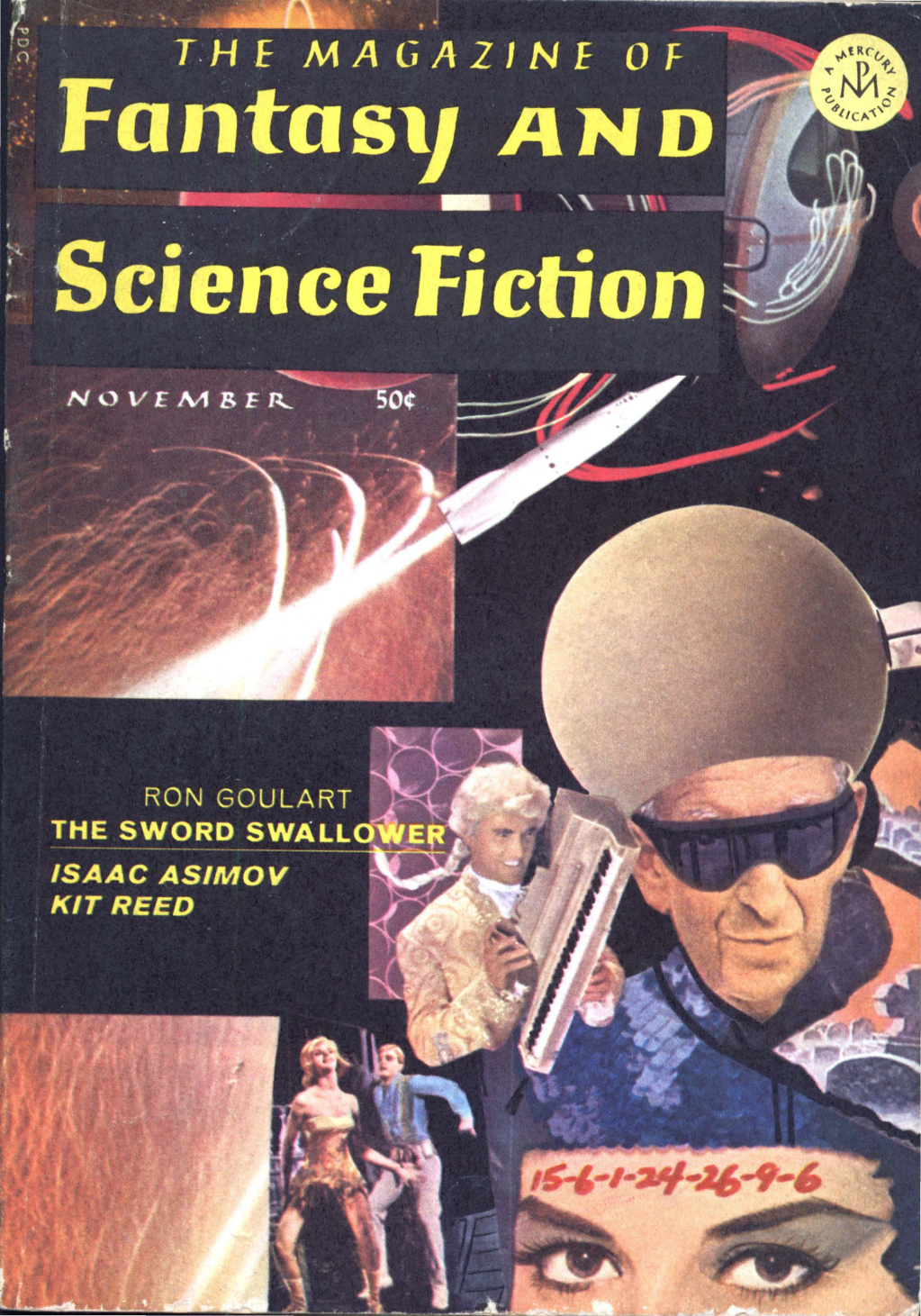
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RON GOULART
THE SWORD SWALLOWER
ISAAC ASIMOV
KIT REED
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NOVEMBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

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There are not many series characters in the SF and fantasy field, but Ron Goulart has successfully created two: Max Kearny, occult investigator and Ben Jolson, the shape-changing Chameleon Corps agent. The two heros have little in common beyond a sort of reluctant but absolute mastery of the most bizarre challenges and the fact that the roles of both men are sidelines. In reality, Kearny is an ad agency art director and Jolson a ceramics man. Come to think of it, they share this last characteristic with their creator. Goulart's sideline is advertising. In reality, he is, among things too numerous to mention, the author of this story, one of the longest and funniest of the Jolson adventures.

THE SWORD SWALLOWER

by Ron Goulart

THE OLD MAN DANCED ON THE wall. He grew larger, flickered, was gone. The peach colored office became light, the projector whirred to silence and the Head blinked his round wide eyes. "I'll tell you who that was," he said. He flicked a yellow disc out of a filigreed pill box and put the disc on his tongue.

Ben Jolson, slouching slightly on the visitor's side of the low black desk, said, "It's the man you want impersonated."

"That's it," said Head Mickens, swallowing and brightening. He rested a finger tip in the depression beneath his left eye. "The pressures that go with this job have increased so much lately, Ben. Due to all the trouble in the War Bureau."

"The disappearances."

"Exactly. First General Moosman, then Admiral Rockisle. A week later Bascom Lamar Taffler, the father of Nerve Gas #26. And this morning, about the break of day, Dean Swift himself."

Jolson sat up. "The Chairman of the War Bureau is missing?"

"It hasn't been on the news yet. I'm breaking it to you, Ben. Swift was last seen in the north corner of his rose garden. He's a great rose man."

"I saw a documentary about it," said Jolson. "You people in the Political Espionage Office have called on the Chameleon Corps because of the disappearances?"

"Yes," nodded Head Mickens. He unwrapped a blue and gold spantial and dropped the foil in the dispozhole next to his desk. "It's an explosive situation, Ben. It goes without saying the Barnum System of planets can't afford another peace scare."

"You suspect pacifists?"

The Head put his thumb in his ear and half rotated his palm. "We have little to go on, precious little. I'll admit there is a tendency on the part of PEO to see pacifists everywhere. As you know, there's some objection to the way the War Bureau is handling Barnum's colonization of the Terran planets."

"Especially when they demolished North Carolina."

"One little state." The Head popped the spantial into his mouth. "At any rate, you have to admit that when key War Bureau people, and their affiliates, start vanishing. Well, it could be pacifists."

"Who was the old man in the film?"

"Leonard F. Gabney," said the Head. He tapped the desk top with his spread finger tips. "I'm supposed to take something for the side effects."

Jolson reached down and picked a pill roll off the peach rug. "These?" he asked, tossing.

"Let's hope so. Now. Gabney himself is not important, just an old gentleman you'll be impersonating. You'll be sleep-briefed on him. We'll get to the actual assignment." Head Mickens tore a pill off the roll. "The important man here is Wilson A. S. Kimbrough."

Jolson shook his head. "Wait. Kimbrough is the Ambassador to the planet Esperanza, isn't he?"

"Yes, he runs the Barnum Embassy in the capital there."

"I don't want to go to Esperanza."

"Don't want to go?" asked the Head. "You have to go, it's in your contract. Once a CC man, always a CC man. Duty before business. Plus which, we can fine you. We can get the lease on your ceramics plant cancelled."

When he was not on assignment with the Chameleon Corps, Jolson ran a pottery plant in the suburbs of Keystone City. He'd been picked for the CC when he was twelve. After a dozen years of training and conditioning, he became a full fledged Chameleon agent. That was ten years ago. There was no way to quit. "Esperanza would unsettle me," said Jolson, slumping.

"They have to bury people someplace, Ben."

"But a whole planet that's nothing but cemeteries," said Jolson.

"There are five hundred thousand people on Esperanza," Head Mickens told him. "Alive people.

Not to mention, let me see, ten million tourists and nearly six million mourners visiting Esperanza each year." He held a memo up.

Jolson looked away. "The whole planet smells of floral pieces."

"Let me," said the Head, "outline the problem. There is a slight possibility—and this is based on material gathered by far flung PEO people—that Ambassador Kimbrough is linked up with this wave of abductions. Admiral Rockisle was actually on Esperanza when he vanished."

"Went to put a wreath on the grave of the Unknown Commando," said Jolson. "I know."

"If Kimbrough is a weak link, we have to establish it. This is one of many leads we are checking out," said Head Mickens. "Starting next week he'll be spending a vacation at Nepenthe, Inc., just outside Esperanza City."

"Nepenthe, Inc. The rejuvenation spa for old tycoons?"

"A refuge for time worn industrial and political leaders, yes. You become this old boy, Gabney, and we slip you into Nepenthe," said Head Mickens. "You won't have any trouble changing into old Gabney will you?"

The Chameleon Corps had made Jolson into a shape changer. He could turn into any person, nearly anything. "No." He bowed his head over a palmed fist. "You want me just to listen?"

"No. We want you to get Kimbrough alone and hit him with a battery of truth drugs. Find out what he knows, whom he's tied in with."

Jolson rocked back once. "Okay. I guess I have to do it. Who's my contact on Esperanza?"

"I can't tell you now because of security procedures. You'll be approached there."

"How?"

Head Mickens felt around on his desk top. "I have a special identifying phrase here someplace." He found a blue memo. "Here. 15-6-1-24-26-9-6. Someone will say, or more likely whisper, that to you."

"How come numbers. What happened to the poetry quotes?"

Mickens said, "Security thought they were too controversial. And it's not masculine to have agents running around saying, 'With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies' and such."

"What's the length of my stay at Nepenthe, Inc., going to be?"

"We've booked you in for a week," said Head Mickens. "Though we expect results before that. Long before that." He noticed a green memo card. "The place costs $10,000 a week, Ben. We had to siphon money out of the Political Espionage Office's recreation fund to pay the tab."

"There goes the new handball court."

"Not to mention our hot lunch fund for computer programmers," said Mickens. "But this is a crisis.

Then what isn't? You can report to Briefing Central now, Ben. First though, help me find a vial of raspberry colored liquid. I was supposed to take a spoonful half hour ago."

They both got down on their hands and knees.

His senior citizen suite in the Esperanza Plaza Hotel kept calling him gramps. Jolson, who now seemed to be eighty-four years old, stooped and spotted, was in a relaxing chair on the balcony of his living room. He'd requested, as apparently many old men did, a view of something besides the cemeteries beyond the capital. Gabney, the real Gabney, controlled telekinesis for all the Barnum planets, and his name had enough influence to get him a room with a view of the business district. At nightfall a cruiser from Nepenthe, Inc. would call for Jolson.

"Souvenir postcards, pappy?" asked a grid under his chair. "Artistic views of eleven famous crypts. Illusion of depth."

"Balderdash," said Jolson in his raspy Gabney voice. "Where's that drink I ordered?"

"Your medical card says no hard stuff, gramps," replied the grid. "Why don't you try the soup dispenser in your bedroom."

"Thunderation," said Jolson.

"Venusian gumbo's the specialty today. Or would you prefer a bowl of real London gruel?"

Jolson drummed the fingers of one freckled hand on the flesh-like arm of his chair. "I recall a suite at the Keystone Ritz where I could bribe the servos."

"You might drop ten dollars down the shoeshine outlet, grandaddy," the grid told him. "It might produce a scotch on the rocks."

Jolson used his blackstick cane to swivel himself up out of the chair. He was poised over the shoe hole when the door of the suite chimed. "Yes?" he said.

"Welcome to Esperanza on behalf of the Barnum Embassy," called a girl's voice. "I have a basket of reconstituted fruit for you, Mr. Gabney."

"Well, well," said Jolson as he opened the door.

A young willowy brunette was standing there, slightly on tiptoe. She had sharply angled cheekbones and short straight hair. Her dress was lemon yellow, on her arm was a Barnum Embassy armband, and across her forehead in lipstick was written 15-6-1-24-26-9-6. She winked carefully and wiped her tan forehead clean with a tissue. "We come out and greet all the important Barnum visitors to Esperanza," she said, coming sideways into the suite. "I'm Jennifer Hark, Mr. Gabney."

"Indeed you are, my dear," said Jolson. The door closed and he added, "So?"

She jerked her head negatively and walked out onto the balcony.

The afternoon wind flicked at her hair. Putting the basket of fruit down on the relaxing chair, she motioned Jolson out. "The basket is an anti-bug. It'll kill any pickups around here."

"Who'd be listening to me?" he asked when he joined her. "Besides the senior citizen andies."

"We have to take precautions."

"The hotel might get suspicious."

"I'm only here for a few minutes," she told him, handing him a runt apricot. "Keep this. If you get in trouble at Nepenthe, squeeze it and I'll help you out of the fix."

"Wait," said Jolson. "I don't need lady daredevils to help me." He thumbed the fruit back to her.

She pushed it to him. "Orders. Keep it with you at all times."

"I'll look silly at the spa carrying a lousy apricot around."

"Tell them it's a fetish. Old men have lots of those," she said. Jennifer cocked her head and studied him. "This is really wonderful. You look ninety."

"Eighty-four. And don't call me gramps."

One long fingered hand spun out and touched at his face. "You really seem old. How do you do it?"

"With twelve years of processing. It's a knack."

"I never cease to be amazed by the Chameleon Corps." She clapped her hands together once. "I've found out something. We're starting to pick up veiled references to something called Group A."

"Behind the snatches?"

"It's possible. See what Kimbrough says."

"You really work for his embassy?"

"It's my cover," said the girl. "Well, good luck on your mission. If all goes well report to me before you return to Barnum. Go into the New Rudolph Florist Shop on Solitude Way and say the numbers. Got it?"

"Sure," said Jolson.

"You get in any trouble out at the rejuvenation place and you yell."

Jolson returned her fruit basket to her. "Thank you for your visit, my dear. Now I'm afraid it's time for my nap."

"Very convincing," she murmured, leaving.

Jolson stepped out of the cruiser and into a pool of hot mud. He sank down to chin level, rose up and noticed a square-faced blond man squatting and smiling on the pool's edge.

The man extended a hand. "We start things right off at Nepenthe. Shake. That mud immersion has taken weeks of aging off you already, Mr. Gabney. I'm Franklin T. Tripp, Co-ordinator and Partial Founder."

Jolson gave Tripp a muddy right hand. His cruiser pilot had undressed him first, so he'd been

expecting something. "I admire your efficiency, sir."

"You know, Mr. Gabney," Tripp confided in a mint-scented voice, "I'm nearly sixty myself. Do I look it?"

"Forty at best."

"Every chance I get I come out here and wallow." Tripp extracted Jolson from the pool and guided him down a tiled pathway. It was a quiet dark night and Nepenthe, all low, pale blue buildings, was on top of a plateau miles beyond Esperanza City. The wind that moved across it was warm and dry. "Let me take you inside and introduce you around."

Behind them an attendant in a blue jumpsuit was unloading Jolson's luggage. Jolson glanced at the heat pad case that had the truth kit hidden in it, then back at Tripp. "I don't mingle at my best when I'm naked and muddy."

"We have no conventions here," said Tripp. "However, you'll have a shower and get into one of our universal robes first. Afterwards you can report to the health lounge on Level One." He rubbed some mud off the dial of his watch. "Then you'll turn in. We rise at dawn here at Nepenthe. Actually, I owe the fact that I still have the mind and body of a boy to getting up with the sun, Mr. Gabney."

"That and mud."

"Exactly." Tripp pushed him through a bronzed door marked Welcoming Shower.

The shower room was long and green, the floor a soft warm material. The room was empty, flanked by two dozen shower outlets.

Sitting on a straightback nearwood chair just outside the far doorway was a wide, short-haired man in a blue coverall. He had an old-fashioned papercovered book steepled on his knee. "Where's your health sandals, old man?"

"I just arrived, young fellow," said Jolson.

The man got up, flexing various parts of himself, gently placing the open book on the chair seat. "Nat Hockering is my name, old man. Where's your health shoe sandals, I asked you?"

Jolson clenched his weathered stringy hands, hunched. "I'm newly arrived. Escorted here by your Mr. Tripp."

"Nobody takes a shower without special sandals. It's a health hazard otherwise."

"I'd like to get this mud off."

"Sure you would, old man. But you're not going to. Exit the way you came."

"Perhaps," said Jolson, taking a deep breath, "I could purchase the proper shoes." He didn't want to blow his cover so soon. Booting Hockering would do that.

"Where you got the money hidden, granpappy?"

"I need hardly point out that a man without means would not come here."

"Give me twenty bucks at the

start of the obstacle course tomorrow at seven sharp. A deal, old man?"

"You have the word of Leonard F. Gabney."

"For what that's worth." Hockering reached around his doorway, got a pair of compo sandals and skimmed them over the floor to Jolson. "Seven sharp."

Jolson bent and tugged the shoes on. "I had expected more cordiality."

"You'll get it. Not from me, though. I'm just biding my time here until I can get to a good accredited university and study architecture." He waved the book. "Do you know anything about balustrades?"

"As much as the next man." Jolson moved under an outlet. The mud was starting to cake. He scratched his plump stomach and pushed the ON button. Nothing happened. "How does one go about getting water?"

"Hot or cold?" asked Hockering, who was sitting again.

"Warm."

"Five dollars for warm water after official shower closing time."

"When do the showers close?"

"About five minutes before you got here."

"Put it on my tab."

"I guess I can trust you," said Hockering.

Three old men were in the Level One health lounge, a domed grey room with tubular chairs and a juice dispenser.

"My name is Leonard F. Gabney," Jolson said, sinking down in a chair and adjusting his grey knee length robe. "Newly arrived. Home planet is Barnum."

The youngest old man, pink and round, grinned and made a toasting motion with his juice glass. "Phelps H. K. Sulu from Barafunda. In the moss development line. You?"

"Telekinesis."

"How," asked a straight, bronzed old man, "do you stand?"

"On what?"

"Start anywhere," said the stiff man. "We'll have to complete the whole profile eventually."

"This is Wing Commander Eberhardt," explained Sulu. "He has a preoccupation with political shadings. Been here, at his family's expense, for five and one-half years."

"Take our commitment in the Terran situation," said the Wing Commander. "What are your feelings about that, sir?"

"I probably agree with your stand," said Jolson.

"And where do you stand in regard to the fact that there's a small green bug crawling along the tip of your nose?"

Jolson made a flicking motion.

Wing Commander Eberhardt, rising up, said, "I believe in turning in at approximately this time. If there is no opposition." He nodded and moved out of the room.

"Let me welcome you," said the third old man. He was a lanky, dusky man with close cropped grey hair. "I haven't had a chance to speak until now. As a native of Barnum, I'm happy to greet you. I'm Wilson A. S. Kimbrough, serving as Ambassador to Esperanza. I will be happy to help you in any way I can, Mr. Gabney."

Jolson smiled.

As they both sailed over the low hurdle, Franklin T. Tripp said, "Running and jumping, Mr. Gabney, if only we did more of it. I really think that I'm often mistaken for a youth of twenty-eight because of the large amount of running and jumping I do."

Jolson hit the turf, panting an old man's wheeze. "I imagine the sweating has something to do with it." A dozen old men were working around a half-mile track that was studded with hurdles and water obstacles. They all wore sky blue sweat suits.

"Sweating," said Tripp, who didn't seem to be winded. "Four entire years were wiped from my age by sweating and perspiring alone, Mr. Gabney."

An old man who'd introduced himself as Olden Grilse at breakfast that morning screamed someplace behind them. Tripp slowed to a trot. "Another one of Grilse's seizures," he explained. "You solo from this point, and I'll clear the old fellow from the course."

Alone, Jolson stepped up his pace, trying quietly to catch up with Kimbrough, who was several hundred yards ahead of him. He jumped a three-foot metal barrier, sprinted, leaped a box hedge. Found himself alongside Wing Commander Eberhardt.

"How do you stand," asked the Wing Commander, "on thermometers?"

"I'm neutral."

The Wing Commander's elbows swung up chin high as he trotted. "They stuck one in me at sunrise. Say I can't be trusted with them orally. Tend to champ the ends off."

"You have a fever?"

"No, I have no use for that sort of thing."

Jolson dashed ahead, leaped a pond.

He didn't get a chance to talk to Kimbrough until they were put side by side in steam cabinets that afternoon. "Is the whole day programmed for us?" he asked the Ambassador.

"There is," answered the steaming Kimbrough, "a free recreational period after the afternoon's enforced nap. You don't by any chance happen to be an archery buff, Gabney?"

Jolson said, "My first love, Kimbrough."

"I've had the devil's own time finding anyone to get out on the range with me. Yesterday I had the whole area to myself."

"Oh, so?" said Jolson. "Maybe we could share the sport this afternoon. To make it more interesting we could wager on bull's eyes."

"Excellent," said Ambassador Kimbrough.

The heavy mist rolled and tumbled between them and the straw-backed target. Jolson could still see the trio of many branched trees to their left. Taped to his side, under the blue sweatsuit, was the smuggled-in truth kit. He ran his arrow nock along his front teeth and then said, "Perhaps a little something to warm the bones."

Kimbrough's bow twanged, an arrow disappeared into the fog. "After I hear the thunk."

They waited as the mist closed in, but no sound came. Jolson inched a small flask out of the gunmetal kit. "Brandy?"

"Well," said Ambassador Kimbrough. "I believe a splash of brandy would go well about now." He took the flask, unscrewed the lid and drank. "You?"

"I carry it only for friends," said Jolson, slipping the flask away.

Kimbrough cleared his throat and fitted another arrow to his bow. "You know, Gabney," he said, lowering bow and arrow, "when I was a boy I attended the John Foster Dulles Academy on Earth. I feel I must tell you that. Here's the secret, Gabney. When I was thirteen, I paid Norman L. Maston five dollars to write my paper on late 20th Century billboards."

"How about Group A?" asked Jolson. He caught the Ambassador below the elbow and headed him for the trees.

"When I was fourteen, I kissed Estelle Banderman in the appliance complex of her maternal grandmother's senior city tower. What do you think of that, Gabney?"

"Group A," prodded Jolson. "Dean Swift. General Moosman, Admiral Rockisle." The misty wind rattled the dry leaves.

"This is the truth," said Kimbrough, squinting at Jolson. "I really did borrow that dictadesk back on Barafunda. At the hearing I said I'd never heard of it. Not so, Gabney."

"Do you know anything about who's taking members of the War Bureau, Ambassador?" Jolson hesitated, got a syringe out of the kit and jammed it into the soft part of the Ambassador's upper arm.

"Those testimonial dinners on Barnum," said the swaying Kimbrough. "I took all the cash and bought a solar-powered motel on Murdstone. Thing spins like a merry-go-round when the sun shines. Tourists like it. I never spent the money on my campaign." Kimbrough back stepped until he was braced by the nearest tree.

"Swift."

"Well," said the Ambassador, "I passed on the information. The

money's too good. Naturally I know the comings and goings of the War Bureau."

Jolson edged closer. PEO was right. "Whom do you tell?"

"In the fringe."

"Where?"

"Esperanza City. The fringe area. A young man."

"His name?"

"Son Brewster, Jr. He's a truly wonderful and delightful entertainer. Barely twenty but much more honest and upright than our generation, Gabney. I pass the news on to Son Brewster, Jr."

"Why?"

Kimbrough was breathing through his mouth, swaying. "Earth, Gabney."

"Huh?"

"Earth supreme. They want someday, Earth supreme."

"Is Brewster the boss?"

"No, A. Group A. No names."

"Where is Group A?"

Kimbrough straightened and his eyes and nostrils fluttered. "Not used to uncut liquor these days. What a jolt."

Jolson said, "The recreation period's about up, Kimbrough. Let's head home."

"One thing first," said the Ambassador.

"Yes?"

"I want to go and see if that arrow found its target." He chuckled and bobbed away into the fog.

Nat Hockering wheeled the hair dryer across the small grey cell. "Exercise can only do so much, Mr. Gabney. Same with intelligent dieting. To really chop away the years we have to fall back on the cosmetic aids."

Jolson was tilted back in a medical looking chair with his head under a faucet and over a basin. "How much is it going to cost me, Hockering?"

"Don't let my grumpiness last night set you off your stride, Mr. Gabney. In the daylight and early evening hours I'm affable." He massaged soap into Jolson's thin white hair, forcing his head further back.

"Certainly makes the scalp tingle," said Jolson.

Resting one hand lightly on Jolson's throat Hockering said, "Let me say one thing."

"Yes?"

"Fingerprints."

Jolson tensed. "Oh?"

"You slipped up. You don't have the real Leonard F. Gabney fingerprints." His wide fingers tightened around Jolson's adam's apple. "We got a man with a tap on the PEO dispozhole. Found a triplicate of a memo asking for a Chameleon Corps man to work on the War Bureau case. Been waiting, just in case PEO had any whiff of us."

"Tripp in this?" asked Jolson, gasping.

"The two of us. Plus old Kimbrough." He swung his other hand up to fend off Jolson's clutching

fingers. "Going to strangle you now, fake Mr. Gabney. Sink you in the mud pool. Very good for the appearance."

Jolson concentrated. His neck grew and stretched some six inches, thinning away from Hockering's grip. He elongated his fingers and jabbed them into the thick man's eyes.

There were certain advantages to being processed by the Chameleon Corps. Jolson shrunk down a foot now and knifed out of the chair. He caught his balance against the hair dryer. Picked the metal pole up and swung the headpiece. It smashed hard over Hockering's skull. Hockering's chin slapped against the basin edge, and he sank down the wall, his spread hands making small circles on the tiles.

In his blue sweatsuit Jolson hit the corridor, mingled. He moved toward an exit, dodged out of the main building and across the grounds. He ran for a moored supply cruiser.

Somebody was calling numbers to him. Wabbling down out of the twilight sky was a private cruiser, dangling a ladder.

"Who?" yelled Jolson.

"Me, Jennifer Hark. Hurry on up."

"Damn it," said Jolson, jumping and catching the ladder. Inside the small compartment he said, "I told you not to interfere."

"You squeezed it."

"What?" He eased into a passenger chair.

"The apricot with the warning device inside." She let the cruiser climb a slow arc away from Nepenthe. "It sent me a warning signal three good hours ago. I came out to extricate you."

Jolson didn't bother to ask her how she'd have done that. "I didn't touch the thing. They must have searched my luggage this afternoon and fooled with it."

Jennifer grinned, which made her cheek bones stand out even more. "But you did keep it with you."

"I haven't had any opportunities to jettison an apricot since I saw you last."

"Did you get to question Ambassador Kimbrough?"

They were flying back toward Esperanza City, high over the colored lights of the cemeteries. "Sure," said Jolson. He told the girl about Tripp and Hockering, filled her in on what he'd drugged out of the Ambassador.

"I had a coded memo from Head Mickens. You're to pursue any leads you've uncovered to their logical end. Adopting whatever new identities are necessary."

"I know. I always do that anyway," said Jolson. "Tell PEO to watch Nepenthe, follow Tripp and Hockering if they skip, which they probably will do now. But I don't want them brought in until I find out more about Group A."

"We've got two agents in a crypt above the place, living on picnic sandwiches and observing." She flicked a radio toggle. "I'll alert them."

Jolson slumped, eyes closed, while she made the call. Then he said, "I want you to drop me off at the fringe."

"You have to be young to fit in there," said Jennifer. "Besides which you haven't even been briefed on the styles and fashions of the area."

"I'll assimilate it as I go along." Jolson rested his face in his cupped hands for a moment, exhaled, became twenty. "This okay?"

She glanced over at him, her eyebrows flickering. "I'm not used to this. Let's see. Hair longer. Usually streaked on the left side. What about clothes?"

"You can lend me some money, and I'll pick up some in the fringe."

The girl said, "Do I ever get to see you as yourself. As Ben Jolson?"

Jolson watched the colored lights. "Afterwards," he said.

The two player pianos collided on the diamond-shaped dance floor of the Ultimate Chockhouse, and the foot pedal of the orange one ejected and hit the old woman who sold hallucinations, knocking her into her barrow. The other three pianos kept racing around the low basement room, all playing different tunes. Jolson ordered another antihistamine and watched the girl who was suspended from the ceiling pump the wheels of her silver bicycle.

"Bless you, addlecove," said a turn-collared man. He was keeping himself from falling with the help of the empty chair at Jolson's green plyo table. "Haven't laid gagers on you before. You new?"

"Beat it, autumn bawler," said Jolson, using one of the phrases he'd picked up in his two days in the fringe.

"I'm a man of the cloth, yes." He was small and big chested, with a bobbing chin. "I'd like to sit and wag the velvet with you."

"Don't overload my wattles."

"They call me Rev Cockspur," said the reverend. He toppled into the empty chair, stroked a crumb of scrambled egg off his worn elbow. "That's a nice benjamin you're sporting."

"I gooseberried it," said Jolson.

Rev Cockspur smiled, massaging his thick neck. "We all have our weaknesses, my boy."

"What's your lay, Rev?"

"I'll order a bingo first."

"Not on my tab."

The reverend shook both hands. "I have an arrangement here at the Chockhouse. Free." He signaled the chrome-plated waitress.

When his drink came the reverend said, "I don't suppose you'd care to be converted?"

Jolson shook his long-haired head. "That what you do?"

"Originally," said Rev Cockspur, tossing down the green liquor with both hands. "Came out to Esperanza three years ago. Sent by my religious association to convert the young folks here in the fringe. Bring them under the wing." He waved for another drink, then pinched his nose twice and wagged his head. "Wish I had a little of the balsam. Then I could get my daddles on a journey."

"You're addicted?"

The reverend's eyes looked into his glass. "Well, initially I'd decided I wouldn't have a chance to reach the young people unless I learned their gob. Otherwise they'd think me a joskin. So I picked up their way of talking. After that I acquired their drinking habits, which brought me closer to them. To really get in close I started using the same drugs they do. So now I have reached the position where I can really talk to them and I'm an alcoholic, a drug addict, a prescription pill fiend, and I'm living with two albino nymphomaniacs in a ghetto down the street."

Jolson shifted the antihistamine pill around in his mouth. "It's a setback sure enough, Rev."

"At least it's been good experience," said Rev Cockspur. His head flicked back and he laughed. "There's the old Son himself."

At the beaded doorway was a slender boy with his white hair braided and scarlet ribbon tied. He was wearing silver flecked clothes and fawn boots. Strapped to his back was a mandolin and swinging in his left hand an amplifier.

"Son Brewster?" Jolson asked.

"None other," said Rev Cockspur. "Who else has got a handle like that?"

"Muck," said Son Brewster, Jr., angrily swinging the mandolin to the front and dropping his amplifier to the stairs.

"He's going to do a protest," said the reverend, lowering his voice.

The wheeling pianos quickly parked and Son picked at the mandolin. "I was sittin' across the street gettin' my hair trimmed," he sang. "An' the barber dropped a hot towel down my damn neck. What kind of universe have you money-grubbin' bastards made when a thing like-a that can happen?"

"Delightful," said Rev Cockspur.

"How come it doesn't rhyme?"

The reverend leaned toward him. "That's an odd question."

Son was moving toward their table. "Hello, Rev. Need any ned?"

"I could use some, Son. My nock's twitching for a journey."

"Hold out your fams and I'll slip you a few rags, Rev." Son drew a folding of bills out of his trouser slit and gave the money to Rev Cockspur. "Who's the sam?"

"Friend of mine." The reverend fisted the cash into his tunic.

Jolson said, "I'm Will Roxbury. You?"

"Son Brewster, Jr.," said the boy. He sucked in his cheeks, narrowed his eyes. "You new in the fringe?"

"Yeah."

"Play a game of zenits with me?"

Jolson shrugged. "How much, cans or dews?"

"Ten at least. Dews," said Son. He carefully got out of his mandolin. "Watch this, Rev." To the dozen young people in the shadowy room he said, "The sam with the fancy charley prescot and I are a-goin' to play a quick game of zenits."

Up above the girl stopped her bike and a redheaded boy said, "Snitchel him, Son."

Zenits turned out to be square cards with pictures of the major cemeteries on them. You pitched them against the wall and whoever got nearest won the toss. In half an hour Jolson was eighty dollars to the good. "Enough?" he asked Son.

Son tugged at one of his braids, sucked his tongue. He took the cards from Jolson and walked back to his mandolin. Sitting down opposite Rev Cockspur, he began to sing. "When I went walkin' into the Free Barnum Information Library this mornin' they tol' me my book was three days overdue, huh. What kind of sodbustin' universe is it when things like-a that can happen to a man?" He handed the mandolin to Rev and returned to Jolson, who was leaning against a silent piano. "Doin' anything tonight?"

Jolson said, "No. Why?"

"Know where the Sprawling Eclectic is?"

"Sure."

"Meet me there at dinner time. We'll have some bingo and sawney. Okay?"

Jolson turned away. "Maybe so," he said as he headed for the door.

In the alley he bumped into an old woman who was selling used wreaths. "If you know any deceased person named Axminster, I've got a bargain," the woman said.

Jolson hooked his fingers around her arm and guided her to the street. "Makeup never works, Jennifer. Stop tailing me."

"You shouldn't blurt out my name without giving the number code first."

"Why? I know it's you under that lousy disguise. Now get the hell back to your embassy before Brewster and everybody else in Group A drops on you."

"Tripp, Hockering and the Ambassador are holed up in the fringe now, too."

"All the more reason. Now get going."

"Are you making progress?"

"Some," said Jolson. A tourist barge was landing on the street, and he waited until it had opened its doors. "Mingle in the crowd. Quick."

"You CC people are sure independent." She handed him a carnation. "How did you know it was me?"

"You have nice cheekbones. You can't hide them with white powder." He refused the flower and walked away from her.

Two tourists called to him to pose for a picture but he kept moving.

Son Brewster, Jr., flicked his thumbnail with a mandolin pick and said, "Not a bad flash panny as flash pannies go, uh?"

Jolson leaned back in the booth, glanced at the twenty or so young people scattered around the realboard walled room. "Fair."

"Here comes a harp I know," said Son, cocking an eye at a tall dark girl who was moving toward the table.

"Who's the sam?" The girl rested her buttocks on their table.

"Says he's a-goin' into the high-pad line out in the subs."

"Dance?" the girl asked Jolson. She put a warm palm against his cheek. "Where you from, rabbit?"

"Tarragon," said Jolson.

"Good. I know all the dances from there."

Jolson didn't. And they had an odd time on the heart-shaped dance floor.

Son Brewster wasn't in the booth after the dancing. "I'd better get over to the venus and earn some rhino. Bye, Will."

"Okay." Jolson watched her go.

"Friends of mine." Son slid in across. He pointed to the ebony entertainment platform where four white-haired young men were replacing the all-girl group. The boys were all tall and wide with their hair worn like Son's. They had on gold clothes and ivory boots.

"Call themselves the Ford Foundation. Do mostly my material, protest stuff."

"Two weeks ago I went into a cafeteria and was orderin' hash," sang the quartet. "An' they tol' me they were all out of hash. What kind of godawful universe is it when they can talk to a man like-a that."

The listeners applauded. But about ten of them stood and drifted out.

After the second protest number there were only two Venusians left in the Sprawling Eclectic. When they went, Son inclined his head toward the platform.

The Ford Foundation dropped their instruments and jumped. They ringed the booth, easing out bright knives.

"You're a fake, Will." Son backed into a standing position. "Tripp warned me there was a CC loose. So I've been a-testin' strangers. You played zenits with the wrong rules and never corrected me. You let Mimi con you into thinkin' you were a-doin' dances from Tarragon, your supposed to be home planet. But they weren't.

You haven't even got our velvet down perfect."

Jolson jumped up on the bench he'd been sitting on. Did a back flip into the next booth.

"Snitchel him," shouted Son.

Jolson ran across the dance floor and leaped up on the platform. Behind him he heard the Ford Foundation stalking. He grabbed up an illuminated bass fiddle, swung it into the first of the quartet who tried to clutch at him.

"He's pullin' a mingus," said Son, still in the booth.

The second boy slashed up straight armed. Jolson jumped to the floor, shrinking down in size. He planted himself and swung up with locked fists. The boy yelled and doubled over.

The two remaining Foundation boys dived together, knives taut. Jolson stretched out his left arm and wound it around and around the neck of one of them. He unwound sharply and the boy spun into his partner. While the pair was on the floor, stumbling upward, Jolson grew to his regular size and booted them in the head in turn. Then he hurdled them and knocked out the two earlier assassins.

Brushing back his hair, he turned to Son Brewster.

"I protest," said Son. "I don't fight."

Staying where he was Jolson shot out an arm and roped in the boy. "Tell me about Group A, Son."

"No."

Jolson tightened his coiled arm. "Come on."

"Go easy. They've got your girl."

"What?"

"That one with the funny cheekbones. Jennifer Hark. We spotted her tagging around."

"Where is she?"

"No."

"Tell me."

"Ouch. On her way to the isle."

"What isle?"

"Beyond the cemeteries. Three hundred miles from here. Where they keep the frozen ones. The isle."

"Who's got her?"

"You better go easy, sam. They froze her solid over an hour ago and if you make any trouble she'll stay that way forever."

Jolson almost choked the boy. He got control and slackened. "Who took her there?"

"Some of Group A. Took her in a hoodoo wagon. They don't allow no cruisers to fly over the main cemeteries, spoils the tourist runs. She'll be there late tonight, early tomorrow."

"Your part, what is it?"

"After the snatchers get the target, I provide transportation. We use some of the cut-rate funeral wagons that operate out of the fringe. Deliver the frozen people to the isle."

"And who's on the isle?"

"Can't tell you."

"Yes, you can."

"Muck," said Son, trying to swallow. "His name's Purviance. Maxwell Purviance. And he believes in Earth supreme."

"What's he after, peace?"

"I don't know. I really don't. Ouch. I don't."

Jolson chopped his free hand against Son's head and the boy passed out. His truth kit also contained a simple knockout drug, and he took time to give each of the boys an injection. Then he dragged them one by one into a supply room behind the platform. It should give him some hours before any alert would go out.

In under an hour he was moving out of the fringe on a mourners' bus.

Tombstones blinked red and yellow and green outside the bus windows. This was one of the wealthier cemeteries, built half a century ago when the trend had been toward equestrian monuments. On each side of the dark roadway stretched row on row of mounted figures, their simulated marble color rotating from red to yellow to green as the ground level spotlights went through their color cycle.

The two-chinned woman next to Jolson was sobbing into a reusable plyo handkerchief. "Going to visit a close relative?" Jolson asked, in an attempt to soothe her into quiet.

"No. I don't know anybody on the whole planet."

"I noticed you were crying."

"I'm fond of horses. Whenever I see so many of them depicted it breaks me down."

A bald man in front of them turned around. "You two folks on the Econ?"

"No," said Jolson.

"I'm on a Three Weeks On Three Planets tour," said the heavy woman as she wiped her puffed eyes.

"My name's Lowenkopf," the man said. The lights from outside turned his head green. "I take an Econ to Esperanza once a year when there's a slack at the little pornography shop I run on Barafunda. This year I'm doing chemists."

"Chemists?" asked Jolson, wondering if there was a vacant seat further back.

"I'm visiting the tombs of famous chemists. Last year I did actors. Chopped a chunk off Hasselbad's crypt. You remember Hasselbad, called The Man With The Kissable Ears. Very big on TV back in my youth."

"I always come for the flowers," said the woman. "Flowers and horses are my two driving interests in life."

"One year I just rode the roller-coasters," said the bald man and turned back toward the front.

"Palomino," said the woman, nudging the window.

After they had passed the Tomb of the Unknown Commando and

the heavy woman had read its Open All Night sign, the bus pulled off the road. In a cul-de-sac between two cemeteries was a sprawling rustic inn. Its blinking sign said it was The Eternal Sleep Motel.

"Six hours for rest and recreation," called the bus driver, who was dressed all in black.

When Jolson passed him he asked, "Suppose I want to keep moving?"

"Switch to the next express that deadheads straight through to the slum cemeteries. It won't be by until nearly dawn though. We'll be pulling out just an hour after that."

"Damn," said Jolson.

"You'll have fun here," said the driver. "In the pub they have a continual wake going."

Jolson stepped down into the night.

Against a smoky wall of the pub, as far from the organized wailing and keening as possible, Jolson drank his dark ale. When the barmaid came by with a tray of funeral meats, he shook his head negatively.

He was watching a leathery, stringy man who was leaning over the darkwood bar. The man had come in a few minutes before, mentioning his truck full of flowers parked outside. If no other sign of transportation showed, Jolson would swipe the truck and move on.

Someone tapped his side. Jolson turned to the group at the wooden table to his right. They were decked with cameras and recording equipment. "Yeah?" He was still in his twenty-year-old shape, and there might be people out this far from the fringe who didn't like youth.

"Would you mind," said the blond woman who'd tapped him, "picking up that film cartridge that's rolled under your foot, young man?"

Jolson bent and retrieved the film. "You people in the communications field?"

"Show some respect for your elders," said the widest of the three men.

"Bert doesn't like lamentations much," said the woman, smiling up at Jolson. She was in her early forties, moderately attractive.

A thin man in too small clothes said, "I don't mind telling you who I am. I'm Floyd Janeway." He lifted his ale glass and emptied it. "And I'm here on a special assignment. Of the kind that has made me universally known, well known. Right?"

"Right," said the woman. "Now hush."

"Go away, kid," said the one who didn't like Jolson.

The third man was freckled and bushy. He ordered more ale, including a glass for Jolson. "Just keep quiet, Floyd. Have an ale with us, kid, and then go away."

"Why be diplomatic," said the big one.

"You have heard of me, haven't you?" asked Janeway as he reached for the newly arrived ale.

"Sure," said Jolson. "Journalist. Work for 9 Planet News in the Earth system and Barnum Telcom out here. What are you covering?"

"Bigger than Janeway With The Barafunda Insurgents. Bigger than Janeway Explains The Tarragon Harbor Fiasco. Bigger than Janeway Lives A Month With The Turmeric Rebels."

"Quiet, Floyd," said the blond.

"Janeway Interviews Purviance. Haven't heard of him yet, have you? Took weeks, months of string pulling to set this up. He'll be big soon."

The big man said, "Go away, kid."

Janeway swilled ale. "We'll change the subject, Jerry. Are you good at games, kid?"

"Some."

"Do you young guys out here still play zenits?"

Jolson grinned, said, "Sure. Is this a challenge?"

Janeway stood up. "We'll play over there next to the dartboard, use some tomb postcards for zenits."

"Play, don't talk," said Jerry.

Alongside the reporter, walking across the room, Jolson asked, "When are you due at the Purviance interview, sir?"

"Tomorrow afternoon I begin it. I go in solo, just Janeway and his golden mind. We're pulling out of this hole after lunchtime. I don't function in the morning hours much at all."

Jolson stumbled, caught hold of Janeway, elongated his fingers and extracted the man's ID packet from inside his tunic. "Sorry, slipped."

"Have to be more agile than that to beat me at zenits."

Jolson was clumsy again after they'd been playing nearly a half hour. The truth kit skittered out of his tunic and bounced into Janeway. "You young people and your drug experiences," smiled the reporter. He picked the metal kit up and handed it back.

Jolson won sixty-three dollars from Janeway, even playing zenits with the correct rules. He said goodnight, went carefully out to the yard and stole the florist's truck. He had Janeway's identification papers and the fingerprints of his right hand. When he hit the road that would take him to the isle, he was Floyd Janeway, down to the fingertips.

The lake was a smooth, chill blue. In its center, dotted with circling white birds, was a bright green island. There were ferns, palms, twisting vines, spilling flowers, all sharp and clear in the early morning. At the top of a low incline was a softly yellow building, with columns and fret work and curling marble leaves.

Glowing white swans drifted across the lake's stillness. Sitting on a jetty was a bearded man, small, in a thick, brown overcoat. He watched over a padded shoulder as Jolson strode up a curved flagstone path.

"Got a load of popsicles for me to ferry across?" asked the man.

Jolson said, "I'm a bit early for my appointment. I'm Floyd Janeway."

The bearded man selected a flat stone from a small pile between his booted feet. He flipped the stone out at the water, and it bounced over a swan. "All we handle here is storage for frozen bodies, mister."

"Floyd Janeway, the reporter," said Jolson. "Tell Purviance I'm here."

The man hunkered, made a single flap of the elbows and stood. His gnarled boots scattered the flat stones. "Stand right there. Very slow you get out your IDs and skim them across the sward to me, mister. Three lasers are aimed at your ass right this minute, not to mention two that'll frizzle your head."

Jolson tossed the identification packet. "That a tattoo on your hand?"

The shaggy man held up the hand for Jolson to look at while he flipped through the IDs with the other hand. "My entire body is tattooed, mister. All pictures of tombs and crypts. I had a morbid streak in my youth. Well, it still makes a nice momento mori. At one time I was quite a tourist attraction."

"You'd look great under a red spotlight."

The bearded man shuffled closer to Jolson. "Hold up your right-hand thumb, mister." He looked from the identification packet to Jolson's thumb. A dove fluttered down and landed on the thick overcoat's left shoulder. The man reached up with his tattooed hand and pulled the bird's chest open. A small mike came erect. "He's who he says. Send a cruiser." While Jolson stood on the jetty waiting, the man said, "I don't take many showers anymore. It depresses me to soap myself down."

"I figured," said Jolson.

From the columned building rose a scarlet cruiser. It came to a stop hovered over Jolson.

The rocking chair was cluttered with eagles. They were carved all over it, twisting and interlocking, black with spread wings. In the chair, which ticked slightly and slowly, was a tight mouthed man, wearing some kind of pullover cloth pants and a wide brimmed straw hat. His fingers were square and smooth, holding a yellow bowled pipe. He was a large man, big faced, and even relaxing in the rocker, he held himself tight. "Understand I mean you no insult," he said, forcing the pipe between his teeth. "But am I right in assuming you are not Earth born?"

Jolson shifted on the padded chair across from Maxwell Purviance. Janeway had been born on Barnum. "Yes," he said.

The small room was clothbound, there were thick flowered rugs on the floor, heavy drapes on the wall. Backstopping Purviance's rocker was a half ring of many legged tables, carved and encrusted, bird and ball footed. Just behind his head was an embroidered Earth Supreme sign. "I can always tell." His nostrils bellowed out once. "I sense such things."

"Maybe what you smell is the dead cat under your chair," suggested Jolson, motioning with his foot.

"No, it's a fresh cat," said Purviance. "I use them to test my meals. Apparently my breakfast was poisoned. Personal poisoning is always easier to catch than organized governmental poisoning. There are nineteen separate poisons in tap water. Ten put there to kill you should you get out of line, five to induce you to take up a decadent way of life and unconventional dance steps, and four which persuade you to vote for candidates with a socialistic voting record. I never drink water."

"What then?"

Purviance tapped his signet ring against the pitcher on the nearest table. "Applejack. An old Earth beverage. I don't eat or drink universe food, Mr. Janeway. Merely and only Earth food. You notice I call you mister with respect, even though you give off an aura of the out planets. In my files I have all the planets classified as to the way their inhabitants are scented. Naturally the planets in the Earth system have a more pleasing fragrance."

"No smell like Earth," said Jolson. "What are your plans for the rest of the universes, Mr. Purviance?"

"Before or after I take over?"

"Tell me about the before first."

Purviance took a blade of grass from a front pocket on the chest of his shirt and hooked it over his lower teeth. "Well sir, the universes were meant to be ruled from Earth. Due to an unfortunate so-called intelligence lag of 20,000 years, Earth was taken advantage of by other planet systems. My job is to simply take back all the planets and rule them from Earth. I believe in a strong central Earth, Mr. Janeway, as well as Earth's rights. I'm also against any tax on a man's income, most toothpaste, and the parking meter."

"I had a notion," said Jolson, watching the leader of Group A rock, "you were a sort of pacifist, a man aimed at cutting down wars."

"I'm interested in cutting down wars I don't start, yessir," said Purviance. A lock of his straight hair had edged down over his wide forehead, and he reached up to pat it. "I'll tell you something off the record, Mr. Janeway. I'm recruiting a very large group of military ad-

visors. I've also had a very prominent fashion designer teleported all the way from a place called Paris on Earth. To design a uniform for Group A. We had the devil's own time getting him, too, because I insisted to my lieutenants the man must not be a fairy. I wanted a ballsy masculine designer."

"You found one?"

"Frankly, he's actually not from Paris. He's from a place called Nebraska. But he was spending his vacation in Paris and we grabbed him. You ought to see what he can do with epaulets."

"How many people live here with you?"

Purviance reached down absently and stroked the dead cat. "I want a drink of cider, but I don't have anything to test it on. I don't suppose you . . . ?"

Jolson said, "No. About these military advisors. And fashion designers."

"Yessir," said Purviance. "I've got them here. I've got them on ice."

"Frozen?"

"That's my cover. I inherited this freezer thing from my late father. We've got him in a freezer, too, but he's dead and gone. Little tag says Our Founder. I'll tell you another thing sub rosa, Mr. Janeway. I really don't like dead people. Even deep freeze people. Give me the heebie jeebies. But we're still on a budget, and I can live here rent free and make a little profit, what the Tax Authority doesn't grab. Some mornings, though, I throw aside the counterpane and hop out to do the chores and I say to myself, 'Maxwell, as far as the eye can see there ain't anything but stiffs.' It gets you, Mr. Janeway."

Jolson kneaded the chin of his Janeway face. "Could we look around your plant here?"

"Some of it, the unclassified parts," said Purviance as he inclined up out of the black rocker. "Remember, you'll be under continual scrutiny. In danger of instant disintegration should you make one false move."

"How many of you are there in Group A here?"

Purviance moved to the doorway. "That's a restricted figure, Mr. Janeway. I can tell you this. Lots." He went out into the chill corridor and Jolson followed.

The storage room was cold and pastoral. Mist trailed from Purviance's mouth and he said, "The walls were my father's idea. Except for the designs, all the rooms are pretty much the same. This is the Sylvan Room, shepherds and fields and lambs. Then we have a desert room and two jungle ones. Famous scenes from Earth history, celebrities and one of fuzzy animals."

"Why?"

"Cheered my father up, I guess. He wouldn't ever tell me." Purvi-

ance touched a cubicle door. "If the walls were all white, I suppose you'd get the notion you were shrunk down and spending your life inside a refrigerator."

Jolson studied the high misty room. "Where are the guys with guns trained on us?"

"Oh, you can't see them. They're too cleverly concealed." Purviance tapped his fingers in sequence on the small door. "Have a famous bocce ball player in here. Waiting."

Slowly Jolson moved over closer to the Group A head. "For how long?"

"We have orders to defrost him at the start of the next century," said Purviance. "During the bocce ball season."

Jolson jumped, made himself thin out and slid between Purviance and the wall. He hooked an arm around the man's neck and spun him so that the front of Purviance was shielding him. He had waited until they were near an undoored corner and he yanked Purviance into it. Jolson adjusted his body so that none of it stuck out beyond the perimeter of the Group A head. "I want the girl, Jennifer Hark, and the War Bureau men. Order them thawed and brought here or I tighten the arm until you choke."

"You parajournalists have strange methods, Mr. Janeway," said Purviance. "Stop throttling me or you'll be rayed to dust."

"Along with you."

"There is that."

Jolson contracted his arm. "Come on. The girl and the others. Tell your men to get in here fast and turn over their weapons."

"All my men?"

"We can start with the ones behind the walls here."

"Who are you? PEO, CC?"

Jolson tightened. "Now."

The yellow pipe dropped to the misty floor as Purviance gagged slightly. "I could have them ray us both."

"You don't like death, remember?"

Purviance coughed. "Perhaps I ought to explain something."

"Give the orders. Hurry."

"Come in here, Rackstraw."

Across the room one of the lower cubicle doors flapped out, and the shaggy man in the overcoat came in, a blaster rifle held gingerly in front of him. "Tyler's taking a bath," he said.

"Who's Tyler?" asked Jolson.

"He flew you over in the cruiser," said Purviance, trying to lower his chin. "He's my other man."

"Other man?"

"We're down to sort of a skeleton crew here," said Purviance. "Just Rackstraw, Tyler, myself and Mrs. Nash, who fixes our meals and tidies up."

"Don't try to con me, Purviance. Group A isn't four people."

"No. We have a considerable

membership. But few of them live in. The problem is most of the money I make off the freezer business goes to paying kidnappers and assassins and to bribing politicians. I just don't have the funds to maintain a large standing army. That will come. I know once I've assimilated all the major war minds in this system, in all the systems, once I have swallowed them up I won't have any trouble. I'll have such a war machine and such a just cause that thousands of people will flock. Money will pour."

"How long is all that going to take?"

"It doesn't matter," said Purviance. "I can always go on ice while my minions iron out the tedious details of taking over the universe."

"You're not a big threat then," said Jolson. "You're not a pacifist. You're just another nitwit."

"I'm not going to bother to refute you. It's too difficult to rationally discuss a major issue when one is being strangled."

"Rackstraw," ordered Jolson. "Toss that blaster rifle over and then go re-animate the prisoners."

"Very well," said the bearded Rackstraw. "I'll feel like a traitor to Group A, but in a way that appeals to my morbid side." He handed over the weapon and left.

"It will take an hour," said Purviance. "Can't we go back and sit in rockers?"

Jolson shoved Purviance away and brought the rifle up aiming at him. "Sit on the floor. We'll wait here."

Purviance sat down.

The sand was fine and white. The ocean a smooth green. Jennifer Hark rested her hands on her narrow hips. "See? No view of cemeteries, cities or even people."

Jolson walked, barefooted, down to the water's edge. "That damned Purviance," he said.

Near him the girl said, "He's all locked away now. Group A is almost rounded up."

Jolson frowned into the sun. "I was hoping he really had a way to stop the wars, that that's what he was up to."

"It won't happen," said Jennifer. "Probably ever."

"Just another nitwit," said Jolson. He started walking again, keeping at the border of the sea.

"I appreciate your saving me," said Jennifer. "I appreciate your deciding to stay another few days on Esperanza, letting me show you things."

"As long as it's okay with Head Mickens."

"And," said the girl, catching his hand, "I'm glad you're Ben Jolson."

"What?"

"The way you look now. You're yourself, aren't you?"

Jolson reached up and touched his face. "I guess so," he said, still walking. ◄

BOOKS

THEY CALL IT THE NEW THING.

The people who call it that mostly don't like it, and the only general agreements they seem to have are that Ballard is its Demon and I am its prophetess—and that it is what is wrong with Tom Disch, and with British s-f in general.

There is a certain uneasiness in finding oneself the publicly appointed Defender of an undefined Faith. But the more I read of (what must be by simple subtraction) The Old Thing, the more inclined I am to take on the championship of TNT—especially as the very lack of definition provided by the innovators of the term leaves me in the happy position of being able to describe my own parameters. What sort of game is it that fits so agreeable a name?

I assume it is my enthusiasm for Ballard's work, and for much of what is being done by the group of new "*New Worlds* writers" in England (commonly, and erroneously, thought of as Ballard disciples by OT supporters here), that has identified me with TNT. I am now, as it happens, preparing an anthology of British s-f for Doubleday, which should make much clearer by example than I can possibly do by precept, some of the specifically British directions of TNT. But any sub-classification of new s-f writing which begins by including such basically dissimilar—and versatile—writers as Ballard and Disch can hardly be limited to the area cultivated by *New Worlds* and the late lamented *Impulse*. The American counterpart is less cohesive as a "school" or "movement": it has had no single publication in which to concentrate its development, and was, in fact, till recently, all but excluded from the regular s-f magazines. But for the same reasons, it is more diffuse and perhaps more widespread. Without reference to such names as Barth and Barthelme, whose s-f qualifications would, I am sure, be hotly debated by TOT supporters, there is a clear vein of native NT running at least from Philip Dick to the American aspect of the split-Disch, and including among its more notable practitioners Kurt Vonnegut, David Bunch, Kit Reed, and above all, the late Cordwainer Smith.

Add the less well-known (inside s-f) work of Carol Emshwiller, Vance Aandahl, Harvey Jacobs, and a score of others barely known in the s-f magazines. Remember that the antecedents of TNT begin (at least) with Kuttner, show up prominently in the best work of Sturgeon and Leiber, some of Kornbluth, most of McKenna, and a good part of Budrys—not to mention memorable excursions into the area by Knight, Blish, Laumer, and Asimov, for instance. Finally, consider the nature of most of the recent work of such current OT favorites as Roger Zelazny, R. A. Lafferty, Samuel Delany, and Harlan Ellison.

The Thing isn't so New: it is nothing more than the application of contemporary and sometimes (though mostly not very) experimental literary techniques to the kind of contemporary/experimental speculation which is the essence of science fiction.

I have in front of me samples of the most recent work of at least half of the best currently active writers (British and American) of American science fiction: novels by Dick, Disch, and Delany, and two anthologies, one of which calls itself WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION 1967,* while the other —ORBIT 2 †—spreads a big black catchline over its title, proclaiming, "The Best *All New* Science Fiction Stories of the Year."

The first of these collections is edited by Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr. Carr generally expresses a more open attitude toward TNT than most American editors; Wollheim is probably as solid an OT man as you'll find in the business. Quite possibly it is just this combination of editorial attitudes which has maintained the generally high level of this series—and predictably, the stories in this year's grouping tend to level out to a fairly even balance between old- and new-style selections. Predictability by name or source falls down almost entirely otherwise. Although there are four selections (out of the book's total of twelve) from *New Worlds,* and three selections which might fairly (though by no means emphatically) be described as examples of TNT, there is only one of those three which originally appeared in *NW*: Brian Aldiss' excellent "Amen and Out," a funny and tender (among other things) treatment of religion, robotics, and immortality (among other things). On the other hand, "Behold the Man"—also about religion, also from *NW,* and written by the editor of that magazine and chief spokesman for TNT, British style, Michael Moorcock—is a highly

* WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION 1967, Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr, eds., Ace, 75¢
† ORBIT 2, Damon Knight, ed., Putnam's, $4.95

effective, completely conventional (in s-f) treatment of a Freudian-conventional view of the hero of that other NT, Jesus Christ.

Just to even things out, the farthest-out story in the book, and the only one to which the NT label can be unequivocally attached, was written by one of the most emphatic and influential opponents of (British, at least) TNT: Fred Pohl, editor of *Galaxy*. And the third NT item, R. A. Lafferty's "Nine Hundred Grandmothers," was published in *Galaxy*. (At the risk of further confusing the issues, I must add that I found both of these below-par both for the collection as a whole, and for their respective authors.)

The two Zelazny inclusions, again, criss-cross my line of definition: "For a Breath I Tarry" is written in a breathless quasi-poetic style usually associated with TNT, but there is not a breath of fresh idea in its crossbreeding of two of the hoariest plots in s-f; "The Keys to December" is exciting, complex, absolutely TNT speculation on education and religion (among other things) structured and styled in such a way as not to seem out of place in a collection of, say, the best from *Analog*. (Both stories appeared in *New Worlds*.)

Best-of-the-book, I'd say, are the Aldiss and Moorcock and Bob Shaw's (conventional, even sentimental, but vividly evocative and inventively consistent) "Light of Other Days," from *Analog*. The rest of the line-up consists of three good-ish stories by Philip K. Dick, Avram Davidson, and Paul Ash, and two undistinguished entries by new authors, A. A. Walde and Dannie Plachta.

It is worth mentioning that in their brief preface the editors speak of the "relative scarcity of genuinely new ideas" in science fiction today. I think they are right—for traditional (which is to say, OT) science fiction: the new ideas of today cannot be adequately written in the style of the gadget-and-gimmick ideas of the golden age of the American science fiction magazines. Just how true this is is made unhappily clear, I think, in Damon Knight's ORBIT 2.

This is the second of the Putnam-Berkley series of anthologies of original s-f. The jacket and flap-copy specify "science fiction," but I note that Knight has omitted a generalizing preface this time, and I expect he was motivated at least in part by the impossibility of reconciling the contents with his own frequently-stated concept of science fiction. Of the ten selections here, only Kate Wilhelm's "Baby, You Were Great" and (just barely) Aldiss' "Full Sun" would satisfy any reasonable traditional definition of science-fiction-proper.

Once again, there are three stories that might be described as TNT, but only one that is unarguably so—and this time I am

pleased to say I also found it distinctively the best piece in the book: Kit Reed's story of adolescence, pop music, alienation, and dieting (among other things), "The Food Farm." McKenna's "Fiddler's Green" was probably unpublished previously precisely because of the way it straddles traditional fantasy and TNT: trimmed of its overlong simplistic-fantasy introduction, this might have been an exceptionally powerful symbolic exploration. Lafferty's "The Hole on the Corner" also seems to me a bit less economical in the writing than his best work, and somewhat looser-woven conceptually as well.

In addition the book contains a straight mainstream story of no great merit by Philip Latham, a transplanted mainstream (medical missionary) story by Ted Thomas, an anti-heroic-fantasy by Gene Wolfe, and two delightfully literate but otherwise routine sword-and-sorcery stories by Joanna Russ.

The outstanding quality of the collection, in fact, is its literary merit. The book is eminently readable—but when you have finished, the sad note struck in the Wollheim-Carr introduction is even more strongly in evidence. Only in the Wilhelm, McKenna, and Reed selections is there any content worth chewing on; for the rest, ingenuity replaces idea, and technical excellence conceals conceptual emptiness.

And there's the crux of it: the people who find TNT uncomfortable now are the same readers and writers who turned away from The Old Thing of mainstream fiction twenty, thirty, or forty years ago for the explosive exploratory delights of The New Things science fiction was then offering—and who seem not to have noticed that speculation about space travel and the Marvellous Machine has become as routinely OT today as summer movie reruns on TV. There is a highly selective sort of blindness that afflicts the members of Establishments (call it the *Let 'em Eat Cake!* syndrome), and it does not discriminate between powerful governments, entrenched academicians, and loyal science-fictionists. It is what makes some people see all bearded men as Beatniks (or, thirty years ago, as Russians), and what made space science fiction look like romantic/escapist junk to parents, educators, and librarians right up till 1957. Presumably it is the same myopia that made the phrase Black Power seem no more than a political slogan to Congress—and allows the solid Science Fictioneers and one-time Futurians to look, for instance, on the Mothers of Invention (or the Fugs, or even Beatles) as well as op art, student protest, the new sexual revolution, psychedelics, and a multiplex of other manifestations of the silly-sounding phrase, Flower Power, as col-

legiate antics comparable to goldfish-swallowing and phone-booth-cramming.

The Brave New World of the Flower People is not always comprehensible to me—but neither was nuclear physics when Heinlein and del Rey and Cartmill turned me on to atom power a quarter century ago. TNT is what Campbell gave us then, what Gold and Boucher gave us a dozen years later, and what looks as weird to some of *our* Establishments today as *Weird* looked to the readers of *Ballyhoo.*

But don't get me wrong: *Ballyhoo* had its good points, and so does some of the OT. (I mean, *I* even dig Jane Austen.) And *Weird* was pretty bad most of the time; so is a lot of The New Thing. But when it is bad, it is usually because the author's technique was not adequate to handle his concepts—rather than because his basic ideas were too old, too stale, or too flat to matter.

Philip K. Dick is admired, if anything, even more by Old Thing adherents than by TNT people. Yet he is virtually the only established American s-f writer who demonstrates a consistent awareness of the facts of life in this country today.

Perhaps because his work is so colorful—and sometimes so garbled—Dick does not seem to be as highly regarded for the acuteness of his political/sociological observations and projections as he deserves: this in spite of the fact that THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE is generally considered (on both sides of the Thing fence) to be his best book, and it is certainly the one with the least pyrotechnics and the most fully-developed socio-economic extrapolation. Since then, his work has been, in general, more flamboyant but also more complex in concepts; more ambitious in scope, but seldom as fully realized.

The three recent novels under discussion here—THE CRACK IN SPACE,* THE ZAP GUN,† and COUNTER-CLOCK WORLD§—are all somewhat more restrained and less infuriatingly *disconnected* than most of the interim work (notably last year's NOW WAIT FOR NEXT YEAR—and the elusive quality of something-extra, a note quite graspable *plus,* which pervaded NEXT YEAR and PALMER ELDRITCH, is (if also somewhat modified) beginning to be more comprehensible.

That is to say, I think I have at last discovered what it is that at once delights and annoys me in the particular kind of *brightness* characteristic of Dick's work of the

*THE CRACK IN SPACE, Philip K. Dick, Ace, 40¢
†THE ZAP GUN, Philip K. Dick, Pyramid, 50¢
§COUNTER-CLOCK WORLD, Philip K. Dick, Berkley, 60¢

last five years or so—and it has to do with his appropriation of a very specialized and very contemporary aspect of pop art: an approach probably excellently well suited to his content—and incidentally, but irrelevantly, extremely irritating to me.

Pause for story identification: ZAP GUN is the Romeo-and-Juliet story of Lars Powderdry, weapons fashion designer for Wesbloc, and Lilo Topchev, his opposite number in Peep East, set against a fascinatingly postulated near-future of intensely controlled economy, in which the two great powers maintain stability by the conduct of a false war, fought in mock-up on tabletops, while the "concomodies" on the UN-W Natsec Board think up ways to adapt the weapon designs to practical civilian use. COUNTER-CLOCK WORLD contains one of the very few future-projections of the present Black Power movement in which there is any genuine comprehension of the issues, motivations, and directions of today's "insurrection," along with further comments on our anticulture, and some cogent asides on the character of contemporary matrimony—all thrown into a really unbelievably banal plot set in an amusing, sometimes-satiric, lightly-scatological reverse-time fantasy, whose burlesque-and-bathos effects almost neutralize the political concepts completely. CRACK IN SPACE uses abortions and human deep-freezing, a pleasure-satellite run by a two-headed mutant, and lots of fast action to veil a meaty account of economic and race issues in an election campaign.

In all three books, Dick makes use of every available color-and-motion effect—as well as his innate magnificent sense of timing—to create a spell-binding effect which carries the reader easily through the countless *nonsequiturs* and logic-gaps of his plots. In every case, it takes aliens or supermen to get things resolved. The characters, going through a series of disconnected but (each time) briefly convincing motions and emotions, seem to be painted entirely in primary colors—

And it was with that thought that the flash of insight came to me. Phil Dick is not writing novels, but comic-strip continuity—and when you chew on that thought a bit (even if, like me, you have trouble swallowing it) you may recognize that it is *not* a Bad Thing, after all. Dick is writing what the British critics like to call a "novel of ideas" rather than a "novel of manners." It doesn't matter what sort of nonsense he makes use of, to carry his concepts—as long as he can hold the reader, and as long as the idea-cargo itself comes through intact. He may offend my sense of fitness—but I learned to read out of Victorian novels. My children learned

mostly out of comic books, and the public school adaptation of comics known to the Ed Biz as Visual Aids.

It may be pushing things a bit, but this view of Dick made me take a new look at Disch, who is represented here by two of his less New-Thing-y efforts: ECHO ROUND HIS BONES,* and MANKIND UNDER THE LEASH † (an expansion of the magazine story, "White Fang Goes Dingo").

It is time, I think, for me to make an admission: when I wrote my wildly enthusiastic review of Disch's first novel, THE GENOCIDES, I had just finished reading the book. I still stand by what I said—but had I waited a week to set it down on paper, I should have said it much more mildly. Disch has a spell-binding trick of his own, and it resembles Dick's only in being intensely visual. The difference is, on one level, the reverse of the point about novels of manners and of ideas: Disch is concerned primarily with character interactions, and he uses his idea content, ordinarily, to construct a showcase for the behavior of his characters. But he focuses on only two or three individuals—and 'focus' is the key word here. These are not comic-strip types, but movie characters: the caricature element is gone, and in its place is the illusion of depth which the motion picture added to the still photograph. The foreground figures are in full focus, and for the most part fully realized; the others at any point are "extras" whose illusion of reality need not be sustained an instant longer than it takes them to cross the screen (unlike the comic book, where the reader can always turn back).

Once again, what sounds like an indictment is meant as an observation of interest. In spite of what I think—or rather, how I *react*—I not only do not *think* there is anything wrong in these techniques, but suspect that they are excellently well adapted to the authors' purposes as well as the readers' tastes.

Certainly, all five of these books qualify as plain ordinary good reading. (And some day I will take you backstage in pulpwriter country—where the familiar techniques of most American commercial writing were developed.)

Samuel Delany's new novel, THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION,* left me as divided in response after first reading as the Disch and Dick novels—but for very different reasons. I read the book at a gulp, delighted page by page, and disappointed at the end, without

* ECHO ROUND HIS BONES, Thomas M. Disch, Berkley, 60¢
† MANKIND UNDER THE LEASH, Thomas M. Disch, Ace double, 50¢
* THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION, Samuel R. Delany, Ace, 40¢

quite knowing why. When I went back to skim through and refresh myself before writing about it, I found myself re-reading instead: and found out it was the gulping that gave me that faint indigestion the first time.

Do not let the easy story surface and lyrical language mislead you: this is a dense mixture, heavily concentrated, double-distilled. If you cannot read slowly, with careful attention to each (believe me!) carefully-wrought sentence—if the pace carries you along too swiftly—then go with it, but go back afterwards, and discover what you missed (or some of it; I suspect I will find more next time, and perhaps more again after that). The epigraphs and excerpts from the author's travel diary that precede each chapter are not there for any of the usual reasons (decoration, counterpoint, vanity)—or at least not for those reasons alone; they are integral to the tight-woven complexity of Delany's multi-level fabric of statement.

If the book has a serious flaw, it is in the over-tight weaving, the too-careful pruning and packing of meaning into deceptively simple and rhythmic language: that is, that it is in large part closer to poetry than prose, without any of the typographical, linguistic, or structural formalities which usually serve as clues to the reader to proceed more attentively than he expects to do with an adventure novel (let alone an adventure novel in cheap paperback format with a lurid red demon-thing on the cover).

Then again, I expect I'd have had that uneasiness at the end even if I had paid proper attention all the way through the first time. I had the same kind of thing when I finished Richard McKenna's SAND PEBBLES. ("Endings to be useful must be inconclusive," says one of the quotes from Delany's journal.)

That is to say: this is a charming book, a gay book, a story of true love and roving adventure, full of strange music, a song of changelings and dragons and a Dove and a devil; where Orpheus battles Billy the Kid, and is saved from the Minotaur by a compassionate computer; but it is also and absolutely a story about where-it's-at, right here, right now.

I cannot imagine a book about the world I live in that could leave me feeling satisfied at the end: which is one of the more important basics of The New Thing.

Another basic is that no two really good examples will be the same. This is TNT by Delany. Buy it, read it, and then go back and read it again. Just to give you a headstart, here's how it starts:

There is a hollow, holey cylinder running from hilt to point in my machete. When I blow across the mouthpiece in the handle, I make music with my blade. When

all the holes are covered, the sound is sad, as rough as rough can be and be called smooth. When all the holes are open, the sound pipes about, bringing to the eye flakes of sun on water, crushed metal. There are twenty holes. And since I have been playing music I've been called all different kinds of fool—more times than Lobey, which is my name.

What I look like?

Ugly and grinning most of the time. That's a whole lot of big nose and gray eyes and wide mouth crammed on a small brown face proper for a fox. That, all scratched around with spun brass for hair. I hack most of it off every two months or so with my machete. Grows back fast. Which is odd, because I'm twenty-three and no beard yet. I have a figure like a bowling pin, thighs, calves, and feet of a man (gorilla?) twice my size (which is about five-nine) and hips to match. There was a rash of hermaphrodites the year I was born, which doctors thought I might be. Somehow I doubt it. . . .

—JUDITH MERRIL

BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

NEBULA AWARD STORIES TWO, Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison, eds., Doubleday 1967, 252 pp., $4.95.

THE TECHNICOLOR TIME MACHINE, Harry Harrison, Doubleday 1967, 190 pp., $3.95.

LOGAN'S RUN, George Clayton Johnson and William Nolan, Dial 1967, 133 pp., $3.50.

THE TENTH GALAXY READER, Frederik Pohl, ed., Doubleday 1967, 232 pp., $4.50.

VOYAGES IN TIME, Robert Silverberg, ed., Meredith 1967, 244 pp., $4.95.

LORD OF LIGHT, Roger Zelazny, Doubleday 1967, 257 pp., $4.95.

GENERAL

UNNATURAL HISTORY, An Illustrated Bestiary, Colin Clair, Abelard-Schuman 1967, 256 pp., $5.95.

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Gahan
Wilson

Charles Birkin has had several collections of horror stories published in England, but we were not familiar with his work until introduced to it by another fine mystery writer, Helen McCloy. It was a satisfying introduction; both the quality and the variety of Mr. Birkin's stories are impressive, and his writing has all the ingrediants designed to make a devotee out of the most casual reader of Grand Guignol: literate prose, quiet but gripping narrative, and horrifying twists of plot.

BALLET NÈGRE

by Charles Birkin

THEIR SEATS WERE IN THE eighth row of the stalls, well placed in the exact center. Simon Cust and David Roberts had arrived early, earlier than they had intended, for the traffic had been less heavy than they had anticipated, and they had misjudged the timing.

The theatre was filling up, but although it lacked only five minutes to the rise of the curtain, the audience continued to obstruct the foyer rather than take their places. It was the premiere of the Emanuel Louis' 'Ballet Nègre du Port-au-Prince' and the majority of the seats had been allotted to those on the First Night list of the management. These favoured personages included politicians, duchesses of a slightly raffish nature, kings of the property market, shipping moguls, and gentlemen who had amassed vast fortunes by sagacious take-over bids. There were also members of the theatrical profession, both on their way up, and also down, together with a sprinkling of model-girls and of those 'confirmed bachelors,' who take such an immense pleasure in the display of black and muscular torsos.

The first warning bell rang in the foyer, and there was a movement in the direction of the aisles. The Duchess of Dumfries and her tiny simian escort took their places in front of the two men, Her Grace

demanding in plaintive tones to be told in what precise section of Africa Haiti was to be found.

Simon Cust looked up from his programme. "What language do these people speak?" he asked David.

"In the country districts, a kind of French-Creole patois."

"Intelligible to a Wykhamist?" the young man asked.

"Yes, if you try and take it slowly," said David. Simon gave a sigh of relief. He was covering the evening for a colleague who was away on holiday.

"It should be good," David Roberts said comfortingly. "They're natural dancers and absolutely uninhibited. Or they used to be when I was there before the war. Of course it's more than possible that their travels have degutted them," he said, surveying the sophisticated audience.

The token orchestra, which was white, and composed largely of earnest ladies, was playing a spirited selection from recent American musicals which sounded oddly at variance with the evening which lay ahead. The bell gave a second and more imperious summons and the audience began a belated jostling in the gangways to claim their places. In order that they might be able to do so, the music continued for a further period before the house lights dimmed.

A tall young man stalked to a seat near to the front, stepping as delicately as a flamingo, and David nodded in his direction. "James Lloyd," he said, "the impresario."

The curtain rose on a riot of color. The backcloth was of a nebulous plantation, sugar-cane or banana. The front of the stage was a clearing in the jungle. At either side a group of musicians squatted in loin cloths crouched over their drums and primitive instruments. After a studied pause to erase the former tinklings, the drums began to throb.

The first number was spectacular but unexciting, a dance concerning the cultivation of the crops, stylized and formal, and accompanied by muted chanting. Next came a homage to 'Papa Legba,' one of the more benevolent of the voodoo hierarchy. This was succeeded by a tribute to 'Agoue,' the God of the Sea, with a magnificently-built negro playing the part of the deity, a scene during which the company warmed up, and which ended to considerable applause.

The final item of the first half of the bill was devoted to the propitiation of 'Ogoun Badagris,' the most feared and powerful of all the Powers of Darkness in the sinister cult of Voodoo. The scene had been changed to the interior of a 'houmfort' or temple. Against one wall stood a low wooden altar bearing feathered ouanga bags, a pyramid of papiermache skulls, and a carved symbol of a hooded serpent in front

of which burned coconut-shell lamps with floating flames. On the floor before the altar were calabashes brimming with fruit and vegetables, adding a deceptively peaceful note.

Simon had been able to study the programme with its explanatory notes, and so recognized the characters as they appeared, such as 'Papa Nebo,' hermaphroditic and the Oracle of the Dead, dressed as part man, part woman, top-hatted and skirted and carrying a human skull. This figure was accompanied by 'Papaloi,' crimson-turbaned and sporting a richly embroidered stole, and by 'Mamaloi,' glorious in her scarlet robes, and surrounded by their male and female attendants and by dancers disguised in animal masks as the sacrificial victims, sheep, kids, goats and a black bull, that had surely but recently taken the place of human beings.

The stage was crowded with a motley of old and young, weak and strong, and the tom-tom drums increased the pace of their rhythm and their volume, building up into a crescendo. "Damballa oueddo au couleuvra moins." It came as a mighty cry.

Simon glanced sideways at David. "Damballa Oueddo, who is our great Serpent-God." He whispered the translation.

And now came the offerings of the sacrifices and the complicated ritual of voodoo worship, in which terrified animals had been substituted for the boys and girls of yesterday. The propitiation over, there came the celebration dances to the deafening clamour of the drums and gourd rattles, the tempo ever increasing, ever mounting, until the scene was awhirl with lithe black bodies, some practically nude, others with flying white robes and multi-coloured turbans centred round 'Papa Nebo,' curiously intimidating, the smoked spectacles which were worn emphasizing the significance of the blind and impartial nature of death.

The dancers were becoming completely carried away, shrieking and sweating, degenerating into a beautifully controlled but seemingly delirious mob, maddened into a frenzied climax of blood and religion and sex.

The curtain fell to a thunder of appreciation, and the house lights went up. As they struggled towards the bar, David Roberts said: "I have to admit that they still appear to be totally uninhibited!"

The second and final half of the programme consisted of a narrative ballet based on a legend lost in folk lore. The story was that of an overseer who, with the help of his younger brother, hired out workers to till the fields. In order to augment his labour force he took to robbing the graves of the newly dead to supplement the quota of the living men with zombies, their

identity being no secret to their fellow workers, who were themselves little better off than slaves and so too afraid to inform.

After a while the younger brother, overcome by pity for the zombies' misery, for his former love had been included in their ranks, broke, from the softness of his heart, the strictest rule which all must observe, that which forbade the use of salt in their spartan diet, for having partaken of salt the zombies would at once be conscious of their dreadful state and rush back to the cemetery in an effort to regain the lost peace of their violated graves.

Included in this saga was a stupefying dance, when a man and a woman swayed and postured in a lake of red-hot ash and, so far as the audience could see, this is precisely what they did, in fact, do.

It was the crux of the ballet, which was itself the high spot of the evening, and the leading players had not appeared during the previous act. Their extraordinary performance and gaunt and ghastly make-up was breathtaking, and they seemed indeed to have strayed from another world, filling the most blase of the spectators with a profoundly disquieting sense of unease.

Simon struck a match to see who they might be. Mathieu Tebreaux and Helene Chauvet. At curtain fall he turned to David. "This is it!" he said. "It's quite incredible. Don't you think so? How in God's name did they fake the fire?"

"Perhaps they didn't." David smiled. "They were probably drugged or doped. Narcotics are not unusual in those voodoo rites; and the soles of their feet are as tough as army boots," he finished prosaically.

"Be that as it may," Simon said with enthusiasm, "I'm off to get an interview and," he glanced at his watch, "I'd better be jet propelled about so doing or I'll be given no more of these assignments. Not that I've designs on Baring's job. Don't think that! But I must get back to the office. Will you come along with me to interpret?"

"If you'd like me to do so," said David. "My Creole dialect may be a bit rusty. It's been a long time since I've used it."

Simon presented his Press card to the stage doorkeeper and, after a few minutes wait, the two men were escorted up to a dingy functional room where the manager of the Ballet Company was awaiting them.

He was a short fat Negro, and was wearing a dinner jacket with a yellow carnation in his buttonhole. He advanced to greet them, his gold teeth gleaming. "Mr. Cust?" he asked, looking from one to the other, Simon's card clutched in his left hand and with his right outstretched. "Mr. Lloyd has already left. He will be sorry to have missed you."

"I am Simon Cust. This is David Roberts, who knew your country well at one time. We were both of us deeply impressed by the performance tonight."

"My name is Emanuel Louis," said the Negro. He shook their hands in turn. "Shall we speak in French? I regret that my English is very halting. I cannot express myself as I would desire."

"By all means," Simon agreed. "You will have noticed from my card that I represent the *Daily Echo*. I would like to have the pleasure of meeting some of your cast, in particular Monsieur Tebreaux and Mademoiselle Chauvet."

Emanuel Louis gave an apologetic smile. "I am afraid, Monsieur, that that is not possible. My dancers give no interviews. I discourage strongly the star system. We work as a team. Personal publicity is strictly against my rules. I would have liked to co-operate but I cannot make exceptions. In any case it would be useless, for neither Mademoiselle Chauvet nor Mathieu Tebreaux speaks one word of English, and very few of French." He shrugged apologetically. "They come from a remote and backward part of my island."

"Mr. Roberts," said Simon, "could translate. He could talk to them in their own patois."

Monsieur Louis seemed taken aback by this suggestion and the look he gave David was speculative. "In the patois of La Gonave?" he inquired incredulously. "That is indeed unexpected."

David shook his head. "La Gonave? I'm sorry. No."

"And I regret, Monsieur, that I can make no variations to the regulations. It is not in my province to do so. You will understand. It is to me a great pleasure that you have enjoyed the show. My poor children are exhausted by their efforts. It is very tiring. Haiti is one thing. A large capital city is another thing altogether." He was shepherding them towards the door.

"I feel still," said Simon obstinately, "that I might get somewhere with them by mime, despite the language barrier. I could telephone my copy through to you for your approval."

Emanuel Louis' face set. "I have already told you, Monsieur Cust, that what you ask of me is absolutely impossible. May I wish you both a good evening?" His dismissal was curt. Simon opened his mouth, but decided against further argument.

"I'll drop you off," David volunteered as they stood waiting for a taxi.

As they neared Fleet Street Simon said: "I wonder just why that fat little bastard wouldn't let me go back-stage. I've half a mind to double back and have another try at reaching them by by-passing the so-and-so."

"I don't think you'd succeed,"

said David as he lit a cigarette. "And how about your deadline?"

"Bugger my deadline," said Simon robustly, "and the same thing goes for Monsieur Louis."

David laughed. *"Chacun a son gout,"* he said, agreeably, as the taxi drew up at Simon's office.

The 'Ballet Negre du Port-au Prince' received fantastic notices, and by the afternoon all bookable seats had been sold out for the six weeks' season, for the telephones of the agencies had been ringing since early morning. Overnight it had become a 'must' for London's theatregoers.

More than ever Simon fretted about his failure with Emanuel Louis, nor was he at all mollified when he learned that the representatives of rival papers had been equally unsuccessful. During the day he telephoned David Roberts, finally locating him at his Club. "After the performance tonight," he told him, "I'm going to follow that loathsome black beetle back to where they're all staying. He can't possibly stick with them every moment, and tomorrow I'll shadow the place and wait my chance. Care to come?"

"Certainly not," said David. "The wretched fellow has a perfect right to run his own business according to his own views. And you must be aware," he added in an over-polite voice, "of my feelings regarding newspaper men, yourself included, and their thrusting ubiquity!"

Simon delivered himself of a few blistering remarks on the subject of the lack of helpfulness of the public in general and of David Roberts in particular, to struggling journalists, and rang off before David could have a chance to elaborate his theme.

At eleven o'clock that night, having contrived to fold his long length behind the driving seat of his turquoise blue Mini-Minor, and with his lights turned off, he sat watching the stage entrance of the Princess Theatre.

He had learned from the doorman, after a friendly talk and a cigarette and the passing of a pound note between them had created the right atmosphere, that the Company was called for each night by two buses, but the man did not know, or had been unwilling to divulge, their destination, beyond the fact that it was an hotel somewhere in the Notting Hill direction which catered for 'coloureds.' "Accommodation is always their problem," he had said. "We had the same thing when the 'Hot Chocolates' were here, and a nicer bunch you couldn't wish to meet."

Simon peered at his watch. It was nearly half-past eleven, and the transport, two thirty-seater charabancs, was in the process of backing-in to the narrow cul-de-sac. The dancers, on cue, were coming out into the street, some in

their native clothes hidden under coats, others in European dress, and were starting to climb into the vehicles. They talked softly among themselves.

Emanuel Louis stood by one door checking a list, and a gigantic negro in a light grey suit was similarly engaged by the other. When the buses were full they both jumped in and the vehicles moved off.

Simon had no difficulty in trailing such a convoy and kept at a discreet distance. In Holland Park they left the main road, and after five minutes or so came to a halt before an hotel, which had been made by knocking together two lofty Victorian houses. It had 'The Presscott' painted in brown letters on the glass of the fanlights, and was sorely in need of renovation.

He was unable to pick out either Mathieu Tebreaux or Helene Chauvet. Louis and his giant aide-de-camp were the last to enter, the latter slamming to the door behind him.

There was nothing more that he could do tonight. Simon drove away, making a note of the name of the road as he turned the corner. He would be back in the morning.

Alice Linley was always glad of a talk, especially with nice-looking young gentlemen who had the time and inclination to spare to take her for a Guinness. She was established by Simon's side in the Private Bar of The Cock Pheasant, perched on a high stool.

"They get all sorts at 'The Presscott'," she said. "This district isn't what it was, not at all it isn't. Gladys, that's my friend, Gladys and I are seriously thinking about leaving our flat and moving to somewhere more select. Those Jamaicans started it. The whole place is becoming just like the Congo if you ask me. Not that I've got any personal feelings against coloured boys. Some of them are very nice really, but it's no longer such a good address, if you see what I mean."

Simon drained his bitter and ordered another round of drinks. "That 'Presscott' lot," he asked, "do they get around much?"

"Thanks," said Alice. "It's hard to say, I'm sure. They moved in last Friday, I believe it was. Stacks of baggage they brought. Props and things, I expect. Great boxes and I don't know what. They're theatricals. Seem to keep pretty much to themselves. There's a short chap, the head one he seems to be. He does go out sometimes with a big fellah, black as coal. They've got a limousine car." She compressed her lips in mock disappointment. "Wish I had! Maybe some day I will. It's a long lane, I always say."

"Where do you suppose they go?" asked Simon. "I heard somewhere that they were French Colonials," he added inconsequentially.

"Couldn't really say," Alice

sounded disinterested. She smoothed the cream silk of her blouse over her full breasts and Simon could not but observe that she had dispensed with a brassiere. "It's usually in the afternoon," she went on. "Being theatricals, I'd say they'd need their rest in the mornings." Her eyes travelled with approval over Simon's athletic and square-shouldered figure. "Like to come back to my place?" she asked pleasantly.

"I'd like to very much," he said, "but I'm afraid I can't. My office calls."

"Oh well," acquiesced Alice obligingly, "perhaps another day. I'm nearly always there until the evening, and you'd be welcome." She smiled at him. "It might even be 'on the house'. I think you're sweet. Most of my . . . my boy friends are such weeds," she said, "or else they're Grandpas with pot bellies. It would make a change. I've quite fallen for you. Really I have." They emptied their glasses and stood up, going together into the street. "Ta-ta," Alice said. "Thanks ever so for the Guinness. Don't do anything I wouldn't do! I live round the corner over the paper shop if you want to find me." She walked away, swinging her orange plastic handbag, the beehive of her peroxide hair glinting in the sunshine.

Simon went back into the pub and purchased a pork pie which he took with him into the car as he settled down to begin his vigil.

The day was bright and warm. Soon after two o'clock a limousine stopped at 'The Presscott,' and shortly afterwards Monsieur Louis and the large Negro came out of the hotel and drove away. Simon watched the car until it was out of sight, deciding to remain where he was for a spell longer.

Presently, in twos and threes, other members of the Company emerged to take the air. The girls were mostly in flowered or patterned dresses, the men in tight suits with elaborately decorated shoes or sandals; but neither of the dancers for whom he was searching was among them.

And now a woman came out by herself. She was taller and broader than the other girls, and her carriage was splendid, and Simon thought that it had been she who had taken the role of 'Papa Nebo' in the principal ballet. He pulled the crumpled programme from his pocket, scanning the names of the cast. Here it was: 'Papa Nebo' . . . Marianne Dorville.

She was standing on the pavement at the foot of the stone steps enjoying the sunshine that was hardly more than a vitiated version of her own. Simon swung his long legs out of the tiny car and straightened up. Casually he walked towards her. As he drew level with her he stopped and raised his hat. "Mademoiselle Dorville?" he asked.

The woman glanced up at him in some surprise that he should

know her name; or could it have been in fear? "Monsieur?"

"You speak French?" asked Simon, using that language.

"I do," she admitted, still ill at ease.

"I much admired your performance," Simon said. "I was at your opening night."

"You are very kind."

"I was," said Simon, "enchanted. I am the drama critic of the *Daily Echo,*" he went on untruthfully, "which is the most powerful of the English papers, and I have come here by arrangement with Monsieur Louis to interview Mathieu Tebreaux and Helene Chauvet . . . and naturally yourself," he finished gallantly.

Marianne regarded him with some doubt. "That is not possible, Monsieur. We never give interviews. It is not permitted." She turned away.

"I assure you that it is all arranged," said Simon. "Monsieur Louis has made a rare exception in my case. If you will take me to him he will tell you so himself."

"He is not here. He has gone out."

"Not here?" repeated Simon in dismay. "He must be." He pulled back his cuff to look at his watch. "But that is a disaster. I have to turn in my copy by four o'clock. My paper is giving your show a tremendous boost. I would be greatly obliged if you would be so kind as to lead me to Monsieur Tebreaux. Otherwise," he said, relapsing into English, "there will be hell to pay. Hell for us all."

Marianne's large black eyes clouded. "Monsieur," she said, "you are talking nonsense. No interviews are permitted, particularly with Tebreaux and Chauvet. They would be unable to answer you." She hesitated and went on: "They are talented, yes—but they are also dumb, and comprehend nothing of the outside world."

"Dumb?" He searched her face. "How do you mean, dumb? Stupid?"

She shook her head and indicated her own tongue. "They cannot speak. They have suffered from this affliction since their birth. Unhappily there are many such in my country." Her gaze was as impassive as that of an image.

"I see," said Simon. So they were dumb, were they? And Louis had told him that they could speak only some obscure dialect. It didn't tie up. It didn't tie up at all. Regarding her pensively, Simon realized that she was beautiful. She hailed from Byzantium or from the land of the Pharoahs or from the drowned continent of Atlantis. She came entirely from the past. "Where are they?" he shot the question at her abruptly.

"In the room next to Monsieur Louis'," said Marianne before she could stop herself. "But you will not be admitted. You can spare yourself the trouble."

"I thank you," said Simon. He ran past her and up the steps into the lobby of the sleazy hotel. Marianne watched him go in a state of considerable distress. Then she followed him into the house, and darted into the telephone booth which stood in the hall.

Simon took the stairs two at a time. He had no way of knowing when Emanuel Louis would be back. Halfway up he nearly collided with a child that was on its way to the street. It could not have been more than ten years old. Simon took a shilling from the pocket of his trousers. "Monsieur Louis?" he inquired. The information would confine his quest to the two adjoining rooms.

The little boy took the coin, regarding him seriously out of huge dark eyes. "You will find him in Room 12, Monsieur."

"Thank you." He found himself on a landing crowded with doors. Their positioning made it clear that the big rooms of the old house had been divided and sub-divided again. The numbers ranged from one to ten. He listened, but the house was quiet save for a muted crooning from a room on his left and the murmur of women's voices from further down the passage.

He tiptoed to the floor above, which was a replica of that which he had just left. The same walls of arsenic green, the same cocoa-brown dados and surrounds, and all around like incense was the sweetish smell of coloured people, which was vaguely reminiscent of musk. Simon found it at once both repugnant and exciting.

From the end of the corridor came the sound of imprecations and the rolling of dice. The ejaculations were agitated and guttural. He knocked on the door of number 11. There was no answer. He knocked again. Dead silence. He tried the door-knob and rather to his astonishment it opened at his touch. There was no one there. So it must be number 13. Twice he knocked and once more there was no sign of occupation. There were footsteps coming up the stairs. He could not risk discovery. He went in. The room was high and narrow. At one end an altar had been erected, a twin of that which he had seen in the 'houmfort' at the theatre, except that he had an idea that the skulls which he was seeing were not made of papiermache.

There were two mattresses thrown on to the floor, and lying upon them were the couple for whom he had been searching. They lay there motionless, arms to their sides, and their eyes, turned to the ceiling, were filled with sadness and desolation. They made no movement at his entrance nor gave any acknowledgement of his presence. Their clothes were those which they had worn in the ballet in which they had danced.

Simon froze where he stood, unwilling to go further. "My apologies," he said, "if I am disturbing you. I am a Press reporter and have come here at the request of Monsieur Emanuel Louis. I represent the *Daily Echo.*" Still there was no reply nor reaction and he stepped forward. "You do not understand French?" he asked. Only their eyes registered that they possessed a semblance of life. At closer quarters their faces were hideous and heart-breaking, the lips drawn back from prominent teeth, the skin taut over jutting cheek bones. "You are ill," he said gently. "Shall I get you a doctor?" He received no answer and walked forward once more until he stood gazing down at the emaciated forms. "You are hungry?" he suggested. "Is that it? You are hungry?"

And now the girl spoke, and her voice was as soft as the wind blowing through willow trees. "Yes," she whispered. "We are hungry. Oh, so hungry." Her jet black hair hung in ragged pennants to her shoulders. Simon dropped to his knees beside her and groped for her pulse. The grey skin of her wrist was as cold as that of a dead fish.

At his back the door was pushed open unobtrusively, but it gave a slight creak which was sufficient to make him turn his head. The doorway appeared to him to be filled and crowded with people. Emanuel Louis, who was grasping a revolver in his hand, the immense Negro in the pale suit, Marianne Dorville, saucer-eyed with apprehension, and behind her the craning necks and dusky terror-stricken faces of a tableau of other men and women.

Emanuel Louis' face was stiff and contorted by rage. "Get out!" he said. "Leave this room immediately. I will not have my artistes upset by such behaviour. If you must know, they are suffering from fever, from grippe, but it is not serious. It has happened before, and they are under my personal supervision. You are committing a trespass, and if you refuse to take yourself off at once, I will summon the police. Your actions are insupportable—beyond all reason. Get out! Get out! Will you leave, or must we throw you into the street?"

Simon got to his feet. "That will not be necessary, Monsieur Louis," he said. "And you can put that thing away," he added, pointing to the revolver. "I must warn you, however, that it is illegal to carry weapons in this country. And also that you have two very sick people on your hands."

"Go," said Louis, "and should you try to return I warn *you* that I will not hesitate to have you arrested." He was so choked by his fury that he could scarcely speak.

Simon said no more. He walked over to the doorway, and the rows

of black faces divided to let him pass. He was shaking as he got into his car.

In the evening he visited the Princess Theatre for a second time, standing at the back of the dress circle. Both Tebreaux and Helene Chauvet were dancing, and their performance was as good as the one which they had given on the first night.

David Roberts must have been right. Perhaps, after all, they were dope addicts. But Simon was by no means satisfied. There was a story here, and he was determined to get it.

It was after midnight when Simon reached 'The Presscott.' No lights showed, and he walked round to the tradesmen's entrance and down a flight of steps leading to an area. Here there was a glow from a curtained window of what he took to be the kitchen. There was a bell in the surround and he pressed it.

It was opened by a mulatto in his shirt sleeves and a tattered pullover, who stood there waiting for him to speak.

"I know it's very late," Simon said, "but I wondered if you could by any chance oblige me by letting me have a room? It would be for tonight only. I arrived from Cornwall an hour or so ago and I can't get a bed anywhere."

The mulatto stared at him with mistrust. "No," he said, "I can't. I am full up. This hotel is for coloured people." He made as if to shut the door in Simon's face.

"I don't mind that at all," Simon said. He produced his wallet, from which he extracted a five pound note. "I only want somewhere to sleep, and perhaps a cup of coffee in the morning."

The man eyed the note. Then he turned away. "Olive!" he called. "Come here a second, will you? There's a bloke out here who wants a bed. He's a white feller." He pushed the door nearly shut once more, and Simon could hear a muttered colloquy coming from behind it. There was a lighter step, and through the crack he was aware that a fair-haired woman was inspecting him.

Apparently satisfied by what she saw, she said: "Come in, won't you? As my husband told you, we are full up, but if it's only for one night, and you don't mind roughing it, I daresay we could let you have Ivy's room. She's my living-in maid, and a lazy slut. Her mother's been taken poorly, or so she says, so she won't be coming back until tomorrow afternoon. 'Clinging Ivy' I calls her, the way she throws herself at those black chaps. She'll get what's coming to her one of these fine days if she doesn't look out. They're only human, aren't they, same as the rest of us? Girls are so inconsiderate these days. But you can't pick and choose, more's the pity, you can't

by any manner of means, and well they know it! No luggage?" she finished sharply, looking at his empty hands.

"I'm afraid not." Simon thrust the note towards her. "Will that do instead?"

"Not on the run, are you?" she asked him suspiciously. "We don't take that sort here."

"No," said Simon, "I'm not on the run."

Olive's hand closed on the five pounds. "It's just to oblige," she said. "We don't usually accept men without any luggage. Certainly not at this time of night. If you'll follow me, I'll show you your room. It's nothing very grand."

He went up behind her to the top floor, and to a door that had no number. "The bed's not bad," said the woman defensively. "And it's clean. You'll find no bugs in my house. What time would you be wanting calling in the morning?" They had encountered no one on their way up.

"Half-past seven?" Simon suggested, knowing that long before that he would be gone.

"Righty-oh. Whatever you say." She glanced around her. "Ivy's left her things, I see. Still, you won't be needing cupboard space, having brought no luggage. Well, good night." Her pin heels clattered away down the staircase.

Simon took off his coat and removed his shoes, and stretched out on the bed, which protested loudly under the weight of his fourteen stone. He would give his landlady and her husband half an hour in which to retire. He must have dozed, for when he looked at his watch it pointed to a quarter to three.

Jumping up he crossed in his stockinged feet to the peg on which he had hung his coat, and took from its bulging pocket a packet of sandwiches, which had been thickly stuffed with nearly raw beef. He had remembered the whisper of the girl in room 12. "We are hungry. Oh, so hungry."

Their room must be on the floor below his own. He stuck his head over the stair-well. There was a dim bulb burning on each landing. Cautiously he made his way down, hoping that there would be no loose treads. On the landing he stood listening. From behind the door nearest to him came the noise of rhythmic snoring.

He reached number 13 and slipped inside, for it was not locked. It was in darkness, but he could hear no breathing. He might have been in a tomb. He had satisfied himself that there was no transom, so he fumbled for the switch and turned on an unshaded light.

The man and the girl were lying just as he had last seen them. "Do not be afraid," he said in a whisper. "I was here to see you yesterday and this time I have brought you food. There is no

reason for you to be afraid of me." He leant down and closed first the girl's cold fingers and then those of the man round the gift that he had brought them.

Their fingers gripped like pincers into the soft bread, and slowly they raised it to their mouths. Simon looked at them with compassion. Drugs, he thought, that is what it is. The pupils of their eyes had dwindled to pin-points. They were chewing on the meat convulsively, their mouths crammed.

And now they were stirring and raising themselves up from the mattresses, and their eyes were changing. The sadness and hopelessness was fading, and a fierce intense hatred was taking its place. Appalled by what he saw Simon jack-knifed to his feet, but quick as he had been, they too had leaped up and were upon him.

Mathieu closed with him and his scrawny arms had in them all the strength of steel. Exerting every ounce of his considerable force Simon was barely holding his own with his assailant. And then the girl, uttering a piercing shriek of passionate and diabolical rage, snatched up a curved knife from the altar and clawed herself up upon his back.

Simon knew that he was being overpowered and had no chance and, weak with fear for the first time in his life, started to shout for help. The girl had twisted her hand into his hair and was forcing back his head, exposing his throat. And the knife flashed once in the light from the unshaded bulb. Simon's cries ceased, silenced by the bubbling blood that gushed into his windpipe.

There came the patter of running feet, and of calling, and amid a great confusion and tumult the door was burst open and Emanuel Louis ran into the room. Almost at his feet lay the body of Simon Cust, the throat from which his lifeblood was pouring had been slit from ear to ear like that of a sacrificial animal.

Emanuel's eyes passed on to the dirty matting on the floor where a beef sandwich was oozing from its torn wrapping. It was clear to him what had taken place. His charges had been fed meat. Meat and salt; those were the forbidden foods of zombies, the keys which would give them back their memories, and the interfering fool had not known it. So they had turned and rent the first man they had seen, judging him to have been responsible for their final degradation.

The two occupants of the shabby room, blood spattered and with their arms hanging loosely by their sides and nearly to their knees, brushed past him blindly. Along the passage, lined with horrified Negroes, they went, and passed unmolested down the stairs and out into the deserted street.

Emanuel Louis let them go, for it was useless to try to stop them, and then in his turn he paced through the waiting and watching men and women and went down to the hall and to the telephone. As he reached it a woman began to wail from above and soon all had taken it up in a weird and uncanny lament.

Having made his call, Emanuel Louis sat on a hard chair by the booth and waited. He had not long to wait. In a very few minutes there was a screech of tyres as a squad car braked to a halt in front of the house and there was a roar of motor bicycles, and the hall became filled with policemen, two of them middle-aged and in plain clothes, and a uniformed constable, and a young Hercules in crash helmet and leather-encased legs who stood behind them with his hands planted on his belt. From the street more men could be heard arriving.

Emanuel Louis led them up to the room where Simon Cust was lying, and for a moment the men stood in a shocked semi-circle eyeing the body. The smaller of the plain clothes men was the first to speak. "Stop those damned niggers making such a bloody din, can't you?" he said. "It's enough to turn your stomach."

His companion also swivelled round to face Emanuel Louis. "Well," he said, "are you going to tell me which one of you is responsible?"

The plump little man stared back at him sorrowfully. "I am going to tell you," he said. "Those who have done this thing have gone. They have gone I do not know where, but it will be to the west."

"What's that?" demanded the police officer. "You admit that you know the identity of the murderers? Why the hell did you let them get away?"

"They will be making for the west," said Emanuel Louis once again, scarcely seeing the stern and stolid faces that surrounded him, "for when the Living Dead realize what they really are, they always head for the graves from which they have been dragged."

Kit Reed's third and most recent book, THE BETTER PART, *was published this spring by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Her publishers describe it as a novel about a young girl who is a virtual prisoner in the world's biggest correctional institution. This story, the latest of Mrs. Reed's many fine contributions to these pages, concerns a different sort of captivity.*

THE VINE

by Kit Reed

DAY IN, DAY OUT, SUMMER IN, summer out, through fire, flood and contumely, over the centuries Baskin's family had tended the vine. No one knew precisely how old the vine was, or who had planted it and set the first Baskin to care for it; when the first settlers came to the valley, the vine was already there. No one knew who had built the immense conservatory which housed it, or who sent the trucks which came every autumn to take away the fruit.

The Baskins themselves didn't know; still they had cared for the vine from the beginning, pruning, shaping and harvesting, watering it in times when no one else had water, feeding it when there was no food. They lived in a small cottage in the shadow of the trunk, giving all their days to it; their backs were bent and their skins were pale and soft from a lifetime of hothouse air. When they died they were buried in the family plot just outside the giant conservatory, laid in the ground without shrouds or coffins so that they could go on feeding the vine. The eldest son was the only one who married. He usually did his courting outside the valley so that the bride would not know until he brought her home that she was to bear sons and daughters to care for the vine. Although there was no proof, there were rumors of a ritual bloodletting, in which the Baskins gave

of themselves four times a year, enriching the earth at its base.

Even contained as it was within multifaceted glass walls, the vine overshadowed the entire valley. In the best times farmers could look at their finest fruit and know it could not measure up to the grapes hanging inside the conservatory. When frost came early or drought leached the soil, they blamed the vine. Yet even as they hated it, they were drawn by it. Summer and winter a steady procession came from the farthest corners of the valley and in time from the countryside beyond, all shuffling toward the great conservatory, waiting in silence until it was their turn to go inside.

Outside the conservatory, no grass grew. For hundreds of yards around the earth was barren, sapped. Visitors approached over a single elevated pathway, conscious of the immense, powerful network spreading just beneath their feet, the root system of the vine. Ahead, the conservatory would be dark with it, each glass pane filled with burgeoning leaves and heavy, importunate fruit. At the door they would give a coin to the youngest Baskin daughter and go through the turnstile, craning over the rail to look at the sinuous trunk. Their eyes would follow it to the base and the carefully turned earth which supported it, and most would refuse to comprehend that the thing measured twenty feet across. The earth was intersected by a series of wooden walks along which the Baskins went with shears and hoes and thongs, ready to soften a clod of earth or tie up any part of the plant which might free itself from the enormous arbor and begin to droop. Overhead the arbor spread, entwined and almost obscured by the many flexing, sinewy coils of the giant vine. The entire conservatory was filled by the branches and fruit of this single plant, so that the visitor could stand on the balcony, just to the left of the Baskins' cottage, and look out across yards and yards of open space intersected by walks and roofed in leafy green. From this green roof hung clump after identical clump of flawless grapes, the opulent purple fruit of the vine. Straining into the green gloom, the visitor could see the Baskins scurrying back and forth along the pathways, pale, incessant wraiths in faded chambray shirts. There were those who said the vine sucked the life out of the Baskins; there were others who said the Baskins took their life from the vine. Whatever the truth, the visitor would sense in their movements a haste, a frightening urgency, and in the next moment he might clutch at his throat as if the vine threatened him too, draining the air he breathed, and so he would turn hurriedly and flee, hardly noticing the others who pressed to the rail to take his place.

Even frightened so, the visitor would return. In his own distant home in another season, he would close his eyes and see once again the brooding tracery. Something would draw him back, and so he would come again, perhaps with a bride or a firstborn son, saying: I tried to tell you; there are not enough words for the vine. So the crowds coming to the valley grew larger, and in time there had to be new roads and places to eat, and since some came from such distances that they needed to rest before going on, the valley people built inns. One by one the farmers cut down their own production, abandoning vineyards to put their money into restaurants and motels. Movie houses sprang up, and someone built a terrace overlooking the conservatory, dotting it with purple umbrellas and studding it with bathing pools. Someone created small, jeweled grape clusters for visitors to buy, and someone else bottled a wine which he told visitors came from the fruit of the vine. The people in the valley grew sleek and prospered, and although they still lived in the shadow of the vine, they no longer cursed it. Instead they would look at the sky and say: Hope it rains, the vine needs water. Or: If there's hail, I hope it doesn't break the glass and hurt the vine. In time they stopped farming altogether, and from that time on, their lives depended on the steady flow of visitors who came to see the vine.

So it was that Charles Baskin was born into a time of prosperity, and the people of the valley no longer shunned the Baskins. Instead they said: Is your family keeping busy? Or, slapping Charles on the shoulder: Hi, Charlie. How's the vine?

"Fine," he would say—distractedly, because he was approaching his twenties: he was the firstborn and it was time for him to find a wife. In the old days, it would have been more difficult—a Baskin who went courting in the old days had to take a cart or a wagon and go over the mountains, traveling until he came to a town where they had never heard of the vine.

Charles's own mother had come from such a town. She came with her eyes dazzled by love and her ears full of his father's lies and promises, understanding only when she entered the conservatory that she would spend the rest of her life caring for the vine. Charles had seen her languish all through his childhood, sitting down on a root to weep, and he had listened night after night to her tales of life outside. Yet in the scant twenty years since his birth the climate and temper of life in the valley had changed. His mother's parents came to visit, and instead of protesting, they were delighted. The mayor brought them in, bursting with pride, and the old man and

the old woman admired the conservatory and exclaimed over the cottage and even went so far as to pat the trunk of the vine. She was still protesting, trying to explain when they said:

"You must be so happy, dear." And left.

Charles, watching, thought: Why shouldn't she be? For the vine exuded prosperity in those days, and even though those who came to see it were awed, they were also solicitous, saying: More fertilizer. Or: More food. Or: We can't let anything happen to the vine.

So by the time Charles reached manhood, any girl in the valley would have been proud to marry into the family that cared for the vine. Several vied for his attentions, but he had always loved Maida Freemont, whose father ran the pleasure palace on the hill.

Standing in the sunset, they watched the last light glint on the conservatory roof below. Charles said, "Come down in the valley and live with me."

"I don't know." Maida looked over his shoulder at the brilliant glass roof. "That place gives me the creeps."

"Nonsense," said her father, who had no business listening. "Somebody's got to take care of the vine."

"Yes," said Charles, chilled by a sudden flicker, or premonition. "I love you, Maida. I'll take care of you." He clung to her, thinking that if he could just marry her, everything might be all right. "Maida . . ."

"Yes."

He took her on a wedding trip to the ocean, a few days of freedom before they went into the conservatory to live. They came back tanned and healthy, and Charles led her through the throngs who lined the walks, waiting to see the vine.

A little self-consciously, he lifted her and carried her through the stile. "And so," he said, setting her down on the balcony inside, "here we are."

She buried her head in his neck. "Yes. Here we are."

Once they had embraced he was uneasy. He noticed a subtle change in the color of the light in the conservatory, a faint difference in the air. The air was heavier now, touched with a hint of ferment. Troubled, he took Maida's hand, hurrying her inside the house.

The rest of the family were sitting around the parlor: Dad, Mom, Sally and Sue. They had changed from their coveralls. Mom and the girls had on lavender dresses; Dad was wearing his wine-colored shirt. They crowded around the newlyweds, and it was a minute or two before Charles realized that something was amiss.

"Where's Granddad?"

His mother said evasively, "Gone."

"Where?"

Dad shook his head. "Something took him and he died."

Sue said quietly, "It was time."

The mother rushed to make it easier. "I've turned his room into a lovely parlor for you; so you'll have a real apartment of your own."

Outside there was a sound as if the whole vine were stirring. Maida shrank against Charles and he hugged her. "Fine, mother. That's just wonderful."

Maida was murmuring, "Oh Charlie, Charlie, take me out of here."

He wavered.

The family watched with violet eyes. They were waiting.

Nodding, he tugged at Maida. "Come on, dear." On the landing he whispered, "Trust me. Trust the vine."

And so they went upstairs. There was a sound outside, like a gigantic sigh.

Charles rose early, but the family was already at work. Sally was at the turnstile collecting money. Sue crouched on one of the wooden walks, pulling abstractedly at a weed. His mother was on a ladder at the far end of the conservatory, tying up a tendril of the vine. Charles approached her.

"Mother, something's different."

But she only frowned over her knot and wouldn't talk to him.

When they got back to the house at noon, Maida had pulled herself together. She was in the kitchen with her hair tied back, and she was whistling. She said, "I've made a pie."

They finished lunch happily. Sally was full of talk about a boy she had seen. He had come through the turnstile twice, never going to the rail to gawk. He had paid just to talk to her. The mother was smiling, giving Maida a whole series of useless household hints. The father was a bit pale, abstracted.

"The pie," Maida said, cutting into it.

They were aghast. "Grape!"

Once they had finished talking to her, Charles led her to their room, trying to soothe her. "Please stop crying, darling. You just didn't understand."

"All I wanted to do was . . ."

"I know, but you hurt the vine. None of us can ever hurt the vine."

Baskin stayed out in the conservatory an extra hour that evening, perhaps thinking to make amends for the grapes his bride had cut. He went along the outer walks, weeding and hoeing, and in the strange, hushed moment just before sunset he came upon his father. He lay on the ground near the outermost wall, pressed close to the earth in some uncanny communion. When Charles called, he did not stir.

Pulling and hauling, Charles got him back on the walk. "Father, you're not supposed to get on the dirt like that."

The older man looked at him, drained. "I—had to."

"Why, father? Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Father, are you all right?"

The old man shrugged him off. "Come, it's time to water the vine."

The last visitors had gone, and so they opened the cock that fed the sprinklers. They ate dinner to the sound of soft water falling. That night Charles and Maida lay close, lulled by the constant artificial rain.

The father was never quite the same; within two months he was dead, carried off by a mystery which wasted him before their eyes. As he faded, the vine prospered, growing heavy with fruit, spreading and expanding until Charles feared the conservatory would not be big enough to hold it. He worked long hours, trimming and pruning, trying to keep it within bounds, and the more he worked the less strength he seemed to have. His mother and the girls seemed to be affected too, dragging themselves about with an effort, diminishing before his eyes.

Only Maida seemed well, busy with a life which had nothing to do with the conservatory or the vine. She was pregnant, and in their dreaming talks about the future, neither Charles nor Maida mentioned the vine.

Only Sally seemed to resent the coming baby, badgering Maida because she did not help as the others did, although Sally herself spent less and less of her own time working. Instead she hung over the turnstile, talking to a boy.

"You'd better tell him to stop coming here," Charles said one night.

"Why should I? I've got to live my own life."

He frowned at Sally. "Your life is the vine."

The next day she was gone. She had taken her clothes in a cardboard suitcase, running away with the boy. They had one post card from a distant city: GET OUT BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE. There was no return address.

Sue shook her head over it. "We'll have to work harder to make up for her."

"It won't help," the mother said from her corner. Her voice sagged with despair. "Nothing will help."

"Don't say that," Charles said sharply. "We have to take care of the vine."

Deep in pregnancy, Maida snapped, "Damn the vine."

Since Charles couldn't find his mother to help him when his son was born, he and Sue had to midwife. When it was all over, Charles went out on the walks and called for the old lady, full of the news. He found her at last, pressed against the earth as his father had been, and he had to pull to get her free. He imagined something snapped as he pulled her away from the soil. Frightened, he took her back

to the house and put her to bed. Even when she was stronger, he would not let her leave the house. He and Sue carried on alone, because they had to. The mother died anyway. They buried her in the family plot, where she could feed the vine.

There were four of them in the house now: Charles and Maida and the baby—and Sue, who wasted before their eyes. Charles might have despaired, he might have fled if it hadn't been for the baby. The baby was his future and his hope: it would grow strong and prosper, carrying on the Baskin tradition of caring for the vine.

"We'll have a girl soon," he said to Maida, beaming.

On the other side of the fire, Sue put her hands to her lips; her fingers fluttered across her face. Before they could stop her, she was on her feet and running. When he went out on the porch, Charles could hear her footsteps, desperate and fast. But it was dark and the great vine creaked above him. With a shudder, he went back inside.

They never saw Sue again, and so Maida had to pen the baby in the cottage and go out and help him with the vine. She was quick and capable, and now that she had borne a child here, she seemed strangely reconciled to life inside the conservatory, at one with the others who had labored here. She and Charles worked well, but he began to notice changes in her. He would find her on the farthest catwalk, her cheek pressed against the glass outer wall. It was around this time that Charles found Sue's skeleton, suspended in a cocoon of green. He freed it and buried it quickly, so Maida would not have to see. The earth was alive with twisting tendrils, and he jumped back in alarm.

"We'll go," he said, biting through his lower lip. "I'll take her and the baby and get out of here."

But it was too late. She did not answer his urgent cries, and he found her at last, lying pressed to the earth just outside the cottage door. When he pulled her up she smiled, blind but still loving. Where it had touched the earth, her skin was flecked with tiny broken veins. He took her in his arms and ran with her, collapsing outside by the road. When the police took them to the hospital, Charles called Maida's father.

"Mister Freemont, Maida and I are leaving as soon as she's well enough to travel."

"You'll be all right," Freemont said, not listening. "I'll look after Maida here. You'd better get back and do for that vine."

"You don't understand, we have to get *away* from it . . ."

The old man turned him toward the conservatory. "She'll be all right, son. You just get back to work."

Because there was nothing else to do he went, but his mind was

seething with plans. When Maida got better, he would take her and the baby; he would steal a car if he had to, and they would drive and drive until they were safe.

"She's dead," the father said, weeping at the turnstile.

"The vine killed her," Baskin said wildly.

The old man patted him. "There, there. It's coming on harvest time. You know how the visitors love that . . ."

"But I have to . . ."

"You have to carry on for Maida. For the valley. We all depend on you."

Before he could protest, the old man pushed a rake into his hand. A crew began installing an automatic turnstile.

"Tell you what," Freemont said. "We'll put up a 'No Visitors' sign. Give you time to mourn."

"But there isn't . . ." Baskin went on, to the empty conservatory ". . . time to mourn. There's only time to take care of the vine."

Its demands took all his waking hours. He would pen the baby on the porch where he could watch it, and if he left the baby unattended that last night, it was hardly his fault. He heard a snap and a groan in the distance, and ran to investigate. The vine had broken a pane of glass. He was about to turn back to the house and the baby when a leafy coil dropped around his arm, holding him as if to say: Listen.

Impatient, he wrenched himself free. In growing panic, he began to run.

He couldn't have made it: no one could have made it in time. The baby had climbed or had been lifted out of the pen, and it was playing in the dirt in front of the house. Baskin shouted, splitting his throat, but before the baby could hear or try to respond, a root whipped out of the ground, looped itself around the child's neck and pulled it into the earth.

He imagined he heard a cosmic belch.

Flinging himself on the dirt, he tore at it in a fury, but there was no sign of the child, not his cap or his rattle, not even a bone. In his pain and rage Baskin dug deep, hacking at roots and gouging the earth. The soil was alive, fighting him, and he barely tore himself free.

He retreated to the porch, breathing hard. Going into the house, he collected papers and sticks and rags, and he followed the walks to the great trunk, making a pyre about its base. He soaked the whole in kerosene and set fire to it.

So it was that Charles Baskin waged war on the vine.

Dancing back to avoid the heat, he cursed it, thinking it would all be over soon, but as he watched the sprinkler system let loose, perhaps triggered by a tentacle of the vine. When the smoke cleared,

he saw that the vine was scarely damaged, with the fire out, it was drenching itself from within, bathing the wounded trunk in sap.

Next Baskin attacked it with a chain saw, but before he had gone far the vine was dropping tendrils from every frame and division of the arbor, and every tendril had begun to root. Fresh tendrils took the saw and tried to turn it on him; he had to hack his way to safety, fleeing the conservatory in a growing despair. He thought to tip a vat of lye on the ground, but before he could get close enough, roots were coming through the earth outside the glass house, twining around the vat and reaching for Baskin himself. He would have attacked the trunk again, but the conservatory was already impenetrable. The thing had surrounded itself with a thick armature of loops and fibrous whips, and he could never get close enough to harm it; it would get him first.

Desperate, he hit on a final plan: if he could not damage the plant, then he would smash the conservatory, and the first frost would kill the vine.

He had broken only three panes when the angry plant whipped out and snared him. He was fighting feebly when the first truck came over the horizon. They were coming out from town to investigate.

"Thank God," he said to his first rescuer. "Oh thank God you've come."

The man peered at him through the greenery. "What happened?"

"We've got to kill it," Baskin said, thinking: Now they'll see. They have to see. "We have to get it before it gets us."

"He was trying to hurt it," the man said to someone behind him. "Looks like we were just in time."

Baskin gasped, still not understanding: "Just in time."

They stood back and let the vine finish what it was doing. Then they held a lottery, selecting the new keeper on the spot. The lucky winner sent a friend back to town to tell his wife, and then he went forward, opening the double doors to the conservatory. As he approached, the vine withdrew its tendrils, rewinding them neatly on the arbor. Only slightly uneasy, the new keeper whispered, into the dimness:

"Are you all right?"

Here is an amusing and appropriately light-hearted story (appropriate because it deals with levitation: "I can tell you that there is no pleasure on Earth to compare with rising into the clear blue air on a fine day over the Pennines"). The name of Josephine Saxton is new to F&SF and to this field, but she is a writer of considerable and varied talents, as we hope to illustrate in these pages. More of her work will be published in the months to come.

NOTHING MUCH TO RELATE

by Josephine Saxton

The Willows,
Halifax Road,
Manchester.
March 10th is it Friday?

Dear Rosalind,

Yes, I know I'm rotten for not writing for *aeons,* but of course I've been hideously busy with the new infant—well you know what they are and also actually (till now) I've had nothing much to relate. Thanks enormously by the way for the sweet little jacket. It fits him nicely and he says thank-you-very-much too. I haven't been anywhere for ages, haven't felt like it and anyway regret that none of my evening dresses fits me—yet. Am exercising like mad. Ronald says I should take up swimming—honestly I ask you aren't they nittish. I mean how could I with babe in arms? They make me laugh ha ha. Anyway this is all part of reason for not writing but now take a breath dear because it's all rather amazing. You know about my sort of *faculty,* I mean handed down from Granma Lee and all that. You remember the automatic writing during that seance at that party? (By the way did I tell you about the poltergeist? I only have one Staffordshire dog now. It is a shame, he looks lonely by himself.) Well. It was yesterday afternoon I had fed the little 'un and he was asleep and all was quiet, you know

that gorgeous hour of the day when? I made myself comfy on the couch with some minty chocs, feeling horribly guilty, and some coffee, meaning to force myself to write to you, to put *something* in an envelope, even if nothing much. I must have fallen asleep or more likely gone off into a trance because when I woke up Baby was howling his head off, it was almost dark, the parkin I'd left in the oven had gone like rock, but geological, and the house was full of smoke, the washing hanging outside was wet through 'twas raining you see, the fire was out, and at that pearlish little moment in time Ronald banged the garage door down and walked in, no doubt expecting me to run to him with a martini in my hand and throw my arms round his neck (titter). There was just about a row you can imagine, I had to sit feeding baby listening to the most awful stuff from Ronald when I bet he'd spent all day sorting out young fed up neurotic mothers who can't cope, it was not a pleasant evening, I could have wept. When Ronald went out to the corner shop to fetch a tin of spaghetti, I did, just a bit. So later when I was tidying up, I was putting away my writing with a sigh, thinking poor Ros no letter today when I saw that there were in fact absolute reams of writing all over several sheets of this lovely mauve paper done in rather a different hand from mine own, in my purple ink. I will say no more except that it is *the* most interesting bit of automatic writing that I have ever writ or even seen for that matter. I enclose it for your perusal which is why this letter is registered and I want you to send it back registered too please. Read it now.
Enclosure.

I think I've made a contact at last, a female, a receiving mind at last, get it written down, I have an urgent need to write it all down but as you will see I cannot. Just let it flow onto the paper, I can feel you have talent for this sort of thing. You are my only messenger and contact. Now listen and write this and then take it to this address. Fourteen John Street Manchester Five. Most important, I owe him something at least although it's too late for help. Don't be scared girl I won't hurt you, just write for me that's all. I shall have to be brief, but I have a desire to tell it all from the beginning . . .

It began when I was a small boy with Tarzan books. If I had not been attracted to all things weird and strange, I should not be in this situation now perhaps. They asked me then, what did I want to be when I grew up? Jesus, I said. Why? Because he had a magic power, I said. In time I learnt to be more prudent and would tell them I wanted to be an engine driver, but I knew what I really

wanted. Later on it was Merlin when I realised that Jesus was a goody—I wanted to do things with magic. New bikes for instance. Abracadabra. Anyway it went on through my schooldays, Rider Haggard, Atlantis, Incas, Mu, Dennis Wheatley, then later, the Celts, Alchemy, Zoroastrism, then books on the sacred mushroom, Jung and Freud, fire walking, fakirs, palmistry and Yoga—the lot. Meanwhile I became an engine driver, I had kept fobbing them off with this putrid ambition in a sort of dream and in the end it happened. I wouldn't mind taking the three-five to London right now. All my spare time I spent reading and practising Yoga to gain some self-control, but not a word to anyone else mind you, I should have been laughed at. No girl friends for me, I hadn't time. I could wish otherwise now, I am almost forty and virginal completely, it's sickening. I wasn't getting anywhere with book Yoga, I needed a proper teacher, and I still wished desperately for real powers, something tangible like turning water into wine for instance. So when I went to the public library about ten years ago now I suppose, and saw an advertisement for a series of lectures by a bloke calling himself a Master, claiming to have secrets from the East, I went along. I was suspicious of course, but I was going to leave no stone unturned. I was not disappointed. It transpired that I became a member of his private group of pupils.

He was an odd fellow, no particular nationality, sort of dark and magnetic looking with long white hair done in scruffy little plaits and always chewing bubbly gum. Apparently he got that habit from a bunch of lamas in Kazahkstan who preferred it to betel nut, they had it sent from Chicago once a year and it arrived by yak over a chasm spanned by a rope bridge, and they used to sing mantras so it wouldn't fall, but I digress and as I said there is little time. He was certainly in the possession of knowledge of exercises and disciplines that I cannot go into fully, not having time and anyway I am sworn to secrecy. But from my point of view there was a snag. He used these exercises for white magic only, which is the same thing as saying they were for good only, for the acquisition of a 'soul' in Western terms. He called all other uses, cheap fairground tricks. He scorned any pupil who came to the meetings eager to show off instantaneous combustion of a wastepaper basket, which was what I did one day. He said matches were good enough for him if he wanted to light a damn fool thing like a wastepaper basket. Why get bushed lighting it from across the room by staring at it? At the time though I was so full of this achievement that I hardly listened to him. He wanted me to get on

with the business of making a 'soul', I wanted very much to learn telekinesis. Whilst all the other pupils taught themselves inner magic, I managed to lift an ashtray up off a table three yards away. I did not tell the Master this, I did it in secret at home in my bed sitter. It is not difficult to do such tricks really, it is a matter of practise, in concentration mainly, a switching onto the right sort of energy in the self. Energies flowing out of the top of the head . . . But I was thrilled, and I continued driving trains and behaving in every way like a normal engine driver. No person suspected my secret life, except the Master. He was not a fool, he could read minds if he wished to, and he had read mine. He warned me of my folly and I pretended to listen. He told me that I was excellent material for his work, but that if I did not desist from using his esoteric and hard won knowledge for wrong purposes, then I would inevitably receive punishment. Not from him he assured me. Evil was its own reward. For a while I was chastened and became a model pupil. It was during this period that the damage was done for as I paid more attention to his words at the meetings I learnt things that I might otherwise have missed. He was putting his group through a course of exercises that would release in them the main source of energy and power flowing through human beings from higher sources. Some would talk of cosmic rays and so on, but he had his own terminology. If you wish to know more, female scribe, then in the library look under psychology and religion, letters 'G', 'O', and 'B'. I persisted with his exercises for about six months, and of course the whole thing hinged on breathing exercise mainly, and I had by that time been so persistent that I had succeeded. I rushed to the Master asking for a private interview, wanting to tell him how I had felt the power flowing into me, building up like electricity in the three main centres of my body, and yet when I told him, he just said, "Yes my boy, very good. Success is not what we wish for, but effort. Very good so far, now go back home, keep trying." I could have wept with disappointment, that was always the trouble, he did not care much for results, only effort. It made life dull at times. In a mood of defiance I went home and turned a jug of tap water into Beaujolais and then drank it. In the resultant haze, in which I missed a shift at the sheds, I had the idea that I would teach myself to levitate. That would show him. Not only did I do the usual stuff, harnessing power and so on, I fasted, and did some very effective Dervish dances I had learnt at the group also. This didn't last long because the neighbors complained, you see, the dances meant

stamping rather hard in some complicated rhythms with the feet, clapping the hands, and at the same time as counting mentally, one had to shout out another complicated count to another rhythm, and occasionally yell "OM" in a hollow voice. When they rapped on the ceiling, it put me off and made me lose the swing of it, so I concentrated more on the quieter forms of exercise. All this and I had not yet risen off the floor one inch. Almost, but not quite. I knew that the total results of my efforts must work on the chemical composition of my body, in particular the blood, so that in effect, put simply, I became a substance upon which gravity does not necessarily act.

I pause to ask you to write faster, my thoughts are faster than that hand of yours that I have borrowed, there is not much time. So. Three days ago it was my day off and I took a walk over the moors. I was terribly thin and pale with all the fasting and staying indoors, and I felt discouraged. I went right up onto a high place near some pre-Roman earthworks, a place I have always liked, and as usual up there, I was alone. I sat down to look around me at the bleak and splendid landscape and almost automatically fell into my breathing exercises. Extremely shallow breathing I was doing, and I felt my body change gradually, adjusting itself to the new balance of chemicals within it. Just for once, I did not force desire for levitation through my system, I was merely sitting there. That was the key to the thing I think, not desiring. If you wish for a thing too much, you do not usually get it. The next thing I knew I had risen into the air about six feet, still in a sitting position. At first I could not believe it, no one would have, after all that time practising, failing, hoping. I felt so light, so full of bliss and astonishment that I just sat there, slowly going up and up. The view increased in magnificence, and if you will forgive the pun, I was completely carried away. I could do nothing but stare and stare, delighted in every fibre, full of triumph, glee almost. Up and up I went at the rate of about five yards a minute, and I can tell you that there is no pleasure on Earth to compare with rising into the clear blue air on a fine day over the Pennines. It was beautiful. In all mystical and magical enterprises one can at times experience ecstasy. I experienced it then. I felt to radiate a glow as I rose into the air, and a sense of timelessness which is quite beyond description. So I cannot say how long it was before I came out of that ecstatic trance, to find that I was high enough above the surface of the Earth to see its curvature, to find that I was frozen stiff, badly blistered with sunburn, and that breathing of any kind was

extremely difficult. You see the atmosphere up here is extremely thin, terribly thin, and cold. . . .

When I then decided to go down again and walk home, I found that not only did I not know how exactly, but that I could not experiment. Because of the thinness of this air, I could not do breathing exercises, it was impossible. That is why there is not much time to tell you more, I am still rising and will soon die, I can barely breathe at all, and I am in an excruciating condition, I shall be glad to die, it is too late to rescue me. I hope you have got all this written, I think you have, tell the Master I believe him, he was right, but it is too late for me to undo my work, too late . . . too late. . . .

End of enclosure.

Now then Ros dear, what do you think of all that? It's fantastic isn't it? I mean, bloody incredible, but there it all is in my writing pad for you to see. I wonder if the psychic research people would be interested, what do you think? I haven't shown Ron, well you know him, he'd just smile sort of tight lipped—having a brain-wright for a husband has its disadvantages. I wish you'd come up during the summer and stay with us and then we could have a good old natter. Must stop now as baby needs tanking up again. Four hourly feeds. Hear from you soon?

Liz.

P.S. It's more interesting than that time I got three pages of drawings of atomic structures that we could not understand, isn't it?

9, Clover Mews,
London W.2. March 12th,
yes it was Friday.

Dear Liz,

Have read your letter and enclosure several times and return enclosure herewith regd., more expensive but you insisted. I felt after a while that I must try and impose some reason on it all. I tabulate:

a) Is my little friend Liz absolutely sure that she is not suffering from just a tiny bit of post natal depression that has just sort of tipped over slightly into the schizoid? Perhaps she had better tell that psych hubby of hers after all. (I suppose it is rather tedious living in Manchester, you poor dear.)

b) Perhaps Liz, always the one for kicks (remember smoking poppy seed in the school lavs darling?) hasn't been just the tiniest bit tempted into stealing just a *drop* of Ronald's intriguing LSD and taking it with her guilty minty chocs??? I can let you have a very good diet if you like, my doctor gave it to me, and I lost a stone in six weeks.

c) Is my dear friend having me on as she has before? I recall some cotton wool ectoplasm in the dorm

one night, scaring me half to death, you rat.
d) This is your way of telling me that you have taken up hobby of writing for pulp s.f. mags and this is first idea, and you want some help from friend Ros who always topped you at Eng. Lang. If I were you, dear, I should seriously consider this, with an imagination like yours, one never knows . . .
e) It is all true bona fide for real in which case you had better go round to the address you got, and investigate.

Apart from this, I myself have very little to relate. Only pregnant, that's all.

Roz.

The Willows.
Saturday evening,
Ron is watching Batman
so have come into the kitchen.

Dear Rosalind,

Firstly I think you were rather bitchy about it being dull in Manchester. It isn't, we're not exactly barbaric you know. Secondly, I investigated. Have met dear old man with little plaits in his hair and passed on message from poor dying magician. I have joined the group. Can say no more as have been sworn to secrecy. Look after your health. Do you want a girl or a boy this time?

Love from Liz.

Eduardo Goligorsky was born in Buenos Aires in 1931. He presently works as a translator (he has translated books by Isaac Asimov, Conrad Richter, and Erich Fromm, among others), and he has written a considerable amount of both detective and fantasy fiction. Vernor Vinge, a graduate student at the University of California, has sold several stories of his own. This is his first translation, in which an often-used science fictional theme is given vitality by Mr. Goligorsky's sure direction and fine sense of irony.

WHEN THE BIRDS DIE

by Eduardo Goligorsky

(translated by Vernor Vinge)

THE SUN'S FIRST LIGHT FILLED the valley, bringing another day of intolerable heat. A soft, warm breeze rustled the cattails and the tall, yellow grass. A narrow brook flowed slowly down the valley. The sky was very blue, and empty. Nothing disturbed its vast clearness. The birds were two years dead.

In the valley there was no observable movement. The stalled locomotive and freight cars were toys tossed aside by the capricious child of some giant wanderer. In two years the weeds had covered the rails.

With a squeaking sound the sliding door on one of the cars rolled back. A man stuck his head out, then emerged all the way. He was quite old. His incredibly wasted skin clung to his cheekbones, his eye sockets, his concave temples, and the knife-like edge of his long, hooked nose.

His snarled grey locks fell all the way to his shoulders. His mouth was a mere slash in the tangle of his dirty beard. A faint, mad

gleam hung in the twin caverns that held his eyes.

His overcoat had a worn fur collar, hardened by scabs and covered with splotches. The wind blew at the folds of that once flamboyant coat, revealing his nakedness. His long bony legs ended in rough mountain boots, their leather cracked and cut.

The man scratched his beard. He looked to the left where the burbling of water marked the brook, and shook his head. Then he put his hand into the pocket of his overcoat, plunging nearly his whole forearm into its mysterious depths, and brought forth a three-quarters full bottle of wine. He removed the cork, raised the bottle to his lips, and took a long swallow. A thin stream of pinkish liquid dribbled down his beard onto the coat, leaving a trail of brilliant droplets on the crusty layer of grease.

The man hiccoughed, plugged the bottle, and dropped it back into his pocket. Something slipped across the ground by his right foot. He moved swiftly to pin the reptilian form. The man bent down and recovered his prey between lean, filthy fingers.

It was a green lizard, almost twenty centimeters long. His foot had crushed its head, but the trunk still twisted in galvanic spasms. The fellow didn't let this stop him. His worn, yellow teeth ripped off strips of its skin and white flesh. As he chewed, his eyes were already searching for his next ration.

Eventually he caught two more lizards, but he threw the last one aside after a few mouthfuls. At no time did he take note of the fact that the three little animals had two stumps, atrophied limbs, growing from their flanks, along with their normal legs. To him that was as bereft of significance as the absence of birds from the sky. The man walked slowly over to the nearest reed mace, tore off a newly flowered tuft, and chewed the stalk. When only a few tough fibers were left sticking between his teeth, he spat them out, and retrieved his bottle.

This swig was longer. His lips pulled from the bottle with an audible smack. Now there was hardly any wine left. The fellow's mind automatically registered this disagreeable fact. Booze was harder to come by than food. But since he was incapable of concentrating on a single idea for any length of time, he finally sat down in the sun, between the rails.

He had lived a long time in the valley—perhaps longer than in any other place. Here he lived alone and in peace. It was not at all as it had been up until two years ago, when he had walked stumbling through the streets, followed by mocking children. The policemen insulted and kicked him

every time they took him off his park bench and put him in some filthy cell infested with cockroaches and bedbugs.

In those times he never felt the sun's warmth as he did here under the wide, open skies. This was better, much better.

He had never imagined that anything like this might exist. If *it* had never happened, he would never have thought to flee from the city. He would have just gone through life with his hand outstretched, begging for money to buy a glass of wine and a bit of bread and cheese.

But then *it* happened. Two years ago—he was walking down the street, oblivious of his surroundings, when he heard the screams. Everyone was running, trampling over each other. Sirens howled deafeningly. Some people held each other close—while others began fighting. In front of him, a show window shattered. He reached in, almost unconsciously, and grabbed the overcoat with the fur neck-piece. Then he too began running. Every few seconds he glanced back, but saw that no policeman had noticed him. He slowed his pace.

He didn't understand what the people were saying. Everyone was shouting and pointing at the sky. Many cried and some knelt on the pavement, their lips moving. Traffic was stalled and most drivers had abandoned their cars. Words coming to his ears were disagreeable noise, mixed with other sounds, mechanical and inhuman.

Soon he was scared, too. A shove knocked him to the ground and his fear became panic. He was used to being kicked around, but this—he somehow knew—was different. He almost lost his bright new overcoat in the confusion.

He sat up with difficulty and put on his coat. Now he wouldn't lose it in another mob. He began running again, moving steadily away from the center of the city. Finally he came to the outlying districts, crossed through the suburbs and ended up in the first of the fields that surrounded the metropolis. But his flight seemed futile. Everywhere he found the same confusion, the same stampeding mobs, the screams. Many men and women had been less lucky than he and lay trampled in the streets. The rest kept right on moving over the bodies without bothering to see if they might still be alive. It didn't take long for the human wave to finish off the dying.

The man panted, breathless, his mouth and throat dry, his side sharply aching. His body, unnecessarily wrapped up in the overcoat, was bathed in sweat.

He saw a highway filled with cars that were fleeing from the city. A motley caravan stretched out along the side of the road. Some of the people were almost naked, while others wore their best

clothes. Many were empty handed, but some bent low beneath their bundles and suitcases. These people all frightened him.

When night came, he moved away from the crowds and walked cross-country. Every so often he saw the lights of other fugitives, who, like him, had left the highway. Whenever this happened he changed direction and continued his slow, difficult way through the darkness.

Until suddenly the night was broken by a terrifyingly bright white light, a glow that covered most of the sky and slowly became yellow and then red. By that glow everything seemed afire. As he watched, the preternatural "daylight" became a deeper and deeper red until there was a bloody twilight, and finally, darkness. The minutes passed. He stood frozen with fright. Then he was smashed to the ground and a roaring wind swept over him. He lay face down on the ground until the sun appeared on the horizon, its light barely piercing the thick, dark haze that covered the sky.

The man never knew what had happened, nor what connection the brief day-in-night had with the mad flight of the people from the city. But it didn't take him long to figure out that many things had changed.

He didn't try to return to that city or to any other—something told him that he wouldn't find refuge there anymore. Now the cities were accursed and he must avoid them. So he continued his course through the country.

He saw fewer and fewer groups of people, but on the other hand he discovered many burned and horribly mutilated corpses. In several places the bodies were piled up into regular little mountains. The man learned to avoid these patches of death, too.

One morning he saw a bird falter in mid-flight and fall screeching to the ground. And though food was scarce, he knew he mustn't eat that bird, and he didn't.

The thick haze didn't dissipate, and there were sunset colors in the sky all day long. Especially at night there were quick white flashes from beyond the horizon, but he kept his eyes fiercely shut and slept in spite of these lights that frightened him so much.

Occasionally he saw country taverns, but they were either empty or their occupants were dead. He didn't go into any of them, and during all that time he drank no alcohol. One afternoon he came on a little stream, but the grass and weeds along its banks were withered and dying. From then on he drank only when the need was unendurable.

Several days later he found the train abandoned in the valley. He climbed into one of the freight cars, threw aside a box that was in his way, and lay down.

The following morning, he observed with some curiosity that the heavy haze had dissipated and the sun shone clear. An agreeable warmth spread through his body. Perhaps it was this new and pleasant sensation that made him decide not to resume his journey immediately, as he usually did.

When he found the brook nearby, he noted with some satisfaction that the grass along it was green and healthy. The water tasted fresh and filling—now that he was used to going without wine.

Since his flight from the city, he had survived on cane shoots, herbs, and tender leaves. In the valley he found some delicious plants. And the new agility his life in the wilds had won him made it possible to catch the little animals that ran about the valley.

After some months, perhaps a year, men began to appear. Not many, but soon they formed tattered little bands. They chose several nearby valleys in which to set up their rickety tents. From time to time, these men walked about the train, but avoided the solitary bearded figure that sat placidly in the sun, scratching. Convinced that they couldn't expect anything from him, they continued their hunting and explorations.

But one day the routine changed. With the hunters came a ragged child of indeterminate age and sex. Its face was emaciated and wrinkled. That face seemed old on the tiny, childlike body with its skeleton-like arms and protruding abdomen. The child straggled weakly behind the others, and when it saw the man resting by the freight car it went over to him. Just then its spindly legs buckled and it fell clumsily in the grass.

The man bent down. The child's eyes were open, looking up at him with a sad, forlorn expression. There were hardly any teeth left in its mouth, and a fresh pustule had broken out on its left cheek. The man was fleetingly disconcerted, but then he remembered something. Perhaps he could help this small being who had sparked some atavistic feeling of compassion in him. He returned to the car, hunted about in one of the boxes that he had pushed aside when he improvised his refuge, and pulled out a tiny bottle. The child's fevered eyes stared curiously at this object which was so alien to its universe. Then those eyes clouded over dully.

The shabby hunters approached then, stepped between the man and the child. They lifted the child up and carried it off in the direction of their camp. The little bottle filled with multicolored capsules went clutched in the tiny creature's hand.

The man soon forgot the incident. He resumed his solitary life, did not count the passing days. But one afternoon the hunters re-

turned, and this time they came directly to him. The child—now it was obviously a girl—came with them. But now she looked completely different. Her cheeks had filled out, her eyes shone, and all that remained of the sore was a pink scar.

The hunters approached the man from the train and spoke to him. He didn't understand a word. A woman who accompanied the group stepped forward, knelt before him, and kissed his hand thoroughly. Then they offered him pieces of cooked meat and several bottles of wine they had probably appropriated from some abandoned city.

The fellow hadn't tasted wine in a long time, and the sight of the bottles brought a stabbing ache to his guts. Ignoring both the hunters and the woman, he ripped the cork from a bottle with his teeth, raised the flask to his lips, and drank—drank until he choked.

From the corner of his eye, he saw one of the hunters edging slyly toward the freight car. He set the already half-empty bottle on the ground and hurled himself upon the intruder, shouting his rage as he did so. The hunter retreated and his companions raised a chorus of protestations and apologies. The woman wanted to kiss his hand again, and the little girl threw her arms around his neck—but he rebuffed them.

They kept on talking to him, till their chatter made him deaf. He was thinking of the wine that he had not tasted for such a long time, of the bottles and the roasted meat that the hunters had brought him. He remembered that he had given the little girl something, several days previously, and he thought that the tiny bottle might have some connection with the gifts they presented him now. He went up into the wagon, brought out another little bottle, and handed it over to the woman who had kissed his hands.

The hunters murmured more unintelligible words and went away. He didn't even look at them—all his interest was concentrated on the meat he clutched in his hands. He chewed it with delight.

The visits soon became numerous. Other children and adolescents filed past his freight car—their flesh emaciated, their eyes sunken, their bodies mere skeletons. What happened then soon became almost a ritual: the man handed over a bottle of multicolored capsules, the women kissed his hands, the hunters intoned a chorus of absurd noises and set at his feet roasted meat and bottles of wine. The man even got used to the name they gave him—he who had never had a name—and always turned to look when he heard someone say, "Wiseone."

That morning the burning sun

was already very high when he heard the voices and saw the hunters advancing down the valley. Every day they were more ragged, and their faces harder. They all carried knives in their belts, and some clutched staves fixed with highly sharpened metal points. The firearms of former times had disappeared.

The man from the train moistened his lips. This visit meant a new stock of wine. It was about time, since he had just emptied the last bottle. What's more, he would be able to eat roast meat, and that was always better than lean scraps ripped off lizards.

When the hunters came near, he got to his feet. The man who always headed the group carried a completely naked child, its rickety limbs hanging slackly. The other spoke rapidly.

"Wiseone," said the hunter, "Wiseone," and something like, "my son, my own son."

The man from the train inspected the little boy. He didn't know what the chief of the hunters had said to him, but he nodded his head in agreement. He looked at the bottles of wine that filled a large wicker basket. There was more there than on other occasions. He licked his lips and walked back toward his refuge. He climbed up into the freight car. The sun cooked its inside. He put his hand in the box of bottles, and felt vainly around the bottom.

The box was empty.

The fellow looked stupidly about. There was no other box like it. The rest of the car was filled with wooden frames containing machinery that still stank of oil and stale grease. He knew he wouldn't find what he was looking for in the other cars, either. He had investigated them and they contained only crated machines.

He checked one last time to see if the box was empty, then went to the door of the car and jumped to the ground. The chief of the hunters scowled and uttered a burst of rapid, cutting speech. The fellow again understood "Wiseone . . . son . . . cure . . . my son."

He shrugged his shoulders and walked toward the basket with the wine. But one of the hunters blocked his way, set the point of a spear against his chest.

The chief of the hunters said something behind him.

The man from the train scratched his beard, undecided. The spear was an insurmountable obstacle.

He turned and went to sit down again on the floor of the freight car, his bare skinny legs hanging down over the edge, sticking out from the bottom of the overcoat.

Suddenly the scene changed. The chief placed his boy in the arms of another hunter and advanced menacingly. His hand closed upon the hilt of the knife

at his belt, and in a single fluid motion he brought the glittering sharpness of its blade into view. He brandished it before the man, who watched unmoved.

"Wiseone . . . my son . . . cure."

Irritated by the fellow's silence, the hunter grabbed him by the tail of his coat and with a quick jerk pulled him from his precarious seat.

The man fell face down in the grass. Then the chief of the hunters bounded into the car and disappeared in its stifling dimness.

Meanwhile the man sat up agilely and started to follow, but he met a barrier of spears. A moment later the chief reappeared, his face twisted with rage. Besides his knife, he brought the empty cardboard box.

Another torrent of words burst from his lips.

"Hidden . . . where . . . Wiseone . . . where?"

The fellow kept his silence, caressed the grimy fur-piece of his coat. All this was just as absurd as the chaos in the distant city. He looked at the wine with dreary resignation. He ignored what they were saying—by their tone he knew he could hope for nothing from these people.

He shrugged again. He could only wait until they went and left him in peace. Later these differences would be settled. At that moment a large green lizard scuttled across the ground next to the rail. It had no tail, and two deformed stumps stuck out from its sides, but he sank his teeth into it with pleasure. It was a shame that his stock of wine had been exhausted.

The chief stood tall before him, shrieking like a madman.

"Where . . . hidden . . . cure . . . where . . . Wiseone!"

With an angry gesture, he threw the cardboard box to the ground. Then he advanced, brandishing his knife, pointing the blade at the other's stomach visible through the opening in the coat.

"Where . . . hidden . . . cure . . . my son . . . cure . . . Wiseone."

When the fellow didn't answer, the steel blade described a glittering arc and sank into his stomach up to the hilt. The hunter pulled it out with a sucking noise and a spurt of blood, and kept stabbing and stabbing until the man fell forward onto the grass, his eyes distended, his hands clutching at his innards.

Blood still flowed with weak pulses thick and slow, when the hunters started back for their camp.

Hilary Bailey was born in 1936 in the suburbs of London. She has a degree from Cambridge and has had jobs publicizing a catering firm and the British way of life. "In 1962," she writes, "I married Michael Moorcock, writer and editor of New Worlds. *In 1963 I had Sophie Elizabeth, who is just like her Dad, and in 1964 Katie Helen, who is just like my mad great-uncle Arthur. I began to write for money when the births of the children made it impossible for me to go out and earn an honest living. Since then I have written many children's stories and science fiction stories." Mrs. Bailey's first story for us is about children, but while it is fashioned with compassion and warmth, it is decidedly not a children's story. The children here are . . . different.*

THE LITTLE VICTIMS

by Hilary Bailey

Alas, regardless of their doom,
The little victims play.
No sense have they of ills to come,
Nor care beyond today.
Thomas Gray

Extracts from statements made to a Royal Commission set up by Parliament in June, 1973. The extracts made by the Committee's Chairman, Sir Robert Morrison, for one of the witnesses, his brother, Henry Morrison, Radfield Professor of Comparative Religion at Oxford University.

Joseph Simons: I guess Rose must have left our flat at Shepherds Bush around January 30th, 1970. I know I woke one morning and she wasn't there. I never knew the reason till the summer—I thought she went because the police had been looking for us. I never knew what Rose was thinking—if I'd guessed why she went, I'd have gone after her as quick as I could. Rose Dalby: I was still half stoned when I got up that morning in the pitch dark. I'd fallen into bed with all these strange shapes whirling and flashing round me. Even when I woke up, about five, feeling sick as a dog, the room looked red and strange and these ratty old lace curtains we had were forming funny whirling shapes against the window. Anyway, there I was, ly-

ing in bed in this littered-up crummy old flat we had on the fifth floor looking out over everybody's chimney pots, breathing in the stink of hash and stale tobacco and fish and chips what always hung about, and there was Jo, lying there beside me all curled up in a ball, with his face turned towards me, all saggy and grey under the brown. And outside the rain was pouring down, and there were funny noises in my ears, and I could hear the rain dripping off the broken gutter on the roof.

And I thought, this is no place for me to be, so I got up in the freezing cold—I can still feel the torn lino and fag ends under my feet; I won't never forget that if I live to be a hundred—and I cleaned out Jo's pockets and cleared off. I said to myself, goodbye Jo, and I never set foot in that flat again.

Alex Despinard: I ought to point out that our—the firm concerned—is a family one. The Board of Directors consists entirely of members of the Barrett family, all related by blood or by marriage. As you can imagine, this arrangement lends itself to a feudal attitude of mind. Decisions are made by the family and transmitted to the managers with less explanation or discussion than is usual in firms not run on what is really a hereditary basis. Anyone wanting to advance himself in the firm does not expect or demand to be involved in making major decisions, or even question them when they are made. I wanted promotion, so, after ten years with the firm, it had become a habit to carry out my orders without asking questions.

It's true I'd been noticing that Mr. Edward Barrett, the Chairman, had seemed to be under considerable strain for a year or so, but I never connected the Board's decisions with this. I met Dr. Simeon Nieve for the first time in August, 1968, and thereafter every six months on my inspection tours.

Rose Dalby: There I was, standing by the side of this road leading to the M.1, waiting for a driver to offer me a lift and all the cars streaking past me so fast I could hardly follow them with my eyes. I'd walked out of London with all this cold rain coming down on me like precious stones, and my mind kept going back to Shepherds Bush and how we'd lived—the great blocks of colour and distorted objects and noises all the time. I could hardly believe it was all over, but it was.

Later a green Bentley drew up in front of me. I got in. The driver pulled away, and as we went along I sneaked a look at him. He appeared to be very tall and thin and pale. He had a great mop of curly red hair, like a faun peering out of a bush, and with it, very pale, blank blue eyes, like looking into the water at the swimming

baths. I began to wonder if I'd done the right thing, getting into this car like that.

I started talking very fast, saying I was pregnant and I was going up to Solihull to stay with my married sister and her husband, who was a police inspector. I don't know why I was frightened.

Now the funny thing was that when I told him about the baby, he didn't look as if he was in two minds about assaulting me, which was why I'd told him so quick. He suddenly got very interested. In fact, he looked as if that was just what he'd been waiting for me to say. And he started to tell me that his sister had a nursing home in Essex and he was a doctor. He asked me if I'd like to go there to have the baby.

I might have been young, but I wasn't stupid—or not that way anyway. I listened all right—then I said my sister was expecting me and I thought I'd be happier with the family anyway. Some hopes. And all the time I was thinking I had to get out of that car. I couldn't stand those eyes and that quiet voice any more. It stands to reason that no stranger is going to take in a girl with no money and give her free board and lodging and medical attention unless he's got something in mind. I got frightened, scared stiff, and that's a fact.

When I told him I couldn't go, he started arguing, going on about the risks to mother and child of not having proper attention before the baby was born, picturing my dying of a haemorrhage and the baby deformed. And all the time his voice got quieter and quieter, and his eyes got blanker and blanker, and the more I argued back, the more he went on and on until I thought that if I didn't get out of that bloody great car, and quick, I was going to go barmy. You've got to remember I was coming down after the drug; I was tired, and I was pregnant.

So, at the next lights, I pulled the door open, got out and ran into the town.

After that, things got worse and worse. I really felt I was on the run, what with the cops calling at Shepherds Bush and that horrible doctor and all. I felt I didn't have nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

I got a few jobs, but it was hard with no National Insurance card. Finally I wound up tramping, kipping in old houses and that. Then Jo's money ran out.

Then I was walking up a nice respectable High Street somewhere, full of nice respectable ladies in hats doing their shopping, when I passed right out on the pavement.

Jo Simons: We moved on from Shepherds Bush to Camden Town. I missed Rose, and she'd been very useful. I went on getting the pills

and these hallucinogens and passing them round. Times were good and we moved up to the West End, getting the stuff from warehouse-men, sailors, the orderlies in mental hospitals and other people.

Now I never had word from Rose for months, and one day this friend of hers, Bella Reed, comes round, and there's a party and she moves in to take Rose's place; so the merry-go-round goes rolling on. Rose Dalby: Like I said, I fainted away in the street. The next thing I know is, I wake up, clean and tidy in a white nightdress, in a nice room looking out at the tops of some trees. There's canned music playing, a little washbasin in the corner, and bunches of daffodils and tulips on the window ledges. I laid there looking at the trees for a bit.

Then in comes an ugly, tough-looking nurse. I laid doggo to see how it goes. She arranges the flowers for a bit and then turns to look at me.

"Oh, you're awake," she says in a nasty voice, being the type of nurse who likes her patients quiet and unconscious if possible.

"Where am I?" I say.

"Summerhills Nursing Home."

"That's lovely," I say, "but who's paying? I can see I'm not here on the National Health."

"I'll fetch Doctor Addams," she says.

Finally this Doctor Addams marches in. He is a very tubby man, rubbing his hands together just like Father Christmas. He has that firm, confident smile dodgy doctors put on when they are pretending to be respectable.

After a bit of how-are-you-today-not-so-bad-thank-you, he told me I had been sent to Summerhills by the magistrate—in need of care and protection. "Our Director, Doctor Nieve," he said, "likes to take cases like yours sometimes."

"For charity?" I says.

"For charity," he agrees.

And at that, still being weak, I fall asleep.

I was sleepy for days. After all, three good meals a day and a nice comfortable bed don't come your way all that often in this world.

Till, finally, I wake up one morning feeling perky. Just after dinner I hear all this noise just below my window, like a flock of starlings.

I get out and look down. On this great big lawn, stretching out to all the trees beyond, I saw a crowd of about forty pregnant women, all bending and stretching about and chattering, with this nurse in front telling them what to do. It turned me up, I can tell you.

"Taking an interest in life again, Miss Dalby?" says nasty Doctor Addams popping into the room like a jack-in-a-box. "Come and join the ladies."

He led me downstairs, through a clean white hall, and put me in

the team so I trundles around with the others, like elephants doing a turn at the circus, until it's tea-time.

We all drifted in through the French windows to the recreation room. It was one of those light, airy polish-smelling rooms, with armchairs and glass topped tables, like they provide in lunatic asylums.

These forty-odd women are all sitting around in pregnant-woman positions, slurping up tea and crunching up biscuits, silent as the grave.

"Been here long?" I say to the woman next to me. She's knitting a mud-coloured sweater for her old man and supping up tea like a horse at a stall.

"Four months," she says.

"Got long to go?" I ask.

"Two months," she says.

"Like it here?" I say.

"Oh, yes. It's lovely."

"Here for any special reason?" I ask.

"Of course," she says with modest pride. "I've got complications. We all have."

"I haven't," I say, feeling worried.

"You must have," she tells me in a pleased voice. "Every woman here has."

"What sort of complications?" I ask.

"They say something went wrong with me in early pregnancy," she says. "So I was asked to come here to receive special attention."

"Christ," I say, and she gives me a dirty look and knits a bit faster. I look around me in the dead silence and begin to wonder if I'm in some kind of pregnant women's loony bin.

Alex Despinard: It was my job to go to Summerhills twice a year and look around me, talking to staff and patients and generally making sure all was well. It seemed to me to be a comfortable, well-run nursing home, providing good treatment. Only one thing gave me any cause for anxiety, and this was on the medical side, in which I was naturally not supposed to interest myself. . . .

Rose Dalby: I didn't like what I heard at these silent tea-slurping ceremonies after the work-out.

"Oh, have you heard?" one woman would say into the deathly hush. "Mrs. Brown's had her baby."

"Oh, how lovely," another woman would say. "What was it?"

"A little girl, but it died."

Now in the time I was there, five women had babies and three died. I might have been very ignorant in some ways, but I knew that wasn't natural. I got very frightened. Another thing amazed me too. It seems that on the first of every month, these women all lumber along to the holy Director's office to get paid out. This benevolent geezer, who's never seen on any other occasion, sits there like a priest doling out bread

and wine—only in this case it's cheques for a hundred pounds. So all the silly cows are being paid to stay at Summerhills; so what with the free board and lodging and not having to slave around all day, they're on to a good thing, and don't they love it. And I must say it was a kind of bribery because who's going to leave a place like that and deprive their family of a hundred quid a month?

By the time I'd found all this out, I was eight months along, and I was really scared. I'd had a good look round, and I couldn't see no way to get out. There was a big high wall with broken glass on it all round and only one set of big gates at the front, with a man guarding them all the time. There was one place where the wall was crumbling, and you could have got over, but there was a big dog let loose in the grounds all night. Also all the doors of the house were locked all morning, and in the afternoons when they was open, there were nurses wandering around all the time keeping an eye on you. Added to that, I was in no state to run or climb well.

So there I was, trapped in this dodgy nursing home full of peculiar women, with an unseen Director and a lot of smarmy, bent doctors and nurses—I was very worried, very worried indeed.

Alex Despinard: Well, yes, I certainly knew that Summerhills was an expensive project. But the company was interested in it, and the expenses could, of course, be set to some extent against tax. I saw it as being the Chairman's pet extravagance, and I privately considered it to be a noble conception.

Rose Dalby: I used to lie awake sweating at night, feeling the child kicking inside me and wondering how the hell to get out and save us both from—I don't know what. They knew what was the matter all right. Doctor Addams gave me nasty smiles when he gave me my check-ups and told me I was lucky to have been sent there. They tried slipping tranquillisers in among the ordinary pills I had to take for the baby but I soon sussed them—pills, after all, was what I knew about, and I used to sort them out and throw them away. Finally, the nurse called Doctor Addams and told him.

"You needn't think I'm going to take them," I said. "How do I know what's in them? They might be bad for the baby—I've heard all sorts of stories about pregnant women taking things and having injured babies."

When I said this, he looked a bit sick and shut up. I was as pleased as punch because I'd had my little battle with authority and won.

About this time I heard about the other place—Fairlands. It seems they had another compound up the road, just for the babies

from the clinic. You left your baby there—on the same generous terms as before—when you got out of Summerhills. This was for a child development study programme, they said. By the time they'd told you how good it would be for the children—lovely surroundings, trained staff and so forth—most of the women left their kids behind when they left Summerhills.

I was about a fortnight off the time when they'd said I'd have the baby when I got back into the recreation room after the daily workout and who should be sitting in there with her feet up, smoking a fag, but Bella Reed, wearing my dress.

"Well, well," I said, "lovely to see you, Bella. What a smashing dress." I knew bloody well she'd been living with Jo. Me leaving was just what she'd been waiting for.

"It is nice, isn't it," she says. "Given me by a friend."

"Nice friend he must be, to land you in the maternity home," I said.

"Oh, God," she says, depressed as hell. "You sent here by the Court?"

"That's right. And you?"

"Yes," she says. "Funny, isn't it. You could have knocked me down with a feather when that Addams geezer stands up in Court and offers me a bed here. It seemed O.K. at the time but now I'm here, I don't like the smell."

"You'll be surprised how much more it'll stink when you've been here a day or two. It's a pity you came."

Bella's a tall, skinny girl with big light-brown eyes.

"What's the form then?" she says.

I put my head close to hers and tell her. I can see the nurse on duty doesn't like it, but she can't do anything to stop us.

When I'd finished, Bella let out a scream you could have heard in Tooting Broadway and, just to get the feel of the place, starts getting hysterical, running around and battering on the windows and generally raising Cain. In a couple of seconds, she's been hauled off by two nurses, and that's the last I see of her for a week.

One night I've been creeping round the place, looking for the exit, and when I come back, there's Bella sitting on the bed. Now Bella was a rotten bitch, but she had more brains than any woman I've ever met and she was always full of ideas.

"Here," she whispers with her eyes glowing like coals, "I reckon they're using us for an experiment."

"That's what I've been thinking," I whisper back. "But what in Christ's name is it?"

"It must be something to do with Jo. Somehow they found out about us being in the club by him and they've got us both in because of it."

"That's what I thought," I say. "But I can't see how them other silly bitches with the complications come into it. It's a mystery."

"You'd better solve it quick then," says Bella, looking at my figure. "You look as if you've got about ten minutes to go. She sits and looks at me for a minute or two. Then she sighs and says, "O.K. then Rose. You might as well have this. I got it off the nurse. It opens the back door—I know, I tried it."

Of course, it's the key. Bella could get the ring off a bishop's finger if he was surrounded by Scotland Yard detectives.

"Go on," she says when I protest a bit. "I've got months to work on getting out. Use it tomorrow in daylight when the dog isn't out. You'll have to scramble over the wall at the back where it's a bit broken down. Mind you, it won't be easy in your condition."

And with that, she went back to her room. That was Bella all over. One minute she'd be trying to murder you and the next, she'd give you her eye teeth if you wanted them.

As luck would have it, the next morning early, I started having pains. I knew it was no good trying to get out then because at that time in the morning, the place was full of nurses bustling about. Finally in comes a nurse and they find out about me.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" she shouts. "Get in to bed at once. I'll call the Director."

When the Director comes in, it's the thin red-headed man in the Bentley. That great flaming mop of hair and the pale green eyes roam over me where I'm lying helpless in bed.

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm glad we managed to get you here in the end," he says.

It was just like a horror film. I lay there, paralysed with fright. I couldn't even think.

He smiles and says in that hissing voice, "Never mind, Miss Dalby, it'll all be over quite soon."

By the look on his face, that was exactly what he meant.

He goes off. The nurse hands me a surgical gown, tells me to put it on and goes off after him.

I lay there for a bit, then something came over me. I got like an animal and started acting without thinking. Once that happened, I couldn't put a foot wrong. I got up and dressed. I opened the cupboard where they'd put my handbag with the key to the clothes cupboard.

I went downstairs and opened the back door with Bella's key. Halfway across the grounds, the next pain hit me. I doubled over till it stopped, then shuffled on. I got over the wall by the broken bit and swung myself down on a tree branch. As I hit the ground, another pain came over me. I fell down in the leaves groaning, but I

never made a sound. I got down the road and into the fields. I just kept going, stopping when the pains came, and then going on again. In a way, I hardly even felt the pains—I was just running away to somewhere they wouldn't hurt the baby.

Finally, I couldn't walk another step.

So I laid down in a ditch and grabbed on to the branch of a hawthorn hedge. That's how the baby was born—in a ditch with me pulling at this hedge with my hands running with blood.

I managed to cut the birth cord with the scissors from my manicure set. Then after a bit, I wrapped the baby in my jacket and staggered through the corn to the main road.

I phoned Jo in London reverse charges and went and lay down in another ditch by the side of the road. There wasn't much traffic about.

Finally I heard Jo's car. I got up and stood in the road, swaying and bleeding with the baby all bloody, wrapped up in a jacket.

He had this new posh flat in the West End, all fitted carpets and mirrors. For the next three months I didn't want for anything. Mind you, I never knew an easy moment. To start with, I hadn't finished my time at Summerhills, which meant the law could come after me any time. And I knew it wouldn't be long before they got on to Jo again. And, of course, a pad like that, full of pushers and people high on various things and phone calls at all hours of the day, is no place to bring up a kid.

Alex Despinard: The Chairman, Mr. Edward Barrett, called me into his office in June, 1970. He told me that the woman, Rose Dalby, had run away, actually in labour with her child. He told me to hand my work over to my assistant and concentrate on finding her. He wanted no one to know what I was doing. When I suggested that the woman was not legally free and should properly be found by the police, he lost his temper and said he did not want the police involved. I did not argue, but I found the matter very odd. There were five women out of a possible eighty who had refused invitations to have their babies at Summerhills. Mr. Barrett was not interested in them and was working on a second scheme for them. I could not see why he was so interested in Rose Dalby and her child.

Rose Dalby: Finally, luxury fur coats or no fur coats, I had to get out. By this time, my period of remand was up; so I guessed I was all right with the law again, more or less. So I got up in the middle of the night again, picked up the baby, got a wad of notes off the dressing table and cleared out again.

I'd already fixed it with Bella's mother in Oxford that she'd look

after the baby while I went out to work; so I went there, got a job as a waitress, and for the next three months nothing went wrong.

Not as far as I was concerned, anyway.

Then, one evening, Bella's mum looks up from her knitting and says, "Eddie took a step today."

"Get away!" I say, quite pleased. "I wish I'd been there to see it."

"In a month he'll be walking and feeding himself," she says.

"Don't they grow up quick," I say. "It seems only yesterday he was a babe in arms."

"It practically was," she says, giving me a funny look. "He's hardly six months old now; he's very forward."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that," I say.

"I'm not so sure," she says.

Then she says, "I should have heard from Bella by now. She's due out tomorrow, and the baby should have been born yesterday. I wish she'd get in touch with me and let me know what's happening. Pity she got caught trying to run away those times."

"She doesn't seem to mind it that much—" I say, and at that moment the phone rings.

Bella's mum comes back into the room looking grim. "She had the baby yesterday night," she says. "It was dead, they say." I can see she's thinking that if Bella had escaped, the same as me, her grandchild would have been alive as well as Eddie. Mind you, I knew that it wouldn't have benefited any of them—Bella didn't want the kid in the first place and her old mum wasn't looking forward to bringing it up.

But I didn't like the way Mrs. Reed looked at me.

Next day, Bella turns up, carrying on about how her baby was born alive, but they got rid of it before she saw it. And although she never wanted it, she still feels deprived and furious. "I'm going to find out what's happening there," she says.

And the next Sunday she gets this American serviceman to drive her to Fairlands.

And comes back sweating.

White as a sheet, she dropped into a chair gasping, "Christ, it's awful," while the American offers her a fag, and her mum rushes out to make a cup of tea.

The baby's sitting on the rug, pegging pegs into a board. She looks at him and looks away quick.

"Well," I say, acting calm and lighting a fag myself. "Let's have it then."

"They've got wire netting and nurses patrolling around, but I managed to get in and see what was going on. I was looking into this little playground, like a little kindergarten, with teachers in white coats. There must have been about fifty kids there, all about two. Oh God, I swear half of them were mental. Some of them could-

n't even walk, and two of them had great big heads—ugh, they were horrible. Christ, it made you sick to look at them. I couldn't help thinking my kid must have been like that, only they spotted it."

"Have a cup of tea, Bella," her mother interrupted. "Drink it up, it'll do you good."

I couldn't help noticing that nobody offered me a cuppa. There was something in the atmosphere that put Eddie and me on the side of the freaks. At that moment Bella looked at the baby again, sitting on the rug, sorting the pegs out into piles of the same colour.

"Mind you," Bella said. "It was looking at the other kids that really made me feel so queer. Tiny tots they were, not one over three feet tall. They had this woman in a white coat in charge of them. They were doing gym, some of them, ever such complicated exercises, and some of them were reading—right out loud—and some of them were reciting great long poems. There was one doing long division on a blackboard. I tell you, it turned me up good and proper, like a school for nasty little dwarfs."

She fell back in her chair sobbing. Her mum got her an aspirin and said she ought to go to bed. The American said she needed a nice visit to the films to cheer her up. Finally, off she went to the Odeon, leaving me and her mum in the room together, with Eddie making a circle of pegs on his board.

"Well, what a shocking experience," says Bella's mum, watching Eddie.

"Horrible," I say. He was a funny looking baby with a small brown face, big staring eyes and skinny, knobby-looking little arms and legs.

Finally, Bella's mum says, "He's not natural, Rose, and that's a fact. Look at what he's doing. The ordinary kid can't hardly put a rusk in his mouth at that age. I don't mean to say anything against him, but he's not natural. He might be better off at Fairlands."

"Over my dead body," I say. "I'm not having him going there."

Bella's mum's still looking at the baby, sort of fascinated and horrified, when he looks up and says, "Hullo."

She jumps up and shouts "Oh, my God!"

"I'll go and make another cup of tea," I say. "Don't take on like that. He's only a baby."

I'd got half way to the door when she screamed out, not knowing what she was saying, "No! Don't leave me in here with him."

So I turned round and said, "Well, I think we'd better go."

She tried to pass it off as being upset about Bella, but I could see it was the end of us staying there. She was too scared.

Once I'd gone, I knew I couldn't leave the baby with a stranger; so I just had to give up my job in

the cafe and live in this one room I'd taken over a shop. Finally, the money I'd pinched off Jo began to run out, and I was at my wit's end. I could see that, in a way, having Eddie was like having a cripple or a mental deficient. I couldn't see how I was going to manage for money unless I went on National Assistance and half starved. Then, living alone like I was, I got funny and self-conscious about taking the baby about in case he started bobbing up in the pram and making remarks. It happened once in Woolworth's—he put out his hand and tried to take something off the counter and then put it back and said to himself, "Not mine." The woman standing next to me looked very queer and walked away without buying anything. It's a rotten world to be different in.

Henry Morrison: She had begun to work about three months before at the ordinary little restaurant where I lunched every day. I had been interested in her from the day when I first saw her. She was about twenty, small, pale, apparently frail but really very tough to judge by the way she carried piled trays and coped with the shouts and cries for food. She was quick-witted, subtle but innately gentle with the sex-starved and often patronisingly lecherous undergraduates who came into the cafe and tried to approach her in that bullying way which timid young men have when they talk to apparently experienced young working-class women. There was something reserved about her expression, something of the transient in her eyes, which made me think she was in flight from a more eventful life. It seemed odd to me even then that for the first time in three years I had experienced a genuine tender feeling and interest in a woman, it should have been for a pale, weary-eyed Cockney girl with tired blonde hair tied in a bunch at the back of her head and strong thin arms and hands which carried trays, cleared tables, emptied ashtrays. Of course, I had no idea of starting a romance. To begin with, I lost the habit of prospecting for girls when I married, and it had never returned after my wife's death. In any case, although I noticed she wore no wedding ring, there was something in her expression which said she no more wanted or expected random attentions paid to her than I did.

I felt I ought to respect this desire for emotional privacy—I did not try to attract her attention. I just liked her and looked forward to seeing her every day and exchanging a few words now and then. I lunched, anyway, at the busiest time of the day.

When, one Monday, she was not there, I felt obscurely disappointed. When the week went on and she still didn't appear, I asked the girl waiting on my table about her. I was a noted non-dirty old man,

and the waitresses were all sorry for me because my wife was dead; so she told me that the girl had just told the manageress that she was very sorry but she couldn't work any more. She said she would try to come back when she could. The girl I had asked was obviously not telling me the whole story, trying to protect her friend in some way.

I paused when she told me this, and she said awkwardly, "She's in a difficult situation."

I deduced that she was having a baby, although I couldn't see why she had stopped working so soon in her pregnancy as I hadn't noticed she looked pregnant.

"Does she need any help?" I asked. The girl looked at me with a new suspicion. Oxford is full of middle-class celibates of all ages—I saw myself through her eyes as an evil toff in a top hat pursuing an honest working girl in cracked boots and a feather boa.

An idea struck me. I saw it at first as an excuse I could give for my interest in the girl, but even before I spoke I realised it was a brilliant idea, possibly one I had had in mind before.

"I was wondering," I said, "if she could do with a job. My aunt can't cope alone with the children for very much longer. She looks like a kind, responsible girl —"

"That's a smashing idea," she said enthusiastically. "I should think Rose would do well at that. Mind you—" she paused.

"Is she having a baby?" I asked. "That wouldn't matter too much."

Glad not to have to reveal a secret, the girl said, "Well, she's got one already. That's why she had to give up her job. She didn't have anyone to mind it any more."

She called the manageress, who gave me the address Rose had asked her employment cards to be sent to. As soon as I had finished my afternoon tutorials, I went to see Rose.

She was living in one bare room, with a bed and a chair and a table, over a shop in one of Oxford's back streets.

She had obviously been sitting and mending by the unlit gas fire when I arrived. The baby was asleep under blankets in his pram in the corner.

I stood in the passageway and said, "I came to see if there was anything I could do."

She said nothing. Plainly, she wished I would go away. She stood awkwardly, with her hand on the door knob, looking defiant and embarrassed.

"Isn't there anything I can do to help you and the baby?"

My mention of the baby did not help, quite the reverse.

"No, I'm all right, thank you. It's kind of you to ask."

Finally, I said, "May I come in?"

For a moment I thought she would refuse, but she said, "Yes,

of course," and turned and walked in. She sat down again, with a nervous glance at the baby's pram, picked up his sleeping suit from the floor and went on darning a hole in the knee.

"He's crawling then?" I said, sitting down on the lino by the gas fire.

She flung her head up and said sharply, "No. I tore it while I was washing it."

Why she was reacting so strangely when I mentioned the baby I couldn't imagine.

"Look," I said, "I'm really here for no other reason than to give you some help if I can. I had the idea that you could come and work for me part time. I'm a widower with two young boys of five and three. My wife died when she had the younger child. My aunt is housekeeping for me at the moment, but she's over fifty and the house and children are really too much for her to cope with. If you could come in for half the day, bringing your baby of course, it would take some of the strain off her and mean that you could work without leaving your child."

She looked at me hopefully for a moment. Then her face took on the same look of stubbornness, and she said, "No, thanks. I've decided to go on National Assistance. It's very kind of you to think of me though."

While we had been talking, something about the room had been puzzling me. I looked at the pegboard leaning against the wall on the other side of the fire. On it were two misshapen squares picked out in red and blue pegs. I had unconsciously been trying to work out who had made them. An adult, in pegging in pegs, would have made regular squares. The child was, from the size of the lump in the pram, too young to have the idea of a square, let alone the skill to try to make one.

She followed my eyes, looked with a mixture of cunning and anger at the board and rose to move it away. As she put it, face down, on the bed, the little figure in the pram tossed about a bit, said "Mum" and struggled up sleepily.

Biting her lips, on the verge of angry tears, Rose stared at me and went to gather up the child. Sitting there waiting for her was the oddest baby I had ever seen.

Plainly no more than seven months old, and small at that, he was still bald, except for a tonsure of brown curls. His thin, pointed little coffee-coloured face was dominated by great liquid, vivid eyes. He was waving knobby little arms about.

As she got to him, he stood up in the pram on short, spindly legs covered in sagging red tights.

"Mum," he said. "Hungry."

I stared at him. No wonder she had been so defensive about him. He was too small, possibly even dwarfish.

She put him on the floor and he ran to his pegboard. He started to take out all the pegs, putting them into two neat piles, one to his right and one to his left. "Two," he said.

I sat and watched him. "There's no need to stare at him," she said angrily. "He's a perfectly normal baby."

I looked at her. Finally, I said, "Now, you know he's not. Wouldn't it be better to take him to the hospital? I've got a good friend who's a specialist in children's—"

"Don't be daft. Why should he need a specialist?" She said scornfully.

I naturally took her attitude to be that of a mother demented by worry who won't face the fact that there's something wrong with her child.

"He's too small," I said firmly.

"Small?" she said, completely bewildered. "He weighs seventeen pounds. What wrong with that?"

"How old is he?" I said reasonably.

"Six and a half months," she replied.

"Good God!" I said.

"He's just forward, that's all," she said, daring me to contradict her.

"He's incredibly advanced for his age," I said. "But I can't see why you're ashamed of it. He looks like a gifted child."

"Gifted?" she said wonderingly. She thought for a moment and looked at me speculatively. "It's other people, see. I hardly dare take him out. They look at him so funnily. People don't like him because he's not normal. That's why I can't have him minded while I work—it's as bad as having a child who's crippled or mental."

"That," I said, hammering the point home, "is because he's better than they are."

She smiled at last. "You may be right."

I seized my advantage. "It's a pity to waste him. Bring him home with me. You can live in and bring him up in more normal surroundings. Don't worry about me —I'm not looking for a mistress."

"That's O.K.," she said, as if this was the last thing she had considered.

"All right, I'll come."

As she packed, she said, "It's a relief to find someone who can take Eddie for granted."

Rose Dalby: At first, I thought he'd come to give me money, and I was half mad with loneliness and being hungry. I hadn't talked to anyone for a week except to ask for what I wanted in the shops. And Jo's money had run out—I was off my head with worrying what to do about the baby.

And I was so bloody scared of any more remarks about Eddie—looking back, I can see I must have been right on the verge of a breakdown.

When I found out he didn't

mind about Eddie—in fact, he seemed quite interested in him—I could have kissed him.

Everything worked out nicely at this old house he had in North Oxford. I was fond of his kids—two nice, bright, naughty little boys they were and good pals to my Eddie.

After a couple of months, the aunt, who must have been itching to get away all the while, although Professor Morrison never noticed it, decided to leave. She told me in the kitchen the day before she left that another three years of that would have finished her off, and I could see that a great draughty house and two little tearaways like those kids could be the death of anyone over fifty who wasn't used to kids in the first place.

And finally, she gives me a queer look and says that although half the University's been after Professor Morrison since his wife's death, she's never been able to imagine anybody yet who would suit him—until I came along, that is. I was a bit surprised that she thought I might be right for him; I thought he'd think in terms of somebody a bit better educated and higher class than me. Anyway, I said nothing.

A few nights later, he came into my room and wanted to come to bed. I sat up and said I couldn't. "Why not?" he asks. "Come down in the kitchen and I'll tell you," I say.

Down by the fire, over a cup of tea, I tell him the whole story—about Jo, the drugs, Summerhills, Eddie being born, the lot.

At the end, he looks sick as a dog. "See," I said, "I meant to tell you all along, but I never liked to. I knew I'd have to in the end. I'm sorry. I know it's going to catch up with me—I can tell it in my bones. I'd better leave before I cause any more mischief."

"It's not that," he says slowly. "Not that at all. Can you stand a shock?"

"I can stand anything," I say.

"It's this," he says very seriously. "This home for the children, Fairlands. There was a fire there three days ago. All the children died."

I just sat there feeling shaken to bits. "The bastards," I said.

He gives me a sharp look. "Do you think it was deliberate?"

"Deliberate?" I say. "Of course it was—you should have been at Summerhills. The whole place stank of mystery and nastiness. How did the fire start?"

"Something went wrong with the heating system. I don't remember the details—I didn't read the report very carefully."

"I bet nothing happened to the staff."

"One nurse was badly burned in trying to rescue the children," he tells me.

"That was the one who wasn't in the know," I say.

And we both sit there, talking it out till morning.

He said he'd make some enquiries about Summerhills, but I was to stay on, looking after the children. We never said any more about ourselves.

Alex Despinard: Shortly before Christmas, Mr. Barrett asked to see me and asked how my search for Rose Dalby was going. I said that I had traced her to the flat she was sharing in the West End with the child's father. But she was not there now and shopkeepers said the last time she had been seen was in October. I had spoken to Jo Simons. He was very uncooperative and said that she had left in the autumn and he didn't know where she was.

I made my report, feeling I had done all a man employed as a general manager, and not a private detective, could do. To my great surprise, Mr. Barrett became furiously angry. He threatened to ask for my resignation if I did not find Rose Dalby within a month. He began to pound on his desk, screaming "Find her! Find her."

I hurried out. In the next room, I looked at his secretary, hoping for an explanation. She just shook her head at me, rapidly prepared a tray containing a carafe, glass and a bottle of pills, and went into Mr. Barrett's office. So I deduced that these attacks were common although I had heard nothing of them before.

Naturally, I increased my efforts to find the woman. Eventually, I had a stroke of unanticipated luck in my search.

Henry Morrison: I was shaken by Rose's story—not, I may say, by her life. I had already known the essence of it. It seemed a matter of public duty for me to find out more about the nursing home, Summerhills, and the children's home, Fairlands. There was no great difficulty in this. The two homes had been opened simultaneously in September, 1969, and were owned and run by the National Drug Company, the third British drug firm in the United Kingdom. The Chairman of the Board was Edward Barrett. The remaining ten directors were all Barretts, brothers, cousins, an uncle, with the exception of two who were husbands of Barrett's brother's daughters. Consulting Who's Who, I found that Barrett had two daughters. One, Irene, was a director; the other was not. Nor, it seemed, was her husband. And this man was the only Barrett, by blood or marriage, not on the board. He was, of course, Simeon Nieve.

Having discovered all this, I went to a biochemist friend who lectured to the medical school. I knew that he took an interest in proprietary drugs and drug firms and was more or less permanently involved in a campaign to introduce laws providing for stricter

regulations on the purity, testing and advertising of drugs.

Over a cup of tea in a Wimpy bar, I told him my story. I concluded with the fire at Fairlands.

He wiped his brow with a handkerchief, as befitted a father of five.

"It sounds too bloody awful to be true," he said, "but leaving the fire out of it, my first impression is that they must have put something on the market which affected the foetuses. Then they decided either that they wanted to study the effects or hide the results, so they put themselves out to collect the affected women before their confinements. Rose and her friend must have been taking whatever it was too. I think it's fairly likely to be off the market now. It won't be too hard for me to find out what it's likely to have been. I don't know about the rest of it—Summerhills sounds an impeccably run place on the surface. The women go there of their own free will. If what you say about the death rate among the babies is true—well, I don't know—the place could perhaps be investigated. It's tricky, though, very tricky."

So I thanked him and went home. I told Rose all this. She was conscientiously interested, keen to see the matter explored, but basically she wanted the whole thing forgotten and ignored. In fact, I felt rather brutal when I cross-questioned her about Summerhills. But I now felt indignantly that something bad was being covered up.

Rose Dalby: It must have been about August, very hot. We'd got married in June. Eddie was just over one year. We were all very happy. Life was very busy and interesting, and all the kids got on well together. It was funny to see little Eddie sitting on the edge of the pond, trying to dangle his feet in the water like the other two, reading comics and chatting away like ninepence.

I was coming back one day from taking the children to the nursery for the afternoon when I saw Jo standing by the lamp post in our street. I just walked past him and in a little while he came up to the house and rang the bell. I let him in.

"Not bad," he says, looking round the living room at all the books and bits of furniture. "Congratulations, Mrs. Professor Morrison. And thanks for the letter telling me."

"No hard feelings, Jo?" I say.

"Of course not. You look fine. You're getting fat. Having a baby, are you?"

"I think so."

"Don't take no pills then."

He looks at Eddie sitting in a corner reading a book and taking everything in. "A nice boy," he says. "I've heard about him from Bella. Me, I feel proud."

"I'm glad," I say.

"Well, make me some tea like a

nice woman and I'll tell you why I came," Jo says.

And I made it. Then he said, "He's an amazing child. I've been talking to him. Don't tell me that all happened by accident. I'll tell you this. There's been a man calling at the flat to find out where you are. And he's still nosing around. He's a man in a business suit, a corporation man. My idea is, he doesn't know properly what he's doing but somebody else has told him to find you. He looks O.K. but who is this other man? I don't suppose you want to run away, but it might be better. I came to warn you and say if you want to come back to London with the kid—then do."

"Thanks, Jo," I say, "but I think I can cope with it here. As well as anywhere."

"All right, girl, good luck." And he gives me a kiss and goes away.

I'm sitting there thinking when Eddie says, "Is that my dad?"

"Yes," I say, a bit blankly.

"He's nice. Has he got many children?"

"Quite a few," I say.

That was that for the time being.

Like I said, I was very happy, except it still used to hurt me when people noticed Eddie and disliked him because he was different. Like the doctor. I had to call him in from time to time for the others but never for Eddie. And I knew, from something he'd said, that Eddie used to stop himself from getting ill. By this time, he was talking like a five year old. He carried himself like a funny little old man, and there was no getting away from the fact that he was cleverer than a lot of kids of ten. People used to watch him tying his shoes and straighten up saying, "That's better—now I won't fall over." It was as if the dog had suddenly spoken up. Sometimes he'd sit in the park with his little feet stuck out ahead of him on the park bench reading bits out of a library book, and other women used to come up to me and ask questions. And it wasn't friendly. Nobody really liked him or felt at home with him. He frightened them.

Alex Despinard: In August, a woman rang my bell late at night. It was Bella Reed. I knew her because when I called at Simons' flat one afternoon, I found her alone and for some reason, she brought me in and gave me a drink. She told me Simons knew Rose Dalby's address. She said he'd had a letter from Rose telling him she was married and enclosing a photograph of the child. Simons had got rid of the letter, and although she'd searched for it, she couldn't find it. She was rather bitter about this because I think she fancied she was second best as far as Simons was concerned. I had the impression that if she had known where Rose was, she would have told me.

This time, she did know the address. I deduced from what she said that during a long row with Simons in which she had accused him of unfaithfulness with Rose, she had wormed the address out of him. Next morning I told Barrett, and he told me what to do.

Henry Morrison: What my biochemist friend told me was this: Only two drugs had been taken off the market by National Drugs during the period he thought feasible. One was a kind of liniment which was discovered to have affected certain skins badly. The other was a tranquilliser, in one form prescribed mainly by G.P.'s, in another, slightly altered and stronger, used chiefly in the treatment of psychiatric-disorders. It must have been this tranquilliser which was being taken by the pregnant women. The psychiatric drug was obviously what Jo Simons was getting and passing around.

"I'll tell you another thing I got from my friend at National Drugs," he said. "It's very hush-hush. This man wouldn't know, only his cousin's best friend lives next door to the Nieve's at Guildford. Mrs. Nieve was taking this tranquilliser before she knew she was pregnant. She's got a two-year old son who's a hopeless idiot. Terrible, eh?"

"Odd, too," I said.

Rose Dalby: It was the day Eddie ran away. One minute I was in the grocer's with him beside me. The next minute he's vanished. I ran all over Oxford like a madwoman, trying to find him. Finally, I thought to look in the colleges.

He's sitting on the side of the fountain in the middle of the quadrangle with a big crowd of professors and students round him. I stand there for a bit, just listening. There he is, chatting away with all and sundry about engineering, space flight and some new archaeological finds, and comparing one religion with another—just sitting there in his little shirt and short trousers and short white socks carrying on like a bishop.

Finally, I pushed through and tried to get him to come home, but the crowd's all excited and won't let him go. In the end, I come away, carrying him through all the people. Some of the dons are asking me to bring him to see them, and then, as I push through, carrying him in my arms, I hear a student say to his friend, "If I had my way, I'd shoot the little bugger." And the friend says, "I agree. The sooner the better."

It must have looked funny, me carrying him through Oxford with the tears running down my face. But it had happened again. I felt as if I had given birth to a performing monkey, a freak, something people stood and stared at, looking cynical and suspicious. When I reached the door, staggering with tiredness, there he was.

"Hullo, Miss Dalby," he says. "May I come in for a moment?"

"What's it about?" I say. "I'm very tired."

"I'm from National Drugs—I've been trying to find you."

"I heard that," I say. "I'm not interested. Go away."

"It's to your advantage," he says quite earnestly.

"That's what they told the mothers of the kids at Fairlands," I say.

But he argues and argues and finally, for the sake of peace and quiet, I let him in. I sit down on the sofa, worn out, with Eddie on my knee and him sitting opposite. He's a big man, about six foot three, and he looks like a decent company man trying to do well at his job and get a promotion.

"Go ahead, then," I say tiredly. "Then you can tell the boss you've spoken to me. But whatever it is, the answer is no."

"My company is starting a school for exceptional children. We got to hear about Eddie, and we'd like him to come."

"Pull the other leg," I say. "I don't want him blown up like the other lot."

He looks a bit embarrassed. "A terrible tragedy," he says. "But I do assure you that that isn't the sort of accident which is likely to happen twice."

"Well, thank you for your kind offer, but no thanks."

"Now, Miss Dalby," he says, "do be reasonable. It won't be long before Eddie has to go to school. How do you think he's going to get on in a class of average five year olds. He's going to have to go back to playing with clay and learning to read. And how can he make friends with children of his own age when he's worlds apart from them?"

"He's better alive than dead, that's all I know," I say. And I can see he thinks I'm an hysterical mum.

"Miss Dalby, one accident shouldn't make you give up the chance of a lifetime for Eddie—" he says.

"Accident my foot," I say. "That was done deliberate and if you think otherwise, you're deceiving yourself. I've got a friend who saw those kids. Half of them were idiots and the other half were geniuses, and no one knew about that place but you and the parents. That's funny for a start—the way it was kept quiet."

"Idiots?" he says.

"Yes, idiots," I say. "I don't believe in this school of yours. I don't believe in it at all. I wouldn't send my kid to it if it was the last school in the world."

"Are you sure?" he says.

"Of course, I'm sure. And what's more, you're beginning to believe me and that's because you've smelt a rat as well, but you hadn't admitted it to yourself."

By this time, he's very pale.

"What's more," I said ruthlessly, "I don't suppose you knew that your boss's son-in-law, who runs Summerhills, has got an idiot child because his wife took those tranquillisers while she was pregnant."

"My God," he says. "Oh, my God!"

I poured him a drink and while he was drinking it, Henry came in.

I told him who the man was.

"I'm afraid this is a worse affair than you thought," said Henry.

"Those children were murdered," Despinard said. "Murdered. I should have guessed, from the figures alone. All the five women who took the drug before we began the clinic—these were the ones who put us on to the drug's effects—had living children. And yet, of the seventy mothers we got into the clinic, only forty had live children. I should have guessed. I actually persuaded three of the mothers who'd had children away from the clinic to send their children to Fairlands—and they were killed with the others."

"How many are there alive?" Henry asked.

"Just six—and Eddie. There were two mental patients who gave birth to children after being treated with the drug. These two children were even more remarkable. I saw one—she was a pretty golden-haired child of one. She had already destroyed everything she could lay hands on. She ripped up her clothes the moment they were put on. She bit and tore at any adult who held her. She smashed her toys. She was maniacally destructive from the moment she woke screaming in the morning to the moment when she fell asleep screaming on the floor at night. She's dead now—she walked under a bus six months ago. Either her mother was too tired to stop her, or she just didn't care any more. The other child was like yours—clever and good. And he's dead too. His mother was a convicted prostitute, in the mental hospital with acute depression. When she was released, she went back to prostitution and, at two, the child was weary and sad. I don't know if he let himself smother or if his mother did it.

There were three other women we found who'd got hold of the drug illicitly—you, Bella Reed and a girl in Birmingham. She had the baby adopted just after birth. It went to a nice couple who wanted a baby daughter. They got rid of her because she was too embarrassing, and I've just got her out of a children's home so that she could come to the firm's school. All the children but Eddie are at the school now. People are pretty ready to part with them, you see. They hate them really. The world's a worse place than we think it is."

"Who's the Herod?" I say.

"And I suppose if it came out

that the drug—I don't know what to think. I thought I had a good job in a prosperous firm," he muttered uncertainly. "These children look right through you. Most of their fathers don't like it. They wanted comical small kids who get into mischief and make mistakes. These kids are cleverer than they are. They don't carry on about ice cream and dolls' prams. They don't come in with mud on their socks and dirty faces. They don't even grumble and criticise—they just observe, as if they were foreigners studying the local customs."

"That's no reason for anyone to murder them," I said.

"It is, in a way. They're going to have it worse when they're older. They notice everything, and they're going to find everything out and be neutral about it. Somebody like that is hard to keep your hands off in the ordinary way—" He stopped, then he said, "It's Barrett, of course."

"Barrett and Nieve," Henry said. "A mixture of commerce and guilt. To begin with, they don't want anyone to know that their drugs had this effect—of course it's not the brilliant children the public will think about, it's the idiots."

"And, of course," Despinard said flatly, "the great Barrett's son is one of them. And it's his fault. If the drug had been properly tested, his daughter would have had a normal child. It could have been my own wife."

"Or anyone's," I said.

He finished his drink and looked at me. "It's the finish of my career if it gets out." He sighed. "Never mind. We've got to get that school closed down before he gets at the children. Not that they aren't going to have enough trouble in the world as it is."

"What will you do?" Henry asked.

"I'll go straight to Barrett and tell him to write to the parents saying the school is closing. I'll threaten him with the police if necessary—he won't want a public scandal. Then I'll take the first train to the school and live there until the children have gone, just to keep an eye on things. It'll all get out, of course, and there'll be some discreet investigation. There wouldn't be any point in a public scandal—you can't bring back the dead."

So he left. Eddie sat on my knee looking at me.

"What a sad world," he said.

"Full of sad people," I replied.

"That's going to be your crime, Eddie," Henry said. "You'll never be wrong."

And I can see that he doesn't know, either, how to protect him from harm.

Extract from the Royal Commission on British Drug Firms set up to investigate British drug sales and testing June, 1973.

KNOCK PLASTIC!

by Isaac Asimov

ONE OF MY FAVORITE STORIES (undoubtedly apocryphal, else why would I remember it?) concerns the horsehoe that hung on the wall over the desk of Professor Niels Bohr.

A visitor stared at it with astonishment and finally could not help exclaiming, "Professor Bohr, you are one of the world's great scientists. Surely you cannot believe that object will bring you good luck?"

"Why, no," replied Bohr, smiling, "of course not. I wouldn't believe such nonsense for a moment. It's just that I've been informed it will bring me good luck whether I believe it will or not."

And I, too, have an amiable weakness—I am an indefatigable knocker of wood. If I make any statement which strikes me as too smug or self-satisfied, or in any way too boastful of good fortune, I look feverishly about for wood to knock.

Of course, I don't for one moment really believe that knocking wood will keep off the jealous demons who lie in wait for the unwary soul who boasts of his good luck without the proper propitiation of the spirits and demons on whom good and bad luck depend. Still—after all—you know—come to think of it—what can you lose?

I have been growing a little uneasy, in consequence, over the way in which natural wood is used less and less in ordinary construction, and is therefore harder and harder to find in an emergency. I might, in fact, have been heading for a severe nervous breakdown, had I not heard a casual remark made by a friend.

He said, some time ago, "Things are going very well for me lately."

With that, he knocked on the table top and calmly said, "Knock plastic!"

Heavens! Talk about blinding flashes of illumination. Of course! In the modern world, the spirits will grow modern, too. The old dryads, who inhabited trees and made sacred groves sacred, giving rise to the modern notion of knocking wood,* must be largely unemployed now that more than half the world's forests have been ground up into toothpicks and newsprint. Undoubtedly, they now make their homes in vats of polymerizing plastic and respond eagerly to the cry of "Knock plastic!" I recommend it to one and all.

But knocking wood is only one example of a class of notions, so comforting and so productive of feelings of security, that men will seize upon them on the slightest provocation or on none at all.

Any piece of evidence tending to support such a "Security-Belief," however frail and nonsensical it might be, is grabbed and hugged close to the bosom. Every piece of evidence tending to break down a Security-Belief, however strong and logical that evidence might be, is pushed away. (Indeed, if the evidence against a Security-Belief is strong enough, those presenting the evidence might well be in danger of violence.)

It is very important, therefore, in weighing the merits of any widely-held opinion, to consider whether it can be viewed as a Security-Belief. If it is, then its popularity means nothing; it must be viewed with considerable suspicion.

It might, of course, be that the view is accurate. For instance, it is a comforting thought to Americans that the United States is the richest and most powerful nation in the world. But in all truth, it *is,* and this particular Security-Belief (for Americans) is justified.

Nevertheless, the Universe is an insecure place, indeed, and on general principles Security-Beliefs are much more likely to be false than true.

For instance, a poll of the heavy smokers of the world would probably show that almost all of them are firmly convinced that the arguments linking smoking with lung cancer are not conclusive. The same heavy majority would exist if members of the tobacco industry were polled. Why not? The opposite belief would leave them too medically insecure, or economically insecure, for comfort.

Then, too, when I was young, we kids had the firm belief that if one dropped a piece of candy into the incredible filth of the city streets, one need only touch the candy to the lips and then wave it up to the sky ("kissing it to God") to make it perfectly pure and sanitary. We believed

* *Some people say that knocking wood is symbolic of touching the True Cross, but I don't believe that at all. I'm sure the habit must antedate Christianity.*

this despite all strictures on germs, because if we didn't believe it, that piece of candy would go uneaten by ourselves, and someone else, who did believe it, would get to eat it.

Naturally, anyone can make up the necessary evidence in favor of a Security-Belief. "My grandfather smoked a pack a day for seventy years and when he died his lungs were the last to go." Or "Jerry kissed candy to God yesterday, and today he won the forty-yard-dash."

If grandfather had died of lung cancer at thirty-six, or if Jerry had come down with cholera—no problem, you cite other instances.

But let's not sink to special cases. I have come up with six very broad Security-Beliefs that, I think, blanket the field—although the Gentle Reader is welcome to add a seventh, if he can think of one.

Security-Belief No. 1: *There exist supernatural forces that can be cajoled or forced into protecting mankind.*

Here is the essence of superstition.

When a primitive hunting society is faced with the fact that game is sometimes plentiful and sometimes not, and when a primitive agricultural society watches drought come one year and floods the next; it seems only natural to assume—in default of anything better—that some more-than-human force is arranging things in this way.

Since nature is capricious, it would seem that the various gods, spirits, demons (whatever you wish to call them) are themselves capricious. In one way or another they must be induced or made to subordinate their wild impulses to the needs of humanity.

Who says this is easy? Obviously, it calls for all the skill of the wisest and most experienced men of the society. So there develops a specialized class of spirit-manipulators—a priesthood, to use that term in its broadest sense.

It is fair enough to call spirit-manipulation "magic." The word comes from "magi," the name given to the priestly caste of Zoroastrian Persia.

The popularity of this Security-Belief is almost total. A certain Influential Personage* in science fiction, who is much given to adopting these Security-Beliefs, and then pretending he is a member of a persecuted minority, once wrote to me: "Every society but ours has believed in magic. Why should we be so arrogant as to think that everyone but ourselves is wrong?"

My answer at the time was: "Every society but ours has believed the Sun revolved about the Earth. Do you want to settle the matter by majority vote?"

* *Well, John W. Campbell, if you're dying to know.*

Actually, the situation is worse than even the Influential Personage maintains. Every society, *including our own,* believes in magic. Nor do I restrict the belief only to the naive and uneducated of our culture. The most rational elements of our society, the well-educated, the scientists, retain scraps of belief in magic.

When a horseshoe hangs over Bohr's desk (assuming one really did), that is a magical warding off of misfortune through the power of "cold iron" over a spirit world stuck in the Bronze Age. When I knock on wood (or plastic) I, too, engage in spirit-manipulation.

But can we argue, as the Influential Personage does, that there must be something to magic since so many people believe in it?

No, of course not. It is too tempting to believe. What can be easier than to believe that one can avoid misfortune by so simple a device as knocking on wood? If it's wrong, you lose nothing. If it's right, you gain so much. One would need to be woodenly austere to refuse the odds.

Still, if magic doesn't work, won't people recognize that eventually and abandon it?

But who says magic doesn't work? Of course it works—in the estimation of those who believe.

Suppose you knock on wood and misfortune doesn't follow. *See?* Of course, you might go back in time and *not* knock on wood and find out that misfortune doesn't follow, anyway—but how can you arrange a control like that?

Or suppose you see a pin and pick it up on ten successive days, and on nine of those days nothing much happens one way or the other, but on the tenth, you get good news in the mail. It is the work of a moment to remember that tenth day and forget the other nine—and what better proof do you want anyway?

Or what if you carefully light two on a match and three minutes later fall and break your leg. Surely, you can argue that if you had lit that third cigarette, you would have broken your neck, not your leg.

You can't lose! If you want to believe, you can believe!

Indeed, magic can work in actual fact. A tight-rope walker, having surreptitiously rubbed the rabbit's foot under his belt, can advance with such self-confidence as to perform perfectly. An actor, stepping out on stage just after someone has whistled in his dressing room, can be so nervous that he will muff his lines. In other words, even if magic doesn't work, belief in magic does.

But then, how do scientists go about disproving the usefulness of magic? They don't! It's an impossibility. Few, if any, believers would accept the disproof anyway.

What scientists do is to work on the *assumption* that Security-Belief No. 1 is false. They take into account no capricious forces in their analysis of the Universe. They set up a minimum number of generalizations (miscalled "natural laws") and assume that nothing happens or can be made to happen that is outside those natural laws. Advancing knowledge may make it necessary to modify the generalizations now and then, but always they remain non-capricious.

Ironically enough, scientists themselves become a new priesthood. Some Security-Believers see in the scientist the new magus. It is the scientist, now, who can manipulate the Universe, by mysterious rites understood by him only, so as to insure the safety of man under all circumstances. This belief, in my opinion, is as ill-founded as the earlier one.

Again, a Security-Belief can be modified to give it a scientific tang. Thus, where once we had angels and spirits descending to Earth to interfere in our affairs and mete out justice; we now have advanced beings in flying saucers doing so (according to some). In fact, part of the popularity of the whole flying saucer mystique is, in my opinion, the ease with which the extraterrestrials can be looked upon as a new scientific version of angels.

Security-Belief No. 2: *There is no such thing, really, as death.*

Man, as far as we know, is the only species capable of foreseeing the inevitability of death. An individual man or woman knows, for certain, as no other creature can, that someday he or she must die.

This is an absolutely shattering piece of knowledge, and one can't help but wonder how much it, by itself, affects human behavior, making it fundamentally different from the behavior of other animals.

Or perhaps the effect is less than we might expect, since men so universally and so resolutely refuse to think of it. How many individuals live as though they expect to keep on going forever? Almost every one of us, I think.

A comparatively sensible way of denying death is to suppose that it is a family that is the real living entity and that the individual does not truly die while the family lives. This is one of the bases of ancestor worship, since the ancestor lives as long as he has a descendant to worship him.

Under these circumstances, naturally, the lack of children (especially sons, for in most tribal societies women didn't count) was a supreme disaster. It was so in early Israelite society, for instance, as the Bible tells us. Definite rules are given in the Bible that oblige men to take,

as wives, the widows of their childless brothers, in order to give those wives sons who might be counted as descendants of the dead man.

The crime of Onan ("onanism") is not what you probably think it is, but was his refusal to perform this service for his dead brother (see Genesis 38:7-10).

A more literal denial of death is also very popular. Almost every society we know of has some notion of an "after-life." There is someplace where an immortal residue of each human body can go. The shade can live a gray and dismal existence in a place like Hades or Sheol, but he lives.

Under more imaginative conditions, the after-life, or a portion of it, can become an abode of bliss while another portion can become an abode of torment. Then, the notion of immortality can be linked with the notion of reward and punishment. There is a Security-Belief angle to this, too, since it increases one's security in the midst of poverty and misery to know you'll live like a god in Heaven, while that rich fellow over there is going straight to Hell, ha, ha, and good for him.

Failing an after-life in some place beyond Earth, you can have one on Earth itself by arranging a belief in reincarnation or in transmigration of souls.

While reincarnation is no part of the dominant religious beliefs in the Western world, such are its Security-Belief values that any evidence in its favor is delightedly accepted. When, in the 1950's, a rather silly book entitled "The Search for Bridey Murphy" appeared and seemed to indicate the actual existence of reincarnation, it became a best seller at once. There was nothing to it, to be sure.

And, of course, the whole doctrine of spiritualism, the entire battery of mediums and table-rappings and ectoplasm and ghosts and poltergeists and a million other things—are all based on the firm insistence of mankind that death does not take place; that something persists; that the conscious personality is somehow immortal.

Is there any use then in trying to debunk spiritualism? It can't be done. No matter how many mediums are shown to be fakes, the ardent believer will believe the next medium he encounters. He may do even better. He may denounce the proof of fakedom as itself a fraud and continue to have faith in the fake, however transparent.

Science proceeds on the assumption that Security-Belief No. 2 is false also.

Yet scientists are human, too, and individuals among them (as distinct from Science in the abstract) long for security. Sir Oliver J. Lodge, a scientist of considerable reputation, depressed by the death of a son in

World War I, tried to reach him through spiritualism and became a devotee of "psychic research."

My friend, the Influential Personage, has often cited Lodge and men like him as evidence of the value of psychic research. "If you believe Lodge's observations on the electron, why don't you believe his observations on spirits?"

The answer is, of course, that Lodge has no security to gain from an electron but does from spirits. —And scientists are human, too.

Security-Belief No. 3: *There is some purpose to the Universe.*

After all, if you're going to have a whole battery of spirits and demons running the Universe, you can't really have them doing it all for nothing.

The Zoroastrians of Persia worked out a delightfully complicated scheme of the Universe. They imagined the whole of existence to be engaged in a cosmic war. Ahura Mazda, leading countless spirits under the banner of Light and Good, encountered an equally powerful army under Ahriman fighting for Darkness and Evil. The forces were almost evenly matched and individual men could feel that with them lay the balance of power. If they strove to be good they were contributing to the "right side" in the most colossal conflict ever imagined.

Some of these notions crept into Judaism and Christianity, and we have the war of God versus the Devil. In the Judeo-Christian view, however, there is no question as to who will win. God must and will win. It makes things less exciting.

This Security-Belief is also assumed to be false by Science. Science does not merely ignore the possibility of a cosmic war when it tries to work out the origins and ultimate fate of the Universe—it ignores the possibility of any deliberate purpose anywhere.

The most basic generalizations of science (the laws of thermodynamics, for instance, or quantum theory) assume random movement of particles, random collisions, random energy transfers, and so on. From considerations of probability one can assume that over many particles and over long periods of time, certain events are reasonably sure to take place, but concerning individual particles and over short periods of time, nothing can be predicted. (On that subject, see THE CERTAINTY OF UNCERTAINTY, F&SF April 1965.)

Possibly no scientific view is so unpopular with non-scientists as this one. It seems to make everything so "meaningless."

But does it? Is it absolutely necessary to have the entire Universe or all of life have meaning? Can we not consider that what is meaningless in one context is meaningful in another; that a book in Chinese which

is meaningless to me is meaningful to a Chinaman? And can we not consider that each of us can so arrange his own particular life so as to make it meaningful to himself and to those he influences? And in that case does not all of life and all the Universe come to have meaning *to him?*

Surely, it is those who find their own lives essentially meaningless who most strive to impose meaning on the Universe as a way of making up for the personal lack.

Security-Belief No. 4: *Individuals have special powers that will enable them to get something for nothing.*

"Wishing will make it so" is a line from a popular song, and oh, how many people believe it. It is much easier to wish, hope and pray, than to take the trouble to *do* something.

I once wrote a book in which a passage contained a description of the dangers of the population explosion and of the necessity for birth-control. A reviewer who looked over that passage wrote in the margin, "I'd say this was God's problem, wouldn't you?"

It was like taking candy from a baby to write under that in clear print: "God helps those who help themselves."

But think of the popularity of stories in which characters get three wishes, or the power to turn everything they touch into gold, or are given a spear that will always find the mark, or a gem that will discolor in the presence of danger.

And just imagine if we had amazing powers all the time and didn't know it—telepathy, for instance. How eager we are to have it. (Who hasn't experienced a coincidence and at once cried out "Telepathy!") How ready we are to believe in advanced cases elsewhere, since they improve the possibilities of ourselves possessing the power if we practice hard enough.

Some wild powers represent the ability to foresee the future—clairvoyance. Or else one gains the knowledge to calculate the future by means of astrology, numerology, palmistry, tea-leaves or a thousand other hoary frauds.

Here we come close to Security-Belief No. 1. If we foresee the future, we might change it by appropriate action, and this is nearly the equivalent of spirit-manipulation.

In a way, Science has fulfilled the fairy-tales. The jet plane goes far faster and farther than the flying horse and the seven-league-boots of the fable-writers of yore. We have rockets which seek out their targets, like Thor's Hammer, and do far more damage. We have, not gems, but

badges that discolor in the presence of too-much accumulated radiation.

But these do not represent "something for nothing." They are not awarded through supernatural agency and do not act capriciously. They are the hard-earned products of the generalizations concerning the Universe built up by a Science that denies most or all of the Security-Beliefs.

Security-Belief No. 5: *You are better than the next fellow.*

This is a very tempting belief, but it is often a dangerous one. You tell this to that big bruiser facing you and he's liable to break your neck. So you appoint a surrogate: Your father is better than his father; your college is better than his college; your accent is better than his accent; your cultural group is better than his cultural group.

Naturally, this fades off into racism, and it is not at all surprising that the more lowly the social, economic or personal position of an individual, the more likely he is to fall prey to the racist temptation.

It is not surprising that even scientists as individuals have trouble with this one. They can rationalize and say that it must surely be possible to divide mankind into categories in such a way that some categories are superior to others in some ways. Some groups are taller than other groups, for instance, as a matter of genetic inheritance. Might it not be that some groups are, by birth and nature, more intelligent or more honest than others?

A certain Nobel Prize winner demanded, some months ago, that scientists stop ducking the issue; that they set about determining whether slum-dwellers (English translation: Negroes) are not actually "inferior" to non-slum-dwellers and whether attempts to help them were not therefore futile.

I was asked by a certain newspaper to write my views about this, but I said I had better give them my views in advance, and save myself the trouble of writing an article they wouldn't print.

I said that, in the first place, it was very likely that those who were most enthusiastic for such an investigation were quite confident that they had set up measurement-standards by which the slum-dwellers would indeed prove to be "inferior." This would then relieve the superior non-slum-dwellers of responsibility toward the slum-dwellers and of any guilt feelings they might possess.

If I were wrong, I went on to say, then I felt the investigators should be as eager to find a superior minority as an inferior one. For instance, I strongly suspected that by the prevailing measurement standards it would turn out that Unitarians and Episcopalians would have a higher

average IQ and a higher performance record than other religious groups.

If this proved to be so, I suggested, Unitarians and Episcopalians ought to wear some distinctive badge, be ushered to the front of the bus, be given the best seats at the theaters, be allowed to use the cleaner rest-rooms and so on.

So the newspaper said, "Forget it!" and it's just as well. No one wants to search out superiors to one's self—only inferiors.

Security-Belief No. 6: *If anything goes wrong, it's not one's own fault.*

Virtually everyone has a slight touch of paranoia. With a little practice, this can easily lead one into accepting one of the conspiracy theories of history.

How comforting it is to know that if you're failing in business, it's the unfair crooked tactics of the Bulgarian who owns the store down the block; if you've got a pain, its because of the conspiracy of Nigerian doctors all about you; if you tripped when you turned to look at a girl, it was some rotten Ceylonese who put that crack in the sidewalk there.

And it is here at last that scientists are touched most closely—for this Security-Belief can turn directly against them for standing out against Security-Beliefs in general.

When the Security-Believers are stung by the explosion of the hoaxes and follies that deceive them, what is their last, best defense?—Why, that there is a conspiracy of scientists against them.

I am myself constantly being accused of participating in such a conspiracy. In today's mail, for instance, I got a most violent and indignant letter, from which I will quote only a couple of mild sentences:

"Not only are we (the public) being played for fools by politicians . . . but now these tactics have spread to science as well. If your purpose is deceiving others for whatever intention, let this tell you that you are not one hundred per cent successful."

I read the letter carefully through and it seemed that he had read some magazine article which had rebutted one of his pet beliefs. He was instantly sure, therefore, not that he himself might be wrong, but that scientists were in a conspiracy against him and were under orders from NASA to lie to him. The trouble was that he was referring to some article which had been written by someone else, not me—and I didn't know what on Earth he was talking about.

However, I am positive that the forces of Rationality will rise triumphant over the onslaughts of Security-Believers despite everything—Knock plastic!

The author of this story has been something less than effusive with biographical information, and the only thing we can tell you about William Lee is that he works as a director of research. However, we do not require resumes with submissions, and when you finish this compelling account of a communication which spans almost three centuries, you will have discovered for yourselves the most important fact about Mr. Lee: that he is a fine story-teller.

A MESSAGE FROM CHARITY

by William M. Lee

THAT SUMMER OF THE YEAR 1700 was the hottest in the memory of the very oldest inhabitants. Because the year ushered in a new century, some held that the events were related and that for a whole hundred years Bay Colony would be as torrid and steamy as the Indies themselves.

There was a good deal of illness in Annes Towne, and a score had died before the weather broke at last in late September. For the great part they were oldsters who succumbed, but some of the young were sick too, and Charity Paynes as sick as any.

Charity had turned eleven in the spring and had still the figure and many of the ways of thinking of a child, but she was tall and strong and tanned by the New England sun, for she spent many hours helping her father in the fields and trying to keep some sort of order in the dooryard and garden.

During the weeks when she lay bedridden and, for a time, burning up with the fever, Thomas Carter and his good wife Beulah came as neighbors should to lend a hand, for Charity's mother had died abirthing and Obie Payne could not cope all alone.

Charity lay on a pallet covered by a straw-filled mattress which her father, frantic to be doing something for her and finding little enough to do beyond the saying of short fervent prayers, refilled with fresh straw as often as Beu-

lah would allow. A few miles down Harmon Brook was a famous beaver pond where in winter the Annes Towne people cut ice to be stored under layers of bark and chips. It had been used heavily early in the summer, and there was not very much ice left, but those families with sickness in the home might draw upon it for the patient's comfort. So Charity had bits of ice folded into a woolen cloth to lay on her forehead when the fever was bad.

William Trowbridge, who had apprenticed in medicine down in Philadelphia, attended the girl, and pronounced her illness a sort of summer cholera which was claiming victims all up and down the brook. Trowbridge was only moderately esteemed in Annes Towne, being better, it was said, at delivering lambs and foals than at treating human maladies. He was a gruff and notional man, and he was prone to state his views on a subject and then walk away instead of waiting to argue and perhaps be refuted. Not easy to get along with.

For Charity he prescribed a diet of beef tea with barley and another tea, very unpleasant to the taste, made from pounded willow bark. What was more, all her drinking water was to be boiled. Since there was no other advice to be had, they followed it and in due course Charity got well.

She ran a great fever for five days, and it was midway in this period when the strange dreams began. Not dreams really, for she was awake though often out of her senses, knowing her father now and then, other times seeing him as a gaunt and frightening stranger. When she was better, still weak but wholly rational, she tried to tell her visitors about these dreams.

"Some person was talking and talking," she recalled. "A man or perchance a lad. He talked not to me, but I could hear or understand all that he said. 'Twas strange talk indeed, a porridge of the King's English and other words of no sense at all. And with the talk I did see some fearful sights."

"La, now, don't even think of it," said Dame Beulah.

"But I would fen both think and talk of it, for I am no longer afeared. Such things I saw in bits and flashes, as 'twere seen by a strike of lightning."

"Talk and ye be so minded, then. There's naught impious in y'r conceits. Tell me again about the carriages which travelled along with nary horse."

Annes Towne survived the Revlution and the War of 1812, and for a time seemed likely to become a larger, if not an important community. But when its farms became less productive and the last virgin timber disappeared from the area, Annes Towne began to disappear too, dwindling from two score of homes to a handful, then

to none; and the last foundation had crumbled to rubble and been scattered a hundred years before it could have been nominated a historic site.

In time dirt tracks became stone roads, which gave way to black meanderings of macadam, and these in their turn were displaced by never ending bands of concrete. The cross-roads site of Annes Towne was presently cleared of brambles, sumac and red cedar, and over night it was a shopping center. Now, for mile on spreading mile the New England hills were dotted with ranch houses, salt boxes and split-level colonial homes.

During four decades Harmon Brook had been fouled and poisoned by a textile bleach and dye works. Rising labor costs had at last driven the small company to extinction. With that event and increasingly rigorous legislation, the stream had come back to the extent that it could now be bordered by some of these prosperous homes and by the golf course of the Anniston Country Club.

With aquatic plants and bull frogs and a few fish inhabiting its waters, it was not obvious to implicate the Harmon for the small outbreak of typhoid which occurred in the hot dry summer of 1965. No one was dependent on it for drinking water. To the discomfort of a local milk distributor, who was entirely blameless, indictment of the stream was delayed and obscured by the fact that the organisms involved were not a typical strain of Salmonella typhosa. Indeed they ultimately found a place in the American Type Culture Collection, under a new number.

Young Peter Wood, whose home was one of those pleasantly situated along the stream, was the most seriously ill of all the cases, partly because he was the first, mostly because his symptoms went unremarked for a time. Peter was sixteen and not highly communicative to either parents or friends. The Wood Seniors both taught, at Harvard and Wellesley respectively. They were intelligent and well-intentioned parents, but sometimes a little off-hand, and like many of their friends, they raised their son to be a miniature adult in as many ways as possible. His sports, tennis and golf, were adult sports. His reading tastes were catholic, ranging from Camus to Al Capp to science fiction. He had been carefully held back in his progress through the lower grades so that he would not enter college more than a year or so ahead of his age. He had an adequate number of friends and sufficient areas of congeniality with them. He had gotten a driver's license shortly after his sixteenth birthday and drove seriously and well enough to be allowed nearly unrestricted use of the second car.

So Peter Wood was not the sort

of boy to complain to his family about headache, mild nausea and other symptoms. Instead, after they had persisted for forty-eight hours, he telephoned for an appointment on his own initiative and visited their family doctor. Suddenly, in the waiting room, he became much worse, and was given a cot in an examining room until Dr. Maxwell was free to drive him home. The doctor did not seriously suspect typhoid, though it was among several possibilities which he counted as less likely.

Peter's temperature rose from 104° to over 105° that night. No nurse was to be had until morning, and his parents alternated in attendance in his bedroom. There was no cause for alarm, since the patient was full of wide-spectrum antibiotic. But he slept only fitfully with intervals of waking delirium. He slapped at the sheet, tossed around on the bed and muttered or spoke now and then. Some of the talk was understandable.

"There's a forest," he said.

"What?" asked his father.

"There's a forest the other side of the stream."

"Oh."

"Can you see it?'

"No, I'm sitting inside here with you. Take it easy, son."

"Some deer are coming down to drink, along the edge of Weller's pasture."

"Is that so?"

"Last year a mountain lion killed two of them, right where they drank. Is it raining?"

"No, it isn't. It would be fine if we could have some."

"It's raining. I can hear it on the roof." A pause. "It drips down the chimney."

Peter turned his head to look at his father, momentarily clear eyed.

"How long since there's been a forest across the stream?"

Dr. Wood reflected on the usual difficulty of answering explicit questions and on his own ignorance of history.

"A long time. I expect this valley has been farm land since colonial days."

"Funny," Peter said. "I shut my eyes and I can see a forest. Really big trees. On our side of the stream there's a kind of a garden and an apple tree and a path goes down to the water."

"It sounds pleasant."

"Yeah."

"Why don't you try going to sleep?"

"OK."

The antibiotic accomplished much less than it should have done in Peter's case, and he stayed very sick for several days. Even after diagnosis, there appeared no good reason to move him from home. A trained nurse was on duty after that first night, and tranquilizers and sedatives reduced her job to no more than keeping a watch. There were only a few sleepy communications from her young

patient. It was on the fourth night, the last one when he had any significant fever, that he asked:

"Were you ever a girl?"

"Well, thanks a lot. I'm not as old as all that."

"I mean, were you ever inside a girl?"

"I think you'd better go back to sleep, young man."

"I mean—I guess I don't know what I mean."

He uttered no oddities thereafter, at least when there was any one within hearing. During the days of his recovery and convalescence, abed and later stretched out on a chaise lounge on the terrace looking down toward Harmon Brook, he took to whispering. He moved his lips hardly at all, but vocalized each word, or if he fell short of this, at least put each thought into carefully chosen words and sentences.

The idea that he might be in mental communication with another person was not, to him, very startling. Steeped in the lore of science fiction whose heroes were, as like as not, adepts at telepathy, the event seemed almost an expected outcome of his wishes. Many nights he had lain awake sending out (he hoped) a mental probe, trying and trying to find the trick, for surely there must be one, of making a contact.

Now that such a contact was established he sought, just as vainly, for some means to prove it. How do you know you're not dreaming, he asked himself. How do you know you're not still delirious?

The difficulty was that his communication with Charity Payne could be by mental route only. Had there been any possibility for Peter to reach the girl by mail, by telephone, by travel and a personal visit, their rapport on a mental level might have been confirmed, and their messages cross-checked.

During their respective periods of illness, Peter and Charity achieved a communion of a sort which consisted at first of brief glimpses, each of the other's environment. They were not—then—seeing through one another's eyes, so much as tapping one another's visual recollections. While Peter stared at a smoothly plastered ceiling, Charity looked at rough hewn beams. He, when his aching head permitted, could turn on one side and watch a television program. She, by the same movement, could see a small smoky fire in a monstrous stone fireplace, where water was heated and her beef and barley broth kept steaming.

Instead of these current images, current for each of them in their different times, they saw stored-up pictures, not perfect, for neither of them was remembering perfectly; rather like pictures viewed through a badly ground lens, with only the objects of principal interest in clear detail.

Charity saw her fearful sights

with no basis for comprehension —a section of dual highway animated by hurtling cars and trucks and not a person, recognizable as a person, in sight; a tennis court, and what on earth could it be; a jet plane crossing the sky; a vast and many storied building which glinted with glass and the silvery tracings of untarnished steel.

At the start she was terrified nearly out of her wits. It's all very well to dream, and a nightmare is only a bad dream after you waken, but a nightmare is assembled from familiar props. You could reasonably be chased by a dragon (like the one in the picture that St. George had to fight) or be lost in a cave (like the one on Parish Hill, only bigger and darker). To dream of things which have no meaning at all is worse.

She was spared prolongation of her terror by Peter's comprehension of their situation and his intuitive realization of what the experience, assuming a two way channel, might be doing to her. The vignettes of her life which he was seeing were in no way disturbing. Everything he saw through her mind was within his framework of reference. Horses and cattle, fields and forest, rutted lanes and narrow wooden bridges, were things he knew, even if he did not live among them. He recognized Harmon Brook because, directly below their home, there was an immense granite boulder parting the flow, shaped like a great bear-like animal with its head down, drinking. It was strange that the stream, in all those years, had neither silted up nor eroded away to hide or change the seeming of the rock, but so it was. He saw it through Charity's eyes and knew the place in spite of the forest on the far hill.

When he first saw this partly familiar, partly strange scene, he heard from somewhere within his mind the frightened cry of a little girl. His thinking at that time was fever distorted and incoherent. It was two days later after a period of several hours of normal temperature, when he conceived the idea —with sudden virtual certainty— these pastoral scenes he had been dreaming were truly something seen with other eyes. There were subtle perceptual differences between those pictures and his own seeing.

To his mother, writing at a table near the windows, he said, "I think I'm feeling better. How about a glass of orange juice?"

She considered. "The doctor should be here in an hour or so. In the meantime you can make do with a little more ice water. I'll get it. Drink it slowly, remember."

Two hundred and sixty-five years away, Charity Payne thought suddenly, "How about a glass of orange juice?" She had been drowsing, but her eyes popped wide open. "Mercy," she said aloud. Dame Beulah bent over the pallet.

"What is it, child?"

"How about a glass of orange juice?" Charity repeated.

"La, 'tis gibberish." A cool hand was laid on her forehead. "Would ye like a bit of ice to bite on?"

Orange juice, whatever that might be, was forgotten.

Over the next several days Peter Wood tried time and again to address the stranger directly, and repeatedly failed. Some of what he said to others reached her in fragments and further confused her state of mind. What she had to say, on the other hand, was coming through to him with increasing frequency. Often it was only a word or a phrase with a quaint twist like a historical novel, and he would lie puzzling over it, trying to place the person on the other end of their erratic line of communication. His recognition of Bear Rock, which he had seen once again through her eyes, was disturbing. His science fiction conditioning led him naturally to speculate about the parallel worlds concept, but that seemed not to fit the facts as he saw them.

Peter reached the stage of convalescence when he could spend all day on the terrace and look down, when he wished, at the actual rock. There, for the hundredth time he formed the syllables, "Hello, who are you?" and for the first time received a response. It was a silence, but a silence reverberating with shock, totally different in quality from the blankness which had met him before.

"My name is Peter Wood."

There was a long pause before the answer came, softly and timidly.

"My name is Charity Payne. Where are you? What is happening to me?"

The following days of enforced physical idleness were filled with exploration and discovery. Peter found out almost at once that, while they were probably no more than a few feet apart in their respective worlds, a gulf of more than a quarter of a thousand years stretched between them. Such a contact through time was a greater departure from known physical laws, certainly, than the mere fact of telepathic communication. Peter revelled in his growing ability.

In another way the situation was heart breaking. No matter how well they came to know one another, he realized, they could never meet, and after no more than a few hours of acquaintance he found that he was regarding this naive child of another time with esteem and a sort of affection.

They arrived shortly at a set of rules which seemed to govern and limit their communications. Each came to be able to hear the other speak, whether aloud or subvocally. Each learned to perceive through the other's senses, up to a point. Visual perception became better and better especially for

direct seeing while, as they grew more skillful, the remembered scene became less clear. Tastes and odors could be transmitted, if not accurately, at least with the expected response. Tactile sensations could not be perceived in the slightest degree.

There was little that Peter Wood could learn from Charity. He came to recognize her immediate associates and liked them, particularly her gaunt, weather-beaten father. He formed a picture of Puritanism which, as an ethic, he had to respect, while the supporting dogma evoked nothing but impatience. At first he exposed her to the somewhat scholarly agnosticism which prevailed in his own home, but soon found that it distressed her deeply and he left off. There was so much he could report from the vantage of 1965, so many things he could show her which did not conflict with her tenets and faith.

He discovered that Charity's ability to read was remarkable, though what she had read was naturally limited—the Bible from cover to cover, Pilgrims' Progress, several essays and two of Shakespeare's plays. Encouraged by a schoolmaster who must have been an able and dedicated man, she had read and reread everything permitted to her. Her quite respectable vocabulary was gleaned from these sources and may have equalled Peter's own in size. In addition she possessed an uncanny word sense which helped her greatly in understanding Peter's jargon.

She learned the taste of bananas and frankfurters, chocolate ice cream and coke, and displayed such an addiction to these delicacies that Peter rapidly put on some of the pounds he had lost. One day she asked him what he looked like.

"Well, I told you I am sixteen, and I'm sort of thin."

"Does thee possess a mirror?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

At her urging and with some embarrassment he went and stood before a mirrored door in his mother's bedroom.

"Marry," she said after a dubious pause, "I doubt not thee is comely. But folk have changed."

"Now let me look at you," he demanded.

"Nay, we have no mirror."

"Then go and look in the brook. There's a quiet spot below the rock where the water is dark."

He was delighted with her appearance, having remembered Hogarth's unkind representations of a not much later period and being prepared for disappointment. She was in fact very much prettier by Peter's standards than by those of her own time, which favored plumpness and smaller mouths. He told her she was a beauty, and her tentative fondness for him turned instantly to adulation.

Previously Peter had had fleet-

ing glimpses of her slim, smoothly muscled body, as she had bathed or dressed. Now, having seen each other face to face, they were overcome by embarrassment and both of them, when not fully clothed, stared resolutely into the corners of the room.

For a time Charity believed that Peter was a dreadful liar. The sight and sound of planes in the sky were not enough to convince her of the fact of flying, so he persuaded his father to take him along on a business flight to Washington. After she had recovered from the marvels of airplane travel, he took her on a walking tour of the Capitol. Now she would believe anything, even that the American Revolution had been a success. They joined his father for lunch at an elegant French restaurant and she experienced, vicariously, the pleasures of half of a half bottle of white wine and a chocolate eclair. Charity was by way of getting spoiled.

Fully recovered and with school only a week away, Peter decided to brush up his tennis. When reading or doing nothing in particular, he was always dimly aware of Charity and her immediate surroundings, and by sharpening his attention he could bring her clearly to the forefront of his mind. Tennis displaced her completely and for an hour or two each day he was unaware of her doings.

Had he been a few years older and a little more knowledgeable and realistic about the world, he might have guessed the peril into which he was leading her. Fictional villainy abounded, of course, and many items in the news didn't bear thinking about, but by his own firsthand experience, people were well intentioned and kindly, and for the most part they reacted to events with reasonable intelligence. It was what he expected instinctively.

A first hint of possible consequences reached him as he walked home from one of his tennis sessions.

"Ursula Miller said an ill thing to me today."

"Oh?" His answer was abstracted since, in all truth, he was beginning to run out of interest in the village gossip which was all the news she had to offer.

"Yesterday she said it was an untruth about the thirteen states. Today she avowed that I was devil ridden. And Ursula has been my best friend."

"I warned you that people wouldn't believe you and you might get yourself laughed at," he said. Then suddenly he caught up in his thinking. "Good Lord—Salem."

"Please, Peter, thee must stop taking thy Maker's name."

"I'll try to remember. Listen, Charity, how many people have you been talking to about our—about what's been happening?"

"As I have said. At first to Father and Aunt Beulah. They did believe I was still addled from the fever."

"And to Ursula."

"Aye, but she vowed to keep it secret."

"Do you believe she will, now that she's started name calling?"

A lengthy pause.

"I fear she may have told the lad who keeps her company."

"I should have warned you. Damn it, I should have laid it on the line."

"Peter!"

"Sorry. Charity, not another word to anybody. Tell Ursula you've been fooling—telling stories to amuse her."

" 'Twould not be right."

"So what. Charity, don't be scared, but listen. People might get to thinking you're a witch."

"Oh, they couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I am not one. Witches are—oh, no, Peter."

He could sense her growing alarm.

"Go tell Ursula it was a pack of lies. Do it now."

"I must milk the cow."

"Do it now."

"Nay, the cow must be milked."

"Then milk her faster than she's ever been milked before."

On the Sabbath, three little boys threw stones at Charity as she and her father left the church. Obadiah Payne caught one of them and caned him, and then would have had to fight the lad's father save that the pastor intervened.

It was on the Wednesday that calamity befell. Two tight-lipped men approached Obadiah in the fields.

"Squire wants to see thy daughter Charity."

"Squire?"

"Aye. Squire Hacker. He would talk with her at once."

"Squire can talk to me if so be he would have her reprimanded. What has she been up to?"

"Witchcraft, that's what," said the second man, sounding as if he were savoring the dread news. "Croft's old ewe delivered a monstrous lamb. Pointy pinched-up face and an extra eye." He crossed himself.

"Great God!"

" 'Twill do ye no good to blaspheme, Obadiah. She's to come with us now."

"I'll not have it. Charity's no witch, as ye well know, and I'll not have her converse with Squire. Ye mind the Squire's lecherous ways."

"That's not here nor there. Witchcraft is afoot again and all are saying 'tis your Charity at bottom of it."

"She shall not go."

First one, then the other displayed the stout truncheons they had held concealed behind their backs.

" 'Twas of our own good will we told thee first. Come now and in-

struct thy daughter to go with us featly. Else take a clout on the head and sleep tonight in the goal house."

They left Obie Payne gripping a broken wrist and staring in numbed bewilderment from his door stoop, and escorted Charity, not touching her, walking at a cautious distance to either side, to Squire Hacker's big house on the hill. In the village proper, little groups of people watched from doorways and, though some had always been her good friends, none had the courage now to speak a word of comfort.

Peter went with her each reluctant step of the way, counting himself responsible for her plight and helpless to do the least thing about it. He sat alone in the living room of his home, eyes closed to sharpen his reading of her surroundings. She offered no response to his whispered reassurances and perhaps did not hear them.

At the door her guards halted and stood aside, leaving her face to face with the grim-visaged squire. He moved backward step by step, and she followed him, as if hypnotised, into the shadowed room.

The squire lowered himself into a high-backed chair. "Look at me."

Unwillingly she raised her head and stared into his face.

Squire Hacker was a man of medium height, very broad in the shoulder and heavily muscled. His face was disfigured by deep pock marks and the scar of a knife cut across the jaw, souvenirs of his earlier years in the Carib Islands. From the Islands he had also brought some wealth which he had since increased manyfold by the buying of land, share cropping and money lending.

"Charity Payne," he said sternly, "take off thy frock."

"No. No, please."

"I command it. Take off thy garments for I must search thee for witch marks."

He leaned forward, seized her arm and pulled her to him. "If thee would avoid public trial and condemnation, thee will do as I say." His hands began to explore her body.

Even by the standards of the time, Charity regularly spent extraordinary hours at hard physical labor and she possessed a strength which would have done credit to many young men. Squire Hacker should have been more cautious.

"Nay," she shouted and drawing back her arm, hit him in the nose with all the force she could muster. He released her with a roar of rage, then, while he was mopping away blood and tears with the sleeve of his ruffled shirt and shouting imprecations, she turned and shot out the door. The guards, converging, nearly grabbed her as she passed but, once away, they stood no chance of catching her and for a wonder none of the villagers took up the chase.

She was well on the way home

and covering the empty road at a fast trot before Peter was able to gain her attention.

"Charity," he said, "Charity, you mustn't go home. If that s. o. b. of a squire has any influence with the court, you just fixed yourself."

She was beginning to think again and could even translate Peter's strange language.

"Influence!" she said. "Marry, he is the court. He is the judge."

"Ouch!"

"I wot well I must not be found at home. I am trying to think where to hide. I might have had trial by water. Now they will burn me for a surety. I do remember what folk said about the last witch trials."

"Could you make your way to Boston and then maybe to New York—New Amsterdam?"

"Leave my home forever! Nay. And I would not dare the trip."

"Then take to the woods. Where can you go?"

"Take to—? Oh. To the cave, mayhap."

"Don't too many people know about it?"

"Aye. But there is another across the brook and beyond Tom Carter's freehold. I do believe none know of it but me. 'Tis very small. We must ford the brook just yonder, then walk that fallen tree. There is a trail which at sundown will be tromped by a herd of deer."

"You're thinking about dogs?"

"Aye, on the morrow. There is no good pack in Annes Towne."

"You live in a savage age, Charity."

"Aye," she said wryly. " 'Tis fortunate we have not invented the bomb."

"Damn it," Peter said, "I wish we'd never met. I wish I hadn't taken you on that plane trip. I wish I'd warned you to keep quiet about it."

"Ye could not guess I would be so foolish."

"What can you do out here without food?"

"I'd liefer starve than be in the stocks, but there is food to be had in the forest, some sorts of roots and toadstools and autumn berries. I shall hide myself for three days, I think, then seek out my father by night and do as he tells me."

When she was safely hidden in the cave, which was small indeed but well concealed by a thicket of young sassafras, she said:

"Now we can think. First, I would have an answer from thy superior wisdom. Can one be truly a witch and have no knowledge of it."

"Don't be foolish. There's no such thing as a witch."

"Ah well, 'tis a matter for debate by scholars. I do feel in my heart that I am not a witch, if there be such creatures. That book, Peter, of which ye told me, which recounts the history of these colonies."

"Yes?"

"Will ye look in it and learn if I came to trial and what befell me?"

"There'd be nothing about it. It's just a small book. But—"

To his parents' puzzlement, Peter spent the following morning at the Boston Public Library. In the afternoon he shifted his operations to the Historical Society. He found at last a listing of the names of women known to have been tried for witchcraft between the years 1692 and 1697. Thereafter he could locate only an occasional individual name. There was no record of any Charity Payne in 1700 or later.

He started again when the reading room opened next day, interrupting the task only momentarily for brief exchanges with Charity. His lack of success was cheering to her, for she overestimated the completeness of the records.

At close to noon he was scanning the pages of a photostated doctoral thesis when his eye caught a familiar name.

"Jonas Hacker," it read. "Born Liverpool, England, date uncertain, perhaps 1659, was the principal figure in a curious action of law which has not become a recognized legal precedent in English courts.

"Squire Hacker, a resident of Annes Towne (cf. Anniston), was tried and convicted of willful murder and larceny. The trial was posthumous, several months after his decease from natural causes in 1704. The sentence pronounced was death by hanging which, since it could not be imposed, was commuted to forfeiture of his considerable estate. His land and other possessions reverted to the Crown and were henceforward administered by the Governor of Bay Colony.

"While the motivation and procedure of the court may have been open to question, evidence of Hacker's guilt was clear cut. The details are these. . . ."

"Hey, Charity," Peter rumbled in his throat.

"Aye?"

"Look at this page. Let me flatten it out."

"Read it please, Peter. Is it bad news?"

"No. Good, I think." He read the paragraphs on Jonas Hacker.

"Oh, Peter, can it be true?"

"It has to be. Can you remember any details?"

"Marry, I remember well when they disappeared, the ship's captain and a common sailor. They were said to have a great sack of gold for some matter of business with Squire. But it could not be, for they never reached his house."

"That's what Hacker said, but the evidence showed that they got there—got there and never got away. Now here's what you must do. Late tonight, go home."

"I would fen do so, for I am terrible athirst."

"No, wait. What's your parson's name?"

"John Hix."

"Can you reach his house tonight without being seen?"

"Aye. It backs on a glen."

"Go there. He can protect you better than your father can until your trial."

"Must I be tried?"

"Of course. We want to clear your name. Now let's do some planning."

The town hall could seat no more than a score of people, and the day was fair; so it was decided that the trial should be held on the common, in discomforting proximity to the stocks.

Visitors came from as far as twenty miles away, afoot or in carts, and nearly filled the common itself. Squire Hacker's own armchair was the only seat provided. Others stood or sat on the patchy grass.

The squire came out of the inn presently, fortified with rum, and took his place. He wore a brocaded coat and a wide-rimmed hat and would have been more impressive if it had not been for his still swollen nose, now permanently askew.

A way was made through the crowd then, and Charity, flanked on one side by John Hix, on the other by his tall son, walked to the place where she was to stand. Voices were suddenly stilled. Squire Hacker did not condescend to look directly at the prisoner, but fixed a cold stare on the minister; a warning that his protection of the girl would not be forgiven. He cleared his throat.

"Charity Payne, is thee willing to swear upon the Book?"

"Aye."

"No mind. We may forego the swearing. All can see that ye are fearful."

"Nay," John Hix interrupted. "She shall have the opportunity to swear to her word. 'Twould not be legal otherwise." He extended a Bible to Charity, who placed her fingers on it and said, "I do swear to speak naught but the truth."

Squire Hacker glowered and lost no time coming to the attack. "Charity Payne, do ye deny being a witch?"

"I do."

"Ye do be one?"

"Nay, I do deny it."

"Speak what ye mean. What have ye to say of the monstrous lamb born of Master Croft's ewe?"

"I know naught of it."

"Was't the work of Satan?"

"I know not."

"Was't then the work of God?"

"I know not."

"Thee holds then that He might create such a monster?"

"I know naught about it."

"In thy own behalf will thee deny saying that this colony and its neighbors will in due course make war against our King?"

"Nay, I do not deny that."

There was a stir in the crowd and some angry muttering.

"Did ye tell Mistress Ursula Miller that ye had flown a great journey through the air?"

"Nay."

"Mistress Ursula will confound thee in that lie."

"I did tell Ursula that someday folk would travel in that wise. I did tell her that I had seen such travel through eyes other than my own."

Squire Hacker leaned forward. He could not have hoped for a more damning statement. John Hix' head bowed in prayer.

"Continue."

"Aye. I am blessed with a sort of second sight."

"Blessed or cursed?"

"God permits it. It cannot be accursed."

"Continue. What evil things do ye see by this second sight?"

"Most oftentimes I see the world as it will one day be. Thee said evil. Such sights are no more and no less evil than we see around us."

Hacker pondered. There was an uncomfortable wrongness about this child's testimony. She should have been gibbering with fear, when in fact she seemed self-possessed. He wondered if by some strange chance she really had assistance from the devil's minions.

"Charity Payne, thee has confessed to owning second sight. Does thee use this devilish power to spy on thy neighbors?"

It was a telling point. Some among the spectators exchanged discomfited glances.

"Nay, 'tis not devilish, and I cannot see into the doings of my neighbors—except—"

"Speak up, girl. Except what?"

"Once I did perceive by my seeing a most foul murder."

"Murder!" The squire's voice was harsh. A few in the crowd made the sign of the cross.

"Aye. To tell true, two murders. Men whose corpses do now lie buried unshriven in a dark cellar close onto this spot. 'Tween them lies a satchel of golden guineas."

It took a minute for the squire to find his voice.

"A cellar?" he croaked.

"Aye, a root cellar, belike the place one would keep winter apples." She lifted her head and stared straight into the squire's eyes, challenging him to inquire further.

The silence was ponderous as he strove to straighten out his thoughts. To this moment he was safe, for her words described every cellar in and about the village. But she knew. Beyond any question, she knew. Her gaze, seeming to penetrate the darkest corners of his mind, told him that, even more clearly than her words.

Squire Hacker believed in witches and considered them evil and deserving of being destroyed.

He had seen and shuddered at the horrible travesty of a lamb in farmer Croft's stable yard, but he had seen like deformities in the Caribbee and did not hold the event an evidence of witchcraft. Not for a minute had he thought Charity a witch, for she showed none of the signs. Her wild talk and the growing rumors had simply seemed to provide the opportunity for some dalliance with a pretty young girl and possibly, in exchange for an acquittal, a lien upon her father's land.

Now he was unsure. She must indeed have second sight to have penetrated his secret, for it had been stormy that night five years ago, and none had seen the missing sailors near to his house. Of that he was confident. Further, shockingly, she knew how and where they lay buried. Another question and answer could not be risked.

He moved his head slowly and looked right and left at the silent throng.

"Charity Payne," he said, picking his words with greatest care, "has put her hand on the Book and sworn to tell true, an act, I opine, she could scarce perform, were she a witch. Does any person differ with me?"

John Hix looked up in startled hopefulness.

"Very well. The lambing at Master Croft's did have the taint of witchcraft, but Master Trowbridge has stated his belief that some noxious plant is growing in Croft's pasture, and 'tis at the least possible. Besides, the ewe is old and she has thrown runty lambs before.

"To quote Master Trowbridge again, he holds that the cholera which has afflicted us so sorely comes from naught but the drinking of bad water. He advises boiling it. I prefer adding a little rum."

He got the laughter he sought. There was a lessening of tension.

"As to second sight." Again he swept the crowd with his gaze. "Charity had laid claim to it, and I called it a devilish gift to test her, but second sight is not witchcraft, as ye well know. My own grandmother had it, and a better woman ne'er lived. I hold it to be a gift of God. Would any challenge me?

"Very well. I would warn Charity to be cautious in what she sees and tells, for second sight can lead to grievous disputations. I do not hold with her story of two murdered men although I think that in her own sight she is telling true. If any have aught of knowledge of so dire a crime, I adjure him to step forth and speak."

He waited. "Nobody? Then, by the authority conferred on me by his Excellency the Governor, I declare that Charity Payne is innocent of the charges brought. She may be released."

This was not at all the eventuality which a few of Squire Hacker's cronies had foretold. The crowd had clearly expected a day long inquisition climaxed by a prisoner to bedevil in the stocks. The Squire's about-face and his abrupt ending of the trial surprised them and angered a few. They stood uncertain.

Then someone shouted hurrah and someone else called for three cheers for Squire Hacker, and all in a minute the gathering had lost its hate and was taking on the look of a picnic. Men headed for the tavern. Parson Hix said a long prayer to which few listened, and everybody gathered around to wring Obie Payne's good hand and to give his daughter a squeeze.

At intervals through the afternoon and evening Peter touched lightly on Charity's mind, finding her carefree and happily occupied with visitors. He chose not to obtrude himself until she called.

Late that night she lay on her mattress and stared into the dark.

"Peter," she whispered.

"Yes, Charity."

"Oh, thank you again."

"Forget it. I got you into the mess. Now you're out of it. Anyway, I didn't really help. It all had to work out the way it did, because that's the way it had happened. You see?"

"No, not truly. How do we know that Squire won't dig up those old bones and burn them?"

"Because he didn't. Four years from now somebody will find them."

"No, Peter, I do not understand, and I am afeared again."

"Why, Charity?"

"It must be wrong, thee and me talking together like this and knowing what is to be and what is not."

"But what could be wrong about it?"

"That I do not know, but I think 'twere better you should stay in your time and me in mine. Goodbye, Peter."

"Charity!"

"And God bless you."

Abruptly she was gone and in Peter's mind there was an emptiness and a knowledge of being alone. He had not known that she could close him out like this.

With the passing of days he became skeptical and in time he might have disbelieved entirely. But Charity visited him again. It was October. He was alone and studying, without much interest.

"Peter."

"Charity, it's you."

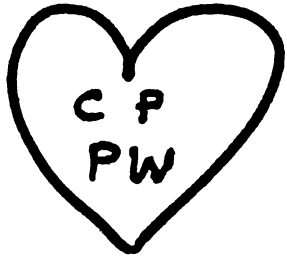
"Yes. For a minute, please Peter, for only a minute, but I had to tell you. I—" She seemed somehow embarrassed. "There is a message."

"A what?"

"Look at Bear Rock, Peter, under the bear's jaw on the left side."

With that, she was gone.

The cold water swirled around his legs as he traced with one finger the painstakingly chiseled message she had left; a little-girl message in a symbol far older than either of them.



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