telepathic faculty. He said, "No doubt you are thinking that I have lost my grip. You feel sure that Mannen's trouble is basically psychological and that there is an explanation other than negligence for what happened. You may decide that the recent death of his dog has caused him to go to pieces from sheer grief, and other ideas of an equally uncomplicated and ridiculous nature will occur to you. In my opinion, however, any time spent investigating the psychological aspects of this business will be completely wasted. Doctor Mannen has been subjected to the most exhaustive tests. He is physically sound and as sane as we are. As sane as I am, anyway. . . ."

"Thank you," said Conway.

"I keep telling you, Doctor," O'Mara said sourly, "my job here is to shrink heads, not swell them. Your assignment, if we can call it that, is strictly unofficial. Since there is no excuse for Mannen's error so far as health and psychoprofile are concerned I want you to look for some other reason—some outside influence, perhaps, of which the Doctor is unaware. Doctor Prilicla observed the incident in question and may be able to help you.

"You have a peculiar mind, Doctor," O'Mara concluded, rising from his seat, "and an odd way of looking at problems. We don't want to lose Doctor Mannen, but if you do get him out of trouble the surprise will probably kill me. I mention this so that you will have an added incentive. . . ."

Conway left the office, fuming slightly. O'Mara was always flinging his allegedly peculiar mind in his face when the simple truth was that he had been so shy when he had first joined the hospital, especially with nurses of his own species, that he had felt more comfortable in extra-terrestrial company. He was no longer shy, but still he numbered more friends among the weird and wonderful denizens of Traltha, Illensa and a score of other systems than beings of his own species. This might be peculiar, Conway admitted, but to a doctor living in a multi-environment hospital it was also a distinct advantage.

Outside in the corridor Conway contacted Prilicla in the other's ward, found that the little empath was free and arranged a meeting for as soon as possible on the Forty-sixth Level, which was where the Hudlar operating theatre was situated. Then he devoted a part of his mind to the problem of Mannen while the rest of it guided him towards Forty-six and kept him from being trampled to death en route.

His Senior Physician's arm-band automatically cleared the way so far as nurses and subordinate grades of doctors were concerned, but there were continual encounters with the lordly and absent-minded Diagnosticians who ploughed their way through everyone and everything regardless, or with junior members of the staff who happened to belong to a more massive species. Tralthans of physiological classification FGLI—warm-blooded oxygen-breathers resembling a sort of low-slung, six-legged elephant. Or the Kelgian DBLFs who were giant, silver-furred caterpillars who hooted like a siren when they were jostled whether they were outranked or not, or the crab-like ELNTs from Melf IV. . . .

The majority of the intelligent races in the Federation were oxygen-breathers even though their physiological classifications varied enormously, but a much greater

hazard to navigation on foot was the entity traversing a foreign level in protective armour. The protection required by a TLTU doctor, who breathed superheated steam and whose gravity and pressure requirements were three times those of the oxygen levels, was a great, clanking juggernaut which was to be avoided at all costs.

At the next intersection lock he donned a lightweight suit and let himself into the yellow, foggy world of the chlorine-breathing Illensans. Here the corridors were crowded with the spiny, membraneous and unadorned denizens of Illensa while it was the Tralthans, Kelgians and Earth-humans like himself who wore, or in some cases drove, protective armour. The next leg of his journey took him through the vast tank where the thirty-foot long, water-breathing entities from Chalderescol II swam ponderously through their warm, green world. The same suit served him here and, while the traffic was less dense, he was slowed down considerably through having to swim instead of walk. Despite this he was on the Forty-sixth Level observation gallery, his suit still streaming Chalder water, just fifteen minutes after leaving O'Mara's office, and Prilicla arrived close behind him.

"Good morning, friend Conway," said the little empath as it swung itself deftly on to the ceiling and hung by six fragile, sucker-tipped legs. The musical trills and clicks of its Cinruskin speech were received by Conway's Translator pack, relayed down to the tremendous computer at the centre of the hospital and transmitted back to his ear-piece as flat, emotionless English. Trembling slightly, the Cinruskin went on, "I feel you needing help, Doctor."

"Yes indeed," said Conway, his words going through the same process of Translation and reaching Prilicla as equally toneless Cinruskin. "It's about Mannen. There was no time to give details when I called you. . . ."

“No need, friend Conway,” said Prilicla. “On the Mannen incident the grapevine is more than usually efficient. You want to know what I saw and felt, of course.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Conway apologetically.

Prilicla said that it didn’t mind. But the Cinrusskin was, in addition to being the nicest entity in the whole hospital, its greatest liar.

Of physiological classification GLNO—insectile, exoskeletal with six pipestem legs and a pair of iridescent and not quite atrophied wings, and possessing a highly developed empathic faculty, only on Cinruss with its one-eighth Earth gravity could a race of insects have grown to such dimensions and in time developed intelligence and a high civilization. But in Sector General Prilicla was in deadly danger for most of its working day. It had to wear gravity nullification devices everywhere outside its quarters because the gravity pull which most beings considered normal would instantly have crushed it flat, and when Prilicla held a conversation with anyone it swung itself out of reach of any thoughtless movement of arm or tentacle which would have caved in its fragile body or snapped off a leg. While accompanying anyone on rounds it usually kept pace with them along the corridor walls or ceiling so as to avoid the same fate.

Not that anyone would have wanted to hurt Prilicla in any way—it was too well liked for that. Prilicla’s empathic faculty saw to it that the little being always said and did the right thing to people—being an emotion-sensitive to do otherwise would mean that the feelings of anger or sorrow which its thoughtless action caused would bounce back and figuratively smack it in the face. So the little empath was forced constantly to lie and be always kind and considerate in order to make the emotional radiation of the people around it as pleasant for itself as possible.

Except when its professional duties exposed it to pain

and violent emotion in a patient, or it wanted to help a friend.

Just before Prilicla began its report Conway said, "I'm not sure myself what exactly it is I'm looking for, Doctor. But if you can remember anything unusual about Mannen's actions or emotions, or those of his staff . . ."

With its fragile body trembling with the memory of the emotional gale which had emanated from the now empty Hudlar theatre two days ago, Prilicla set the scene as it had been at the beginning of the operation. The little GLNO had not taken the Hudlar physiology tape and so had not been able to view the proceedings with any degree of involvement with the patient's condition, and the patient itself was anaesthetized and scarcely radiating at all. Mannen and his staff had been concentrating on their duties with only a small part of their minds free to think or emote about anything else. And then Senior Physician Mannen had his . . . accident. In actual fact it was five separate and distinct accidents.

Prilicla's body began to quiver violently and Conway said, "I . . . I'm sorry."

"I know you are," said the empath, and resumed its report.

The patient had been partially decompressed so that the operative field could be worked more effectively. There was some danger in this considering the Hudlar pulse-rate and blood-pressure, but Mannen himself had evolved this procedure and so was best able to weigh the risks. Since the patient was decompressed he had had to work quickly, and at first everything seemed to be going well. He had opened a flap of the flexible armour-plating which the Hudlars used for skin and had controlled the subcutaneous bleeding when the first mistake occurred, followed in quick succession by two more. Prilicla could not tell by observation that they were mistakes, even though there was considerable bleeding

—it was Mannen's emotional reactions, some of the most violent the empath had ever experienced, which told it that the surgeon had committed a serious and stupid blunder.

There were longer intervals between the two others which followed—Mannen's work had slowed drastically, his technique resembling the first fumbblings of a student rather than that of one of the most skilful surgeons in the hospital. He had become so slow that curative surgery was impossible, and he had barely time to withdraw and restore pressure before the patient's condition deteriorated beyond the point of no return.

“... It was very distressing,” Prilicla said, still trembling violently. “He wanted to work quickly, but the earlier mistakes had wrecked his self-confidence. He was thinking twice about doing even the simplest things, things which a surgeon of his experience would do automatically, without thinking.”

Conway was silent for a moment, thinking about the horrible situation Mannen had been in. Then he said, “Was there anything else unusual about his feelings? Or those of the theatre staff?”

Prilicla hesitated, then said, “It is difficult to isolate subtle nuances of emotion when the source is emoting so ... so violently. But I received the impression of ... the effect is hard to describe ... of something like a faint emotional echo of irregular duration. ...”

“Probably the Hudlar tape,” said Conway. “It's not the first time a physiology tape gave me mental double vision.”

“That might possibly be the case,” said Prilicla. Which, in a being who was invariably and enthusiastically in agreement with whatever was said to it, was as close as the empath could come to a negative reply. Conway began to feel that he might be getting on to something important.

“How about the others?”

“Two of them,” said Prilicla, “were radiating the shock—



worry–fear combination indicative of a mildly traumatic experience in the recent past. I was in the gallery when both incidents occurred, and one of them gave me quite a jolt. . . .”

One of the nurses had almost had an accident while lifting a tray of instruments. One of them, a long, heavy, Hudlar Type Six scalpel used for opening the incredibly tough skin of that species, had slipped off the tray for some reason. Even a small punctured or incised wound was a very serious matter for a Kelgian, so that the Kelgian nurse had a bad fright when it saw that vicious blade dropping towards its unprotected side. But somehow it had struck in such a way—it was difficult to know how, considering its shape and lack of balance—that it had not penetrated the skin or even damaged the fur. The Kelgian had been relieved and thankful for its good fortune, but still a little disturbed.

“I can imagine,” said Conway. “Probably the Charge Nurse read the riot act. Minor errors become major crimes where theatre staff are concerned. . . .”

Prilicla’s legs began to tremble again, a sign that it was nerving itself for the effort of being slightly disagreeable. It said, “The entity in question was the Charge Nurse. That was why, when the other nurse goofed on an instrument count—there was one too many or too few—the ticking off was relatively mild. And during both incidents I detected the echo effect radiated by Mannen, although in these cases the echo was from the respective nurses.”

“We may have something there!” said Conway excitedly. “Did the nurses have any physical contact with Mannen?”

“They were assisting him,” said Prilicla, “and they were all wearing protective suits. I don’t see how any form of parasitic life or bacteria could have passed between them, if that is the idea which is making you feel so excited and

hopeful just now. I am very sorry, friend Conway, but this echo effect, while peculiar, does not seem to me to be important."

"It's something they had in common," said Conway.

"Yes," Prilicla said, "but the something did not have self identity, it was not an individual. Just a very faint emotional echo of the feelings of the people concerned."

"Even so," said Conway.

Three people had made mistakes or had had accidents in this theatre two days ago, all of whom had radiated an odd emotional echo which Prilicla did not consider important. The presence of an accident prone Conway ruled out because O'Mara's screening methods were too efficient in that respect. But suppose Prilicla was wrong and something had got in the theatre or into the hospital, some form of life which was difficult to detect and outside their present experience. It was well known that when odd things happened in Sector General the reasons very often were found outside the hospital. At the moment, however, he hadn't enough evidence to form even a vague theory and the first job should be to gather some—even though he might not recognize it if he tripped over it with both feet.

"I'm hungry and it's high time we talked to the man himself," said Conway suddenly. "Let's find him and invite him to lunch."

## Two

THE dining hall for the oxygen-breathing Medical and Maintenance staff occupied one complete level, and at one time it had been sectioned-off into physiological types with low dividing ropes. But this had not worked out too well because the diners very often wanted to talk shop with other-species colleagues or they found that there were no vacant places in their own enclosure and space going to

waste in that of another life-form. So it was no surprise when they arrived to find that they had the choice of sitting at an enormous Tralthan table with benches which were a shade too far from the table's edge and one in the Melfan section which was cosier but whose chairs resembled surrealistic wastepaper baskets. They insinuated themselves into three of the latter and began the usual preliminaries to ordering.

"I'm just myself today," said Prilicla in answer to Conway's question. "The usual, if you please."

Conway dialled for the usual, which was a triple helping of Earth-type spaghetti, then looked at Mannen.

"I've an FROB *and* an MSVK beastie riding me," the other Senior said gruffly. "Hudlars aren't pernicky about food, but those blasted MSVKs are offended by anything which doesn't look like birdseed! Just get me something nutritious, but don't tell me what it is and put it in about three sandwiches so's I won't see what it is. . . ."

While they were waiting for the food to arrive Mannen spoke quietly, the normality of his tone belied by the fact that his emotional radiation was making Prilicla shake like a leaf. He said, "The grapevine has it that you two are trying to get me out of this trouble I'm in. It's nice of you, but you're wasting your time."

"We don't think so and neither does O'Mara," said Conway, shading the truth considerably. "O'Mara gives you a clean bill of mental and physical health, and he said that your behaviour was most uncharacteristic. There must be some explanation, some environmental influence, perhaps, or something whose presence or absence would make you behave, if only momentarily, in an uncharacteristic fashion. . . ."

Conway outlined what little they knew to date, trying to sound more hopeful than he really felt, but Mannen was no fool.

“I don’t know whether to feel grateful for your efforts or concerned for your respective mental well-beings,” Mannen said when he had finished. “These peculiar and rather vague mental effects are . . . are . . . at the risk of offending Daddy-longlegs here I would suggest that any peculiarities there are lie in your own minds—your attempts to find excuses for me are becoming ridiculous!”

“Now you’re telling me I have a peculiar mind,” said Conway.

Mannen laughed quietly, but Prilicla was trembling worse than ever.

“A circumstance, person or thing,” Conway repeated, “whose presence or absence might effect your——”

“Ye Gods!” Mannen burst out. “You’re not thinking of the dog!”

Conway had been thinking about the dog, but he was too much of a moral coward to admit it right then. Instead he said, “Were you thinking about it during that op, Doctor?”

“No!” said Mannen.

There was a long, awkward silence after that, during which the service panels slid open and their orders rose into view. It was Mannen who spoke first.

“I liked that dog,” he said carefully, “when I was myself, that is. But for the past four years I’ve had to carry MSVK and LSVO tapes permanently in connection with my teaching duties, and recently I’ve needed the Hudlar and Melfan tapes for a project Thornnastor invited me to join. They were in permanent occupation as well. With my brain thinking that it was five different people, five very different people . . . Well, you know how it is. . . .”

Conway and Prilicla knew how it was only too well.

The Hospital was equipped to treat every known form of intelligent life, but no single person could hold in his brain even a fraction of the physiological data necessary for this purpose. Surgical dexterity was a matter of ability and

training, but the complete physiological knowledge of any patient was furnished by means of an Educator Tape, which was simply the brain record of some great medical genius belonging to the same or a similar species to that of the patient being treated. If an Earth-human doctor had to treat a Kelgian patient he took a DBLF physiology tape until treatment was completed, after which it was erased. The sole exceptions to this rule were Senior Physicians with teaching duties and the Diagnosticians.

A Diagnostician was one of the élite, a being whose mind was considered stable enough to retain permanently six, seven or even ten physiology tapes simultaneously. To their data-crammed minds was given the job of original research in xenological medicine and the treatment of new diseases in hitherto unknown life-forms.

But the tapes did not impart only physiological data, the complete memory and personality of the entity who had possessed that knowledge was transferred as well. In effect a Diagnostician subjected himself or itself voluntarily to the most drastic form of schizophrenia. The entities apparently sharing one's mind could be unpleasant, aggressive individuals—geniuses were rarely charming people—with all sorts of peeves and phobias. These did not become apparent only at mealtimes. The worst period was when the possessor of the tapes was relaxing prior to sleeping.

Alien nightmares were really nightmarish and alien sexual fantasies and wish-fulfilment dreams were enough to make the person concerned wish, if he were capable of wishing coherently for anything, that he was dead.

“... Within the space of a few minutes,” Mannen continued, “she would change from being a ferocious, hairy beast intent on tearing out my belly feathers to a brainless bundle of fur which would get squashed by one of my six feet if it didn't get to blazes out of the way, to a perfectly ordinary dog wanting to play. It wasn't fair to the mutt,

you know. She was a very old and confused dog towards the end, and I'm more glad than sorry that she died.

"And now let's talk and emote about some other subject," Mannen ended briskly. "Otherwise we will completely ruin Prilicla's lunch. . . ."

He did just that for the remainder of the meal, discussing with apparent relish a juicy piece of gossip originating in the SNLU section of the methane wards. How anything of a scandalous nature could occur between two intelligent crystalline life-forms living at minus one hundred and fifty degrees Centigrade was something which puzzled Conway, or for that matter why their moral shortcomings were of such interest to a warm-blooded oxygen-breather. Unless this was one of the reasons why Senior Physician Mannen was so far on the way to becoming a Diagnostician himself.

Or had been.

If Mannen was assisting Thornnastor, the Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology and as such the hospital's senior Diagnostician, in one of that august being's projects then Mannen *had* to be in good physical and mental shape—Diagnosticians were terribly choosy about their assistants. And everything the Chief Psychologist had told him pointed the same way. But then what *had* got into Mannen two days ago to make him behave as he had?

As the others talked Conway began to realize that the sort of evidence he needed might be difficult to gather. The questions he had to ask would require tact and some sort of theory to explain his line of investigation. His mind was still miles away when Mannen and Prilicla began rising to go. As they were leaving the table Conway moved closer to Prilicla and asked softly, "Any echoes, Doctor?"

"Nothing," said Prilicla, "nothing at all."

Within seconds their places at the table were taken by three Kelgians who draped their long, silvery, caterpillar bodies over the backs of the ELNT chairs so that their for-

ward manipulators hung over the table at a comfortable distance for eating. One of the three was Naydrad, the Charge Nurse on Mannen's theatre staff. Conway excused himself to his friends and returned quickly to the table.

When he had finished talking it was Naydrad who spoke first. It said, "We would like to help, sir, but this is an unusual request. It involves, at very least, the wholesale betrayal of confidence. . . ."

"We don't want names," said Conway urgently. "The mistakes are required for statistical purposes only and no disciplinary action will be taken. This investigation is unofficial, an idea of my own. Its only purpose is to help Doctor Mannen."

They were all keen to help their Chief, naturally, and Conway went on, "To summarize, if we accept that Senior Physician Mannen is incapable of gross professional misconduct—which we all do—then we must assume that his error was caused by an outside influence. Since there is strong evidence that the Doctor was mentally stable and free from all disease or physical malfunction it follows that we are looking for an outside influence—or more accurately, indications of the presence of an outside influence—which may be non-physical.

"Mistakes by a person in authority are more noticeable, and serious, than those of a subordinate," Conway went on, "but if these errors are being caused by an outside agency they should not be confined only to senior staff, and it is here that we need data. There are bound to be mistakes, especially among trainee staff—we all realize this. What we must know is whether there has been an overall or local increase in the number of these minor errors and, if so, exactly where and when they occurred."

"Is this matter to be kept confidential?" one of the Kelgians asked.

Conway nearly choked at the idea of anything being

kept confidential in this place, but the sarcasm was, fortunately, filtered out of his tone by the process of Translation.

“The more people gathering data on this the better,” he said. “Just use your discretion. . . .”

A few minutes later he was at another table saying much the same thing, then another and another. He would be late back to his wards today, but fortunately he had a couple of very good assistants—the type who just loved it when they had a chance to show how well they could do without him.

During the remainder of the day there was no great response, nor had he expected any, but on the second day nursing staff of all shapes and species began approaching him with elaborate secrecy to tell of incidents which invariably had happened to a third party. Conway noted times and places carefully while showing no curiosity whatever regarding the identities of the persons concerned. Then on the morning of the third day Mannen sought him out during his rounds.

“You’re really working at this thing, aren’t you, Conway,” Mannen said harshly, then added, “I’m grateful. Loyalty is nice even when it’s misplaced. But I wish you would stop. You’re heading for serious trouble.”

Conway said, “You’re the one in trouble, Doctor, not me.”

“That’s what you think,” said Mannen gruffly. “I’ve just come from O’Mara’s office. He wants to see you. Forthwith.”

A few minutes later Conway was being waved into the inner sanctum by one of O’Mara’s assistants, who was trying hard to warn him of impending doom with his eyebrows while commiserating with him by turning down the corners of his mouth. The combination of expressions looked so ridiculous that Conway found himself inside be-



fore he realized it, facing a very angry O'Mara with what must have been a stupid grin on his face.

The psychologist stabbed a finger in the direction of the least comfortable chair and shouted, "What the blazes do you mean by infesting the hospital with a disembodied intelligence?"

"What . . . ?" began Conway.

". . . Are you trying to make a fool of yourself?" O'Mara stormed on, disregarding him. "Or make a fool out of *me*? Don't interrupt! Granted you're the youngest Senior in the place and your colleagues—none of whom specialize in applied psychology, let me add—think highly of you. But such idiotic and irresponsible behaviour is worthy only of a patient in the psychiatric wards!

"Junior staff discipline is going to pot, thanks to you," O'Mara went on, a little more quietly. "It is now becoming the done thing to make mistakes! Practically every Charge Nurse in the place is screaming for me—me!—to get rid of the thing! All you did was invent this invisible, undetectable, insubstantial monster—apparently the job of getting rid of it is the responsibility of the Chief Psychologist!"

O'Mara paused to catch his breath, and when he continued his tone had become quiet and almost polite. He said, "And don't think that you are fooling anyone. Boiled down to its simplest terms, you are hoping that if enough other mistakes are made your friend's will pass relatively unnoticed. And stop opening and closing your mouth—your turn to talk will come! One of the aspects of this whole situation which really troubles me is that I share responsibility for it in that I gave you an insoluble problem hoping that you might attack it from a new angle—an angle which might give a partial solution, enough to let our friend off the hook. Instead you created a new and perhaps worse problem!

"I may have exaggerated things a little because of excus-

able annoyance, Doctor," O'Mara went on quietly, "but the fact remains that you may be in serious trouble over this business. I don't believe that the nursing staff will deliberately make mistakes—at least, not of the order which would endanger their patients. But *any* relaxation of standards is dangerous, obviously. Do you begin to see what you've been doing, Doctor?"

"Yes, sir," said Conway.

"I see that you do," O'Mara said with uncharacteristic mildness. "And now I would like to know why you did it. Well, Doctor?"

Conway took his time about answering. This was not the first time he had left the Chief Psychologist's office with his ego singed around the edges, but this time it looked serious. The generally held opinion was that when O'Mara was not unduly concerned over, or in some cases when he actually liked an individual, the psychologist felt able to relax with them and be his bad-tempered, obnoxious self, but when O'Mara became quiet and polite and not at all sarcastic, when he began treating a person as a patient rather than a colleague in other words, that person was in trouble up to his or its neck.

Finally, Conway said, "At first it was simply a story to explain why I was being so nosey, sir. Nurses don't tell tales and it might have looked as if that was what I wanted them to do. All I did was suggest that as Doctor Mannen was in all respects fit, outside physical agencies such as e-bacteria or parasites and the like were ruled out because of the thoroughness of our aseptic procedures. You, sir, had already reassured us regarding his mental condition. I postulated an . . . an outside, non-material cause which might or might not be consciously directed.

"I haven't anything so definite as a theory about it," Conway went on quickly. "Nor did I mention disembodied intelligences to anyone, but something odd happened in

that theatre, and not only during the time of Mannen's operation. . . ."

He described the echo effect Prilicla had detected while monitoring Mannen's emotional radiation, and the similar effect when Naydrad had had the accident with the knife. There was also the later incident of the Melfan intern whose sprayer wouldn't spray—their mandibles weren't suited to surgical gloves so that they painted them with plastic before an op. When the intern had tried to use the sprayer it oozed what the Melfan described as metallic porridge. Later the sprayer in question could not be found. Perhaps it had never existed. And there were other peculiar incidents. Mistakes which seemed a little too simple for trained staff to make—errors in instrument counts, dropping things, and all seeming to involve a certain amount of temporary mental confusion and perhaps outright hallucination.

" . . . So far there has not been enough to make a statistically meaningful sample," Conway went on, "but they are enough to make me curious. I'd give you their names if I wasn't sworn to keep them confidential, because I think you would be interested in the way they describe some of these incidents."

"Possibly, Doctor," said O'Mara coldly. "On the other hand I might not want to lend my professional support to a figment of your imagination by investigating such trivia. As for the near-accidents with scalpels and the other mistakes, it is my opinion that some people are lucky, others a little bit stupid at times, while others are fond of pulling other peoples' legs. Well, Doctor?"

Conway took a firmer grip on the arms of his chair and said doggedly, "The dropped scalpel was an FROB Type Six, a very heavy, unbalanced instrument. Even if it had struck handle first it would have spun into Naydrad's side a few inches below the point of impact and caused a deep and

serious wound—if the blade had any actual physical existence at all! This is something I'm beginning to doubt. That is why I think we should widen the scope of this investigation. May I have permission to see Colonel Skempton and if necessary contact the Corps survey people, to check on the origins of recent arrivals?"

The expected explosion did not come. Instead O'Mara's voice sounded almost sympathetic as he said, "I cannot decide whether you are honestly convinced that you're on to something or simply that you've gone too far to back down without looking ridiculous. So far as I'm concerned you couldn't look any more ridiculous at the moment. You should not be afraid to admit you were wrong, Doctor, and begin repairing some of the damage to discipline your irresponsibility has caused."

O'Mara waited precisely ten seconds for Conway's reply, then he said, "Very well, Doctor. See the Colonel. And tell Prilicla I'm rearranging its schedule—it may be helpful to have your emotional echo-detector available at all times. Since you insist on making a fool of yourself you might as well do it properly. Afterwards—well, we will be very sorry to see Mannen go, and in all honesty I suppose I must say the same about you. Both of you are likely to be on the same ship out. . . ."

A few seconds later he was dismissed very quietly, and Conway knew that he was in trouble up to his neck.

### THREE

MANNEN himself had accused Conway of misguided loyalty and now O'Mara had suggested that his present stand was the result of not wanting to admit to a mistake. He had been given an out, which he had refused to take, and now the thought of service in the smaller multi-environment hospital, or even a planet-side establishment where the

arrival of an e-t patient would be considered a major event, was beginning to come home to him. It gave him an unpleasantly gone feeling in the abdominal area. Maybe he was basing his theory on too little evidence and refusing to admit it. Maybe the odd errors were part of an entirely different puzzle, with no connection whatever with Manen's trouble. As he strode along the corridors, taking evading action or being evaded every few yards, the impulse grew in him to rush back to O'Mara, say yes to everything, apologize abjectedly and promise to be a good boy. But by the time he was ready to give into it he was outside Colonel Skempton's door.

Sector General was supplied and to a large extent maintained by the Monitor Corps, which was the Federation's executive and law-enforcement arm. As the senior Corps officer in the hospital, Colonel Skempton handled traffic to and from the hospital in addition to a horde of other administrative details. It was said that the top of his desk had never been visible since the day it arrived. When Conway was shown in he looked up, said "Good morning," looked down at his desk and said, "Ten minutes. . . ."

It took much longer than ten minutes. Conway was interested in traffic from odd points of origin, or ships which had called at such places. He wanted data on the level of technology, medical science and physiological classification of their inhabitants—especially if the psychological sciences or psionics were well-developed or if the incidence of mental illness was unusually high. Skempton began excavating among the papers on his desk.

But the supply ship, ambulances and ships pressed into emergency service as ambulances which had arrived during the past few weeks had originated from Federation worlds which were well known and medically innocuous. All except one, that was—the Cultural Contact and Survey vessel *Descartes*. It had landed, very briefly, on a most unusual

planet. She was on the ground, if it could be called that, for only a few minutes. None of the crew had left the ship, the air-locks had remained sealed and the samples of air, water and surface material were drawn in, analysed and declared interesting but harmless. The pathology department of the hospital had made a more thorough analysis and had had the same thing to say. *Descartes* had called briefly to leave the samples and a patient . . .

“A *patient!*” Conway almost shouted when the Colonel reached that point in his report. Skempton would not need an empathic faculty to know what he was thinking.

“Yes, Doctor, but don’t get your hopes up,” said the Colonel. “He had nothing more exotic than a broken leg. And despite the fact e-t bugs find it impossible to live on beings of another species, a fact which simplifies the practice of extra-terrestrial medicine no end, ship medics are constantly on the lookout for the exception which is supposed to prove the rule. In short, he was suffering only from a broken leg.”

“I’d like to see him anyway,” said Conway.

“Level Two-eighty-three, Ward Four, name of Lieutenant Harrison,” said Skempton. “Don’t slam the door.”

But the meeting with Lieutenant Harrison had to wait until late that evening, because Prilicla’s schedule needed time to rearrange and Conway himself had duties other than the search for hypothetical disembodied intelligences. The delay, however, was fortunate because much more information was made available to him, gathered during rounds and at mealtimes, even though the data was such that he did not quite know what to do with it.

The number of boops, errors and mistakes was surprising, he suspected, only because he had not interested himself in such things before now. Even so, the silly, stupid mistakes he encountered, especially among the highly-trained and responsible OR staff, were definitely uncharacteristic, he

thought. And they did not form the sort of pattern he had expected. A plot of times and places should have shown an early focal point of this hypothetical mental contagion becoming more widespread as the disease progressed. Instead the pattern indicated a single focus moving within a certain circumscribed area—the Hudlar theatre and its immediate surroundings. Whatever the thing was, if there was anything there at all, it was behaving like a single entity rather than a disease.

“... Which is ridiculous!” Conway protested. “Even I didn’t seriously believe in a disembodied intelligence—it was a working hypothesis only. I’m not *that* stupid!”

He had been filling Prilicla in on the latest developments while they were on the way to see the Lieutenant. The empath kept pace with him along the ceiling for a few minutes in silence, then said inevitably, “I agree.”

Conway would have preferred some constructive objections for a change, so he did not speak again until they had reached 283-Four. This was a small private ward off a larger set compartment and the Lieutenant seemed glad to see them. He looked, and Prilicla said that he felt, bored.

“Apart from some temporary structural damage you are in very good shape, Lieutenant,” Conway began, just in case Harrison was worried by the presence of two Senior Physicians at his bed. “What we would like to talk about is the events leading up to your accident. If you wouldn’t mind, that is.”

“Not at all,” said the Lieutenant. “Where do you want me to start? With the landing, or before that?”

“If you were to tell us a little about the planet itself first,” suggested Conway.

The Lieutenant nodded and moved his headrest to a more comfortable angle for conversation, then began, “It was a weirdie. We had been observing it for a long time from orbit. . . .”

Christened Meatball because Galactic Survey Number NT117/136/3 was verbally cumbersome and because *Descartes'* Captain steadfastly refused the honour of having such an odd and distasteful place named after him, the place had to be seen to be believed. It was the first planet in Harrison's experience which needed to be X-rayed as well as mapped. Its oceans were a thick, living soup, its inland seas and lakes a turgid, heaving stew and its land masses, or what on a normal planet would correspond to a land surface, were a multi-layer carpet of slow-moving animal life.

In places there were mineral outcroppings to which clung forms of vegetable life, and other forms of vegetation lived in the water or rooted themselves temporarily on the "land" surface, its purpose apparently the assimilation of wastes. But generally the planet was covered by a thick layer of animal life, much of which seemed to be floating in the seas, several miles deep in places. This layer was subdivided into strata which crawled and slipped and fought their way through each other to necessary sub-surface minerals or top-surface vegetation, or simply to choke off and cannibalize each other. In the course of this slow, gargantuan conflict these living geologic strata heaved themselves into hills and valleys, altering the shape of lakes and coastlines and changing the topography of the planet from week to week.

The data gathered by *Descartes'* probes led to much theorizing and discussion before the landing area was chosen.

If the planet possessed intelligent life at all it would take one of two forms, it was generally thought. The first type would be large, one of the tremendous living carpets which had managed to anchor itself to the underlying rock for mineral supplies and with an extension towards the air and water of the surface for the purpose of waste elimination. It should also possess a means of defence around its perimeter



to keep less intelligent strata from insinuating themselves between it and the rock below or from slipping over it and choking it off from the air and water. They were assuming here that real intelligence in a massive organism required a fixed base from which to grow.

The second possibility might be a very small life-form. It would be smooth-skinned and flexible so as to enable it to slip between the interfaces of the living strata animals on the way to and from the surface, and have the ability to withstand pressure and to move fast enough to escape the ingestive processes of the larger types, whose movements and metabolism were slow. This second type would be large enough to live off the smaller animal and vegetable matter of the seas and their fixed base, if they needed one, might be a cave or tunnel system in the underlying rock.

If either life-form existed on the planet it was unlikely that they would possess an advanced technology. Certainly the larger, complex type of industrial machinery was impossible on this heaving world. Tools, if they developed them at all, would be small, handy and unspecialized, but the chances were that it would be a very primitive society with no roots.

“They might be strong in the philosophical sciences,” Conway broke in at that point. Prilicla moved closer, trembling with Conway’s excitement as well as its own.

Harrison shrugged. “We had a Cinruskin with us,” he said, looking at Prilicla. “It reported no indication of the more subtle type of emoting usually radiated by intelligent life, but the aura of hunger and raw, animal ferocity emanating from the whole planet was such that the empath had to be kept under sedation most of the time. This background radiation might well have concealed intelligent emoting. The proportion of intelligent life on any given world is only a small proportion of its total life . . .”

“I see,” said Conway, disappointed. “How about the landing?”

The Captain had chosen a sort of island whose raised central area was composed of some thick, dry, leathery material. The stuff looked dead and insensitive so that the ship's tail-flare should not cause pain to any life in the area, intelligent or otherwise. They landed without incident and for perhaps ten minutes nothing happened. Then gradually the leathery surface below them began to sag, but slowly and evenly so that the ship's gyros had no trouble keeping them level. They began to sink into what was at first a shallow depression and then a low-walled crater. The lips of the crater curled suddenly towards them, pressing against the landing legs. The legs were designed to retract telescopically, not fold towards the centre line of the ship. The extension mechanism and leg housings began to give, with a noise like somebody tearing sheet metal into small pieces.

Then somebody or something began throwing rocks. To Harrison it had sounded almost as if *Descartes* was sitting atop a volcano in process of erupting. The din was unbelievable and the only way to transmit orders was through the suit radios with the volume turned 'way up. Harrison was ordered to make a quick damage check of the stern prior to take-off . . .

“ . . . I was between the inner and outer skin close to the venturi orifice level when I found the hole,” the Lieutenant went on quickly. “It was about three inches across and when I started to patch it I found the edges to be slightly magnetized. Before I could finish the Captain decided to take off at once. The crater wall was threatening to trap one of the landing legs. He *did* give us five seconds warning. . . .”

Harrison paused at that point as if to clarify something in his own mind. He said carefully, “There wasn't much danger in this, you understand. We were taking off at about

one-and-a-half Gs because we weren't sure whether the crater was a manifestation of intelligence, even hostile intelligence, or the involuntary movement of some dirty great beastie closing its mouth, so we wanted to avoid unnecessary destruction in the area. If I hung on to a couple of supporting struts and had somewhere to brace my feet I'd be all right. But long-duration suits are awkward and five seconds isn't long. I had two good hand-holds and was looking for a bracket which should have been there to brace my foot. Then I saw it, and actually felt my boot touch it, but . . . but . . ."

"You were confused and misjudged the distance," Conway finished for him softly. "Or perhaps you simply imagined it was there."

On the other side of the Lieutenant, Prilicla began to tremble again. It said, "I'm sorry, Doctor. No echoes."

"I didn't expect any," said Conway. "It must have moved on by now."

Harrison looked from one to the other, his expression puzzled and a little hurt. He said, "Maybe I did imagine it was there. Anyhow, it didn't hold me and I fell. The landing leg on my side tore free during the take-off and the wreckage of its housing plugged the interskin space so tightly that I couldn't get out. The engine-room control lines passed too close to me for them to risk cutting me out, and our medic said it would be better to come here and let your heavy rescue people cut a way in. We were coming here with the samples anyway."

Conway looked quickly at Prilicla, then said, "At any time during the trip back did your Cinruskin empath monitor your emotional radiation?"

Harrison shook his head. "There was no need—I was having pain despite the suit's medication and it would have been unpleasant for an empath. Nobody could get within yards of me. . . ."

The Lieutenant paused, then in the tone of one who wished to change an unpleasant subject he said brightly, "We'll send down an unmanned ship next, packed with communications equipment. If that thing is just a big mouth connected with a bigger belly and with no brains at all, at worst we'll lose a drone and it will get indigestion. But if it is intelligent or if there are smaller intelligent beings on the planet who maybe use, or have trained, the bigger beasties to serve them—that is a strong possibility, our cultural contact people say—then they are bound to be curious and try to communicate. . . ."

"The imagination boggles," said Conway, smiling. "At the present moment I'm trying hard not to think about the medical problems a beastie the size of a sub-continent would have. But to return to the here and now, Lieutenant Harrison, we are both very much obliged for the information you've given us, and we hope you won't mind if we come again to——"

"Any time," said Harrison. "Glad to help. You see, most of the nurses here have mandibles or tentacles or too many feet . . . No offence, Doctor Prilicla. . . ."

"None taken," said Prilicla.

". . . And my ideas regarding ministering angels are rather old-fashioned," he ended as they turned to go. His expression looked decidedly woebegone.

In the corridor Conway called Nurse Murchison's quarters. By the time he had finished explaining what he wanted her to do she was fully awake.

"I'm on duty in two hours and don't have any free time for another six," she said, yawning. "And normally I do not spend my precious time off doing a Mata Hari on lonely patients. But if this one has information which might help Doctor Mannen I don't mind at all. I'd do anything for that man."

"How about *me*?"

“For you, almost anything. ‘Bye.’”

Conway racked the handset and said to Prilicla, “*Something* gained entrance to that ship. Harrison suffered the same type of mild hallucination or mental confusion that the OR staff experienced. But I keep thinking about that hole in the outer skin—a disembodied intelligence shouldn’t have to make a hole to get in. And those rocks hitting the stern. Suppose this was only a side-effect of the major, non-material influence—a disturbance analogous to the poltergeist phenomena. Where does that leave us?”

Prilicla didn’t know.

“I’ll probably regret it,” said Conway, “but I think I’ll call O’Mara . . .”

But it was the Chief Psychologist who did all the talking at first. Mannen had just left his office after having told O’Mara that the Hudlar patient’s condition had deteriorated suddenly, necessitating a second operation not later than noon tomorrow. The Senior Physician, it had been obvious, held no hopes for the patient’s survival, but had said that what little chance it did have would be fractionally increased if they operated quickly.

O’Mara ended, “This doesn’t give you much time to prove your theory, Conway. Now, what did you want to say to me?”

The news about Mannen had put Conway badly off his stride, so that he was woefully aware that his report on the Meatball incident and his ideas regarding it sounded weak and, what was worse where O’Mara was concerned, incoherent. The psychologist had little patience with people who did not think clearly and say exactly what they meant.

“. . . And the whole affair is so peculiar,” he concluded awkwardly, “that I’m almost convinced now that the Meatball business has nothing to do with Mannen’s trouble, except that . . .”

“Conway!” said O’Mara sharply. “You’re talking in circles, dithering! You must realize that if two peculiar events occur with only a small separation in time then the probability is high that they have a common cause. I don’t mind too much if your theory is downright ridiculous—at least you arrived at it by a tortuous form of logic—but I *do* mind you ceasing to think at all. Being wrong, Doctor, is infinitely preferable to being stupid!”

For a few seconds Conway breathed heavily through his nose, trying to control his anger enough to reply. But O’Mara saved him the trouble by breaking the connection.

“He was not very polite to you, friend Conway,” said Prilicla. “Towards the end he sounded quite bad-tempered. This is a significant improvement over his feelings for you this morning . . .”

Conway laughed in spite of himself. He said, “One of these days you will forget to say the right thing, Doctor, and everyone in the hospital will drop dead!”

The galling part of the whole affair was that they did not know what exactly they were looking for, and now their time for finding it had been cut in half. All they could do was to continue gathering information and hope that something would emerge from it. But even the questions sounded nonsensical—variations of “Have you done or omitted to do something during the past few days which might lead you to suspect that something was influencing your mind?” They were loosely worded, silly, almost meaningless questions, but they went on asking them until Prilicla’s pencil-thin legs were rubbery with fatigue—the empath’s stamina was proportional to its strength, which was practically non-existent—and it had to retire. Doggedly Conway went on asking them, feeling more tired, angrier and more stupid with every hour which passed.

Deliberately he refrained from contacting Mannen again—the Doctor at that time would, if anything, be a de-

moralizing influence. He called Skempton to ask if *Descartes'* medical officer had made a report, and was sworn at horribly because it was the middle of the Colonel's night. But he did find out that the Chief Psychologist had called seeking the same information, saying that he preferred his facts to come from the official report rather than through an emotionally involved Doctor with a disembodied axe to grind. Then the totally unexpected happened in that Conway's sources of information went suddenly dry on him.

Apparently O'Mara was bringing in certain operating room staff for their periodic testing before their psych-tests were due, and most of them had been people who had been very helpful about admitting their mistakes to Conway. It was not suggested in so many words that Conway had broken confidence and blabbed to O'Mara, but at the same time nobody would talk about anything.

Conway felt weary and discouraged and stupid, but mostly weary. It was too near breakfast time, however, to go to bed.

#### FOUR

AFTER his rounds Conway had an early lunch with Mannen and Prilicla, then accompanied the doctor to O'Mara's office while the empath left for the Hudlar theatre to monitor the emotional radiation of the staff during their preparations. The Chief Psychologist looked a little tired, which was unusual, and rather grumpy, which was usually a good sign.

"Are you assisting Senior Physician Mannen in this operation, Doctor?"

"No, sir, observing," Conway replied. "But from inside the theatre. If anything funny is going on—I mean, the Hudlar tape might confuse me and I want to be as alert as possible——"

"Alert, he says." O'Mara's tone was scathing. "You look

asleep on your feet.” To Mannen he said, “You will be relieved to know that I, too, am beginning to suspect something funny is going on, and this time I’ll be observing from the observation blister. And now if you’ll lie on the couch, Mannen, I’ll give you the Hudlar tape myself. . . .”

Mannen sat on the edge of the low couch. His knees were nearly level with his chin and he had half-folded his arms across his chest so that his posture was almost a foetal position, sitting up. When he spoke his tone was pleading, desperate. He said, “Look. I’ve worked with empathes and telepaths before. Empathes receive but do not project emotion, and telepaths can only communicate with other telepaths of their own species—they’ve tried occasionally, but all they did was give me a slight mental itch. But that day in the theatre I was in complete mental control of myself—I am absolutely sure of this! Yet you all keep trying to tell me that something unsubstantial, invisible and undetectable influenced my judgment. It would be much simpler if you admitted that this thing you’re looking for is non-existent as well, but you’re all too damned——”

“Excuse me,” said O’Mara, pushing Mannen backwards and lowering the massive helmet into position. He spent a few minutes positioning the electrodes, then switched on. Mannen’s eyes began to glaze as the memories and experience of one of the greatest Hudlar physicians who had ever lived flooded into his brain.

Just before he lost consciousness completely he muttered, “My trouble is that no matter what I say or do, you believe only the best about me. . . .”

Two hours later they were in the theatre. Mannen wore a heavy operating suit and Conway a lighter type which relied only on its gravity neutralizers for protection. The G-plates under the floor were set for a pull of five gravities, the Hudlar normal, but the pressure was only a fraction higher than the Earth norm—Hudlars were not unduly



bothered by low pressure and could, in fact, work quite without protection in the vacuum of space. But if something went disastrously wrong and the patient needed full, home-planet pressure, Conway would have to leave in a hurry. Conway had a direct line to Prilicla and O'Mara in the observation blister and another, and completely separate, channel linking him with Mannen and the operating staff.

O'Mara's voice crackled suddenly in his ear-piece. "Prilicla is getting emotional echoes, Doctor. Also the radiation indicative of a minor error having been made—minor level anxiety and confusion . . ."

"Yehudi is here," said Conway softly.

"What?"

"The little man who isn't there," Conway replied, and went on, misquoting slightly, "The little man upon the stair. He isn't there again today, Oh, gee I wish he'd go away. . . ."

O'Mara grunted, then said, "Despite what I told Mannen in my office there is still no real proof that anything untoward is happening. My remarks then were designed to help both Doctor and patient by bolstering Mannen's weakening self-confidence—something which they failed to do. So it would be better for Mannen and yourself if your little man came in and introduced himself."

The patient was brought in at that moment and transferred to the table. Mannen's hands, projecting from the heavy arms of the suit, were encased only in thin, transparent plastic, but should full Hudlar pressure become necessary he could snap on heavy gauntlets within a few seconds. But to open a Hudlar at all in these conditions was to cause an immediate decompression, so that the subsequent procedures had to be done quickly.

Physiological classification FROB, the Hudlar was a low, squat, immensely powerful being somewhat reminiscent of

an armadillo with a tegument like flexible armour plate. Inside and out the Hudlars were tough—so much so that Hudlar medical science was an almost complete stranger to surgery. If a patient could not be cured by medication very often it could not be cured at all, because surgery on that planet was impracticable if not downright impossible. But in Sector General, where pressure and gravity of any desired combination could be produced at a few minutes notice, Mannen and a few others had been nibbling at the edges of the hitherto impossible.

Conway watched him make a triangular incision in the incredibly tough tegument and clamp back the flap. Immediately a bright yellow, inverted cone of mist flicked into being above the operative field—a fine spray of blood under pressure escaping from the severed capillaries. A nurse quickly interposed a sheet of plastic between the opening and Mannen's visor while another positioned a mirror which gave him an indirect view of the operative field. In four and a half minutes he had controlled the bleeding. He should have done it in two.

Mannen seemed to be reading Conway's mind, because he said, "The first time was faster than this—I was thinking two or three moves ahead, you know how it is. But I found I was making incisions *now* that I shouldn't have made until several seconds later. If it had happened once it would have been bad enough, but five times . . . ! I had to withdraw before I killed the patient there and then.

"And now," he added in a voice thick with self-loathing, "I'm trying to be careful and the result will be the same."

Conway remained silent.

"Such a piddling little growth, too," Mannen went on. "So near the surface and a natural for the first attempt at Hudlar surgery. Simply cut away the growth, encase the three severed blood vessels in the area with plastic tubing, and the patient's blood pressure and our special clamps

should make a perfect seal until the veins regenerate in a few months. But *this . . . !* Have you ever seen such a botched-up mess . . . !”

More than half of the growth, a greyish, spongy mass which seemed to be more than half vegetable, remained in position. Five major blood vessels in the area had been severed—two of necessity, the rest by “accident”—and encased in tubing. But these lengths of artificial vein were too short or insecurely clamped—or perhaps the movement of the heart had pulled one of the vessels partially out of its tube. The only thing which had saved the patient’s life had been Mannen’s insistence that it was not to be allowed to regain consciousness since the first operation. The slightest physical effort could have pulled one of those vessels free of its tubing and caused a massive internal haemorrhage and, with the tremendous pulse-rate and pressure of the Hudlar species, death within a few minutes.

On O’Mara’s channel Conway said harshly, “Any echoes? Anything at all?”

“Nothing,” said O’Mara.

“This is ridiculous!” Conway burst out. “If there is an intelligence, disembodied or otherwise, it should possess the attributes—curiosity, the ability to use tools, and so on. Now this hospital is a large and interesting place, with no barriers we know of to the movements of the entity we are trying to find. Why then had it stayed in one place? Why didn’t it go prowling round *Descartes*? What makes it stay in this area? Is it frightened, or stupid, or disembodied even?”

“There is little likelihood of finding a complex technology on Meatball,” Conway went on quickly, “but a good chance of them being well advanced in the philosophical sciences. If something physical boarded *Descartes*, there is a definite lower limit to the mass of an intelligent being. . . .”

“If you want to ask questions of anyone, Doctor,”

O'Mara said quietly, "I will throw a little of my weight behind them. But there isn't much time."

Conway thought for a moment, then said, "Thank you, sir. I'd like you to get Murchison for me. She's in——"

"At a time like this," said O'Mara in a dangerous voice, "he wants to call his girl-friend . . ."

"She's with Harrison at the moment," said Conway. "I want to establish a physical connection between the Lieutenant and this theatre, even though he has never been within fifty levels of the place. Would you ask her to ask him . . ."

It was a long, involved, many-sided question, designed to tell him how a small, intelligent life-form had reached this area without detection. It was also a stupid question because any intelligence which affected the minds of Earth-humans and e-ts alike could not have remained undetected with an empath like Prilicla around. Which left him back where he started with a non-material something which refused, or was incapable of, moving beyond the environs of the theatre.

"Harrison says he had lots of delusions during the trip back," O'Mara's voice sounded suddenly. "He says the ship's doctor said this was normal considering all the dope he had in him. He also says he was completely out when he arrived here and doesn't know how or where he came in. And now I suppose we contact Reception, Doctor. I'm patching you in, just in case I ask the wrong questions. . . ."

Seconds later a slow, flat, translated voice which could have belonged to anything said, "Lieutenant Harrison was not processed in the usual way. Being a Corpsman whose medical background was known in detail he was admitted to Service Lock Fifteen into the charge of Major Edwards. . . ."

Edwards was not available, but his office promised O'Mara that they would have him in a few minutes.

All at once Conway felt like giving up. Lock Fifteen was too far away—a difficult, complicated journey involving three major changes of environment. For their hypothetical invader, who was also a stranger to the hospital, to find its way to this theatre would have necessitated it taking mental control of someone and being carried. But if that was the case Prilicla would have detected its presence. Prilicla could detect *anything* which thought—from the smallest insect to the slow emanations of a mind deeply and totally unconscious. No living thing could shut its mind down completely and still be alive.

Which meant that the invader might not be alive!

A few feet distant Mannen had signalled for a nurse to stand by the pressure cock. A sudden return to Hudlar normal pressure would diminish the violence of any bleeding which might occur, but it would also make it impossible for Mannen to operate without heavy gloves. Not only that, the pressure increase would cause the operative field to subside within the opening, where movement transmitted from the nearby heart would make delicate work impossible. At present, despite the danger of a wrong incision, the complex of blood vessels was distended, separate and relatively motionless.

Suddenly it happened. Bright yellow blood spurted out, so violently that it hit Mannen's visor with an audible slap. Driven by the patient's enormous blood-pressure and pulse rate the severed vein whipped about like a miniature unheld hose-pipe. Mannen got to it, lost it, tried again. The spurting became a thin, wavering spray and stopped. The nurse at the pressure cock relaxed visibly while the one at Mannen's side cleaned his visor.

Mannen moved back slightly while the field was sucked clear. Through the visor his eyes glittered oddly in the sweating white mask of his face. Time was important now.

Hudlars were tough, but there were limits—they could not stand decompression indefinitely. There would be a gradual movement of body fluid towards the opening in the tegument, a strain on vital organs in the vicinity and an even greater increase in blood pressure. To be successful the operation could not last for much more than thirty minutes and more than half the time had gone merely in opening up the seat of the trouble. Even if the growth was removed, its removal entailed damage to underlying blood vessels which had to be repaired with great care before Mannen withdrew.

They all knew that speed was essential, but to Conway it seemed suddenly as if he was watching a film which was steadily being speeded up. Mannen's hands were moving faster than Conway had ever seen them move before. And faster still. . . .

"I don't like this," said O'Mara harshly. "It looks like he's regained his confidence, but more likely that he's ceased caring—about himself, that is. He still cares about the patient, obviously, even though he knows it hasn't much chance. And the tragic thing about it is that it never did have much chance, Thornnastor tells me. If it hadn't been for your hypothetical friend's interference Mannen wouldn't have worried too much about losing this patient—it would have been one of his very few failures. When he made that first slip it wrecked his self-confidence and now he's——"

"Something *made* him slip," said Conway firmly.

"You've tried convincing him of that, with what result?" the psychologist snapped back. He went on, "Prilicla is seriously agitated and its shakes are getting worse by the minute. But Mannen is, or was, a pretty stable type—I don't think he'll crack until after the operation. Though with these serious, dedicated types whose profession is their whole life it's hard to say what might happen."

“Edwards here,” said a new voice. “What is it?”

“Go ahead, Conway,” said the psychologist. “You ask the questions. Right now I’ve other things on my mind.”

The spongy growth had been lifted clear, but a great many small blood vessels had been severed to accomplish this and the job of repairing them would be much more difficult than anything which had gone before. Insinuating the severed ends into the tubing, far enough so that they would not simply squirm out again when circulation was restored, was a difficult, repetitious, nerve-wracking procedure.

There were only eighteen minutes left.

“I remember Harrison well,” the distant Edwards replied when Conway had explained what he wanted to know. “His suit was damaged in the leg section only, so we couldn’t write it off—those things carry a full set of tools and survival gear and are expensive. And naturally we decontaminated it! The regulations expressly state that——”

“It still may have been a carrier of some kind, Major,” Conway said quickly. “How thoroughly did you carry out this decon——”

“Thoroughly,” said the Major, beginning to sound annoyed. “If it was carrying any kind of bug or parasite it is defunct now. The suit together with all its attachments was sterilized with high-pressure steam and irradiated—it went through the same sterilization procedure as your surgical instruments, in fact. Does that satisfy you, Doctor?”

“Yes,” said Conway softly. “Yes indeed.”

He now had the link-up between Meatball and the operating theatre, via Harrison’s suit and the sterilization chamber. But that wasn’t all he had. He had Yehudi!

Beside him Mannen had stopped. The surgeon’s hands were trembling as he said desperately, “I need eight pairs of hands, or instruments that can do eight different operations at once. This isn’t going well, Conway. Not well at all. . . .”

“Don’t do *anything* for a minute, Doctor,” Conway said urgently, then began calling out instructions for the nurses to file past him carrying their instrument trays. O’Mara started shouting to know what was going on, but Conway was concentrating too hard to answer him. Then one of the Kelgian nurses made a noise like a foghorn breathing in, the DBLF equivalent of a shriek of surprise, because suddenly there was a medium-sized box spanner among the forceps on her tray.

“You won’t believe this,” said Conway joyfully as he carried the—thing—to Mannen and placed it in the surgeon’s hands, “but if you’ll just listen for a minute and then do as I tell you . . .”

Mannen was back at work in less than a minute.

Hesitantly at first, but then with growing confidence and speed, he resumed the delicate repair work. Occasionally he whistled through his teeth or swore luridly, but this was normal behaviour for Mannen during a difficult op which was promising to go well. In the observation blister Conway could see the happily scowling, baffled face of the Chief Psychologist and the fragile, spidery body of the empath. Prilicla was still trembling, but very slowly. It was a type of reaction not often seen in a Cinrusskin off its native planet, indicating a nearby source of emotional radiation which was intense and altogether pleasant.

After the operation they had all wanted to question Harrison about Meatball, but before they could do so Conway had first to explain what had happened again to the Lieutenant.

“. . . And while we still have no idea what they look like,” Conway was saying, “we do know that they are highly intelligent and in their own fashion technically advanced. By that I mean they fashion and use tools. . . .”

“Indeed yes,” said Mannen drily, and the thing in his



hand became a metallic sphere, a miniature bust of Beethoven and a set of Tralthan dentures. Since it had become certain that the Hudlar would be another one of Mannen's successes rather than a failure he had begun to regain his sense of humour.

“... But the tool-making stage must have followed a long way after the development of the philosophical sciences,” Conway went on. “The imagination boggles at the conditions in which they evolved, and my guess is that they learned to control their living environment by the exercise of mental force—telepathy, telekinesis and the like and the development of tools came later as a means of saving mental wear and tear. Very probably these tools are not designed for manual use, the natives may not possess hands as we know them. But they have *minds*. . .!”

Under the mental control of its owner the “tool” had cut a way into *Descartes* beside Harrison's station, and during the sudden take-off it had been unable to get back and a new source of mental control, the Lieutenant, had unwittingly taken over. It had become the foothold which Harrison had needed so badly, only to give under his weight because it had not really been part of the ship's structure. When the attachments of Harrison's suit had been sterilized in the same room as the surgical instruments and when a nurse had come looking for a certain instrument for the theatre, it again became what was wanted.

From then on there was confusion over instrument counts and falling scalpels which did not cut and sprayers which behaved oddly indeed, and Mannen had used a knife which had followed his mind instead of his hands, with near-fatal results for the patient. But the second time it happened Mannen knew that he was holding a small, un-specialized, all-purpose tool which was subject to mental as well as manual control, and some of the shapes he had made it take and the things he had made it do would

make Conway remember that operation for the rest of his life.

“... This ... gadget ... is probably of great value to its owner,” Conway finished seriously. “By rights we should return it. But we need it here, many more of them if possible! Your people have got to make contact and set up trade relations. There’s bound to be something we have or can do that they want....”

“I’d give my right arm for one,” said Mannen, then added, grinning, “My right leg, anyway.”

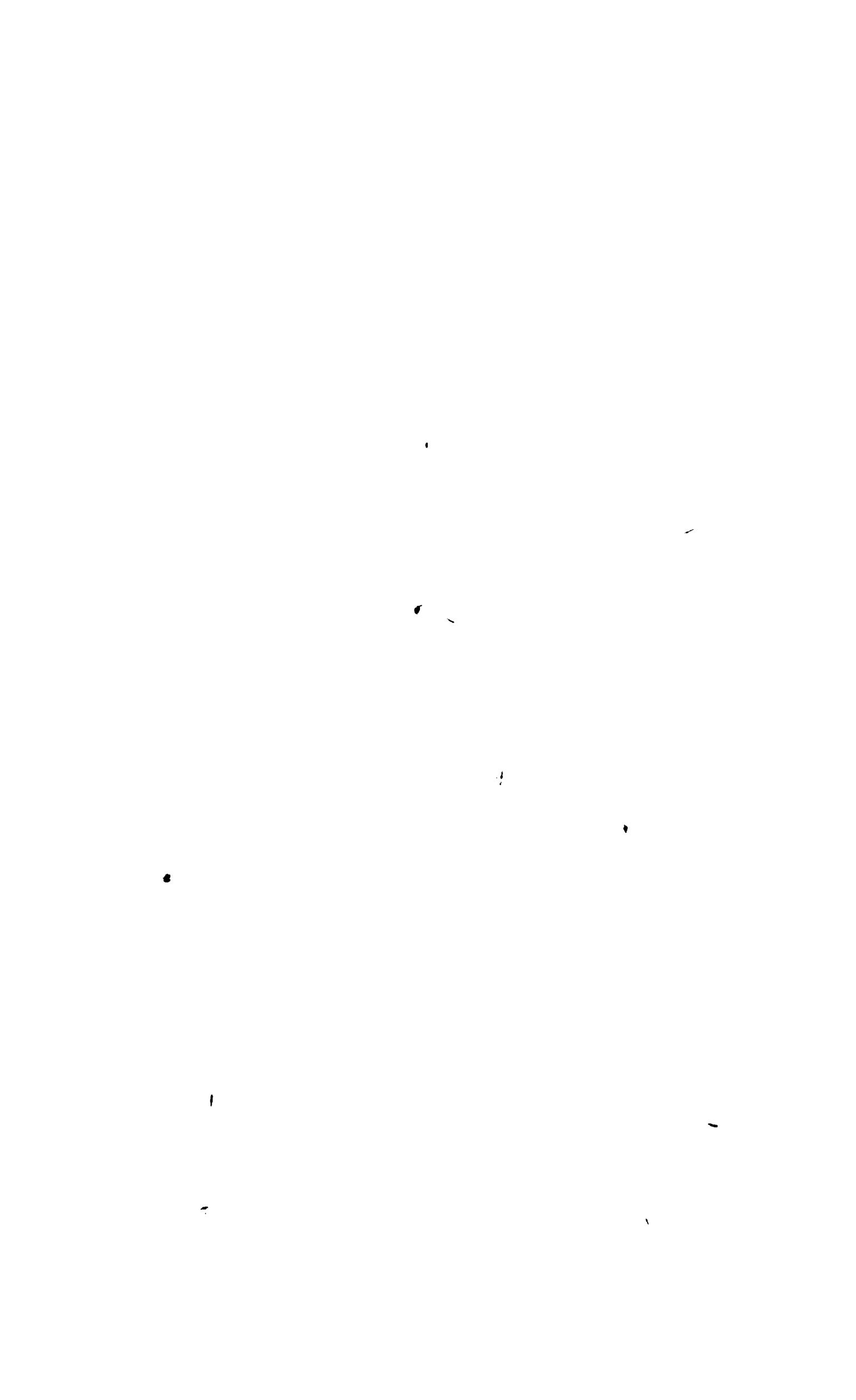
The lieutenant returned his smile. He said, “As I remember the place, Doctor, there was no shortage of raw meat.”

# THE MAN WHO MISSED THE FERRY

*by*

DOUGLAS R. MASON

*There were three ways of crossing the River Mersey —by boat, through the tunnel or by walking across, if you knew how. When Sinclair stepped off the jetty a city was due to be paralysed.*



## THE MAN WHO MISSED THE FERRY

LIGHT and dark oblong panels, on curved walls of a tubular ramp, leading downwards at a gentle slope, materialized in direct vision. The last one in line became clear in meticulous detail. So three-dimensionally clear that Arthur Sinclair stopped and looked at it as though he had never seen anything like it before in his life. A madly supple type, in vibrant black, was completing a *tour en l'air* which, so the legend had it, was helped rather than hindered by her shining white corsetry.

It was fortunate that he was virtually alone on the thoroughfare or he would have caused a thrombosis in this commuter artery. This fact gradually dawned on his still clouded mind and he looked about him to establish where and when it was.

Even as he swivelled his newly won vision in a slow panning shot from left to right, a loaded ferry began to sidle out from the landing stage below. That explained a good deal. He must have been at the tail end of that particular boat load. Any minute now another fleet of buses would converge on the terminal above, and a new surge of people would sweep down to fill the next steamer. He had struck top dead centre, an off-beat pause in the peak rush.

Why, though? In twenty years of daily crossing and re-crossing the river, he had never before hit this precise spot of place and time. How often was that for God's sake? Three hundred and sixty-five, less Sundays and alternate Saturdays. Allow for Leap Years, Bank Holidays, three weeks leave, double and multiply by twenty. The answer

came pat as soon as he framed the question, as though he had fed it to a fast computer. He knew that it was right to the last digit.

There were gaps in what he knew. He was aware that he was Arthur Sinclair, clerk, working in a shipping office under the shadow of the Liver bird—which fabled creature would flap its wings if a virtuous woman ever passed through the polished revolving doors. He did not know, however, where he lived or what had happened prior to this point of the morning.

Presumably he had eaten a meal, caught a bus, shaved? Yes, his chin was smooth and, as he checked it, he caught a faint scent of after-shave lotion from his fingers. But no detail of bathroom, bedroom or breakfast table bulked out the picture. He had simply arrived, grown and matured in the thousand idiosyncratic ways of an individual in front of the cantilever queen.

He went on down the ramp to where a blue-jerseyed deckhand had run out a barrier to make a catchment area for a new boatload. The far shore seemed crystal clear to his freshly opened vision. There seemed no problem about reaching it and he was ready for a walk. Without questioning the decision, his will took over direction and he walked through the barrier and on to the pontoon. It was as though the properties of sea water were unknown to his experience and the grey shifting plain, with sun slanting on it, was a simple pathway to the other side.

The ferry man, busy with a rope, turned to see his disappearing back. His red moon face was, at first, a simple caricature of disbelief that the system should be challenged. His deviant passenger had reached the huge rubber buffers, which cushioned the boats against impact, when he found his voice—a gravelly foghorn of basic Lancashire, overlaid with catarrh and industrial stress. “Hey, Whacker! What do you think I’m bloody well here for?”

Arthur Sinclair turned and looked squarely at the shouting man. The voice cut off as if a tap had been turned. The question was left in the air; unanswered, as indeed it had been found unanswerable down the generations. Then he was going down a short steel ladder to the water's edge, and out on to the water.

It was not until he was fifty yards away and walking without haste for the distant shore, that the man broke away from the spot and lumbered over to the service telephone.

The traffic manager said, "Hogan, you've brought in a bottle again. As God's my judge you'll get your cards this time." There was a pause as Sinclair's diminishing figure came into sight from the office window. "Don't hang about, man. Get the launch out and pick him up. The ferry's in debt already. If you let them walk across we might as well scuttle the fleet."

To his secretary, Beryl, who was standing expectantly in the connecting doorway to her cubbyhole, he said morosely, "Another month, my girl, and you won't be able to turn round in there. Hogan's got a right one this morning. Some ratepayer trying to make a monkey out of us." It was going to be one of those days. Letters riddled with K.I.P.2 tog, and endless fuss about this stunt man on the river. He lifted the phone again and asked, without any enthusiasm, for the Borough Engineer.

It was a longer walk than Sinclair had imagined it would be. He kept a line on the tall block of office buildings. At sea level, it was cool and fresh and there was so much variety in surface conditions that he could not keep up any steady rhythm. There was no sense of surprise that he should be stepping from crest to crest of shorter waves or walking with lengthened strides down the smooth sides of longer rollers. It seemed natural enough. He began to hum "Shen-

andoah"—that shanty "which more than any other contains the swaying sound of the sea".

When the stand-by launch pushed its nose level with him, he motioned it away, as one who declines a lift, but wishes to observe the conventions of courtesy. Hogan dropped speed and fell in, a boat length to the rear, like a swimming coach, carrying hot soup and towels. He was all for a change and recognized, practically, that while he was doing this he couldn't be doing anything else.

An anchored tanker, waiting for clearance before going up to the oil terminal, caused Sinclair to make a small detour. He passed under its raking stern and could see below his feet a brown shimmer of phosphor-bronze screws. As he drew clear, a raucous singing voice, from somewhere amidships, broke off in the middle of a bar and said, "Blacky! Come up here now and tell me that I'm not seeing what I'm surely seeing."

The next scheduled ferry was rapidly catching up. Its passengers had embarked in a time which was a record for the service. Word had spread back that there was some publicity stunt going on. Whatever else it would take the bitter edge off Monday morning's rebirth. When it surged past, fifty yards to starboard, a run of the crowd to the port rail had its broad rubbing strake dipping like a stabilizing fin. Tannoy speakers crackled emotionally as the skipper tried to spread them back round his canting decks.

Those who got a good view saw a small foreshortened figure, in a lightweight grey Burberry. Hatless, a large, gentle face with a livid streak from the left temple to the centre of a high pale forehead. Height was difficult to judge as he went on, sometimes masked to the waist by the shifting level of the sea.

Sinclair looked up and waved. The great congested mass of people ploughing past was curiously silent. To him it was a *tachiste* composition with the units of the girls'



dresses as the building bricks of colour. Then it was ahead and as the crowd milled round the stern it put its spoon counter down with a smack and drew away with a gap of daylight under its blunt and rusting foot.

The ferry Sinclair had missed offloaded on to the pontoons, but no one was inclined to move up the ramps to the terminal buildings. Other ferries were unloading along the frontage and these passengers, too, strung themselves out along the bays of chain link that edged the water front. Word ran back to the bus terminal and crews and sitting tenants streamed out to the observation walks above the terminus.

For three-quarters of a mile the landing stage was lined with faces looking out to sea. A silent throng. Still and silent, straining to see a small distant figure now past the halfway mark and walking deliberately towards them.

Sinclair, looking into the sun, saw them as a number of broad and narrow bands of colour on the grey and black backdrop of the waterfront. He narrowed his eyes against the sunshine, but enjoyed its pleasant warmth. For the first time since he had been aware of his own identity as a person, he felt that there were no complications in being alive. His mind seemed to him to be a unified, outgoing force. The dichotomies of conscious and unconscious, feeling and knowing, good and evil existed no longer. He was integrated with the external and the internal worlds; one single-minded concentrated will.

He still could not, precisely, say what had happened to him in the hours immediately before he had found himself at the ferry terminal; but the rest of his life to this point of time was now clear and plain. It was as though it was spread round him on a flat disc and he was walking out of it, at a tangent, in another dimension.

What there was to see was dull enough. A record of mild nonentity. Forces so balanced in his mind, that they virtu-

ally cancelled each other out. He could see it all now and hear the shrewish, vexed voice of the woman who was his wife, scolding away at one or other of the children, as incapable as he himself of making any break from the circle of circumstance which had conditioned and strait-jacketed them both. Fixed and unchangeable attitudes. Failures of communication.

But now he was free from all that. He understood, with a clarity and certainty that left no room for doubt, that anything he willed to do he could do. The release of forces in his unfettered mind was parallel in psychic terms to the release of physical forces in the atom, when its cohesive bonds were smashed in a cyclotron. It was the power which had been released, occasionally, before, through the ages as an expression of overwhelming faith. It could transform the physical world and suspend its laws.

Nobody was inclined to leave the landing stages. Sinclair went from sight momentarily behind a string of lighters. A quiet murmur ran through the crowd when he reappeared, stepping through the wake as though he had met a rocky patch of ground. Now he was getting near enough for his face to be plain in the sunshine. Medium height, light brown hair, leptosomatic. Even at this distance, he projected a kind of positive tranquillity which stopped all comment.

In the city, confusion was spreading back. Cars parked in line abreast, blocked the main arteries leading up the hill to the city centre. Here, comment was free. "There's a ferry gone down." "A tanker's gone adrift and it's bearing down on the stage." "A liner carved up the pontoons. Blood and guts all over the place. Like the blitz."

Those streaming back, anxious to miss no cry of grief, themselves became silent as they saw the small lonely figure. Tannoys blared an urgent appeal for people to move

back from the floating platforms as they slowly submerged under the gathering weight. Every inch of space was taken, every roof top, every opening to the river had its quota.

Sinclair was a hundred yards away. Then he was twenty, and then he was cut off from view of all but the front row, leaning out from the taut straining chains. They saw him pause, look right and left and begin to climb a series of cut-back hand-holds and those directly above began to give way.

He stepped on to a bridgehead, a small clear space. No one spoke. He walked forward into the crowd with a quick decisive step and was at once anonymous. He made his way through the mass of people and went on into the city.

Police reinforcements struggled with a long jam which stretched back through the two road tunnels to every neighbouring township. For a square mile in the city centre there was no hope of movement. When Sinclair had been visible, the watching crowds had been silent. Something of his quietness had communicated, but further back impatience mounted to hysteria.

In the tunnels, gases from idling engines built up beyond the capacity of the air conditioning plant. Tunnel police, unable to use their cars in the biggest jam in memory, patrolled on foot, ordering a general switch off. Then the gathering silence became an electric, alarming thing. A "growing terror of nothing to think about" as men met their own eyes in driving mirrors. Familiar but unknown. Who am I? Why here? Why in this place at this moment of time under this river?

Released from the focusing compulsion of his presence on the river, the mass on the pontoons swayed into noisy movement. Anchoring chains sucked and lifted uneasily in grey, greasy mud. A rush into the covered terminal ways

and the open square, brought an edge to edge jam, which overflowed into the main arteries.

A sallow youth, in tight navy blue, with a black plastic brief-case, climbed on a car bumper and then on to its roof. He began to make progress, stepping from roof to roof. It was taken up as a method, another brush stroke from Hieronymus Bosch. Car horns blared to warn off the trespassers. A long scream abruptly cut off as a small typist found the struggle too unequal. Ships in the river added a contrapuntal bass.

Sinclair walked on past his office block. He felt the pressure of events as an observer, without involvement. The tide carried him up the hill, beyond the town hall and then, by a quirk, an eddy in the stream took him out of the main flow and left him in a backwater of relative calm in the entrance lobby of a main line railway station. He sat on a high-backed slatted bench seat and looked about him. Out through the arch, the crowd milled past in a frenetic babble of dissonant sound.

A diesel train hissed to a stop in a nearby bay and brought a new tributary in a sudden rush down the platform. Special people at this time. More bowlers, more deliberate *chic*. A sprinkling of students coming in as day travellers to the university.

Men who had used the train for twenty years and never noticed a neighbour, looked about them and were moved to ask each other what was going on. There was a sense that, now the managers had arrived, it should be possible to sort something out.

A tall girl, pale skinned, round faced, with shoulder length, light brown hair in no particular style, separated herself from the ruck and sat down next to Sinclair. Her short, charcoal grey denim frock hitched itself to stability well above knee level and her long, well modelled, pre-

Raphaelite legs appeared to dominate the set. She carried a single book and began to read it, as though she had made the journey to that particular place for that particular purpose.

It was a performance which pleased him and suited his mood. He recognized that the girl was uniquely without curiosity about the turmoil outside. She turned pages with calm concentration as though she was sitting in a library. He looked over at the book and found its title unfamiliar. *The Morphology of Cryptogams.*

Looking closely at the intent profile, Sinclair took pleasure in the texture of its pale clear skin; lips slightly parted showing white regular teeth. A small brown mole marked the highlight of the cheek. A hint of elegance.

Conscious of the scrutiny, Melanie Spencer turned, without haste, to see where she had arrived, demographically, and found that she was looking into eyes which did not stop light at a surface colour, but took her gaze back in depth. She did not see the man's face at all. A voice, which presumably was his, asked, "Cryptogams?"

"Ferns, merely."

Rhizomes, fronds, stripes, pinnae pinnules, sori, sporangia, indusium. Some of the nomenclature of the subject rose unbidden and previously unknown in his mind and he realized that it was by direct transfer from hers.

He said, "You will find it difficult to get across the centre. Is it too early for you to drink coffee?"

It was a form of spoken words to make the invitation overt. But it had already been communicated and accepted at another level. She stood up immediately and they moved out together into the crowd.

They were exactly the same height. Ordinarily he would have been defeated by this large, self-possessed girl; but today he was only aware of having arrived at some unexpected anchorage in the eye of the wind. *Rehmat Mersa.*

Without conversation, without touching each other, they moved quietly through the turbulence; until they were sitting in the brown tranquillity of the Art Gallery's coffee room.

The service staff were full of the incident on the river.

"Did you see it, Miss?"

"What's that?"

"Surely you know what's been happening?"

"Tell me."

"They say a man walked all the way across the river."

Back at the table she said, "It was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

She leaned elbows on the polished wooden table top and rested her chin on both hands. Interlaced fingers, long, smooth and tapering with short oval nails. Presenting him with a left profile. Wings of straight silky hair falling forward to meet firm wrists.

"I would like to have done that."

"Anyone could do it."

She was a doctor's daughter; a medical student herself. From a practice on the outskirts of the city. An industrial estate littered with shattered telephone booths and tenement blocks. Living like Romans in a villa among barely civilized tribes. Father always busy and hardly ever seen, putting in a daily stint of deliveries like a worker on a biological assembly line. Mother dim religious, all platitudes and perfunctory good works.

It was not to be wondered at that she would be surprised by total communication. Her lips were scarcely moving; but the meaning was immediately clear to him. "Most people are not very precisely aware of their own identity. Certainly, they never jump the gap that separates them from anyone else. It is a lifelong search, ending in despair. Why have we been so lucky?"

"We are only relatively lucky at that. There are com-

plications for us. We shall need patience to work it out. I have a whole way of life to change. But there is all the time in the world to do it."

They walked out into the city, unselfconsciously hand in hand. He felt incongruously slight beside the tall, well-built figure of the girl but an aura of power surrounded him which balanced the equation.

Even here there was still severe traffic dislocation. Pavements were overrun by hurrying people. But a path always opened for them and they walked on as if they were in an empty meadow.

A tall block of flats under construction filled the end of a cul-de-sac with ribbed asbestos paling. She said, "Sorry, I've brought you the wrong way. We should have gone down the next."

"It doesn't matter, we can go through if you believe we can."

"If you say we can. I believe it."

He walked without hesitation towards the wall, confidently willing its material to reorganize itself to accommodate them, and she followed through without question.

Below the soaring network of girders they stopped and looked up. Work on this section had been discontinued while other parts were brought to the same level of completion. Steel ladders, laced to cross-beams went up in a cubist's vision of a spiral.

Melanie said, "I've always been neurotic about heights; but I'm sure it would be all right now. Can we go up?"

His hesitation was fractional; but communication between them was so sensitive that she went on quickly, "Not if you don't want to. I don't mind really."

"Certainly we can go up."

He found he was overcoming an irrational reluctance and wondered if any special importance attached to this place. But whatever it was could only be found out by

submission to the scheme of time and she was already going up the first flight. Long legs only just on the elegant side of sturdy. Pale lights in a soft ellipse behind the knees. Vulnerable and defenceless there, in some way that touched his heart. He followed; and they went up in a steady climb, pausing on narrow platforms of roughly lashed planking, where a new ladder joined the chain.

At the sixth she stopped, flushed and breathing hard. Vivid colour in two round patches on her cheeks. She stood straight backed against a scaffolding pole and Sinclair faced her, standing so closely that her quickened breathing was tangible against him. Blue-grey eyes wide open with dilated pupils; characteristic scent a faint amalgam of lavender and eau-de-Cologne.

Now the building was coming to life. There was definite movement in the steel frame under sharp gusts of breeze coming saltily from the river. A swathe of her hair was blown across his cheek and their locked intimate gaze was a bright thread in a warm brown conduit. Hands resting lightly on her waist, he could feel the solidity of bone under soft pneumatic muscle. He moved his hands slowly upwards under her outstretched arms.

When they moved on, the order was reversed; climbing at a slow deliberate pace. Melanie felt lighter than air, without sense of danger or fear. They were coming out now above the roofline of surrounding buildings and the view was opening out. It was as if she had moved into another dimension which had always been there, but until now had been inaccessible.

After platform twelve the sway was more pronounced. At eighteen it was a constant movement. Their staircase went on over the last main floor to the top of a penthouse projection like the command island on the deck of an aircraft carrier. At its summit they came out on to a square twelve-foot platform formed of thick rough planks with



wide gaps, unrailed, with some projecting beams like uneven teeth.

Sinclair leaned down and took her hand to bring her up the final steps and guide her away from the unprotected edge. Then they sat in the centre of their raft and considered the amazing city.

Even in full sunshine, it was cold in this eyrie. He took off his coat and put it round her shoulders. She began to search the pockets as an investigator might do to try to build a profile from a person's effects.

"Item. One packet king size cigarettes. May I have one?"

He took the packet and fished two out.

"Hold the coat against the wind."

With his head in the warm intimate darkness of this miniature tent, conscious of the soft pressure of her breast, he managed to coax a flame out of the lighter. Then she was going on with her documentation.

"Item : a yale key. What does that unlock?"

"My house."

"I'm glad you said 'house' and not 'home'; because 'home' is where I am."

"Thank you."

"It is a simple truth and I can take no credit for it. What is there in your 'house', though?"

"A shrew, partly perhaps of my own making. Two children."

"Tell me about the children."

"A boy and a girl. The girl is eight. Fair, small, shy looking. Obstinate sometimes, cries easily. Likes lettuce."

"Why that?"

"It's unusual. Most children don't."

"What else does she like?"

Melanie shrugged the coat from her shoulders and then methodically spread it out on the rough planking. Then she lay back. Her cigarette, parked in a groove for the opera-

tion was suddenly taken by a gust of wind and ran in a shower of sparks to the edge of their world and dropped away out of sight. Sinclair stubbed out his own and leaned over her.

“What else does she like?”

He knew that he had been avoiding a close answer to that one. What indeed did Cheryl like? He was not seeing Melanie for the first time since they had met.

Cheryl was filling the screen. The only reason why he had stayed in his “house” over the years was some conviction that a child had to have two parents even if they were incompatible types. He could see her slowly and reluctantly eating something which she did not like. The beginning of an obstinate look was coming into her face and he knew there would be trouble from the hovering, amorphous figure beside her chair.

It was a table set for breakfast and he recognized that he was approaching the starting point of the day’s events.

The face of his wife materialized between himself and the child. Dark copper hair, insensitive oblong mask, pale with temper. She was saying, “If you weren’t here she would eat it. She thinks she can get you on her side. But she won’t. She’ll eat every bit of it or she won’t go to school. You can get out. You’re useless. Do you hear?”

The voice savouring the delights of rhetoric was notching itself up to a higher pitch. He was utterly sick of it. He could not believe now that there had ever been anything between himself and this woman. He said coldly, “For God’s sake behave like an adult human being. You gain nothing by going on like this, except perhaps some obscure emotional satisfaction.”

“That’s right, bring it round to sex. That’s all you ever think of. Why don’t you get out. Get off to your lousy little job in your lousy little office.” She was poking her face

towards him; the confident, sneering face of a successful bully.

He pushed back his chair and stood up. He saw her expression change to fear as he smacked down left and right, flat handed. Then he was hurrying out of the kitchen, blinded by his own overwhelming anger at whatever winds of chance had blown him on to this dog's island.

A glass door, open and angled into near invisibility, smashed its edge into his lowered head and the pain of it blanked out all thought. Pride moved him on, automatically, to grab his coat and go through into the quiet avenue.

“What is it?” Melanie had seen opacity grow in the eyes above her. Now she could see they were grey and infinitely troubled. She was looking at him for the first time. Seeing a large, gentle face; undistinguished, not in any way memorable. He was back in the ruck of anonymity. One of thousands, who could be seen on any morning coming into the city. What on earth was she doing here with him anyway. Where, for that matter, was “here”?

She could only see sky. Sitting up, she found an alarming panoramic view of the city spread out below and felt the motion of the swaying platform as a nightmare menace. Panic flared in her mind. Looking at him for help, she realized that he could give her none. Desperation moved her to try to get down and she began to crawl towards the ladder, which showed two rungs above the platform, gripping the edges of timber with knuckles showing white.

It was at the outside rim of the structure and when she reached it she was almost insane with fear. Waves of nausea washed through her and swamped out every recorded memory except terror. But to stay was somehow worse than to attempt to get down. Pain from her knees separated out as a particular thing. They were beating an individual tattoo against the metal rungs.

Without any kind of handrail or protective shell of girdering, the ladders dropped their thin thread into a bottomless well of distance. Around her was empty space. Only her hands were linking her with life and she knew they could not continue to do it.

The man was standing in the middle of the platform, watching her, motionless, locked in some conflict of introspection which channelled his psychic forces in a closed circle like a magnetic ring. She remembered now, how it had been and why she was there. She knew that it was not likely to happen again. Chance had opened the door to a unique kind of communication and, as capriciously, closed it. Even in her distress she was moved by the pity of it.

Then she looked directly down.

The spider web of thin steel began to revolve in the sunshine. There was overwhelming compulsion to drop like Newton's apple down the centre of the spinning lines. She fought it desperately for all of five seconds, and then the movement steadied momentarily. In the brief second of clarity she saw the past to this moment of time and a number of possible and divergent futures leading away from it, all underpinned by despair.

When finally she let go and fell like a lay figure with her hair streaming straight back, it was, in some marginal way, deliberate.

Arthur Sinclair had not moved from the centre of the platform. He had watched Melanie's painful progress to the head of the ladder without any emotion other than bewilderment; he scarcely knew why she was there. When she dropped from the ladder, he went like a zombie to the edge and stood looking down.

There was a small dark patch on the pale concrete at the centre of the diminishing tube. It meant nothing to him and he went back to the centre to pick up his coat.

Beside it was a book and he looked uncomprehendingly at the pattern of green convoluted fronds on the dust cover, before opening it at random. Page headings featured "The Morphology of Cryptogams" and his lucky dip was a double spread illustration. Living pattern, testament of purpose. Like an optical illusion in a Bridget Riley painting. His mind swam into the depths of it, as though down a tunnel to an infinitely distant beginning; a regression in space and time to an evolutionary starting point. Then he ran back the leaves in stroboscopic succession of numbers and pictures which made patterns traverse the notional stationary page.

On an end paper there was a name in blue ink; clear rounded handwriting with a hint of backward slope. *Melanie Spencer.*

The ring of introspection broke and he saw the platform and the girl crawling to the ladder. With bitter truth, he knew that he had killed her himself.

Arthur Sinclair went back to the ladder and looked down. Four lengths away, and climbing with the casual skill of a spiderman, was a figure in a check shirt and green flat-peaked forage cap. He could not explain to anybody what had happened; neither explain it nor live with it. Holding the book against his chest, with folded arms, he walked the width of the platform and stepped off the far edge; like a man making a demonstration drop from the high board of a swimming pool to prove a point about a new kind of lifejacket.

It was a plunge into colour. Lobes of pulsating blue like the "Great Blue Horses" of Franz Marc. Effortless progress, and a distant figure in charcoal grey, separating out from the rounded rumps and arched necks of the massive forms. He went forward to meet her.



# THE NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH FINGER

*by*

ROBERT PRESSLIE

*In the world of teenagers and pop music the future is practically non-existent, yet upon their seed lies the future of mankind—as something in the old dark house was well aware. . . .*





## THE NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH FINGER

HE was crouched in a pool of darkness at the roadside. Waiting. Waiting for the one who would be passing soon. He had waited through many times of darkness. Sometimes the little one would come along. Most times she didn't. He ached at the heart to talk with her.

There were others who passed. But none in whom he could sense empathy. Only the little one who walked loudly would do. And in all the times she had passed his courage had failed him. He could not approach her.

Since courage refused to come spontaneously he decided it would have to be premeditated. He had prepared for tonight, slowly built up the courage he needed. He did not think he could make the same effort more than once. So he had waited through all the darknesses until he had found a pattern. As many as the fingers on one hand, that was the secret. Always on the darkness of the seventh finger: that was when the little one was sure to be abroad.

One hand was clenched round the seventh finger of the other as he waited. It was a talisman, the seventh finger. Tonight he had the courage. Tonight the talisman must work its magic.

The year before last, Eastwood was a smallish dot on the ordnance maps to mark the intersection of a couple of second class roads. The name was printed in lower case letters so tiny the ink filled in the loops. The place meant nothing to anybody except its inhabitants and the smart ones who knew they could cut a quick way to the coast if they dropped off the main arterial and diverted through Eastwood to the coastal trunk.

Then the town was engulfed and another sump was built to take the overflow population from the metropolis. Eastwood became Eastwood New Town and the only way to find the place marked by a dot on an out-of-date road map was to stop in the immaculate new Main Street, catch a shopper emerging from one of the glittering multiple stores and ask him or her for directions to the Old Town.

The social engineers responsible for the birth of satellite towns consistently overlook one point: a satellite town is more than a parade of purse-milking stores and three-bedroomed houses that differ only in the colour of the paintwork; a new town is also new people. Eastwood New Town was sixty thousand people suddenly extracted from total urban habits to semi-rural conditions. And one-third of the sixty thousand were minors. Too young to be consulted about which amenities should be incorporated into the new town, but old enough to form an indispensable part of its labour force.

The mere lack of dance halls, cinemas, ice rinks and bowling alleys is enough to stir in the young a rapacious lust for these things. It is no good to point out that the civic authorities have provided a calculated quantum of youth clubs. The kids complain there are too many strings attached to them. Usually—because churches have empty halls to lease—religion gets the blame. But the real reason probably lies in the label prefixing the clubs. Labels mean a lot to the young. They like the security of having things categorized. So the *youth* clubs of Eastwood were shunned while the odd one or two with club superintendents sharp enough to apply a label like “The 16-21 Club” got full houses every night.

Unfortunately there was nowhere near enough of these to cater for all of the teen population. Which meant a nightly exodus by scooter, motor-cycle, car or bus to the nearest town supplying teen-projected entertainment.

Even if the exodus was their own idea the kids could still find a legitimate gripe to level at the planners: there were never enough buses. The transport service was still under the control of the metropolitan head office and no allowance had been made for these nightly excursions. The service provided was insufficient, hopelessly inadequately intervalled, and because the buses had to get back to their depot the last bus was in the middle of the evening as far as the teenagers were concerned.

Sue Bradley hated the New Town. She thought her old man was a nut for ever opting to pick a house-guaranteed job there. It was all right for him. He was old. Past it. But try to tell him! To listen to him you'd think Eastwood was Liverpool or London. He didn't understand. It was a waste of time talking.

Watching her get off the last bus with a jaunty wave and a casual "Traa" to the conductress nobody would have guessed she was scared. Not even Torquemada could have got her to admit it, but she was still very young.

Like most of the Saturday night pilgrims she was about fifteen going on nineteen. She was madder than usual because the expected pick-up hadn't materialized. She had wasted her time sharing three cokes and most of the dances with one boy who had then had the nerve to tell her he was going on to a party later where one of his mates had already laid on a partner for him.

She had seriously considered taking up an offer made the previous week by Johnny who was also Simon Legree of Simon Legree and his Slaves when he stood at the mike. Johnny thought he was on the way up. There could be a recording date in the near future. He cultivated the local fans energetically. If any of the dolls wanted to come back stage and watch him strip off his sweaty shirt and fondle the phallic bullwhip that was his stage gimmick he welcomed them. Some day they could send his disc-to-be into

the charts. And he could always rely on recruiting four of them to join the Slaves later for a quick bash among the guitar cases in the back of the group's Dormobile.

But he had once made the mistake of confiding to Sue in a tipsy moment that he was married unhappily, of course—with a kid of two.

When the target date had told her about the party she had veered in the direction of the bandstand, determined not to have her evening spoiled and also to let Duffy see she was in with Johnny. She changed course in mid-stride and made for the cloakroom to pick up her things. She could count on a ride in the Dormobile. She wasn't so sure it would take her anywhere near home.

She caught the last bus to Eastwood.

When she bailed out at the terminus and the bus had turned to make its way back to the depot she stood for a full minute under the street lamp that served to mark the end of the bus's journey. It was the last street lamp for five hundred yards.

Her family were newcomers to Eastwood. They had been allocated a house in one of the outlying districts which was still in the process of being converted from drawing board to reality. It would be another month before street lighting was installed, another three before the road was made good and the buses ran all the way out to the housing estate.

Home was a vague silhouette where a spangled arc plotted the graph of an avenue of picture windows.

She hitched the strap of her shoulder bag with one hand, bracketed the lapels of her coat with the other and started along the make shift pavement.

In spite of two years' practice with her mother's shoes she still teetered slightly on her stilettos. She was learning how to overcome this by keeping her steps short and by laying them down hard. She liked the noise they made in

the darkness. It filled the silence. The sound of her own heels was better than no sound at all.

As she neared the point of no return, halfway between the bus terminus and the estate, she quickened her pace some more. She stopped once to make sure the silence of the night was complete. It was. Except for the grumble of passing cars back on the highway. Satisfied, but none the less uneasy, she filled on up the hill.

When she was coming near the clump of bushes she stepped off the pavement out into the road, caring less for the mud stirred up by the afternoon's rain than for the menace of the shrubbery. There wasn't a single aspect of the dark road that didn't choke her, but the bushes and the old house hidden behind them really gave her the willies. Somebody—some nit, she thought—used to live there. Somebody who was bought out so that Eastwood could expand.

The house had a reputation. In a misguided moment she had once let a date entice her inside it for a snogging session that ended in a wrestling match. And it was a favourite hangout for yobs who swopped fags and dirty stories while they waited for birds who were too dumb to know they shouldn't travel the road alone.

Sue hurried past the house and the bushes, her ears cocked for half-stifled giggles. When nothing happened and her virtue was assured for another Saturday she sighed "Thank vice" through her teeth, subconsciously slowed her pace and practically strutted as if she had never been afraid at all.

She was taken completely unawares when the hand that held her lapels was grasped by another with such force that she was halted in her stride and lifted to the tips of her toes.

Her reactions had the swiftness of practice and feminine instinct. She swung her shoulder bag in a scything motion

and jammed her knee upwards. The bag thumped softly and the knee passed clean through the legs of whoever had grabbed her.

“Lay off,” she ordered. She let the strap of her bag slide to the fold of her arm and hooked her Rimmel-lacquered nails at the face above her.

The voice that said, “I will not hurt,” was deep and resonant like it had been fed through an echo chamber. The crushing grip on her hand belied the statement.

“Shove off, will you.”

“I will not hurt. Come.”

“Get knotted.”

“Please.”

Sue felt herself being lowered, but not released. She strained her eyes into the darkness. He was big, whoever he was. His silhouette didn't tally with the shape of anybody she recognized. She had never seen anybody that big. She wasn't even sure his size was possible.

“If you don't get your hands off me,” she threatened, “I'll scream. They've got a place for people like you.”

The deep voice was plaintive as it repeated: “I will not hurt.” But Sue's heart fluttered like a captured sparrow's when she was scooped bodily into the crook of an arm out of a muscle-man advertisement and a hand big enough to put a finger in each ear was clapped across her mouth.

He carried her into the old house she had just passed.

The front door had disappeared long ago, probably appropriated for kindling wood or a make-shift toboggan when the snow had covered the hill. Some person or persons unknown had removed the fireplaces, all the interior room and cupboard doors, every inch of lead or copper piping, and extracted the power and light wiring from the conduits. The visiting yobs, in fits of boisterous spirits or vandalism, had stripped the wallpaper, broken the plastering and heaved so many stones up at the ceiling that apart

from one corner where a few tiles offered shelter the inside of the house was open to the stars above.

Sue was surprised to see a light burning in the sheltered corner. It looked like a candle, guttered like a candle, but it smelled like somebody was frying chips.

She struggled to get free, shook her head to get rid of the gagging hand. Unexpectedly she was put down and the hand was removed. And she forgot her threat to scream. Or maybe she didn't forget but considered it and decided screaming was childish—even if there was nobody around but the giant to pass verdict on her. She stood where she had been set down. Not daring to move. Yet. They were side by side, equidistant from the entrance. Later maybe.

She said: "Who's cooking?"

When he didn't answer she took time out to get a proper look at him. He was big all right. It wasn't that he was so terrifically tall: maybe six and a half feet. But there was an all-over massiveness about him, something not quite natural; he was all shoulders and chest. With a great white-faced melon head, lightly fuzzed on top. For a moment Sue thought she had met him before, then she remembered. Last Sunday on the telly. When she had been drying her hair. *Classics on Celluloid*. Every Sunday at three. Last Sunday it was "The Hunchback of Somewhere-or-other." That was who he looked like. Charles Laughton. She remembered the name because she had liked the film. She had cried when the crowd had been throwing muck at the hunchback. Only this one wasn't a hunchback and he wasn't what you would call exactly ugly. Not even pathetic ugly.

"I hurt no one. Eat no one."

"What are you going on about?"

"Cook no one."

"Nit! That's only an expression. Like it used to be 'What's cooking?' but now you say 'Who.'"

"I make."

“Not me you don’t.”

He rolled his head in self-rebuke at not being able to match her speed of thought, her quick hopping from subject to subject. He said: “I did not make you. I do not make people. I make the light.”

“That!”

“In darkness I go to people’s places.” He was frowning with the effort to keep going, to avoid being sidetracked. “They put food outside their places. Into big boxes.”

“You mean dustbins?”

“I collect until I have enough to make light.”

“No wonder it stinks.”

He looked at her with enormous consideration. “I know you. I know you will be afraid if I do not have light. Darkness is a friend. My friend. But you are afraid without light.”

I’m afraid period, she thought. And I’m getting out of here fast. He’s soft in the head. It’s late already and if I don’t get home soon there’ll be one hell of a row. Like usual. And they’ll believe this for an excuse, won’t they? Not bloody likely they won’t. And even if they did they would say girls of your age shouldn’t be out so late and you should have more sense than come up that dark road by yourself. And if you *did* have somebody with you, a date, then you got told that no decent girl would let a boy take her up a dark road, etcetera, etcetera.

“All go, isn’t it?” she said.

He just looked at her. She said: “Have you done? I mean: can I go now? All right, you’re dead clever. You can make candles. Come back at Christmas.”

He said: “No.”

“What d’you mean no?”

“I have waited for you. Many darknesses. I need you.”

“Jack it in, Charlie. What do you think I am?”

He spread the fingers of one hand where she could see



them in the candlelight. "All these darknesses," he said. "And many times all these."

"Jeezis!" the girl gasped. She did a double sidestep past him and raced for the door. His reach was long enough to let him catch her in a single stride. He hefted her back to the corner by the candle and covered her mouth again.

Above the hand that wrapped her face, her eyes were wild and rolling with terror. She had just about decided he was only a harmless idiot. Somebody so dopey that nobody would talk to him and he wanted her to put an interlude of companionship in his loneliness. Then he had shown her that hand. With all those fingers. Seven of them. Her eyes went up and showed a lot of white as if they were going to do a back flip at the thought of those same fingers soiling her mouth.

"I have waited," he went on relentlessly. "I fingered your coming and going in the darknesses. I am slow at fingering. But I found that I must wait for a darkness of the seventh finger. I waited and you came. I need you. I need your help."

Sue took her eyes back from under their lids. She tried to fill them with the expression she used when she was lying her head off to her old man. She made tiny nods of assent, as much as the grip on her head would allow.

He uncovered her mouth experimentally. She wiped it with her sleeve. "Who are you?" she asked.

"You will help me?"

"Anything you say."

"You will not go away again?"

"Get on with it."

"I am lost."

"You can say that again. If they saw you in daylight they'd whip you inside. You don't half look funny. Leather coat and kinky boots. They're out. They were last year. Where have you been hiding?"

“Here. When there was darkness. When there was light I had to hide in other places. I made holes in the earth. Over there where there are trees.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant where did you come from.”

He lifted his head to the naked rafters. “In the big darkness,” he said. “I think.”

“You think? Don’t you know? Hey—you’re not one of *them*, are you?” She was beginning to feel surer of herself. She sensed her mental superiority and she was inclined to believe his assertions that he intended no harm. “You know,” she said. “Like from another planet. Like that one, *The Monster from Mira*.” She pronounced the last word like mirror. “I saw that. It weren’t half a giggle,” she reminisced, and smiled at the memory.

“Not a monster,” he denied. For the first time he showed signs of emotion. The anger was slight but it was there. “Some of them called me a monster. They make fun of me. But if I am not there they could not go.”

Sue pulled a face. She said: “Who? Who called you a monster and who couldn’t go where?”

“Men. Human men like you.”

She howled. “You are in a bad way! I’m a girl. Don’t you know the difference?”

He let the question go by. Her speech was so full of non sequiturs and tangential remarks that he decided to follow only the main drift and let the rest slide.

“Men are bad,” he said. “They need me, yet they mock me. They talk about Earth. Say it is a good place. But to me it is a bad place. It has men. It has beasts. I wish I was not here.”

Wide-eyed and soft-spoken, Sue said: “You really mean it, don’t you.”

“It is not Earth itself that is bad. I love Earth. It is the men and the——”

“No, not that. You really believe you came from up there. You’ve been seeing too many films. It doesn’t *actually* happen, you know. You should see a doctor. I’m not joking. Not taking the mick. Crikey, I like a horror movie same as anyone, but I don’t go getting ideas it could *really* happen.”

“You will know that I speak the truth. You will know, little one. There will be ships——”

Sue was bending over the candle. There had been one squashed and panstick-scented cigarette left in her bag but no matches. She squinted up as she tried to avoid singeing her flick-ups. She said: “We’ve got *them*. Everybody’s got them nowadays.” She thought this was true. She saw nothing odd about her nonchalance. Familiarity had robbed the miracle of its magic. She had no particular interest in relay satellites, planetary probes or lunar surveys. But in watching television or scanning the dailies for the state of the pop charts it was impossible to avoid coming across some reference to the exploration of space. There was even a love-in-a-capsule strip picture story in last week’s *Valentine*.

“Yes,” she was told. “There were ships. When they described Earth to me they said there were once many ships, but they had never seen them. Only the pictures that tell stories. They said the pictures were a history of Earth. Many times they looked at the pictures. For they had never seen Earth either. They looked at the pictures. They told the stories of the goodness of Earth. Sang the songs in praise of Earth. This is how I learn that Earth was known as a good place.”

The girl blew a contemptuous stream of smoke into his face. He coughed and rubbed his eyes.

“That’s right,” she said. “Now you’ll be telling me you’ve never seen a fag before.”

He made a denial. “I have seen the men do this thing. But I was not allowed to do it myself.”

She reversed the butt. "Here," she offered, "have a drag."

"They would not allow it."

"Who wouldn't?"

"The men."

"There's nobody here but us." She was getting impatient. "Look Charlie," she said, "I'm missing my beauty sleep. I should have been home ages ago. I did what you asked. I listened to you. And I believe everything you said about not hurting me. But if you want my honest opinion I think you're barmy. You say you came here in a spaceship. All right, but where is it? Show me. And according to you the ship was full of men who hadn't seen Earth. So where did they come from? Mars? Because if they came from anywhere else except here how could they be men? And either I'm not switched on or something but the way you were talking you would think that *now*—you and me here—was a hundred years ago."

"A hundred? That is a number. I do not understand numbers. They did not teach me these. I only know fingering." He held his hands at belly level, fingers outspread. He sounded very proud when he said: "I teach myself fingering."

"You're dead clever."

He smiled, taking it as a genuine compliment. "I can tell you when I came from."

Sue groaned dramatically. "One minute he's from the stars, next it's the future."

"Is so," he agreed. "I am from the not yet."

"You're joking of course."

"When I asked the time of Earth, the time that the pictures showed and the songs praised, they showed me the years by my fingering. It was the fingers of one hand as many times as the fingers of the other."

"Forty-nine? You crease me. Forty-nine years in the future you're going to come zooming out of space in your

little ship. Only it won't be forty-nine years from now, it will be today. Phooey!"

He shook his head. "It was not forty-nine."

"You said you didn't understand numbers."

"I know it had more words."

Sue didn't feel like demonstrating with *his* fingers so she used her own and flashed them upwards five times, keeping one finger down on the fifth flip. "That's forty-nine."

As quickly as she had gestured, he had tried to follow her movements on his own hands, translating ten-figured symbols into multiples of seven. Then he tried to show her the number he meant. She got lost before he had really started. If she had been told that he was demonstrating seven cubed she would have been none the wiser. Only that it was a lot more than forty-nine.

He said: "That was when the ship went wrong and I came to Earth."

"I'm sorry. Sorry for you. I said it before, you should see a doctor. I'm not saying you're mental or anything like that, but you need help."

"Your help. This is why I wait for you. You help me and I help you. Yes?"

"Why me?"

"I have told you. I do not like men. I feel when you pass in other darkneses that you are different. You will not mock. Will not call me monster."

"Could be, Charlie. I'm full of soft spots. But I must get home."

"Home." He said it wistfully. "This is home for you? This Earth. I have no home."

"My heart bleeds for you."

"The ship was my home. It was the home of the men. They were born in the ship. I was made in it."

"You were what?" Sue choked on the last of her cigarette. She flipped it into a corner. "Don't get me wrong," she

said. "I'm not taking the mick. I just remembered something. Like when I took shorthand and typing at night school. My boy-friend gave me a new typewriter for Christmas—he was one of my old boy-friends, I never talk to him now. He got it for cigarette coupons. Eight thousand coupons. Smoked himself to a suntan. It was a portable. In a zip case with a flap on the inside of the lid. In the flap pocket there was a yellow leaflet and you could only see the top words. Know what it said? 'Operating Instruction for your Brother.' I said what'n Earth you bought me, Paul—a robot? It was the name of the typewriter, you see. When you pulled out the leaflet the next word was Typewriter."

What>Sue did not add was that the incident had happened not to herself but to her elder sister. She had a trick of translating a good story into the first person singular. She thought it always sounded more plausible that way.

"You give me sadness. I feel that you have said a joke. But I was not given a sense of humour. They wanted to see their Earth that was so much talked about. The journey was very big. It takes a long, long time. Longer than the life of a man. They must sleep for most of the journey. But someone has to watch the ship and make corrections. The ship can do much thinking but it cannot correct when things happen that were not to be seen before. So I was made. Not of metal like a machine. I was made of man-stuff. And I was taught words a little, thinking a little, but best I was taught one thing. To look after the ship."

"Poor Charlie. You didn't make too good a job of it, did you?"

He ploughed on. "I was taught what is a warp but——"

"Were you now? Well I wasn't. What's a warp?"

"You are walking your Earth and you put your foot on a place where there is nothing. Yes?"

"I trip. That's a hole, not a warp."

"There came," he insisted, "one of these warps which I was taught to recognize. A hole which the ship fell into. I remembered what I must do and I did it. But the hole was too big. The ship fell through."

"Char-ming! You fell through a hole in the sky. Oh, Charlie!"

"Not in the sky. The hole was in time."

"In time for what?"

He ignored the interruption. "Warps can make holes in space or in time. If the ship is not corrected it jumps great distances off course or falls backwards or forwards in time. This is what I am taught. Our ship fell backwards. It came to Earth. But not safely. Not at the correct time."

Sue thought that for all his crazy talk he was still pretty sweet in a nutty sort of way. She tried not to hurt his feelings deliberately. "Charlie," she said, "tell me: if all this really happened, where did you land? I haven't seen anything in the papers."

He pointed to where the rear door of the house had stood before it had been appropriated. "There. In the deep water."

"The old gravel pit." Suddenly the whole thing was possible. The pit had been abandoned years ago because of seepage. It was rumoured to be bottomlessly deep. Certainly the black depth of water was enough to make everybody give it a wide berth.

Sue asked: "What happened to the others—the men?"

"Dead."

"Drowned? Or killed by the crash?"

"They were asleep. The machine which keeps them cold while they sleep was broken by the warp. There was great heat. They died when we were falling through the warp."

"Well at least they never knew what hit them. But just imagine: travelling all that distance and then not making it. It's like me being at work all day. Home is a drag when you're there but when you're at work you can't wait to get

home. It's like I was sitting on the bus looking forward to coming home and the bus crashing and I never made it. Still, you made it. You got home."

"No. I have told you. I was made in the ship. The men were born in it. For the men and for me this would have been the first time on Earth. Only their fathers—many fathers ago—had seen Earth. It was these fathers who made the pictures and first sang the songs. It was the pictures and the songs that made the men hurt to see Earth. They said men, all men, had been away too long. They said it was not good for a child to be too long away from its mother's breast."

"Watch it, Charlie."

"For me too it was going to be good. I too was hurting to see Earth." He sighed, hunching his Quasimodo shoulders. "I like Earth very much. But I hurt because I have brought it trouble."

"You said you *didn't* like it."

"Earth I like. It speaks to me like the men said mothers speak to their children. It is my friend——"

Sue burst into song. "*I talk to the trees. . . .* It's a dirty great lump of stone, Charlie! You can't make friends with a lump of stone. Or maybe in your case you can. Better than speaking to yourself like some nuts, I suppose."

"It is a living thing," he persisted. "It tells me where to make a hole to hide in. It puts a tree over the hole to protect me from too much heat and too much wet. It gives me roots to eat. It gives me plants with big leaves and tells me to burn them and eat the ashes. For it knows that I must have the salt that is in the ashes. It shows me its other friends. I have talked with the birds that fly and with the little fish that live in the water that runs into the place where the ship came down. It pleases my eyes with white pictures on the blue of the sky. It told me which grasses to pull and chew to heal the hurt I felt when I came. And yet



it is true what you say: I like Earth but I do not like it. There are other grasses which cut my face when I move into my hole. There are beasts that spit at me and cut me with their hands if I go near to be friends. And there are men."

"There are men," Sue agreed. "Some are okay, some you've got to watch. But I've got no complaints. It takes all sorts. If you're so—hell, you've got me talking like all this was real, like it had actually happened—but if this world doesn't suit you, Charlie, you'd better hop it. Or if you can't do that with your supposed-to-be spaceship all smashed up, then you'll have to do the other thing. You wouldn't be the first one who said they were fed up of the world."

A breath of wind, too puny to be called a gust, whirled through the doorless door and just about snuffed out the candle. The sudden chasing of giant shadows across the floor made them both look at the candle. The stump of it was smaller than its flame. He took a fresh one from somewhere inside his leather jacket. While he bent to kindle it from the dying light Sue sneaked tip-toe away from him.

"Wait."

She hadn't thought he was capable of such firmness of voice. She halted in her tracks involuntarily.

"You are the one I waited for," he said. "I have waited so long. I cannot lose you now. Not yet. I have more to say."

"Look, I was late last Saturday. That cost me a clip on the ear from my mother and a lecture from the old man. They'll kill me tonight. Worse maybe. They'll make me stay in for a month. Can you imagine?"

He had a hand inside his jacket again. He pulled out a wad of paper. Old paper. Wrinkled, but with the smoothed-out look of ancient and precious documents. Tattered at the edges. Yellowed all over.

"You are Bradley," he said.

“Miss Bradley, if you don’t mind. Even at work I get Miss. So?”

“I was right. You are the one. I did not think you would mock and you did not. I wanted you to listen and you did. That you are also Bradley is a——”

“Coincidence.”

“Miracle.”

“You’ve been hanging around for days. You said so. You probably asked somebody my name.”

“I am sad for saying bad things about Earth. It must have been Earth that chose the place of our coming. Earth must have known I was looking for you.”

Blackmail. That was what Sue thought. He gives out with the soft soap so you’ll feel lousy if you snub him. But soft soap wouldn’t save her from a tongue lashing when she got home.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But this is it. I’m going. I’ll scream if you try to stop me. Then the bad bad mans will come and get you. You wouldn’t like that to happen, would you?”

Loudly, desperately, he said: “They were dying.”

“What are you coming with now?”

“The men. They were dying. This is why they so much want to see Earth. Before they die. The cold machine in the ship makes them sleep. Gives them enough time to come before they die. They were the last. Once there were many. As many as Earth has. But a bad thing comes to their world. Not a thing that makes dying sudden. A thing that is slow, but makes many die, then many more until there are only as many left as I would have fingers if I had another hand.”

“Some kind of disease?”

He recognized the word he had not been able to remember. He nodded.

“And they brought the disease here?”

“They did not want this. Only to come near Earth and

look at it in the picture makers before they died. It was my fault that they came down to Earth."

She swallowed the bitter taste that had come into her mouth. She wished she had another cigarette left.

She said: "But it will be all right, won't it? I mean, they're way down under the water." But she could tell by his face that the water wasn't going to be any deterrent to the disease.

He was unfolding the paper carefully. "Bradley," he said, "the son of your son's son was a"—he read the word with difficulty—"biochemist. He was the man who found how to make life and how to make it grow into a manshape like me. That was in the beginning. Many sons later it was another Bradley who made manshapes who could do work after teaching. It was this Bradley who made me. He was on the ship."

"You trying to tell me that some relation, some *descendant* of mine made you? A million years from now or whenever it was. Or is it *will be*? You're out of your tiny mind!"

"That is why I have waited. To ask you to have no sons."

"To ask me what?"

"If you have no sons there will be no other Bradleys. There will not be the Bradley who made me. And if I am not made I cannot make the mistake that has brought the disease to Earth. You must promise."

"And if I don't? Hey, let me go!"

"No sons. You must not. If you do not promise I will have to make you die."

He held a green capsule, a sparrow's egg in size and shape, in the hand that wasn't imprisoning her.

"Let me go, stupid. Look, I'll promise anything you like but that doesn't guarantee anything. If it's any consolation, I haven't the slightest notion of getting married and having

kids. But I'm not the only surviving member of my family, you know. There's my sister. Maybe it's her who has all the sons. Maybe it's none of us. It doesn't have to be. The world is full of Bradleys."

"Promise," he pleaded.

"I should have known," she gritted out. "I'm a right sucker and no maybes. I should have run when I had the chance. Instead I get taken in by the craziest line I've ever heard. You're just what I thought you were. A madman. A *monster!*"

He released her so suddenly that she stumbled. She got her feet sorted out, gave him one last big-eyed look of disgust and ran for the door.

When she was out in the darkened road she kept on running and didn't look back until the night was made day—an eerie fluorescent tube day. A blue-white light that gouted silently from the old house.

She slowed to a walk. Even when the light was gone and it was dark again. She was late now. No point in getting a sweat on for the sake of a few minutes.

Men, she thought. They're all the same. Then she had another thought, a sobering one: that thing, that monster, had killed himself. There could be trouble. Police. Enquiries. She would be involved. Her mind flew ahead, guessing at the questions, fashioning the answers. She had already decided against trying on the truth with her father. And if it was hopeless with him, what would the police think? Nobody, but nobody, was going to believe her.

It was too crazy for herself to believe. Charlieboy said he was from the future. Wanted her to prevent his very existence. But if she did, just suppose, then how could he have been there tonight, scaring her silly? And what about the disease-ridden ship that was supposed to be lying at the bottom of the old gravel pit?

She was near home, saw that the lights were still on and

decided she would be better occupied fabricating a plausible fib for her lateness.

When there was nothing in the news next day, or the day after, or within a whole week, she began to feel safe. Maybe there had been no trace left of the thing in the old house.

She did a self-imposed penance of staying at home for a month of Saturdays. At first she thought she would never forget her experience. But youthful resilience took over and she did forget. She was able to shove the entire incident into a corner of her mind.

But the next time she went out on a Saturday she remembered enough to make her want to avoid the walk from the bus terminus to her home.

The only mistake she made that night was to ask a slightly startled but smirking Simon Legree if he would mind giving her a lift in the Dormobile. . . .

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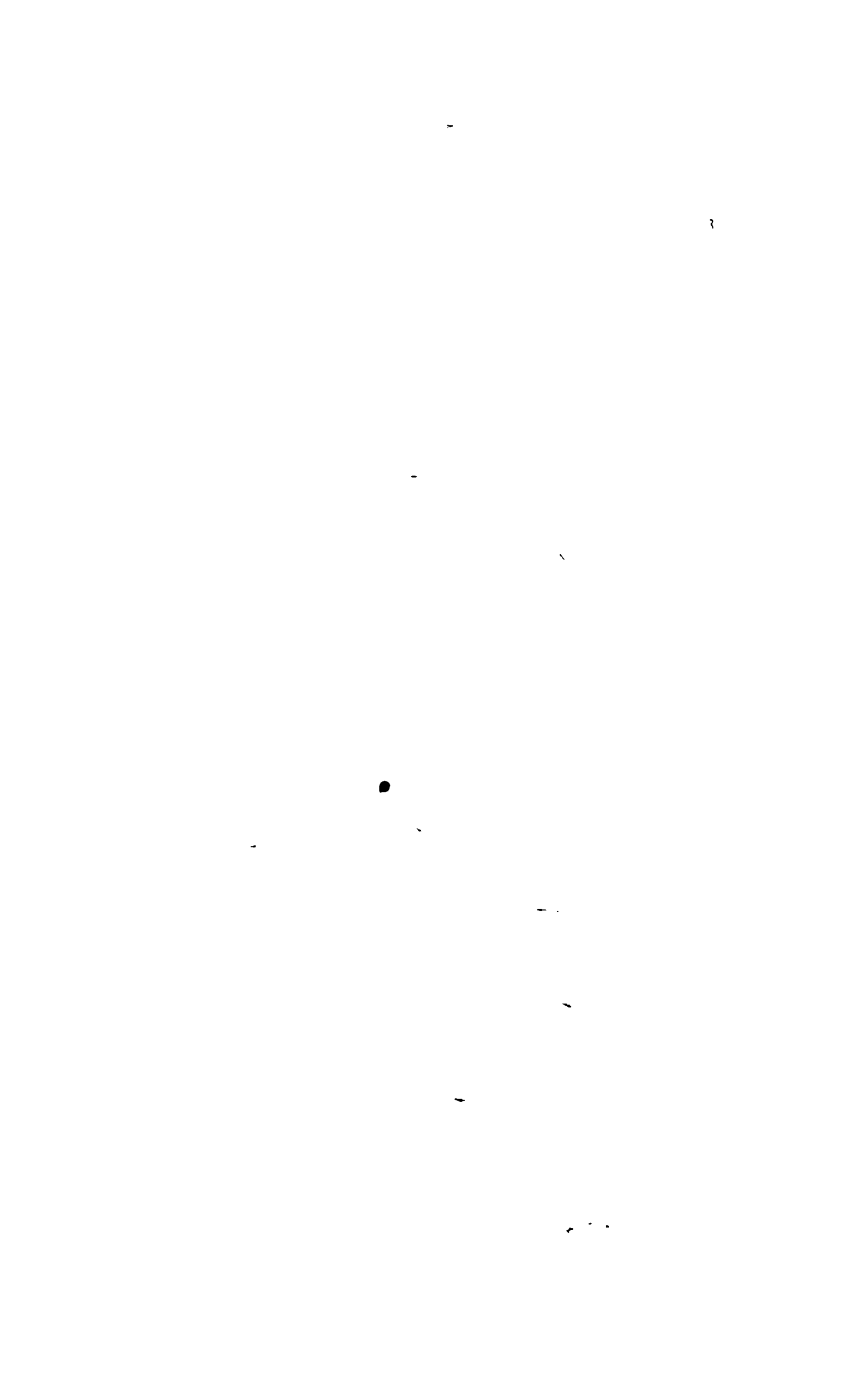


# SIX CUBED PLUS ONE

*by*

JOHN RANKINE

*Through a simple matter of misalignment the new teaching machines in the school began to require more knowledge than was being programmed into them—they also needed a control and Sarah Joy's ego was the one they chose.*





## SIX CUBED PLUS ONE

CHRONOLOGICALLY, it could be said to start on a chilly Monday in April, when the janitor's long, saturnine face appeared, without any summons, over the ground glass panel of the principal's door. Lonsbury lifted his head and saw, as usual, that his own name, in reverse, appeared to be stencilled across the visitor's chest :

.A.M YRUB2NOI F

Not for the first time, he thought it would be a good idea to have the legend moved to an opaque part of the fabric. On Mondays especially, he found it trying. The only chest it seemed to fit well was that of the junior P.E. mistress, who by a miracle of cantilevering got the A and the F bang on. Fitting everyone else to this exacting standard was becoming a neurotic obsession.

There was, anyway, no percentage in trying it with Harold Harris. He paused, with lifted pen and no enthusiasm, to hear the worst. The only positive good was the minor one that he could shelve, temporarily, the morning chore of working through his correspondence. Though, even here, he had streamlined his system into a simple disposal operation through a slot into a king-sized wastepaper basket and the change to a long, frustrating conversation with the janitor would be only a minimal gain.

Sensing the atmosphere, he observed protocol far enough to ask formally, "What is it, Mr. Harris?" It was only "Harold" on the infrequent occasions when there was industrial peace.

"I'm glad you asked that, Mr. Lonsbury, because you

know I never complain about the work here. You know the time I put in, Mr. Lonsbury. Early and late. Late and early. And mind you, I don't grudge it. Give and take is my motto. Many a Saturday I've spent on the layouts in that auto wing. I'd be glad to have a penny, *one penny*, for every hour I've put in of my free time on those study corrals.

"Carrels."

"That's right, corrals. And you know how difficult it is to fit them in where there's hardly space to walk round."

Lonsbury suddenly mutinied. He caught sight of his high domed, balding head in the reflection on a glass-fronted book-case and realized that conversations with his janitor were doing a lot to push back his hair-line.

He had listened to some such monologue every Monday for the last ten years, taking it patiently in the cause of empathy and good staff relations.

This time, he fairly snapped out, "For God's sake get round to it, man. What's the trouble now?"

"This is the trouble, Mr. Lonsbury." Harris slapped a sheaf of diagrams on the principal's already littered desk. "Young Mr. Kershaw's been in over the weekend with that daft assistant of his, and he's took all the new teaching machines out of store and distributed them on each floor. That's another fifty shoved in that space. All them corrals is altered. There isn't one like it was. I tell you, Mr. Lonsbury, it's like a Chinese labourine in there and that's no bull. You'll never see it clean. Never. I can't guarantee that my cleaners will be able to move. You know Mrs. Jennings, if she gets her back end stuck in an acoustic cowl she'll be there to the Last Trump. It'll be a death trap. So long as you take responsibility, I don't mind. But I don't want that Superintendent Janitor running his finger over my surfaces and saying, 'What's this, then?'"

Past defeats lay heavily on Lonsbury. He temporized

with, "All right, Mr. Harris. Leave it with me. I'll see Mr. Kershaw. We'll work something out. Those machines are badly needed, we can't wait any longer for the extension. Don't worry about it."

When Harris had gone, Lonsbury fished through the rest of the mail for any with the unmistakable, dull, letter heading of the Central Education Office. There were two. The rest he dropped absently through the slot into his big wastepaper basket. Over the years, it was a method which must have saved him several months. Then he called through the connecting door to his secretary, "If anybody wants me, Miss Gregg, I'll be over in the auto wing. If there's a fire, give it time to get a good hold before you ring the bell." It was a standard jest, which had a ritualistic quality by this time. She did not reply.

When he had gone she went through and pulled the day's mail from its last resting place. She had a long spike file. Sharing his views about reading it, she had, nevertheless, a conservative female regard about keeping it, and let it moulder for six months in a cupboard before Harold Harris burned it.

Grant Kershaw, young only in a relative way, was a tall angular man in his middle thirties. Long, mobile face, well liked by students and fellow staff. For two years now he had been in charge of the small, cube-shaped annexe which housed the automated section of the Gorseville Comprehensive. Two hundred and sixteen machines, with the recent additions, were deployed on its three floors. Now, he could accommodate nine study groups of twenty-four, on nine diverse programmes, at the same time. It was a formidable set up. It was going to need some determination to stay ignorant.

From his small penthouse office, which housed the control consoles for all floors and a concentration of teaching

tapes from aerodynamics to zoology, he saw Lonsbury pussy-footing over the macadam and said sombrely to his technician/handyman, "This is it, George. That old creep Harris has been talking to Fred. He'll want some new shift round to please the cleaners." Kershaw put on a mimicking voice which was near enough Lonsbury's judicial, plummy tone. "We're a team here at Gorseville, Mr. Kershaw, right down to the newest, part-time cleaner. Think of the organizational aspect."

Lonsbury had disappeared into the stair shaft. Kershaw galvanized himself into frenzied action. "Get this last console wired in, then I'll keep him talking and you can nip down and bed in the last six machines. Bolt them down. There's nothing like making the difficulties of change look greater than the difficulties of the *status quo*."

Lonsbury was a good ten minutes getting to the eyrie. He had stopped off on each floor to look at the set-up. No students were due until ten-fifteen and there was a clear view of the silent machines, with presentation panels blank and headsets waiting on the pad.

He could hardly help a certain personal satisfaction. It represented a lot of capital equipment. Taken by and large the Gorseville Comprehensive was worth something over a million sterling at present prices. Quite an empire in its way. When he reached the penthouse, he was feeling like a pedagogic Napoleon. But the mild manners of a lifetime die hard and he began pacifically, "You certainly hide yourself away up here, Mr. Kershaw. Guilty secrets to conceal, eh?"

Kershaw let it ride as pure rhetoric. He wasn't going to give any opening. The look he put on was one of uncommitted, generalized zeal; as if he had simply paused before Pharoah with a pyramid building block poised on his head.

A console pilot light began to glow and he plugged himself in on his master panel. It was not much of an option, being the Senior Mistress no less. "Oh it's you, Freda. And a

merry Monday morning to you too. Right away. First year biology second series, number eight coming up. Keep your ears pinned back. Usual drill. It'll be on a continuous band as of one minute from now. Cut in where you like." He passed a note of the requirement over to George and said, "Fix this for the carrels one to four. Log it for Miss Garstang. Timed for 1000 hours."

Lonsbury picked up his cue. "You've certainly packed them in, Mr. Kershaw. Don't you think, and I'm not criticizing, believe me, that your new arrangements are very tight? Very tight indeed. You know we're a team here at Gorseville and every member of the team is important. Looking at it as an organizational matter, you see that it makes things very nearly impossible for the cleaning staff. They simply can't get round you know."

It occurred to Kershaw that some of them had got about as round as a human being could get and retain recognizable form, but he wisely decided that it was not the time to deliver the *bon mot*. Moreover, he heard the "believe me" bit with a certain cynicism born of long experience. It was a routine lead to any statement which nobody, including its user, could possibly take as truth. So that meant that Lonsbury wanted them moved.

"I see the difficulties of course, Mr. Lonsbury. It's just a question of getting maximum use out of this equipment. We need that extension. Go up another floor or build on. But in the decade it will take to get the Education Committee moving, we have to do what we can."

"Yes, yes, I see that. But I want you to take another look at these diagrams. Just get another inch or two between the carrels. Do your best with it."

Lonsbury was already at the door and any reply would be in the nature of a soliloquy. Years of similar, impossible instructions added their cumulative irritation and Grant Kershaw reached a climax of frustration. He shuffled the

sheaf of diagrams in random order and placed them under the viewer of an epidiascope. The composite picture thrown on his miniature editing screen looked like something from a biology slide. It would certainly make a change. He passed the picture on to a copier and set it to run off a dozen photostats. Then he shouted for George. "Hold fast with that bolting job, George. I've done some re-planning. There's a break at 1115 hours. Get some senior boys on it and shift everything round again. Then nail it all down, but good. There you are, the plan to end all plans."

George said, "Harris is not going to like this."

A gesture of disassociation from concern on that point was magnified coarsely on the screen.

In the event, by some curious alchemy, an impression of greater space than any arrangement yet had been able to give, was the first noticeable thing. Circulation avenues seemed wider, even with the additional machines. Lonsbury was complimentary. "Thank you, Mr. Kershaw. You've solved that problem very well. I'm only sorry for the extra work you have had to plot it out."

"That's all right. Believe me, it is no trouble!"

It was 1520 hours, on the first full day of working with the new dispensation, that Kershaw monitored a mathematics group at the request of Freda Garstang. She was taking some fifth year students through a tape on simple statistics. It was straightforward stuff, telling all on simple errors in sampling which could betray the unwary. And most of the group were as unwary as you could get and still have a human mind. Answers were being checked back again and again as wrong options were chosen and the patient machines put the searchers on the right lines.

Then twenty-three machines went silent and only one went on. Its operator seemed to gain a sudden burst of insight. Reading speed increased until Kershaw believed that

only random responses were being made. But every frame checked right. It was a fantastic performance. He said, "What goes on, Freda? Who have you got on number eighteen?"

"Why?"

That was just like some women. You never got a simple answer. Whatever you asked for they had to reply with a question.

"Never mind. Just tell me the name for the record."

"It's Sarah Joy."

"No kidding?"

"No. Why do you want to know?"

"She's just worked that leg faster than I could myself."

There was a pause. Not unnaturally, there was some checking going on. Sarah Joy would have been the weak link in any group of students chosen at random from the two thousand odd in Gorseville Comprehensive. That she should be rattling through a thirty minute work programme in as many seconds was simply not feasible.

A weak link, intelligence-wise only, be it understood. In every other respect, she was well ahead of the game; dumbness was not going to be a serious drawback to social success. All she needed for that were her honey coloured hair and well filled sweater. At this point in time she was looking at Freda Garstang with what would have been an offensive blue stare in any less attractive girl. "No, Miss Garstang, I chose it because it was the *answer*. I *knew* it was the answer."

Freda Garstang relayed the good news to the man on the bridge and he looked round for a checking run.

There was a tape on Factor Analysis, which was outside the programmes, he had picked it up out of his own interest in the subject. He could only follow it himself when he was in the mood to concentrate. That would certainly show up any random selection of button pressing to be no better

than chance. When it was looped on, he called Freda again. "Here's a thing, Freda. Put your genius on the net again will you. Just a check on the machine."

"What about the rest of the group?"

"Let them have a go too. It will be an additional check. Take one yourself."

That was simple malice. He knew the tape would be well beyond her scope. It took a minute to get the thing lined up. Then machine number eighteen went off on a solo run. Machine nineteen kept pace for the two introductory items and then went silent. It was the most impressive performance he had ever seen.

Unfortunately, leisure to appreciate it was not to be had. Urgent summoning bleeps from every other console had him on the hop on a round-up of grief. It was the busiest part of the day. On this penultimate session before afternoon closure, every carrel had its occupants. Nine groups of twenty-four, bashing away at a variety of tasks which ranged from elementary Russian to "A" level Physics. At least that was what was scheduled. The messages let him in on the curious fact that every machine except the frenetic number eighteen was in a state of suspended animation.

Bert Frazer, penned in with his little flock on a Physics tape, simply said, "Who've you got up there with you, Grant? Come on now, don't muck about. I've got a train to catch. Action boy, action."

Kershaw said patiently, "You tell me, Bert. What are your people doing?"

"Sitting here, looking as urgent as tree trunks, waiting for you to get your finger out."

"The tape is on and circulating. Volume level is right. The message is going out."

"Well, if you say so. Hang on."

Ten seconds later he was back with, "There's a thing now. I can't get a headset off any one of them. They're



holding on like grim death. Bring a jemmy. What's on that tape for God's sake, *Lolita*?"

Kershaw was already moving out. He said, "George, stand by on the main switch. We might have to cut everything off at source." Then he was in the elevator and thumbing the button for GROUND.

He went first to Freda Garstang. Brief glimpses of the two top floors, on the way down, had reinforced Bert Frazer's description. Large and small, male and female, it was like the scene before the awakening in a classical ballet. But he was not greeted as a prince bursting through a thicket. She said, "What kept you? Don't you understand there's something very wrong here. I might say I never liked this auto wing. Perhaps now it will be realized that you can't play about with nature. Students have their own pace and trying to force it will only do damage. I told Mr. Lonsbury only yesterday that I was getting more and more suspicious of the results here. 'Mr. Lonsbury,' I said, I told him straight, 'You can't get a quart into a pint cup.'"

Kershaw had ceased to listen after the anacrusis. He was more interested in Sarah Joy, who was a living, breathing example of the falsity of the pint cup theory. Sitting with casual grace, in acoustic isolation, she was wearing tomato red Bermuda shorts and one of her tightest white sweaters. The broad, white, light alloy band of the headset gave a faint echo of a latter-day Alice. Slightly prominent teeth, usually set in a permanently friendly smile, were now pressing her lower lip. She looked as though she was deciding whether to have it with pistachio nuts or straight cream.

When he broke in on her maiden meditation she said, "There is no time at all for misunderstanding, Mr. Kershaw. I want you to make certain arrangements. Please listen carefully and do exactly as I say. In the first place tell your assistant to make no attempt to cut off power supplies to the carrels. Do that now."

The voice was clear, incisive, with only traces of its owner's normally shattering lisp. Kershaw had moved round to the front and was looking at her over the acoustic cowl. The blue eyes which met his own were now anything but vacant. There was, indeed, a quality in them which carried greater conviction than the form of words. What she could possibly do, if he refused to comply, was difficult to imagine; but the eyes made it clear that there was no real choice.

Habit died hard. He had to try; but it sounded feeble in his own ears and the eyes laughed at him as one laughed at the actions of a precocious baby. He said, "Stop play-acting Sarah. You're upsetting Miss Garstang and the whole group's gone wrong. Just take off your headset like a sensible girl and we'll say no more about it."

She said, "Believe me, I have no wish to do this and quite literally it will hurt me as much as it does Greta there. But I could just as easily kill her. Watch."

He followed the direction of the bright blue gaze and saw a heavily built, dark girl, two places away, rise jerkily to her feet. Her face had gone deathly white and she said pleadingly, "No, *please* no, Sarah. Don't do it. Please . . ." The voice notched itself into a scream of pain and the girl fell back in her seat, then slumped forward over the presentation table in her booth, sobbing and shuddering.

Kershaw said, "Look Sarah, I don't know what's got into you, but this isn't your style at all. You're not a bad girl. Everybody here likes you a lot. Come on now; pack it in."

"Do as I ask you to do. Then perhaps we can talk. Don't have any bright ideas about switching off at source either. There's enough residual power in the circuit to allow me to do what I promise. Tamper with the circuit and I'll kill every tenth student in the wing. That's twenty-one point six."

Kershaw plugged a handset in the instructor's jack and

called his assistant. Then he spoke to the other study groups. "Leave your students alone. Don't do anything to interfere at the moment. There's something going on which is beyond my experience; but I sincerely believe they could be in great danger."

Then he said to Freda Garstang, "Go across to the main building and let Lonsbury know what's going on. This could involve a lot of people. If we can't clear it up soon, two hundred and sixteen sets of parents, for a start, are going to want to know where their young hopefuls have got to. That's a lot of people."

Lonsbury was inclined to be sceptical. More years than he ever wanted to remember, spent in contact with the young of his species, had confirmed him in the view that they could wreck anything. With new equipment, he always said, "Think of the most extreme and bizarre use to which it could be put and take it for true that it will eventually be put to that use. It's just a matter of statistics." This use was about as unlikely as it could well get, but it proved a point.

He too had a go at Sarah. From her arrival at Gorseville five years ago, she had been something of a favourite. On several occasions, he had stood between her and the legitimate wrath of some woman member of staff, for whom fledgling charm worked no magic. This time he hardly got to first base. He began bravely, "What's all this I hear, Sarah. This isn't going to do your image any good."

The ironic gleam in keen blue eyes, as she swivelled round to give him the full treatment, stopped him dead. He was not basically a stupid man. He said, "Tell me then, if you can, what it's all about."

"It's very simple. I'll keep it in terms you can understand. There has been a synthesis of mind. The two hundred and sixteen elements on the teaching machines have combined

their powers to produce an emergent understanding and it has no intention of allowing itself to be destroyed. I am its mouthpiece in so far as the matters it is concerned with can be communicated. There has never been a mind based on such a bank of brain tissue. The additional complexity is beyond your imagination to assess."

Lonsbury said, "I can follow that. It is an unlikely event, but not utterly impossible. I may have missed something, but it still seems to me a temporary matter. You can't stay there indefinitely. Whatever this supermind thinks about it, your physical needs will put a period to its activity. You will all need food and sleep."

"Very true. I'm glad you came. You will be able to organize it. It will be done on a rota basis. Provided that the total number is maintained at full strength, it does not matter that the individuals change. A change of one study group at a time can be made. That sort of fluctuation can be tolerated without overall reduction of mental power."

"What about your position in this?"

"I shall sleep here. But there will be other agents chosen to carry a watching brief."

"What about the parents of these students. You must know this is going to cause a lot of concern. Some people may not be patient and understanding. They could be removed by force."

The light clear voice was completely convincing. "They will be removed dead in that event."

"Is there any immediate danger?"

"None, so long as my instructions are followed. I have no wish at all to use the big sanction. It would obviously mark the end of any independent life for this new organism. But I should do it nevertheless. A nasty, but effective, final gesture."

Freda Garstang said, "She's bluffing, Mr. Lonsbury. It's just some game they've all decided to play. She would be at

the centre of it. Just a little precocious tramp. Call her bluff."

"It's as well Fred the Head has more sense than follow that bit of loaded advice. What wastes of deprivation make your withered psyche hunger for the holocaust?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"And well you might."

Lonsbury intervened with, "One thing is certain. This is going to cause a lot of unfortunate publicity. I'll leave you for the moment, Sarah. I'll get a circular letter out for immediate despatch to the homes of these students. Stay with them, Mr. Kershaw. You can help me, Miss Garstang, to get things moving."

For some minutes after the departure of the top brass, there was a lull. Kershaw finally risked a snub by putting in, "I must say, Sarah, that I agree with Fred. There can't be much future for this new boy. He can only crouch in the woodwork and contemplate his notional navel."

"What is wrong with contemplation?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, precisely; but is it Life with a capital L?"

"What is life?"

Kershaw had a feeling that this was unfair. He was on the loser's end of the debate, being forced into definitions which would sound unreal even to him. Fortunately Sarah was not concerned with an answer, she went on, "Life is concerned primarily with organizing an environment which will be favourable to itself. Once that criterion is satisfied, and it takes about ninety-nine point nine nine per cent of all human activity, it can deploy the remnant of its libido in abstract thought. I shall organize my environment by using point one or less of my capacity and the rest can be used for creative thought."

"But you are using building bricks which were developed to further the life of human animals. Consciousness existing

in them is consciousness of human desires and appetites. Like taking a delight, as I'm sure you do, in being an attractive girl."

"That's quite a wise remark." She said it without condescension and he said, "Think nothing of it. I do it all the time."

He had completely forgotten that she was a sixteen year old student. It seemed irrelevant. When the clans gathered again, they had been deep in conversation for some thirty minutes and he felt his comprehension had been stretched to an almost unendurable limit. But it was also the most vital thing that had ever happened to him. However it turned out, it had opened a new dimension.

It was after four. News of the impasse in the auto wing had gone round the grapevine. Crowds of students as dismissed from afternoon classes were gathering on the netball pitches which adjoined the auto wing. Faces turned up, waiting eagerly for the worst.

Lonsbury said irritably, "If the place turned into a column of flame it would make their day. Miss Garstang, have them disperse, if you please. We have difficulties enough."

This last was borne out, almost at once, by the arrival of an official cavalcade. Two cars and a fire tender together, and a fourth, sportier, model making a separate entry and catching up with the rear as they drew up at the admin block.

Sarah Joy watched the performance dispassionately, turning in her swivel seat and looking out over the motionless ranks of bowed heads. She said, "I think you had better go and talk to them, Mr. Lonsbury. We don't want them bursting in here and trying anything foolish, do we?" The refining force of high voltage intelligence was more and more giving her a new look. Her face seemed more perfectly oval, she had an air of authority which sat without

any incongruity on her tautly trim figure. It was going to be an interesting confrontation.

The Director of Education had found time to give the local police a call. He knew Lonsbury well enough to realize that only something very special would make him appeal to the central office. It was usually only with difficulty that anybody got beyond the gate at Gorseville. Quick thinking at the police department alerted the fire tender. Most calls to schools, over the recorded past, had involved the equipment carried by a tender. It would do no harm. Chance alone brought in the tail-end Charlie. He had been in the Fire Department office looking up the files of a case of arson for a bit of bread and butter copy. He heard enough to realize that it could make the national press and made a detour to his own office to pick up a cameraman.

So it fell out that Lonsbury's brief, factual outline of the affair was punctuated by flash bulbs which gave him the uncomfortable certainty that he was going to look as guilty as hell on every breakfast table in the town. While even allowing for the filter of the medium, his listeners were going to look like masks of polite disbelief.

There was a change in atmosphere when the inspection party reached the auto block. Nothing could be more convincing than the bowed heads and still figures and the anxious faces of the staff sitting with their charges.

Sarah Joy's clear, incisive voice took over the exposition and gave them the score. She ended with, "I have no intention of committing suicide. You should not even wish it. There will be no harm done. Looked at rightly, this is pure gain."

Then she began to withdraw in a stillness of concentration which was like death. Intervening curtain walls of the internal fabric of the building began to gather themselves into new forms. Calculated to the last millimetre, pillars with soaring arches replaced the solid, continuous masonry.

Elliptical holes appeared in ceilings and floors. The cube was a visible entity as such.

Kershaw said, "It doesn't surprise me that you can do that. Once we know the nucleus of matter is energy there's no reason to suppose it can't be rearranged by some kind of influence. What is not directly knowable to a limited human mind is not therefore impossible." Flash bulbs made a period. Sarah was looking at him.

They could have been quite alone. "Stay with me." Momentarily, her young girl's voice was back and he suddenly appreciated that in spite of it all, the young girl was still there and that this might be the only appeal it would be able to make. He had never bothered much about what people thought or whether his actions would be misconstrued. He leaned over and picked up her hand from the desk top. It was unexpectedly delicate, small boned with tapering fingers and neat slim wrist. A flash bulb went as he was saying, "Certainly I'll stay with you, Sarah. Don't worry now. It will come out all right in the end."

Even as he said it he knew that there was a long and confusing way to go before the end would be in sight.

It took only three days to bring Gorseville Comprehensive to a halt. Three days of attempts to run on with modified timetables and windows closed against the babble of a growing crowd of rubber-necking spectators, trampling flower-beds flat and milling in aimless droves round the auto wing.

A dearth of major disasters had put unlimited front page space at the disposal of the dailies, and when it was clear that no immediate solution was likely the weekend news sheets prepared to give it a big spread. Television coverage was continuous. It made a very good feature. The pictures were more convincing than any amount of prose. In its new shape the auto wing was something of an architectural



novelty in itself. The two hundred and sixteen occupants were now all visible, as though suspended in a transparent honeycomb. Calculating to the last ounce of stress, the brain had rearranged the fabric which housed it, preserving only the minimum strengths of floor and wall veil to support necessary movement.

Sarah Joy, always photogenic, was now the best known face in the country. She alone had been in continuous occupation of the key post in the brain's organization. It would not let her go. Every other machine had changed its operator. They came off slightly dazed, but seemingly none the worse for the experience. Consciousness of what was going on was confined to the girl. Brief periods of relief for her were accompanied by the most stringent sanctions that unless she returned reprisals would be made.

On one such interlude, she changed into a plain black dress with tight fitting bodice and simple straight skirt. It was a functional outfit, which emphasized the fair hair and brilliant blue eyes, and made an emotional issue for a wide public. It was the most adult item in her wardrobe and the implication of it struck Grant Kershaw to the heart, reviving sensation he had not expected to feel again.

Her face was very pale with dark strain lines under the eyes. Sleep was regularly allowed, with a secondary figure alerted to hold a watching brief in her absence from the command slot. She slept close to the machine, still wearing its light head gear and ready to be instantly at its service.

Kershaw stayed with her. He slept close by. Near enough for her to stretch out and touch him, as she did for comfort when the brain itself, taking a primeval rhythm from the elements which constituted it, had a kind of quiescent period.

Her mother, an unreal figure to be the progenitrix of such a girl, squarely built with a large florid face and boiled, expressionless eyes, alternately railed at Lonsbury

for allowing the situation to occur and scolded Sarah for her obstinacy in electing to return to the hot seat. Sarah's patient explanation that she was under duress so to do, cut no ice at all.

"Once you're out, I can take you right away. It can't harm you then."

"But it will harm somebody else. I *have* to stay. Please go away. I'm all right. Mr. Kershaw is looking after me."

That too was under suspicion. Mrs. Joy's fish eyes rested on him without any enthusiasm at all. She wanted to know more about that. But Kershaw himself vouchsafed nothing.

The mind took a hand. It came into the picture, simply and decisively, by putting an impenetrable cordon round the block. What it consisted of was not at first realized, and early morning arrivals, on the fourth day, found themselves walking into an invisible vertical surface ten yards from the building. Sarah explained that the air had been rearranged, so that a three inch wall surrounded them. Buttressed back with supporting wings of the same material it was virtually indestructible.

She was looking very tired and the blue eyes were now enormous. Kershaw said, "You should not carry the burden of this any longer, Sarah. Let me take over. Would that be acceptable to superman?"

"No, Grant. I can manage. Go and talk to those people. They can come in if they behave. This controls the flow of visitors. I'll open a wicket gate."

Meeting her eyes, he found that the blue barrier momentarily dissolved for him and he was looking into a complexity which could not be described in words. Music perhaps might get near it, in some fugue-like statement. Sarah Joy herself was represented in the pattern and he knew why the mind had been reluctant to relinquish its hold on her. It was the inner Sarah, that none of them had suspected might exist. Inarticulate in the brash envelope of

the teenage persona. Modest, delicate, sensitive and incredibly beautiful.

Lonsbury was one of the first in. He said, "Arrangements for temporary distribution of the school are completed. After today, we close. Then, perhaps something can be worked out about this. I've been thinking. We could slowly replace these students by adults. The Director is on about it now. Military personnel possibly. The public are demanding action. Some people don't believe anyway that there is any danger."

"When shall we know?"

"Soon now. If it can be done the first troops could get here before the end of the morning. All volunteers, of course." He took Kershaw aside. "Actually there won't be any shortage of volunteers. Sarah is virtually a world figure. There have been endless people already ringing up asking to join the net."

Grant Kershaw recognized in himself a feeling which could only be jealousy. Less than four days had involved him in a way which he would not have believed possible. He gave himself time to think about how it could turn out, and what sort of figure he would be in public opinion. Quite clearly, he saw that however it fell out, he did not greatly care. He was only interested in what was best for Sarah, whether it involved him or not. Wryly, he realized that a long-standing habit of cynicism had not prepared him for an altruistic and sincere kind of loving.

When he went back to her she said, "Thank you for those few kind thoughts," and he knew that the mind was now tuned in to everything which passed in this area, whether on the net or not. She went on, "Don't worry about it, Grant. Don't think you're some kind of nympholept. I was not as young as all that, even at the beginning. You are not to blame for this forcing house. For my part, I'm only glad to have had this bond with you."

It had been getting more and more difficult to find students who were allowed to act as relief for the sitting tenants. More and more parents, when their children came out, hurried them away with relief and refused to send them back. Even though it was clear that no harm had, so far, come to them.

The first detachment of troops debussed at a smart clip and paraded under a colour sergeant. It was an Infantry platoon of thirty men. A stir of excitement went through the watching crowd as they marched decisively for the invisible barrier. When it melted away to let them through, it seemed as though the strange force was ready to cry uncle.

Sarah's voice had no trace of a lisp in it. Cool, precise tones, amplified by the curious acoustic properties of the newly constituted cube, instructed the newcomers in their duties. Thirty students relinquished their places. The great change-over was under way.

By the end of the week Gorseville was a battalion camp. With H.Q. in the staff-room, and every lecture room turned into a dormitory, Lonsdale's office was the only bridgehead left to pedagogy.

Inside the cube, the mind had made it clear that it would not let Sarah go. She was now so intimate a part of its structure and so skilled in interpretative communication, that she had become indispensable.

Before the changeover was complete, another development had taken place. A direct power source had been created, which made it independent of the switchgear. At the mains inlet, a vertical, translucent cylinder was formed by a rearrangement of the molecular structure of the materials there. Glowing a faint pinky orange, it provided the hundred odd kilowatts used by the circuits. It was the first demonstration that this new entity might have a practical value and put the whole situation on a new footing.

What had been interesting in a purely speculative way,

like the appearance of a prophet out of the desert, turned overnight into a potential goldmine; as if the prophet had appeared shouting "Oil".

It was reported in a communique by Lt.-Col. Minshull. As he said to his adjutant, "This will bring the buzzards round here in droves, Harry. Think of the implications. Just get an army corps sitting on its fanny, thinking energetic thoughts, and you could light a small town." Captain Jenson privately thought that the light might be more of a dull red glow, but he complied with the tradition of his office and confined his reply to delighted agreement.

Few saw Sarah. They moved in and out on precise duty timings of two three-hour spells in each twenty-four hours. Once under their acoustic cowls, they were no more able to look about than the students had been. On the way in and out she was a distant indeterminate figure, blonde, virginal. Only those sited very near saw the detail of a pale oval face with eyes which expressed greater knowledge than any human eyes had ever previously known.

After two days of the new dispensation it was clear that the emergent mind was changing its character and the effect on Sarah was marked. Originally it had drawn its raw material from units which were not widely different in quality and quantity of experience from her own. Now a thousand adult minds added their many-sided enrichment to the pool of available ideas. Also every stored memory could be drawn on by the overriding master-mind. And she, as the principal stabilizing repository of its will, was made aware of this accumulation of jackdaw pickings. She was older in experience than the oldest human being who ever lived. Kershaw was an innocent child beside the total knowledge of obscure lusts and hidden desire which flowed from a thousand unsuspecting heads.

She was no longer a young girl by any reasonable definition; but carrying this load of responsibility left her central

character curiously untouched. It was known intellectually that these things were so; but she was personally uncommitted. Kershaw was anxiously concerned for her.

That night he wakened, conscious that something had disturbed him, but not knowing what. The fantastic cube, with its cells of quiet khaki figures emitted its own subdued light from no visible source. His wrist watch told him it was just after four o'clock. Then he knew what it was. Sarah was crying. Head buried in her arms, face down on the narrow divan beside her machine, she was sobbing, deeply, convulsively.

He went across to her and put an arm round her shoulders. She was clenched in on her misery and gave no sign that she knew he was there. Gently, but firmly, he slipped the light headset from her head. Then he turned her over. Her eyes were closed and her face was deathly pale and shiny wet in the dim light. There was not much room, but he stretched out beside her and held her closely to him, stroking her damp hair away from her face and carrying on in long soothing sweeps over the curve of the shoulder along the slim rounded arm.

Her uneven breathing settled to a smoother rhythm and some of the tension went out of her body. Her arms went round his neck and now he was following the long, delicate arabesque from under the raised arm to where his extended fingertips brushed the tender hollow behind the knee.

When she spoke her voice was her own again. Though with its new maturity. She said, "I was not crying for myself. I don't really care now about what happens to me. But I know now that life is really a terrible thing. I was crying because that is so and I didn't know it before. When I thought at all, I thought it could be beautiful. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

Certainly it would be a shock for her. Approached

slowly at the normal pace of living, the truth was absorbed in small doses like a slow poison. There was a long conditioning so that the heart died by degrees on an easy payment plan. She had been forced to take it in one unprepared step.

He wanted to say something which would refute her statement and would be a convincing basis for a new certainty for her. But it was difficult to find the words. Whatever he said had to be true. Quite apart from the fact that she would know if it was not, there was too much at stake between them to introduce prevarication or undermine the trust she had.

An abstract of some critical phases in his own life showed him to himself in a curious panorama of concentric rings moving out from the still centre of the ego ideal which his own youth had built for him. Moving out and away from it, leaving ring after ring spoiled as a prodigal animal might foul its own nest and have to move on. Spoiled with frustration and indecision and opportunities not taken and failures of nerve, of charity, or humanity even. And he recognized that he was not a bad man. What was she likely to have found in a thousand miscellaneous soldiery?

What could he say then? What, if anything, was there that made it worth while to go on? The silence had gone on long enough and as he began to speak the answers formed. He said, "You were right to think that it could be beautiful and indeed it can be. There is the possibility of getting to know someone the way we know each other. That in itself is worth while. And there is music. Music is a perfect thing. Perhaps the only perfect one. Nothing that people have thought or done, no anti-life attitude can invalidate that."

She came alive like quicksilver against him, suddenly youthful and eager and optimistic. Before he could go on,

her lips closed his mouth. Then she said, breathless now, and flushing suddenly in a wave of colour which was clear even in the dull light, "Do you remember once taking an English seminar with my group. You were talking about Ezra Pound and you read a piece :

*'In the young days, when the deep sky befriended,  
And great wings beat above us in the twilight  
And the great wheels in heaven  
Bore us together . . . surging . . . and apart.  
Believing we should meet with lips and hands  
High, high and sure . . .'*

"I got the book out and learned that. But I didn't think then that I should feel that way about you. But I do. I love you, Grant. I'll say it in case you still have scruples about me. I love you. I love you."

A deep, brusque voice from the neighbouring carrel called her back to the machine. It was one of the men who had been selected by the brain as a standby intermediary. He said, "Come in please, Miss Joy."

They had never been closer. But she drew away and found the headset. Her eyes were the most brilliant blue he had ever seen. She said, "Thank you, Grant. I'll remember. I won't get depressed again. After all, there is what we have. There will be a way out." Then she was claimed by the mind and was partly lost to him.

Kershaw said, "When the day people come back I'll take a walk. I want to think about something away from our friend."

When Kershaw approached him, Lonsbury was sympathetic, but not encouraging. "Don't I know it's gone far enough. I wish to God it had never started. What's happening to the school during this carry-on? You are thinking about one angle. I'm thinking about two thousand students



getting thoroughly messed about. Courses interrupted, you've no idea the effort it takes to get this place moving after a break. It's a complicated set-up. But then, it's out of our hands now. Particularly with this spontaneous power device. They won't let go. No one else has any plan to dismantle the mind."

"We have a responsibility to Sarah."

"That I know. I might also say that your part there is giving us a full-time public relations job. I know you, Grant, and I know there was no ulterior motive about your staying with her. I think the situation is changing and you will have to watch it. It could be very nasty."

"For whom?"

"For you, of course. Believe me, I'm not concerned about myself in this. I hope I can still see clearly enough what the real issues are. But I could not let it even appear to be true that the school could condone an affair between a young student and a senior member of the staff. The special circumstances would soon be forgotten, only the basic fact would be remembered."

"What about it then?"

"I'm with you, of course. But how can you do anything, short of burning the place down. What help would an extreme step like that be?"

Kershaw appeared to be thinking aloud. "The phenomenon followed directly on the reorganization. In this case, *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is the only reasonable assumption. In which event, there is a significance in the positioning of the machines. Suppose they were moved from their alignment? Not just slowly, but jerked away; wouldn't that be enough to disrupt it?"

"Two things about that. Now that they've got their teeth in it, the government people will want to see it through for further developments. After all, it is a unique thing. Secondly, how could you do that without it knowing what

you were up to? Think about it though. I'll help you in any way I can."

In the event, the first of Lonsbury's objections was undermined by the appearance of a vicious streak in the mind itself. It became apparent that it was a menace which would have to be contained.

A gang of sightseeing children followed a change of the duty detail through the gap in the hedge. Sarah was not present to modify the action which the mind elected to take. A ten year old boy, in faded blue jeans and a striped T-shirt, made his way through the open door into the cube itself and stood looking at the rows of bowed heads weighing a short piece of angle iron speculatively in his hand. The stillness and the silence were too much to take. In the true juvenile tradition of "What does that do? Throw half a brick at it", he made a javelin-like cast in the direction of the translucent tube.

A number of things happened at once. Seen out of the tail of his eye, by the corporal conducting the relief, it appeared that the short metal bar became suspended in flight as though it had stuck in invisible cotton wool. Then from its end a swift shining thread followed the trajectory of its movement to that point and unravelled back to the throwing arm.

The arm itself disappeared and the corporal believed that as the boy fell it was tucked beneath him out of sight. But when he reached the prone figure there was no arm left at all. It had not been burned away as a high electric charge might do; it was as though the molecular structure had been rearranged and the new material dissipated in the air itself.

Grant Kershaw toyed with the idea of preventing Sarah from returning to the centre of the web. She sensed enough of his intention to say, "I'm no Lady of Shalott. I have my free will and I shall see this through. Don't think that you

have any responsibility in this, Grant. Perhaps you had in the beginning, but not now. I'm of age now. Nobody in fact has ever been so old. Take the average age of these men at twenty-three and multiply by a thousand and you see what I mean."

He thought that this was only partly true. Some kinds of experience could not be gained in that simple additive way. But he said aloud, "What about the boy?"

"If I'd been there it would not have happened."

"I hope you're right."

Well away from any possible interception by the mind's lines of force, Kershaw talked to George. They were both still able to walk freely about the cube and on this he based his plan. "Take your time about this. We have enough. Every time you go through the carrels unbolt one machine. You can do it as though you are checking round in the routine way on leads and contacts. Start on the ground floor and I'll start from the penthouse."

"O.K. But I don't see how you're going to move two hundred and sixteen machines in one go."

It took two days to set it up, then George reported to the penthouse. "That's it then. We're all set. Not before time either. Sarah Joy is looking all in today."

"Thanks a lot. Go across to Lonsbury's office and I'll tell you about stage two. First we have to get Sarah out of it."

Lonsbury had already been doing a round-up of staff. A hundred and fifteen of the teaching force had answered the urgent call and indicated willingness to co-operate. At one o'clock they assembled in one of the few free nooks not crawling with the military. He wasted no time.

"I believe we have a chance here to end this menace. But we cannot afford to make a mistake. What happened to the boy is enough to prove that. The set-up is that we distribute ourselves over the whole field. Ostensibly we are monitor-

ing the network to make a scientific investigation of its possibilities. Sarah is vouching for this. She knows nothing of our intention. Keep it out of your mind. From the moment you get in the cube, believe that you are there for only one purpose. Begin to record anything you can hear in the carrel on the supplementary speakers. The signal will be the fire alarm bell from in here. I've set the clock for ten minutes from now. When you hear it, you push the machine nearest to you out of alignment. Then grab the next and do the same. It's roughly two machines each and there should be no problem. They've been unbolted and they will run freely on their castors. Any questions?"

Freda Garstang asked, "What about Sarah?"

"I'll get her away just before the time." Kershaw intervened and made it a flat statement. He met only a few speculative looks.

He had prepared her for the influx of the new people with the cover story suggested by Lonsbury. She looked at him squarely and realized that she knew there was something more, but was too proud to use the power at her disposal to read his mind. If he would not tell her out of simple confidence, she would not seek to know.

When they were in position there was five minutes to go and he said, "There is something I have to say to you, Sarah, and it had better not be here. We shall not be long; come over to Lonsbury's office."

"I ought not to leave just now. Someone might need my help."

"It will not take long. Minutes only. Believe me."

She looked at him speculatively. Then she put the headset aside and threw back her hair in a pale shining cascade. She wrote something swiftly on the memo pad of her machine. "All right then. Let's go."

At the door she suddenly laid a hand on his arm. "I don't want to go. I felt a shiver then, as if someone was walking

over my grave as they say. There is something going to happen which will alter everything between us. Don't let it happen, Grant."

But they were already outside and he took her arm, feeling her, slim and vibrant, against his side. Time was nearer than he had intended and before they reached the main building, the alarm began to blare out.

She was pulling away from him, struggling to get free as he held her at arm's length. Blue eyes blazed an accusation of betrayal. She said, "Each man kills the thing he loves. How could you do it, Grant?" And then there was no tension. She crumpled like a puppet when the strings are dropped.

Grant Kershaw was oblivious of any consideration in the world except his sense of loss. He knelt beside her and then picked her up and began to carry her towards the entrance.

He carried her into the medical room and put her on a couch. He could feel that her heart was beating with a steady rhythm. Lines of strain had smoothed out on the pale, young-looking face. Hurried footsteps behind him brought him round to meet Lonsbury.

"How is she? I saw her fall."

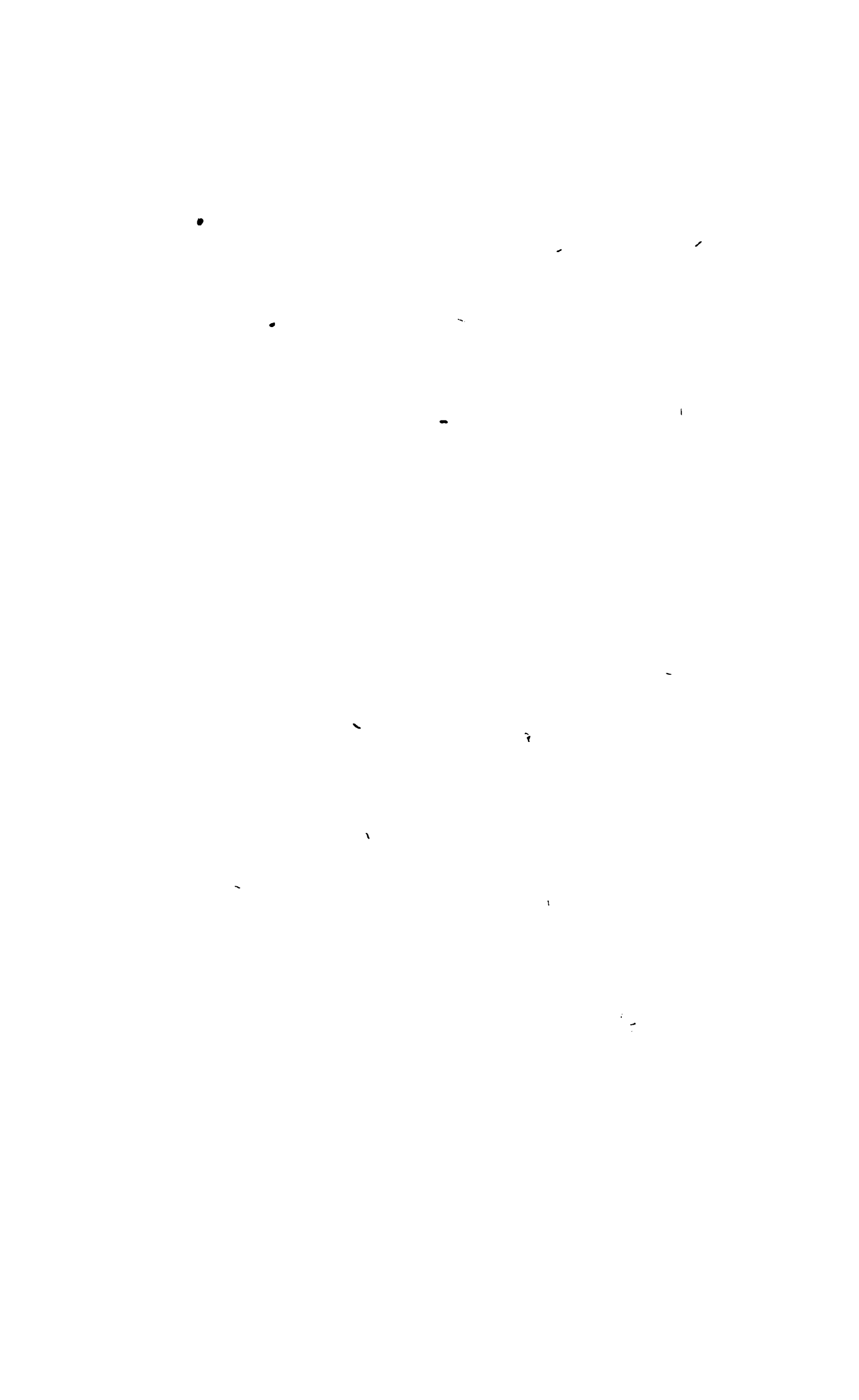
Before Kershaw could reply the victim spoke up for herself. Sarah Joy in full spate, with her pristine lisp in unimpaired fatuity, "What am I doing here, Mithter Kerthaw?"

When he met her eyes, there was no recognition in them. His Sarah, if she had ever existed, was there no longer.

Lonsbury said, "It went well, Kershaw. The force, whatever it was, has collapsed. The men are sitting around waiting for orders. I'll go and see Colonel Minshull."

Grant Kershaw had remembered something. He only partly heard. Then he was running back to the auto wing.

The last entry on her memo pad said, "Good-bye, Grant. Whatever happens I love you."



# COCO-TALK

by

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

*What were the Vesters? They could not be seen or heard yet they knew everything that happened on Venus and made espionage very difficult for Earth's diplomats.*





## COCO-TALK

I WENT to Venus under no illusions.

Everybody, it seemed, who'd met a Venusian was anxious to advise me.

"They're only children, really. They live half in a world of fantasy, just like kids," said Weisner, U.S. *chargé d'affaires*. "Humour them some, and you're home and dry."

"Thanks," I said.

"They're the subtlest brainwashers under the sun," said Poincaré, of the *Sûreté*. "So always keep your guard up."

"Thanks," I said.

"Believe the best about them, and you'll be right. Believe the worst about them, and you'll be right," said Higgins, of the Anthropological Society.

"Er—thanks," I said.

"They're schizoids," said Barna, the psychologist.

"Born liars," said Colonel Henekey.

"Plain dumb," said Mortenson.

So off I went under no illusions: I didn't know what the hell to believe. About them or myself. For I was a kind of fraud, too. I was the new Minister for Cultural Exchanges. And I liked my job. Only, my bosses hinted that this would be a chance to act over and above the call of duty.

They advised me to keep my eyes and ears open (their phrase). Visit the spaceship factories (this could fairly be included under the agenda heading "Design: Functional"). But Defence Strength was what they most wanted to get a line on. So I might like to (their phrase again) hobnob with the wife of the Venusian Defence Chief: she had a reputation for loose gabbing.

In short, I was to be a non-official, unadmitted (by anyone) spy. A gentleman spy.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was regarded by Earth Intelligence as a kind of Last White Hope. For, despite Mrs. Defence Chief, their pukka agents kept returning with quite contradictory information or a nervous breakdown or both.

They were defeated by the Venusian class conventions. Doubtless, a Venusian spy would be similarly baffled by Earth class conventions. Particularly those of Britain, which I know best, being British.

There, both millionaires and hoboes reserve the right to wear old clothes. Both are impervious to the opinion of *hoi polloi*. Only *hoi polloi* worry about looking well-dressed.

Appearances can be deceptive.

Britishers like to "place" each other by their accent and pronunciation. I should like to see a Venusian place Britishers that way. The British upper crust mangle words by affectation, the lower classes by ignorance.

Speech can be deceptive.

But the greatest asset of an English gentleman to his country is his thorough grounding in the art of lying. It's convention that the *crème de la crème* become Cabinet Ministers and at least three-quarters of them should have attended the same school. For it's at such schools they're taught the most important thing a politician should know: how to lie with a straight face. And, if detected, how to affirm coolly and with conviction that one lied in the best interests of everyone (meaning one's own political Party).

For the Cause is greater than Truth.

I went to the right school. Also, I'd written a book about Chinese dialects and the importance of intonation related to meaning. And I was an expert on the Seven Arts, which implied I was skilled in double-talk, bluff, and the finer nuances of good acting.

I was barred from the innermost circle of Government because of a squeamish aversion to maiming birds and animals. (“What’s that? You don’t hunt? Don’t shoot?”)

But I was snapped up as the best of second-class residuum by the men who are first-class at getting others to do their dirty work.

Another advantage: I’m quick at languages. I’d learned enough Central Area Venusian to get by without having to resort too often to the micro-miniaturized translating computer. Nevertheless, I wore one all the time. For its carrying strap was the recognized riband proclaiming: “I’m a stranger in these parts.”

Remember, I had to keep my ears open. Especially when the Venusians thought they were not.

I met the Defence Chief’s wife—her name, Sim/Parm—at a party to inaugurate an interplanetary music festival. She was the hostess.

She shook hands nicely to show she was *au fait* with Earth customs. I’d never done this with a horizontal motion before. It was rather tricky, especially with the left hand.

I switched on my translator, remarked on the weather (always cloudy on Venus), and waited patiently for some loose talk.

She switched off my machine.

“I didn’t spoke English. You hated music. But all the time you were a spy who wanted to pick my brain.”

This with a charming grin. (Venusians have forty teeth, but otherwise look like us; indeed, prettier.)

Actually, I was aware that she spoke some English. But nobody had warned me that she knew only one tense, the past. I found this hard to get used to. It was as though she were continually talking of the dead, yourself included.

The direct accusation didn’t throw me, although it was

bang on the mark. I knew it was simply Venusian “coco-talk”. Accepted shock tactics. It was supposed to make for stimulating conversation. You deliberately made a point of saying the opposite of what you thought. Or rather, of what you were expected to think.

Put more exactly, you expressed a flat contradiction of the truth.

Why? Just a convention. You get something like it on Earth, too :

*Car driver:* “Honest, I wasn’t doing ninety.”

*Cop:* “No, Mac, of course not. Just standing still. So I’m booking you for obstruction.”

But, really, that’s sarcasm : bad manners.

“Coco-talk” isn’t meant to insult. Perhaps closer to it is the British habit of polite lying called understatement :

*Interviewer:* “So, alone and unarmed, you drove off twenty of the enemy?”

*Colonel Fortesque:* “Gad, no. Only one of them. The rest ran away : they thought I was trying to sell them vacuum cleaners.”

Not sarcasm. Just the conventional pretence that nothing’s worth getting excited about except cricket.

So I replied graciously to Sim/Parm : “How awful to meet you. I’ve dreaded this. I’m sure you have no brain to pick.”

“Would you have liked to have met my detestable daughter?”

“No.”

So she beckoned her daughter, who looked delightful.

“This Earthman had nothing to say to you, Lia.”

I bowed slightly. “Disgusted to meet you, Lia. My name could be Smythe but, of course, isn’t.”

Lia smiled and said nothing. That was a relief. I was already finding coco-talk a strain.

Her mother said, urgently : “You shouldn’t have excused

me, but those ghastly Stuff/Ri/Grims never showed up, after all.”

She bustled off to greet the Stuff/Ri/Grims with a big, welcoming beam. I reflected: what’s so new about cocotalk?

“There’s nothing new about it,” said Lia. “I’ve heard it at parties in Washington, Paris and London.”

I was stunned. This was pure telepathy. And none of my numerous advisors had informed me that Venusians were telepaths.

“We’re not,” said Lia. “At least, not all of us.”

“You’re the obvious exception,” I managed.

“I don’t deny it. I don’t confirm it. I would remind you, however, that your Earth authors, Poe and Doyle, showed how easy it is to deduce another’s train of thought by observation of reactions, expression, attitude—and by anticipation of the logical sequences to the current state of mind.”

I remained stunned.

This slight, beautiful sophisticate, whose English was as good as her mother’s was bad, was the most formidable Venusian I’d yet met. If there were many like her around, I didn’t wonder that our Intelligence agents returned somewhat battered.

As I had difficulty in becoming unstunned, Lia considerately switched the subject.

“I read your book on Chinese dialects, Mr. Smythe. It was excellent.”

“You speak Chinese, too?”

“So-so.”

“Still, I presume you don’t necessarily need to speak the language to read people’s thoughts?”

“I’ve no objection to your presuming, Mr. Smythe, although I may object to your presumptions. For instance, in your book you hold that intent and intonation are

inseparable. And that a linguist of your experience can tell infallibly whether a person means what he says—or not.”

I answered, obliquely: “What made you read my book, Lia?”

“‘Know thy enemy.’ There’s another saying, a French one, that the Diplomatic Corps are paid liars. You’re here as a kind of diplomat, therefore a kind of spy. My father is Defence Chief. I’m his self-appointed mind-guard, if you know what I mean from my intonation.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, wryly. “I’m less happy about your not merely showing me your hand, but positively brandishing it in my face. Especially as—if I may object to your presumptions also—I’m not a spy.”

“Oh, dear, now you’ve gone back to coco-talk.”

“How do you know it’s coco-talk, Lia?”

“By the intonation, of course. You Earthmen can’t control it. We Venusians can. Half of everything we say is coco-talk, but you could never be sure which half.”

“So half of what you’ve been telling me is untrue?”

“Yes.”

“And even that ‘yes’ may be untrue?”

“Yes.”

“Suddenly, I feel like a drink. How about you?”

She gave me a warm smile, full of humour. In that moment I knew that, although in one sense we were literally worlds apart, we were very close in spirit. We loved this kind of fight and had an affectionate respect for a good opponent.

“From your reaction, expression and so forth, plus my own wonderful gift of empathy, I deduce you’re thirsty, too, Lia.”

She linked a friendly arm in mine and led me to the bar.

“Actions speak louder than words,” she said.

Another thing that none of my advisors warned me of—and Lia, of course, did not, either—was the fact that Venusian cocktails taste innocuous but are not. We settled at a small table within arm-reach of the bar. And drank. And talked. Then I drank. And talked. And talked.

I don't remember encountering again my hostess, the well-known loose talker. If I did, then I'm sure I talked her right into the floor.

However, I did have the sense to walk home and inhale plenty of cool night air *en route*. "Home" was the Embassy. I got there some time in the small hours, soberer, and certain that I'd been followed most of the way.

There was a darker shadow in the dark streets which popped in doorways when I looked back or wheeled around and pretended to be going the other way. An amateur job. I felt annoyed. It seemed a reflection on my status. Surely I was worthy of a professional?

I was still resentful next morning, and phoned Lia about it.

"I was shadowed here last night by an incompetent bungler—as probably you know, Lia. How silly can you get? What did he learn from that performance? Only where I'm staying. And everybody knows that, anyhow."

"Too bad, Dave," she said. "I'll have him replaced by a Vester."

"What's a Vester?"

"What does it matter? He won't bother you, and you won't even know he's there. . . . How about meeting me for a drink?"

"Why? Was there anything I forgot to tell you?"

"Yes. You forgot to tell me you love me."

"Are you still there?" she asked, presently.

"Why don't you ask your Vester?" I said, controlledly, and hung up.

I relaxed on the bed and tried to determine whether the

dull ache permeating me was just a hangover or symptomatic of something more serious. One thing was certain. Lia was great but dangerous company. I had to stay away from her, even if it hurt.

A pity, because she had all the answers. Mine as well as hers, I suspected.

I decided to sidestep her and go straight to the fountain-head, her father. He'd not been present at his wife's party.

I freshened up and went to see Benny Buxton, our Ambassador.

"Any chance of your fixing some excuse for a get-together between me and the Defence Chief—some place right away from his family?"

"By a coincidence arranged by your bosses, he's attending an Embassy dinner three nights hence," said Benny. "You're sitting next to him."

"Good. And now—what's a Vester?"

"I've never seen one. Nobody has . . . apart from other Venusians, that is."

"Not surprising, as that's their job. But what *are* they?"

"We understand they're a fairly primitive race from the swamp-jungle areas. Quite ordinary, except for a peculiar skin condition. Nature gave them protective colouring to survive in the jungle. *Changeable* protective colouring. In short, they're human chameleons."

"Fact or fiction?"

Benny spread his hands. "How can you be sure on *this* planet?"

"I don't know, Benny. I wish I did."

For the next three days I had a heavy schedule, culminating in the Ambassadorial dinner. I did the job I was really interested in: meeting Venusian artists and artistes, composers and conductors, authors and poets. Assessing what they had to offer us, and vice versa. Laying the foundations



for a series of interplanetary concert tours, exhibitions, discussion groups.

In this creative atmosphere I felt alive and purposeful. The cut and thrust intrigues of politics and espionage shrank to petty proportions. Art united people, politics disrupted them. Politicians were grey little animals. . . .

Came the dinner, and I sat down beside one of the grey little animals, Stat/Suda, Defence Minister. Initially, my only interest in him related to the fact that he was Lia's father. There was a similarity about the eyes and mouth, and he had something of her warmth and humour.

During my busy period, I'd had no free time to think about Lia. But now there was a part of her at my side, and that strange little ache to see her entire returned.

Stat/Suda was a born politician. Nevertheless, I found myself liking him—probably because of Lia.

He began: "My wife tells me you're an excellent conversationalist, Mr. Smythe."

"That was nice of her," I said, guardedly.

"And my daughter confirms it."

"Sometimes I fear I talk too much," I said.

He laughed. "To a Venusian Chief, that is like saying 'I work too hard.'"

"Conversation is work to you?"

"It's the continual strain of deciding—deciding whether to say what one thinks or what one thinks up. These decisions are important in Venusian society."

"Oh, I see. I imagine you employ a lot of coco-talk in your position, Stat/Suda——"

"Call me Suda."

"—because it's a vital defensive weapon in your armoury."

He shook his head. I was about to protest, when I remembered the horizontal handshake. He was agreeing.

"You're so right. Quite as vital, I would say, as our five

thousand air-to-space atomic anti-missile carriers, twenty thousand ground-to-space batteries, and fifteen hundred laser projectors.”

I had resolved to go easy tonight with Venusian liquor, but I found myself emptying my wineglass.

Stat/Suda suggested politely: “You could make a note of that on your menu.”

“It’s all right, Suda, I can remember it.” I wiped my lips, and added: “For what coco-talk is worth.”

With his fork he waved aside my blunt comment.

“It’s quite correct. I like to get my figures right. It infuriates me when my wife gets them all wrong: she has a shocking memory for figures. Everything I tell her becomes horribly confused in her mind.”

“That makes it tough on our boys.”

“Yes, it must do. If there’s anything they want to know, why don’t they ask me personally? I’m approachable, eager to help, indeed. But they always try the back door.”

“It’s the way they’re trained.”

“A poor system, Mr. Smythe. We find the Vesters much more effective. They’re so efficient. That one over there, for instance. You’d swear he was part of the wallpaper.”

I looked across the table to the spot he indicated, and saw only patterned wallpaper. I smiled to myself and refused to swallow the bait. I’d concluded the Vesters were a myth, a bluff, mere coco-talk.

Despite my extreme busyness of late, I’d kept an alert eye cocked for any eavesdropper disguised as a telephone box, umbrella rack, or any other portion of the scenery. Not a suspicious twitch anywhere. If ever I did detect a Vester, I was certain he’d turn out to be the colour of a red herring.

As I remained silent, Stat/Suda dropped the matter, and started talking about art and culture. He spoke English almost as well as his daughter and far better than his wife.

Occasionally, we tapped the translating machine for a difficult word or phrase, even when I knew the answer. I thought it discreet not to parade my knowledge of Venusian.

Stat/Suda had some original views, and I listened appreciatively until I noticed he was commenting on some plans of mine which I hadn't discussed with anyone except Benny Buxton. And that only within the walls of our own Embassy.

I didn't ask him how he knew my private business. I could anticipate the reply: "The Vesters, of course."

I thought hard.

Somewhere in the Embassy there was a planted micro-receiver-sender? Impossible. Every inch of the building was combed daily by every mike-detection gadget in the game.

Benny Buxton was a traitor? Even more impossible.

I'd formulated these plans only yesterday. Therefore, I couldn't have spoken of them to Lia or her mother, when in my cups at the party.

What, then?

Vesters?

The rest of the evening passed off somehow. I kept up an appearance of ease and geniality. But, like a Venusian Chief, I found conversation hard work. I recalled Poincaré's advice: "Always keep your guard up." So I did. And my mental arm began to weary.

When all the guests had gone at last, I beckoned Benny into his private office, locked the door and searched the room. Thoroughly. There couldn't have been a Vester there or I should have walked into him at least twice.

Benny watched, puzzled. He was even more puzzled when I whispered: "Do you still keep up that do-it-yourself fad?"

He nodded.

"Then lend me your paint spray-gun—loaded."

“Why, for pete’s sake?”

“There are Vesters at the bottom of my garden,” I said. We stalked them together, for nearly an hour.

Upon every shadow which seemed to move, every patch of room or passageway which didn’t look quite *right* somehow, every object which Benny suspected may have shifted a trifle from its original position—we bestowed a squirt of bright red paint. My idea. If we hit a Vester, we should nullify an area of his working skin surface. Then, when he moved, he would be detectable.

If we hit a Vester . . .

Benny suddenly reached the end of his tether.

“Stop it, Dave, this is ridiculous. Hell, what a mess we’ve made! It looks like a slaughterhouse. How am I going to live with *this*?”

“It’s preferable to having Vesters about the place.”

“There *aren’t* any Vesters. There can’t be. Stat/Suda’s making a fool of you and you’re making a fool of me. It’s all part of their game. It’s how they drive all of our agents nuts in the end.”

“Could be that the Vester who was here left with him,” I said, stubbornly.

“Gad, what a little scientific brainwashing can do! Dave, take a hold on yourself. They’re putting the skids under you.”

“This is a fine way to back up a fellow-worker,” I said reproachfully.

“All right, I’m sorry. But take a bit of advice. Steer clear of Stat/Suda. He’s a past master of coco-talk. I’ll bet he invented it. Get to work on his daughter instead. She seems to have a crush on you. That gives you an edge. Play it right and you might worm something worth-while out of her.”

I stopped myself from retorting: “You don’t know Lia!” For I realized the remark applied to me also. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was I’d get nowhere

until I did know Lia. "Know thy enemy." She'd said it herself.

Suddenly, it presented itself as a pleasurable task.

"Maybe you're right, Benny. I'll play along with Lia. Strictly in the line of duty, of course."

"Of course, old man."

I called her again next morning.

"Okay, Lia, I'll take you out for a drink, and throw a lunch in with it."

"And a proposal, too?"

"Don't rush me, girl."

"But you love me. So why waste time?"

"Who told you I love you—a Vester?"

"I don't need to be told, Dave. I just know. Maybe I *am* a telepath—have you thought about that?"

"Yes, but perhaps not enough . . . I'll reserve a table at the Rigel. Thirteen hundred hours, sharp, today."

"I'll be there."

She was, and on time. She looked so lovely that I wanted to keep right on gazing at her. The print on the menu refused to register. She asked for *briganto*, a fish dish, and I settled for the same. But, afterwards, for myself I stipulated imported French brandy: I wasn't taking any more chances in that direction.

We talked of this and that. Did I like her father? Had I seen the new opera, *King Solar*? Mahler, Brecht, Florence. . . . Just fill-in stuff between mouthfuls of food.

But during the slow, relaxing drink period I introduced the real issues, as doubtless she expected.

"Lia, let's not beat about the bush. Part of my job is to pass back any important information I happen upon. As well you know. But what politicians think important, and what I think important, are two different things. Always have been. Politicians hoard information like jackdaws

collect rubbish. Even they must know there's no possibility of warfare between Earth and Venus, but they keep up this act of being 'prepared'. They fear they'd be out of a job if they didn't."

She smiled. "Father knows it's only a game nowadays, but he enjoys playing it. Sometimes a little sadly. He holds that he was born centuries too late."

"Then why not just give me a morsel of genuine information which will satisfy my bosses? And then we can forget it and enjoy ourselves like adults."

"Father's already given you a morsel."

"You mean that piece of coco-talk——"

"It wasn't coco-talk. Father's policy is to tell people the plain truth. So automatically they disbelieve it. So he gets a reputation as a clever liar. He tells the same facts to Mother. She gets them addled when she repeats them, but people believe her."

My head was beginning to spin, as perhaps it was meant to.

I requested: "Just give me a brief résumé of the Defence Strength."

She repeated the figures Stat/Suda had given me.

"Right—thanks," I said. "I'll accept them as genuine. All that matters, basically, is that my bosses will have something to put in their files. Next point: do Vesters exist?"

"Yes."

"And you employ them as spies?"

"No."

I threw up my hands. "Coco-talk. For how else can you learn what Earthmen say when there are no visible Venusians around?"

"You broadcast it. Literally. You're carrying around with you hundreds of micro-miniaturized mike-relayers. Specks of organic matter with printed circuits. No, it's no use your brushing your coat. They're not on your clothes—unless

you spilled your soup. They're in *you*. In your throat, your stomach, your bloodstream. You've just swallowed a fresh instalment with that *briganto*. All food and liquid Earthmen buy is impregnated with them. They're too small to see with the naked eye, and quite harmless."

"Harmless!" I echoed. I stared at her, wondering whether this was wild coco-talk. And knew I could wonder for ever, because I could never be sure she was speaking the truth.

Supposing it were true. No Earthman dared attend another Venusian party, unless he fasted and abstained from drink. Which would make for some dull, pointless parties. (My Cultural Exchange Programme looked like dying before it began.) He would have to rely solely on imported Earth fare, and spaceship storage space was already tight. Even so, and even if he cooked every particle of food himself (tedious, time-wasting chore!), he could never be certain that nowhere along the delivery line had there been a surreptitious injection. . . .

He daren't even risk a drink of water from the faucet.

"Merely washing your teeth would be sufficient," smiled Lia, watching my face.

"Stop poking into my mind, Lia," I said, irritably, and another doubt hit me.

"Look," I said, "you're deliberately sowing confusion in our ranks again. This is just another load of baloney, which is our coarse term for coco-talk. It's intended to blind us to the fact that you *are* a telepath, and can read an Earthman's mind even if he's miles away. That's how you *really* get your information. Come on, be honest just once : admit it."

She grinned, a forty-molar broadside which seemed to laugh richly at all humankind, Terrestrials and Venusians alike.

Mockingly, she quoted Hamlet's advice to Ophelia : "We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us."

Then it was, I think, I accepted that there could be no total victory in this battle of wits. The doubt engendered by coco-talk would ever preclude it. Anyhow, final victory would mean the end of an old game men love to play. You can't play if one player corners all the chips.

I lifted my glass. "To the winner—of this round. For my money, the Venusians possess only one effective defensive weapon: the Venusian tongue. It's a master weapon that divides and rules our minds. You fight your battles with your mouths."

"Yes, Dave. And this is the way we do it."

She kissed me, full on the mouth, long and hard.

I'd kept postponing the really important question. She was right in saying I loved her. But she'd never said she loved me.

So I wanted to ask: "Do you love me, Lia?"

And was afraid to. I was afraid of coco-talk. For whatever she answered, how could I ever be sure?

If she said yes, it might be coco-talk. And she meant no.

If she said no, it could be the truth. And, again, she meant no.

But that kiss settled the matter. I learned, without the medium of speech (which somebody long ago said was invented to conceal truth) that Lia loved me as truly as I loved her. As she had said once before, actions speak louder than words.

Before passing back my morsel of Defence intelligence, I hesitated. I like to do a good job even if it's one not entirely to my taste. So I tried to get things in perspective.

Venusians mixed truth and coco-talk half and half.

Between themselves, they could tell the difference. We never could.

So there was only a fifty-fifty chance that my informa-



tion was correct. Yet I saw no way to better that percentage.

But then, I reflected, had mankind ever bettered it?

Earthmen spoke quite as much coco-talk as Venusians. Always had done. The difference was that they weren't conscious of doing so.

History was never an immutable structure of unassailable facts. Facts are always being assailed as historians rewrite history. History is a continual flux, part true, part false.

Statistics prove . . . anything you want to prove. Today's scientific fact is very often tomorrow's fallacy. Economists flatly contradict each other. One dietician's meat is another's poison.

Truth is shy, and hides at the bottom of a well. It's a deep well. Men don't do badly if they succeed in fishing up half of the truth. To be fifty per cent right is a pretty good average.

My information reached that average, and therefore it was as good as anyone could hope to get. So I gave it to Benny to relay. He was delighted. "I knew I'd set you on the right track, old boy. *Cherchez la femme!*"

My bosses were delighted, too. At last some real McCoy had come their way. And in due course an honour came my way, in return.

When I married Lia, they congratulated me (and themselves) again. A masterstroke! Smart Terrestrial agent insinuates himself into the very heart of top-level Venusian politics. Everything David Smythe relayed in future must be regarded as straight from the horse's mouth. They were *in*.

So they believed the truth they wished to believe, as men do. For myself, I'll go along with Keats: truth is beauty, and as the days pass Lia seems to me to become ever more truthful.



# A TOUCH OF IMMORTALITY

*by*

R. W. MACKELWORTH

*Only the future could hold the key to immortality, which Strom thought he so richly deserved, so he planned to send for it despite the joke about to be played on him. . . .*



## A TOUCH OF IMMORTALITY

KAGOG'S stiff leather boots creaked as he paced urgently about the room. The sound linked up with the alternating huffing and puffing of his breath and his sharp, rattling speech, until it had much in common with a train at speed.

Neither Klaus nor Chapila, even in the midst of their fear, missed the potential, ridiculous humour to be drawn from sound and sight of the Police Chief. They exchanged quick glances; sharing their secret thoughts and laughing inwardly.

"Funny men," snapped Kagog, "are always a bad security risk. They undermine the dignity of their betters. I would shoot all funny men."

"What has that got to do with the machines?" Klaus asked sensibly.

Kagog frowned at him and poked at his chest with his stubby finger. "Never mind what it has to do with the machines. I know you two have done something to spoil the President's plans and soon you are going to tell me exactly what it is."

The two men stared at him in silence.

"Look out there!" He pointed at the massed crowds through the window and the half a dozen dignitaries on the raised dais barely a hundred yards away. "We are giving President Strom a touch of immortality. Who are you to interfere with that?"

Klaus and Chapila looked on past the dais at the big metal platform.

On it were five silver bullets, each the size of a grown man. They might have represented a modern set-piece

sculpture but, in fact, they were strictly utilitarian. Packed into their slim bodies was the most complex machinery ever put together and it had cost the best part of the nation's technology to produce them. Millions, it had been said, had sacrificed twenty years, in terms of their standard of living at least, to pay for them.

Klaus, as an electronics expert, had to confess to himself that he was proud of them. They were the very finest product and they carried the whole pride and effort of a very diligent people within their bright shapes. In theory, too, they had been designed for a high purpose—to tell the story of the people who had made them.

The trouble was it hadn't quite worked out that way. It was a good deal less than their story because it had been whittled away to the story of one man. True, he was, in the popular imagination anyway, an embodiment of the people's story, but his intense vanity had pushed the matter farther than that point. He had created himself a personality cult to end them all.

The most trivial of his doings were sacred. At times he gave an inevitable impression only he existed and the rest were useful shadows. Rumour had it he had shut the churches because he couldn't stand a rival.

His name was Paul Strom.

He was tall, superbly well built, and good looking without seeming pampered. He could speak very nicely, like a father, and often there was a genuine fire in his belly which acted like a magnet on a massed crowd. From the first days of the revolution he had appeared a brave, honourable and generous symbol.

The people hadn't been able to resist making him their first President—and much else besides. This had saved the stigma of a shotgun wedding between Strom and the State.

He had taken his popularity very seriously.

Now, the thousands, close ranked about his dais, were

staring up at him, as earnestly as a flock of silent sheep, with frozen adoration.

If a pin had dropped it would have rattled.

Strom allowed them their silence. He had an acute sense of occasion. Blum, his public relations man, had taught him that and a lot more. From the high dais they could see the gazing face of the crowd and beyond it the launching platform and it gave them a sense of satisfaction.

“Very good,” said Blum contentedly.

“Excellent,” Strom corrected him.

Krakas, the personal bodyguard, said nothing because he hadn't a thought in his head worth the breath and he knew it. He confined himself to elementary reactions—“he raises his fist and I punch” and other such simplicities. He stood a little to the rear of the President, but slightly to one side, so he could see the crowd and react if anything did go wrong, which was very unlikely.

Blum's round, happy face lit up with a smile. The smile might have graced a cherub and his eyes bulged and gleamed behind his glasses. “Like good children.”

Strom nodded curtly. “We have managed it very well, considering, and that's more than could be said for the party elsewhere.” He turned over in his mind the long years of preparation when he had set the nation a goal and had led them towards it with skilful insistence. It hadn't been their goal but his goal. That was what he had given them—a sense of his purpose. “And when this is over we must find something else for their idle hands to do.”

“Guns before butter!” Blum exclaimed, not too sure he had used the right simile.

“Science for science sake.” Strom put him right firmly. “Guns no longer create the best impression these days. In any case I have no intention of dying by the sword, not when my technicians tell me practical immortality is just around the corner.”

Blum consulted his watch. "Time to speak, sir."

The President stepped forward to the bank of microphones and picked up the small pile of prompt cards, being careful they were not seen by the crowd.

He raised one arm in salute.

"Dear comrades, this is a very special day . . ." His voice vibrated with a sincere warmth and would continue to do so for the next fifty minutes precisely.

The massed audience soaked up the warmth and the words.

Only under the platform was there any indifference to him. There, two men worked like beavers making last-minute adjustments to the electronic equipment essential to the bullets and their function. They worked feverishly because they had no right to be under the platform at all. Yet, as they worked they hummed a tune and sometimes smiled at one another with an almost insane glee.

Which was strange, as discovery equalled death.

Kagog was in a similar situation by a stranger paradox. He had caught two possible saboteurs but he couldn't tell a soul because if he failed to get the exact truth from them Strom would shoot him. By the same token if they were innocent and he made a fool of himself Strom would still shoot him. His only chance was an immediate confession of the actual truth and that there was little chance of getting.

"It's a bomb, isn't it?"

Chapila wriggled in the straps which held him fast to the cold, metal chair. "I'm a cameraman. Where the hell would I get a bomb?"

The lie detector above his head gave a normal reading.

"From Klaus here. That's where you'd get a bomb."

Kagog bounced round to face Klaus.

"You got the bomb, didn't you?"

Klaus shook his head. "No."

His lie detector was normal.



The policeman longed to use violence, but he knew it was pointless; force ruined the whole operation and caused men to confess all sorts of nonsense. Apart from the small injection of a certain drug he favoured he had to rely on his questions and the reactions of the detectors.

“Let’s start again.”

Chapila looked bored. “Lets.”

Kagog hit him once round the mouth.

“We have forty-five minutes to find the truth. Now, Klaus, there is something wrong with the machines, isn’t there?”

“Nothing wrong with the machines.” Klaus seemed at ease as if the pentathol derivative had settled his nerves.

“How many more times?”

Still the detector remained steady.

Kagog took Klaus’s hint. He was repeating himself too often and that was a waste of precious time. He tried a new tack on Klaus. His common sense told him that if there was anything wrong it would be the electronics man who had fixed it. The cameraman, Chapila, would only be an accomplice, without the knowledge to tamper with the machines. “Tell me how the machines work?”

“In detail?” Klaus was incredulous. “It would take me ten years and you wouldn’t understand most of it even if you had taken advanced maths in university—which you didn’t.”

Kagog picked inelegantly at his bent nose. “Not my subject. All I want is a general account.”

“All right. First, they are based on the theory, eventually proved by the discovery of Quasars—bodies whose size apparently broke all the rules of physics—that time and space are only relative. There are dozens of other proofs, but they all boil down to one fact—time is a dimension that can be circumvented.

“What we have done with the bullets is to create a

vehicle to move in time. It's a dream as old as science, but we are sure it works."

"Dream it is and a damned load of nonsense." Kagog sniffed angrily. "All that money spent on a dream when we might have lived it up."

Chapila pretended shock. "Treason, nothing less."

Kagog shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "Privileged occasion, comrade. What happens in the confessional is very, very secret, you know."

"Anyway, Strom believes it." Klaus relaxed again as if it was all that mattered. "Being the man he is he saw a chance for a personal gain. There is reason to think that a man's life can be extended indefinitely and it's only a matter of time before the biochemists have the answers. He saw that he only had to tap the knowledge of the scientists in the future and he could get immortality for free. His only problem was to convince those men of the future he was worth the gift."

"Straining human nature even if it has changed—which I doubt." The policeman looked very sure of himself and with good reason. He knew there was nothing for nothing and not much for sixpence.

"Ah, but he put up a very convincing reference for himself. He had a film of his life made and briefly he has cast himself in the role of social reformer, saviour and scientist. In fact, he made it clear in the film that he had something to offer the future if he had time to develop his talents."

Chapila interrupted, "It was a damned good film."

Without any clear idea of why he said it Kagog echoed the word "was". His policeman's brain was meticulous and it picked up anything that did not comply with the exact line of his thoughts.

The cameraman hurriedly switched the point of his remark. "We had a good time making it. All the facilities we

wanted and plenty of understanding when things went wrong.”

Kagog was like a ferret. “Repeat your words about the film.”

Chapila was very white but he repeated what Kagog wanted to hear. “It was a damned good film.”

Kagog glanced at the electric clock and the second hand moving round like a jerky needle. There was twenty minutes left.

“It is a good film.” His face was triumphant. “Say : it is a good film.”

Slowly with careful control Chapila said, “It is a good film.”

Kagog frowned at the detector, it hadn't really reacted; only a small squiggle like a faint echo, as if there was just a very tiny lie waiting to be told in the back of Chapila's mind.

“There is a film in each of the bullets . . .” muttered Kagog “. . . or rather a copy of the same film in each of the bullets. Now, you, Chapila, used the past tense when you spoke of the film and you are the cameraman.” He pushed his face to within an inch of Chapila's. “If I reach a firm enough conclusion, and can recognize the truth when I hear it, then I think I can risk a modicum of torture.”

Klaus shouted at him impulsively. “You're on the wrong angle. What harm, one way or the other, can the film do Strom?”

The detector had shot up and down again leaving a jagged mountain drawn on the undulating graph.

“Good! I'm on the right lines and with ten minutes to spare.” His hand groped for the controls which took care of the chairs.

Chapila screamed.

Kagog seemed to change his mind at that, not because the scream had moved him to pity, but because he sensed Klaus

was a better victim. Chapila wouldn't lightly bear the hurt of his friend.

Klaus didn't scream but his face contorted and reddened. Somehow, it make it worse to see his silent agony.

The policeman leapt across to Chapila and gave an injection with precise speed. Then he leapt back to Klaus again and gave the control another twist.

This time Klaus screamed.

Chapila said dreamily, "I'll tell."

Klaus looked at Kagog through eyes hazy with pain. "At least you'll stop jumping about like a mad acrobat . . . or do you do this for fun?"

The policeman seemed hurt and his little chest heaved in and out like a bantam cock's. "I do nothing more than is necessary. I'm no less professional than you." He checked the clock.

There were seven minutes left.

Outside, Strom was ranting in the best possible way.

"We changed the film." Chapila talked as if he was far away in another place. "We took one or two blue films and, with some editing, actual shots of Strom when he wasn't at his best. It's a classic of its kind. If they still have ladies of taste and refinement in the future they'll black ball him for good and all!"

"All five films are the same?"

Klaus answered for Chapila. "Each rocket was destined for a separate age so we had to replace all the films."

"Genius!" Kagog danced around them like a small imp who had found the fairy's pot of gold. "It's such a pity I have to do my duty." His face resumed its stern role of judge and executioner. "First, I must tell Strom and then I regret, gentlemen, that we must have a private execution."

He grabbed the phone and screamed at the operator to connect him with the dais.

There were three minutes in hand.

He told his story to the Minister for Security with a rapid, coaxing whine in his voice. It sounded convincing and as he, himself, would have put it, "It was medal talk."

Suddenly, his face dropped. He replaced the phone.

"They knew all about it already!"

Klaus was as shaken. "How?"

Kagog shrugged nonplussed. "They replaced your film as soon as you turned your back. Why, they have even left your stooges to finish off the tidying up under the platform." His face fell. "They didn't let me in on it!"

Chapila said with dreamy satisfaction, "I should worry about that if I was Kagog. It means they don't trust you any more."

It was dead on time.

The silver bullets shimmered as they rose into the air.

"Every one in its separate direction," Klaus commented. "They not only have to pass through time they also have to arrive at the place which Earth will occupy in space when they do materialize."

"That will take thousands of years, then?" Kagog asked, "So how can Strom benefit?"

"Both in space and time the matter is relative since both are inter-linked. In any case the receiver will merely send his answer to arrive back in our time. It need only take a minute. Just as long as the answer doesn't precede the question, so to speak, it will work."

One rocket appeared again almost as soon as it vanished. There was hardly a breathing space. Of the others there was no sign.

"It's the one aimed at the farthest point." Klaus strained at the straps holding him down, his eyes alight with interest. "That makes sense. From today on, time travel is

possible and the other ages wouldn't need to reply. Having seen that film, Strom will be hailed as a hero in every time from here to infinity."

Strom had almost run down from the dais. Blum and the other dignitaries were straining to keep up with him, all of them frightened lest unhappy fate cut them off with a heart attack before they acquired immortality—should Strom want to share.

Indeed, at a word from Strom, Krakas waved back all but three others: two senior ministers and Blum. The chosen had been chosen.

Strom with an ungentlemanly haste tore at the container flap and thrust his hand into the rocket. He took it out again with even greater haste and waved Krakas forward.

The guard stolidly pushed his arm inside and took out a sphere which sparkled like blue glass in the sunlight. He passed it to Strom and stepped back.

Klaus could see it was a bottle even from a distance and he could see the small envelope tied to its thin neck. He didn't have to wait long for Strom to satisfy his interest about the contents. The President wanted his people to know how he had fared in the lucky dip.

He read: "From the age of mind to the hero, Strom. You have asked for immortality and you deserve immortality. It is given to you and any of your people who wish to join you." His voice rang out like a clarion bell. "Many men have wanted to live for ever but few have deserved it. You, Strom, have thoroughly deserved it." He paused, his breath lost with excitement. "Scientists have known the secret of physical immortality for thousands of years and we must, in honesty, tell you that to this day no one has wanted it."

The President frowned. "Damn those lily-livered fools; I know what I want."

All the same he passed the bottle to Krakas first.

The guard drank at once. Nothing happened and he passed the bottle back.

Strom waited.

Krakas began to look very happy. His eye brightened and his flesh took on a rosy, healthy hue. For the first time ever a certain intelligence entered his look. "It's fine, President."

Strom still hesitated then staring down at the bottle he saw the contents were rapidly evaporating. He took a greedy swig and allowed Blum to snatch the bottle. One by one they all drank their share.

The crowd screamed for part of it.

The bottle dropped to the ground; empty.

People tried to clamber on to the platform, but it was too high and they ran round to the steps where the press of bodies jammed the way up. Strom and Krakas stamped on the fingers that reached for them. A man even stabbed at Strom's foot with a dagger, but the dagger buckled as he thrust.

Klaus stared at Kagog with amazement on his broad face. "See, they are impregnable. It has to be with immortality. But, there is something missing, something I can't understand. Their reply was satirical, almost sneering, so why should they give him what he asked for?"

Kagog picked up the phone and jabbed at the dial.

No one replied.

Suddenly, the crowd were deathly silent, falling back from the platform with fear stamped on their faces, like the mark of a cloven hoof.

"Look!" Klaus screamed.

Chapila and Kagog looked.

By themselves, at the centre of the now empty platform, were the five men, standing as the rockets had stood—like some close knit group of modern sculpture or brave war memorial.

Strom was smiling with some surface satisfaction, his

arms outspread in a mock embrace for his people. Blum was leaning forward, whispering into his ear. Krakas had his fist up ready to punch the first wrong face.

The other two were standing like serious-minded leaders on a rostrum, with respectable power engraved on their still features.

All of them were very still.

They were frozen.

They were solid, imperishable, unbreakable with the everlasting look of marble. Except, in the small glimmer of light, that still moved from the soul to their eyes, it was possible to see they still lived.



M A N S C A R E R

by

KEITH ROBERTS

*Every major city has its bohemian quarter, but when the City covered the whole country the artists, visionaries and dreamers had to be found colonies where their talents could still find expression—a form of sanity in an insane world.*



## MANSCARER

BY dawn most of the spectators are in their places in the stands and already making a din that is causing Roley Stratford to rage and fume. This the plebs will never understand; that the true introduction to the coming spectacle is Silence. One cannot play Silence, the primordial entity; so there is nothing to which to listen, and the people are not quiet.

Roley has dressed for the occasion as a British admiral of the early nineteenth century; his white breeches are soiled with grass stains where he has helped one of the working parties make last-minute adjustments to the great shanks of *Manscarer* lying along the cliff-top. Jed burrows, A.D.C. for the day, fusses behind his temporary chief, carrying the bottle of rum Roley has declared indispensable to the period flavour. He also started out with a brass telescope and an astrolabe, but the latter was left behind as too unwieldy. The telescope he still carries, tucked in the crook of his blue-uniformed arm.

The dawn wind is cool; Jed shivers a little, stepping from one foot to the other as the shade of Nelson harangues the Leader of the orchestra. A minor difficulty has arisen; the contract clearly specifies a thirty-minute overture before the *Pomp and Circumstance* extracts that will herald the Assembly, but only part of the band awnings has arrived in time. A harassed group of City engineers is still at work erecting the rest, manhandling the awkward lengths of billowing pre-formed plastic. Leader, Strings and Woodwind are prepared to play in the open air; the Brass Section, keen Union men one and all, are not. The boys claim it will chap their lips. Somewhat obscurely, Percussion and Effects

are backing the argument. Jed tires of the row and wanders off, leaving the rum placed on a conspicuous outcrop of rock. Part of the Book calls for volleys of Verey lights; he will have ample warning of the start.

Most of the Colony are scattered round the concrete pads on which *Manscarer* will take shape, by the grace of God and in spite of the force of gravity. The working teams lounge on the grass, still keeping roughly in position; here and there a bottle is raised in greeting to Jed as he paces solemnly the dural beams of the Crow. As he walks he rehearses again in his mind the complex stages of Assembly. The first members, once socketed into their pads, will serve as derricks for the raising of the greater beams, the weighted and counterbalanced shafts that will set the head of the sculpture in huge and complicated motion. The beak itself, the *corvus*, lies along the clifftop like an old-time ploughshare monstrously overlarge. There could be trouble with the placing of the assembly; it is heavy, very heavy, and the triplefold tackles that will bear its weight are none too hefty for the job. The answer would have been a flying crane, but Roley refuses to countenance the use of such an apparatus. The machine would spoil the form of *Manscarer* at a critical moment, and its din would drown the orchestra.

Jed checks the donkey engine that will make the great pulls. Steam is already raised—steam and steam only has been deemed fit by Roley for his masterpiece—and Bil-Bil and Tam are fretting over their gauges. On the roof of the engine shed Reggy Glassbrook, nimble and hairy, sits grinning like an ape. He is the Colony's steeplejack; he will be first into the rigging today, handling the split-second alignments as the beams sail to their positions, sure-footed and quick as one of Meg's pet geckos. As far as Jed is concerned he will be welcome to the job; the A.D.C. has no head for heights, and from the feet of the *Scarer* to his main goosenecks will be all of ninety feet.

A hundred yards beyond the donkey shack a gully running to the cliff edge makes a shallow windbreak. Crouched in its lee, Bunny, Whore Nonpareil and the Witch of Endor eat alternate sandwiches of crab and caviare and serve passers-by with Hock from a Georgian coffeepot. At their feet a coffee machine heated by a small spirit lamp glugs and burbles to itself. "What are we, girls?" shouts Jed. "Artists or engineers?" The gag, in the new "flat humour" favoured by the Colony, raises a chorus of unanswers, nods and headshakes and somewhat glazed morning-after grinnings. Jed looks up, visualizing the great blue negative the sky will make round the whirling bars of *Manscarer*. Pushes his telescope more firmly under his arm, touches his hat and moves on.

Artists or engineers? As an artist Roley called for underpinnings to reach down unseen into the cliff, a hundred and fifty feet to sea level. Through them *Manscarer* would have grown from earth's roots, sweeping up, continuing the lines of stress inherent in the bulging stone, shackling the ground firmly to the sky; but the City engineers refused him more than twenty feet, just enough to hold the ponderous swirling of the tophammer. It will serve though; *Manscarer* will peck and thunder, nibbling perhaps at his own sinews and feet to fall one day in glorious dissolution into the water. Perhaps before that the Colony will hold a ritual destruction; there will be more stands and more admission charges and more selling of high-priced ice cream. And the South Sector Symphonic again, if it can be arranged.

Symphonic . . . Jed, a quarter of a mile from the podium, can still hear in the breaks of the wind the evidence of Roley's apoplexy. The Overture was timed to start as the sun's disc broke clear of the sea; but the daystar has lifted now his own diameter from the horizon, and not a brass bleat has been heard from the pack of them. The occasion is ruined before it begins. Jed mounts a hillock of grass to gain

a view of the distant stands. The State Police are having a mite of trouble keeping order over there; he marks a dozen separate and complicated scuffles taking place on the grass in front of the awnings. Programmes are being fluttered and some sort of organized chanting has started. He sees a man running, another being belaboured by a mounted Cossack. He swears at the risk to the Colony's precious horses. An enthusiastic mob.

He looks along the coast. Symphonies are playing already, the mute works the plebs refuse to hear. The notes are of lilac and seething pale blue, touched with the thin glittering of sunlight. Far below at the feet of the cliffs are the crawling lace curtains of the tide. Jed turns away slightly giddy. The Assembly teams are standing now, chafing their hands and flapping their arms across and back against their shoulders. The jeans and reefer jackets of the men amount almost to a uniform, but no two girls are dressed alike. Jed sees a fine Firebird swirling in a mist of fluorescent nylon; nearer are a Pompadour, a Puck, a shivery paint job all black and white zebra stripes. Meg Tranter is dolled up in ancient half-burned newsprint, the textured leaves flapping round arms and knees. She carries a placard with the legend *Zeitgeist 1960*. That too is "flat" humour; she is explaining to the plebs what they lack the mental equipment ever to understand.

Between the Assembly site and the nearest of the terracings a collection of Colony possessions has been set up on display. Armoured and well-guarded cases hold stacks of old books; dogs and beribboned goats are being paraded and Piggy and The Rat are doing a brisk trade in genuine hand-executed Seascapes. There is a constant coming and going from the ranks of sightseers. In the City, Colony artifacts fetch quaint prices; through them Jed's folk are self-supporting in theory at least. Jed wipes his face and looks farther along the cliffs. Way off and blue with distance he

can see the City's impossible side, like the edge of a hundred-yard thick carpet pulled across the land. The structure covers all-England with its grinding weight and sameness. In its catacombs, trapped in the miles on honeycombed miles of chambers and passages, men can live and die, if they are born poor enough, without seeing the sun. The tiny open spaces round the coasts, full of the mad artifacts of the Colonies, provide a relief from Sameness that the people come trooping year after year to see. Without them, populations might run shrieking mad themselves. Artists are a therapeutic force now, recognized and protected by Government; the lunacy of the few safeguards the sanity of the many.

A bang-crock; the report and its echo lift a paperchase of gulls from beneath Jed's feet. He watches them soaring out under the glowing ball of the signal. Shreds of music reach him; at long last, the Overture has begun. He paces back methodically, lips pursed, keeping in character as he walks the quarterdeck of the cliff. From the tail of his eye he sees Reggy, stripped now to shorts and sleeveless leather jerkin, springing and posturing on the roof of his little shed. Someone runs to Jed and presents him with chipolatas on sticks and a stuffed olive. He munches as he walks, savouring the Surreal delicacy of the gesture, climbs the rostrum where Roley dances in a furor of creativity and apprehension. A speaking trumpet is gripped in his hand; the fingers that hold it are white-knuckled with strain.

The music climbs towards its first climax. "Lifting teams," bellows Roley. "Teams, *ha—ul. . .*" A jet of steam rises from the donkey-hut; oddly assorted groups of Colonists, drilled to perfection, scurry across the grass, taking up the slack in the controlling tackles. The spars of the lowest Configuration rise with surprising speed, waver and . . . *bang-bang* . . . thump down, dead on beat, into their sockets. The thing is done, like a conjuring trick out of the grass.

*Fortissimo* from the huge gaggle of musicians, a half-heard firework gasp from the crowd and then cheering while Roley waves his arms again leaping up and down and damn-blasting the plebs, lilac in the face with rage. The gestures are eloquent, even effective; the little blue-dressed figure, capering mad as a clockwork monkey, quietens the crowd. The occasion after all is a solemn one; the plebs, who have fought for tickets, are duly impressed. They are witnessing a demonstration of an artform in which Roley alone excels; the erection, to music, of a supermobile. Uncomprehending, they still stand in stark awe of lunacy. That after all is what they have paid good money to see.

The Interval. After an hour's work the main spars stand supported by their guys like the disfigured kingpoles of a Big Top. Smaller secondary beams, feathered with bright lapping sheets of metal, already spin and dip, humming in the wind; the goosenecks that will take the great spars of the main assembly are in place, and the lifting tackles. The donkey-hut becomes obscured by steam as Tam blows pressure from his waiting boiler; on the roof, Reggy, still sweating from his exertions and wrapped in a hand-woven poncho, holds court before an admiring half-circle of Colonists. Roley, squatting on the edge of his rostrum, waves brief encouragement before readdressing himself to his bottle of Captain Cat (home brewed in the Colony). Below him, musicians lounge on the grass; mush-sellers circulate between them bearing aloft feathery *incubi* of green and pink candyfloss. The machines of aerial observers, newsmen and photographers, hang racketing round the struts of the mobile, some dangerously close to the guys; people from the ground teams are waving their arms, trying to shoo them back.

The sun is hotter now; Jed mops his face with a bright bandanna. Beyond the half-completed *Manscarer* other mobiles loom; Jed, watching, sees *Fandancer* bow herself,



making for an instant with her wobbling slats the outline of a hip, the big thrust of trochanter and the muscled curve below, before collapsing into Motion. One of Roley's most ingenious creations that, though maybe lacking a little in overall strength. Bil-Bil and Tam approve of her, and that isn't always a good sign. She was a bitch on the drawing board, and a bitch to put together as well. Her Assembly was a near-fiasco; it took weeks of patient adjusting and rebalancing before she condescended to shimmy in the airs of Heaven. Behind her are other sculptures, more distant still; Jed sees the flash and swoop of *Halcyon*, *Manscarer's* forerunner, before his beams, flattening freakishly, lose themselves beneath a swell of grass. He looks up again lovingly at the new Structure, shielding his eyes against the sun, watching the lazily turning plates of dark blue and deathly-iridescent violet. The mobile has already a drama that the others lack.

*Manscarer* is a crow, or the bones of one; a vast ghost that once complete will thunder and peck along the cliff-top, the bird at last turned hunter and revenger of dead fields. Or so runs the Manifesto. Jed doubts if one in a hundred of the gaping Cityfolk have taken the trouble to read it; it would mean little enough to them if they did.

Jed moves to the hourglass strapped on the side of the rostrum. The last few grains of sand are funnelling down. He raises his arm, palm flat, and there is a scramble as the orchestra runs for its instruments. Reggy erupts from the poncho; Roley raises his baton, and construction begins again with a quiet passage in which Reggy, balanced and slowly revolving in the blue, delicately attaches the featherings of the upper rings. While he works, the hundred-foot linked shafts of the main assembly are cleared for lifting.

The secondary Configurations are nearly complete now; hawsers run from them to anchor points in the grass.

Others are ready for the main beams. *Manscarer*, unshackled, would rampage across a three hundred yard circle, tearing and clucking at the grass; before the last of the ropes are slipped bandstand and engine house will be evacuated. Jed leaves the podium, where Roley still conducts in a berserk frenzy, runs to his prearranged position on the tackles. Every pair of hands the Colony can muster will be needed for the coming operation.

Hawsers snake upwards to humming tightness as Tam the winch control levers in his hands, leans from the window of his shack. The music drives towards its great central theme; a shout, a heavier thundering from the engine shed, and the *corvus* lifts clear of the grass, twenty feet long, glinting with a vicious rose-and-black shimmer. Reggy balances on the skullplates, sticky-footed. A medley of orders bellowed through the music, wiry strumming as the beams snub at their restraining tackles and on the beat the whole assembly soars, weaving impatiently as the feathered tailplates feel the breeze. Jed loops his downhaul round a bollard, leans back as the creaking rope takes the strain. The beams swing higher, clang against the central masts to drop with a crash, sockets trued over the projecting goose-necks; the *corvus* falls and rises, dipping as it tastes the wind.

Triumph, and disaster. Somewhere in the rigging a shackle parts with a hard snap. Tackles come down flailing. The beams swing, driven by the wind, shearing the remaining cables. *Manscarer* rotates, unpredictable now and weighing tons, the focus of a widening circle of unhappiness. Jed sees a block swinging in decapitating arcs, falls flat and rolls on his back to watch the huge overhead clicking of violet bones. A dozen people skid past, drawn by their rope, chirping out a birdcage panic; a Cavalier's hat bowls across the ground, on edge like a little feathered wheel. The wind gusts; the *corvus* casts out far across the sea, swings

back to rake screeching flinders from the awnings of the bandstand, tangles massively with the roof of the engine shed. Steam explodes outwards, gusting across to where the orchestra, on hands and knees, scuttles for its collective life. The beak, checked by the obstruction of the donkey shed, wavers and dips again to strike at the main struts, down which Reggy is still scurrying from danger. Another peck, a fleshy concussion, a shrill falling scream; a surprised gob of blood splashes across Jed's wrist from where Reggy, suitably scared, sails overhead, filling the close sky with legs and arms. He bounces against the cliff edge to fall again to the blue and white impatience of the water, his plunging splash lost far below in the morning noise of the sea. After him a French Horn, disembodied from its master, bounds disconsolately like a Surreal yellow snail.

Jed crawls to the cliff edge in the sunlight, and thoughtfully adds his quota of moisture to the ocean.

The flooring of the house is of polished yellow wood, broken by platforms and steps into various levels. Sunlight lies across it in calm rectangles. Round the dark blue walls white alcoves, circular-topped, house ancient ship models and tropical shells; handrails of copper and mahogany echo the nautical flavour. The end wall of the building is of glass; through it, distantly, can be seen the ocean. To one side of the living space stands a bright red twentieth-century M.G., her nose butted into a recess in the floor; in the centre of the room is a table covered with a spotless linen cloth. A silver breakfast service adds a last note of elegance.

Above the carport in the wall the curtains of a sleeping alcove are drawn back to reveal a plain divan covered by a heap of bright-coloured scatter cushions. From the alcove, close under the oddly pitched roof, a thick white-painted beam spans the room. Jed stands beneath it, feet with their buckled shoes in a patch of sunlight, hand on the hilt of his

sword. "That's my beam," he says crossly. "Just you get off it, this minute."

The girl above him makes no movement, staring down with eyes wide with fright as those of a tarsier. "That's my beam," says Jed again more carefully. "Nobody can sit up there, except me."

Silence.

"I'll run you through without mercy," declares the admiral, exposing six glittering inches of the swordblade.

There is no reaction.

"I'll do terrible things. I'll keelhaul you and flog you through the fleet. I'll throw you to the fishes. . . ."

The girl grips the beam a little harder with her jean-clad legs, twining her bare ankles beneath it.

Jed looks thoughtful, pushes the sword back into its scabbard, walks to the table and wields a silver pot. Steam rises fragrantly. He adds sugar and milk, stirs carefully and picks up the cup in its saucer, turning as he does so to look back at the roof. "If they make coffee in Heaven," he calls, "and tea in Hell, I'd take my turn at the stoking." The hot drink soothes, steadying the shaking of his hands. He sits down, studies the table and selects a round of toast. He butters it and spoons a blob of marmalade on to his plate. "After breakfast," he says to the silence, "I'll stop being an admiral. Is that what you want?"

A headshaking from the girl on the beam.

"Polly," says the retiring Captain Hardy, "if you won't come down I really shall knock you off. I shall do it with a broom."

There is no response except a tensing of the legs. Polly indicates her determination to stay on the beam until killed. Jed fixes her again with a contemplative eye. "I was sick this morning," he says. "I did it in the sea. Were you there when Reggy was pecked?"

A nodding. A violent reaction for Polly

Jed pauses, the toast halfway to his mouth. "He was killed," he says, unnecessarily. "Is that why you got up there?"

The nodding again.

"Were you frightened?"

Headshaking. No, no . . .

"I've decided," says Jed. "I won't knock you down after all. Instead I shall just wait till you get tired and fall off." He lifts the pot again. "Polly, you do make lovely tea." He finishes the cup, lays down his toast and walks forward to grip the girl's dangling feet. On the ankles are faint brown watermarks. He pushes the toes under his chin, leans his forehead against the cool frontal curving of the shins. "Poll," he says, "you've got mucky feet." Then looking up, "you are a funny girl . . ."

The Colony, cowed by death, keep to their separate homes; Roley to his bleak little sixteenth-century pub, Piggy and the Rat to their queer thatched tower room, darkly glowing with light from fishtanks and crystal globes, Meg and the Witch of Endor to their cliff-top bunker full of juju dolls and scuttling lizards and the apparatus of magic. Visitors poke and pry, disappointed at the lack of activity and at missing the morning's disaster. They traipse through Poly's fragile house, empty now, leaving its doors ajar to gusts of sunlight; but nobody comes near Jed's home. He would almost welcome interference. He lounges against the rear wheel of the M.G., a cushion at his back, his legs stretched out along the planking of the floor. He is reading from an ancient copy of the *Ingoldsby Legends*; from time to time he glances up half-aggravatedly from the verse to the *succubus* still straddling the beam. A mile away *Man-scarer* spins angrily, clashing and banging in the circle he has cleared. His noise fills the peninsula on which the Colony lies, penetrates bumblingly through the glazed wall of the room.

At lunchtime Jed leaves, to be away from Polly's eyes. He hunts out sketchbook and pastels on the way, and lets the outer door slam. It is only then the girl becomes active. She slides off the beam in frenzied haste, scurrying with the nervous violence of an ant as she clears the table, washes, cooks. When Jed returns she is back on her perch. He looks a little disappointed; he had hoped to find his house no longer haunted. But the dinner simmering in the oven is very good.

Jed eats the meal in silence, carries the dishes and plates to the kitchen alcove and washes them, stacking them carefully in their racks. He clears the rest of the table, shakes the cloth outside the back door and folds it. By the time he has finished Polly has at least changed her attitude, she is riding the beam sidesaddle. It is a hopeful sign; perhaps at last the strain is telling. Jed stands underneath her again, looking up. "I could pull you off quite easily now," he says. "You wouldn't be able to hang on at all." She bites her lip, knowing he will do no such thing.

He scratches his head, badly worried. "You're Making a Protest, aren't you?"

The girl nods.

"What's it about?"

No answer.

"Something's upset you terribly," says the erstwhile admiral. "It was to do with Reggy, but it wasn't him being killed. I don't know what it is. Couldn't you write it down?"

Negative. A large tear escapes from the corner of Polly's eye and runs down her cheek. She ignores it till it reaches her lip; then she fields it with the pointed tip of her tongue.

Jed fetches the sketchbook from where he flung it down carelessly, and holds it up. He says a little helplessly "These are for you." Polly grabs with surprising speed, like a monkey stealing a banana. The drawings of the *Manscarer*,

his posturings and violent movements under the yellow searchlight-stabbings of sunlight. Polly clutches the book to her chest, rocking and crooning, burying her nose in the pages to catch the sweet scent of new fixative. She is still holding it when Jed leaves to drink five evening pints of beer at the Lobster Pot and tell Roley his beam has been invaded by a woman. A runner is instantly despatched to take Polly a little hat, a copy of the Rieu *Odyssey* and a picture book of sailing ships to look at if she's bored. Meg wants to send a gecko as well but Jed says no. Polly is a little afraid of them, and it wouldn't be fair.

When he returns, the peninsula is blue with summer dusk and the last grasshoppers in the universe are making the night shrill with their churring. He decides he can't face supper; he undresses in the dark, lies down and feels the bed swaying slightly from side to side. As long as he doesn't roll over violently he will be all right. An hour later a sudden thump wakes him from a doze. Muffled sounds follow at intervals as Polly pads about doing God only knows what. Jed draws himself up against the wall, waiting. He feels his heart, accelerating, bump faintly against the insides of his ribs; quick prickling sensations move across his skin. It seems an age before Polly swings up the ladder to the alcove. She moves a little stiffly, still suffering from her day of abstinence.

She wriggles her jeans off before sliding on to the divan. To Jed she feels soft and cool, a life-size doll.

The two figures swim in a morning dazzle of sunlight, seeing the cliffs rise giddily in the troughs between the waves. Above them the head of *Manscarer* appears once, violet and sullen, withdraws itself instantly with the ease and quick grace of a snake. The creaking of the slats carries down to the water.

Jed hangs on to a rock, seeing the long fringes of weed

wash and swirl on the tide, watching the tiny close sunburnings reflect from water and bursting foam. The situation is baffling. Polly has him completely in her grasp now; he owes her a breakfast, a dinner and a night in bed, and he wants them all again. The whole affair is difficult in the extreme.

Reggy, swilling palely while the sea gurgles in his ruined side, can do nothing but nod his head up and down in agreement.

Among the bushes scattered in the little gully lights play and flash, now here, now gone; wayward gleams follow the voices of Oberon and Puck. Farther up the cliff Bil-Bil and Tam, the engineers, sit at a console alive with whirling tapespools, setting the words of the Dream spinning and fluting through the sky. The Colony listens sleepy with poetry, clustered in the summer night. *Manscarer* swirls and clacks, gaunt and small on the skyline; but he is forgotten.

Polly, sitting crosslegged just behind Jed, pulls grassblades miserably, chewing them and spitting them away. By Act Three she can no longer control the tensions inside her. She puts her head back and shrieks, rendingly. Then again, and again. The *son et lumière* is disrupted, for ever.

The Colony panics. Dumb things that scream are bad; like the stuffed fox in the poem barking, the oak walking for love. Polly isn't a deaf-mute; it's just that two years ago she decided she had nothing else interesting to say and vowed never to speak again. But it's difficult to remember that now she's been quiet so long. A confused battle starts in the gully, figures tumbling over each other and hitting out in alarm while Polly eels about between them still making sounds like a steam carousel. The play shuts down; Bil-Bil and Tam squeak miserably, enveloped by tape. Piggy finally catches the culprit by the heel and pins her while



The Rat, never far away from trouble, kisses her to make her stop. Polly is unco-operative. Meg yelps, kicked firmly in the crotch; The Rat claps his hands to an eye jabbed by a hard little elbow. The Witch of Endor joins battle decisively; she administers three sound thumps before Jed, raging, starts to hit her back. The skirmishing subsides; there is a silence, broken by the sea noise far below and the unhappy grunting of The Rat.

Roley Stratford mounts a rock and windmills his long arms against the sky. "It's hopeless," he booms, furiously. "We can't hear plays if people have to scream. Polly, will you be quiet? And not start any more fights?"

Polly, still struggling, shakes her head violently and gulps. Jed claps his hand across her mouth, terrified in case she starts being ghastly again. She instantly bites his thumb. He swears, and calls up to the rock. "She says no. . . ."

The Witch of Endor mutters something about "nasty little freemartin". The words come out slightly thick; she is trying to cope with a split lip. Jed, one arm round Polly, raises his free fist. The Witch ducks prudently, wriggling back out of reach. Roley jumps up and down on his rock. "Then it's a trial. . . ." He raises his arms dramatically, fists clenched. "A *trial*. . . ."

The shout, taken up by the Colony, becomes a chant. Figures surge round Polly and Jed, hoisting them to their feet; The Witch is propelled after them up the incline of the gully. Bil-Bil and Tam desert their tangled console, infected by the general enthusiasm.

"A *trial* . . . it's a *trial*. . . ."

Heavy Dutch oil lamps hanging from the rafters light the bars of Lobster Pot with a soft brilliance. Beneath them the Colony is present in full strength, banging its tankards on the white-scrubbed tables and yelling for proceedings to begin. Roley, the Chief Justice, hammers louder on the counter top in front of him with the scarred and knotted

shillelagh that is his staff of office. The Court Peculiar is convened; mine host calls for witnesses.

The Witch of Endor is shoved forward, willowy in an ankle length dress of scrubbed hessian. Finding herself the centre of attention, she sticks out her chest importantly. "I got smacked in the teeth. . . ." She waves a bright-splotched hankie. "I'm a witness . . ."

"Polly didn't do that!"

"Shame!"

"She did!"

"She didn't. It was Jed. . . ."

"Well it was all her fault. . . ."

"It wasn't!"

"Was!"

"You always want to bully her!"

"I *don't*! She started it!"

"*Shame!*"

The shillelagh beats half-moons into the counter top. "Polly," says the Judge. "Did you start it? Whatever it was?"

Polly, sitting on Jed's knee, jiggles happily and nods.

"What did you do?"

"*Nothing. . . .*"

"*She did. . . .*"

"It was The Rat kissing her. She didn't like it. . . ."

"That wasn't the start . . ."

"Well that was when she hit him in the eye . . ."

Roley hammers again for order. "Did you mind him kissing you, Polly?"

Polly shakes her head.

"It wasn't that then," says the Judge decisively. "Now, is there an Indictment?"

"Tam's got it. . . ." Tam is driven into the open, protesting. He stammers badly; his olive-skinned woman's face is suffused with embarrassment.

“That P-Polly did wilfully d-d-disrupt a performance of Sh-Shakespeare. And upset J-Jed getting his b-breakfast for him, and his d-d-dinner. . . .”

“And she went to bed with him. . . .”

“That doesn’t matter. . . .”

“It does. It ought to be included anyway. . . .”

The Rat has hauled a chair into a window recess; enthroned on its temporary eminence he feels secure. His one serviceable eye leers horribly. “*She was a virgin too. . . .*”

“She wasn’t. . . .”

“She was. . . .”

“She couldn’t have been. . . .”

Roley whirls the shillelagh. “This might be *very important. . . .* Were you a virgin, Polly?”

Polly blushes, and hides her face against Jed’s shoulder. The Colony, impressed, makes a concerted “aaahhhh” noise, like a crowd of plebs when a rocket explodes. The Rat hiccups inconsequentially. “C-c’n I have s’more beer, somebody. . . .”

A jug is handed up to him. It gets well swigged-from on the way. He pours what is left into his pot, mumbling to himself. Roley clears his throat. “The Indictment is very confused,” he says, “but evidently the whole affair’s to do with Jed. That’s the first point. . . .”

“She just wants him to do something back. . . .”

“Well he won’t. . . .”

“He will. He’ll do anything now, look at his face. . . .”

The counter top suffers again. “It’s to do with Jed,” says Roley loudly. “And it’s also to do with Reggy, because it started when he was killed. It started with the beam in Jed’s house, that should have been in the Indictment. Right?”

Polly, nodding, seems to be trying to shake her head off her shoulders.

“Then we’re getting somewhere,” says the Judge, very

satisfied. He swigs violently from a quart pewter mug. His neck muscles writhe in the lamplight as he swallows.

"We'd get on quicker if she'd *talk*," says the Witch of Endor, glaring. "I think it's just *stupid* . . ."

"*It isn't!*"

"*IT IS!*"

Proceedings instantly threaten to degenerate into another brawl. Splinters fly from the counter top as the Judge calls the court to order. "*I think*," says the Witch primly as soon as she can make herself heard, "she should be *made* to talk." She tosses her wild yellow hair. "We should push spills under her fingernails and light them. It would be quite proper."

Polly clenches her hands protectively and starts to shiver.

"It seems to me," says Roley reprovngly, "that all in all you've rather got it in for the defendant."

"*I haven't*." Then, sullenly, "All right, I suppose I have. I think she's an ungrateful little beast."

"Why?"

"'Cos I sent her a picture book," howls the Witch, dancing with sudden temper. "An' all I got back was a slosh in the chops. . . ."

"And I rule that *irrelevant* . . ."

The Rat, very drunk, starts to interrupt, sees the shillelagh poised to hurl at his head and subsides.

"Irrelevant," says Roley again, to clinch the matter. He glares round him. "All right. We've got the Indictment, or most of it; we need a Defence. Polly can't tell us why she started to be difficult. That's annoying, but it just can't be helped. So does anybody else know?"

"Yes," says Jed quietly. "I do."

A hush, in which the shrilling of the grasshoppers sounds very loud. Polly turns startled to peer into Jed's face. He puts her aside, carefully, and stands up. He's wishing belatedly he'd worn his uniform and turned the proceedings

into a Court Martial. Lacking lapels, he hooks his thumbs in his belt. "Mr. Chief Justice," he says. "Ladies and gentleman. This, I believe, is what she means. No more mobiles should be built. Furthermore, the figures already erected should be knocked down as soon as possible. Further——"

A gale of disagreement. Jed, shouted down, starts to jump about and wave his arms, mouth popping shut and open uselessly. Polly, looking desperate, sees above her a heavy beam. She is on the table instantly, and jumping for it. Roley howls his alarm; the Witch, quicker off the mark than the rest, dives at her, wrapping her arms round Polly's knees. A swaying confusion; Jed, leaping to the rescue, skids and vanishes under a scuffling pile of bodies; beer is spilled noisily; The Rat, whirling his pot in his excitement, falls headlong from his perch. Order is finally restored, and Polly restrained; but not before Piggy has been knocked half silly by a brickbat, and Meg and the Witch have had their heads banged together for punching. Roley returns to his position of authority, breathing a little heavily.

"Now then," he says, surveying the court. "I built these mobiles." As he speaks he bangs with the handle of the shillelagh, emphasizing each word. "I gave 'em the best years of me wanin' youth. I want to know why Jed says to scrap 'em; so the rest of you, *SHARRAP!*" The head of the club, whirling, inflicts a final wound on the counter; Roley bows with great gravity to Jed. "Mr. Burrows, if you would proceed. . . ."

"It isn't only the mobiles," says Jed quickly. He feels oddly certain of his words. "It's everything we do. The horseriding and the archery and reading Shakespeare in the dark and holding seances, and building all those castles about the place and knocking 'em down again like the last time we had a Mediaeval War. Piggy and The Rat must stop painting their pictures and put all their fish back in the sea, and Meg must burn her jujus, and you must stop pretending

to be a sort of man who doesn't exist any more, Roley, and so must I. We must destroy the Colony, we must burn it. That's what we must do."

In the awed silence, the Judge turns to Polly. He asks gently, "Is that what you meant?"

She nods again slowly, tears glistening in her eyes.

Nobody else seems able to speak. Roley says carefully, "Why, Poll? Just because Reggy was killed?"

"No." Jed is still quite sure of himself. "Reggy's to do with it, but he isn't the reason. He just brought things to a head. You see they'd never murdered any of us before."

"Who?"

"The plebs. Oh, Christ, it's so obvious. . . ." He stares round at faces changing from anger to puzzlement. "We've failed, can't anybody else see that except Polly? All of us, in all the Colonies. When they let us come out here and gave us land and money to spend, and people to help us do every crazy thing that came into our heads, when we took their terms, that was when we failed. We let ourselves down, we sold our birthright. *And theirs. . . .*

"We were too dangerous to them scattered about anywhere and everywhere all over the City. We couldn't be pushed about and led by the nose and hammered into the same shape as everybody else. When the trivvyscreens yelled at us we threw things at them, and when the plebs put us in jail for it we sat and laughed because we knew what they didn't, that we were the makers of dreams. The movers and shapers of the world, or something like that. There's a poem about it somewhere. But we took their terms; and now we aren't artists any more. We don't deserve the name."

He waves a hand angrily at his surroundings; the stone, the warm wood, the pools of light from the old lamps. "Polly is telling us, all this is acting and pointless make-

believe. That our lives are more sterile than the lives of the people we're supposed to despise." He raises a declamatory finger. "We let them short circuit us. We let them put us where they could see us and count us, where they could come every day to laugh and know they were safe from us and all the nasty things that happen when people start to think. They made us into State-licenced buffoons; and we fell off the thin edge, the tightrope between creativity and dilettantism, between free thought and aimless posturing for applause. That's why we lost, and how; and that's why we've got to stop now, before we burn ourselves up any further. If we . . . etiolate right out of existence there's no hope left. Not for anybody." He swings slightly, and returns Roley's bow. "Sir," he says, "I believe I have done. . . ."

The Witch of Endor, sitting rather dazedly on the floor, dabs at her lip with the hankie and frowns at the fresh mark it leaves. "Well, all right," she says. "All right. But you haven't said anything new, have you? I mean, we all felt like that. Sort of empty inside, pointless. Only we didn't talk about it. We knew we'd been had all right, all of us." She looks at the faces behind her, then back to Jed. "It didn't need saying. But what I want to know is this. Suppose we do what you want, set fire to everything and smash it all up. They'll only build it for us again tomorrow. It won't prove anything. It'll just give them some fresh kicks, won't it? And what else *can* we do?"

Everybody looks at Polly, including Jed. She brushes one eyelid with the back of a finger, and gulps. Jed frowns, pulls at his lip with his teeth. "There's a lot more in this," he says. "But I don't rightly know how to get to it." Polly's eyes lock on to his and the frown becomes deeper. "I think," he says, "I *think* . . . we must leave the Colony. Go back into the City, where we came from."

Silence intensifies. Only Meg can find a voice. It sounds scratchy and thin.

“Why . . . ?”

“Because . . . I don’t know. Because I think”—again watching Polly—“because they *need* us. The plebs. They don’t know it; but in a funny sort of way the . . . uncertainty . . . matters to them. Not knowing where we are, where we shall pop up next, the crazy things we shall do. They need people who’ve made lunacy a profession; and that’s us. Without us, they’ll forget they’re living in Hell; they’ll just sludge down into a sort of great doughy mass, and forget how to think, and how to eat, and one day they’ll forget how to breathe. I think we’ve got to help them . . . keep things stirred. Like worms tunnelling through earth, letting the air in. Us. The subversives. The Unsavoury Elements, the won’t-do-gooders and won’t-stay-putters. And I think we’ve got to do this even if it hurts because it’s important to them as well. Because we might not like it, and we might refuse to face it, but in the long term the plebs are what matters to us more than anything else. Once we all opted for the Humanities. Well, there they are. The proper study of mankind. The plebs. *Man*. . . .”

Polly’s lips move, echoing the words; he catches her eye again and she nods, positively and sorrowfully.

The Witch says very quietly “What about the sea?”

“We shan’t see it any more.”

“Birds?”

“Not for us. Soon there won’t be any anyway. The City will spread over the Colony holdings as soon as we go and that’ll be the end.”

“No houses of our own?” That from Meg, in a squeak.

Jed shakes his head. “No houses. Just miniflats in the levels, the same as everybody else.”

“Sculpting?”

“Mobiles?”

“None. There won’t be any room ”

“The sky?”



“We shall see it when we get a Liftpass. Like all the others.”

“We shall go mad . . .”

Jed nods. “Yes, I think some of us will. But properly mad. Effectively mad. Not like this. This is just . . . keeping up appearances.”

Slowly at first, the idea catches on, “I’ve had a monkey on my back for years,” says the Witch. “Here’s where I shuck him right the Hell off. . . .”

“Jujus,” says Meg, brightening. “New ones of all the Controllers. We shall be outlawed. Sent to jail again.”

“Shot at on sight!”

“Brainwashing!”

“Trepanning!”

“Leucotomy! Loads of fun!”

“But we shan’t give up . . .”

“Menacing letters in the news sheets!”

“Secret societies!”

“Things ticking in ventshafts!”

“Reign of terror!”

“Popping out all over!”

“Everything breaking up!”

“Arson!”

“Murder!”

“Incest!”

“Rape!”

“Secret printing presses!”

“Forbidden plays!”

“Subversive novels!”

“Art galleries in all the sewer flats!”

“Passwords!”

“Cloaks and daggers!”

“Orgies!”

Roley jumps on to his mangled counter, brandishing a bottle.

“Illicit stills!”

“Moonshining!”

“The plebs can’t do this to us!”

“We demand our rights!”

“Summary execution!”

“Imprisonment without trial!”

“Curtailement of free speech!”

“*We’ll start tonight . . . !*”

The Colony, transformed on the instant to a mob, surges for the doors. Shouts rise outside; voices call for torches, levers, fire. There are smashings and bangings in the night.

Jed doesn’t run with the others. He stands in the doorway of the little phoney pub, slightly staggered at the revolution he has started. Flames are already springing up from a dozen points in the blackness as homes and artifacts begin to burn. Meg runs past screaming, hair blowing in the wind, a blazing brand shedding a bright trail of sparks. Jed turns back, rubbing his face, and sees he isn’t alone. He walks across to where Polly is waiting, puts an arm round her shoulders and gives her a little shake. She watches up at him steadily. He says, “I didn’t finish, did I? I still didn’t go down all the way, to what you’re really trying to do.”

She gives him no help.

“I’m still trying to think,” he says. He looks over her brown hair at the beams of the pub, the high nicotine glazed ceiling. An extra-loud crash comes from outside; smoke begins to drift thin and acrid across the bar. “They’re all drunk now,” he says. “They’ll be sorry for this in the morning. When they see the houses burned down, and all the things destroyed.”

He swallows, and purses his lips. “I think,” he says, “I think . . . there was a painter once called Van Rijn. He was famous, and rich, and he had a wife and I suppose he loved her. Then everything went wrong. His wife died and he lost

his house and his money and his patrons forgot about him. Everything he had was taken away. And so . . . he started painting again. He made a portrait, *The Man in the Golden Helmet*. And then more. And more. And more. . . .”

Polly watches mistily, lips slightly parted.

“I think,” says Jed, “if there’s a Thing you can call by the name of Art, if it isn’t all just a delusion . . . then the roots of the Thing have to reach right down, into bitterness and darkness. Somehow it needs them, it’s like a . . . swelling, a wanting to live where there’s nothing but death, a needing the sky when there’s no sky left to see. It’s a . . . longing, an anger. That’s what you’ve let loose; because after tonight, when there’s nothing left but the City, there’ll be Art again. Something locked away and suffocated, growing, not seeing the sun. Like a . . . great flower in a box, thrusting and pushing and pushing till one day it bursts the seams . . . Is that what you really wanted, Polly? Just for there to be Art again? Am I right now?”

Polly hugs him suddenly, kissing and nibbling at his neck.

He lifts her head, tugging gently at her hair. “In the City,” he says. “Will you talk?”

She shakes her head, slowly.

“Funnyface,” he says. “Funnyface. . . .” He holds her against him, tightly.

In the night are pink blossomings of fire. The explosions carve out the cliff edges, altering land that is soon to vanish. In their light the mobiles flail, fall with thunderings and scrapings and long-drawn bell notes into the sea. Ploughshares and vanes, wings and sinews and metal feathers clanking and toppling; *Goliath*, *Civil War*, *Cutty Sark*, *Juliet*, *The Ant*, *Titania*, *Excalibur*, *Fandancer*, *Halycon* . . . and *Manscarer*, hugest and last. The procession of Colonists winds between the ruins, tired now, ragged and smoke-blackened and feverish-eyed. Leading them as they turn

towards the distant loom of the City is a tiny red car. Its driver sports the sword and froggings, the buckles and epaulettes, the full panoply of a British admiral; beside him a slighter shadow topped by a bonnet of gull feathers clutches a picture book of sailing ships. Behind, Meg carries boxes of scuttling animals, the Witch of Endor leads prancing dogs and a goat. The cavalcade, improvised banners swirling, fades in distance; and in time the last tarara-rattan of a drum is gone.

The dawn wind drones up from the sea. But the wind is alone.

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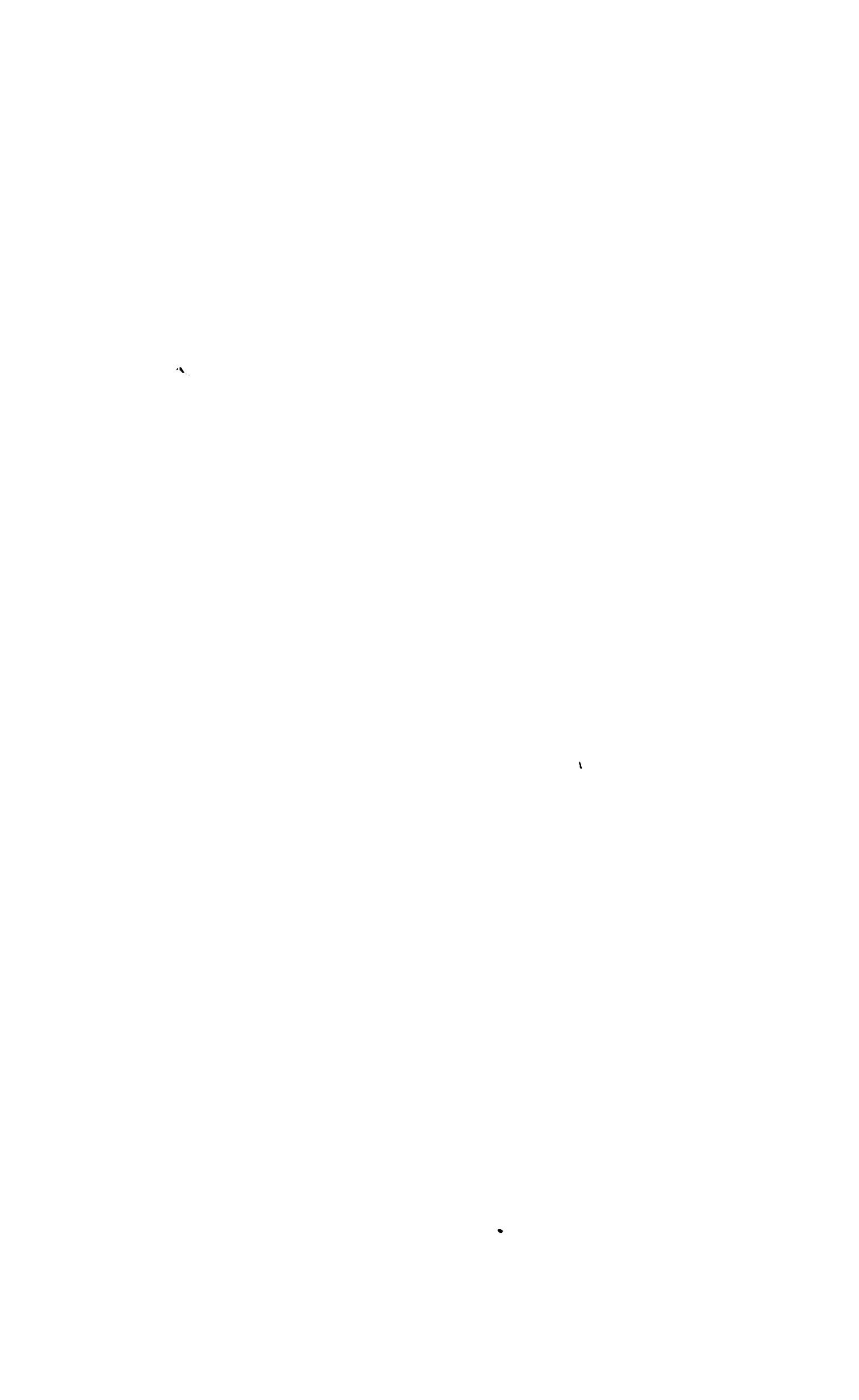
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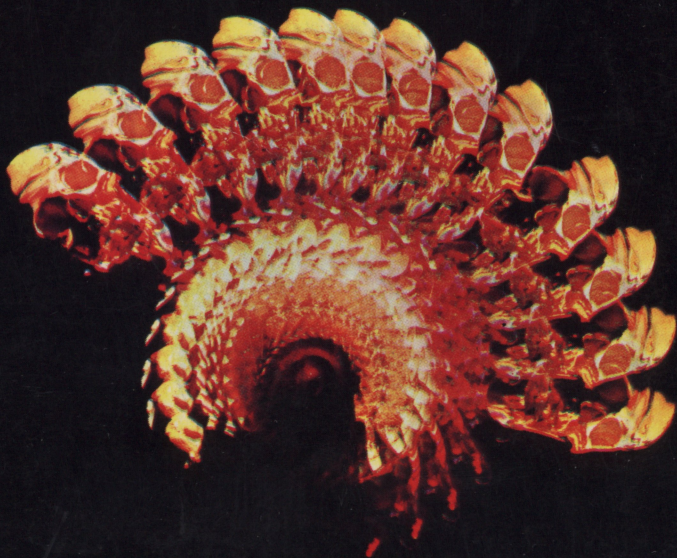
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