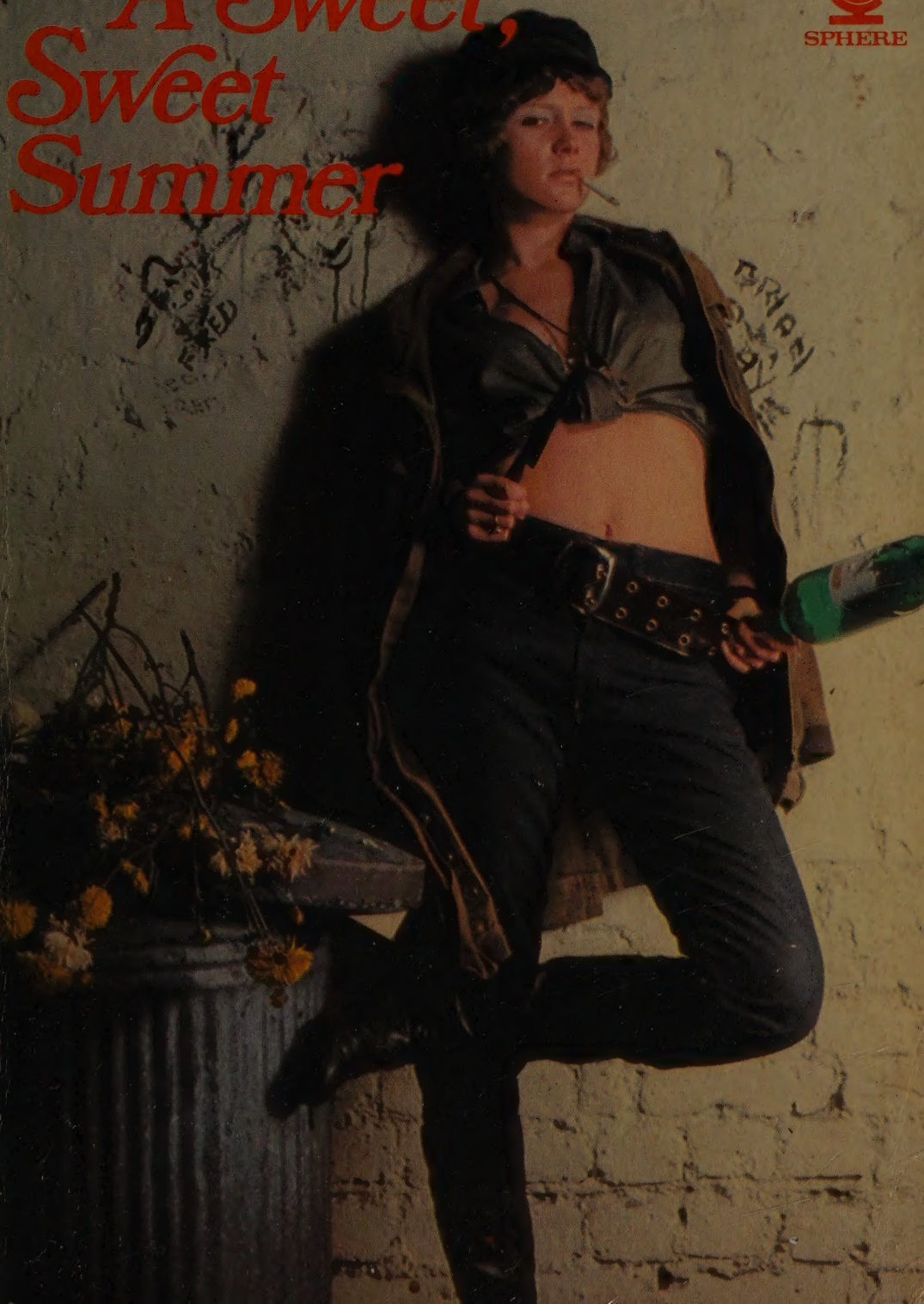


# JANE GASKELL

*A Sweet,  
Sweet  
Summer*







P. Gaskell

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## A SWEET, SWEET SUMMER

Jane Gaskell

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A SWEET, SWEET SUMMER





# *A Sweet, Sweet Summer*

**JANE GASKELL**



**SPHERE BOOKS LTD.**

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Till *she* came we were all just one big happy family. The summer laid itself like a lover's sweat over the rooms where we laid on our beds, *Szzummer, Szzummer* went the bright busy bluebottles in our rooms, Connor rooting Sweetness on her old pungent mattress, me in my neat tidy nice room relaxing with my collection of knives and sea-shells.

Then *she* had to come.

Them Aliens knew what they were at when they ordered that I must take her in on my charity.

She didn't cost much in food, my cousin. She cost more in bandages, at first.

I didn't mind the *idea* of having her in the house. Only too glad I was to meet my cousin from the Badlands of the Docks.

"You're sure to fall in love with her," Sweetness said to me on the stairs.

"Lust at 1st sight," I agreed. You know, I was quite looking forward to it. Not that I *really* thought I'd feel anything sexual for her. It's better to keep that out of the family. I believe in family, I believe family is something only the Supernatural could have dreamed up, and it's better not to go spoiling it. But I hoped she'd be a new face for chatting: I hoped she'd like be on my side (her being family) against the tenants when they were in arrears with their rent for our rooms, making their excuses all pathetic and having to be dealt with brutally, or devising some cataclysmic new way of fixing the gas meters. *And* (her being my generation) on my side against Dad. His heavy heave of pomposity refusing against all evidence the way I run his house is BEST.

But though she was ill, I never saw on a girl such cold eyes as my cousin's.

I tended her sweetly. I brought her broth. She said thanks and she stared at me over her bandages.

"The Aliens said you must come to Dad and me," I said.

"Yes. I never even knew my relatives lived in London," she said.

"You're lucky to have us to come to," I said.

"Yes."



"You would've been put in a home otherwise," I said. "The law would have stuck you in one of their Homes. You'd've been *corrected*."

She smiled, my cousin. She was only young, only my age, but her eyes were so cold.

I like girls to have hot eyes. I like girls to be what they are, and the more so the better. I don't believe in girls not being as fuckable as is possible.

"Excuse me," I said. "I hear a scuffle."

I left her to carry on feeding herself as best she could. I ran out up the stairs to the next landing and there was Sweetness – who is just what I approve of – in her bra and she was crying and throwing out Connor, who had been in her room with her.

He strode down the steps towards me and Sweetness scuffled down the oilcloth after him, saying, "Get out, get out," and swearing and grabbing him, trying to pull him back, but Connor just kept on walking as though her hands were crabsbites.

"Here," I said, barring the way, "I've caught you at it at last. Don't you leave here without paying me my percentage. It was me introduced you to Sweeters."

Sweetness pulled her boa round her, she wears an old Biba boa as a wrap, pulled it round her, an act of dignity though not efficient, sat on the oilcloth and said, "Oh for hellsake Pel, *him* I don't *charge*."

It was me she switched her anger to.

"You stinking ponces are all the same. Your stinking percentage is all that matters." Sweetness is a very ladylike girl. She never swears worse than *stinking*.

"If I gave you a choice, Pelham," she said, "between me, and a stinking little percentage off him having me, you'd sooner he had me." Well, the little love, she's right. Mind you, I'd sooner I had her than some (but how about that being more for her sake than mine even?); but I like to know her and Connor is together.

Connor picked me up and set me to one side out of his way.

I didn't blame her not charging him for it at all, though it was strictly against our gentlemen's agreement, the terms on which I let her have the room so cheap.

These girls have always got to have someone they can give it to free, it's their only way to unwind. I thought her and him was just right. Her, our Sweetness, like a double-page spread or even



fold-out in one of the older more basic copies of *Playboy*, even to the whitish places on her tan where she'd not dared to tan on top of our skylight without her leopardspots-bikini, and him Connor, in his jackboots and tawny hair and his strong sinewy shoulders with the eagle tattooed on one bicep, masculinity and femininity they were, so well-matched, and so different from my cold cousin laying in there with her hair just beginning to grow like a convict's on her recently shaved skull.

"And don't come back, not ever, do you hear, not never!" Sweetness shrieked.

Connor by now had passed me and was down the next flight of steps.

He descended lightly, like a seaman on moving rigging.

"Do you hear me, do you?" Sweetness came lower to shriek over my shoulder.

He never looked up, but he never does anything pointless. Of course he will be back. He didn't even slam the door on the way out into the hot pavements and tarmacs. He moves in absolute control. I think he was in the Merch at one time, ran off to sea as far as I know when we lost trace of him after his stay in the Borough Orphanage at the end of our street (Children's Welfare they preferred you to designate it), before years later he suddenly reappeared as one of the Lot in their boots and eagles.

Sweetness was ready to slit me because he had gone.

She come running down to me, letting her feathers fly again. "You might have stood your ground," she yelled. "You *wanted* him to leave me, didn't you, you glory in him insulting me then getting away with it. You're no friend, and what you're doing in the position of Authority in this house I just don't know *dear—*"

"Come and help me feed my cousin," I said. "I daresay your electric presence might bring some life in her face, invalids bore me."

They don't. I like invalids.

I like to prepare new-laundered beds and slip a sick person in, I like to baby their longing for reassurance, soothe their aches and horrors, wring out a wet flannel on their fevered pulse. I like to get animals that have been kicked and watch them stop trembling as I hold them and murmur to them. I enjoy that nice feeling of warm good power. I enjoy warmth. But my cousin gave me the creeps.

"I expected to like her," I said.

Sweetness came to her sick-room door with me.

"I only wanted to do the best for the poor wretch," I said.

"She not grateful?" Sweetness gasped, shocked.

"Come and *meet* it," I sneered.

My cousin lay on her bed. She'd made no attempt to spoon up the broth since I left her.

"Don't you like the broth?" I said. "I made it myself. It's full of ingredients."

She sort of smiled to show I had done well.

"Just didn't feel like feeding yourself, did you," I said nastily but not too nastily, my surface tone being just a sort of scolding tone. "Well, lovey," I said to my cousin, "It's no good you pretending to be too *ill* to feed yourself, just waiting for me to come back and wait on you hand and foot, dear. Too *lazy*, more like. Now you do a bit of helping yourself. I'm not your slave," I ended briskly.

I saw no sign however that my slimy tone had flicked her at all. She just lay and stared very calmly from me to Sweetness.

I sighed for Sweetness's benefit and like a sweet saint I went to take my cousin's light head and continue the feeding.

"Come on," I said. "All this protein and iron. You'll be up on your feet in no time, and no pretending you're too weak to be up, I hope, when you are well and fit. I expect you (and Dad expects you) to be taking your proper grateful part soon in helping us run this house. It's no easy task running a lodging house, or didn't you know, *and* looking after an invalid."

I spooned the broth into her mouth as I supported her head on the crook of my arm.

"By the way," I said, "this is one of our lodging lady-guests, Sweetness meet my cousin Frijja."

"Pleased to meet you," smiled Sweetness.

My cousin Frijja moved those cold eyes over Sweetness. Sweetness suddenly felt the chill and pulled her thing over again.

My cousin wore just a boy's sweat-shirt, and the old jeans she'd arrived in hung over the chair by the bed. Her hair was only just beginning to grow and it stood up round her head like bumfluff. Duckling-down. You could hardly see it, it was so light and variable. She had cheekbones sticking out like a haunted cat's. She was pale, though you could still see that at one time, before the long stay in the police hospital, she had had



a weathered tan. There were not just shadows but rings under her eyes. One of her eyes was narrower than the other, and at a different angle slightly, more of a slant. It was that eye too that had the puffing of discoloured bruised flesh round it where they'd managed to save the eye she'd nearly lost. Yet her two eyes in her pale sharp face were so dark blue and so cold it was like a dip in a fast North Sea tide.

I could see the goose-bumps come up on Sweetness's healthy arms.

Sweetness was standing whereas Frijja was lying. Sweetness is all delicious, brown and rosy and smelling of her correct function, but she really seemed to feel at a disadvantage. I held it against my cold cousin, making poor Sweetness feel trollopy or whatever it was that made her tug her little Biba boa over her swelling titties as though they were something to be ashamed of! Suddenly there was a row downstairs.

On street level, several people, quite a lot of people in boots it sounded like, had arrived by kicking open our door.

I shot downstairs to see what was going on. Sweetness followed me. She gasped as she saw it was Connor and a gang of the Lot he belongs to, all rusty black leather chunky and threatening in the hall.

I hung over the banister.

"Friend or foe?" I yelled.

They looked foe-ish enough, down there, all that milling mass of black leather a-gleam. Then I saw they had not only the usual knives (they will carry them unsheathed everywhere, like other people carry their Biro, so they *look* always ready for slaughter whether they are or not – though they generally are, that's their whole point) but they had guns too, clear of the black eagle-crusted holsters.

"Put those guns away, they might go off," I scolded intrepidly, still master of my household. But I pulled my head well back from the banister and shoved Sweetness behind me.

I'd meant to run down to the hall and meet them. I didn't now.

"That's the idea, sonny-lad," said a large squat man.

He shouldered out from among the others. I knew he must be Helmut.

Helmut, he exuded all over himself, Helmut. He had low brows like a heavy male toad's.

"What's up, then? Come in out of the rain?" I said. I had to go a little way to meet him down the stairs. I wouldn't look at the others, just at him, and I had to figure out which eye to gaze into – his glass eye was almost as real as the other.

He said out of a sour grin, "Your cellars is what we want."

"Fine," I briskly said. "That'll be a fair rent, or you can pay in real meat if not in money."

"I said we want your cellars," he growled.

I wouldn't look at them all, but I was so aware of them. I saw from the edge of my eye the shimmer as they all moved their black leather arms and fiddled their guns. Just a tiny misunderstanding of the type I'd made, that's what they all live for. They love you to be 'discourteous' – not to offer everything they want, instantly gratis – so they can claim "Provocation!" and shoot you down and perform little rites on or in various bits of you.

All the same, though trembling, I dangerously prolonged the pause before I must humbly retract my insolent reference to rent, and throw the cellar at their feet. Our cellar for what? Their meetings, their armoury, their prison, their torture-chamber, their bomb-making?

In any case, we'd likely become a sort of HQ for them. The cellar was a nominal division. They'd take over the whole house. They'd take over the lodgers, they'd tease Mickle in Room 11 as soon as they scented he is a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -Jew, tease him worse and worse, playing little practical jokes on his sax that he's just finished buying, finally breaking it, finally hurting him, till they tired of the game and one day they blinded, castrated or killed him. They'd take over Sweetness till she was a drab with permanent fear in her eye. They'd terrorise Dad. We'd have no lodgers, no rent coming in. They'd ruin the house, break it up, play Russian roulette with us when they felt jolly, find our secret pantry-store, knock us around a bit for having it at all without telling them and then take it over. They'd use us as slaves, especially when they were drunk. They'd smash my sea-shell collection.

As I hesitated, and the instants sped in which I should have cried, "Welcome to the house!", Helmut's brows drew together as though coagulating.

He didn't even speak to me once more.

I'd had my chance, my 10 seconds.



“What do you say, lads?” he turned to the gleaming milling mass at the corners of my eyeballs. “They don’t seem too hospitable in this nice house, do they then?”

There was an acid feeling in my bowel. I could smell my own sweat like mushroom soup starting up in my armpits.

Suddenly, a door clicked open on the landing below me, the last landing between me and the ghastly hall.

“Dad!” I yelled – “Dadgetback!” Absolutely simultaneously, a bullet whined over my shoulder. Like a big gnat it flubbed into the wall-skirting behind me. I fell to my stomach, to my face. The oilcloth was greasy under my nose. *I haven’t polished the stairs this week*, I thought.

“That thing won’t go off!” shouted a derisive voice.

“If it did have a bullet or so in it, the recoil would knock you arse over tip, mate, little fish like you,” drawled another.

Oh Jesus I thought Dad has pulled out his old rifle rust dropping everywhere.

They started a slow surge up the stairs. Such a semblance of order they have. They even commit their rapes in file of rank.

I waited there, my eyelashes flicking little close rustles off the lino, my heart bonging a dent in it. I waited for them to murder Dad and then come on up and get me. If I shoved Sweetness at them first, would she distract at least some of them? Or is it better to have a mob to tear you apart rather than just a few giving it their special attention?

A machine-gun splattered out from below me.

No GPMG, I could tell from the unreliably rapid rattattatt, almost a liquid sound. Rattattatt-spling-peeeying-tattatt. Maybe an ancient light Bren. I took it for granted they had decided to play with that, having acquired it somehow recently, and I blessed their delight in their new gadget which might help finish us off with bullets rather than other ways. But then I was right off balance to hear their cries and grunts and snarls, and Christ yes, lovely wonderful moans of pain.

I slid on my cautious belly. I looked over the edge of the step I was laying on.

And there, on the landing below, was Frijja my cousin in her shirt and jeans, her cropped hair fluffing with electricity as she handled the bazooka or whatever you could call it on its small stand, the used magazine jerking out in a gorgeous solid stream of security at her knees.

Rattattatt-spling-peeeying-ttattatt – the fantastic thing was spewing not bullets but bits of rubbish, i.e. old nails and metal pins. It was some sort of building-trade tool, for shooting bolts into walls, she'd got hold of and brought along to us in her luggage. It was mucking up our dado and skirting all right, thank you very much.

Some of the Lot, recovering themselves, edged to the sides, flattening themselves against the walls of the hall hoping to keep out of her range, and sidled up towards her with their guns taking aim.

In mid-spleeying, Frijja took her right hand off the jerking spraying object long enough to really grab our kitchen butter-knife from where it somehow happened to be in her big old belt.

It's a clasp-knife, and I don't know what luck showed her how to aim it so it went through Connor's boot and stapled his foot to the floor.

The Lot stopped short, and Frijja for a second was able to stoop and scoop towards her Connor's gun over the landing-lino and she straightened with it aimed.

"First Fascist fool to move," she said so quietly you really must strain to hear which they did.

I rose and ran down to her. "How did you do it?" I was shouting as I ran. "The old clasp-knife throws off-centre, which is why we have it for the butter."

Then I said: "How did you get out then? How was you in the bed 1 minute and dressed and armed in the downstairs room 2 minutes later? I never knew you had a tool-gun. Was it in your luggage?" I was going among them and taking their guns.

It felt great, moving between them (they all creaked menace), easing the black weapons from their slack strong white ragged-nailed fingers, while they glared horrible looks at me.

I felt light-headed. I was sure something vile would happen. One would stick something in my spine and in the confusion they'd overpower Frijja. Any minute now. Yet I got to Helmut unscathed.

You could feel the power emanate from him, the big magnetism that makes one man in a pack able to control and manipulate the violent mob.

I trembled as I took his gun, and he knew it. I had so many captive gats now, I was afraid of dropping one (I hitched them in my belt luckily supple with age) as I frisked each disarmed man for any further trinkets, shiv or razor.



*What if 2 move at once, I kept thinking. She can't cover me from all directions.*

But so far none of them wanted to chance being the one she dropped, not even for the risk of success certain against us. At such sneaky speed, those nasty little nails can be worse than bullets, tearing as they do, plus danger of blood-poisoning. Taking Helmut's tiny shiny little Biretta was a moment all right. I kept expecting his big hand chopping on my young tender neck that I bathed with bath-salts and a loofah last night. But he just sort of grinned sideways and let me.

"Now we see to our blokes," he said. "You're not going to let them lie there losing blood and guts. You've pumped a few pretty pins in a couple of abdomens, you know."

"I have no experience of your little ways," Frijja's quiet voice said from her stairs. "But it would seem to me that you could quite calmly have endured the sight of our blood."

Helmut stared.

"You're a cool one, baby-boy," he said. "How old are you? Fifteen? Where did you learn to handle a butter-knife like that?"

I realised they reckoned she was a boy. She is so slight, like a wisp after the slow time in hospital being patched together, and there's nothing female about her crop, with the scars still plain under it where her skull was chopped. Her face is not exactly boyish, but it's not a girl's face just yet either, all eyes and bones and pallor, and she looks like she's a sickly kid its mother never expected to live, except for the capable tough matter-of-fact efficient-knuckled thin hands on the 'gun'.

"You want me to join your mob, do you?" she asked.

"I usually do the asking, sonny, but we could use you," says the flattering Helmut, taking out a Wills Whiff to test her reaction as his hand moves in his pocket (but she knows I've frisked him and pronounced him clean) and ostentatiously relaxed lighting it.

As soon as he took just one puff, I stepped up and removed the cigar and his lighter. I wasn't having no risk of sudden flames.

"Of course you could use me," says Frijja, not sneering, just a little cold smile in her.

Helmut's big relaxed grin faded. He looked most sour again.

"Miss Sweetness," says Frijja politely, "would you care to come down and bind up the people bleeding over my uncle's

Axminster? Tear strips off their black shirts. What a pity all that black dye will get in their wounds."

She didn't say it like she disapproved of their politics. Just like she thought costumes and play-acting was pointless. Helmut didn't take to that neither.

I took a drag at the cigar, but to tell the truth it took all my courage to make the gesture, even Menthols are too strong and set me coughing. Funny, I didn't mind that it had already been between Helmut's tongue and teeth. He's nasty, but he's so respected it sort of acts as hygiene on him.

I did turn thick-veined and my ears hurt as I controlled my coughing in my throat that felt swelled.

Frijja took that in at a glance though she didn't know me too well yet.

"Pel," she says to me, "you take the gun. I'll have those revolvers."

She hands the bazooka over to me as though in deference to my superior status in my Dad's house, but really it's so she can have the guns, she cocks two and keeps them steady and watchful one in each hand, she trusts herself to shoot neat if there's trouble, me she trusts only to cough and spoil my aim. As far as she knows, I can't even shoot, I'm only good for manning a Tool.

Sweetness is stooping round doing the bandaging. Eight of the Lot we got! They groan.

"Take them away," Frijja says in her small voice to Helmut. "Get them to someone who'll dig the bits out."

Still under cover from us, they all set to heaving up their poor suffering comrades (oh, no, that's the other lot, the neo-Russians!) and dragging them out our door.

"Don't come back please," Frijja says casually as an afterthought to Helmut as she closes the door after his look of straight naked hate, and bolts and bars the locks and window-shutters too.

"I advise you and Uncle, Pel," says Frijja to me, "not to leave the door open like that ever again. And tell the lodgers not to carry their keys around on them. Take their keys, and let them in only after they knock, so you can inspect them through your peep-hole."

"Watch who you order about," I said. "Who do you think you are giving orders in our house?"



She wandered up to Connor, who still stood with his boot pinioned to the carpet and floor-boards. He had folded his arms and leaned back against the wall behind him.

He regarded her with an insolent calculated amusement.

"Why didn't you lift off your boot?" she inquired.

"Your blade, actually, is through my foot," he remarked. There was blood coming out sticky from the oozy leather upper and crepe rubber sole.

"Cover him, Pel," Frijja ordered.

She knelt and pulled out the blade. I knew by now she is strong, and she had to tug a bit to get it out. I suppose there was wood as well as flesh and leather to get it out from.

Connor's lazy expression whitened but didn't alter. The blood started coming out like mad.

Frijja eased off the boot. It didn't want to come, part of it was sticky, almost sodden.

"Sweetness, go and bring water, clean water," Frijja said.

"No need to overwhelm me with your concern, just allow me to hobble out," Connor says.

"You're in danger of contracting tetanus," Frijja remarks.

She peels off the shredded wool, and puts her hand in the clean water Sweetness has dumped beside her in the scullery-bowl, and sets her wet palm very tight on the gushing hole in Connor's foot.

"Any cloth for a bandage?" she asks.

"No, and don't look at my  $\frac{1}{2}$ -slip," says Sweetness clutching her  $\frac{1}{2}$ -slip. "I wouldn't give it *him* if he was bleeding his ring up."

"It's too grubby anyway," Frijja murmurs. Almost absent-mindedly, she takes the knife in her free hand (happens to be her left, though I noticed when she threw she was right-handed) and slices off a rag off her shirt.

This she swabs the bubbling hole with. She keeps cupping up water and pouring it over his foot. "Really you should hold it under a tap of running water," she says.

"Yes?" Connor, interested.

"We've had half our week's water ration and it's only Tuesday," I says.

"It would soon stop bleeding and stay clean," she says. "Any iodine in this building, Pel?"

"Ah, fuck it," says Connor. "I don't need fucking iodine."

You can tell he is absolutely fascinated to be babied like this, though then again I don't believe my whiplash cousin could *really* baby anyone no not even to save her life.

"How did you get down?" I ask her.

"Drainpipe."

"You was so fast. Was that thing already loaded?" As I ask my patronising questions, I am flipping up and down under my conqueror's-thumb the lighter I relieved Helmut of. It is a heavy gold Ronson with the entwined curly monogram HvH – it really is Helmut's.

Connor reaches out and takes it off me and slides it in the back pocket of his dark jeans. I am light-fingered enough to get it out easy, but I wouldn't dare. Just then he gasps. Frijja has torn another strip for bandage off her shirt, and he has seen what he couldn't believe – the edge of the bottom swell of her undeniable little bosom. Actually she has quite large breasts, her bust measurement must be all of 34 inches, but it's her actual ribcage and back that is so small, and she's a woman enough.

"You're a—" he says.

Frijja gives a small odd smile that chills me and should chill Connor too.

The Aliens let us alone a while, but I knew they would be angered that their Lot had been given fleasears by us.

"How can the Aliens be angered?" Frijja shrugged. "They don't know what emotion is."

"That's only our latest theory," I pointed out. "A while ago, we'd worked it all out to the conclusion that they were nothing if not emotional."

"Anyway," yawned Sweetness through her nicotiney fingers, "What did you advise, Pel? Total Submission to Helmut and that Connor and their Lot, sooner than possible peevishness from the old As?"

The truth was, Frijja niggled me.

I wanted to do everything to belittle any feat of hers.

She was beginning to settle into a groove in our household more than I'd ever be able to, it seemed to me now, for all the years I'd lived here.

Dad had been so thrilled and overwhelmed by her routing the Lot like that right from her sick-bed, and saving his livelihood not to mention his beloved home – "me nest," he said stroking



the banisters which instantly rattled as at a hurricane, "the threshold over which I carried your Mum rot her—" that he found her all sorts of little treats – an old feather mattress I'd had my eye one, and a brass clock I never even knew was in the cistern-loft with cupids and angels clambering all over it and each other like lizards, and a load of books you had to smack the pages of to blow off the dust before you could see the print.

Frijja in the hospital had been brain-washed by the busy nurses into making herself understood in the English language without putting in words and phrases in German, French, Arabic and Swahili.

At first she hadn't understood which was English and which wasn't. It was all just language, Docklands language.

But though she could now only just about talk to a Christian without all that bit, and she still couldn't write a straight English letter without putting in oaths and invocations and in fact the only bit you could decipher was her massive vast signature FRIJJA with all the dots over the i and the 2 j's flying like pennants in a high wind, she took to reading just like *that*.

It didn't matter to her that it was all in English. She didn't really know what was English and what wasn't, but she knew this was something she could remember all right and what's more go off and have to herself without having to listen to my bullying or Sweetness's gossip or even Mickle's sax.

"Are you coming to the party Sweetness is giving?" I went up to ask her.

She was curled up in the hummocky spring-gone pram Dad had found in a wet copse on Barnes Common and had brought home to serve as a window-seat.

She put down her book. She said sharply: "Party?"

"It's all right, keep your hair on—" I paused then, an ironic twinkle in my keen grey eyes, for a significant stare at her skull still covered by no more than fluff. "It's all by Invitation Only."

"And how many black-shirted gate-crashers?" she inquired.

"Oh, we can't live like hermits all our lives," I said, fed up. "Even Dad agreed."

"After you broke him down," she guessed.

"Well, it's in Sweetness's room on Friday, after the pubs," I said. "You better be there, after all Sweetness's excuse for throwing it is your return to health."

"Thanks," was all my cousin said and picked up her book.

I saw red when I saw what it was she was shutting me out with. It was Dostoevsky *Crime and Punishment*.

Now I had gone to a great deal of trouble to train myself out of ever picking up a volume of that sort. I'd liked them in my childhood, and never let them alone when I was first in the molten glory of my adolescence of which I'm now in the last vinegar years when the intensity is still there and yet the world has shown itself clear enough couldn't be clearer thanks, and I'd pushed myself into never reading anything now but comics and paperbacks, called *Forbidden Romance* or *The Delight of the Forbidden*. They're *cheap*, you see, they're *clean*, they don't lead you on to things that squiggle about in your mind at awkward moments like the 'good' books do, they don't clutter you and come up and hit you just when you think you've set your life to the only essentials anyone can afford. The 'good' books abound in that sort of Thought and Clarity and Search that is like an insult to all I'm after. You never get a simple crude crass statement in the 'good' books that doesn't twist your tail, that doesn't swing around and sting you like a scorpion playing dead. Never a sweet easy cliché, only a sort of difficult glory that gets a hold of you and fights not to let you drop when you want.

Nevertheless, though I had perverted myself into being really contented wallowing in my right level of reading matter, it flicked me on the raw like a calculated insult, her reading *Crime and Punishment* when she knew I was downstairs sprawled over the kitchen table listening with one ear to Sweetness's tales of a neighbour's arrest for indecent exposure and reading *Sex Secrets of a Nazi* with one eye.

I snatched *Crime and Punishment* from Frijja's hand.

"That stupid crap!" I said. I tore some pages in contempt.

She stared at me. She wouldn't knife or shoot her cousin, and I am stronger than she is hand to hand, and know as many snide tricks.

I threw the book out the window.

The Aliens at this time are still as enigmatic to us as when their craft first appeared hovering over London, Birmingham and Edinburgh two years ago and Wham! Pow! suddenly we found an enigmatic invisible curtain had descended all around the island and we were cut off from America, Europe, de Gaulle, Jack Lemmon, everyone, and any ship or plane that



tried to get through to us (or out for aid or escape) simply disintegrated.

At first, what with the equal disintegration of our export and import trades, and our economy, and our food market, and our deaths from malnutrition, and our sheer panic, we couldn't get to know the As very well.

But they helped us. Or it seemed they did.

They directed our parliament back into some sort of order – coalition government as it instantly was, flying to its own arms and lap, like an amoeba fusing like mad. They *strengthened* our military and police force. True, they also gave their blessing to the Fascists and the roaming criminals who saw their chance for plenty of loot and booted kicks by banding together, like the Lot, under the Fascist banner. And then the Aliens went and blessed the Communists too. And the IRA. Welsh Nationalists. And Scientology. Sometimes Trafalgar Square fountains literally ran blood. It was obvious what the Aliens were at, even while they were doing it. They wanted us as confused as possible, so we couldn't find too many ways of looking after ourselves. Nor of getting at their ships – just in case one way worked.

We tried the lot. Army and RAF – bombs, flame-sheets, rockets. Germicide even. But nothing could pierce those enigmatic sneering craft hovering there above Regent's Park Zoo and Battersea Funfair, and Sir Walter Scott's house near Edinburgh.

I like remembering all this now. Really it was Frijja reading that book set me off. I know so there's no sense in covering up to myself. I'll lie to myself any time, fine, I enjoy it, it's really hard and challenging fooling myself because I'm pretty good at detecting lies and I have to be really sneaky at it, but this I face – Frijja has set me off with pen and a big black index-book again.

Great prophecies there were of course that we would become British, all of us, as never before. If not swimming, sinking together. But factions arose everywhere, and while we hoped that our troops in Aden and our baboons in Gib was being fed and bombed by someone or other still to keep them feeling cheerful and useful, we was being forced to create not only an artificial economy (well, I don't call buying bread with meat natural, do you?) (international loans and balances of deficit and so on between Wales, Scotland and us with much Irish agita-

tion) but an artificial nationalism (Welsh against Cotswolders, like) to keep everyone happy and channel off the energy and resentment released by the massive Union stranglehold on every industry, in its turn forced on the industries in self-defence against the massive inflation *and* unemployment – the entire British economy constipated and export and import trades dead stone dead.

Other prophecies shrilled out that racial prejudice would be colossal and race-riots be blood-baths across the nation I'll put that in commas 'nation'.

"But the Aliens saved us that too," I remember I was saying only the other evening, as we sat round smoking. Mickle still can get good cigarettes from his musical acquaintances, and smoking puts us in a good intellectual mood. Smoking an entire straight would make me cough, but short puffs, passing one of these around, is OK for me – mine are shorter puffs than anyone else's, because between you and me they don't do much for me till I start to relax and lose some of my control. And who can afford to relax these days? I'm always in a good mood anyway, but just *seeing* me put the thing to my lips makes the others all passing the thing around feel a sense of good fellowship, and thus I can watch them enjoying themselves, losing or gaining their cool according to how it takes them. We often discuss the As, just as one discusses whether there's a God, and used to discuss politics only now there are none to discuss.

"Nothing could have been calmer really than the way it all went."

"Calmer?" abruptly says Frijja.

"Maybe you aren't remembering," I says. "Maybe your emotions are colouring your recall."

One can talk in this way, which I confess comes easier to me even now after all the hard honing-down of myself I've done, when we're all smoking. They think it's the smoke talking, and they feel it's the sign of a good high, and they start talking that way too, thinking they're on a great high, whereas they'd lynch me if they heard me talk that way 'normally'. Well, any of the blokes would, except Mickle; Sweetness would just gape at me believing she couldn't understand me, and therefore not understand.

"Your Bank is still full of charge," Mickle explained to Frijja.

I like his scientology language. It's better than real language,



so I use it a lot too, though I'm always forgetting what the words mean because they're so like each other.

"Where you get these, Mickle?" I says. "I thought scientologists was forbidden to smoke."

"My auditor says I'm nearly clear now, anyway," shrugs Mickle. All the sequins and mirrors on his shirt, really an old blouse he swopped off Sweetness, shimmy lights on to us when he shrugs. "Then I can do what I like, including walking on water, that'll shake you. So I might as well do what I want now."

"It follows," I says. "You're someone the Aliens really love. They never even had to try to confuse you."

"Because we're already tranquil and serene," agrees Mickle.

"You reckon they confuse only in order to smooth all to deeper calm?" Frijja says.

"They know what they're doing," I chuckle amiably. "They blessed the Fascists, giving them the go-ahead with just a bit of the old blood-bath bit. So absolutely instantly the Government and the powerful Comms embraced *colour* with all they got. The International Committee of the TUC, who had so long been left by the TUC with the problem of job discrimination and promotion and Sikhs conducting red buses, at long last treated the scene as domestic rather than as a 'foreign' issue and very thoroughly protected coloured workers."

"Not much else they could do, come to think. No issues or policies are 'foreign' any more," says Mickle.

"So thanks to the As," I said, "turban-wearers are IN. Even in Manchester.

Sweetness gazed at me in awe, as I hoped Frijja noticed. I use syntax when I'm discussing. I can discuss like a public-bar pro. It's only language for its own sake I refuse to use, and she can stop watching me with her eyes expecting me her cousin to 'live up to myself.'

"Look, Mickle," I adds, "do you mind not shrugging so often?" Mickle likes to be spoke to sharply now and then, it helps him to feel meek and perfect. "Your mirrors and sequins go in my eyes." I already got a slight squint I'm trying to train myself out of. Discipline is good for the eyes. I put my hand over each eye in turn and blink the other.

"Do you still pay your auditor?" asked Frijja.

"Of course," says Mickle, "with what I make blowing sax. He should work for nothing, you think?"

"Very few of us," says Frijja slowly, "can do anything else now, unless we held a Union card before the Aliens arrived. Take my Docks. No exports, no imports, the Unions can only hold desperately to any and every job and privilege. Why should your scientology auditor get money a Union card-holder doesn't get?"

"Your English is getting better," I says. "A bit quicker, and you might be a pleasure to listen to. That reading done you some good then. I must be fair."

"I pay him what I'm paid," says Mickle stiffly, for he has his pride. "Cigarettes, not money."

"Suppose," says Frijja, "you refused to take cigarettes? Perhaps we are just helping the Aliens, when we allow barter to become usage."

"I could starve, I suppose," Mickle said.

"Don't bully Mickle, Frijja," I said. "I don't like to see bullying in this house. The As is haywire. See us going even now to a Court of Law over being cheated – how far would we get? We don't pay proper taxes now."

"I never did," shrugged Frijja. "Either we help the Aliens. Or we tighten our belts a bit."

"We starve for you," I sneered, "and your ascetic holiness, if you know what ascetic means, and we get more plagues and epidemics from malnutrition. Oh all a great groove it is. What is it you accuse us of? Having some sort of ball?"

She looked at me.

I paused. A ball, all this horror? "I'd like to see you have to work as I do, juggling a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -hour here and an hour there every day to make sure you're all comfortable in clean and welcoming surroundings, while I *also* have to get on with keeping the accounts and all the other struggles."

"Is it true," says Frijja, "we shouldn't get ill because then we have to go to hospital."

"You hated your stay in that one, didn't you?" said Sweeters.

"Hospitals are too important," Frijja said slowly and painfully, keeping her mother tongue in tidy lines, "to be filled with silly sick people. That's a reason your boring little Fascists—" she glances at Sweetness – "have no right to rouse us against the coloured people who are so many doctors and nursing."

"One reason," says Mickle.

"Ah, shut your whining," I said. "That's just why the Fascists



are having to fight desperately with gritted teeth to rouse-rabble against British spades. You don't realise what thankless work it is being Fascists. No one is much of a foreigner any more, not even you, no more than the Welsh bombing the Cotswold partisans in the crypt of Gloucester cathedral."

Frijja shook her head when Mickle passed her a drag of his cigarette.

"I don't enjoy these intellectual discussions no more," I said. "Frijja is too fanatic."

"Take it," said Mickle, wafting the cigarette at Frijja. "It will ease you."

"She's an abstainer," I explained. "From everything. In fact, she don't really approve of being alive at all."

"Be happy," pleads Mickle with Frijja, of whom he's petrified. "I shall ask, the next gig, for money."

"England, after so many deaths," I said, "is in fact under-employed but not over-populated. You take what your conscience tells you, Mickle, and that's *all you can get*, baby. It's your duty. You got your rent to pay me and Dad, for a start. We'll take whatever we can get, don't worry. Write Frijja one of your letters of disconnection, she's a suppressive, and thereafter ignore her even when you meet on the stairs or at the bog door."

I looked at Frijja. I wouldn't want the skinny waif to feel got-at or hurt.

"What you'd have asked him to do yourself," I smiled at her.

I took the wavering cig from Mickle's wavering fingers, and stubbed it out on the naked electric lamp bulb, as I have always learned a good way to command awe and finalise a conversation is to stub out your fag on something unusual. I stubbed one one in a jar of Sweetness's cold cream and even Connor stared.

And since then, Mickle has obediently solved the problem by acting as if Frijja don't exist.

Here we go round the raspberry bush – all in the golden stinking summer with the flowers and flies springing everywhere.

Did you ever see those paintings, rather pretty but surrealist I suppose you'd call them, of London in a state of great realistic detail – only all arse over tip, as for instance Nelson's Column rising majestically mirrored from Regent's Canal. Like that we

was now. And convolvulus ringing the equestrian Alfred (or Caractacus? or Heroin the Wake) before the seat of Parliament.

I found those pictures once, and looked at them before I tore them up, in a magazine I found in an old dump on Paddington Station. I often like to get away to one of the big stations for a bit of peace and quiet, so contemplative it is on the platforms with the dandelions pushing their heads up through the tracks, the clumps of hollyhocks buzzing with dirty little wings pushing aside the sleepers and rails and waving over your head.

I still reckon that if America or Russia had been able to come along to our rescue, they'd've managed something. But their ships just disintegrated when they touched the repellent rays which let nothing in or out except weather and the odd migratory bird or so. Though, they still kept trying to perfect new devices they hoped could make it through; and we watched two Chinese fleets, even, lost at different times trying to get to us; it made no difference – same as the people who tried to leave Britain when they saw these whopping great things hanging over us one fine morning, their little pleasure-steamers and helicopters and all, simply pow! And serve them right for trying to save themselves and leave us to it.

No radio signals, no messages from de Gaulle or aunts and cousins long since emigrated to Sidney and Toronto and Boonga Bay.

Of course every Faculty in the world must have had scientists working out ways to get messages to the As.

And all the professors putting their brains together working out codes and signals to try and communicate with the As, let alone X-ray telescopes and all that to see into the craft, which they never did manage, though the As didn't seem to mind, except just once an impertinent helicopter bleeping over the Birmingham A hull was suddenly blasted out of existence, well blasted isn't the word, no fuss, no noise, just a shiver in the air and then no helicopter. Then widows and orphans and headlines – but first *shock*, that's all.

The disintegration was so utter that the scientists, or so we heard, but of course they only tell us what they want us to know, they even began to work on the assumption that the As use a sort of time-lock to get rid of a moment they disapprove



of. But this hypothetical manipulation of the 4th dimension was just an attractive idea to some scientists – they *wanted* to believe the As might be using that, so they could set to and find out how, because ever since reading H. G. Wells and Dan Dare as kids it had been their dream that it could be done.

Meanwhile, the huge A craft just hung there casting 1000 foot of shadow across each of the big cities, over the Woolworthses and Dolcises and babies out in their prams for an airing. People rush under them when the rain starts so municipal authorities have erected seats and slot-machine arcades under them and charge you for using them.

And then one day, after we'd tried months to get through to them, a message came from them just as a man was trying to climb up a nylon rope-ladder to an under-hatch of one of the Craft.

He'd thrown the ladder from a helicopter and the hooks had actually caught on some 'bars' around the under-hatch – 'bars' that had been noted (from afar) already, as being there possibly for support of a gang-plank or chute if ever the hatch did some day open.

(Perhaps they were even there. I've thought since, expressly for a human being with a nylon rope-ladder.)

The ceaseless tele-vigilance in the  $\frac{1}{2}$ -dozen helicopters and gliders always whirring around the Craft noted a small disturbance, a small silver globe appear suddenly on one rung of the ladder up which the intrepid Baptist minister was climbing from Brumland.

It was the moment, I think now, at which the As finally had broken down to their satisfaction the labyrinth of the English language.

The minister, busily climbing hand over hand in his fresh dog-collar and nail-studded boots, watched from below through binoculars by what members of his congregation could be bothered (this was the 97th attempt to knock on the hatch and get some response from the As) did not at first notice the globe.

It wanted to be noticed.

It seemed to tremble and jump up and down on the rope rung.

"Dad, that thing's *alive!*" I remember saying to Dad as we watched the tiny scene on TV – I almost always switched to the

channel that had been dedicated specially for watching the Craft around the clock, though hardly anything ever happened.

"Perhaps it's an A," Dad said sucking the left droop of his moustache.

I sneered, and Dad flinched. He tried to look as if he hadn't said anything, his surmise had been just indigestion-rumble, much less indelicate than actually daring to open his mouth as though audaciously believing he was worthy to comment.

I had reached that stage in my treatment of Dad. It seemed in another age, in another world, that he had taken the trouble to show off just to bother to delight me, and I had thought he was so tough and hard because, oh, like, he refused ever to touch the sticky jams and marmalades I loved.

But suddenly it seemed as though the TV commentator had woken from a long sleep too.

"There's something – something on the rung – by the Rev's foot—" he was gabbling, though we could all see. "It's quivering a little – it really seems to be trying to attract the Rev's attention – Reverend! Can you *see* it?"

A quacking sound came from the Rev's precariously strapped-on walkie-talkie.

The Rev was jerking around in the beginnings of panic. He thought the commentator was warning him that the As were coming out of the ship for him tentacles a-lust and fangs a-slobber.

The little globe actually jumped, and the Rev bent down to listen to it.

"Phew!" said Dad. Then looked apologetically at me.

The tiniest inorganic tinkling was coming over the radio.

"It's saying something," quacked the Rev. "It's telling us something in English—"

"What does it say? Tell us what it says, Reverend," urged the breathless commentator. "Can you hold it up to the mike?"

But the Rev didn't want to touch it. Later, of course, everyone touched them, in spite of the early warnings about radio-activity and Outer Spatial germs.

Just then a breeze veered under the mighty ship's belly, and we all, all over the 'leagured land', heard the globe's last words . . .

"We want your help."



In a little, tiny, tinny voice that came from tubes.

“Don’t believe it!” cried Dad, jumping up in excitement. “It’s a trick!”

“Of course they need help,” said the Rev, while his glasses slipped off one ear and his Brum flock crowded round their sets. “Your masters – landed like this on a strange planet – they need all the help they can get. And that’s what *I’ve* come to tell you. I’ve come to offer you the hand of international – inter-universal—” he paused. He was feeling sick. He was hastily reeled down. His rope ladder was left dangling like a flutter of nylon web as swiftly the Military’s steel aerial ladders were thrust up beside him and uniformed arms took him down. In all the efficiency, the little silver globe was lost for two days, and when they found it again, it had gone dead. Gerald Durrell withdrew his offer of a reward if it were found for his Jersey menagerie. It wouldn’t talk, it wouldn’t jump, it didn’t quiver or thrum or vibrate, and it ended up in a junk-shop off Leather Lane. A fake one, however, fetched £20,000 at Sotheby’s.

That was only the first of the globes.

After that, they came thick and fast. They had broken down our language. The Aliens wouldn’t emerge themselves – too cautious they was for that – think of the reasons they have to stay tight: our germs, our atmosphere, our hostility, our bloody weather – but the globes came and told us what to do. At first we obeyed from terror, but later we obeyed because some (though not all) that disobeyed were disintegrated like the planes had been.

It seems safe to disobey if you are near a house when the globes come. But even then, you might be blasted some fine day months later as you walk along a country lane amongst the honeysuckle having forgotten all about your Alien order.

The globes can’t come to you when you’re indoors. They can only form in open air. Of course they’ve been examined exhaustively. They’ve had *everything* done to them by our scientists, exhilarated by their own blessed enchanting ignorance in an expanded universe. The best, rather science-fictiony idea is that they spin themselves down through the sky on fine filaments, and Klomp! curl up into the complete ball as soon as their radar tells them their message has reached its objective, its one and only personalised recipient.

Anyway, that’s all hypothetical, because whoever attempts

any kind of screen between us and Them is sooner or later blasted out of existence.

Yet still we keep trying.

"Because it's intolerable," as my spindly cousin says; "our world commanded."

"We've never commanded it. Why shouldn't they?"

Frijja frowned as she took in my idea.

"They're only like the Ancient Romans," I point out. "They'll 'work with us' so they can just get to understand us, as a test-base for their understanding of our whole world. They're quite happy to let us barbarians do our own governing, as long as we acknowledge their overlordship."

"Caligula would be nicer," she says. "It's our world. We were put in it. They weren't. It was created for us."

"Created? Oh, dear, dear," I says. "The scientists say the Aliens' coming proves Science and disproves God," I said taking the water I'd just boiled the eggs in to pour down the bog, that is hygienic, boiling water.

When I came back she had Sweetness on the same tack.

"They could make us change into anything," says Sweetness, looking sick. I don't like poor little Sweetness to be frightened, by other people. I put my arm round about her.

"You've had billets doux from them too, I see," my cousin nodded at my 2 dead globes stood on the dresser among the stickers from Hayling Island.

"They don't have the same shimmer as when they're alive, but they're a good gimmick," I sidestepped. "I know a bloke, you know him, Sweetness, old Oz, goes down the Lane, buys them up, he's stringing them together to make bead curtains, charming chiming sounds they make when you . . ."

"Were you *sent* these?" Frijja asked directly.

I don't approve of giving direct answers to direct askers. Who does she think she is?

"Who do you think you are?" I said. "You may have led a gang in your own territory among the rats and bananas, and even then they finally turned on you and savaged you, but let me tell you—"

"What did the globes say to you?" She had set her eyes on mine.

She hadn't bothered to refute my slander. She neither knew nor cared did I know of the total loyalty of her gang, who'd



brought her up in Dockland since her mother died (naturally enough, since she bore Frijja in a damp cellar with terrified gang-members as midwives) in childbirth, and then her father died from malaria caught off a cargo (and a heart-ache; obviously, this family story is too schmaltzy not to be distastefully true) leaving his infant and his discipline as his legacy to the gang. Pause for tight throats. Tears choked back. I *wanted* her to defend herself.

It's not good for someone to sit back like a slob and take all that's chucked at them.

"One," I said, "rolled genially up to me as I was torturing a cat by a kerb grating one summer day last year. It stopped just beside the cat and it said to me: *Stop*. I said *Why the hell should I?* and *Show me one good reason*, as one does, but as usual it had said its piece and then the light went out of it. I stopped, of course."

"And the other?"

"Shit, they know," I said, spitting, "they know you been obtaining poisons from old warehouses in your manor and infiltrating it into the samples of this and that getting crated up and slung off to the As for analysis. It's a ropey, dicey way of putting them off the scent, 'n it? Suppose they turn out to be joyous about those very poisons, and think Whooppee, this *is* the planet for us, full of yummy old strychnine?"

Defiantly I took an apple from the table-bowl of nails, screwdrivers, chocolate, Black Bombers, fruit and fag-ends – and bit into it without peeling off the skin first with my claspknife, illegal though it is to eat DDT-charged fruit-peel.

"They wouldn't have picked on this world in the first place if they didn't have a pretty fair idea it is just right for them," Frijja said levelly. "It follows that they are probably of much the same chemical format as ourselves. Finding their own planet untenable—"

"You'd make a Hyde Park Corner lecturer," I said, restless under her phraseology, it always seems to say to me, Look, you can understand all this, Sweetness can't but you can, and yet you're unclean, unclean.

"They're probably Martians," Frijja said, "tired of living inside the crust of a dying planet."

"Well, they can't have our planet!" Sweetness burst into runny, leaky tears.

"So after the Dockland 'Fascists', their creatures, failed to kill me even after banging a rusty nail through my head," Frijja remarked, "they sent a globe to you reminding you I was your cousin, and telling you to claim me from the police lost-property, and set your local Alien-inflamed gang on me?"

"You mean that Connor's *Lot*," said Sweetness. "He's a bastard, that one. There was never a feller with such a mean streak as that one. He'd give his grandmother for firefaggots, that Connor."

"It would be far less trouble just to blast you," I says. "What do they want of you, hamstrung but still alive?"

"Save the cat and watch the cat," Frijja said, flicking each of my message-globes with an inquisitive yet contemptuous finger, so they rang a tiny descant.

Sweetness cornered me on the stairs.

"Why don't Connor never come to see me these days?" she demanded.

"Sweetness, you left the light on in the bathroom all night. I came down this morning and found it still on."

"He ain't been since that time, the guns and all. Why ain't he been?"

"You ask him. He don't whisper his prayers to me every night."

To be truthful, I haven't seen Connor since that day either, really, except once in the caff and he bought me a cup of tea but he was with all the others and didn't talk. He never talks, of course, but this time he talked even less. The bigger the crowd, the less he joins it. Yet he never seems to try to be on his own, as if it's never occurred to him he could go lonely walks or have thoughts to himself in his head alone. If you see him in the dark wet streets at night with the bulbs all gone from the straight lamps, he's always patrolling with at least two others in their booted watchful ready stroll. He's perfectly integrated.

A unit, he is, a perfect *part* of the *Lot*. Yet we pick him out, Sweetness and I.

"You want to bring him round?" I advised her. "Get your friend to come here. Gloria. Or Mabs."

"You just want their rent," she says.

She is not so keen on my naming girls. She'd sooner the choice was left to her.



“Why don’t you just go and pull some birds?” she says. “You and Connor could pick what you fancy.”

“I’m lazy,” I snapped. “And what are you doing there? Throwing away the cotton-wool you’ve dabbed your roots with? You’re just pretty wasteful, ain’t you? What’s wrong with keeping it to clean your repulsive mirror with too – bleach is a cleansing agent you know. Cotton-wool don’t sprout off trees you know.”

I felt better when I noted her cringe. I stopped my shaking.

What I remembered with an attack of the shakes was the only occasion I’d been privileged to go pulling along with Connor. It was pre-Alien days, we was very young and we’d gone to the cinema down the end of our block. We seen a shitty film, but there was a couple of useful-looking birds down the front row, so we nipped over seat-backs till we was behind them, then sat down and picked off from our boots the popcorn we’d stood in on the laps of crunching munching Mums as we trekked cross-cinema.

We chatted these 2 up OK, I mean they liked the look of us, you could tell from the way they insulted us and tossed their hair in our faces, it was in the days of Tom Jones bows on long fat back-combed sausage-ringlets. We asked them for a light, then offered them fags, they offered us sweets. What did we want with their sweeties? “Come back of the phoneboxes with us,” we invited. “We’re watching this,” they said. “Well, after it finishes off, then?” They said they wasn’t that sort. Connor snarled “Of course you are.” He was getting a bit angry with them. They was trying to drag it out, trying to get an ice-cream or some sort of courtship out of us to feed their back-combed little egos when they knew right well they was only out for the 1 thing all they was fit for sitting there waiting in the dark for someone to come up behind them they couldn’t care less about the film chewing their gum tossing their legs around watching all the blokes in the seats hardly facing the screen at all. Connor I could tell was excited by the time he even got to them across the cinema, and now the way they held off and played for their little vanity – Connor is not sweet-tempered. So he caught one girl’s wrist as it lay alluringly, the charms on her bracelet twinkling in the light of John Wayne, along the back of her seat in mid-giggle, and she wondered what he was doing and then gasped as she found he’d put it in her hand, which he dragged over. He forced her to do it too – she was too amazed

to scream, I was the one who nearly screamed I was so terrified, an usher would pass any minute and see – I don't know how long it took, very quick I expect as he was already so ready but it was a timeless panic – I could tell he must be uncomfortable too with her bracelet digging in him (cheap tin you can come to harm that way) but he was grim – then it all spurted up on her, she grabbed her wrist away and shouted, "You vile pig," as he zipped up and Connor and I got out of there we walked up the aisle very casual and then bunked out through the emergency exit and run like mad under the fire escapes and God and Jesus I never stopped trembling till we was on the bus. "I'll never go to another cinema with you again," I said. "She deserved it," he said pulling on his fag. "I agree she deserved it the dim cow," I says, "But never ask me to go the flicks with you again."

"Have that party you keep on about," I says now to Sweetness. "Invite him and some of the Lot. Just three of them, say; tell them there's only three girls too, so they won't bring more than twenty other blokes with them."

"Why can I tell him I'm having a party? He'll know it's just another excuse to get him coming round I've had two birthdays this year already."

"Go ahead, tell him it's to celebrate my cousin Frijja's victory over him and Helmut," I say.

"Jesus wept," Sweetness says in awe.

Sweetness ran Connor to earth over his baked beans and egg fried in bicycle oil down the caff, and got him to promise to come to the party. That doesn't mean he'll come.

Now she's got her friend Glor to come and stay in the room under the eaves. There are others empty, but Glor would have that one, it's cheaper because of the way the rain pours in. Glor's kid Tarkwin (age 4) is in a drawer out of the old bureau, as there's not proper cot.

"If Connor gets a look at Glor," Sweetness nibbles her nail, a sign of intellect for her, "will he be sure to come along?"

"Depends how succulent Glor is looking," I shrug. "Wouldn't it be better if you yourself was slowly wandering past the caff looking tasty? Wash your hair instead of brushing talc in it. I'll give you a lend of my bathroom."

'My' bathroom is the one that Frijja and Mickle should I



suppose always have access to, it being on their floor, but I make them go down a flight and share with the rest of the house – so that way I keep the key of this to myself, always locked I keep it, so I can wander in at any time and know the geyser is ready to use, I don't have to wipe someone else's tidemark off the bath before I even get in for my own, and the chain ain't been recently broke by someone in a tantrum – Mickle, for instance, never has got the knack of pulling the chain right especially when he's blocked to the eyeballs, and Sweetness doesn't know what a chain is for.

“Buy a new dress,” I suggested.

I wanted her to lure him along if possible.

“It would be safer to let him see Glor,” she says. “Glor can't fail. She's guaranteed.”

“You can be as good as Glor,” I says, kidding her along so she'll be at her best too, though of course she can't match quite that musky dark look of Glor's.

So she goes out to work a couple of nights, she doesn't bring them back but has it off in their cars so I don't get any cut, and with the money she suddenly puts to use she turns up in a tight new dress, emerald green with a bodice frill of pink lace so low you don't know which is frill and what might be nipple, and you keep peering to determine.

“Bravo,” I says, “fabulous, me deah.”

“Great,” says Glor, her dark eyes smouldering, and of course she goes out and buys one too then, intending to throw Sweetness in the shade, and she won't show us it. “On the party night, not before,” she says.

“What will you wear, Frijja,” I says.

“I'm not there.”

“You cow,” Sweetness cries. “It's all for you, this party.”

Frijja pushes away her plate and goes out.

I suddenly shove aside the table, so hot grease spatters in Tarkwin's little curls, and go out after her.

I grabbed her shoulder.

Have I touched her since she was ill?

I don't think I've touched her since then. A funny thing, her shoulder is smooth and warm like a healthy animal's. I always think of her as so remote and thin and cold.

A horrible shudder went over me as I touched Frijja.

She turned to face me.

I had no idea really of what I meant to say. I just wanted to grab and stop her, I didn't plan more than that. So do you know, as her eyes coolly questioned my face, I told the truth.

"You get on my wick. All that I've. All grammar to show up the rest of us," I said. "What harm we ever done you? Nothing but kindness you've had from us."

"The way I talk," she said.

"Your princess-complex," I sneered. "A way to keep the ignorant louts on their bellies around your pedestal. You only picked it up from books. That's all."

Frijja didn't answer. She is a very boring personality. She is so secure in herself, and so uninterested in the rest of us except perhaps Dad, that she is *impossible* to rile! Don't that give one the creeps, someone without a nice human temper. Mind you, I have no temper. I am completely in control of myself.

But I have a great interest in ethics. I will always make sure my conscience is clear. If it isn't, I'm uncomfortable. I sometimes do things people might think questionable, ordinary people. But I have always a reason I am always completely clear as to my justification.

But her! She's lazy, morally. She can't be bothered justifying herself. She will answer a question civilly. She won't rise to bait.

"So our party ain't good enough for The Frijja of Dockland," I said. I laughed pleasantly.

She smiled. She glanced at my hand on her shoulder as she turned to walk off. My hands is clean, always, and sensitive. I didn't like touching her. I wouldn't remove it so, as though she thought I'd forgotten it was there, she gently reached up and removed it.

"That was offensive!" I yelled.

She walked up the stairs to her own room.

"Your syphilitic darlings from the Docks left you to rot in your own juice, remember!" I roared up the length of the echoing stairwell. "If they don't love you no more, and us you spurn too, where are you ever going to get any human commerce?"

The stair-well clouded. The windows rattled. As if the panes was tambourines. A flurry of weather flashed past. The street door banged open. A little silver globe rolled in.

I moved my foot so it wouldn't touch it.

It was all covered with glassy beads of rain. That didn't affect it. It knew when it reached me. It said: *She is harm for you.*

Now I shall tell the real reason I hate Frijja. I haven't put this in this book before. I don't know really why I am writing this book. It disturbs me to write it. It is a sort of scratching of itches I thought I had deadened and made to rot away through neglect a right time ago.

She started me off on it. She has me picking through the old old feelings again and I am starting up that sort of perceptiveness I thought I had threw out along with the other old rubbish.

I see things with my ribs as well as my brain now. I mean, I can feel a quiver in my bowel when I see a patch of blue petrol spilt on a wet road. My brain don't just think petrolspiltminda-skid. Even my ribs doesn't just shout *Bluuuuue. What a blue!* I see with my *eyes* as well. That's bad. That's going too far.

And then along comes the right word, a nasty senseless habit that should have gone out with the garbage, along with all the things that clutter and soggy your life, and sugar and sticky and *freshen* it up, and make you waste time and nervous energy and make a fool of yourself over things that don't farther any ends, only pull us backwards in the race. You find yourself thinking That was not the blue of denim, like a summer sky is, nor the blue of an Admiral's eyes like a summer sea, it was the blue of mouldy gorgonzola with a phosphorescence on it. Oh, it rots you, it draws you and weakens you and pulls you, this coming back to the *light* when you thought you'd stamped all such sliminess out of your system.

And yet I indulge it because I know how to do it. It's my skill, to be perceptive. I'm famous locally for my slyness.

And what did I write all those words *about* for myself, and still not put that the time in the café Connor bought me a tea, I was with Frijja?

As we come in, Connor glanced at us. He got up and come over and said, "Have a tea, Pelham," to me, more a statement than a question.

"Great," I thanked him.

He spun a shilling on the table and the man what owns the place had to come from behind his counter and take the order.

"What'll you have?" Connor asked Frijja. He didn't call her 'Luv' as I suppose he would have tagged on the end of the sen-



tence to any other female in the world, even if he was going to bash her up the next 10 minutes.

"I won't have anything, thank you," she said civilly.

Connor raised his brows, he would of let it pass, but the others at his table looked. Well, that was nothing either, I think he just made it his excuse. In his head I think he said, *She's making a fool of me* (he wouldn't use the word *fool* but I don't like to swear nor to write down swear words) where normally he'd never of thought it. He just *wanted* for some reason to make a stab at contact with her. He put his face right against hers and said very nasty, "What's wrong with you then?" She should of been flattered, as any other girl in London would of been. They all know that Connor's only way to make contact is to be nasty, and it's rare that he's interested enough.

Frijja put her hand on his face, the palm of her hand on his moody fair pock-marked face, it was just the only way she could get up as he loomed over her chair, and pushed him away, and got up and walked over to another table and sat down.

I didn't know what to do.

Connor didn't look offended or go black, and none of the Lot behind him snickered. They wouldn't dare. He just stared at her, then as my tea arrived he said in a normal voice, "There's your tea Pel."

"Yeh, great," I said.

She made no move or sign to make me join her, just ordered a mushroom omelette for herself when the man went over, but I couldn't sit with Connor, his place was at the Lot table with no seat spare, and I didn't fancy being on my own, exposed, so I went over to her.

"OK, your omelette?" I said.

I knew they could hear every word we said.

"I've eaten worse," she said, like everyone does.

I couldn't let it alone. I reckoned I'd put myself enough with her by sitting with her after she done that publicly to Connor, I couldn't agree with her over anything else as well.

"Not good enough for your highness?" I sneer.

She glances at me. "Not good enough for anyone." She's pleasant enough.

"What's up with you, who are you having on?" I says. "What else are you used to?"

“Since you ask,” Frijja says, tearing the bread with her strong ivory-colour teeth, “I’m used to kiln-baked breads from our Dock ovens, and the cheeses we mellow in vats in the deserted warehouses, and plenty of real meat. Our refrigerated store-houses.”

“You eat each other too when you ain’t smart enough to catch the rats, don’t you,” I say conversationally, and I hear a ripple of approval go through the listening Lot behind.

“Rat,” she says, “is likely to be unclean,” and she picks her teeth very elegant with a match.

She never uses old spent matches for a toothpick, only fresh unused ones.

They laugh.

“That’s one on you, Pel!”

I am known locally as The Rat. That is a compliment. Often I’ll introduce myself as Rat, so I’m properly placed. But this is that sort of conversation where you feel she’s scoring because she’s not attacking – you don’t know does she know your name is that, or is she totally innocent and detached as she seems? That, I think, would be worst. To be detached is a genuine sin. It’s saying ‘Up you’ to all your brothers and sisters in this age of need. “What, catch the venereals too, do they, from the gallant Dock gang members that can’t find no females?” I say because they’re all listening to hear what I come back with.

Connor leans forward on the table.

Frijja glances at me. “True, there are no women there,” she says.

“What about you?” says Connor, my ears catch his intent calm voice, but there are raucous shouts from the others almost simultaneously overlaying it: “You have to do for all of them, do you, darling?”

“Let’s try not to pick on her,” I says. “She’s no slag, you know. She’s their Great White Virgin Queen. They all worship Our Frijja – that’s the official version, anyway, even if they did tip her out with a spike through her ear!”

Frijja blinks. Like almost a wince. It’s the first emotion I’ve seen her show since I’ve tried to draw her on the subject of her ex-gang back in Dockland.

A little weasel from the Lot, that Kevin with the half-gouged eye, stood up on the table and begun to thump it: “You’re winning, you’re winning, Rat!” he squealed.

They remembered how she'd held them at bay when they was a mob with blood-lusting guns. They don't bear *vengeance*, just malice, but now she's no longer a sexless aureole-headed whiplash figure appeared from nowhere high on a staircase with a machine-gun, she's just a small lone bird eating runny omelette and being pack-baited.

Frijja finished her omelette. They was shouting filth at her now. All the filth ended in 'Darling—' it was all questions about life in the Docks with all those big blokes and her availability now and the fact she weren't so choice, thin and recently hospitalised (because of her own kind!) here where there is plenty of bird competition. I was drumming on the table with the rest. I got in a few witty sallies but we was none of listening to the rest, just fixing our glowing eyes on her. Connor and a few of the hard men was laying back in their wooden chairs, their eyes narrowed as they drew on their fags stuck in their long unshaven jaws, squinting watching us all.

One of the ones down from Glasgow, a Blackhill turk with red stubble growing like fungus over his bottle-scar puckering up a whole faceful of flesh, he reached and ripped open her shirt.

Frijja pulled it close again.

There was silence.

"Now we'll see the Queen of the Docks in action," someone said.

She shoved her plate of half-eaten bread and cheese across to me.

"You have it, Pel;" she said absolutely nicely. "You like pre-packaged bread and you like processed cheese."

Then she walked out the caff. Connor heard her clear as a bell. They all heard her. They none of them understood. They thought she'd lost, they thought she'd retreated. They didn't know she won.

That's why I hate her.

We had the room all fixed up nice for the party. Mickle brought down his sax, he was going to play along with some Getz records, I didn't tell him nobody would like it and they'd ignore him and put on something else after all the fuss of inviting him down special to play.

We had candles. The chairs was pushed round the walls. There



was masses of shant. I use my influence with the bottle-shop, he's frightened to death of me since I used to take every opportunity to stroll in there in Connor's company.

The gram is on full, the curtains drawn, the candlelight flickers, a red light bulb all dull and great.

Sweetness, the pink lace in this light has gone rosy like her bosom and face, you can't make much out, but Glor chose well as she promised. Her dress is backless black-sequined slither that moves when she does like something wet and slimy she's rolled in. You look in Glor's eyes and they're like holes leading straight down to her womb.

Connor comes in with 8 of the Lot.

I told you he'd bring more than we asked, but 9 of them is a lot. I don't know if we'll keep them amenable and partyfied. I reckon Dad is in for another heart-attack tonight.

They sprawl in the armchairs and Connor sees down Glor's eyes while of course automatically pulling Sweetness down. The surplus wander round examining the gaff and pouring themselves big slugs they knock back like Tizer. Someone automatically gets out cards. That'll keep them quiet till the game gets really nasty when it'll keep them far from quiet, still, let us for the time being count our blessings.

"Where's that One?" says Connor.

"Who's that?" I say casual pouring him whisky.

"I thought we was all coming to see it," he says.

"I'll go and tell her to hurry," Sweetness says, anxious for everything to be just right since Connor wishes to play bait-Frijja again tonight.

"She probably doesn't know what end of the dress to get into," drawls Glor. "She never wears anything but them sawn-off jeans.

Sweetness runs back in.

"Of all the bitches!" she yells. "Not even there! She's ignored our invitation!"

"She's not in the house at all?" I say, then regret it, because that sets them off on a hunt.

They don't break much though, just disturb Dad a bit as he startles in the middle of his evening onanism to see the Lot leering in.

"Where's *her* room, then?" demanded Connor, holding aloof from the yelling and tally-ho'ing of the others.

"Here," I said, and I led him up the stairs to it.

He looked in at the door I held open.

There was just the 2 of us there. It was still light. The late May dusk only licked the edges of the room. I could smell his leather and the humus of his sadistic body that doesn't even think about itself to know it is.

He went across to the window and looked out on the flat roof outside.

"Why are there bars on this window?" he says.

"What do you think, these days?" I counter.

He tries one with his hand. It looks like he's fingering it casually, then suddenly a sinew stands out on his wrist and he's hunched one shoulder a hunch of power under his airman's jacket, and the bar twists and shrivels and rust flakes off on the palm he holds out to me with a bit of the bar in it.

"That for her bars," he says, and spits on the Indian-marmalade rug.

"Still, she could get between them - that time . . . didn't she?" he strolls over to her bookcase. "What's all this?"

"Books." And then, as he turned away un-interested, I added craftily, "She likes them."

Instantly his arm lashed out and he'd swept them all from the shelf. They fell in a pattern of paper on the rug, pages and covers upturned and defenceless.

Systematically he stamped and scuffed them around, till they was a mess of torn and dirtied confetti. I could see illustrations, E. J. Sullivan and Photography Year Book illustrations, from the days when there was still such events, trampled and booted away to nothing and for ever. I kept quiet. I felt like Connor was stamping on something in my own heart, something secret and too strong for me to stamp on myself.

He flung himself to lie on his back on her bed, calm, not even breathing heavy, he'd only been booting paper.

He put his leather arms behind his head and grinned up at me, his teeth and eyes lilac in the light dusk.

"Send that Gloria in to me, Pel."

Very dark, the lampless streets, by the time Frijja arrived in from them. In fact, so dark you could tell the lightening of the dawn was on its way. I was sat on the stairs like a waiting-up guardian.

"What time of the night do you call this? Where you been?"  
I snapped.

She looked at me. She laughed.

I felt my mouth twitch into a sour smile.

"Have some . . ." I offered my plate at her I'd been down the scullery and made myself a pile of hunky sandwiches.

"Tomatoes!" She took one. Then she spat it on the stair. "This bread—" she said. "I can't." She sounded distressed.

"I been noticing lately," I said. "You eat like a sparrow."

"Sparrow-hawk," she joked. She neatly toed the spat-out bread through the banisters and off the stair, to show she hadn't meant to be careless of my housekeeperliness.

"Aren't you hungry?" I pursued, launching myself into my game, which is 2nd-nature to me and which I keep slipping into since I minted it years ago to deflect aggression from aggressors around me, my role of *Sweet Succour for the Afflicted no Matter how Rapacious They Be*.

"Ravenous." Frijja put her hand on her hollow belly. The jeans there are so flat they go in concave, and the only thing you could seize her by there is just the material of the jeans themselves.

"Come in the kitchen."

I rose, she followed me down the back stairs through the slitherings of silverfish, I pulled the cord and on flicked the weak light like a blur of stale yellow dishwater laying over everything. That showed how late it was — electricity isn't allowed again till dawn, once midnight is over, which is I suppose why Sweetness invariably forgets she's left it on once it turns itself off.

"Now let's see what's in the icebox."

I call it the icebox because, well, because I just do. It helps keep up the standards, even if it is in fact a cast-iron meat-safe with holes in the door to ventilate, stood in a tray of lukewarm water, with a damp dish-towel hung over its lid.

It always smells a bit rancid actually somehow.

"Ham" I say alluringly.

"It'll do," Frijja seizes it, "and more tomatoes if you can spare them." I can, but I won't let her bite them till I have rinsed them off under the tap, which leads me to note the slug which has come in through the ever-moist 'concrete' between the tiles around the sink.



I put salt on it and derive great pleasure from watching it shrivel, tossing its blind wet helpless head around not knowing which way to turn and having no way to turn anyway.

Frijja glances at me over her ham and tomato.

“What way did your party go – as parties go?”

“It was a right giggle,” I said, holding myself still from hitting a heavy pickle-bottle on the slug. “Lots of booze, couple of punch-ups.”

“Good hosts, my uncle and you? I suppose upstairs is smothered with snoring bodies,” she remarked, no mention of why she hadn’t turned up, just as though it could be taken for granted that because she said she wouldn’t come, she didn’t.

“Come upstairs and see for yourself,” I invite her.

I scraped her chair back for her.

I led her up through the house-dark, and up again, past the snoring sprawled Weasel and O’Shea clutching Sweetness among the bottles where they had all eventually passed out together on the initial landing, up through the centre of the 4 little staircases that run off at different angles each with its small wide windows like cats’ yawns letting in the black breezes of London under A anarchy.

And we reached Frijja’s own bedroom. And I pushed open the door for her, bowing with a flourish.

But she hasn’t been Queen of the Docks for 16 years, nearly all her life, without having a valid 6th sense. She had known there was something wrong, she knew I was gloating over something, since she seen me in the kitchen with the slug. It makes me hate her more than ever, this feeling she gives me that I’m a predictable genus, I’m on a par with any number of other rat-blokes she’s come across and dealt with in her career.

There was light in her room.

Connor had kept the candle afflicker for hours. He had kept himself awake too, waiting for her, at every creak of the old stair or bang of a wind-ridden door. He’d even come down and bought some pills off me to stop himself possibly dropping off.

He’d arranged the dress of Glor, who lay curled asleep in the crook of his body. She’d gone asleep with her dress still zipped up, but to make her look more suggestive a shock to Perfect Purity walking in, he had stage-managed her, so she had just a

sheath of black sequin-sewn glitter peeling off her here and there like skin off a fleshy double-thighed banana.

But as we opened the door, I saw his hand flash like lightning and his own zip was done up when we come in. What a waste! All night he'd laid there with his fly open, waiting to impinge on Frijja's mind an insolent image she should find for ever unforgettable ever after she innocently walked unsuspectingly in for her sleep.

But no, for some reason suddenly at the last instant his nerve shot from under him and he was quite reasonably decent when she did walk in.

And there was her books, her maps, her bureau with her personal things, lying smashed and dirtied everywhere – and her windows and bars broke and splintered.

Her pram, that she curls up in to read in, laid wheels in the air, the springs coiling down from the slashed mattress, the thin tyres ripped and the spokes exposed.

She showed no flicker on her face, though she did stand still a moment and take the scene in. But it seemed (somehow) less a triumph for us than for her. It was Glor's fault. She did indeed look as suggestive a lump as we'd planned, telling a tale of the use of Frijja's bed, but she was snoring.

Frijja didn't say, "Get out," or any of the other things we was looking forward to. She didn't show even disgust, nor any hurt.

She said, "I'll sleep elsewhere. But let me get my toothbrush." She walked over to the bureau.

Connor sat up on her bed and grabbed her viciously by the wrist.

"Not before you tell us where you were all night," he said.

"Working against the As," Frijja said straight out. It is one of her more irritating aspects that when asked a simple question, she almost always gives a simple answer, no "Is it your business?" and all that.

Connor was thrown aback. He'd expected a bit of fun, spending the next  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour ferreting it out of her.

"Against Them?" he said in a belligerent voice.

Frijja laughed. She sat down on her bed, her free hand pushing aside Connor's feet under the covers and the plush eider-down Dad found her when she arrived. She laughed happy. "Don't you," she said, "sound a soupcon grotesque, you a common-or-garden mercenary thug under a neat black swas-

tika, talking about your holy allegiance to Them, bug-eyed monsters straight out of USA comic-books? (Or possibly, I grant you, from Hoerbiger.) I lay a £ to a piece of shit, you used to disbelieve in everything like Them when your mother tried to take you to church and tell you about wingèd angels!”

Connor twisted her wrist so I could see the veins empurple and the white of her face turned to wild rose-red.

Suddenly Connor was gasping head-down in an arm-lock as my limber cousin had cart-wheeled herself into an arc across the bed, levering herself by his grip on her wrist though it must of really agonised her, and her other forearm was up against his adamapple and she was lunged over him pressing his head down to cracking-point with her shoulder because he still had her left wrist. Connor jabbed his hard elbow back at her ribs but, expecting that, she'd matter-of-factly braced her skinny ribs for such a whack.

Connor forced her back and somersaulted. They landed on the floor, Connor at a crouch but with Frijja's stranglehold still on his throat. Connor jumped up and swung Frijja (on his back) right against the wall before *I* had time to expect it. But *she* got her legs round his waist so he had her on him like a uncle giving a kid a jockeyback. He kept slamming her backwards against the wall. It must really be jarring her spine, but she stuck it. Meanwhile Connor was beginning to cough. He is strong, but no one can take that for long.

He stopped moving much, and tried to scrabble and claw her arm away from his throat.

Tarkwin woke up from the floor where he'd fallen asleep – he always stays with his mum. He watched in fright and excitement.

Glor didn't wake, she'd smoked charge in the evening.

Connor had nearly let go of my cousin's wrist. He got her little finger and viciously jabbed it up at right angles.

Frijja tightened her right arm.

Connor couldn't grab for her balls, seeing she wasn't a man, could he. He could only choke. He was much weaker.

“Shall I kill you?” Frijja inquired.

All this time I had wondered if I ought to rush in and bash her on the head with a bit of pram or suchlike. Well, I say 'all this time'. Of course, in fact it was a few seconds or so. They are both agile and hard as guerillas. Connor from his years as a



Congo mercenary after his dishonourable discharge from the Merch – Frijja from her bleak monarchy in the trade-deserted jungle-wastes of Dockland.

I would of done it like a shot, knocked her out or slit her ear from ear, if I'd thought Connor would be pleased and warm with me after.

But I held back. I was a little bit scared she might choke Connor, but not really sure she would. And something told me Connor would not want *me* to deal with her, he would not be warm with me after.

But the result of me holding back, was that Connor would not give in. Even at this point, he insisted on not letting go.

He is not a Leader, like Helmut, who would know fucking well (excuse my vehemence, reader) when to save his skin and smarm gracefully. Connor is a good 2nd- or even 4th-in-command, blunt, suspicious of all, yet trusting to his Cause or his Lot in its abstract form, and he is a soldier, even if a mercenary thug. He is contented and relaxed within discipline, within a framework of obedience. He don't try to save his skin. He goes over the top yelling for the swastika (or the shamrock, or whatever) while the enemy snipers pick him off by his silhouette and he knows they are. He don't give in.

"No – don't kill him—" I shouted. "Oo," Tarkwin sucks 6 fingers and a thumb at once in his thrill.

Connor's elbow knocked the candle.

It fell on the spoiled books. They turned black and curled as though alive. Brisk little bright flames busied themselves here and there and there and here.

The leg of the bed had a mane of flames. The pillow caught. "Glor!"

I bounded on the bed, which immediately slid on its casters and banged to a shudder against the broken window. "Glor!" I pulled her head off the crackling pillow. The red tongues jumped for her hair.

Frijja, still calm, let go Connor and he tried to cough but his throat was momentarily paralysed and his pockmarks gone blue from lack of blood circulation.

Frijja walked over to help me with Glor. The eiderdown, a flaring glory with sparks spitting off it like roman candles, fell

between her and Glor and more paper on the floor started burning.

Frijja disregarded the eiderdown and made to wade over it. But Connor hurled her back, his arms round her waist.

"Do you want to burn?" he hoarsely roared at her.

Tarkwin whimpered. He tried to run to his mother over the flames, the sparking eiderdown. I think he thought if he ran he'd get through too quick for the flames to catch him. They did.

I seized the kid back. Frijja lunged at me too out of Connor's arms and together we tried to slap out the flames on his burning Batman T-shirt and his grubby thin little cowboy-fringed jeans. He didn't cry, he was too shocked, his little white face all points.

Connor it was who managed to get Glor off the bed. He lugged her over his shoulder. "Connor!" I said. "She's setting you alight." I pulled open Frijja's rickety wardrobe to see if we could wrap something round her to suffocate the flames. But Frijja had not a single garment hanging in her wardrobe except for one spare leather belt. Somehow I never realised before, she hasn't even a jacket.

None of the bedclothes was any use for the purpose, singeing and charring as rapid as they could go.

Connor jammed the door wide and roared for the others. Then, without even waiting to see if they'd wake and come, he flung Glor, flames and all, still dead to the world with her mouth wide open, on the lino and turned back in to us.

He seized Frijja. Leaving me to follow with the kid, he slung Frijja over his shoulder and her he carried past Glor (licked by flames feeding on her dress, sequins popping everywhere) and down to the next landing before he let her go. I caught a glimpse of her upside-down face as he carried her past me in the thick oily smoke by now pouring out of the room. She was laughing a bit, though as soon as he set her down she darted back up the stairs again to Glor.

Suddenly the house was full of the Lot. Helmut and Dad-in-pyjamas worked side by side. Dad glanced at me through the smoke. "You see *now*," I gently points out to him, "what a good thing I let Sweetness have her party here the kid had set her heart on, and let her invite Connor and them. Otherwise where would we have got help when the fire started?"

The Lot had hoses (they enjoy gadgets and collect them every opportunity, these they won off the firemen once called to douse them when there was a demonstration followed by the Battle of Cromwell Road) but no water. They ran up and down with a few buckets from the scullery, sloshing more on the stairs than the flames. In the end they mostly beat it all out with their jackets. Lucky, lucky there was so many.

It smelt vile. Weasel and O'Shea grumbled about their charred jacket-sleeves. Frijja's room gaped like a black rib-cage. The dawn had come, and with it the early summer drizzle. It sent little sizzles up off the still-hot wreckage.

Embers glowed in the bed, bookcase and pram.

Some of the broken glass-shards had melted.

Plaster had fell in big lumps on the wreckage. That had helped, actually, smothering the burning. Smoke hung about. The rafters of the attic floor above grinned at us.

"I'm off back to bed," one of the turks said. "I'll take me fucking jacket with me for a hot-water-bottle."

The kid started a little cry to itself.

Glor lay, her dress a mangy-looking sticky clinging puddle, her mouth still emitting snores.

Connor hit Frijja a back-hander across her face.

"I never disbelieved my mother," he said.

The next day I was up after a thorough lay-in. I like a lay-in now and then, after a Crisis say. Well I'd been up all night hadn't I.

Let the sweeping and the laundering go wank itself I thought to myself (though as you know I am not by nature profane) and what did I do but turn over and pull the blanket back over my head in my little cave of fug.

When I got up and wandered down to cook a few beans, I found the Lot had just moved into our Cellars as they'd always wanted, as though by right after they put out our fire last night.

Helmut had a long table drawn up under a lamp in one corner, and there was dynamite and rope stood about in boxes. I had a fit. But though I blustered about candles and holocausts, they just smiled in their beards, Helmut and the hard men.

So when Frijja and I met at the table for our beans, there was Connor too. "Nice morning it turned out," Connor said con-



versationally. It was, too, sparkling through on to the cutlery. Frijja glanced at him and wouldn't speak. She made herself a plateful, rinsed out the pot, stepped over some lounging bodies and took her plate upstairs.

Connor moved fast, if he didn't actually run, and stopped her. "You aren't going up to your room?" he said.

"Why not?" Frijja asked.

"It's a burnt-out shell!"

"It's a fresh morning. I'll have a good view over my plate."

She went on up.

He turned to me.

"She never slept in that nest last night?"

"She slept with Sweetness."

"Are you giving her a fresh room?"

"If you say," I said, watching for his reaction.

"Well, she's not got much gear for the removals-van!" he chuckled, this was wild hilarity from Connor.

I smiled carefully. So did some of the blokes lying around with their plates on their bellies.

"Her toothbrush and an escaped book of poetry," I catalogued.

"And her ickle pin-machine," rumbled O'Shea.

"Who'd've thought she'd get so upset over some 'books,'" said Connor as though it was a foreign word. "I mean, what are they? Just paper."

He started spooning beans in his mouth. His elbow went up and down like a pump handle and he grasped his defenceless spoon like his fist was a vise.

Sweetness drifted in, then started at sight of Connor, and came forward, all dimples of welcome.

He hadn't looked up from his meal and I shoved her outside before he noticed her.

"What - you—" she struggled.

"Sweetness," I said, "you aren't fit for human consumption in them dirty greasy slippers and ain't you got no hair-brush? I know it's your monthly, I took your sheets for laundry this morning. But you don't have to go right under. Do you know what I read the other day? Cucumber laid on the cheeks is great for the complexion."

"Gee, thanks," Sweetness gazed at me.

Glor, Sweetness, Tarkwin and I (but Dad stayed upstairs making the beds) went down to watch the evening meeting of the Lot in our cellar. We weren't thrown out. They really, without coming out and saying it straight, were glad to have an audience. And though it really all was most edifying and blood-curdling, oaths and some flashy slashing of thumbs to sign documents in blood, I was mainly preoccupied by my mental rehearsal of the moment I really must stand up and inquire of Helmut how long he meant to go on using our larder without replenishing it.

They had done the cellar up quite nice and home-like, covering the bare mildewy walls with banners and wreaths of plastic oak-leaves and someone had painted huge swastikas that had dribbled a bit. I reckon you need some basic intelligence to draw a swastika, I always get them the wrong way round. They had had a happy time, using all the colours of the rainbow, including powder-pink and sky-blue swastikas, and one was picked out in shiny coloured drawing-pins on a big sheet of corrugated cardboard covered with fag-packet silverfoil. (That same innocent fag-packet foil is one of the things they based their wealth and first steep rise on – they simply cornered the market in pretty foil no one else collected except to buy old guide-dogs for the blind with.) The only colour they hadn't used, which must have broke their hearts, was blood-red – it looks too bolshish, and is sacred to the use of the Comms. When I say basic intelligence is needed to draw swastikas at all, then add I can't do it right half the time when I doodle them, like when I'm thinking of Connor I may happen to doodle an eagle or swastika, I don't mean I haven't basic intelligence. I have too much. That's my burden, my cross I always bear.

Finally, I stood up and I said my say. But it come wrong rather.

I cleared my throat in a lull when they seemed to be concluding their own Minutes. I stood and said, "If I may speak—"

But Weasel spoke over me, just some joke about the dynamite and Helmut's cigar.

I went on, "Are you going to eat all our food?" That came out in a silence. It sounded so, well, to their ears, *insolent* – instead of bold yet calm as it would've been with my first bit audible, that I instantly tagged on the end – "After all, I *am* your host."

Helmut bit the end off his Wills Whiff and spat it in my

direction. "That's just what you'll want to stay, Rat. There are plenty of other things you could be in this house."

Desperately I said, "Yes, but—"

"*But . . . ?*" repeated O'Shea nastily fingering his ever-ready ever-rite knife.

"The food'll all be gone – we took months building up and balancing that store – protein, iron, vitamin C—"

They all burst out in a ragged howl of what I suppose one could call laughter for want of a better word. But Helmut held up one hand and it snickered to a stop.

"And we're vandals, upsetting the diary-planned quality as well as the quantity, eh, Rat?"

I nodded gratefully.

"Call us vandals once more – or  $\frac{1}{2}$  a time more – and there'll be one less of us to use it up," he said very, very silky and awful. The cheering and hooting burst out louder than ever. He'd been playing to the gallery after all.

My knees were so shaken I couldn't even sit down. I went on standing there, a target for them. I seen Helmut gouge a man's eye out once. I had to rush away and masturbate after, but do you know it wasn't that I enjoyed it. My nerves was so terribly jangled by it, I wasn't right for days after.

The 2 girls was very quiet, just biding and taking in the flavour of the scene. But Glor's little kid Tarkwin burst out in little snivels.

Helmut strode over and lifted him up, under his armpits, so his little shoulders was wrenched up under his ears.

Glor made no move, but she seemed turned to stone. She reckoned playing it quiet and still was the only way for both or at least one of them (her) to stay unnoticed/unscathed.

"*What* have we here?" says Helmut the jolly uncle. Then he snaps out, "And any snapping from you bitches, and this child is dropped on its head on the stone floor, and you can come when you like and shovel up the curls and pieces."

Glor's eyes glowed on the kid, she never even glanced to Helmut. It knew something bad was happening again (something bad happens every so often to it) and its small permanently soiled fingers that are so small I marvel where the joints fit in so they're able to bend, knuckled against its eyes in that unco-ordinated, un-practised way that very young kids knuckle



away their tears as a) tears trickle, uncomfortable and b) they inflame and provoke adults.

This whole bit meant that Helmut and the Lot have in mind for the girls something they know the girls won't want, and will have to be coerced into accepting.

"You don't think I'd do it, do you?" says Helmut softly, his Whiff still firm between his teeth. "You think I'm too soft and sentimental—"

And he made to dash the kid's brains out, hefting its mini-size, manageable grubby body while not one of us even breathed he would get carried away by his gesture and complete it  $\frac{1}{2}$  for enjoyment and  $\frac{1}{2}$  for example to us.

Then my cousin flung through the cellar archway from the stone steps.

She had her knife in her hand and her gun in her other hand, her Army revolver that she always carries like Sweetness carries Kleenex.

"Put that boy down slowly like a box of eggs, Helmut," she says across the cellar.

Helmut stares at her. He lowers the little quiet quiet kid to the ground.

"You'll not live long, Gina Loren," he sneers at her.

"I can look after myself, Helmut," Frijja says quite amiably.

She starts stepping towards him to take the kid back to Glor. Tarkwin won't move though Glor's arms are out to him.

As Frijja steps, swinging ceaselessly but delicately in full circle to keep herself covered (and we know if she's shot in the back she'll wheel like lightning and drop whoever done it before she falls) towards Helmut, Lot thugs rise behind her where she's passed, then remain in stooped postures ready to leap but uneasy under her vigilance.

It is Connor's arms that grasp her both at once round her waist from behind. He holds her tight in front of him as if he's about to have her arse. She doesn't struggle, though. Before the others close in, she simply shoots downwards into the same foot she stuck the knife in before. Connor grunts and his grip jerks, involuntary, for a second in which second she has forced out of his arms and she's reached the kid, whose hand she takes as gentle as if it is in fact a small egg.

Helmut grins wolfish at her.

Now she's with Helmut she relaxes. It might seem a crazy

way to play, but she has her 6th sense as well as her automatic caution and her guerilla expertise. She knows Helmut won't destroy her today, not for a while yet in fact. She and Helmut are 2 of a kind really, and like all leaders he's lonely, he don't often meet anything like a kindred spirit and he wants to savour the full challenge, not cut it off quick (unless suddenly pushed or unable to control himself) and then be left lonely again.

"You push your luck, Pin Up Girl," he says.

She knows she does, and don't bother to reply.

"Now," she says, facing them all, the kid held close at her knee. "I'm growing mushrooms in these compost-boxes around the wall. I don't mind you holding your amateur theatricals down here as long as you don't get strong light on them, nor throw dregs of liquor and so on in there. I see you ripped down the moist sacks I had up in a curtain. OK - but let me damp your flags and hang them near instead. Now, in a while you'll see little silvery threads starting up all over my boxes. These aren't spiderswebs: leave them alone, they're the mycelium filaments, the start of my mushrooms. Don't leave food down here - there'll be flies, and that means *diseased spore*."

They all gape at her in alarm.

She leads the kid back to Glor and off up the stairs.

The meeting disperses, and we follow her.

I see Connor hobbling up the stairs leaning on O'Shea's arm who is going to dig the broken nail out of his bullet-grazed toe. A foot's a tricky thing to shoot into. I wish she'd used her knife again, but you can't pin a boot to a stone floor, can you. At least she didn't manage to get her way without violence. That would of been too much a sickener. They might have taken some real notice of her then. But she found it impossible not to answer threat with violence. Violence makes the world go round. It's a lesson we all learn. She would have to choose the same foot again too. I hope the bone hasn't been shattered, there is so many tricksy little bones in a foot.

I run up behind Connor but I see Sweetness has got there already so I leave it.

"Blood!" admired O'Shea. "Hurt, does it?"

Connor grunts.

"She's a wicked cow," Sweetness hisses. "She had no right to do *that*. It wasn't necessary, just a real mean streak."

"That's true." O'Shea is peeved.

And it is true, too. You think she's noble, don't you, reader? Saving the tiny Tarkwin like that. But she's just demonstrating her fitness to challenge Helmut, maybe more seriously one day. Staking her territorial rights – she was protecting her mushroom filaments. No one's a saint, not these days. She's not. So, she's fighting the Aliens. So what?

And Jenkins comes up behind, he is the little dark Sicilian, and he says, "Arf a mo, I'll settle *er* little amacher featricks for er," and as the staircase hairpin-bends and Frijja is one flight above him yet parallel with him, his little monkey-hand goes for his flick-razor and he's lunged with a sparkling smile for the backs of her knees to cut her walking-sinews.

Connor, judging for the unsteadiness of his own leg, hurls him brutally away so he hurtles down bumpbump step after step among the boots.

He stares his innocent question up at Connor.

"Nobody does her," remarks Connor, "but me. She's mine."

"Come in Pel's bathroom," says Sweetness, unable to keep her hands off of him. "Pel'll give us the key, won't you, Pel?"

"What? Eh?" I pretend not to have been listening so closely.

"The key of your bathroom. So Connor can have his toe dug out with plenty of running water."

"You'll need real boiled water for this job," I sniff. "And less about the private keys. Not so loud if you don't mind."

Connor regards me with the look that is almost a smile, though not a nice smile. Not a *nasty* look anyway.

We go up to the bathroom and I'm very busy spreading newspaper. We sterilise one of my stilettos. Connor sits on a wooden kitchen chair, his foot out on O'Shea's jeaned knee, and holds the arms. Sweetness stands near moaning and trembling as in a high wind so Connor feels he don't need to, it's done for him. At every suggestion of a wince. There is a load of blood and Connor takes a swift swig from a Vat 69.

"Oh, ugh, ugh," says Sweetness tenderly regarding Connor's red blood.

The little spent splinters pink out on the newspaper.

O'Shea staunches the hole with a wodge of clean rag (I got that) steeped in both iodine and whisky, a mixture that sets Connor actually a-laugh as he clamps his breath.

"Put the foot up, put the foot up," urges O'Shea.



"Hobble off to bed," Sweetness helps him off the chair, always ready to get him alone away from the Lot.

"Where's my bed?" Connor asks O'Shea.

"Your room, sir, is up the stairs to the right and past the horns on the wall," says O'S.

"Horns!" I jeer. "Stag antlers."

Connor hooks an arm over O'Shea's, and hoppities up the stairs, the blood at this movement welling through the bandage and leaving a trail. Sweetness keeps her hands on him too. On the way to 'his room', we pass Frijja's skeleton of a room, the door is shut but a panel has charred right off and through the hole we see the sky, the panorama over Battersea with the river and the 4 huge chimneys (just a stump, the 4th, since the Comms blew it up) and the scene not exactly sunny but alive with bright peaks, as the wind drives back the waves it's lifted, curling them back on each other with shining tips, and we can feel the wind and smell the Thames through the hole in Frijja's wall and door, and on an exposed limb of rafter there is a small object which because of the bright whipped hair (it's growing every day now) you look at again and see is Frijja gazing out over the slime and boats and jetties and warehouse ramps with her knees hunkered up under her chin.

Using my frail shoulder as a lever, Connor with his OK leg kicks open the door.

"Hey. Yer Royal Highness!" he yells.

Frijja's one visible eye focuses on him.

"Come down," he orders. "You're coming up to bed with me."

Sweetness quivers like a shocked dog.

"I didn't hear you?" Frijja says slowly.

"Oh, yes, you did," Connor scowls.

Frijja looks at our faces, O'Shea's and mine. Suddenly she leaps up, swings down from that rafter and on to another, and lands on the balls of her 2 feet beside us, rocking on to her soles and yelling into Connor's face, "Arrogant cretin."

O'Shea at a sign from Connor got a ½-nelson on Frijja and she was bundled into Connor's room and tossed on the bed. O'Shea covered her with his gat, which he spun now and then in a lively way. She glowered up at Connor. "Now," he said, taking his jacket off and there just in his black shirt, "this is your room from now on. So move anything you want into it."

"It's *your* room!" she said.

"There isn't a room for each," Connor said. "So you want to share with 5 others, all of them snoring when they're not raping? It's the only alternative. It's our house now, no one holds out against us for long, not even one skinny bitchcat."

Frijja went to the window. She looked out. Suddenly Connor slammed it down on her hand, which she got out by a split second of time.

"Don't look at that!" he roared. "You'll be hand-cuffed to the bed-end every night if you're caught trying that, and I'll let the boys in to have a go. Little there is they like better than a little body writhing tossing spitted on the end of a chain. Now, is this your bedroom or isn't it?"

"Under what terms do I accept your hospitality?" she inquired.

"Accept?" Connor heaved himself on the bed and put his leg up. "I should think, Jesus, you'd be on your knees begging for terms. Who else do you choose to sleep with?"

"Is there a lock on this door?" Frijja asked me.

"No one comes in my room," Connor growled. He's right enough.

"Yes," I told her.

"I'll share with you," Frijja said. "I'll move a bed in."

"All beds commandeered, and bedding," says O'S.

"I'm used to the floor," she shrugs. Connor sighs. He closes his eyes. Frijja turns to go back to her river-gazing, but without opening his eyes he shoots out a hand and pulls her down on the bed where she sits with a spine like a ramrod.

"You stay here," he says. "You others get out."

We get out, O'Shea closing the door. "She's got the only spot of protection for her in the whole o' London," he says.

"Till she ballses it up," says Sweetness anxiously.

"Who says she will?" O'S lazily closes an eye.

Sweetness grabs me by the wrist. "Your spy-hole, Pel! You got a spy-hole into this room?"

"I can't remember," I says. "So long since it had an occupier—"

"Come on, find it, find it!"

She rushes me up to the cistern-loft, where I do my little rigged-up shaving-mirrors and holes bored at accurate angles.

"No," I says. "No way of peeping in that room. But I'll bug it later. Or drill a hole. Meanwhile, if we count these rafters, we'll know which it's under."

"But it's not on the floor directly under this!"

"No," I agree. "But it is on the outside of the house, with a deep window."

With a crafty smile and her breathless attention, I un-slot one of my dinky microphones and folded mobile aerals behind the cistern, and pop a valuable battery in, and gently lower it out the window. I have the length of each window I want to spy on marked out on the rig.

"Oo you are devious," she says.

"Yeh . . ." we listen intently.

Not a sausage.

"Perhaps Connor just went to sleep—"

"And she's gazing out over the river."

"Or your bug ain't working—"

We listened a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -hour in hopes of a sound. They didn't appear for the evening meal. I went to my room early.

I found 3 other beds in it, and a sleeping-bag too under one of them. Oh, well, I thought. Oh, well. They'll be company. A Pollyanna thought. I got in my bed and pulled up the sheets — someone had filched the quilt — and in order to get off to kip I had to employ my old sheep-counting tricks — I pretended I could see any film I wanted without having to pay 30/- a seat for it — I reckon they could charge more now and people would still go, about 12 films a year are released and usually about an intrepid reporter or pop star beating the As with some old H. G. Wells trick like giving them all colds or crabs.

"I'll make *Gone With the W* with Sean Connery instead of Gable," I say in my omnipotent head. "And *Wutherings* with Oliver Reed as Heathcliff." I enjoy all that and I was soon off. But rude hands dragged me out and dropped me on the lino. I sat up blinking. The light was full on, and 4 of the Lot, accompanied by girls they'd brought in from outside, was standing round me leering, 2 with their boots raised.

Funny, you can tell what their 'fascism' means to them, they particularly compete for coloured bints.

"How come you're in my bed, Rattikins?" sweetly inquires Herlihy.

"It was my bed last I knew — I paid a quid for this bed," I say.

"Feels like it 'n all," says Weasel bouncing on the springs.

"We didn't forget you," Herlihy says. "Here's a pocket for you." He pulls out the mangy old sleeping-bag.



They all pile into the beds. The noise! There's no room for me on the floor between beds. I am  $\frac{1}{2}$ -under Herlihy's bed, and him and his friend busy in it brings the springs down to within an inch of my face every 10 seconds or so. I roll out from under, dragging the old bag with me, and make for the kitchen.

Sweetness stops me on her way out the lavatory.

"You after somewheres to sleep, Pel? Come and sleep with me."

"Ain't you in good business tonight, Sweetness?"

"They won't pay," she bitterly says. "So I've told them I'm under the Doctor, you know, taking the treatment. They won't bother, when they've got Glor and brought so many others in."

"But you don't want Connor to get hold of that story."

"What do I care what *that* eejit thinks?" she says withering.

"You washed before bed, Sweetness?" I says. "I know better, darlin'," she says comfortably, "than to ask you in with me without."

I put my bag down. I got in her bed. Well, I more or less got in. You couldn't get straight in, you was 1st trapped in wreaths of coiled-up sheet. "How you manage to get your sheets like this," I says, "first day of the new laundry—"

"They've been on since morning, ain't they? You do love people to be clean, don't you, Pel? I admire you, Pel. You're so —" she couldn't think of the word she wanted, something too complicated.

"I like girls to be clean," I says. "So do Connor."

"Only, sometimes," she says, "I think you prefer people to be filthy so you can go on at them. We shouldn't be any good to you if we was all clean already. You'd have to go some place filthy."

"Here, what are you insinuating?" I said, hate ready to inject in her.

"You got a missionary spirit, Pel," Sweetness sighed.

"Frankly," I says, "the Lot ain't so bad. I don't have a lot to teach them. I like people to be themselves," I said, pushing my feet past the tangles of sheets. "The Lot are good *basic* brutes. I don't teach people, Sweetness. But in this rotten world you got to know your enemy. You got to be able to manipulate him without him knowing."

"Go on then," she worships me. "You manipulate me."

"You're basic material, Sweetness," I compliments. But

something kept me from proper fun, not that Sweetness noticed. A brightness radiated round my heart, making it cold. Who let that beastly brightness in? No matter how I dug myself into the darkness and dumbness of Sweetness, that brightness wouldn't let go. I knew who it was connected with. "Connor didn't know he prefers girls to be clean, but he's getting to know it," I says. "I'll keep up with him," she promised. "He's only a soul like the rest of us," I insists, because sometimes I think he's not got a soul, not like I have, he don't seem to feel or suffer or, well, exist. "Would you believe it, Connor's a soul. He's surprising himself these days. He's after a bit of – well, maybe of feeling. You must save him from my cousin, Sweetness. She's dangerous. She's too—"

"She'd take him away from me," Sweetness says. "Glor wouldn't, no one else would, but she would. She'd take him away up there."

"What do you mean," I said angrily; and I hurt her. "*Up there?* What rubbish are you on about? She don't command no heights."

But suddenly, gaily, I remember that incident in that cinema I already regaled to you.

One thing that time proved. Connor no matter how passionate and determined in his lust he is he has nothing but contempt for the object of it.

Wouldn't you say that time had proved that?

Just as I settle, 3 of the Lot bustle in and, undeterred by whatever Sweetness has let drop about the state of her health, they pile in. Sweetness gives in with gusto. I know she thinks it's a great revenge on Connor. I move in under her washstand, which turns out to have a slow leak, and for the life of me I can't get to sleep what with the picnic going on around me and wondering about Connor and that cousin of mine.

Shall I or shan't I, I thought when I woke up.

I was debating whether to get up and polish all the lino throughout the house as I usually do of a Thursday and this was Thurs.

But the Lot trampling everywhere – what good would it do me or the house ever again to bother about cleanliness?

Still, routine dies hard, so also does a sort of *hope* that if you do your bit of effort, make your arms ache getting a place clean

when you don't want to, perhaps it will act like a sort of little magic on other people too and the place will indeed have that much chance of staying less sleazy.

Pathetic self-delusion, in fact related to masochism probably; because after I'd fulfilled my compulsion, and my arms really were sore and my back throbbing, it was all covered in spit and tobacco and fag-burns again almost instantly.

"Golly-gee, look at all those casual rippling goose-pimples," O'Shea said behind me. I put my hole-y sweater Sweetness knitted me back on over my singlet and washed the grit out from under my fingernails.

I had got up at 5 as I usually do Thursday, as to get the polishing done as well as all the rest of the daily housekeeping, you need one long day a week. O'S trundled off to bed after that little sally.

But Connor had been to bed early, and I reckoned he (or he and Frijja) would be down soon and I could have a breakfast ready.

As soon as I decided that, I thought I'd make it a *nice* breakfast.

So I peeled some spuds (the Lot had not touched those in the larder, taken just the lazy things like tins of beans, bread, cheese, tinned soup and shant) and then I chipped and fried some, brown and crispy, and boiled others. I went out in the garden and got a little sprig of mint where it grows beside the dustbins. I popped the mint in the spud-pan to scent them.

I stood a moment in the garden. It is healthy to let air pour on you. Dad's garden, getting overgrown.

The convolvulus is tangled in a jungle on the fence, cracking it and splitting the boards, dragging the fence down like a predator on a good old buffalo's back. The grass is tit-high, full of rank weeds, and the air close above it is tingling with little gnats. You daren't walk in among the grass, for fear of treading on squashy decaying rubbish thrown out among it by the Lot or lodgers, and I just don't have time to cut it all myself (it is supposed to be Dad's job, but he always says *Next* week) since we lost our mower to a cadging neighbour who went off to Devon, still with our mower, when the riots made London unhealthy.

One thing about the Aliens, they've got rid of our friends and



neighbours for us. Who can afford friends as well as all one's other expenses?

I trudged over the gravelly grey earth, full of hairpins and broken glass, to the hen-hutches where the old lavatory pan lies lyrically embedded under the blackberry bramble. I pulled off some berries, Lovely. Black and soggy with juice. Untouched by the Lot. Anything really good for them, they'd run a mile from Vitamin C, I thought, I must try to grow more out here. Set it to use.

My fingers were purple when I reached for the eggs, and true enough there was several.

Back in the kitchen, the dawn leaking over the rusty sky, the window-panes grimy. Another job Dad has neglected. No bacon of course, they've had that.

A mouse comes out and has the gall to sit up and squeal.

Probably it's gnawn away from its inside with desperate hunger.

I drive it away, failing to kill it with the broom I wield. Then, sure enough, a tread on the stairs and in slouches Connor.

"Here's your breakfast," I shove it promptly in front of him, smelling crunchy. "I'm just brewing tea."

He looks surprised all right, though he can't have known it was all expressly for him personally.

He picks about a bit with his fork, almost finicky. He is not much of a food-lover, he thinks of it as fuel. But he seems pre-occupied all right now.

He has raw-raised scratches on his face, they've bled till recently. His knuckles are skinned. There's blood on his jacket and jeans.

I creep nearer.

"You killed her?"

He pushes away his plate and walks out.

I pause a bit. I'm curious, but I don't want her (or him) to treat me as if like I'm behaving nosy. If she's hurt, though I hate her, I'll go and mother her. I like helping hurt things, the more hurt the better. It's worth hurting them yourself just to enjoy soothing them after, in fact that's best of all, because they're so trembly and distrustful and heart-wounded, and they take a long time to understand you're really going to cuddle them and make them feel better again now at last. Then, just as you've

got them thoroughly bewildered, trusting, relaxing, grateful, you can hurt them again.

There is a poetry to it. You can't trust cruelty to jobs and mobs. They aren't worthy to be trusted with it.

The plate of cooling fry is what decides me. I don't want to waste that, nor have it gobbled up by the Lot.

I'm about to take it up to Frijja, when Herlihy, Weasel, Sweetness and about a million others hurtle down around me.

Herlihy seizes the plate with a glad cry and starts wolfing it down.

"More eggs, more spuds, Rat," they cry.

"There isn't none," I tell them sullen.

"Rustle some up then," orders Herlihy, very nasty, on behalf of the others – *he's* OK grabbing up his mouthfuls.

I do what I can, not using the best of what's still nestled in the store, yet wondering why not since it'll all be rifled soon enough – can I hide it anywhere really safe? Without being bludgeoned or brained if they discover it?

Then something plops on the mat.

"It's *mail!*" shrieks Sweetness.

They all run for it. A letter or parcel is the last thing you expect these days. No postman ventures out – important letters are delivered (for a charge) by the police or militia, armed as they zoom through the streets on BSAs.

"It's from the As," says Sweetness, not sure whether to be disappointed or amazed.

"Who to? Couldn't they send a globe?"

"It's to all of us. They sent it via the nearest printing shop – I expect *they* got the globe. We've got to write back!"

"This is ridiculous!" I seized the crudely lino-typed hand-sheets.

There were lots of them – one, in fact, for everyone in the house.

It was all the same questionnaire, with dots and spaces for us to fill in, then we were to send it back to the nearest GPO (General Post Office) where it would be 'collected'.

"Just look at their estimation of our intelligence," says Mickle, entering.

"Yer," says Herlihy, instantly insulted by his 'patrons', the As' estimation of his genius, as Mickle had meant him to be. Curiously, they all like Mickle. I had expected them to victim-

ise him, but he can do what he likes with them to quite an extent, so long as he is gentle and lackadaisical about it. They are a bit thrown by him, think of him as an intellectual, like to request him to play tunes their parents sang to them that they therefore think of as vaguely Classical and likely to win Mickle's approval, vie with each other in getting him to talk to them in his odd absent-minded way. He doesn't even seem to have really noticed that there is anything like crisis in their take-over of the house, so I shall continue to get rent out of him (Sweetness and Glor have both refused to pay any more because of the Lot's presence here).

And Herlihy, Bert, Weasel and the rest jostle to peer over Mickle's shoulder at the questionnaire he's holding up, till he settles the matter by handing out one to each.

They don't hate Mickle even when, politely, he tries to hand them out by name, and he gets the names muddled. "I'm O'Shea," grunts O'S. "*He's* Herlihy." "Oh, you're all alike anyway," Mickle, exasperated, thrusts a questionnaire on Reg. "You're indistinguishable from each other." "All upstats, eh, Mick?" they roar at him.

If I went on at them like he does, they'd lynch me. Well, I started off *keeping in* with them once long ago, and wasn't it Christian of me? Aren't we told to do as we would be done by? Shouldn't I be rewarded for it now?

It's all in crude colour, and each question is in a deliberately eye-catching colour and type-set, different from the others.

"They've got hold of some graphic design handbook which tells them the human retina is most readily susceptible to yellow lettering on black," says Mickle, derisively.

"Yer," sneers Herlihy.

"What do they want us to tell them?" the Blackhill turk is trying to spell it out. As he thinks D, O and Q are all the same letter, and a W is just a fat N, he don't get far.

"Do you want me to read it out?" I ask casual.

They crowd round me as I read the questions, then with a stub of Sweetness' eye-pencil I fill in their answers for them.

*What do you miss most about the days pre-Alien Invasion?* (much *They care*, I added.)

Now, I bet everyone else in the land, in the sieged suburbs and the leagured farm-houses and struggling office-blocks and soldiering-on civic communities of Britain, was licking their



pencil-stubs and warming their old Biro's in their mouths, and neatly spelling out:

The security of such dear departed days.

But not our Lot. "Fuck all!" they all roared together. "These is the days! Lords of creation, mate! Wouldn't 'ave the old days back for anything! Long live the Aliens!"

"FUCK ALL," I spelled out on everyone's form.

*"In what do you still find most pleasure?"*

You can guess that one. Not your first thought. Your second.

*"Is life still an adventure to which you look forward each new day?"*

"Dunno where they learned English. A Victorian child's primer," says Mickle, cheerfully spooning the Weetabix and sour tinned milk the others have left him.

"There's some deep trick behind this, naïve though it may seem," I says. "These are psychological questions. Note they don't ask nothing about how frequent we eat, or whether we'd like the electricity and the sewers to be better manned."

"The Government has enough migraines keeping our heads above anarchy," Mickle points a reproving spoon in my direction. "We're very well off, excellently looked after and public-serviced, all things considered."

*"Describe your ideal day's routine."*

I had to explain that one out.

"They want us to tell them what we'd do if we could. Like – go to the shops and buy fuel at under a £ a pound. Or get fresh milk delivered to our doorstep by a milkman with a cheery smile and a white overall, and be able to leave it on the step a couple seconds without it disappeared, or get on a train and reckon within a day you'll be where you want, with another train back the same week – or for the water and electric to stay on all the time, instead of being turned off after midnight."

The Lot proceeded to describe their ideal routine, which was pretty much what they all do now. (It's nice to know someone in the country is so contented and at peace.) Only Weasel made a few nostalgic remarks about the old, easy-to-Fix phoneboxes, which have been replaced at considerable cost by the Government since these days any form of speedy communication has become so precious.

*"Your most respected public figure?"*

This stumped them all after the predictable facetious remarks about the public quality of Glor's figure.

A couple actually mentioned the Doctor by the Park. "And put, so the As know *why*, that he still makes you better if he possibly can without referring you to a dreaded hospital," stipulated Bert.

"I cheer for Getz," says Mickle.

"He's *American*," says the Blackhill turk, because after all America is no longer in the same world.

"What are we supposed to say?" asks Weasel.

"The prime minister or field marshal," I says, "I suppose."

"But we all know who the most popularest person is," says Herlihy.

"Yer," agrees everyone without much interest even, and we go on to the next question after I scrawl Ringo Starr while I listen for sounds from Friija's room. I better get up, I think. I wonder if he did kill her? If he didn't, she's probably out the window by now, and he'll be mad at me for letting her get away.

As soon as I could, I slipped away up the stairs.

Connor's door had not been locked. He knows, sure enough, no one else would be venturing in without an RSVP invitation.

She couldn't get away through the window. She'd been had-cuffed to the end of the bed.

She was lying slumped very uncomfortable against the brass post, half-on half-off the bed. I thought at first she was unconscious. Her eyes were closed. But when they opened and looked at me, they was still practically closed. She had 2 black eyes, the flesh bruised and puffed. The whole of her face, practically, seemed covered by a black crust - it was the dried blood that had poured out of her nose.

I ran and got a warm moistened sponge, and tried to get it off. She peered up at me with a flick of humour.

"He tried to get it off that way," she said. "It won't shift."

"It needs a cream—" I got some vaseline, and with that and cooler water, it slowly came off till she had her usual pale face clear.

"Do you - do you want to—" I was thinking of natural functions, but I knew really I shouldn't move her from the bed, it was my duty to Connor to leave it as I found it.

"I'm OK," she said. She knew I'd be no help except for bringing in some pain.

"Your teeth—"

"No, I broke this tooth a year ago; in the Docks," she said the name fondly.

"Well, your lip is split. Is your nose broke? No, it's not. Good. Tell me what ointment or — or aspirin you'd like—"

"I'd like — I'd like Sweetness to come in—" Frijja said with difficulty.

I was shocked I hadn't thought of this. Just, I hadn't thought of Frijja as the sort of girl who'd like a girl's ministrations and company at a time like this.

I run and found Sweetness.

"She wants you," I said as she flew upstairs.

"What happened? What happened?" she squealed at Frijja though she could see perfectly well.

I took a turn round the room, while Frijja talked low and (I thought) with embarrassment to Sweetness. Then Sweetness seized me out of the room.

"She wants an abortion," she said excitedly.

"Rubbish. She can't know if she do or she don't."

"Yes, but don't you see? She's so innocent she don't know. We can give her some pills, tell her they've done the trick and she certainly won't get preg — and perhaps she will!"

"What's so lovely about that?" I frown.

"It'll put *her* out of action," smiles Sweetness.

"It's a long shot," I says. "Nothing to be so silly and happy about. She'll probably have no kid at all, how many people do automatically have one? Still, I'll do that."

"She seems terrible upset," Sweetness smiles pitying, "even though she don't think she's showing it."

"So would you if Connor had raped and beat you up and left you hanging to the bed-end," I surprise myself by snapping.

We give her some Aspro in water. I smooth her head and when I leave her she may be asleep or as near as she can get.

We're walking down the stairs, when we meet Connor coming up.

I feel very guilty, and hope he'll think we've been in some other room. Sweetness, however, faces him boldly, her eyes dancing and her teeth caught in her underlip the way she grins when she's signalling what she calls Mischeef.



"You done your good turn of the year," she says to Connor, like a fellow-conspirator.

"What d'you mean?" Connor scowls. He is holding something bundled up in old vinegar-stained newspaper.

"That one will be a changed lady from now on," Sweetness nods up at the door above us. "May even know the joys and blessings of motherhood, she reckons."

"What do you think you're on about?" Connor raises his voice.

Sweetness refuses to flinch, though she is taken aback. She giggles meaningly.

Connor turns to me.

"Did *she* say that?" he asks, slow.

I nod placatingly. I suppose for some reason he's reluctant to accept the possibility of a pregnancy in the community, the moans and ailments of the mother, her inability to move fast and keep up, the extra food needed after the messy need of a midwife. "But it's most unlikely," I say.

"I'll say it is," he says between his teeth.

He bounds up the stairs, pushing us aside, and shoves open the door. All I can see from my stair is his back as he stares at Frijja still on his bed.

"Who cleaned her up? Pel?" he raises his voice.

"My cousin Pel, yes," Frijja answers him.

"I couldn't do it," Connor says.

"She *was* in a bit of a state," I venture.

Connor frowns and asks her very deliberate, he almost clears his throat first, "Did you tell Pel you was pregnant?"

"I told Sweetness," Frijja says so low it's almost a whisper. "I thought she'd know how I can get an abortion."

"So who has made you pregnant?" asks Connor, his hands now fists.

"Why are *you* asking *me*?" Frijja inquires coldly, as though putting a stop to some game he might be playing at her expense.

"Because I want to know," says Connor. "Why didn't you tell me last night? I'll kill him for you - if you haven't already."

"You—" she says in amazement.

"Frijja," I cuts in quick, "I must explain. Connor don't know that *you* don't know very much about all this sort of thing. You don't automatically have to be pregnant just because Connor——"

“What is this?” Connor demanded of her. “Are you telling them, do you want them to believe for some dim reason, I fucked you last night?”

Frijja lunges at him and grapples for his face, but the handcuffs bring her up sharp.

“I didn’t, you know,” Connor says to me over her trembling body as he holds her off.

“She reckons you did,” I says – “not calling you a liar, of course, Connor, I’m just repeating what she reckons.”

“Do you really think that?” Connor asks her in the liveliest amusement.

She stares at him.

“Where did you learn the facts of life?” he asks.

“Why – why—” says Frijja and I both together.

“All *she* did,” he says, holding her off him, “was try to strangle me. So all I did was keep her away. A couple of punches at last was the only way I could get her out of action just long enough to handcuff her here for her own good. Otherwise you’d be out of that window and away into the Wilderness, wouldn’t you?” says Connor. “Foodless, roofless, soon out of ammunition and a prey to anyone or anything as soon as you sat down to rest. By tomorrow night you’d’ve been the one to be strangled, if not also raped – oh, I tried,” he says into her amazed face. “Till I realised it would be *that* much a bore to you, what’s the sense in being that unwelcome?”

“So you didn’t—?” she says, her small voice a real question.

Connor is patient enough to answer it again. “No, I didn’t,” he says without rancour.

My brain is spinning. So was I wrong about him being a sadist? Something I’ve always thought him. So the other birds—? They really asked for it? Or he looked on them as something different, something it was all the same with no matter what way—?

I don’t know am I disappointed. Or more magnetised than before.

“Now,” Connor morosely queries her. “Am I to leave you handcuffed for ever? Or will you promise not to get away if I unlock you?”

“I could make it to the Docks within 4 days,” she reminds him.

“Longer than that, as the barriers stands,” he says. “Don’t

forget the Thames cordon. Don't forget the Tower and Greenwich Fascists, with their dainty habits. And no-man's-land across the river, where they let the Battersea dogs loose. And the gang waiting who put the spike in your head."

I see her eyes change as they did once before when that was spoken of.

"Get me some food," she says. She holds her 2 small wrists out for Connor to ease the cuffs off, over the blue veins all swollen where he had twisted the chain in a slip-knot - he knows her wrists are like a child's, and the handcuffs alone wouldn't have been tight enough to hold her.

"Shall I unpack your parcel for you?" I says to Connor.

"No," he says, "it's for her to unpack if her hands are able."

He dumps the newspapered bundle on her knee, then rolls a fag so he won't be watching her.

Frijja's wrists are obviously stiff and temporary disfigured, sort of deformed, but she takes pain all in the day's work and gets the paper off. Inside are a pile of lousy old books, yellow, musty, where did he find them, with cheap fibre binding and titles like *Algebra for Class VI*, *Arable Farming in 1954*, *Tiny Tots Album*.

She stares at him blankly.

"That's to make up for your ones I destroyed," says Connor gently. He turns back to his dexterous roll so he won't have to be overwhelmed by her ecstasy.

We was all invited to the execution of Ringo Starr.

I don't know how many millions of questionnaires had been returned with the Aliens' query answered - Ringo is the most popular person in Britain. Short shrift the Prime Minister would have got from even the old middle-ageds, and otherwise I suppose everyone nominated their local doctor or cheerleader. The only majority vote was for Ringo.

What a service we all done him.

The As only wanted to know whose public execution we'd be most demoralised by. I don't think they'd quite reckoned on a figure nothing to do with politics nor martial admin, nor if they properly realised Ringo was sheer decoration. Still, they knew there'd be sorrow throughout the nation, even if they reckoned there'd be more social disintegration than in fact could be caused by a musician's murder.



It was not televised. The networks refused to do it. And Friija, Sweetness and I stayed home from the event. The other Beatles didn't turn up neither. They'd made a pact with Ringo not to, and said their farewells beforehand. It was intrinsically very worrying eh, and opened up a whole new way of worry. The Beatles might never have been insurmountably anguished by mere old death, of which they aren't now in awe, but this is a much unfairer thing. It's the real unknown isn't it. The rioting of course was colossal. Not only was people (some, young respectable kids who had gone to somehow wish him well just somehow) trampled, 2 whole buildings were torn down. Not hard actually, since the recent state building maintenance has got in. Massive looting went on, which I hated missing, but no fires as the Grenadiers was out with hoses. He stood there, then he was nowhere in evidence.

Sweetness certainly is as upset as the Aliens can have wished, always supposing they are interested. She hardly ate for hours. She keeps weeping and singing old Beatle melodies and weeping again.

Mickle is pretty shaken too. He could of had Getz (who is marooned here) bumped off, if he and enough other people had voted for Getz, as Mickle had gone round asking his friends to do. Mickle has gone a permanent grey colour, and one day I walked into the lavatory (he hadn't locked the door) and found him with a syringe. I didn't make a drama out of it as he'd possibly wanted. I think he left the door open accidentally, on purpose. I just backed out and said "Oh, I'll wait till you're ready."

He was only joy-popping, anyway. But perhaps the As knew what they were up to more than we thought. Picking on Ringo (and making everyone responsible, all of us who'd casually admired him enough to vote for him is now a murderer) attacked a whole new stratum (?) of society who till now have remained relatively unaware of Britain's Disruption.

The musicians, the singers, the actors, producers, agents, box-office-ticket punchers, even guitar-throbbing buskers - everyone who till now has been doing pretty nice thank you on the wave of fantasy-fever that has flooded the nation in our great need for escapism.

They now all begin infecting each other with despair. And you know how inter-holed and jig-saw-slotted intricate incestu-

ous old showbis is – *one* despairs, they're all down in the black wallow. The thing is, their *incentive* has been slipped out from under them.

If Ringo got that because he was so *popular*, what are they all trying for?

“Not much good you practising any more, eh, lad?” said Dad to Mickle and though I shut Dad up instantly with a venomous look (he is so tactless, other people's feelings don't have any ins and outs so far as he's concerned old oaf) still he was right.

Mickle eventually ambled out of the bathroom and wafted PLJ over us all – he after-shaves in lemon juice since it's easier to obtain than is Old Spice. “Fit, then, Pelham?” he inquires of me. His agent is waiting outside reading the *TV Times* at the wheel of his E-Type and Mickle is shy of being alone with anyone so I am coming too.

I don't know what fascinates me more, Mickle's agoraphobia or the whereabouts of the agent's secret petrol dump. It ain't an electric-driven Jag.

“Your best local meal?” inquires the agent looking me up and down meanwhile.

“Where can you afford to take us?” inquires Mickle. “You're taking me, isn't that why there's 2 of you both?” inquires the agent flicking his half-smoked cigar at little Tarkwin who needles him by ignoring it.

“Business is unsalubrious,” says the agent driving us off through the rusty cans.

“I got a good press the other night up the ballroom,” Mickle justifies himself.

“Yes, you watch it,” growls the agent. “This cayf OK?”

“Good beans, egg and chips,” Mickle four-stars it.

The agent instead of opening the car-door beeps his horn lordly and out amazingly comes the proprietor. “What can I do you for?” asks the Proprietor who is Old Ginger.

“Bring us out a pie and chips each,” says the agent reclining like Cleopatra in his burnished synthetic-PVC bucket seat, and adds: “And bill this gentleman,” sourly he indicates Mickle.

“That's all right, I'm flush,” smiles Mickle, “after the ballroom gig.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” the agent lifts a weary lip. “You won't be booked for much longer if you go on getting rave notices like that local weekly gave you. The ballroom is careful

about not attracting Alien notice to itself. They'll be thinking they got a second Richard Starkey on their hands if you go on in this reckless fashion. I asked the local news-hound to soft-pedal but no they got to lam in the superlatives and purple prose these young reporters."

"You don't reckon I warranted good notices?" Mickle says offended.

"*You* try keeping it all smooth so no one gets too excited," complains the agent unpeeling his pie as it arrives from its paper napkin. "The ballroom only want the mediocre acts now, and as for the theatres, they're terrified the As will strike again any minute. All the chicks in the audiences are requested not to scream and no one is booked who hasn't disbanded their fan-clubs."

"I went to the shop to swap one of my Bogart blow-up's for a Brando for my bedroom wall of him on a motor-cycle with a cheesecutter and long sideburns and langorous menace in his narrowed eyes," I says, "and I noticed they ain't got one British celebrity on sale no more. Three little Sally Army lasses came in to buy a Cliff Richard and the shop bloke accused them of wishing him ill."

"Some people do think Cliff should fall off one," says the agent airily scraping the last bits of beanburger off his paper napkin, and sucking them from under his fingernail.

"But what," he added, "seriously, would the As think if they happened to glance through a window or wall, and there they behold the five-millionth pin-up of Cliff? *Lo, we've seen enough of him*, they'd say. *Thou shalt have no other pin-ups but me*, and all that. You can bet they didn't like Ringo after all those reports of the Beatles' laying-on of hands and walking-on-the-Serpentine that got about. *We really will give them a spot of levitation*, they reckoned. Too much of an influence. The As don't like us to have heroes. You can pay, lad?"

"Just about," says Mickle. Fishes three tarnished zips and a packet of needles from his pocket "Reckon these should pay for three lousy pies. Old Ginger tailors on the side but he's so ham-handed he always breaks his needles - gets through packets a week. Can't you get the chits signed no more for the expense-account lunches over which you dutifully run down your clients' images?"

"Straight, I'm ready for a Home, suffering schizophrenia," says the agent.



"Go ahead, feel free, run me down," glowers Mickle. "Run me down to them all. And then you'll *be* free, won't you eh? It's all unnatural."

"Nothing unnatural about it," I says at once, since the agent is sitting morose and sorry for himself. "Good pointer to character it all is. You can tell who your enemies is now – they're the blokes who praise you up, and that's just the way it always has been. I tell you, you two, your busking fellowship ain't no more human than the As. You ought to come and live round here – because you don't, Mickle, not really; you hold yourself aloof. Now, I don't really hold it against you that you see yourself a little above the rest of us. But . . ."

"I don't," says Mickle, going pink under his sandy curls. "I'm very humble."

"You don't really mix in with us. And you're not humble cos your auditor told you you're nearly Clear. Now I quite understand believe me . . ."

"It's you Lot that don't mix in with me."

"No, no, Mickle," I wave me hands around. "Never say that." (He thinks I'm with the Lot now, does he? That's flattering. He must be a bit more apprehensive of me than I thought.) "You just give the impression you ain't *part* of us all. But there's nothing like the comradeship of the so-called criminal, mate. And that believe me is what you are cutting yourself off from in this time of trouble when comradeship is of the essence. You need us, Mickle, more than we need you."

"Honour among thieves?" the agent puts on his leopardskin driving-gloves and squints out at the tawny sunshine of the high street traffic-jammed by two mopeds leaving serpentine tracks in the sweaty sticky blue tarmac.

"You think there isn't any?" I sneer at the agent, and I recline back on his upholstery while narrowing my quizzical eyes at him. "You'll see mate, when you're tripping to ruin on your LSD fairy old cultured scene, all your aesthetic values won't save you the way our simple brotherhood will sustain us. By the way, where do you get your petrol?"

The agent reaches across me and opens the door..

Mickle and I get out in our yard, stumbling over a blazing-hot beer can or 2, and watch him drive off in his poncey car. "Car like that ain't everything," I smile, amused. "Thinks he's big, don't he, getting Old Ginger on the crawl to him. He'll

soon learn correct values. Because that, you see, is what the As seem to be teaching us. Correct values."

"Us artists are hardly anyone's favourite as it is," says Mickle still brooding about his publicity. "And yet now the churches and town halls are a dead loss because everyone's lost faith in that spiel, we are the ones who are still fighting the rearguard action for all the rotten rest of you."

"You mean," I says, "like Billy Fury's nature reserve? For shrews and cow-irin tim'rus badgers and all that on the run from sprayed fields and DDT dribbling into the streams peeving the tadpoles and water-midges?" "And geese unable to migrate," automatically replies Mickle. "Hello, Sweetness, any tooth-paste left, I feel that's all I want after that pie. Warmed-up tapeworm, eh."

"You should go vegetarian," I says bracingly to him. "Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Tapeworm . . ."

"That's another thing," says Mickle with energy. "Who is keeping alive the movements for kindness to seals and voluntary zoo-cleaning and all that?"

"I know, I know. Out-of-work actors. What's praiseworthy in that? Want a medal, do you? Why shouldn't you all do something in all that spare time you got?"

"The Beatles had nothing but kindness in their hearts," sniffs Sweetness. "Ringo will come back though, you see. Everyone knows he's not really dead, just they took him away up in the sky for a little while."

"You are just trying, Mickle," I said word by word, "to make out because you can read music and are *artistic*, whatever that smug little dirty word may mean, you are better than the rest of us. Aren't we all pulling together then?"

Mickle looked at me. In distress, I was sorry to see. No, I didn't want to depress him. I wasn't being mean. I like little Mickle.

"Come with me tonight to see the new Dick Lester flick," I kindly said, "instead of sitting there alone in your room."

"I like being alone," Mickle said. "Don't feel sorry for me."

"Cutting yourself off from us all," I scold. "Morbid. In times like these, Mickle my mate, we need anyone who will show us a little warmth."

"You," mumbles Mickle, "are so insistent on this point about

the time being dark that one could suppose you to be enchanted with darkness.”

“The cinema has been decorated like as a sort of shrine,” says Sweetness. “How about the scenes of Ringo making fun of the As eh and getting the better of them in little ways? Suppose it’s *safe*, do you?”

“The As are broad-minded, we all know that,” I says. “Anyway, I’m addicted to Dick Lester though of course I doubt if *you* can be. What I like about a Lester movie, is no one understands it but me.”

“I don’t want to see it,” says Mickle and goes and puts tap-water on his head wasting our water.

The days was so hot that all the shadows were really short and really black. The hens fussed on the ground that was hot with seeds. Our home-crop of grass proliferated in the window-box, still too weak to make more than marijuana fudge from. The pollen count was something chronic.

I wouldn’t be in the scullery, working, without baring an arm and keeping it on the harsh, tickling, burning-hot blistered-paint windowsill, even if it made me stand awkward. I used to leave my work soon as I could and spring up to my room, empty in the day but for perhaps one drowsy couple, and I’d lay under the window and let the tiny breeze bang the fly-screen, and strip off, rolling my jeans up and my fly down, and soon even the dirt between my toes was tanned.

I didn’t lay out on the yard though.

It was always littered with bodies, staring up at the hard polished blue with the significant sky-scrape Change – the great ships hung motionless over NW1 and SW3, dwarfing the steeples and domes and factory-spires and minarets of London.

Always littered with flies too. Our chooks are messy eaters, and little Tarkwin is a messy feeder. He spends hours, practically days, out there with the hens, that kid. It’s not so much as he likes chooks, it’s that feeding them and changing their tin ashtrays of water and so on is the way he has a proper childish socially-acceptable excuse for keeping away from the house teeming with Helmut grinning evilly and the Lot grinning any old way and full of jolly ideas for keeping a kid on the go, and me kicking him, and his Mum whoring. They’re wild, our



chooks, not domestic poultry, not fit company for a little lad like in the colouring-books, where you see these drawings of little lads with pails over their arm scattering grain, to be coloured gold, and the chooks, to be coloured snow-white and poppy-scarlet, wolfing it down and looking at him lovingly. Here, you'd colour the chooks dirt-colour, from the dust-baths they love taking, and you'd colour their food the same. We give them a bit of pale meal I keep in sacks, that hourly I expect rats to get in, and otherwise they have the scraps, bacon rinds, potato peelings, stale crusts. The flies buzz around, the chooks peck each other and us, and we can yell, but little Tarkwin has to bear it like a stoic, otherwise if he made a fuss Glor would come and forbid him to go near the vicious brutes, and he knows damn well they're his only hope of keeping away from us all, looking as if they're his hobby. They fly, too, and they won't roost in their boxes, they hurl execration and etc. at you from the crotches of the two elms.

Helmut never appears in the yard, but he was called out sharp enough when the helicopter arrived.

It hung shimmering and buzzing in the air about 25 feet up – just clearing the elms, which still remember they've been pol-larded – and a rope ladder unreeled, and down, nifty as you please, came the spider.

None of us had seen anyone like him for a long time.

Most of the people you see outside are in uniform. Even shop-keepers wear canvas overalls, and come to think of it even the Lot wear a uniform. Well, I suppose this cat's ensemble was uniform too of its sort, but it was so neat and light, the dark suit of severely-tailored yet featherweight mohair, glistening shoes like strips of licorice, and a white blob on his heart which I thought was a pocket hanky, till he got nearer and lo, it was a white Peace rosebud in his wide elegant lapel.

We all rushed up about him as he touched toe to ground.

"Where'd'ye get them socks? That tie? Then cuff-links?" we wanted to ask, but as he stood among us, courteously doffing his hard dark bowler and looking around on us, we fell silent. We felt, too, he must of come to see into our souls. Though he was smiling on us a bit from his moustache, it was a grave, solemn smile, and solemnity fell upon us all.

"Who is master here?" he says.

Helmut steps forward, one weighty step, and stands towering.

With no flourish, most sedate, the stranger flicks a paper from his inside pocket and hands it to Helmut. Helmut takes it. And stares. It is not a paper, it is a document. A big red seal dangles off it, and it's in copperplate.

"What's this?" says Helmut. "May I inquire?"

I had stepped up beside Helmut, and in despair he thrust it at me. He even pleaded, seeing as he'd got no help from the smiling stranger. "Translate it, Rat," he says.

I froze up. What should I tell Helmut? I had only to glance over the legal rabbit to see it was not really for Helmut at all, but he had claimed it, he could have it. It was really for Dad, but apart from the fact I wouldn't dream of bothering Dad with it if Helmut was so willing to take it, anyway Dad had put on his best shoes, the brown suède ones after brushing them with a stiff special Hush Puppy brush up and across, up and across, and had gone out to sit on a bench in the park and perhaps say good morning to a keeper and be cheeked by playing children; then, after watching the goldfish now and then partly visible beneath the lilyweeds, he'd come home again - this was his big outing. But he wasn't due back yet a while.

The stranger watched me while I held his document. I was afraid any moment he'd say something about its contents and give the game away to Helmut.

"Will you sign?" he said to Helmut, and though he said it very courteous, the 'copter was whirring away up there impatiently.

"I don't know whom you represent," Helmut stalls for time, reluctant to say again in front of the stranger and, more important, in front of his gang, that he can't understand the legal stuff. Actually if it was in his own language he'd be sure to be able to take it all in, but it is a bit difficult you must admit to follow technicalities in a foreign tongue.

"I represent the English Government," says the man.

"I'm Irish" - "And so am I" - "We're all Irish," says O'Shea and the turks instantly.

"I'm Scots," says the Blackhill turk, who has forgotten he's Irish too, and a valid point it is because of the separate governmentation of Ulster and Wales and all them.

"We are all domiciled in England," says Helmut, looking round at them and frowning.

Helmut gives me a glare and a nudge.

"Er - *I don't see why you shouldn't sign this, Helmut . . .* I'm about to drop him right in it, but I surprise myself by saying to the gentleman in the immaculate suit and inscrutable smile: "Are you sure you aren't in the pay of one of the big farming factories?"

He looks very odd at me. His smile deepens at one corner, just under the thin curve of the moustache.

"What's this, Rat?" booms Helmut.

"This bloke is supposed to be a government food inspector," I says, feeling my neck go thick with nerves, as I put myself out on a limb, yet I'm too sick and angry with my suspicion to let it alone. I feel I'm fighting for the hens and Dad.

"Yet," I continue into the man's smiling silence, which is somehow more hard to force my words into than a noise would be to talk through, "the government's policy, I thought, is to encourage as much private husbandry as it possibly can. Our local authorities here used to be really vicious on allotment-owners, and now we're allowed to keep pigs and a herd of goats on our lawn if we want, let alone hens, and we'd be given a grant to plant apple trees and have a greenhouse if we bothered to apply.

"And yet," I says, into my stride thank you, "this gent wants you to sign, Helmut, to say that we're reported as feeding scarce human food to our hens, and we've got to stop wasting it."

"What is this wrangle?" says Helmut, taking a step nearer the inspector but halting as he hears the hum of the helicopter keeping its eye on us. "We don't feed those birds *anybody*."

"We don't infer cannibalism," says the inspector, smiling away. "But do you deny that you let them have, for instance, bread - at a time when bread is worth gold, and must be rationed even for human beings?"

"You say he's not on the level, Pel?" says Helmut, regarding the man, measuring himself for his jacket, minus the rose perhaps.

"I just say it's odd," I says. "True, this is a time when food is scare. But for that reason we should all be encouraged to keep hens and such, and in fact we are. But the big farmers and egg-manufacturers aren't pleased about this. At all. People ain't nipping down to the corner shop for a frozen broiler, or a roast leg in a transparent spit-oven, or even 3 or 4 eggs still with



a lion on. They're laying their own, or in some cases selling their own. And the big farmers, I shouldn't be at all surprised, are paying blokes like this enough to stuff their buttonholes with orchids, just to cast a spoke or 2 in our wheels."

Helmut and the turks had edged closer, but still they cast nervous glances up at the glinting bug in the blue above. Was there someone else up there? Was there a gun up there, trained on us?

"Is this true?" Helmut abruptly asks him.

Helmut says ordinary things. But his glaring eye, and his only less glaring glass eye, create quite a panic, breathing out as he does this large aggressive power as of a bull in a gate-less field.

"Yes," says the inspector languidly.

Helmut and the turks are nonplussed. Now they are certain there is a gun with us in its sights up there, for the man to admit this without hesitation.

"Do you expect us to bribe you to leave us alone?" I asks.

"What other yields have you?" he inquires, taking out a notebook.

"Do you expect us to bribe you in home-grown mushrooms?" sneers Calaghan.

"Mushrooms?" he lifts his manicured eyebrows.

"Don't say you're from the greengrocery trade too," says I.

"Who grows your mushrooms?" the gentleman inquires.

It's a leading question. It leads straight to just one name. At this moment, little Tarkwin, who has shinned up an elm, pipes down to Helmut, "It's empty, Helmut" and Helmut squints up and is sure the 'copter is empty, and being the Leader he is of the Lot it is, he can't resist, and he signals happy and sudden to his turks, who leap on the gent and get his arms twisted behind his back which he allows for them to do without a struggle.

"Now," says Helmut, "you want to get back to your office desk, I daresay, on a muggy day like this. Do just direct us who to contact, and we shall send off a polite note which will have you back in your air-conditioned sanctuary in no time."

"Ransom?" says the gentleman.

"If not for you, for your helicopter," beams Helmut. "They'll be wanting that back. Useful little vehicle. Climb up and get it, O'Shea. Touch her down."

"Nar, Helmut," says O'Shea, horrified. "I can ground a TA tank, but not a bleeding bug like that."

"Get Connor," says Helmut, impatient.

Connor unwinds himself from a doorway and strolls out in the yard, while we shoulder aside to make way for him. He seizes the rope ladder without a word, more or less shins up it, he has kind of bow-legs like a cow-hand or deck-hand, and up he is there at the controls, and from the sudden whirr he's giving her a touch of the choke, and she rises a bit and levels off again at 70 feet, just a silver dot. Then he finds the right control and down he comes making a vile racket. I thought at first he was going to have a little fly-round for fun, do a little jaunt just out of gaiety, but Connor is not like that. In no time she's bumping a bit on the yard, and the hens are delirious in the dust. She stops buzzing and he steps out and nods at Helmut.

Helmut peers inside his new gang-gadget with satisfaction.

"Ah," he says, "They'll be wanting this back."

"Pel," he says, "come and we'll help this gentleman compose a letter to his Bureau."

Helmut smiled at Dad, and he said to him, "We've got civilised companionship for you in your room tonight."

Helmut is often not bad at all with Dad. He gave orders to the Lot quartered in Dad's bedroom that they must treat him with fair respect, and not muck him about too much.

But Dad looked over his seeing-glasses, which are as useless as his reading-glasses since the prescription ran out, and looked at our new captive, and said Humph.

"All right, Dad, all right," I says. "He could say humph at the idea of sharing with you, too."

"I'm snorting," says Dad, "with the whole idea of kidnapping. Where is it going to stop, just where, this wholesale use of our 'premises' - which once were our home, and which I'm still paying the landlords for by monthly bloody Banker's bloody Order."

I feel everything Dad feels, I'm on his side aren't I, he don't have to yell at *me* - but Helmut's eye is narrowed as he watches me, so I say pityingly, "Keep your fluff on, old bloke, times is changing or hadn't you heard?"

"So can you move over in your bed from now on?" orders Helmut, and walks out leaving us in the dark of the old dining-

room with the bobble-fringed curtains drawn against the heat, at least that's what Dad says he's drawing them against.

"You'll have to slim, Dad," I says, playful. He don't smile back at me though I've taken pains to be nice soon as Helmut leaves the room, so I shrug, let him sulk, if he wants.

"It's not that bad, anyway, young man," says Dad gravely to the kidnapped gentleman. "You don't really have to share with me. You have a bed to yourself, any rate, if that's a crumb of comfort - Helmut isn't aware that I sleep elsewhere."

This is the first I've heard. I look at him sharply.

"Then just where do you sleep?" I demand.

"If you'd troubled to come to me for an exchange of a word or so, just a word or so, in the last besieged days," says my Dad slowly to me, "you'd have known as easy as pie."

"Oh, stop trying to attack me, I get enough of that, what am I, some kid still in your eyes that you got to discipline?" I says bitterly. "Just tell me straight without the riddles, where the hell do you think you're sleeping?"

"He sleeps in my room," said Connor from his slouch by the empty grate, his leather gleaming against the shells and paper-fans my Mum put in the grate long years ago. (Connor told me once he remembered my Mum, "she was a graceful lady.")

I had a split second of relief; I'd thought for a moment in the back of my head the old buzzard might be trying on some trick of getting his sleep in Helmut's room during the day when it was empty, Helmut's being the only room besides Connor's that is clear of bodies, and thinking he could go on getting away with it. But then I felt furious. I don't clearly know why, just furious. Mainly perhaps that I hadn't known about it till now. I felt for some reason as if they'd all been making a fool of me, Friija, Dad and Connor, though as Dad said I could have found out at the slightest Dad-wards move on my part.

"How come?" I croaked.

I know what my feeling was, I felt they'd got a nerve having my wheezy old Dad that I kick around in their room and not me, in their room I'd been trying for days to control my curiosity about:

Connor won't answer. He looks morose but goes on sitting there with his gun negligently in the direction of the gentleman.



I gather with a slight lift of my spirits that he don't particularly adore having Dad in his room.

"Your cousin Frijja," says my old man, "noted that I was not having a sunny experience in my own bedroom, and being that I'm perhaps at the wrong stage of life, of physical and mental and—" he broke off and said in a more even voice, "to adapt myself as you, Pel, advise me, she suggested to — Connor," there was a pause as Dad spoke the lieutenant's single name, which still sticks in his gullet, "that there might be space for an extra bed in 'his' room."

"Why not?" says Connor shortly.

He's got no call to want privacy with Frijja, I reflected with yet another lift of the spirits. He don't feel a thing for her but exasperated distaste and he just sees to it she don't go getting murdered.

"About whom are you conversing?" asks the gentleman, taking out a quartz cigarette case and tapping it open in Connor's direction.

Connor takes the case out the gentleman's hand. He takes a couple of snout, sticks one down his jerkin, lights another. He thoughtfully hands the case back.

"My niece? — Frijja?" says Dad, leaning forwards to the stranger and talking very clear, since Connor won't answer.

"Let me introduce myself," she says, her cold small voice coming from the corner just behind me, and I turn round, trying not to turn as though I'm nervy, and see her leaning there just the pale shaft of her with the floss of light hair about the only thing, and that's a blur, to mark where she's quietly come in and is leaning against the jamb.

Connor don't even swivel an eye in her direction.

"You've been talking about me?" she says, chilly? "Now return the compliment."

"I am less than aware as to how, in this particular household, to describe myself," says he, but he's rising and bowing.

"He's a prisoner," says Connor.

There is a pause again, because when Connor speaks it always sounds as if he's roused himself to do so simply in order to shut up all the rest of us.

Then, "Indeed?" says Frijja.

She comes forward into the centre of the room, and I see the stranger looking at her, perhaps summing her up, wondering if

she's the mistress of the household and if he ought to appeal to her if he somehow can, and what sort of household it can be where a female like this can be in any position, so unlike his own ladies I suppose.

"I am being held to ransom," he says, offering a fag which she ignores.

"You are so valuable?"

"I bring a dowry—" he waves his arm out at the garden, where the helicopter stands shimmering visible between the bobbles and net of our heavy dining-room curtains.

"Have they fed you?" says Frijja. "And are they deigning to allot you a bed?"

"I gather I am to share a room, or perhaps a bed, with some other gentleman."

"Connor," says Frijja, and presently Connor glances interrogation at her.

"Connor, there is space for this man in your room. He shouldn't be subjected to the—"

"No," Connor's voice is a snarl.

Frijja leaves it. She would shrug, only she don't make such extravagant gestures. But she looks round with contempt on what members of the Lot are down the end (for no room but Helmut's and Connor's stays clear of them) as though thinking with impatient repulsion of having, like the captive, to sleep among them with their friendly, polished little ways.

"Let's get the child its supper, Pelham," says Dad, for he likes to see to it, since no one else will, that the kid eats every day or so.

Little Tarkwin has peeked in the door, holding the crotch of his jeans which is his only comfort in a hostile world. He is very shy and stammers like hell these days.

Dad goes over to him before any of the Lot pulls him in for a 'game'.

"Well, then," Dad says, "shall we have a chop or 2, then?"

He don't mean meat, no one these days would suppose it. He means judo, which he is teaching the little kid to keep it busy. He lays himself open inviting a couple of simple little moves and then slowly and carefully frustrating the kid's attempted rabbit-punch with a simple old shoulder-lock which is marvellous to little Tarkwin who gapes at him with adoration and awe

and love shining off him, and darts round him and laughs and laughs, happy.

It rings a bell, it strikes a real chord. It's just the way I used to carry on over Dad.

I think the same bell is struck in Dad, for he straightens up and a dead, bored, what's-it-in-aid-of look closes his face and he leaves little Tarkwin sparring the air. Dad is remembering how I used to cling round him in paroxysms of love and admiration, and now I'm so entirely superior to him, and he thinks if that's the way I am now, why bother going through it all again with this unrelated snivelling little stranger, this whore's kid.

Sweetness come in. She sees little Tarkwin looking forlorn and peaky. "Here, Kiddo," she says, jolly at once. "Come off with me and we'll shovel some sweeties down you." He follows her off.

Connor speaks.

He says, very nasty, "There's nothing so edifying as the contrast between Respectable Folk and the brass."

That's as far as he goes. But he says it with such venom, pointed a bit at Dad (who I sense he blames not so much for not feeding little Tarkwin at that specific moment as for sharing his room with Frijja night after night) and at Frijja (who I know he don't think is hard-hearted towards Tarkwin who most people have forgotten she saved from Helmut as that happened at least a fortnight ago, as he blames for whatever way it is she is unsatisfactory to him). So I think I'll direct his venom a bit for him, a good turn you know, make him feel evil instead of uncomfortable.

"Yeh," he says, his right-hand man I am, his point-maker, a loyal creature like me can help a Connor to get a direction in his whole life eventually, just by clarifying his chaotic grievances and nursing them along in good directions for him, "take any brass, it'll have a heart of—"

"When I was on the cabs," chips in Herlihy who used to be one of your best men at charging an old retired gent 15/- on a 7/6 minicab fare, "who'd give you a grand-hearted tip, never right, but all the brass? A so-called Enemy-o'-Society *prostitute*, all darlings they was, they'd always drop you a quid or so tip. But a so-called Respectable Lady or Gent, they'd tip you a filthy shilling or so. Ugh." He shuddered at the hypocrisy of it all.

Frijja stayed in the room, though they began to sneer about



Good Women in a very rabid, directed way. It was a bit of a laugh actually, they always thought of Frijja as a Proper Person, in spite of her life in the Docks, mainly because they were the intruders here where she was the owner's family of the house, and she was so unenticing and, it seemed, purposely so, beside Sweetness and Glor.

"You'll never find a 'nice girl' with a 'good heart' that isn't really thinking about her own skin, her own motives," grunts Connor.

"Not free and easy, not nice to know. You'll never beat anyone for just being as great *company* as a pro," says Herlihy.

Frijja listens with detached interest. If she knows they're getting at her, she's unwoundable. But I gather she don't know much if anything about the most elementary workings of prostitution. In the Docks, there is hardly any females, except the tarantulas off the bananas, and what there is are devoted camp-followers mainly.

Me, I've been a ponce since I was toddling. I knew it all. Some girl, it lived up the street from the orphanage in a posh house with a door-side foot-scraper, it once told me I had no idea what love is. But I do, I know it all, from the inside I do.

And I agree. I prefer the brass any time, thank you *very* much. Open-hearted, generous, they'd always go without their own next meal or rent-money in order to help you out if you cry on their warm shoulder. Well, of course, being a landlord myself, I can see the disadvantages of that. My trouble right through life is a foot in more than one camp, but I'm stamping on it.

I become quite a artist at the business, all which Dad became aware of when it was so profitable (and so far gone, it'd've taken a major upheaval, and endless recriminations from me, to set the darling business in reverse) that he just turned a sloppy old blind eye to it with the occasional whine.

I had none of this "customer is always right" lark. Not even to the big customers, the big racketeers, betting-shop owners, men behind the grass-planting, and that. Oh, no. I know they enjoy a brothel for its sleaziness. Otherwise they wouldn't come. Couldn't they always choose a bird of their own, set it up in a place where it was allowed to choose the satin curtains to match its sheets and negligee, where it could have the bottle of vino always at the ready and really be exclusive sweet-swelling

Strangers Off the Grass. No. Sleaziness and a certain *lack* of sweet smells is the stock in trade of the brothel. Or of one like mine anyway, which would never be fancy as brothels go, and if they didn't like it the way it is they wouldn't have visited. After all, a man who needs a prostitute instead of a girl, he's a man who needs degradation to enjoy his bit of sex – he *needs* to pay. He's just not happy if he's *given* to. That's the answer to dear sweet nose-in-the-air little damsels who say to you, "But why do men not prefer us in all our fragrance and faithfulness half so much as some ugly, old, tatty tart who's kept going for years and has infected  $\frac{1}{2}$  Battersea by now?"

"Yeh," I chips in, blank-faced, whittling a piece of wood that was once an ornament on our mantel – which I been doing lately to show them I've got as little finickiness about the place as they have, to show I don't look on them as interlopers – "these Good Girls is like whey beside junket, even the jolliest of them. *Which* we ain't got a number of around here."

"The femininity around here, of whichever type, is fairly edifying," says the Ministry gentleman, lighting a gold-banded cheroot.

"If you're sucking up to *her*," Connor growls, "in order to get a decent bedroom, forget it. She's *no* influence."

"Who in fact is the owner here?" inquires he.

I knew he didn't mean who was the *leader*, he already knew fair enough that is Helmut. But he had summed up the situation.

I lounged back, feeling a mellow glow. It was my situation by right for a second or two, I no longer had to crawl round watching the psychology and weak points and possible future moves, like nerve-straining chess on which your life depends, of the toughs around me.

"I am," I says, casual. "Let me extend you me welcome."

But at this same instant Dad had raised his old rheumy hand. I was furious. He may own the title-deed, but since when has he held the place together? It seemed Dad was furious too.

"Pel," he barked at me. "Am I invisible that you forget whose house, whose walls and roof and furnishings these are?"

"Garn," I smiles indulgently at Dad, and lounging back in my chair being kind to him through my smoke, I felt quite protective towards him, fatherly I felt, "since when *have you mattered here?* Or where?"

"I'll show you your room," Friija says to the gentleman, and

they both rise. Everyone is suddenly rising, for Dad is shuffling out. And Connor stands, and says, "No." Frijja glances at him. Connor nods at Herlihy, who takes the stranger out.

Sweetness gets sweets all the time. They are still cheap, and easy to get, none of the struggle that getting meat or bread is. She practically lives off them.

"You'll get spotty," I says to her severely in the kitchen.

"They're nourishment," she says. "Sugar. Energy, 'n it?"

"You already got a chin like a pink cheese-grater," I says, more sorrowing than anger.

"What is all this concern about my appearance?" she says.

"You'll loose Connor," I says, boding.

"Connor's not likely to care about a couple little spots!" she flashes. "You judge everyone by your own meanness!"

"So, why should Connor be easier to please," I says.

"He just is," she smirks. Brushing her hair off her shoulder, smiling sideways, her tits bouncing under her blouse and her arse wagging, I got to admit she is appetising. What is more, it is Connor sets her off, so she has a person-to-person field of magnetic force working for her in that direction too. "Give us the key to your bathroom, Pel," she says. "I'll take your advice and clean up a bit. I might get that new gent to like me."

"He'll hardly fly off with you when he returns to the bosom of the Civil Service."

"No, but Connor might get jealous. Anyway, you got to keep picking out some feller you like the look of, else you lose any interest in yourself," says Sweetness. "Wherever a girl is, where she lives, and where she works too, there's got to be someone she can pick out to be in love with. Even if it's just for a day. Otherwise there's no point in anything, is there - dressing, or washing her hair, or using loo paper."

"I ain't giving you no bathroom key," I says.

She pokes her face forwards at me.

"You think I'll go flashing it around in front of Helmut and the boys?" she says. "You don't trust me, you don't, do you. You admit it, Pel, come out with it straight, you don't trust me."

I laughed.

She stared. She had to change her tone.

"I know," she whined, "you told them you'd lost the key to that little room. Well, they ain't suspicious. They looked



through the hole to make sure it was only a bathroom, they ain't bothered bashing the door down."

"What are you whining for, Sweetness," I smiles. "I don't have to have reasons. I just ain't in the mood to give you the key today."

Sweetness walked off, wounded, liking me less. But since she never has liked me really except for what she can get out of me (but she don't know that, she thinks she feels liking for me) that needn't worry me. What matters (I prune with economy; first things first) is that Sweetness's resentment against me will swell into another vein of her hero-worship of me. She thinks anyone who is tough with her, and that she can't understand, is Connor-like. She'll be turning herself inside out thinking up ways to please me whether she likes me or not.

I was up in my cistern-loft, adjusting my mirrors – I always misled Sweetness about how to use them and no matter how much she comes up here, she can't spy so good – this house of ours is no Gormenghast, rooms are in an easy pattern, and at spying I am adept.

I got nearly everybody under control of some kind, psychological if that's all, by having watched them from me cubby-holes, corners and home-made eavesdropper-tubes.

Incidentally, under them mirrors I can't  $\frac{1}{2}$  get a good tan as they direct the sunlight.

Well, thus it was with bated heart and beating breath that I happened to overhear a neat little interchange between the new gentleman and Our Frijja.

I could tell right off whose voices *these* was.

No mistaking our gentleman for a Lot member, nor my cousin for a scrubber.

"I am getting you away. Out of this," he drawls.

"I must admit, life is hardly now a glory," Frijja said, Indifferently.

"We miss you."

"I miss you."

That was nice.

Christ. I think I'll go and bring Connor to overhear this little lot. But suppose they stop their mutual loveliness while I'm

fetching him, and then all he finds out about is my spy-system, which he might even smash.

The rightness of eavesdropping is, just as you want to yell out a question, ask them to clarify the matter, they usually do anyway. Specially if they're even touching on a mutual past, they can hardly help reminiscing a teensy bit.

"Gorbals misses you," he says ever so sad. Poor Gorbals whoever may *he* be.

Frijja is silent. I think she's going to let Gorbals pass. Then suddenly she says: "Nobody could shoot like Gorbals."

"Possibly his favourite pupil." I know from the courtly dryness of the gentleman's tone who *that* was.

"I get no chance to shoot these days," Frijja is mooching.

"When I get you out of here," says the gentleman, "Let us do it in style, little girl. Let's leave them blazing."

"Foolhardy," she says with her voice hard. "We aren't working for pleasure. First, we'd never get away with it. They'd get us. Here is a house full of them, crawling and pullulating with them. Second, we'd endanger everything we've so far got done."

"And a long uphill roll it's been," he observed.

Frijja acknowledged that with a nod, I suppose, if at all.

"Hasn't it occurred to you, Baby," he says lightly, "that They probably know about everything we're doing and everything we've done, just anyway?"

"Bartlemy," she angrily said, "this is to give them the status of - god." She said it with a small g. I distinctly heard the small g. I despise people who don't believe in Him. "They may or they may not know. Their spying system obviously is not infallible. They may, I suppose, be waiting to smash us just as we achieve what we've been climbing to. But your attitude to them is disastrous."

(Now I come to think of it, I don't claim to know if He exists or not. I'm not that know-it-all, am I? But why dis-believe?)

"You don't wish me to joust God?"

"Joust that?"

"Then stop fighting. And let me take you away from here. It took long enough to find you."

There was a pause, just a bit of one. Then Frijja said, "Oh yes. Get me away."

My fingernails froze. All the spots of light danced off my mirrors around me all over and around the dark dizzy loft. Let

me go and get Connor now? Oh, let me. Should I go and *tell* Connor? Or wait till I had more. More proof. More evidence. More flagrante delicto. More wherewithal deliciously to catch the birds red-handed. Trap.

Trap.

I was coming back from 'shopping' when as I approached our house I saw a number of the Lot gathered around, outside. They was cursing and howling. One of them picked up a brick. The sweetheart lobbed it through the fanlight over our unusually-closed front door.

Once, I would have run up and yelled (trying not to yell squeaky) what did they think they was at. That fanlight was Dad's pride and joy, you'd only to see his expression soften with wonder and pride in the afternoons when he shuffled up or down the staircase and saw the coloured reflections swimming over his polished toe-caps on the polished lino, as the sun came through the bits of stained glass. Blue, red and khaki – the khaki representing gold. A religious motif it was, a crown of khaki thorns dripping blood the colour of a bank statement.

My last words to Dad might have been about his not mattering, not here, not anywhere. Still, I dreaded having to see his face when he found the shattered rainbows cold and chunky on the scuffed stair-lino.

But I kept quiet, I did. Connor was there, appeared at the edge of the Lot, moving in to the front, and they parting for him. I weren't opening my big mouth and endangering my capture of Our Bart and Frijja.

I kept on walking forward with my armful of stale bread in its tatty wrappings.

"House!" yelled Helmut. They had all been out on one of their little jaunts and he was leading them back after their victory (it was always victory) doing whatever they'd been doing to yid drapers in St Pancras.

A window squealed up and Mickle looked out.

"Open this door!" roared Helmut.

"I'm afraid," says Mickle politely, "it's been barred from inside as it were."

"Un-bar!" Helmut screams.

"There would hardly be much point to such an exercise,"



says Mickle, "considering I've just gone to all the trouble of changing every lock in the house."

"You did?" cries Sweetness who I am standing beside at the edge of the crowd.

"I'll ram my key up your throat," says Helmut very quietly. "Now open up, boy. We can get in anyway if we set our minds to it. And don't expect any little chat from us then."

"I've got my orders," says Mickle.

Helmut is irritated. No one really wants to have a go at Mickle. We all know he means no harm.

"Whose *orders*? Send the bitch out to us."

"It wasn't the chick," remarks Mickle. "It was the owner." He turns his head a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch to the side to escape a thrown stone.

"That old goat?" Helmut whistles through his teeth, relieved of stress. "Standing up for his property at last is he? Leaving you to face the music, though, eh?"

"I haven't seen him since he ordered me to change the locks," agreed Mickle.

"Then why'd you change 'em?" blared Helmut.

"Mickle," suddenly shrills Sweetness, "while they're keeping you here talking, they're moving round the back to bash the fence in!"

"I thought they would," says Mickle.

He adds, "I might as well stay here. Me being round the back won't stop them bashing it."

I stare at Sweetness. Why should she be braver than me? "What are you protecting my Dad's house for?" I growls. "None of your business, is it?"

"What you making gestures for, then?" Helmut barks up at Mickle. "Well. You've made your point. You don't like us. Now come down, open up and we'll say no more about it."

"You'll get in," says Mickle. "But I took a good two hours changing those locks with a blunt screwdriver. I'm not letting you in."

"It's the principle!" screams Sweetness.

They all slew around to stare at her like I'm staring.

"It's an old man's house and you've taken it over! You're supposed to be *for* private property!" Sweetness is pink with her own rhetoric and intellect. "You're supposed to be for the individual person, not the bogful of pigs!"

She was shining with it. Her righteousness, her splendour,

and knowing how surprised we all was at her. She couldn't keep her eyes away from Connor. She reckoned she was really making a real impression at last.

"Shut your flap, you cow, you eejit," they was all shoving her: "Shut your stupid mouth." "Here's something to stuff in it if you got to use it." "Let her talk," says Connor, speaking for the first time, and they quieted.

"You're *cruel*," says Sweetness, bursting with pride, and as if she thought this would upset the Lot and make them change their ways. ("Cruel? Us cruel? Golly-gee, we never saw it *that way*.")

"You're all victimising an innocent house," says Sweetness and a halo shimmers around her head and she beams at Connor, but soulfully, like a wilting Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones ladies I used to look at in a book of Dad's and I used to get pins and stick them in their moony dreamy soulsick the-world-owes-me-a-living faces.

She is well into her stride but the door opens.

"Well, look who's letting us in," Helmut takes his Whiff out his gripping teeth. "Our hostess . . ." He bows to Frijja.

We all push in.

Connor pauses in the crowd, and stays by Frijja to remark, "You aren't buying no favours. You are on borrowed time. We all know you are going to be killed by one of us here one day."

"What has led me to expect," smiles Frijja, "a favour for a favour? It saved the old man's fence and more windows."

"You are *treacherous*," Sweetness hisses at Frijja and her halo sneers sparks over Frijja. "Why didn't you back me up in—"

"Your little spiel," finishes Connor, shoving her up the stairs with a finger in her back.

"You admired it," Sweetness glances coyly down at him.

"It was sentimental inaccuracy," says Connor who knows his book of jargon.

"Then why did you listen to me?" she jeers, secure, she knows she's been a heroine at last, and if he wants heroines then she'll be heroines.

"Because you got big tits," says Connor shoving her up.

Sweetness gasped. "You crude pig!" she said as she ran up the stairs, her face scarlet, tears coming in her eyes.

The Lot flows back into the house. No one does nothing to Mickle except for a little roughing-up, just a token thing. Dad is nowhere around. He'll lay low for a bit. Not surprising.

I pick up the bits of crown-of-thorns. I would of said something about that. Yes, I would. Except I've got my denunciation to guard. I mustn't get in trouble before I can denounce the Tasteful Twosome.

I could hardly sleep that night. So excited. My knees and joints all had that feeling in them you get when a squeaky sound sets your teeth on edge. *All of me* was on edge that way.

And there was a big hole in the sheet.

My toe kept going through it and the rotten stuff frayed and presently my foot was through.

I tried to lull myself off with the old games. *Books I would like to have seen illustrated* – *Forever Amber* by Gerald Scarfe, like. Scarfe would show up the mess of Charles II's cosy Court all right. All supposed to be so sexy and romantic by compare with us peasants, just like so many people we're still supposed to look up to, and I tell you, that was a great book that Amber, she really showed how all these fancy people really they never hardly washed and they used their expensive scents to cover up so people shouldn't guess they was unwashed, and if people can't wash why should anyone ever be ordered to 'look up to' them. Then suddenly Dad was calling me. "Pel. Pel!"

I realised I'd been asleep after all. I'd drifted off. I got muzzily out of bed. His voice sounded so urgent. So authoritative, as it had always automatically sounded to me when I was *me* – that's a slip. That's how I think of myself in my younger days. *Me*.

So at once (because I was still sleepy) as Dad called me again, I got up. I stumbled over Glor who was entwined with someone at the foot of my bed. I looked again. Good Christ! The someone was Helmut! Not snoring, but asleep. I stumbled to the window. This was where Dad's voice was coming from.

I woke up – *really* woke up, I mean – as I swung with my fingertips from the sill. I was 3 storeys up. I was in my singlet. I was freezing with fright. I edged back into the room. Any moment, I thought my grip would fail. I could feel the hairs on my legs scrape across the wood sill, so I knew how they must be on end.

Suddenly two hands were beating me across the head with something heavy. Someone was trying to prise my hands off the sill. I tried to pour strength into them, but they were so weak



and numb I thought my grip would peel off like stale Sellotape. "Get out! Get out! Intruder!" a voice was screeching. Glor's. "Intruder yourself! It's me, Pel!" I roared.

Even in my ears, my roar sounded rather reedy, though it was a right bellow, rucking my throat. Suddenly I was grasped and pulled head-first into the blessed, blessed room, my stomach scraped on the sill and one of the bent nails gave me a scratch I still got now, but I welcomed it.

"What was you doing out there?" Glor demanded.

"Dad - he's out there. Dad called me. He's on the roof," I said.

Then I was sorry. Perhaps, calling in that secret way while everyone was asleep, Dad had not meant *them* to know.

"On the *roof*?" says Glor's companion, and I saw it wasn't Helmut at all, it was old Manny. I could tell by the smell. I don't know why I saw him as Helmut. Then it was I realised. I had been asleep, right to the very instant I found myself hanging off the sill.

"It's all right," I mumbled.

"He had pickles for dinner," Glor laughed. I hadn't, we got no such animal as pickles in the house, but that to Glor is *exactly* the same thing as saying, "He had a nightmare" just as some people say, "I got to see a man about a dog" and then would honestly swear in a Court of Law thinking they weren't perjuring themselves that they said, "I'm going to the bog." Actually I'd like to work out a case where someone said one thing and was dead sure they'd said another and murder evidence depended on it.

So I tumbled back in bed and though I woke in the morning with such an enlarged hole in the sheet I was really come through on the other side of it and the sheet could never ever be darned, would just have to be torn up for bandages and dusters, I was perfectly happy. It's not every night you're rescued from stark death.

I can't look at that unsuspecting little couple without hugging meself now. Oh, my God, do I know what they're in for! There they sit at the table, munching their baked beans, not looking at each other, doddling their crumbs on the oilcloth, looking moody, and all the while their little smug soulful hearts

are jogging with self-satisfaction at the thought of their happy breakaway to come.

Oh, how I long to burst their bubble NOW. To sidle up to Connor. And say, casual, "Oh, Connor. By the way, them two little lovebirds is scheduled their getaway for tonight."

And Connor says, "Lovebirds? No lovebirds *here*."

And I says, surprised like, "Oh, didn't you know about my cousin and that new bloke what parked his 'copter in our garden?"

And Connor goes slowly so grim I shudder to think of it. And off he goes to scotch their plans. So we catch them absolutely red-handed. I'll leave it to the last possible second so they're absolutely sure they've succeeded and they're getting away. And if we managed to catch them in the middle of a sex act, so much the sweeter. Connor would strangle her. And spiflicate him.

"Get hold of your old bloke," Helmut said to me.

"What for?" I says instantly.

Helmut, about to go away, turns his heavy face on me.

Hurriedly I got up to get Dad. "I don't know where I'll run him to earth," I mumbled as insurance in case it took a ½-hour or so to come back with him. "Ain't seen him for 3 days." It's OK to get him, I told myself. If Helmut had been mad about the locks, he would've smacked Dad's skull in before this. Anyway, if I don't find Dad for Helmut now, Helmut will be mad at me.

Dad was going to be furious with me for disturbing his rest like this. It was gone noon, the time of his midday withdrawal, when he not so much napped as exercised the prerogative of an elderly man in being able to opt out of distasteful company for a tiny, jelly-frontiered hour with the official title of NAP. Still, I took the stairs 4 at a time.

Connor's room I hardly ever enter.

It has a barrack look. The beds is always neatly made. Either he or Frijja does that: they both got the same military outlook. Because I make a point of keeping rubber soles on my shoes, and also because no matter how open a mission I'm on I prefer to be quiet in my advance, I approached the room just naturally quietly. And because my ears are attuned to catch quiet tones more than extrovert ones, I heard the almost non-existent murmurs just before I entered. And I didn't enter.

Right off I knew whose bat-radar the sounds must be. And I listened like hell.

Yes. It was tonight. And he'd fixed the helicopter ready for its little old Vertical Take Off.

I nipped away from the door, as soon as I'd verified my darling information, as though it was electrified for yards around. And speeding on up the stairs on my errand, to try Dad's other hidey-holes, I bumped into a shadow coming down.

I was so excited I'd forgotten my own radar. I'd felt as though there were no more need for caution since at last caution had gained me what I'd been dreaming of. The shadow reached and lifted me out of its path.

"Connor," I whispers, in the air and in his strength.

He sort of pauses in his step to let me speak if I will.

"My cousin," I says, ever so shy now that it had come. And I wanted to talk slowly so as to draw the intimate moment out, yet gabble so as not to lose his attention.

But he is attentive.

He even prompts me. "Your cousin?" he says.

"She . . ." I says. "She - is planning escape."

"Escape?"

Connor added, "From what?"

"Tonight. With her lover."

The reaction has all the interest I could have desired. More, in fact. Connor's fingers deepen into my arm. Jesus. I'd be black the next morning.

"Her fucking lover? She hasn't got a lover."

"Well - she has." I whimper it. He's truly hurting.

"Talk, Pelham." Connor gives my arm a vicious twist. This wasn't as nice as I had thought it would all be. One is generally let down if one pins hopes on an outside-the-law.

"Her - gentleman - that - gentleman."

"Gentleman?" Connor don't seem to know the word at all.

"I don't know his name. That - bloke - who come in the copter."

"Him? What? Give." "Yer - yer—" I gabbed on as he shook me. "This - bloke - and her is old chums. He came on purpose to find her. They been doing resistance work together. Resistance against your Aliens. Connor. He knew her in the Docks. He's getting her away tonight."

"The fuck he is."



Connor let go of me and walked rapidly downstairs. I knew I was to walk with him. "Where are they?"

"In your room."

"He's her lover?"

"Well. Obviously."

We looked in the room. It was empty.

Suddenly Connor gave an awful yell. It was vile, yet it had complete authority. And after a pause for a quartet of heartbeats, the whole house come alive. There was voices and feet running everywhere. Helmut appeared on the stairs.

"That cunt with the clothes," says Connor, "is making off with the girl."

"Which girl" inquires Helmut, and not at all interested.

Connor looks at him in surprise, as if there's only one girl in the house. Then he says brief, "Frijja," and says to the others, "You, Herlihy and O'Halloran, search the garden. O'Shea, check the top floor. Flaherty, the cellar . . ."

"Does it matter?" Helmut makes a big yawn. His tongue folds out of sight. You can see his glottals wobbling in the red backward and abysm.

"Of course it matters!" Connor stares at him again.

Helmut waves a hands, stilling the activity like a dropped bomb. Connor stands alone in the silence. Then Connor says, "They're taking the helicopter," and doesn't wait for Helmut's roar to continue ordering his search.

Helmut is beside me suddenly in the uproar. "Your old man," he says into my face. "You didn't bring him to me."

I begin stammering. Something about the glint in his slit of an un-glass eye seems so evil (the glass one is kind and benign) – suddenly I get all my courage together and I squeak out, "You never told me what you want him disturbed for."

"I just want you to find the old carrion," Helmut said so smoothly, so silkily that for some reason I was appalled, "wherever he may be."

"I'll keep an eye open," I says and wriggles away from him.

Hadn't Helmut seen Dad after the attempted gesture of the lockout? Had Helmut only just now decided to mete justice on Dad? And here I was quite in the dark about it all, not knowing what the situation was. What was wrong with the old man's mental processes now, that as usual he hadn't come to tell me what it was all about, and give me some sort of fair warning?

The house! I never seen it so live, not even on whisky-nights. There were members at full-tilt everywhere. The garden was being combed. The hen-house was being combed, in case they was hidden under the antique hay. The mushroom beds in Frijja's cellar was being spiked and rumped, not so much because anyone thought she was in the mould, as from sheer "This is the end of *her*."

Already it was nearly night. The slugs was seeping in out of the yard, through the plaster and gluing themself on the kitchen corrugated-wood draining-board. The convolvulus along the fence was rattling as it does at terrible hours. The lamps was lit and shadows ran around at boot-soles, lengthening and thinning, or drawing in and squatting up at a gallop. Everyone was hoarse and ribald. There was a blood-lust in the air. The girls joined in. They ran up and down the corridors, poking in the cupboards, their dressing-gowns flying wide over their slips — they pulled out all the old Minton that my mother and father had for their big main wedding-present, and it crashed in its box and the wrappings Dad had cuddled round each individual cup and bowl with its thin gold-leaf edge-line was no good at all. Crash! And the endless shuddering crepitations of bashed porcelain, the death in an instant of an old dinner-service, and Glor burst out laughing and laughing. It was a holiday atmosphere. The kid joined in the poking. In cupboards, even in chests-of-drawers. The wardrobes was hauled around. Chimneys was smoked. But the gates and doors was locked, shutters barred, the fence guarded and the 'copter still stood in the yard. "Who's got the ignition? Who's got the starter?" Helmut yelled. Connor patted his dark pocket.

There was crashes and bashes all through the house now. As wardrobes crashed to the lino, their hinges burst and their mirrors splintered and old clothes thudded in a solid wham and moth-balls scudded like hail-stones in a happy hurricane or like a game of marbles on which O'Shea slipped and went yelling arse over tip.

I was yelling along with the rest. But in my secret places there was a quiet satisfaction. Pack of violent idiots. Even more surely than Helmut, I manipulated this reservoir of violence. I had set all this off. And Frijja was done for.

Then I passed a door. It was the bathroom door to which only the family had had the key. But it had been kicked in to-

night. It swung. There was a face in the bath. A familiar face. I bounded in.

Dad had been having a bath. The water was still chin-high. It hadn't even been drained out yet. But it was red. It was red.

Dad's head was laid back on the rack the soap and toothbrushes is kept in, just as he always liked to bathe, a sort of racketsy pillow. He may even have been asleep there when it happened. His mouth was open. His eyes was closed. He looked so bloody placid, his visible flesh untouched except by his usual pallor, that for a crazy moment I cancelled his death and decided to start the game again, as one does in dreams. I knew the red water was a new kind of bathsalts. And the bath was ruddy rusty. Your water always mixed with rust.

"Dad," I said. "What time is this to fall asleep in your bath-water?"

Dad's head wouldn't move. His neck was stiff as a loofah. My arm of the hand that had touched him went so cold. Like a mountain-climber caught in the ice.

"Dad!" I screamed, racing out of the bathroom so quick I fell. "Dad! Who of you killed Dad? You killed him! You murdered him! I want you to know not one of you sods is getting away with this! I'm having the Yard in here. I'm having justice done. You won't get away with this. You think you can take over a old man's *home*. You think you can kick in *his* bathroom door. Since when has a bathroom been a public railway platform? You think you can beat about an old man and not have any reaction? You've done it! You killed him! He's dead. It's murder. It's murder. Bloody murder. Bloody Dad."

"Pel. Pel. Get a grip on yourself. You're OK. You're safe, Pel."

A face I didn't recognise was looking down at me. It beamed warmth and pity. It was Frijja. I'd never seen her face warm. Behind her was the gentleman. They were standing in full view of everyone, right out in the hall, except nobody was looking, everyone was too busy smashing and breaking.

"Fools!" I shrieked at them. I shouted it at the Lot for not lunging on their prey to tear them limb from smug limb. I shrieked it at Frijja and him for not getting for their lives out of this slaughter-house.

"They killed him," I sobbed. "An old man in his bathroom. They came in and beat him about a bit for the fun of it. I sup-



ose he'd growled at them to get out. They hated him. Because t's his house. Or Helmut—" I paused. "Or Helmut—" I said slower. "Helmut could of come in and done it. Because he thought he wouldn't come to him when I give him the 'order'."

The gentleman had an elegant stiletto in his hand.

"I think," he said airily, "that it devolves on me to kill this Helmut before we say goodbye."

"You're not leaving this place, mate," I said sadly. "The scum got a cordon round the walls. They got your 'copter. You'll never get away."

"Connor has the key," Frijja said to him. "Kill Connor." Then she laid her hand on my shoulder. "And we'll take my cousin Pel with us," she said. "Now they've done for my poor uncle, how can we leave Pel alone with them?"

Her friend, less blind and less trustful of me, gave me a look I interpreted as quite a dirty look. But he said, "You're right."

"Then we must find Connor," Frijja said. "We must kill Connor. He's the one with the starter-key." She started off up the stairs, agile as a cat bred in a narrow alley.

The racket was intolerable now. I thought every noise was a raw sore in my ear. They was breaking the place up entirely.

Connor saw Frijja before she saw him, and I saw them both.

The place was so dark with our low-wattage regulation lamps only half on (they hadn't thought to turn them all on even for their 'hunt') that only people with electric between them could sort each other out of the mêlée. My eyes flew instantly up the convolutions of the old gloom-ridden staircase and there sure enough standing by the head of one of its main branches was Connor just coming out of a room ransacked. And his eyes fixed like a gun on Frijja gliding rapid and snakily up the staircase to find him to kill him. And I saw what pleased me. Only looking at Frijja, backed by her gentleman Bartlemy, Connor has a massive hard on. This meant he'd give no softness, there'd be no quarter given.

But as Connor raised his hand and head to give the vile call to tell the Lot 'Found. Quarry found' so suddenly Frijja on her way up by the brooding banisters saw the half open door. She saw the red bath. She saw my Dad's old naked face. And she clung against the banisters.

I'd never seen Friija collapse like that. And Connor, never taking his gaze off her, it made him pause too.

Bartlemy hastened up beside her. He was alarmed. It was one thing to expose yourself in a houseful of 'hunters', who were really fairly innocent and vulnerable all agitated by their destructive urges, if you were on the alert and offensive among them – that was walking into calculated danger. But to break down in tears among them was another thing.

And then they were seen.

Helmut saw them.

The wolfish grin curled Helmut's long lips. His one eye spit glitter. His glass eye, usually so friendly, seemed to revolve in a bloated wallow. He gloated with the gentlest, delicatest, sweetest, lickigest leer.

"Look, boys and girls," he said gently. "Look what we have here."

And the stillness spread in concentric ripples. The Lot stilled, first near him, then farther, then in the far corners, they stilled.

I wondered how many knives Bartlemy had. Probably only the one. All he could afford to spend.

Friija lifted her head and her hair lifted higher with the movement, like a floss of silver static.

She said nothing.

She said nothing at him. (I'd expected her to hiss.) It hit him full in the face, her nothing.

"So. So the old buzzard's a welter," he said. "What of it? My lads have had it owing to them. We've let the old grave-sore lord it here long enough. What use was he to us? Always in the way, always grumbling. Yet we let him stay on, eating our food, taking up bed-space.

"So you're on the gad, are you, little fly? Off by moonlight? On the wing?"

"Oh, no, little fly. Big spider is here. Big spider . . ." And Helmut walked down the stairs to her.

He's a big man. The stairs creaked. The low-wattage shone off Bartlemy's knife in a line with Helmut's shirted navel, and on rows and rows of happy teeth with the snarls lifted off them. They were almost sorry Helmut was dealing with this, though they loved to watch the good show he put on. A gesture from him, and they'd take over.

"I'm pretty sure he had *no* immediate intention of killing her.

Or if so, it would be a long killing, full of conversation. The longer she refused to speak to him, the longer he'd delay killing her. It was getting her to talk to him that he valued.

But Bartlemy, due for the chop in any case, was taking no chances. He intended to kill Helmut. Bartlemy himself, after all, is another killing machine.

Bartlemy's knife-hand came up.

Oh, what a beautiful clean light aim. Helmut's navel would have been unwound back into an umbilical cord and wiring the wall. But Connor saw the aim and its beauty, and knocked Bartlemy's arm and the blade just skimmed blood from Helmut's solid rib.

Helmut leered sideways at Connor. He wasn't saying to Connor, Thanks for saving my life, man. He was saying Ha, ha, together you and I are trapping these scraps of prey at bay.

Helmut pulled his big gat from his hip-holster, casually aimed it at Bartlemy's belly, and fired.

Frija threw herself at Bartlemy to knock him sideways, and came in the line of fire.

The bullet grazed her shoulder. But blood sprang from the graze and beaded her shirt like a line of epaulette, then coloured her shirt as though the shirt was so much blotting-paper. She is strong, but she's small and she was knocked spinning by the bullet and she fell. All this blood was on her shirt. Helmut advanced on them both, she and Bartlemy. He shot again. He'd seen the blood and he couldn't stop himself now.

Connor is familiar with the old blood-lust, Connor knew that next shot before it came. Connor threw himself against Helmut. Helmut's shot went wide. It whined, it was lost. Helmut turned in a paroxysm against Connor, bewildered, offended, huge. A ripple went through the ranks.

Helmut thrust the gun right in Connor's ribs. I could see the pressure on Connor's muscles of the nosing black gat. Helmut was furious. His finger licked the trigger. Connor did the only thing he could do, in the last instant of time in which he could do it. He pulled the knife from his leather pocket and drove it in up under Helmut's belt, at the same time seizing Helmut's gun-hand and wrenching it away just as the weapon did, in fact, loose its explosion.

The Lot gathered around in toddler-like wonder as Helmut died.



They listened to Helmut's obscenities. Dying-bed obscenities, or in this case death-floorboards', are always the most effective. They watched Helmut's threshings-about and the most habit-bound of them automatically tried to curry favour by easing him, slipping their Sir Francis Drake jackets under his angry head.

Connor's hand now closed around Frijja's wrist. "This way," he jerked her. Bartlemy followed. I followed.

It was a moment or 2 before Helmut made them understand his order to kill Connor.

They all, or most of them, streamed out after us. They brandished guns, knives, their jolly hatchets. Wardrobe-smashing weapons. Connor-smashers. Me-smashers.

The garden was very dark. There was a moon. Clouds billowed before it.

In the few minutes we had free, Connor hurled us over to the strange 'copter standing locked on the lawn. Our boots crunched on old cans, crackled on fish-shop wrappings. A bottle went burbling away as I kicked it. It was impossible to keep silent.

Connor pulled the key from his recesses.

A bullet zinged past my ear. I didn't realise it was a bullet till it had gone. Glor came at Connor from the hen-house where she been hunting for Frijja. Glor flung herself bodily on Connor as though she was a sheet. Her 2 arms and her 2 legs went round him. "You ain't leaving—" she was screaming. Connor in one movement hurled her off of him again, but it was a slow movement, he had to peel her off. In this bit of time, Frijja tore the key from Connor; and Bartlemy was already scrambled right into the 'copter. Bartlemy was at his controls at last. Glor fell heavily to the ground some feet from Connor. He didn't look her direction as she landed, his eyes were on Frijja. Frijja was framed in the 'copter aperture. Already the thing was buzzing, it lifted a couple foot off the high grass. I watched Connor's eyes watching Frijja go. But Frijja put a hand over Bartlemy's on the controls and said, "Pel, Pel is down there. You can't leave Pel with them. He's my cousin." Bartlemy was going to leave me the scum, but she'd delayed him. Connor grasped the step and hauled himself limber aboard as I reached for Frijja's hand outstretched to me. Connor knocked Bartlemy away into the back of the little buzzing machine. Frijja stared at Connor and Connor stared at Frijja. She was horrified by his presence,

but she started very urgently to tell Connor something. "The little boy," she said. "We must take that child with us. We mustn't leave that child with them." Connor hit Frijja across the mouth. The 'copter juddered. Its wings swivelled. Bullets ricocheted by the near window. I was sure we'd been struck, a wing, a tank. I could imagine the fuel boiling ready to burst. Still the craft continued to obey Connor's touch on the choke. We were shaking like a tin jelly. People were rushing at us across the dark garden. They battered boom-boom on our sides. They kicked us, they clawed at the door-handles beside Connor. Suddenly we were 50 feet above the dark garden. We were in the dark sky. We were above the bullets. We were above them all. Connor's face, as he levelled her out, had a look of slack stupidity. He couldn't believe what he'd done.

His hand came off the control column. He removed his foot from the rudder bar. We hovered, looking down at the dark.

It was small, and there I'd spent my life.

There was a disturbance in the garden, as faces turned up to us and weapons were brandished, and no doubt fired. It was the disturbance one sees on grass-blades as wind turns the seed-pods.

We made a noise like a small car in need of a service.

Through the sound, Frijja said: "Bartlemy will take us to the Ministry. He knows the air-routes without charts."

Connor's mouth closed. He lost that look of a lieutenant unthinkable without a leader.

"Does Bartlemy fuck," remarked Connor, it was no question. "We're going where I say. I can still go back to them. If I go back to them, I can smooth them. I can take over. Most of them are my blokes. They're so used to obeying me, I'd only have to snap at them and they'd be turning somersaults. I could toss you and your gentleman to them as something to play with, to get over their guilt with, so they could feel they'd revenged Helmut."

"Why not?" inquired Bartlemy.

Bartlemy was in the back seat, with me. He was ready to jump Connor at the 1st chance. I was ready to disillusion him.

"Because I've a Bargain to strike," says Connor into Frijja's face.

"Strike it," said Frijja indifferently.

"If you give me your word, your word to sleep with me," says

Connor, "I'll get you away safe. Him too, since that's the way you work."

Frijja's eyes went white.

The 'copter nosed a bit down towards the garden. They were still there. The faces, the hatchets, the blood. She looked in the back seat, at Bartlemy alert, at me alert as a pointer fixed on Bartlemy.

Bartlemy said expressionlessly to her: "This has happened because you waited for your cousin. You gave your admirer-thug here time to come aboard." "Here, watch who you call what," I snarled at him. Bartlemy added: "And we might be a little easier without this passenger too."

"Pel is loyal to Connor," Frijja said in a low voice, nearly looking at Connor as she spoke his name, but in time flinching her gaze from his. "Pel knew Connor before ever he knew me. Who knows what gratitudes he may owe to Connor. But I owe Pel thanks for his hospitality and the way he looked after me when I'd been beaten up."

I laughed. "I know," I said pleasantly, "when someone is trying to get me on their side with smarmy speeches."

"You must sleep with me not once," says Connor like a lecturer explaining a child's primer. "You must do it when I want and however often I want, till I say I don't want you any more at all. You must give me your word not to get away till then. So I can trust you. Otherwise I'll take you back to them."

Frijja hesitated a ridiculous pause.

"Is it him?" Connor asked. "Are you his?"

"She's not mine," Bartlemy said, as one makes a modest disclaimer when a complimentary mistake is made that a lesser man would allow to stay made.

"Isn't that a fair offer?" Connor said.

"It's an offer any others would jump thanks at," I says, contemptuous of her. "My cousin's a squeamish virgin."

"You was informing me as *this* is her lover," Connor indicates Bartlemy.

"They're confederates," I says. "Obviously, they're old colleagues, they plot their little sneakings together. But I know a frigid hysteric when I see one. Don't you?" In this way, without presuming to tell him outright I thought him misguided, I planned to put him well off her body.

Frijja, whom I never knew one solitary thing to embarrass



except like this, was agonised by this public discussion of her fate, this exposed wait for her decision. She turned her eyes, to us all – me she could not influence, Bartlemy she would not for on her answer depended his life – she turned her appeal at last to Connor, almost as though he were the only one from whom she could expect help.

He *met* her appeal, what's more – in the most ruthless way *I* could have devised after a long think.

“Don't you worrit yourself,” he said. “Don't you tease your head about it. All we have to do is to take the responsibility right off your shoulders. I'll land down there again. They're already missing me. They don't know what they're going to do without me. They can have him. And I'll have you. But you'll both be free to do what you can to get away.”

“The Bargain you'd prefer?” Frijja said.

Connor made no sign, so that was as good as a nod.

“If it's more to your taste,” Frijja said, able a little less painfully to discuss the unthinkable (or, what I believe it was to her, the impossible) if she could discuss it in terms of trade. Docks-wise, “that I am sweet and willing about it all, does this mean that you are entirely averse to committing rape? That I find hard to believe,” she said in the entirely too broad-minded innocence of the ignorant. “Surely both methods are identical more or less. So does it mean that you are eager to leave them all, now that an opportunity offers itself, rather than take up probable leadership?”

“I don't care one way or the other,” said Connor truthfully, and he yawned while intently regarding her.

Frijja had picked an empty egg carton from in the back of the 'copter and kept punching it with her fist as if for comfort.

“Or does your move towards a Bargain mean that you must have my co-operation because your method involves cruelty,” says Frijja in a cool school-teacher voice, “and I might fight back or even kill you rather than co-operate unless my word had been given?”

There was a pause. Then Connor said rather thickly, “Wait and see.”

There had grown in the cabin of the 'copter a concentration which I recognised. I had watched it once all of one long summer noon on a beach at Southend where Dad had took me to collect my shells. There had been a lady and a gentleman in

bathing togs about 4 yards away from me. At 1st they just wasn't aware of each other. They was each lying on a towel, not with each other, not been introduced, she with her book, he with his transistor, both with the sun. Every now and then she shot him a look a distaste because his Desert Island Discs was interfering with her assimilation of paragraphs. He become aware of this. The distaste, I mean. He looked back at her and though he didn't often catch her eye, because she was concentrating on her page, he managed to make a sort of insolence flow out from his body at her as he highered his set. And she very obviously was hit by the emanation. And there they laid on the hot sand with their bodies talking to each other so hard / *could see it!* I could feel it, yards off from them. Very gradually, they moved closer to each other. It was irresistible magnetism formed of the repulsion of 2 poles over the magnifying electrical particles of the scorched sand. Eventually their forearms was parallel. Not touching flesh, but the alert hairs along them must of been. And all along their whole bodies you could sense the strong irresistible pull, so strong there was waves of surplus for me to feel too. And finally they got up, weakly, hardly able to walk, staggering with their sickness, and made off clinging together, still un-introduced, to their nearest hotel.

Well, as I'd *felt* the physical concentration that day, so I felt it here up in the sky. And Frijja was holding herself from staggering with the force of it, She'd fight it as calm and dead-pan as ever, not letting it get its brutal hold, drawing on her reserves of coldness.

Frijja punched a hole right through the egg carton.

She looked at it, then held it out to Connor. "A hole," she nastily says. "Here you are. That's all you want, isn't it?"

"We could hover," says Connor, "while we ponder our vexing little conundrum. But to save fuel, let's land."

There was static on the radio. Then a voice said urgent but weary, as if it had been calling for days without any hope of reply, "Come in Bartlemy. Come in Bartlemy. Bartlemy - are you receiving me?" Before Bartlemy, leaning forward keenly, could yell an answer in the affirmative, Connor draws into the intercom, "I'm receiving you on 2, baby. Out." He switches it off dead. Bartlemy's and Frijja's faces are tight.

He swung the 'copter over to the black trees at starboard. Then we was skimming places I had never known as patterns.

The evacuated houses, the great gasworks, the brick brewery, alas long empty, we'd all made sure of that in the early months, the corrugated iron 'shelters' that hadn't sheltered any soul, the factory with its erect empty impotent chimneys.

He come down on the vast large space of the Corporation playground. There was the football pitches coming up to meet him.

We landed with hardly a jolt, taxied a tiny distance towards centre-forward, dug our heels in. There was large trees near us, protective, yet we was clear for instant take-off.

Frijja made a move for the door.

"Pel, you got your knife," Connor says. "Accompany Frijja" – it seemed indecent, his use of her name, – "and bring her back here."

He accompanied Bartlemy. That Bartlemy had a wicked smile in his eyes, and I didn't trust him not to pull some stroke. For myself, I didn't know if Connor thought I was up to handling Frijja if she got difficult. She knows things I don't.

But we all got back in the helicopter without incident.

There was swings and slides just off by the trees. I used to play on them when Dad brought me. We all sat down on the little hard seats. It was impossible to be comfortable. I looked out at those swings and slides that used to know my bottom so well.

"We shouldn't have left that little child with them," Frijja said.

"What time would we have lost copping him away?" said Connor. "We mightn't have got away ourselves. And no kid should be separated from its Mother."

For a moment, I wondered who he was talking of. To hear Glor called a Mother is dead odd.

Frijja suddenly froze up, and she put a hand furtively on Connor's knee, left it there a minute, and took it away again. Connor thought of course she was used by now to his Bargain, which naturally enough she must accept. He grabbed her close to him with his one arm, with his other hand he grabbed her jeaned knee, not just her knee but her whole leg just about, and moved in for the kill. Frijja struggled and banged her elbow up under his chin. He tightened his grip then shrugged and let her go.



"You take some breaking in, don't you," Connor said. Frijjas' profile was impassive.

"You did put your hand on me," Connor said.

"To tell you," she hissed.

"Tell me what. Go on. Tell me what. What, Frijja?"

"She didn't want you talking about people losing parents," I interposed.

"Why," Connor inquired.

"Because I just lost my Dad," I said, offended.

"But that's not the same as a Mother," Connor said.

Frijja suddenly choked. Connor looked at her in alarm. There were tears all over her face. Connor's alarm turned to disgust.

"Anyway, Pel's away from them now," Connor said, a bit stiffly, as though all this chit-chat instead of his usual silence was like using a rusty hinge for him, and he only did it as a concession, almost like the only way he might consent to of 'courting' Frijja. "He don't have to be there with them. Jesus, if anyone had killed my Mother I'd've murdered him."

"What has that got to do with it?" Frijja sharply says, normally she'd've let the subject alone but I think the ugly way he said it bugged her, also the way he said it as though I ought to be rushing back there with a hatchet in my hand to commit mayhem there and honourably revenge my Dad on the entire Lot.

Connor glanced at her. "You want to kill the person," he bothered to say reasonably, "whether you know which one they are or not."

"But no one killed Pelham's father," Frijja said to Connor.

"He's there lying in his blood, 'n he? He ain't alive, is he?" I cried outraged, resisting any attempt she might make to deprive me of my ghastly suffering and tragedy.

"My uncle cut his wrists," Frijja barely said.

". . . You mean he cut his old wrists in his bath-water?" I said.

Frijja said to me, "Didn't you look, Pel? How could you? I looked. I wanted to know if he were still alive, if I could breathe him back. He had slashed first one wrist with a Wilkinson razor, then the other too, not so well. But he was dead. We found him too late."

"You lying filth," I said violently. "He never. He wasn't

upset about nothing. You're saying it to protect who done it."

"Wasn't he happy?" Connor asked with curiosity.

"You bitch. You whore," I said to Frijja.

When we woke, we was very hungry. I was stiff, too, from lying coiled on the tiny seats. I am small and supple but I ain't indiarubber. But Frijja and Bartlemy didn't seem stiff. And Connor wasn't even there. He had been the reason I had meant to stay awake all night, just in case he dropped off while Bartlemy didn't. I relished the anticipation of Bartlemy thinking he could bury his shiv in Connor's guts and make off with Frijja and the 'copter all neat and sweet, most likely leaving my corpse too with a word of apology to the gullible Frijja. And me upping from behind and spitting in his ear, "Your mistake, *sir*," as I buried *mine* in *him*.

But all the time Connor had been outside while I uneasily napped.

He come in from the dawn. He unlocked the 'copter - we'd all three been locked in. He was as stubbly as usual round the chin, always seems to be a 3-day growth, so he might of been at home for all the difference the night in the open had made. His shirt was open, his jacket off slung over his shoulder. I could see his whitish-grey chest (his Merch tan disappeared long ago) and his navel with the blond hairs glinting a trail to it.

He was holding a piece of *Observer Weekend Review* containing 4 flaky hot pies, and a piece of *The People* in which was nestled chips chalky with salt and beaded with vinegar.

"These is Wandsworth pies, no, yes?" I said. "You could tell we're in Wandsworth. Pies in Wandsworth is always warm and musky like so."

"This is very nice," says Frijja, taking her pie in both hands and contriving to eat delicately without meaning to.

"Better grub than we got at home," I says. "A bully old breakfast."

As I said the word home, the vision of the house passed over me like a wet shroud. I knew it hadn't been home for a long time, but now even the husk itself had left me. I thought of it there, still solid, still swarming with life, but no longer visible, no longer existing as far as I could tell. You can't prove something's existence once you're away from it. Yet there it stood,

beyond the swings and brewery and spaces and chimneys, the Lot now completely in possession, and entirely dumbfounded, squeaking in circles like flies in meat, Helmut gone, Connor gone, my Dad lying up there in his red bath-water, perhaps horrifying and misery-making them, yet probably to remain forever un-buried, knowing the incompetence and irresolution of the Lot, who would never get round to do anything about him, not wanting to soil their hands, only with terror *deciding* to.

I thought of Dad's voice calling me out the high window and up on the slates. He had been dead already then, and I hadn't known. His old lonely ghost on the roof, old bugger, calling me out, luring me out to my death. Why should he be malicious? Why should he call me? I never done him no harm. One more example of his self-centredness.

The bullets, as they 1st pinged us, we somehow thought were Lot bullets. Easy enough, in fact, for the Lot to have found us if they'd actually thought of such a undertaking. But after we had ducked and run and ducked into the trees, and paused to look back to judge the enemy, we saw that the bullet-slingers were strangers, forty or fifty Wandsworth men in old overalls. They took no notice of us. Once they'd scared us off from the 'copter, they just ran up to it and started patting it and laughing.

"Shoot a hole in it," I urged. "Make it useless so it don't do them no good."

"Waste a bullet we'll need?" Connor grunted. And I realised now as we faced the lonely waste land of Corporation playing-fields and all the lonely waste-land of London behind it, most likely we would need every blessed bullet.

"Let's get it straight," Connor says. "Where are we going?"

"To wherever Frijja wishes to go," Bartlemy shrugs. "You can hardly hold her now to your rather unappetising Bargain-that-wasn't."

Connor just suddenly laughs.

"We're still 2 against 2," I add.

Connor strode on. He was not looking at Frijja. But such a look stiffened her eyes. And then in sight came a roadhouse. A sort of municipal canteen, with lavatories and changing-rooms (for the magnificent playing-fields) attached.

"I want to go to the lavatory," Frijja said directly.

I thought how stupid this was of her. She should of said



something about *something*, the *amenities* the place could provide – something that would urge Connor to go in there for his own sake. Obviously thoughts of no lavatory weren't going to rush him in there, he had no inhibitions about needing chains and cisterns and doors. And we know she ain't some little deb neither mate. But then I thought what should she of mentioned instead to get him in there? Food? Beer? Fags? He can do without all these.

“All right. We'll wait by the counter,” Connor said.

Connor walked in the canteen and everyone looked nervously at him and us. Frijja nipped in the door marked with a silhouette in a skirt and high-heels as opposed to the door marked with a bloke in trousers and a trilby. That was the one Bartlemy went in. I let Connor use a few seconds to buy a packet of fags through the smell of boiling cabbage. Let him reflect a moment on what must now have struck him, the inescapable fact he actually was being kind or polite, the 2 words of course mean the exact same, to Frijja.

Would poor little Sweetness ever have been allowed to demand a loo? No, my little Sweetness would have been crudely rebuked for asking (if he weren't in the mood for a wait by a counter) – that would have been her reward for being wholesome and nourishing instead of something pale and posh straight out of a fridge.

Then I sidled up gently. “Connor. She's nipping out her window.”

What does he think I am, a sorceror? How could I of seen her doing it? We couldn't see nothing out of the cabbage-steamed-up canteen. He trusts me. I am omniscient. (Omnipotent? . . . we're working on that, sir.) Instantly he hurled out the door, dodging through the rusty-railing zig zag, and he bashed round the stucco corner, and Frijja slipped out under her Ladies frosted windowframe straight into Connor's arms and chest. She grabbed for her knife. The gentleman hurtled round his corner and very calmly, very viciously chopped Connor. I waded in too then. Suddenly I had Frijja by her narrow jeaned legs and she was no longer fighting because the gentleman and Connor was bashing each other under the chestnut trees and a old lady walked past with such a worried lonely look as though saying This world I got to make my old home in now.

Well, the upshot was Connor killed the gentleman. He caught

him such a whack on the head with his large shimmering fist. The gentleman just laid there with blood-stained froth on his well-shaped civilised mouth. KEEP OFF THE GRASS, the sign by his head said. The corner had caught him falling. Frijja did the classic vomit, which even for a girl like Frijja it is hard not to do when you see someone you're keen on killed. And she depended on him too. Let's not think it's all sentiment. She had depended on him. I went of course to hold her head, and suddenly Connor, just standing there weighty-fisted, he shoved me aside and he went and held her head while she juddered and spittled and involuntarily groaned, and he wiped her sweating little face on the cold sleeve of his leather. She just made no resistance and we all set off again leaving the messy lawn by the municipal lav.

Great slobbers the rain came down in. Round about here was the little granite stone fountain of a lady nude rollicking with her lambkin. Long dry. I had always seen it dry. Now it streamed black with rain and you could smell the nice wet granite in your nose, and your mouth, if you opened it, was drenched with that smell of wet asphalt path with the craters long un-mended and springing with wet rank grass.

Our feet squelched along the municipal path, all of us with holes in our sneaker-soles as shoe-menders is few and far between and expensive, asking as they do for meat and bread in preference to the money kind of bread.

The water did little rills spurting up between my active toes. Where am I going? I think through the municipal rain. What will happen? I am far from home. Home. I ain't got no home now any more. But then I never did have for a long whiles now did I really.

And what's happening in the world I think as dusk comes down with the downpour and here it's not even elevenses-time yet. Are there still lads with short back'n'sides in Munich and Aden trying to twiddle their radio knobs (cursing them) hoping to tune in to Family Favouritism and hear from the best Mum in the world? Gibraltar grieving solidly. Those Barbary monkeys worrying on their backsides - *We're* still here. Whatever happened to old Britain?

We're much richer. No Polaris (Polaris was ours?) No black kings taxing us to pay for their sacrifices. How is India getting on without Oxfam? Of course we've lost our three hundred

million £ a year I read somewhere it was tourist revenue. The Americans would of enjoyed home-moneying us now. For all we know Elvis may be a granddaddy.

Frijja didn't ask a question. Just went on walking, as though there was nothing left to do for the time being, her hair down over her head, her shirt soaked to her chest.

Sperlitter sperlicker said the rain on the leaves and boughs. A little bird just said one little squeak as a accident and shut up again in its perch among the noisy leaves. We will all contract pneumonia. "Where are we going?" I said. My voice creaked: none of us had used nor heard a voice for decades.

"I'm safe-conducting Frijja to her gang," Connor says into the rain.

Then I say, "I am too," quickly before I realise: "Then what's all the fighting about?"

Frijja didn't say nothing. "You and I are safe-conducting her," Connor says as before.

"And on this depends her payment of me," Connor says not looking at all at Frijja but with a hard jaw and his voice aimed her direction. "You see?" he says, sharp. "She didn't answer. She makes sure she walks along of us, instead of bolting quick, which in these poxy trees and wet she has opportunity to do. She would of been safe-conducted by her—" he started to say bloke, changed it to swearing, stammered angrily. "He's gone. She's a fast hard lady, your cousin, but she knows she can't make it alone to where she's going. London being the jolly way it is, Pel. She got to have us. Even with my Bargain as it stands."

"You realise," I says, soaked moving in the tepid rain, "soon as we get her near her gang she can have them kill us? And if we help her we'll offend the As."

"See what I'm risking to have the pleasure, darlin'?" says Connor, going up and running the murderous hand of the final conqueror along her spine. She is silent, still, though yet walking. She seems frozen. She seems to consider: she makes no move. Then, as unexpectedly, she pulls very violently away from that hand.

Connor's hand is left in mid-rain. His soldier's mouth is open. The same this is as when he couldn't of himself think that she would nip out the bog. Obedience is an engrained little thing in him. He can't think himself into the skin of a rebel. A neurotic.

The map in my mind I polished up. Presently we were in the



old railway tracks. No trains had run up the Junction since just a while after the As blotted our old sky. Sleepers was awry. Hollows in the gravel deep as pot-holing and slimy with grass. By the time we'd swum the puddles we was pretty cold. There was the great long shapes of sleeping trains lying deserted in the rain like un-loved dinosaurs. We trudged across to climb in one: then we saw a shed importantly marked Depot. It didn't mention of what nor for what. There might in there be means of kindling some workman's left-behind brazier. The rain slithered round us as we walked and the huge sign DEPOT floated towards Connor, Frijja and me bigger as it came.

We clonked up an iron staircase full of holes. Our soggy feet no longer had the power to bring much thrum from the stairs. Nevertheless, a tin rhythm hung in the rain. Music! Someone had on a record-player inside the DEPOT. The others made out the strange sound as I did.

"Listen . . . !" I says.

"Music!" remarks Frijja.

"Music?" says Connor. He don't think it can be, for it is Sibelius sneaking into the rain, and never before has he heard anything which ain't pop.

Connor makes an abrupt sign for us to stay still. He moves quiet to the slightly ajar unlatched green wooden door.

I had a knife. Frijja had 3 knives and a gun. Connor had a gun, his knife and the gentleman's knife he took off him.

But before we could peer in sussing the place, the door opened and out come a girl.

"Hullo," she says to Connor and us, natural as anything.

She is very young, about 12, in tartan socks and a woolly dress with a yoke and pleats. She has got a Robertson's Jam gollywog brooch on her limp collar. A long tail of black hair hangs down her back kept neatly in a couple of rubber bands.

"Where did you get them rubber bands?" I exclaim.

"We have lots of things," she says. She opens the door to invite us in.

There is a man with a white beard and no hair except white around his ears, like Father Christmas, sat on a pile of blankets on the planks playing his battery-record-player. "Don't be afraid," Connor says brutally to him, "there's just the 3 of us," and Connor strolls in and over to the table where fresh-looking

bread and cheese is spread and some rolls of a very thick ham of which there is more hanging up from hooks around the walls among the yellow British Railways calendars, but it don't look properly smoked. Connor spits some ham on the point of his knife and eats it, but he says: "This ham is home-made, 'n it?" in a disparaging way as if he expects 4-star bed and board (this year?!) and he takes cheese. "Get us some drink, old man," he orders, "and towels."

"You are very wet," agrees the old bloke, arising from his blankets, he is not so old except for his white beard, he is very big and fat with big fat hands set into rolls of fat at the wrists like a nourished baby's.

The girl at a sign from him nips over to a track-mender's brazier and brings it to Connor, also she nips up on a store-gallery at the back of the Depot stretching into darkness, and she brings down old BR towels which she hands us as we gather round the brazier.

"The ham is nicer," she says to Connor, "if you roast it at the fire." She gets one of the towels and begins expertly to scrub Connor's blond-brown hair till it stands up in soft wiry loops and tangles around his ears and neck which she then begins to scrub with a fresh towel.

"The life getting back in yez' veins?" the fat bloke chuckles at us, tamping what smells like scorching lettuce leaves into his pipe to smoke.

Connor looks up at the girl as with a deft, intimate, impertinent movement she twists the towel inside one of his ears. She smiles very duckity at him. Suddenly, with a side glance at Frijja and a complete disregard of his duty to the old fellow's hospitality, Connor swipes the girl up off her feet and has got her on his thighs where with a sly sly look she demurely tries to pretend nothing has happened and continues to rub him.

The old host can't do much, can he, with the 3 of us here so young and competent and armed, but he manages to keep a close watch through his pipe-reek. As for Frijja, she gives a glance OK, but I can tell to Connor's detriment, if only he'd noticed. She is glad, glad, she would give the child to Connor tied up in birthday ribbon with a little card on saying To Connor.

"You live alone here?" I said to the old bloke since Frijja

would say nothing and Connor was busy wolfing his ham and goosing his granddaughter.

"We manage," the old fellow said through his oboes and horns. "We have our cottage-industry."

"You build cottages?" says Connor, deigning to speak, his mouth full.

"We have a humble allotment out the back," the old fellow gestures. "A few cabbages, we have, a few hens, a goat. It would have welcomed you skipping, tethered as it is, but for the rain drenching its spirits. Talking of spirits – this I make," he says, lifting a heavy glass decanter from a strawboard packing-case, "from my potatoes. Try it."

"No," Frijja says quite rude.

"We would not dream," I expand her refusal, "of taking what obviously is your own treasure, your home-grown solace on long lonely evenings."

"No, no," he says, pathetically eager, wallowing over to us with his treasure and beer-glasses bearing the legend TAKE COURAGE looted from some long-smashed pub. I suddenly see why he runs the risk of our being bandits, of Connor taking advantage of the girl. He is lonely. Lonely. He pours his spud wine for us and Jesus like all home-brews it knocks the pupils off your eyeballs. Frijja sips at hers with her mouth straight and no twinkle in her eyes at our jokes, my wet-blanket cousin, but the rest of us become very jolly in our little conclave in the old railway store-house in the rainy shadows of a 'leagured London. It is not, mind you, like Connor to be jolly. He is doing the jokes and the laughs and the mutual nibbling at ears with the girl when the man seems not to be watching, but he's doing them all for effect and it's not being done for the mature-chested sly-eyed black-haired little slut in the gollywog brooch and rubber bands.

There is just one window in the shed, half obscured by packing boxes all containing the same object, an electric kettle that never reached its warehouse. Beautiful shiny automatic kettles that boil 2 pints of water within a minute, then turn themselves off, that housewives coveted on magazine pages, now impossibilities, can't use here where there are no electric points and a rusty sink with a hole in that has to be plugged with a rag and a bucket set to catch the leaks when the rusty tap yields a trickle that has to



be let run a ½-hour to provide 2 pints. Can't even be sold, for there's no electricity to spare now for a thinking kettle.

In this tiny corner of wire-criss-crossed glass, I see the day change its colour as the rain continues sleeking down outside and rumming its stern music on the dips and dops of the corrugated-iron roof. From grey the day went soaking charcoal, and now it was mauve going on bruise-tone, and the girl unwound her lithe arms from round Connor's neck and unlaidd her peach-down cheek from against his drunken straw stubble, and off she trips to light a cosy lamp or 2 and the stink of hot oil mingles with the fumes.

Connor, momentarily unburdened, looked across at Frijja where she sat, huddled, so tiny she had contrived to pack herself also into non-existence, her hardly-touched potato liquid glowing through the word TAKE COURAGE in her hand, and staring into it. He seized the bottle and went across to her. His foot caught my glass and it went bounding and soaking the boards. Undeterred, Connor clumsily grabbed Frijja's glass from her and poured more in so it overflowed on her.

"Mourning your Bar'ley?" he inquired, making some conscious effort not to sound jeering.

She just looked at him. She didn't dash the stuff in his face. "Yes," she actually said.

He sat down, not very near her.

He took care not to peer at her.

"You don't think I'm attractive, do you?" he accused her.

He waited for her answer.

I said, to cover the silence, "How is times for you here then?"

"We manage," the old man said, changing the record, now I recognised *Tapiola*. "We're company for each other, the girlie and I. We get enough to eat, generally. She has her books and I my music."

He indicated stacks of paper and records and portable-batteries up on the gallery.

I wanted to go up and have a look. Browse. But I didn't like to, dreading as I did Connor's jeer, Connor's estimate of me as 'soft' which is what they all used to yell at me, "Soft! Soft!" when I use to try and read when the other kids was all playing, knocking each others' heads, ears, and fingers off.

"What is it you listen to that for?" Connor asked him.

The old fellow grinned. "Ah," he said. "If you can't hear it,

how can I tell you in a million years what to hear? You do. Or you don't."

To my surprise, Connor went on, very serious and un-aggressive. I looked under the stubble, the soldier's jaw, the Merch and the Congo and the swastika in Connor's rather small eyes, and I saw that he looks young, a thing I never seen in his face I been so busy looking at the danger-signals and always hugging my fears.

"What do *you* hear?" Connor asked.

"I hear notes and rhythm," says the old guy tantalisingly, refusing to talk about winds in the Finn forests.

(I remembered how once, to Sweetness, I'd called Connor 'a soul.' Calling him that, I'd surprised myself – I'd often previously thought to myself that he hardly seems to exist at all. But perhaps after all that explained his fascination – to me, and Sweetness, we can imagine anything we want into his blankness. And it's the very reason he is not fascinating to Frijja, who wants something there already: Frijja wants a person to have in him something already. I am excited by the idea of Connor, the brute and unpredictable unmarked clay, difficult and dangerous to touch; but still, it's possible from a safe distance to run up now and then and jab a little spike of my own will into him and then watch it bear ferocious fruit. But watching him talk to the old man with the music, I had a strange sudden new thought: Why hadn't I ever thought of making this unmarked clay, to which I'd always been so drawn, into the friend I've never had? Why don't I impress not seeds of my own revenge or will-to-power over other people, but seeds of the things I really *like*? I've always been too much in fear of Connor, or of something, perhaps of letting the light into my eyes, to impress on the savage but waiting clay ideas about books and music and light. They've always been a weakness I've fought away. But if I transplanted them into Connor, they'd become a strength I could enjoy. No one would ever laugh at Connor for talking about them.)

So I thought, with Connor being like this, it was OK for me to show *I* know about these things, and maybe Connor would even respect me for it.

"I knew it was Sibelius soon as we come up near your door," I says, thus letting out I knew what it was – like any connoisseur without having to be told.

"But it isn't Sibelius!" the old man says in some surprise. "It's Mendelssohn's old *Cave*."

Connor just looked at me, he didn't know what was it all about, but I hadn't after all had my satisfaction of him hearing me talking as connoisseur to connoisseur.

"I could of sworn it was Sibelius," I muttered. And do you know, I felt ashamed now! Because I hadn't been right in my knowledge that went so far and not far enough. Instead of ashamed, as I usually feel, that I know or care anything about Good Things at all.

"Ah," he says. "If the Aliens only understood the joys of such gentle things! It might all be so different. If only somehow we could educate those Aliens up there."

"So you don't think the Aliens are gentle?" Frijja says in her small dry voice. "Have they been unduly violent?"

"They are our enemies - they have done us great harm—" the man glares at her.

"They harness our own passions," Frijja remarks. "They use gangs of thugs, but they have turned into thugs no one who wasn't so already." She doesn't see Connor's look, and goes on: "What would they have done if there hadn't already been such gangs?"

"Have some cheese, you haven't eaten," the man says to me.

I take some, but it is strong, I can't get it down.

"Do you have to live on this?" I says pitying. "I only eat processed cheese. I'm very fussy."

"It's from our goat," he says.

"Where are we going to sleep?" Connor says.

"Ah," he brightens, the old bloke. "I was going to offer you hospitality, but didn't know if you'd care to accept. We are fairly humble here, and this is such a back-water, for bright young travellers like yourselves—"

"You're good company," Connor says patronisingly, "and your friendly little bird."

I wish Connor just hadn't used that particular word *friendly*, which may put warnings in the old head of the bad little bird's guardian, granddaddy, whatever he is

But he gives no sign. He's busy being happy he is a host. "Dolly!" he calls. "Come with a lamp and show the gentlemen where they can sleep."

Up she runs, her sleek tail bouncing in its rubber bands on



her back, and she has a hand-lamp in which the oil beams brightish.

"This way, gents," she bobs shyly.

Connor turns to see if Frijja will follow. She stares at the floor-planks. Connor puts an arm enthusiastically round the girl, and off we go up on the gallery, and into a long-looking dark passage that slopes downwards with slats on the floor and used to be a goods-belt.

Connor and the girl walk along ahead of me. The black shadows go this way and that. The whole passage seems lurching because the girl has her arm round Connor and the lamp jerks too much. Now it jerks and flares and blackens so I don't know where my feet are or where is the floor. I sit down on the slats and wait while down ahead of me they have their little bit. Presently they no longer grunt. She picks up her lamp, the corridor lights again, and on we go. Why can't it be as simple as that with Frijja? I think. If it was as simple as that, I wouldn't mind.

"Here is the guests' room," she says, as we reach a big door. It is metal.

She opens it. We go in. The door bangs shut. She ain't followed us in. It instantly strikes us cold. "It's a cold sort of guest-room," Connor grumbles. "Where's the light-switch then?"

The chill is chilling by the moment. I obediently set off for the light-switch. There is a humming which I noticed out in the tunnel. I take it to be a generator, and presume this room will have some light and obviously heat too, or she would of left us a lamp. "She had to hurry back quick all right!" Connor chuckles. "Scared the old bloke would start asking why she was such a while showing us to our room eh?"

"Parky old room I must say," I says and I blunder against something. I grasp it to steady myself. I don't like it. It is cloth, with buttons, and it sways. It is heavy in a familiar way, as I might be myself if I was hung up - it has legs. "Connor!" I squeal. "There's a human bloke hanging here!"

"What do you mean a human bloke?" he growls. He don't believe it, but he finds us, me and the it, and he says in a colder voice, "You mean a body."

He is furious now. He don't see why they should leave us in a cold room with a body. Or rather he does see. Not in the dark, mean, but with angry understanding. He is very angry with

hem. "Find the light," he snaps. Neither of us doubt there is one, we hear the thrumming, we are freezing, we are stamping and clenching our hands and punching our own backs and we can't stand more than a half-minute at a time on the freezing tingling floor with our worn-out soles. "God, God," we exclaim to warm the air, it is hard to speak, the cold drives spikes in our eardrums. We believe we will find a light because we refuse to face being left *here*, and *cold*, in bloody *dark* – and suddenly my hand sliding along the tingling wall feels a switch and I snap out *up* and here we are each visible in the bleak visible hall stretching around us with its metal walls its metal floor its metal roof its rows of hooks with meat from, some still dressed, some now carved up into carcasses with hollow ribs ready for the cleaver and arms dangling with tattoos and vaccination marks.

"They're butchers!" I says, shivering, shivering.

Connor takes a run and kicks the door but it hardly vibrates.

"That was an airlock she shut us in by," I says. There is no handle on this side. We run about a bit like training boxers, our knees up, our fists doubled, breathing short. We can't stand still, we are like runners on hot bricks. If only we was! Oh for a nice warm cover-all track-suit. With a hood. And gloves. Oh for big boots fleece-lined. Oh for a fur blanket. Then I remember I am wearing 2 jerseys and 2 pairs of socks as I always did in the mangy sleeping-bag from which I'd hardly emerged (pointless as early rising had become) when Helmut (only yesterday?!) had asked me to find my Dad for him. And I feel I could race across to Connor and tear the leather jacket off his back.

"I am hurting," I says. "So am I," Connor says.

"We'll get out of here," he says. "We'll get out of here because I'm going to kill those 2 if it's the last thing I do I'll kill those 2 tell you Pel."

I tactfully said nothing.

Connor said, "We'll keep warm, Pel. We keep warm, do you hear?"

"I'll try," I promised obediently. I liked this confidence and anger. If I had to be shut in a fridge with anyone, it would be Connor. A couple hours of this, and we'd be frozen so stiff it would take days to thaw us.

"We keep awake, that's the main thing," Connor scowled. They won't get us giving in. We'll keep moving. When they

come for their next snack, they'll find 2 very unsound propositions to try their carving on.'

We ran round a bit. Connor seemingly without a qualm hacked the sweater-arm off a hang-er, wrapped it round his hands. (They'd left us our knives, hadn't bothered to take our weapons, weapons is no threat in a refrigerated hand.)

Connor said, "Come here."

I went over to Connor.

"Put your arms round me," Connor said. "Under my jacket. Stand closer to me."

I did. But I felt pretty odd. I could smell Connor as close as ever so, and he put his leather arms round me. Connor held me. Connor held me really close. I couldn't believe it. I looked at his chin and the corners of his mouth and the grain of his skin and the muscles were really round me. I wondered would he say something nice to me. "Jump," Connor said. "Come on. Up and down. We'll unite our warmth. Body-heat multiplied by 2 is 4 times as good as 1 person's body-heat frittering away. We'll fool them. Keep jumping. We'll keep this up till they come."

"They might not come for 10 hours," my teeth chattered.

"So?" Connor said. "Isn't it worth it?"

I didn't, couldn't say out loud that they might not come for 10 days.

I didn't want to say it out loud in case I heard the terrible words. I must protect my ears from such words. Also, I daren't start sapping Connor's confidence. His lovely strong warm stupidity.

Our boots kept striking the freezing floor. Do you know, we actually struck up a bit of warmth in our toes and our insides too.

"Lucky we ate before coming here," Connor said.

"I didn't," I said sadly. "Friija's probably up there now eating my meal."

"If she's alive," he said and he moved very violently and threw out my jumping-rhythm.

"Oh, she's alive," I said to calm him down. He thought I was paying a tribute to her toughness, and he said, "She's a queer fish, your cousin."

He never passes opinions on people as being any way different from other people, and I knew now he was sounding me out, waiting for me to go on and say something that might give him some clue about her.



But I was too cold to talk about my hateful cousin, even to get him off her. It seemed so pointless. It hurt to talk, inviting the cold into your mouth to pierce your tooth-nerves and clamp and dry your tongue and dry your breath in your throat. I had my eyes closed, so my eyelids might protect my eyeballs which seemed about to set hard as any jelly does in a 'fridge.

And Connor had no idea how to start asking me.

I tried to think of what else might help.

"Shall we say a prayer?" I suggested.

Connor said seriously - he remembered his daily morning prayers and weekly sermon-plus-hymns at the Orphanage chapel - "Yeh, but Pel, God don't exist."

"Just in case?" I persist in my superstitious way.

"But God don't," Helmut's logic. "We know about the As now. If they'd known about the As in Jesus' time, nobody would of been took in by Jesus, Pel, eh? . . . not even Jesus. Now we have the benefit of the As' scientific presence. We know about them. We know what runs the universe now."

"Corblimey," I said. "Connor, you are so anxious to find readers in the universe. You follow the Aliens because they're the super-Nazis, but they don't have to be God just because they come from outside the world."

"I don't say they're God," he repeated patiently while we bumped and jumped. "They just prove there ain't no God left."

"Just in case," I repeated. "Go on. We ought to try everything."

When I released my arms from round Connor's fairly warm chest and knelt down on the ground, Connor kneeled down too, following my example since I was quite sure of myself.

It was colder but I thought we better do it in case He was watching and waiting for us to do it if He exists, thinking up here ~~Why~~ don't they get on their knees ~~Good God why should I held~~ them anyway?

"Will God see us under the ground here?" says Connor, copying my hands-position.

"He sees everything and knows everything," I says, one eye on Him, "and He loves us."

"If He knows all about me," says Connor, thinking Daft Old Bastard, "how come He loves me?"

"Because He knows you," I says in a holy voice.

"He knows I don't love Him?"

"You must learn to love Him. He will give you a chance."

"Good," Connor says, and leaps up as though his prayer has been answered and he don't have to give it another thought. I realise he thinks if God exists, and means Connor to learn to love Him, He will give Connor a long life else Connor couldn't learn, and I suppose the longer Connor holds off from loving Him the longer Connor feels he will have to be allowed to live.

I don't feel God will be very pleased with all this. But it is too cold to get back on our knees again.

We started as of one accord racing around in opposite directions to each other, jumping as a form of salutation when we crossed paths. It could have been an intimate experience, the sort I've often longed for, except it was desperate. Also, our breath was coming like splinters impaling our chests, and our ears was bubbling.

The door opened. We heard the air-lock begin to turn. Connor at once was behind the door, his gun clear; but before the door fully moved, Frijja's voice came.

She said: "Don't shoot. It's Frijja. I'm alone."

She came in and Connor made sure the door wouldn't swing shut behind her - she'd already made sure of that - and he grabbed me and her and tumbled us back into the passage. It did seem quite hot now (it was only a draughty old tunnel) yet not really as my feet, hands, ears, hair, everything was still near-frozen I mean frozen quite literally.

"There. God answered us," I cries to Connor.

"Well, you look like God to me just this moment," Connor admitted to my cousin. "You killed them both?"

"In My just wrath," she says, "I slew them not but tied them up with rope and set near them food for their sustenance. However, I think we'd better destroy their slaughter-house. Is anyone else alive in there?"

"How could they be?" I jeer, it is a bit soon to jeer at her I know but still I knew she wouldn't of left us. No need to butter up someone who would never hurt you anyway not matter how rotten you treat them. "You saw them."

"It didn't occur to you," she says, "that someone might be hanging there watching you, listening to you, praying, but too frozen to be able to speak or sign to you?"

Connor tries angrily to restrain her, but she goes back in.

Connor keeps the door open. She is wandering round. Now she comes out and passes us without speaking on her way back up the tunnel. Connor jerks his head to me, and we limp after her. Up in the store-room the girl and big fat man are sat on chairs, bound with ropes, not gagged but not speaking, just watching us.

The record is still on the player. Pa hoo say the big echoing horns.

For the first time since she just casually said: "I tied them up," I wonder how she managed it, 2 to 1, and the man so bloody big – and where she found the rope, and how she knew anyway that they were foe not friend. Why should *she* know when *we* never.

She goes for a packing-box and starts carrying it back down the tunnel.

"Here—" Connor bars her way with one arm. "What's all this? Aren't we getting out now?"

She flinches from Connor's arm. Connor has killed her best and only friend, yet still he wants to use her in an unthinkable and (to her) almost mythical way and where she may have felt fear of the two butchers without even noticing her fear except as he notices her pulses and heart-beats, Frijja is in fact suffering sick fear of Connor.

I nudge Connor. "How did she know they was nasty, them 2?"

"Because she's so used to the taste of human meat she recognised it straight off. They all eat it in the Docks," he says brief and without fuss. So I lost that chance of egging him on to bait her.

"I'm going to cut them all down," she says. "I need to stand in this to reach them."

"Cut them down?" He is exasperated, belligerent. "Well, one of them *is* alive."

"I suppose not. But it we are going to smash the generator, we must bury the bodies."

"Bury them!"

"Or they'll rot. They'll spread disease."

Connor don't mind lingering to smash the generator. Not because he cares, which he don't for anyone else who get caught by the welcoming 2 once we're safely out the way, but from sheer revenge. But digging and burying and handling the wrecks, the meat, is a different matter.

"So what? There's plenty of disease already."



"All the more reason we must not spread it."

"I can't dig," Connor says, "neither can Pelham. We got bad cases of pins and needles. And you're not to touch those. You'll get disease off them."

"They're frozen," Frijja considered sufficient answer to shut him up.

"Make *them* do the burying," I suggest, "at gun-point."

Well, this in the end we done, Frijja giving in rather scornfully because Connor made a point of it. She is not squeamish, or if she is she don't consider it worth noticing – much less indulging her squeams. We made them smash their generator too. It was a scene of high good humour. Connor and I enjoyed their sidelong looks of hate – if *looks* could kill! Ha ha! – and their discomfort. They was dainty enough when it come to touching now what they had lived off. Now and then – it was still pouring rain and we was eager to move on, not kip this night here – we hurried them up with the butt-end of a gun. "Stop that," Frijja said to me.

I waited for Connor to stick up for me on principle.

He ruminated at Frijja. "Whose side you on, as a matter of interest?"

"You'll notice," Frijja said coldly, "that each, the girl and the grandfather, is trying to take the burden of work from the other."

"So that in your sentimental eyes gives them the perfect right to succour each other off the bodies of helpless travellers," sneers Connor.

"You give damn-all for helpless travellers," Frijja says, turning away from him to give a hand with a genuine bonafide mutton-shoulder into a shallow grave.

"And you're so *bountiful*," says Connor. "You're so—" he can't think of another grand synonym, and he just jeers, "*kind*" and it comes out rather flat. "Don't try and talk as though you know all about goodness there is to know, looking down on us sinners from your heights, busy delaying us all with night on us. Why did you rescue us? Because you daren't go on alone without us. Why don't we just start on now without *you*? We'd soon have you dropping everything and racing after us. We'd soon see who needs who."

"We'll start now," Frijja says, having seen all more or less in order, "so come on."

Whistling, Connor considers himself to be suddenly the winner of another little bout. We set off (northerly) and the rain is lighter though the dusk darker. We leave the 2 tied up once more, just in case. "You tie me up this time," the girl invites Connor. She throws him the sparkling sly look that must be a habit with her. It's probably a fine habit for a girl to have, it must pay off more times than one would think possible, even at the eleventh hour when otherwise all seems lost. But with Connor it don't work because Connor is basically a woman-despiser. No cheery chirrup or cherypy sexy promise can get him feeling bright and ego-stroked if he don't want to be.

The rain came down like floating spiders now in the dark.

"No lights!" I grumble. "No neons, no signals. And it's only nipping-down-the-coffee-bar time."

"See that mist floating off across there?" Frijja points for me and Connor. "That's the mist of typhoid on the marshes, that used to be commons. Your Aliens have spread all this."

"Yeh," Connor energetically agreed, "but since 'my' Aliens have proved themself so powerful and clever as to fox all the old stupid politicians and Army and all the lot of them, aren't I nearly as powerful and clever to be throwing in my Lot with Them, under Their protection?"

"You," Frijja said, "should of all people know the general value of the word 'protection'. A racket. Since all is lost even if They are served, why don't you decide to fight Them - which may turn to a useful result?"

"You trying to recruit me?" Connor says with an unfriendly grin.

Frijja raises her brows.

"What could you offer us?" she inquires.

"You know," I says, brooding, "before we left. I looked on the label of that record. It was Tapiola. That smarmy old swine only said it was Mendelssohn's *Cave* in order to be superior because he was annoyed one of his intended sandwiches was competent to discuss culture with him on a . . . cultural level. That just shows," I smote one fist in the other and astonished myself by saying, "It's no good buttering someone up just to keep in with them."

As I heard myself saying this (I might not have spoken at all for all the signs the others gave of hearing me) I realised what I had said about all my whole entire life.

And I had a thought. The thought was that I'm not going to bother changing my basic philosophy round and about and twisting my likes and dislikes in order to keep in with people who don't react properly anyway. In fact, I am going to stop doing what has been getting on my nerves anyway. I am not going to write 'of' any more in this book when I would sooner be bloody writing 'have'.

Who am I writing this book for?

Connor will never read it.

We made now for Brixton Underground Tube Station. It was in very good nick. The Fascists care more for the *look* of their property. They keep their tube stations scrubbed on the outside, and their swastikas and garlands of brass oak-leaves covered in thin gold leaf are always immaculate, though once you get down there in the train and platforms it's all a shambles of course, well quite a large fraction of London's population is *living* there and sleeping on the Circle line as it careers round and round.

The Comms, on the other hand, have with the As' help bought much more *important* properties from the Gov., including lots of farms and a chunk of the East End, but theirs don't look so flash at all and their uniforms is always a lot scruffier.

*Are a lot scruffier.*

Why should I write any more in this lingo I force myself to use when it don't come natural to me? Doesn't come naturally. Well, of course, these days it really does come more natural than the other. I've forced myself to use it so long. But I'm always really conscious I'm using it. I know it annoyed Dad, and a bit grieved him, to hear me hurling away (with such vicious contempt, as it seemed) the grammar and vocabulary he taught me, that I always used naturally (the grammar) and with delight (vocab.) till I was adolescent and found it set me apart from all the ones I admired as more tough and getting more out of life than myself.

I also truly *hated* all that. Because I once revelled in it and loved it so naïvely and it never done me no good.

I hated the long words, the beautiful sensual words, the subtle synonyms, because they were too bloody fine in a world where all the best things are BAD.

But I can't change my nature. I am weak.



I am weak. And I am now alone and friendless. No one reacts now the way they use to when I had my odd secret control over them that they hardly suspected but sometimes they had to acknowledge and even though they called me Rat they thought of Rat in the end as a real compliment. But now Connor is the only one I have any of my old control over. It's all wet and cold and nasty people who openly and without shame enjoy themselves playing Sibelius like I often wanted to but trained myself out of, they try to kill me. There are wild animals about, all the wild household dogs and cats and wild Longleat lions and Mancunian wallabies that are spreading in prides and packs and hordes across the country. And all the wild typhus germs. And I might as well enjoy myself while I can.

I was never really genuine at my illiteracy anyway.

First the literacy came creeping back with me hating my cousin so much I had to *write it down*. Then come the keeping of the journal. And I was always consciously writing ugly, the way I've trained myself to talk and think, without realising that a *real* genuine ugly, any member of the Lot say, if writing a Diary would a) not have to discipline themselves into writing as little as possible because they couldn't and wouldn't want to write-and-write and b) they would not write things like 'ain't' because they know that is incorrect, and when writing *they* take great tremendous care to write like some little Government official as absolutely *correctly* and expressionless as possible.

"We want tickets to Rotherhithe," Frijja told Connor.

"I've got no bread," he said.

"Well, neither have I," Frijja said. "We'll have to walk."

I hesitated. Then I said, truthfully, "I've got 2 quid."

Connor clapped me on my shoulder. "That's OK, Rat," he says. "We'll joy-ride."

The gun-hung booted blokes lounging around the ticket office yearning with their balls between their legs for some sweet Trouble and a chance to put the boot in, they straightened up when they see Connor. Connor, for a start, wears more or less the proper uniform and walks in that military slouch. For another, it's obvious they know his face. They all know their top ones, the ones who stand on platforms at their masses of mass rallies and screaming-matches, and Connor's been standing beside Helmut on platforms for a long time. Connor was with the Fascists right in the beginning, in their glorious nostal-

gic adrenalin-racing days when they (with the Aliens' help) was beginning to challenge the Alien-helped might and power of the Communists, and get together a bit of bread by going round for instance doing the salvage-collections, which most people served by the ghastly Borough Council once-a-month refuse collectors was glad to let them do, and other people who was *paying* people to collect their salvage was on their knees to them to do. And the few who was being paid by independent organisations to give up their salvage, just got beat up. And in this little way alone, the Fs made a few little sprotz, eh, as the Fs sorted it all out in paper, glass and tinfoil (and they didn't go buying no Blind dogs with that, as I've told you) and returned it to whatever import-starved industries was after it and do you know that was over 250,000 tons a year making the Fs nearly £3m. a year and that from waste alone, that the Gov. had never really cared about.

What with all their other little takes-over too, there was enough cabbage in the kitty for all the coloured drawing-pins and boot-polish.

They clicked their heels when they see Connor. They don't have to, as he is not horribly high rank, but they love to click their heels.

"We want 3 to Rotherhithe," says Connor.

They give him 3 wilting green-paper tickets, very smartish. And obsequiously they wave aside his feint of starting to dive his hand in his leather pocket for 'paying'.

We start down to our platform to wait for our train.

A right soft look has come over Connor's brutal features as he walks a bit in front of Frijja, but glancing at her. The daft look is shyness; he only hopes she is impressed by the casual, high-handed, splendid way he has got us our 3 green tickets.

Splendiferous escalator it is.

Just pre-As, the Min. of Transport which was making an enormous loss on the tubes got a Grant for making all the escalators better, even in the stations which till then hadn't enjoyed one. The Fascists who now own the tube system, all but the Victoria Line which they couldn't get hold of, but which they keep sabotaging and hindering anyway, have taken a real pride in their new escalators and keep them lovely, and run them nearly twice as fast as they were originally meant to be. Of course, they're pretty *dark* as all the lighting is haywire, the

Board won't give any to the F tube-system and the generators the Fs have are overloaded anyway.

Down we zoomed, and hopped off the end as the passengers behind us grazed their toe-caps on the backs of our shins. All down the escalators, where the ladies in ecstatic corsets used to be, there are oak-leaves, swastikas and slogans glimpsed in the swift dark – GOD IS TALKING TO US DIRECT AT LAST – DO WE CLOSE OUR EARS TO HIS VOICE? is one reproachful one, v. popular, which all who use the tubes must take in everywhere, every day. Because of course, in spite of Helmut's 'logic', the orthodox-F official religion is RC, and while the real Roman Catholics abhor Them as a sort of challenge to the faithful to ignore Them as something fake and plastic and not really there at all definitely not from outside the world anyway, and the old C of E try to be tolerant about them and hope They'll be converted to drinking half-pints of Mild and watching cricket and joshing with the Vicar about whether They'll decide to turn up to Sunday morning Service 'just to give it a try' if ever They do emerge, the RC-Fs in the Hoerbiger tradition find Them objects of tremendous veneration, archangels, daemons, sent by God to tell us every damn thing from *Down With the Weak-Kneed Coalition Gov.* to *Down with the Typhoid Victims For They Shall Infect Our Visitors Who Are Already Reluctant to Land.* It's those who are crippled or weakened who find their test at the end of those marvellous escalators all right! We are all propagating like mad (the Fs have closed down, or bashed down, as many as possible of the Birth Control and Family Planning and Welfare Centres opened everywhere by the Comms) but God picks off all those He doesn't want to see in this chosen age welcoming the archangels to earth, He infects them or likewise shows His disfavour, and then we all follow His example by scorning/starving them.

On the platform, Connor stepped among the huddled bodies in their blankets and bags, and asked of the nearest Guard: "When's the next line to Rotherhithe?"

"Five hours' time," the efficient Guard answers instantly without having to consult his timetable.

I go across to the slot-machines. I buy a Mars bar. It's the best thing to buy when you're with other people. You can pretend to start breaking it in bits to offer them a share, but you make such heavy weather of it, being thick and sticky, that the



other people tell you to stop, thanking you for your nice thought, and you can eat it all yourself with a clear conscience.

We settled down to wait. Even 5 enchanting hours here is better than a trek through the wilds above. It was dim and flickery down here. Babies cried at their Mums' brassières and old men chewed tobacco or spat it through their moustaches. I went to the Gents and rubbed my arms with water from the one tap that was working, if you could call it working, hah. My arms was a mottled blue-ish grey, like a very exquisite lithograph.

"You go sleep in the Ladies khazi," Connor said to Frijja.

She went off to the Ladies. It must of stunk but at least it was more private, with corners to lean against, and enclosed from the thin hard draughts that bleeped along the platform.

The lights grew deeper and darker. There were snores, though up in the streets it was probably bright morning. A guitar plonked a pitiful chord over and over again. A little man shuffled along remarking in a cracked sing-song that we could hire torches from him with life left in their batteries, and I took one because a torch is probably your only insurance against battery and assault/violence with robbery when the train does come along and it's all black without any lighting. (The bulbs get broke for use as weapons or accidental, but always are broke.) And with luck and a bit of cunning you can manage to keep the torch and not hand it in after the ride.

You, my reader – I rather hope there's only the one of you, I trust and hope whoever you are that's found my old Accounts Book with the rentals for Sweetness's and Mickle's rooms tabbed out in the beginning, set out in the faint-ruled double-columns against the rates and household expenses and the dues to the Borough Council's Planning Committee for their monthly-reviewed Permission to Let our own rooms, followed by the little trickle of words saying how I hate my crop-pated cousin, in among the bills (paid in eggs) for the weekly larder-full of baked beans and the stair-polish made of candle-drippings, and then the spate of sentences about the Lot's take-over, and our bills (unpaid) to the Police for their Regular Protection, and finally the whole of this Diary – you are, I am sure, an intelligent and wide-awake person, who could not otherwise have read to this page (unless you are only skipping through,

which is a paltry way to non-read). I am not buttering *you* up, believe me. I wouldn't do that to *you*. You have formed for yourself your opinion of me as I show forth from these pages. You know I am quick-witted, with enthusiasms and not a bad person to have around in a tight spot.

You may, however, have formed the impression that I am perhaps inclined towards the homo part of sex.

You have possibly formed this impression because I haven't told you about my dalliance. You think I'm after Connor, don't you? Perhaps I should go back to where I said I was in bed with Sweetness, and report more than just the conversation. But no, why should I feed your prurience? You're just a peeper, aren't you? I'm convinced you have made up your own godalmighty mind to it that I am after Connor. But I haven't told you about my oats I've had. In sheds, down Gents, down Ladies (you usually take her in hers, it's politer) in railway carriages, in beds even. With fat girls, bony girls, dirty girls and clean girls smelling of hair-lacquer and hygienic chew-gum. Oh, no, there's nothing you can tell me that *I* don't know about love.

And *I'm* not queer for Connor, see? I don't want *her* to get him, that's all. Why not? Because she don't want him. Because she don't deserve him. She don't understand him, she'll start to influence him without even caring if she does. She'll waste him. His hardness and his precious strengths of *second-in-command* will be all directed towards her, her away off away over there with her spininess and her sexlessness not like a proper girl who is fit for one thing and glad of it, her scorn of that function (and of me and you who she was made for and she won't admit it and looks at you and me her masters with coldness) and her demanding, her *demanding* mark you (no *giving* in return from her to our warm dark easy cosy side of things).

After an hour, about, a figure come walking on 2 legs through the gloom and stepped over the sleepers and waiters and groaners, and come directly stepping right up to Connor.

He sits upright with his knife out.

"*Frijja*," she hisses, that name's a real hiss-word. I shine my torch in her face; just a formality, but got to be done as I mutter at Connor when he strikes my wrist down from blazing the light in her dazzled calm eyes.

"You tired of the stink?" he grumbles at her.

"I am not keeping my bargain," she whispers. "You are pro-

tecting me and escorting me – I would not make it alone through these mazes of your Fascists – they would ask to see my passport and I am no favourite of theirs nor of their archangels – and yet, I am using you, without keeping our bargain.”

“It’s all right,” Connor says, very unfriendly. “I’m not going to fuck you here. You can go back to your dormitory.”

“I want to stay with you,” she says, firmly, but the whisper making her voice warm. “I am yours, I suppose. If you lose me, go to Lost Luggage. Because I was not with you – escorted by you but not *with* you last night – you went to use the butcher in the tunnel, and thus put your own and all our lives in danger. I will act in good faith from now on.”

She knelt, not between us, but at his other side. She moved, towards him, and down, till she was lying there. His arms that had been folded, and then had moved, and then had been clamped nonchalantly at his sides, now suddenly moved again, and were tentative, and then were around Frijja.

She entered into her bargain, without grudge. She was entirely and totally rotten honourable. She didn’t stiffen, she didn’t take the right position and yet splinter her aura icy around her to rebuke him. She lay warm (I could tell it was warm; couldn’t you?) and cradled against Connor.

You can tell how glad I was.

Now she would be ordinary. She would no longer be a trap of steel and diamonds. She would lose her height and her glitter, and be much *less* than ordinary. Instead of watching and wondering at her coldness and liveness, he’d feel a few little bones stick in him. And he’d have to handle all that awkwardness and coltishness and unprofessional ham-handedness of the virgin. (Like the eager urgent messy melting of an exciting pat of bland butter.) And let’s face it, one of the most uncomfortable things in the world is having to force a virgin, whether she’s eager or not, apologetic or not. And best of all, she’d fall in love with him, as they always do with their first one. And she’d be done for.

I slept, full of plans for filming *Gone with the Wind* with Marty Feldman, relaxed at last as a baby I was.

And Frijja slept! When I woke Frijja was still asleep, still cradled as she had trusted herself to Connor, who had merely received in his discreet arms this unbelievable gift. When she



drifted awake on the draughty dark humanity-strewn platform, a very happy smile lilted her face. Her mouth was surprised, with no defence on it, just surprised by sweetness she's never suspected or expected.

Then her eyes opened. And she saw Connor's face close to her, regarding her and only her, very intent indeed. Her look clouded a little. The defence came back, but the surprised sweetness stayed. Then her eyes were caught (I suppose) by a flash of white where it shouldn't have been. She looked down and there was her own small bosom naked and Connor's big fingers playing gently over, paying attention to every contour and tremble.

She shot up, galvanically thrusting her shirt back together again, rebuttoning it with rigid shaken fingers.

"Are you worried?" asked Connor, who had I thought been incredibly controlled and discreet. "Don't worry," he said.

She had, I think, been most shocked and shaken by the bemused fact, which she realised just a bit after her defensive horror, that she had been enjoying this, and submitting herself to it without even telling herself that she must. She just nodded to him, and then actually smiled to make up for her sudden snatching-away, as though she'd been raped when actually she'd given him entire (deserved) permission to do far more than he had done. The defensive, ready-to-spring ready-to-strike calmness came back over her, but her shoulders looked at times doubtful, as though she'd been beaten by a friend.

The same humanity was strewn around us.

The train had still not come. Five hours had long passed.

"This train is late," Connor grumbled.

"Breakfast, sir?" a booted Guard said and he came up before Connor with a bowl of grey 'porridge' and a kipper floating on grease.

"For my guests too," Connor said, waving a lordly hand, and by his grace we were each presented with the same.

Only *we* didn't get jam with our leathery toast. But Connor gave his to Frijja.

She didn't want his jam, but she ate it to be friendly to him. She is done for. No more waving her uncaring fanny around in front of him like dangling a carrot at an aggressive donkey.

The Guards patrol the platform, booting back into line

(booting awake) their customers who have strayed untidily near the edge overlooking the lethal line.

"I don't want you to be afraid," Connor informed Frijja, this is the first time he has ever *looked after* someone as opposed to guarding, humiliating, hurting or destroying them, and given a bit more of it he could become really pompous.

"I'm not going to leap on you. You must feel happy about it. I'm going to consider you."

'Considering' someone – he must have heard that once in a song about overworked Mommas and wives to whom little things mean a Lot.

"For instance," he expanded, his mouth full, jabbing a gesture at her with a knife he was eating a chunk of porridge off, "It'll be not just when I'm ready, but when you are."

"When is your Time?" he inquired delicately.

"I don't have one," Frijja said. "Hardly ever."

Connor is badly rattled by this, and I hope a bit repelled.

"When I was first adolescent," Frijja said, "I decided I didn't want to be bothered with them. The boys would have got me the gear somehow. But it would have interfered with climbing. I decided not to have them, and I didn't."

"More likely just iron deficiency in your diet," I said.

"Sexless," Connor said moodily. But he remembered her happy awakening, and he cheered up. "I'll change all that," he said masterfully. "A bit of time with me and you'll be normal as clockwork."

Frijja looked acidly at him. "Thank you very much," she could not forbear saying. "It will be jolly."

He smiled kindly.

I got up to visit a man about a one-eyed dog. I bumped into a little old person shuffling along with its head down. I was about to curse it, when it lifted its head and looked through me. It was an old woman, I think, with its coat kept together by string, like string round a parcel. It had almost gusted away from our bump, as though it were as frail as feathers. I suddenly put my hand in my pocket and pulled out a £. "Here," I said. "This is for you. Cop it quick." The person's eyes raised to mine with a sudden coming-alive, not because I'd given it something, which it hadn't noticed yet, but because I'd spoke to it. I remembered my baby sister, now deceased, who had laid in her high-sided plastic carrycot hour after hour just with eyes

open, till you bent over the sides and said Googoo to it when all of a sudden its face come alive, its eyes saw you, you were visiting it from the sky, and it gurgled with ecstasy. Same with the look a deaf person gives when he's been sitting there at the party, and then someone actually takes hold of his deafaid and actually speaks on it, communication for a miraculous moment.

I looked round quickly. Had Frijja and Connor seen me giving the £ to the old person? Not of course that I cared whether they had.

That was a Truly Good thing of me to do, so I won't pretend it wasn't.

Aboompita the tunnel shook as the train approached.

The train roared out of its tunnel. Everyone scrambled to their feet, clutching their blankets and shawls and draped infants. The doors opened. There was a surge inside.

A Guard stood by the door. With the back of his hand he knocked aside a mother with 2 babies who was caught in the rush. He ushered Connor and us in.

Everyone settled on the floor and seats. Most of the seats are just slats, or filthy grey sponge, as the upholstery has been ripped away. There are no arm-rests left. They have been removed so the 'train-squatters' can lie at full length on the seats as they illegally whirl round and round on the Circle Line, their only home. Their pots clang from the overhead lines (by the swastikas and Keep Britain Alien posters) where the unlucky strap-hangers no longer have straps to hang on to because all the balls on springs have been razored off to provide coshes for passengers. Little closed-in portable ovens litter the gangways.

With a grinding of gears the train starts off.

The wind whooshes through the windows, most of which have been inadequately boarded-up after being broken. Everyone's hair and blankets fly about and our eyes water. Connor grasps Frijja as he feels she may be blown clear across the carriage.

I put on my torch because it is almost pitch-dark and I don't like the look of some of our fellow travellers. A rat runs over my foot from its hole under the seats where the warm air comes up. Good, I think, if we have one of those frequent power seize-ups where we're all stuck in the train in a tunnel for days, we won't have to start looking at each other to see who goes first to feed



the multitude. We can have stewed rat. It's a brown rat, mind you. I know all about the dangers of disease and how the black rats are not such desirable citizens.

A crippled girl totters down the gangway.

No one rises, as once they would have done definitely, to give her a seat. Connor doesn't. Frijja doesn't because she takes discomfort, her own and other people's, as part of life and she just doesn't notice it until it turns into pain.

I rose.

"Sit down, love. Have my seat." That was what I said to her.

She stared at me with her mouth dropped. Then she got in the seat so fast she almost pushed me off balance. Then she thought to say "Ta." Connor looked at me with surprise and Frijja glanced up at me an odd glance.

I stood there, swaying against the train's motion with nothing to hang on to. It was v. comfortable. But it would have been much more uncomfortable on twisted legs.

I remembered the days when I broke my ankle, after Connor and the big ones pushed me off a wall and laughed at me when I said I couldn't walk after, and I had to stay a while in bed because I got pneumonia because it came on to rain and they kept pushing me over so they could laugh at my funny attempts to get up again, and I was out in the rain hours trying to get home. And really that time in bed was what shut me off from the others, and got me reading book after book because that is what you have to do, read, when you're in bed a long stay. And how I was still shaky on my legs after getting out again, and I couldn't fight so hard or keep up with the others, or thought I couldn't. There was only one good thing that come of that. Ever after that I seemed to stop growing, which is why I am small now, though before that I had been tall for my age, and for a while had even been afraid I was going to be taller than Connor, who was so much tougher and older than me. I had been afraid of that because I thought it would really rile him to see me taller than him. But now I know he wouldn't have noticed.

Neither of them noticing me, you see.

Both my cousin Frijja and my – my protégé Connor – they merely *don't notice* me. I'll make them sit up. I'll make their smug in-turned eyes pop.

I'll be so *nice*.

We got off the train. I was behind Connor and Frijja, and I had to step pretty smartish off that train to avoid being nipped in the closing doors as the Guard leaning out laughing closed them too quick on purpose. He must of taken a dislike to the look of me, something people often do.

"Power-mad! You're pathetic!" I yelled at him.

How the truth hurts. He would of liked to leave the train a minute or two to come over and jump on my head once or twice, but was too scared, you could tell, by Connor's 'uniform'. I really feel sorry for people who feel these muddy little urges, I actually do. They haven't the slightest idea how to be violent really. They don't get no red-hot evil naked pleasure from it, just the feeling vaguely of scratching an itch, of showing themselves they can exercise some sort of power though all around seem to tread on *them*. I seen 6 of the Lot once jump a bloke they never seen before, not because he was even wearing a suit they didn't like, just because he was alone in the street. They kicked him to death. But not one of them did that kicking in a violent way. They did it sadly, sourly, grimly, something that had to be done before they could feel comfortable, and breathe large, within themselves again after all the ways Helmut and the Aliens and the law had been belittling and ordering them around and making them feel small recently. They kicked the bloke to show themselves they had a power over a human body. They were too dumb to hurt anyone's mind or feelings, it had to be a body, that was all they were clever enough to hurt. They would of preferred to humiliate someone properly the way they always were being humiliated. They hoped as they mangled the bloke that he was feeling humiliated, that he was admiring them. It's an unaesthetic way to be violent, isn't it? I think so. Don't you think so? It's the same with thieving. Mind, I'm no expert, I hardly ever been on a big break-&-enter, but I always been aware of the value of money. I'd economise, go without lunch, walk in the sleet rather than 'waste' 5d. on a tube fare, and nip into a big store to do a spot of lunch-hour shop-lifting. I took the things home, so warm in my heart. It was marvellous to know I had this lovely object (I only took small things that I really yearned for, never anything shoddy because this was in my young days before I realised that shoddiness is the only refuge the world offers you) - and to think I hadn't wasted

money on it that should have gone on rates or bread. How guilty I would have felt if I'd *bought* this thing, however useful and beautiful! I read Alan Sillitoe's story *The Ragman's Daughter*, and was appalled and revolted by the way the hero and heroine stole anything, 'just for kicks', and then threw it away or tore it up. It seemed so wicked, so criminal and ugly to take tradespeople's things, objects made by designers and craftsmen, and destroy them – though I think it was meant in the story to be careless and sort of pure and ungreedy. This was in those perilous *living* days before ugliness came to be so precious to me.

Still, I suppose every thief sees his way as the only aesthetic one.

The Guard the other end was so busy clicking his high thick black heels at Connor, he didn't demand my hired torch from me so I kept it.

We went up the tall escalator.

We escalated to the barrier at the top. "Tickets please," said a bloke in pink riding-breeches. "Complimentary ride," Connor said brief. "Passport," the bloke said at once. He was a Comm and others stood around with rifles.

I fumbled for my passport. But Frijja and Connor couldn't either of them show theirs. Frijja is very much on the 'Wanted' list listing enemies of the Aliens. And Connor is a key Fascist, a competent lieutenant with infinite trust and responsibility quietly reposed in him and quietly competently accepted, which as every organisation knows is 10 times more dangerous than many of the romantic flashy expendable 'top' figureheads.

We had emerged in the East End which is cordoned off as Communist land.

Connor grabbed my torch off me and lobbed it at the officer.

It hit him in the teeth. He opened his offended mouth and they fell out.

I grovelled for my torch. Can't waste a good object.

Mobs of Comms happily vaulted the barriers and come at us.

Connor grabbed Frijja by her wrist, as if even knowing her as he does he couldn't trust her to run by herself, and we 3 run off. Down the escalator we run. The outraged Comm, fitting his teeth back in his mouth with one hand, fired a shot. It whined off a gold oak-wreath, and the plaster underneath lay bared to the dim 'light'. The Fascists was legging it around everywhere.



Connor turned and made to aim back up at our pursuers, but by now there was a whole mass of screaming Fs among them. Connor is too conscientious to shoot at his 'own side'. On we run, down the moving metal steps clong clong and great horrid concentration needed not to trip, my stomach sick to its pit and pounding.

Friija and Connor were ahead of me now, his arm round her, unnecessary. Connor's face and shoulders and body were grim. Friija ran easily, almost casually, the way she treats every incident as it turns up, though it was she who 'needed' to get out to the Docks.

I felt a bullet nick the metal just under my foot as I raised it to run another balanced step. Then everything turned topsy-turvy. Everything turned arse over tip. There was my feet, my knees, my very hips non-obeying me. *They got me*, I thought, my brain burning. *The bastards got me while she was leading him off away from me*. Then I tripped. I fell, I sprawled, the hot bullets zinging off the metal, and I began to be carried back up *towards* the Comms! I hurled myself forwards, face first, and tumbled off the bottom of the escalator, grazing my hands on the asphalt. Friija and Connor dragged me up before the dirty ground hit my chin.

The Fs had reversed the direction of the escalator!

The Comms, hastening vengefully down, were suddenly scrambling and scraping, downward-bound on an upward-glider. They were not comfortable. They fired off a few random shots, v. humiliated, and I was glad none of the cowering passengers and bystanders helpless on the escalators was hit. Then 2 of the Comms, with great difficulty, like Signal-striped spiders, started the long hard trek down after us against the stairway's impetus (the commander with the dusty teeth was one of them) and the others just went up again to the top and there they indulged in a little pitched battle against F Guards.

The place went even darker as the Comm fired after us. (His aim was wild. He struck a lamp.)

"Civilians all keep back," Friija's voice issued with a peculiar carrying wail, like a radar warning-signal, a call they must all use during crises in the Docks. "Civilians keep back."

We plunged into a narrow passage marked **POSITIVELY NO ENTRY**. The Fs who had beckoned us in, closed ranks, 3 of them, behind us.

But there were shots. And the Comms burst through them.

Connor turned to face the 2 Comms. He fired twice into the angry man's face. Both shots merely clicked. His bullets was spent. Before the Communist could fire again, Connor crouched and moved forward, his legs bent, his arms out. That bullet went over, where his head had been, and Connor threw himself on the commander and got his throat. The other Comm with the gun closed in. I was all set to knife him, but Frijja with a slight chop laid him out and I felt *she'd* think me a melodramatic idiot if I still went ahead and knifed him, though Connor would have made sure of him.

Back on to the platform they swayed, the 2 thugs, the 2 mercenaries for their rabid ideologies. Probably if they had been in different districts when the As and the specialised Alien brand of anarchy arrived, Connor might have been a 'Communist' and the commander a 'Fascist.' They were mercenaries paid not in money but, and loyal to death because of their pay, in petty power and in a sense of belonging. That's nice, that sense, but you've watched me take it or leave it. The Fs and I circled around, wondering where to put the bullet in or (in my case) the blade, without doing for Connor. Frijja stood back, her eyes glittering. She was praying for Connor to be killed.

The murk on the platform was knotted with figures, prancing sideways like murderer/referees in their efforts to keep tabs on the fight, to keep control of the murdering by being able to have a hand in it.

The passengers, the fathers, the old men, the frightened undernourished youths, the mothers with children, cowered back against the reeking tiled walls.

Connor's head was forced back by the Comm's arm and Connor's eyes bulged. I was frantic. Before anyone could get a move in – more Comms had come down but were so menacingly armed, grenades yet, that no one appeared to have seen them – Connor and the Comm commander had turned in their bear-hug-lock, and the commander was bashing Connor's head against the tiles. A rhythmic melodic vibration started along them. Frijja was looking hopeful. But Connor exerted some pressure. Like an eruption from Connor's jacket-arms, the commander was forced away and staggered, separated from Connor, and his Tuf labouring-boots couldn't grip because he was off balance, and what did he do, he clutched at the air and he

teetered on the white-washed brink, and over the platform-side he tipped, and he shrivelled in a galvanised arc on the live rail and lo! a myriad rainbow sparks like lights in a Mecca ball-room spit off of it, and several guns shouted at Connor, and Connor grabbed the hope-beat Frijja and we run again, and the shots started ominous nasty echoes in the gloom and the tunnels. Ba-boom pa-peeeeeow.

What a waste-land we come out into. The no-man's land (or rather, hideously, the gun-gay thugs'-of-both-sides'-land) on the borders of Comm/F-controlled territory. Shop-windows was boarded up, even if the shops (some of them) was still carrying on business. Only the food-shops was carrying on (protected by the Communists and 'protected' by the Fascists) stocked from Communist agriculturisation. Little Jew jewellers' and even drapers' had been so raided by the predatory nomad bands of Fs roaming even here, that they was done for. Connor stooped and picked up something shiny lying among the holly-hocks growing as tall as himself from among the cracked tar right out in the middle of the road.

"A watch!" he said. He wound it fast and bullyingly till it ticked. "And it goes!"

It was a man's watch but he fitted it round Frijja's wrist. Not bad, rolled gold and a thing that told you the day and the month.

"I dunno the date," Connor said, "but we can ring TIM and set it right for you."

We went up to a phonebox, which happened to be a 'Fascist phone' - that simply meant the GPO ran it, but the Guard standing outside it was a F.

He recognised Connor and didn't demand the usual half-crown fee for F protection of the phonebox from vandals.

PUT IN TEN CENTS, said the Instructions inside the phonebox. But though the phoneboxes, like most vending machines and like the advertising posters flapping on the battle-scarred walls of Britain, had been altered for decimal currency before the Aliens arrived, the old English £sd was still circulating where trade and barter was not the order of the day.

So everyone dials the Operator to get numbers.

Of course the Operator *always* answers *instantly*.

Connor was just dialling when a hectic noise came from out-



side the phonebox. A tatty lorry, mudguards and tarpaulin flapping and no number-plates, had drawn up with a screech and out jumped a West Indian woman with a little crinkly baby's head bobbing at her great breast.

"Quick," she cried, hammering on the glass. "Quick! My baby is sick! He breathing bad! Open up so I can phone Doctor to come to *baby* . . ." She wailed the last word.

"What do you think I'm here for?" roared the Guard. "No spades. Find a Comm phonebox. There's one up the road."

Connor opened the door and pulled the big woman in by one arm. "Phone," he ordered. "I know what a mother's grief can be."

But at the Guard's roar other Fs, ever alert for such a heartening sound, had run out from a nearby caff, buckling on their uniform jackets without which they don't get the full satisfaction.

So then 2 big buck niggers jumped down from the cab of the lorry. "Polluting *our* phonebox!" screamed a Colonel, at the very least that's what his medals proclaimed he was. A Guard smashed a rifle-butt across a spade's chest. At this moment the mother leaned out of the phonebox, and hurled her baby among the Guards. It exploded – it was only a little black Topsy doll stuffed with gun-powder. The glass in the phonebox door shattered, all brown inwards. Three of the 4 Fs was flung to the pavement, their faces scorched, their tunics in flames which was more heart-breaking. The 4th had his head blown off, also an arm in mid-grab, an amazing sight. The spades made it to their lorry in time, though one was limping where he'd been kicked on his jutting-out heel, always a spade's weak point where a good kick is concerned.

Connor stopped the woman as she made to follow.

"Take us with you," he told her.

One of the spades in the lorry-cabin picked up a brick (it was a lorry loaded from some demolition-site) to hurl caving in Connor's chest in its F gear. But the woman called that this was a good man. The brick was dropped, and instead we were helped up into the cabin just as more Fs, who'd heard the explosion, raced up on black-lacquered motor-bikes.

The motor-bikes was mainly old BSAs in need of a service. They was soon left behind for the lorry was in fact a souped-up Foden. We chucked bricks at the ones who hung on beside us, and our bricks toppled them, while they was firing wild. Frijja and Connor didn't even need to take a hand, thus conserving

their valuable ammunition, which we may soon find hard to get. Only one F managed to get his gauntleted gun-hand right up into the cabin, as he rode level with us. He took aim. Frijja with a half-brick struck aside this hand beside her, so the gun dropped not even going off, and then she saw with a look of sheer dismay that his motor-bike was toppling as, going at such a rate, the blow to his arm and shoulder had shaken him off the bike. It was about to scrape grievously our side, perhaps hurling us into a skid. She jumped down out from the open side of the Foden and leaped astride pillion (only no 'pillion') on the beezer as it toppled and all in one movement as he fell she edged on to the saddle and took the handlebars and righted the machine of which obviously she was fond, holding it right among the mob who, carried on by their own impetus, hardly noted her. She brought the machine to an instant but tender stop, and patted it, before jumping upright on the saddle and making a flying leap for the back of our Foden. Connor had sprung into the back too and caught her in 3 or 4 of his grasping arms. If he hadn't caught her, I think she might have gone right on over the length of the lorry. Connor and Frijja rolled over and over together in the back of the lorry, among piles of scaffolding and trestles and ladders and rubble and bricks, his arms and body wrapped around her head and body till the tumbling spent itself and there was less danger of blows to her. She pulled away from Connor and we watched as in the distance that fallen F got shakily up, swayed over to the middle of the road and found his beezer stood like a miracle waiting for him on the crown of the road with its brakes neatly on. As the last hanger-on got a half-brick full in his back tyre, and did an exhilarating skid culminating in a somersault into a hoarding advertising Smarties which promptly burst into flames, we turned superior smiles on each other.

"It was good of you to take us up," Connor said.

"You was nice about my baby," the 'mother' said seriously.

"How would my Mum have felt," Connor explained, "when I was a kid, if I was sick and she couldn't get help?"

"We are going into Essex," said the driver. "That all right for you?"

"I want to get into the Docks," said Frijja.

"Impossible," they said, staring at this crazy female. "The

cordons are regiment-strong, Missy. And then there is nothing but Wild Gang inside the Docks now."

I couldn't tell them they were looking at the queen of 'Wild Gang.' But Connor frowned and said to Frijja, "Fair enough. Make it Essex. We won't have such trouble with passports."

"You promised to get me home!" she said.

"If we get to Southend," Connor said, "and get on a boat, we can *sail* up into the Pool. The Pool itself isn't blockaded is it? And no real Port Authority no more. The only people *in* the Docks *is* your own people."

She went silent in acceptance of this delay, but I wondered whether Connor wasn't playing games of his little own. The network of rivers, canals, river-law and passport-barriers being what it was, I doubted if we could get into the Pool of London even if we attempted it from Tilbury, as I hoped we weren't going to commandeer some house-barge and sail it from Southend to Tilbury for a start.

It was lovely weather for Connor to acquiesce, for the first time ever, in actions against his Party. Sparkle sparkle, goes the sun on this and that. Butterflies was flitting around, and little day-loving cabbage-moths; also things you didn't see in London at all till v. recently - for instance bumbling jolly honey-bees, which was just lately declared Extinct even beyond the Thames Valley where all the bee-keepers have had to close their fragrant swarmy apiaries because our insecticide-sprays had finally done for the bees and the pollen. Now what the Thames Valley has lost, London seems to be re-birthing.

"Sniff," I says. "All this lovely clean air. Weeds flourishing in the very road, no exhaust-fumes but our own. This soot-free solitude is something what you must thank the As for."

Then I nearly corrected myself and altered my grammar but I thought why should I in front of them all. One thing I've found, it's odd, I used to think I had always been forcing myself to speak ugly. Now I find it had become a habit while I was still telling myself it was an effort. Now I don't know what I can congratulate myself on. I used to be proud of talking and thinking ugly; but apparently, as I discover now that I find I was wrong, I was particularly proud also of 'having to pretend'. I thought I was proud of having feet in every camp, belonging nowhere. But now I find I wasn't pretending at all. I really do belong nowhere.



Frijja laughed at me.

Connor didn't take to her laughing about the Aliens from whence cometh all Power. "Just what," he inquired indulgently, "is your Gang doing in there to spit in the As' eye may I inquire?"

A remarkably nasty feeling closed over me as Frijja then put Connor right. The things she told him her Gangs was doing away in there in their Docks – the things they was doing to get at the Aliens. God. Doesn't she care who hears? I couldn't understand all of it but Connor could and we both knew it was lethal stuff and these spades could be spies for anyone, even Them, and didn't she know, didn't she care, didn't she even mind if she dropped *us* in it up to *our* necks?

She babbled on in her cool little way, the wild words just grazing her lips, about fake messages sent from fake 'A globes' to fool heads of organisations, and about trained armies of 'infantry' waiting in the Docks with fleets of electric fork-lift trucks, quay cranes, mobile and floating cranes, acres of deadly dry dock, organised menace lurking in the transit sheds – and here was Connor listening to every word, and in no position to do anything about scotching any of it, and never a thought of shutting her up. And the spades' faces full of agile comprehension.

It occurred suddenly to me that she was babbling on just on *purpose* to implicate us.

"All this," said one of the spades, "sounds just exactly like you're in the pay of them Alien gentlemen."

Tinted nit, I thought gratefully. They haven't even picked up the fact she's working against Them.

"Paid by them! She's trying to knock them outa the sky!" Connor exploded.

I groaned.

"She creating mayhem and anarchy among their disciples," said the driving spade, "just as we been doing. And just as them As doing. Them As very highly-delighted with their peoples being effed about."

That's not only true, I registered, it's an eye-opener for Connor who been one of their peoples so long. Does it shake the loyalty of an obsessively loyal man to find his loyalty has been used for its own sake, as admittedly for its own sake he has been giving it?

At this point the driving spade kicked from off the accelerator the brick that had been resting on it keeping us swift while he stretched his legs up for a nice rest on the dashboard.

He wrenched at the wheel. He swerved the lorry.

We was coming up to a Customs block.

A great brick wall stretched across the wall.

ANYTHING TO DECLARE? inquired the lettering under the hammer and sickle. HOW ABOUT YOUR CONSCIENCE, BROTHER?

Four Comms come out and pointed rifles our direction. We slowed but kept in top gear.

"Honour to Labour!" they greeted us.

"Honour to Labour!" repeated the spade, but kept his hand on steering. All but the most abject spades, whom the Comms are so glad to 'aid', are pretty suspicious of the Comms, who try to stop them worshipping God and this brand of Comm anyway seems to expect not God but black cocks to be strangled at the dark of the neon. But these Comms see themselves as benelovent to spades, because they are a discriminated-against majority, but mainly because the Fs don't like them. If you're at a Comm phonebox, for instance, you're pushed aside by the guard so the negro waiting 5 behind you can go in first. The Comms have even forgiven the spades for being black sons of black granddaddies, and so ignoring the most basic of Comm intellectual tenets - that heredity don't exist because Environment decides everything.

"You Trotskyist, man?" our driver asked the Comm.

"Who?" he demanded. "What?"

Connor was restive.

"They'll have us!" he muttered. "I got a Fascist passport."

"What about her?" the spade indicated Frijja.

"They know she's fighting the As," Connor grunted. "And they know she's doing it in the name of God and Country."

"Ss. You grunting obscenities, man."

"Let's see your passport, comrade." A Comm glove reached up to Connor.

The spade put down his foot, as good as any brick on that gas. and we roared through the little opening.

Bullets immediately. We looked around. We was in a bad state. We had gone through the little Customs-check only to find ourselves in a huge brick compound. A great high iron-

spiked gate, all the spikes curving at us like picadors, faced us, triple iron bars locking it. A similar double-gate now clanged to behind us. The compound was full of lorries. Into 2 of these angry Comms now jumped, and came rattling at us from different directions. The spade smiled and went forward to meet them, very quick. Quicker than our old heap seemed able. We passed between them and they rammed each other. Everybody was yelling. Another truck come at us at an angle. It just brushed with us at the wrong place, as without slackening speed we turned a corner in a rough roaring arc in order to go round (and round and round for ever if need be) just so long as we need not stop and be done for. The third enemy lorry just catches its front bumper on ours and because it is a smart new shining chrome one, made since the Invasion in the smart Comm-factories which, being manned by British 'Comms', millions of shop-stewards all having it their own way with no Management to get excited about, are absolutely orgiastic what with tea-breaks and Reliability-Productivity, that bumper snaps off caught on ours neat as a pair of wall-antlers.

We go ramming straight through that huge immense bar-bound gate in front of us, which after all the dodging and skirmishing and screaming of brakes and changing-down is a great relief.

We are chased by 3 more lorries but the gate-posts fall inwards on them, and the brick walls start bombarding the compound with displaced avalanching bricks. We hear the sling-shot, see the Red Flag *whup!* down on its splintered flag-pole, and are able to stop and disentangle ourselves from the remains of the gate trailing behind us.

"Motherers!" yells the spade, shaking a triumphant fist.

"Driving. Great." Connor slaps the spade's back as we drive on.

"If it were not for this good straight metalled road, we wouldn't have got far," Frijja says. "The Comms are rebuilding for serving their farms the good roads your Fs have broken up."

"If it weren't for the Comms' jerry-building, that wall would have stayed up and the gate stayed put," Connor replied. They are like each other, I think, in one way: they both use text-book sentences about text-book 'facts'. They are both rotten at conversation.

"I like the Communists," Frijja said.



Connor glared at her. He thought she'd lost all logic. "But you're a Docks-leader," he pointed out.

Frijja said, "I was only *chosen*. I didn't nominate myself. At home we often sat round the bonfire and discussed the worth of Communism." (Yeh, I could just see it. So sort of savage but monklike, I get the picture of her blessed Docks-toughs. At least the Lot is human.) "We agreed about the worth of Communism much more than about the other things we used to discuss at the fire – all our different religions, and books we'd read."

"Fireside chats. 'At home'—" Connor sneered. "Cosy ain't the word, eh?"

"All in their pigtails and turbans and leather jackets, burning their joss-sticks and lighting their votive candles, salaaming to the East India Docks on their bellies studded with nail-heads and bike-chains; nauseating's more the word," I joined him.

Frijja and the spades glanced at me impassive. Connor looked at me with a leer of approval. I went on, to Frijja: "How can you say you was *chosen*? Like John the bloody Baptist. The Communists wouldn't approve of you, chicky-boo. Hereditary, you are. You're a leader cos your daddy was."

"What was her daddy?" Connor asked, the 1st time he's got me on this subject at last.

Frijja had gone very composed. A vein beat violet in her wrist. It hadn't beat that way after all her exertion helping get the tangles of iron plus chunks of concrete gatepost off our rad. I said, "Frijja's daddy was *the* thug, the king-pin. He led his little gallant band of hooligans rampaging around having no end of fun among the banana-boats. They all lived, once upon a time, children, in a big damp deserted warehouse which was the king-pin's palace. On a boat, hi-jacked, bringing Christmas trees from Norway they found a Christmas present. A stow-away called Barabritt, who had wanted to leave her little seaport and her step-parents who cruelly wanted to sell her to a fisherman. She was trying to reach London and her mother's sister – who happened to be my Mum. But having a minimum of money, she thriftily stowed away. After they had all raped Barabritt, they set about arranging for a ransom for her from my family. But Jim the king fell deeply and purely in love with her when she was pregnant, and when the money my Dad had raised with his sweat and blood arrived for Barabritt, they kept

the money but they kept her too. They all attended her lying-in. Well, they didn't really know which one was responsible, did they, though King Jim claimed it by right as his. Whoever was King would have claimed the pregnancy – they was all so amazed by this magic phenomenon like lightning or gun-powder. Barabritt could of been the plainest dolly in the world and still as soon as she was magically fecundly up the duff they would all of fallen in love with her. They cut the cord and tied it in a slip-knot, they washed their hands and used plenty *Newses of the World*, but still Barabritt bled to death but was able to stipulate with her dying breath – unable to see her baby through her haze – that it must be brought up proper and sent at once to my Mum. And my Dad. But the little Frijja was their pride and joy. They taught her to climb drain-pipes and leap roof-gutters before she could walk, and how to handle ammunition and cut a man's head off with the side of her little hand. They worship you, don't they, O Great Whiteish Queen?"

"So you're illegitimate," was what Connor said, what he'd grabbed for out of all this.

I wanted him to hate her more. To rile him against her, I said sweetly, "Ah, but she's a *love-child*."

"But they didn't even know who was her father for sure."

"They all loved Barabritt. She's a *love-child*."

"My mother loved me," Connor said with disgust at Frijja, "enough to marry my father before she had me. My mother was a decent woman."

"Look. A Communist farm," Frijja said. "What a lot of trees."

There were about 4, but she's not used to any.

"Opium field," Connor said. There's an immense market in home-grown tea and so on now, and though it's extremely illegal the Comms can afford to do it openly. In fact, the more they do it, the more they can afford to.

Comms, of course, hate hallucinatories. But any means is good means. Tea makes great dough. Witty?

A pastoral scene. A sky the lovely faded colour of Connor's denims. A bit of a funny look on the waste-ground over to our right, where nothing grows but the soil seems to be sweating: that's obviously one of the places they've been burying all the factory's waste plastic they can't burn, and it don't rot either, just forms a sub-strata under the earth that cuts the top-soil for

ever off from the rest of the earth. But beyond the flat poppy-lands – there whirples a rustic stream, brilliant under the sun, whiter in fact than white, owing to the detergent with which it is thick. They did use to have a chemical that made all the waste froth so *wet* it could flow up-hill, and it dispersed the coagulant bubbles the advertisers insist the house-cows won't buy anything *but*, in which to wash their little woollies and thingies. But since the As, the water-controllers have lost control.

"Isn't it pretty?" says Frijja. "Just like champagne."

She doesn't know it's not a Real Stream.

"We're hungry," says a spade. "Let's try that chicken-house."

We leave the Foden parked. We take off our jackets and lay them thickly over the wire fence, which is obviously craftily electrified, and thus we scramble over full insulated.

The pale poppies are fun to trample through. A nice smell comes off them. We reach the chicken-house which is a great long building sort of coated with tin. It gives off a tremendous heat in the sun. It shimmers and I get spots in front of my eyes but I don't let on as people will think I am in some way deficient (I remember how sometimes I would get spots in front of my eyes while being hit, but I would just keep on flailing wildly rather than let them know I was prone to this weakness) – I just grope my way on trying to pretend I can see. It is surrounded by a drainage swamp which smells vile. It is not tempting to walk here and we skirt the great structure till we find a cement gangway across the stinking marsh.

Crossing the gangway very carefully, I fell behind the others. A hand touched me. I looked in the direction the face should be, but saw mainly dancing dazzle.

"Get off me, Frijja, leave me alone," I said.

"You'll stumble," her voice said. "You'll fall in the muck."

I pushed her away.

"How often do your eyes play up?" she asked.

I was on the point of snarling and shoving her when I thought, could Connor see me? Then I thought, I'm being good; and that means being good even when people aren't watching.

"Bless you, Frijja," I said. "How kind you are. Lead me across then, eh?"

My eyes cleared up halfway over. But I let her go on leading



me. She felt good doing it, she thought she was putting me in her debt. She thought I would note how she helped me even after I been rotten to her. Let her lull herself into thinking she got me tied up. While she thinks she has power over my conscience, really I got the last say because I know she got this compulsion to 'do the decent thing' and show off how perfect she is. Well, I'm wise to her game and I can be more perfect.

We enter the big tin through a little tin door. An old man in smelly overalls takes one look at us and retreats into the gloom. It really reeks. The floor runs filth in grooved runnels. Different voices bleep and bloop to either side of us. On our left runs a row of boxes from which peer heads and ears and nostrils, great liquid black nostrils and great liquid black eyes. Calves. Along our right is a great cage sectioned off within itself into tiny apertures, in which thousands of feathered squawkers balance teetering with their curved talons stretched across their tiny wire floors; none of them would have been able to stay upright on those tricky floors but for the fact each cage is so tiny the hen, who has no room to turn round even, is kept upright by her walls. Wish we'd thought of curbing our ruddy vagabond hens at home this way, but Dad of course rest his soul would of been too lazy to build such efficient cages. Ahead of us lay a Stygian pit. The smell was ghastly up there. But we couldn't see what giant forms moved and heaved behind the trembling tin wall. We could only hear great grunting. I thought it might be hippopotamus.

"These no egg-chooks," says the head spade. "These are for freezing in polythene bags."

"So, we can't get eggs, so, we screw chicken's neck to eat," suggested the woman.

"Raw?" frowned the chief.

"How nice," says Frijja, "to see efficiency and usefulness and something constructive going on. This is all so well laid out, these farms with which the Communists have made themselves impregnable on the land. So clever and organised, all of it. After plague and evacuation, all round here, pushed on by the Comm germ-wielding scientists, labour gets so scarce that huge wages have to become the order of the day. Rents are huge because land is so scarce, still compared with population - taxes are much harder to exact, so death duties become fantastically high..."

"Private land is practically illegal where it's known of," Connor sourly quoted the property-proud Helmut. Helmut had been very proud, in fact, of our cellar.

"Exactly," glows Frijja. "The Government prefers the Comms to the Fascists, so the Aliens aid the Fascists most. The Comms are free to concentrate. Costs increase without a corresponding rise in market-prices. I assume I'm seeing it all straight? You must correct me, you were in the middle of it when I wasn't. The Government and other land-owners, even the Church, have to leave - land and stock. And here are your intelligent Communists well in power, keeping us dependent, feeding us all from splendid farms like these."

"It was the Aliens, then," Connor scores off her, "that according to you yourself helped put your benevolent Communists in power."

"And the Aliens," Frijja leaned against a cage and looked without wincing at him, "who have kept your rabble, by *helping* them to what they wanted, in their slough of anarchy enlivened by mass rallies."

"The Aliens do everything just right," says the woman. "Why you fight them?"

"They call to be fought against. And she a fighter," the man who had driven indicated Frijja.

Frijja looked straight at me.

"We all get the Aliens we deserve," she said.

"So I can choose my own Aliens?" I says with my driest sardonic wit. "Well, I shouldn't care to spend my life in this stinking tin, particularly hot days."

"Your life?" repeats Connor, puzzled.

"They do spend every minute of it here, don't they?" I am thinking sympathetic and thinking nice, as I promised myself and God, but it don't cut ice with her or him - she'd be jealous if she realised how good I am. "Who's going to take them out of their boxes to stretch a knee or a claw?"

"But that's so they should stay fat. After all, they're for meat," Frijja with admiration says. "If they were allowed to move, they'd be a bit less fat when they're killed. Besides, more animals can be packed into a smaller space this way, and so more of you Pel can be fed. Really, it's well organised."

"Well, the stink," I says. "Hygienic, is it?"

"That's the pits under the slats of their cages, and under the

hens' wire," says Frijja. "That's thinking. Someone decided the fattening creatures shouldn't always be disturbed (and slimmed) by people coming to clean up their floor – so they're all standing balanced on slats or, in the hens' case, wire – through which their droppings *fall*."

"We are discovered," says a spade quietly and with great loping leaps he makes away up the side of the hen-wire. We look round. Yes, there coming in at the far door are a platoon of Communist farmers, looking peeved with us. The old man we thought nothing of must have nipped off to give the alarm. The rustic Comms raise their rifles to their shoulders. They advance. "The animals will help us!" says Frijja with a smile. She glides like a swift little snake down past the calf-boxes, unsnicking each gate. I think she imagines a great mooing stampede like in Westerns about maddened buffalo herds and stampeded cattle-drives 'Texas style' red in horn and hoof; the nice but expendable Comms trampled, 'drowned in beef'. But the calves have never been outside their boxes. Frijja urged 1 or 2 out, and the spades and I got the message, and pulled more out, as the Comms advanced to us down the long tin hall, and Connor looked round for steps to the higher hen-galleries, so he could jump the enemy. Eventually the calves were persuaded to leave off chewing away at their wooden sills, which I suppose they find is the only way they can get any roughage in their little young diet, judging by the pans of pulp that were waiting on the conveyor belt ready to send along past their box-holes at the dozen feeding-times daily. This was better. If the Comms, getting near enough to see it was no good challenging us, decided to shoot – they'd now find their own product in the way. Out between us and them tottered the fatted calfs. But they could hardly stand. They almost couldn't walk. They blinked in cowering, cringing, wincing terror of the space and brilliant cruel 60-watt lamps after their little lives motherless but en-wombed/tombed in tight blackness. Also, all their hooves and fetlocks was deformed.

I could see by looking that calves is cloven-footed animals (each hoof in two bits) and a few months or weeks even of standing perforce balanced on slats all an inch or so apart, had given them funny swollen fetlocks like old ladies who've varicose weakness. Some of the calfs just keeled over where they 'stood'. The others limped, round and round in slow but pan-



icky circles, afraid of the light, the space – they was suffering agoraphobia now! after probably spending dim months instinctively yearning for meadows and mama-cows' teats in *weather* – all flinching from each other, since none had ever seen a calf before! It would have been really funny if it hadn't been so annoying. No stampeding herd here.

What's more, the farmers didn't care about shooting them. Now or later, it was all good plump meat. The shooting started. Bellowing their little bewildered bellows, more calves fell. The hens started racketing in their tiny cages, their agitated wings rattling miles of wire. "For God's sake don't go letting the chooks out now," I besought. "Fat lot of good they'd be – they couldn't get in anyone's way proper neither, their claws is all long and hooked see, from curling over the bits of wire, they couldn't walk." The farmers saw our dilemma. Big laughs they laughed. Closer they come. They took their time and they smiled at us.

"What's down the end there?" says Connor. "More deformed fodder?"

We were backing down towards the dark end, nowhere else to go eh.

I found my defensive hand in a door-hold, and I slid at it. It moved heavy, not locked.

God! The reek what come out shook us. And the wallowing snorting. Nothing deformed about this pork. Out they come in a surge, the great fat grunting nasal evil-eyed bristling stinking jolly amiable questing porcine sows and boars, their filth-crusted hooves clip-clopping across the cement, their ears and snouts demanding information, greedy for something to nose and tusk, and what ears, what bloody fucking snouts, all moist and gory with half-dried wounds where they'd all been fighting and chewing each other to keep themselves occupied in the endless ennui of their black wallow. What they reminded me of, familiar in some way I felt they were, as though I *knew* all they'd been and done here, lives in the crowded dark, somewhere I'd lived or been once. Being, as we were, the very first things of all in their way, we were hardly noted as we flattened ourselves against the walls, we weren't stopped for, we were passed in their eager surge to wallows new. They thundered grunt-grunt across the hot tin hall to the prostrate beef and the anaemic iron-starved veal and the 'long pork' of the shocked farmers.

They left empty behind them the low long pens in which they'd sweated shoulder to shoulder fattening nicely unable to move except to mill around with the roof inches about their snouts, and stalactites of accumulated filth and sweat peaking down from it in little inverted spires.

"Out here—" says Connor and we tumble out through the tiny iron exit. We bash it shut behind us. It has bars, which we push into place. We race round to the entrance, and bar it from outside too. What a row in there, what squeals and shots and other squeals. "We saved our bacon, eh?" I says with my cool grin. They all choke and hop with mirth. The rain comes down as the electric clouds break. Blue tense sky dissolves into mauvey-grey. We run along to find the lorry. It ain't there. "They found it! They took it away!" We stare at each other through the thundering rain pouring down our faces. We wade across fields and the mud sucks at our boots. Sometimes one boot stays in the mud and our naked foot goes on without it and then we have to go back and stick our rotten slimy black foot in our squelchy old rotten boot again. It is very gay. We don't much know which direction we're going, nor why. We climb an agricultural hill. A horizon slicks out below us. "There's a town!" "Sahfend," says Connor. "It's a fair way off." "We'll make it by Christmas." Southend is beckoning. We plunge on down through the screaming corn that stings our shins even through our jeans. A big black crow flaps croaking across the drenched field. It's a steep slope, I have to fight gravity, and dig my boot-heels in not to go too quick and start tumbling a—over tip. (I must stop swearing. I don't like profanity. It is untidy and unnecessary in the scheme of things. I caught it from them Lot.) My ears is stinging raw. I imagine them exposed and swelled like raw chilblains. Our hearts are pumping. We are all hungry and just about all-in. "Dis country-life is rawther enervating," drawls a spade. We all come to a stand-still in the wet bollox-high corn, panting rain into our sore chests. Connor sneezes. "Bless you," I says to Connor. He is puzzled. "See the hedge," says a spade and points. It's the cosiest thing I've heard, it's still ringing nice in my head, "Seetheehedge, seetheehedge," when I find we're crouching under it.

The wind whistles down our backs past the twisted stunted boles of the stubby hedge. But its arch bows above us. It shelters our ears. The wind whistles through the holes, bearing

spatters of v. wet rain, but we're no longer drenched and pulverised. We huddle together in a long line. The world, gazing up-hill to our east and slightly above us, is wild with grass tearing at its roots as though it wants to whip away flying on the weather. Downhill, to our west, below and before us, is weltering wet grey teeming grass hardly distinguishable from the silver wild slanting lonely rain. I wish I was back in the city. I think of Southend with love. I think of real streets and real hot-dogs and mustard.

I was separated from Connor, and then Frijja, by only one spade. And with my acute awareness, I knew all about it, all about it, when Connor v. determinedly turned Frijja in his arm, against his chest, and actually kissed her.

She let him, of course. She is a waif of her word.

"Would you like it if I touched your breasts the way I did down the Tube?" he inquired.

She paused. "Yes," she had to say honestly.

So I suppose he did. I didn't look. I strained my ears, though, and I heard every little word. Except there weren't any more words. Not after this: "Are you worried in case all this lot see?" he asked. "No," she answered. She cared about it all: she worried about being touched, about being taken, about things done to her individuality with which, when untouched, she is able to guard herself (and anyone she adopts) in a perilous world. But "no," casual, "no," she didn't worry about people maybe *seeing*. Not that anyone could, properly, in the total dark and the wild weather. But she was brought up in the big communal warehouse-gantry where everyone did everything. She's remote, fastidious, unassuming and non-modest. The wind rained, the rain whined. The darkness did not warm the hedge, not for the rest of us.

In the morning we reached a caravan-village just about eggs-bacon'n-kippers time. It still, even this year, looked like a holiday town. Caravans with nice smells; little kiosks, freshly white-washed, advertising beach chairs for hire, and your holidays snaps printed and enlarged. A kid in an elasticised bathing-suit walked unconcernedly in front of us gnawing away at candy-floss. We came to a dinky little town-centre: one street, an amusement arcade, a few Bed and Breakfast with



porticoes, a Dolcis, a Woolworths, a whelk-stall, a Municipal Museum and Art-Gallery, a many-staired Town Hall.

Here the spades, without actually leaving us, drifted off, the leader and the woman to examine settees covered with turquoise synthetic-fur in a furniture-store window (PERMANENTLY CLOSED but unlooted), some to niggle each other by winning cleverly in the pin-table alley getting monstrous scores without the light saying TILT, some to a bacon-sandwich breakfast in a caff, 2 happily into a Church hoping they said to take communion as thanks for the achieved-morning – though they wouldn't find it so effective I shouldn't think, as in London where it's LSD instead of wine and a wafer: pastors down here are still in the stone age.

And on we pressed, we 3, up the salt-sprayed High Street to inquire for boats and available canals at the Town Hall Citizens' Advice Bureau, onwards with our great journey, across the vast plains of Barsoom – the mighty scowling Tars Tarkas, intrepid princess Dejah Thoris, and I. Who was I? Gallant Capt. John Carter of Barsoom? No, I reckon I was the double-rows-of-teeth, but faithful and loyal, hideous hound Woola.

Had he had her last night? Or had he held off again, such a gentleman our Connor is becoming. I'd listened carefully enough, but there comes a point when sounds don't tell you any more than you know or don't know already. She'd moaned a bit, but she would anyway, eh? Still, I kept my ears skinned, and walked a bit behind them, and presently as we passed the poxy little Municipal Art Gallery and Museum, we see a classic Greek statue of a bloke lobbing an inferior marble discus, and he has no fig-leaf either. I bet the locals are proud of such breath-taking culture. Frijja walks slower past him; she stares, then I hear her say to Connor: "I don't understand. It seems impossible." "No, what happens, you see, is when I'm with you, like, it starts to *rise* – like a lark singing its heart out," says Connor.

He's very ornithological of a sudden, isn't he?

"You can tell we're in the sticks," I chats. I points up.

"Blue sky?" says Connor. What's his mood? After the rainy hedge? Hard to tell, he's always so phlegmatic.

"No," I says. "But you're on the right track. Notice? No Alien spacecraft hovering over us. Not one within view even."

"Do you suppose they can't see us, then, now?"

"Their sweet little silvery-voiced messengers have been known to appear even in the Hebrides."

Outside the stucco pillared imposing entrance of the tiny Town Hall was parked an incredible motor-car. It was a Rolls-Royce, I could tell by the little lady in flowing garments on the bonnet. That's what a little education does indeed do for you. You find out about things like the little lady on the front of a big car means if you say "It's a Rolls" you're right. But as I don't suppose Frijja and Connor had ever really heard of a Rolls anyway, I didn't bother. I'd say it dated from about 1920. It had a single seat in front for the chauffeur, screened off separate from the rest so he wouldn't have to be bothered with their chatter, and it had a black coupe roof that took off. It had a massive great running-board and head-lamps. It was mainly silver, with touches black as lacquer, and even the spare wheel at the back was gleaming immaculate.

"That's a funny-looking object," Connor says.

"It's got real leather upholstery inside," says Frijja.

"Probably belongs to a Town Hall official," I says, doubtfully.

"I thought all them big Civil Servants could afford Corsairs," said Connor. "Whoever owns this can't be too important. It looks quite old."

But, as they dismissed the car and walked on up the steps into the Town Hall, they had been a little shaken. The long black low wide machine looked so, yes, *alien*.

The chaps at the desk in there turn to us amazed, from their little chat. I suppose no citizens ever come in here now.

"Can I help you?" asks the one in a v. tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

"Can you direct us, please, to someone who'll hire out a boat to us?"

The other man says, "What kind of boat are you envisaging?"

"Why?" asks Frijja direct. "Have you one?"

The man in the different kind of tweed, tweed like cream clotted over pebbles, possibly semi-precious pebbles, raised his brows. "What kind of boat are you thinking of?" he repeated.

I could have whooped.

I'd often heard Frijja get what she wanted with this cool, "Don't-mess-me-about, here's-what-I-want, see-I-get-it," bit. I'd

never till now heard anyone use it straight back to deflect – and ha, ha, *belittle* her.

Frijja blinked.

Connor said belligerently, "If you got a boat, tell me what is it? We might pay you for it."

"For what purpose do you intend this boat?" inquired the dark harsh man. "How far are you taking it, for how long, and do you intend to attempt to put to sea in it?"

"Have you got a sea-worthy vessel?" I asked. I thought I sounded like an extra in *Westward Ho!*

"I have several," says the man. He lights up a black cheroot without offering to us or to the man behind the desk.

"We want to go a fair way," says Connor, his eyes doing a glitter inside their very narrowed lids. "Can you spare a 3-berth for a fortnight?"

"Possibly," says the man, "if you can bring yourselves to tell me where I shall be taking you."

"Taking us?"

"You don't delude yourself that anyone is likely to hire to you a boat in England today and sit simply back trusting you to bring it back again one fine day?"

"A 4-berther then," Frijja shrugs. "For the Port of London."

"Which Dock?" the man with an odd look eyes her through his smoke.

"National Albert."

A quirk of the man's smile-muscle at a corner of his harsh lean mouth.

"Once Royal Albert. Now hashish, tape-worm, tarantulas," he said.

"Tobacco, frozen meat from Australia and NZ, also bananas," Frijja corrected primly. She laughed at him. Surprising me, he laughed at her. They liked each other.

"Come to my hotel," he said. "We'll discuss it there. I am not, in any eventuality, leaving here until tomorrow afternoon."

He led us out and we all got in the Rolls. A chauffeur in a bottle-green braided uniform like a Rifleman's unwound himself from a corner caff and we set off with an amazing take-off. "Tell me," back against his soft leather leaned the man, "what are you going to do with the space for 300,000 Antipodean carcasses which have long since mouldered away?"



"Why should she be doing anything?" Connor demanded.

The man smiled. It was towards Frijja he smiled, inviting her to share his amusement. She did share his smile. We passed a bit of Bay, a bit of Front, and we arrived alongside a high long brick wall, grown against by hollyhocks and nettles, in through a long circular gravelled drive, the gateway flanked by stone lions with manes in stone ringlets, which led us to an elegant entrance with a semi-circle of pallid steps.

At the desk, supported on gilded cupids, a v. pretty receptionist was about to pass us straight through. (When the man called this *his hotel* I suppose he was merely speaking literally.) But the man waved us towards her. "These guests," he said, "will pay in advance for the back rooms on the 4th floor. They will sign the register now."

We had expected to be asked to pay on leaving. If anyone saw us leave.

"We have no money," Frijja said.

He raised his brows. I got ready to make a dash for it, and I itched into my fingertip-whorls the nervous energy necessary for instant sill-leaping.

"You are saving your cash for payment on my boat?"

"No," Frijja said. "We have no cash."

"How were you planning to pay me for my seamanship and my vessel itself?"

"We'd have managed something."

... "No doubt."

The v. pretty receptionist looked at us all. And this man stopped looking at us. He no longer troubled to look at us. "I will take you - free," he said to Frijja. "Your 2 menfolk can pay me before we embark, and accompany us, or make shift to follow as best they may."

"How do I pay you for my - free - passage, if I want it after all? And what do you do when I reach my destination?" Frijja asked him.

"Discuss all this with me at lunch," said this man. "Come. Be my guest."

"I don't think any of us want to accept your little offer," said Connor, pulling Frijja's hand into his and flexing her fingers through his big spatulate fingers which must be a strain on her fingers.

"You have, after all, till tomorrow afternoon to find the money," says the man.

"And where do we all live while we're raising it? Is there another hotel nearabouts?"

"Be my guests," this man sighed. He obviously wanted Frijja in his clutches, and he just wasn't sure enough of her to suggest, perhaps panicking her, that she stay here *without* us.

I saw no reason to think up a false name. I like my name. "Pelham Cecil Garfield," I wrote in my neat loop-lettered writing. And my address, of my house back home. "I'll put yours too," Connor grunted at Frijja and he came over and leaned heavy on the register and scrawled something with his elbows out and his tongue out too.

The v. pretty r. took the register and she gave a bit of a gasp. I wondered why. I looked to see what Connor had wrote. "Mister and Missis Connor Ranald," he had wrote.

"You have mislaid your wedding ring, my dear lady?" the man said to Frijja.

Frijja hesitated. She looked at Connor. If she went along with him, she'd have to share a room with him. She'd never get rid of him. She could go with this bloke now without ever having to see Connor or me again. Hadn't she melted last night, as I could see well enough *he* had? Every bird is supposed to feel she belongs in a way for ever to the bloke she first done it with, no matter how many come after. Frijja, in any case, had given her word to Connor not to act like some outraged virgin, and she just said to the man: "You are observant."

We all sat at a round dining-table.

"The menu, I am afraid, offers a not very extensive choice," said the man. There was about 3 choices of each course, a fish course included. I looked round the huge dining-room. It paid him to have all this *now*? Yes, apparently it did. The dining-room was filled up with people at the tables, laughing noshing people in happy clothes. I suppose they was all wealthy folk what had come here to live away from London. *Who* had come here. There was lots of waiters in evening suits. Our one that came to take our orders was particularly attentive.

I ordered shrimp cocktail. I know how to posh it a bit when necessary to keep my end up. Connor had onion soup. "Scampi tartar to follow," I ordered from the waiter with a crack of my menu. (Like a lash.) "What might that be?" enunciated Connor,

thinking to catch me out. "Fish-balls," I said quick as a flash. "I didn't know fish had any," said Connor in his ignorance, and ordered rump.

"My friend," I explained, "was brought up in a Home. Connor's attention was arrested. He considered me. If he felt I'd belittled him (he's got no actual feelings to actually hurt) I'd make it up to him later. I'd flatter him in front of someone else. But right now, well, really, I got to dissociate myself from his uncouthness. Or people here would think I was raised in squalor too.

"You got all the mod, cons. here," I said to the dark man. "Including a fair old cook."

"She is blonde," he agreed, "but only 50 or so."

A big large fat man come up. He was holding a gun, which made me wince. But the man said, "This is Ferdinand, who fixes our stock-pot for us. Now that most of the big parks have been nationalised, venison and salmon are easy game. Do you enjoy ospreys' eggs - poached?"

"It's not as easy as all that," grunted the anthropoid with the gun. "Ospreys are even eating their own eggs these days. There are still plenty of fish, but they're the weensiest littlest mutated, too often. Doesn't do on a restaurant plate, unless you can hide it with slatherings of sauce." He adds, "Who are these? New recruits?"

"This is the lady I am taking to National Albert Docks, tomorrow, Ferdinand," said the man. "And these are, possibly, her companions."

"Aliens," Ferdinand said, "won't like to see you leave here."

"Ah, well, we all get the Aliens we ask for," sighed the man. Frijja looked at him very suddenly.

"Perhaps," he sighed. "I must be choosing differently from myself from now on."

After lunch Frijja asked if she could have a bath. "And could you spare water for me to wash my head in?"

"Your hair? Why, there is a ladies' hairdressing salon here on the mezzanine floor."

"I can't afford whatever it is," says Frijja. She is not very satisfied about manipulating her 1st sugar-daddy. "Unless you can pay for me," she simply says to him, not even a question-mark at the end of it.

He assures her he'll be honoured to pay for her twenty



seven-and-sixpence worth of shampoo. (No decimal here. Back to the time-honoured.)

We leave Frijja at the scented carpeted salon in the care of 2 v. smarmy women in pink linen overalls, surrounded by dryers and great pyramids of polyvinyl gladioli. There is masses of taps and rubber spray-tubes here. They don't seem to have any troubles with their water ration.

"Have you plans for this afternoon?" abruptly asks the man, making it quite clear he don't intend to spend a moment longer with us.

"Where can I buy a nightdress?" asks Connor.

The man at this query looks taken aback, but he says: "I am sure my cook, or her daughter, will prove mines of information regarding such a purchase."

He walks off. "Hey!" I says after him. "Where are they?"

He waves a hand at his v. pretty receptionist.

"Are you the daughter of the cook?" I awkwardly inquire, left alone with her and Connor.

She is a formidably *composed* young person. She leans her v. pretty chin on the out-turned palm of a smooth hand that must be creamed after every foray into wet old water. It's got long immaculate pearlised fingernails. She deliberately flicks one look at me, one at Connor, and she flutters her natural-hair, adhesive eyelashes and she says: "And if I am?"

"I want to know where to buy a nightdress," Connor asks.

She puts on a 'sense of humour' look – purses her mocking lipstick and raises her plucked eyebrows.

He says: "Is there a shop in your town?"

"Neatawear, Jax and Etam," she says. "Take your pick. Frilly, plain or sexy?"

"It's for my wife because tonight I'll be in a real bed with my wife," says Connor.

It's obscene. He's fallen obscenely *in love* with my cousin.

"Put your shirt in our laundry, poppet," said the large lady, the cook who was the mother of the v. pretty receptionist, whose place at the desk was now taken by a walrus-type porter. "And off we'll gallivant eh and find you a nightie eh."

She spoke ever so refined. Her aitches were aspirated. Connor looked at her amazed.

The sun was shining. It was not too far to the High Street.

We passed some pretty gardens, full of iris and hawthorn and kids killing each other on swings, and the woman said: "Municipal swimming-baths over there," and pointed to a structure fronted by columns. Then she pointed to some dots circling over our heads in the blue sky, and she said, "And them's the municipal vultures."

"Vultures?"

"Kites. Birds like vultures. Scavengers. We use them here now because the sewers have gone funny."

We presently reached the shopping centre. Connor and I were silent but our 2 guides suddenly became extremely *soignée* and drawled in an animated yet condescending way about tucks and ruching and yokes and gathered gussets. "Poor quality" and "Inferior stitchery" they kept saying as they wouldn't let us past all the little drapers' windows.

"You're not bored, sweethearts?" the large lady asked us.

"I never heard anyone so expert on domestic stuff," said Connor, thrown as much by her knowledgeable chat about strange exotic 'lady' things as by her effortless enunciation and her graceful, self-confident way of gliding along, or wandering into a shop as if she were doing the assistants a favour, flicking aside a piece of rayon with a contemptuous finger, sighing when they said they had only sky-blue and eggshell-blue but no peacock-blue, and gliding out again with her low-cut dress shivering and bouncing over the Great Divide.

The v.p.r. saw that Connor was impressed by her ma but had hardly noticed *her*. She drew Connor into a shop, silkily murmuring: "Everything for bed," and stood beside him at a rack of nightgowns and stuff accidentally pulling one of her long-nailed fingertips down his chest as she reached across him to riffle through the filmy garments and there was Connor in a swirl of delicate chiffon and gauze and the sort of gossamer he had never met.

She kept giving him side-long looks and also absolutely couldn't keep away from Connor's chest. Now that Connor's filthy old denim shirt, that as the mother noticed had been through so much, is being laundered, his chest is bare under his jacket because though he used to wear a scruffy old singlet with beer-stains on it, it one day got too scruffy and Sweetness to curry favour said, "Let me wash your singlet, Connor," and as a treat he let her and that was the day we left for ever on account

f all the sudden developments that suddenly took place. So we can see bare to the eye (when unobscured by leather jacket) his pale hard rib-cage with its tigerish muscles and the blond hairs round his little flat pink nipples and congregating down beneath the zip of his stiff old jeans.

"I dunno how to choose," he muttered shifting from boot to boot. "Pelham," he says, "what do you think Frijja would like?"

Then he looks at me very narrow, and he says, "You'd only choose something just exactly the one she'd hate."

"She'd like this," soupily assures the mother, pulling out a quilted flowered sort of thing, quelling with a glance the shop-girl who hovers in the background but don't dare to come nearer. "It would keep her warm. A wonder she hasn't succumbed already to the weather and conditions you 2 fellers dragged her through, one of these fragile dollies she looks. You must be *devoted* to her not to feel she *holds you back* a little."

"This is *younger*," says the daughter, pulling out a baby-doll affair of sheer nylon covered with green spots. It has baggy see-thru bloomers to go under it and is not designed to come below Frijja's arse if she had one. Connor gives it a v. startled look.

"I'll have this," he pushes a full-length wisp of pure white lace on lace at the shop-girl who says in a dazed voice: "Ten guineas, sir," with a big question-mark.

"It's just right. I'll have it," he says.

"Here's a shorter one the same," I says. "Cheaper."

"I want this one for her."

"But you got no money, Connor," I whispers, edging up against him.

He pushes me aside with the edge of his fore-arm and snarls. "I want this for her," he repeats. The shop-girl says, "Yes, cash or account . . ." and adds as an afterthought, "Sir?" "Nothing," says Connor. "Just give it me." The shop-girl, who from his face and tone was already expecting him to say this, gives a frightened dry sob. The manager of the shop pushes forward. "What is happening here?" he asks. He is a great big suave bloke with a pair of trousers up nearly to his chest, stretched over his gut by a pair of coarse brown braces. His round spectacles glitter very menacing and he smells of such a potent after-shave. They never did have blokes like this in ladies' shops pre-Alien.



"Sir doesn't want to pay," the shop-girl squeaks.

"Oh, he doesn't? What has Sir set his heart on?" The manager sarcastically lifts the expensive froth of white.

"Take your hands off that!" Connor in a sudden paroxysm of disgusted outrage hits the manager's hairy-sausage knuckles off Frijja's bridal bed sacrament.

The manager quick as a flash like a gutty gorilla in braces hits Connor horribly hard a mean un-called-for smug commando punch with the side of the middle-aged hairy hand on Connor's naked nude bare adam's rib, and follows by bringing his 'silk-mohair' knee up to the Connorcrutch. The manager has on his doughy face such a pleased-with-himself expression. *Showing a thug what's what* he would call it. Really it's *showing a younger bugger than me* . . . Then he has to realise suddenly that Connor's muscle-solid solar plexus has taken the punch like it's a kiss of thistledown, and the knee to the bollox is simply knocked aside by Connor's own nasty knee. There lies the big manager on the patterned carpet not even able to groan he is so humiliated he is just wheezing and his eyes watering with the immoveable spectacles still over them he is so watery-eyed and preoccupied with feeling angry and embarrassed he is unable even to look up the skirts of the assistants standing twittering around. Connor picks up his nightdress and walks out. The white satin ribbons wave and flutter in bright farewell off to their new life.

"You're a goer," says the mother.

"You could of took more," I says, egging him on with my subtle compliments. "You could of gone through them cupboards at your leisure and walked off with all the gear."

"It would sell for a packet if your wife couldn't wear it all," agrees the v.p.r.

"That's just the sort of idea you would have," Connor says without expression *to me*.

She got him with her *Pelmanism* crack. "Must we have all this *Pelmanism*?" or "More *Pelmanism*?" What was it Frijja said to him a while ago when I was employing a little sarcasm at someone's expense? Now he reckons I'm shit. He reckons he's holier than I.

He used to think it even when he and I was the only ones that could beat all the others at swimming when the Street bet the Orphanage up the Canal. We was all around eight or nine

summers and winters of age. All them boys smoked except me, had good lungs because the dog-ends I picked up I would roll and pack into fairly dainty-looking 'cigarettes' and sell, instead of smoking them myself. I could swim great. Connor smoked like the rest, but he was a good swimmer anyway. He jeered at me even when I beat him, not sour grapes, just because he reckoned I cheated. He got them all to think that if weren't for my making money out of their dependence on their little pleasure, I wouldn't have my 'unfair advantage'. They stopped buying, and started beating me up and taking my takings as well as my fags. So then I didn't go in business again till I was eleven and stood on the corner by the tote-shop and took pennies for evening papers and made myself totally indispensable again by noting everything that passed and telling Bert, "I seen Mary, up to the station khazi the other night with that tall blond bloke in a collar and a tie," or telling Connor where the bloke was probably hiding out who owed Connor 8 quid 1 sprotz and a bent transistor, but walked past me every evening at 8 o'clock sharp. And sharp was what he got, the next evening-stroll.

If I didn't like someone, they knew well enough I could make out they been seen with some hard man's little friend like, and they'd be for it if they didn't toe my line.

So here I am in another street, still with Connor, still not with Connor, not with him. Two blokes I see coming along towards us through the sunnyness. One is old and decrepit, one young and tall. The old bloke is carrying a great heavy crate full of household effects. He is breathing very heavy and you can see that in the inside bend of his elbows, where his arms are out at full stretch, there is a permanent tremble of overstrain. Now and then, when crossing streets for instance, the young one gives a helping hand. I swallows; then I says, when level with them: "Hey. You're a nice type. Watching calm as you please while an old man struggles with that great thing." The big young one looks at me with a face of unutterable sadness while the old bloke pauses (which makes him stagger under his load so he goes forward two steps involuntary) to glare at me and snap: "People might mind their own bloody business. You're about the tenth person stopped us in two blocks to say that, and no doubt there'll be ten more. This walk would be much easier for us without all this holiness along the way." I just stared as they

went on again, the young one walking slow to keep up with the staggering old one.

“Busybody, aren’t you?” the woman said to me, with a tiny peal of fake laughter. “For your nosy information, them two is Dad and son, and the old one has to keep the boy alive. He’s hollow inside, the doctors say, wasting away; the tiniest thing could make him breathe too heavy and he’d drop dead.”

An odd thing, normally I would have burned all over with resentment and hatred of everybody concerned, the old bloke and his stupid son most of all. But now I just looked pityingly at our woman, and when an Indian lady walking along in front of us, constantly hitching her trailing scarves back over her sari-shoulder, lost one of the scarves that dropped and she didn’t notice, I just automatically went forward and picked it up (several people had trod past it not caring) and gave it her. I didn’t even do it, I noticed, with an urgent compulsion for Connor to see and note me. I have discovered an odd surreal law of nature, something fit for the noble science of pataphysics: if you keep on doing good things, it becomes natural and the good starts seeping in no matter what your first motives (ulterior) were. What got me: (you want to know what got me?) – it was the old bloke so angrily and forcefully saying *bloody*. He really thought he was using extremely angry profane language.

Police passed us. They looked searchingly at us. Connor’s stride slowed, he would probably have liked to meet trouble more than half-way; though it was noticeable his eyes never even glanced at the police: for all his eyes told you, he’d never seen they was police. He can see out the corner of his eyes without moving the pupil. We passed the police.

“You’re a goer,” says the mother again to Connor. But such remarks do not automatically get him randy as she naïvely works on the assumption of.

He walks on through the glowering sunshine, past the Wimpy and the Municipal Museum of Modern ART, 1889, and the pond with swans and the beds of tulips and the board fences with convolvulus and flipper flapper go the twinkling satin ribbons leering on the sun and air.

We had our evening meal in the kitchen with the mother. The v.p.r. went back up to duty at her desk. The mother had a domain down there in the big kitchen. I respect men chefs more



myself, but all these blokes down here scurried to do as she commanded be it by a word or heavy-lidded blink. "Yes - Mrs Garfield," they giggles. "Yes, Mrs G." There were great ranges, not just stoves, but rows of ovens with countless boiling-plates, and a long thing you just had to throw a steak on and there it was, crisping up. The steaks were cut pretty damn thin of course, and they didn't look like cow-steaks,  $\frac{1}{2}$  of them. More the deer and other odd stuff the poaching corps tickled away from the private land taken over by the Comms, and the State property nabbed by the Fascists. Things simmered going plop-plop in great metal cauldrons stained with years of burnt potato-water dribbling down their sides. There were none of the Kenwood mixers and so on you expected to see standing around in the kitchen of such a posh little old establishment. There was under-cooks, rabbity little men with hair in their ears, scurrying around grating things with great rusty graters, with old wedges of ancient green food stuck among the holes and bumps, and whipping things laboriously with forks and splattery egg-beaters. It was all too dark, and too warm, and too smelly.

"Cheer up, handsome," says the mother to Connor. "It may never happen, ducks."

"It probably has," glowered Connor.

On arrival back at the hotel, he had jumped off to inquire for Frijja. She had left the hair-salon long before, but was now closeted with the man, and had been for hours. Connor had a rotten look on his face. He went to the man's office, but it was empty but for a vague secretary who turned her glasses in our direction and murmured something about the lady having gone for a walk with the Master.

"Fine wife she is then," tartly rejoins the woman. "Not but what the Master isn't *rahther* irresistible, you know, pet, when he sets his mind to it. Us girls are only normal - so you must remember not to blame her too much."

"What is all this?" I shocked myself silly by jeering, I was just so impatient. "Are you trying to tell my friend he's being knocked up rotten behind his back already? What do you hope to gain out of it? You want him for your little darling with the pearlised fingernails, don't you?" Connor looked at me.

The woman rose up. "Out. Out of my kitchen," she said. "Both of you." She hoped to get Connor against me by making

Connor 'suffer' for my 'sins'. She spoke in a loud voice, to shame us, and all her scullions turned to watch, their tiny eyes blinking rapidly in an effort to concentrate. "This is what I get," she orated. "I take you in, look after you, make you welcome, and I get this sort of foul abuse."

Connor insultingly trod on one of her cockroaches squodging across her smelly lino. With a great heave of fury, her arms straining the floral satinex of her sleeves, she tossed at him his laundered shirt as if it was an axe-head. "Out. Out," she grates. "Out."

We climb the back stairs with their greasy lino.

"Frijja's no whore," I says. "We know that. That's the last thing Frijja is."

"I thought you hated Frijja," says Connor.

"I don't know where you got that idea," I says. "Frijja is my cousin. I'd sooner see you with Frijja, not that it's any of my business who you're charvering, than with that p'oney bitch with the *face*."

"She's got the same name as you," says Connor, squinting at me narrowly.

"Yes, I heard them calling the old cow Mrs Garfield."

"You may not remember your Mum," says Connor, "but I remember what she use to look like sailing past the Institution."

"But my Mum died. She died when I were young."

"What are you now?" inquires Connor, with an odd smile. "You think you're older'n a turtle, don't you, some wrinkled old bastard lived to be a ton. Your Mum never. She didn't die, not her. She went off with a buck wog in white pants and no skants. No woman wants a decent hard-trying bloke like me or you, I tell you, Pelham, once she's had it dusky."

"My Dad always said she died."

"To your Dad, she did."

"That poncified bit is my sister? She's English enough," I mused.

"You had a baby sister. Pamela."

"She died when I were—" I paused. "You mean Mum and Pam never had meningitis they caught infectiously off of each other as Dad always used to moan and weep over?"

"She just made off one night and took her baby."

"Why didn't she take me and all?"

“Ah, who’d want you?” Connor smiled.

We was up on the Axminster now, and the banisters in this residential part of the hotel had been polished. “I suppose she had to leave me to Dad because it would be too cruel to take his favourite, as I was,” I said compassionately.

“When will you tell her the great long-lost tidings?” Connor asked.

“When I feel she deserves it,” I says. “At the last minute. It’s too nice a secret to lose for a while.”

“You’re the sort of bloke won’t let go of anything you got,” says Connor with grudging admiration. “I bet you even hang on to your piss till the last possible minute.” Or was it grudging admiration? Was it really distaste. I had a sudden lost feeling.

We went in the gents and Connor took his laundered shirt out of its cellophane pack. “What’s the time?” he says to a white-haired colonel buttoning his baggy tweeds and washing his finicky old clean hands amid the white tiles. The colonel, or retired brigadier, or financier or whatever he might be, looks at us and is reluctant to open his mouth to answer in case he breathes in some of the same air as us. But he aspirates in agony, and manages to say: “Eight-sixteen-ah.”

“Much obliged,” Connor says. “Well, I still got time to dine with her. She must be back from her walk by now. This place must be a bit too civilised for her, no wonder she wants to get out of it. Of course, I’m OK here, I’m used to big institutions. I must teach her how to Relax . . .” he growls, and I can tell he’s in genital difficulties again as he is whenever he thinks of Frijja. He takes a deep calm look on his face and steadies himself by removing from his shirt collar the little cardboard navy-blue ‘bow tie’ that says, “*Your Shirt is Ready to Wear, Sir.*” He shrugs the shirt on but of course the top button, the important one right at the neck, won’t do up because it has been neatly broke right in  $\frac{1}{2}$  by the laundry. Connor pulls off the starched, snowy, pressed shirt and chucks it in a basin. Then he makes off, practically through the colonel, through the frosted doors, and up the stairs.

All the hotel chandeliers are sending off sparks and sparks of light.

Connor is still copping tight hold of the now rather limp but still pristine nightdress, and its satin ribbons actually sparkle in



the light. Little rainbows happened, and lingered, in the nylon lace.

We got up past two creaky Axminster landings, and there was the door 124 where we knew Frijja had been billeted (we still didn't know would we be given rooms at all, but Connor quietly reckoned 124 as his too, as it had a double bed).

Connor knocked on the door. We could hear a sort of creaking from inside, but no one opened the door. "Frijja," he said quietly. He knocked again and waited. The satin and lace sparkled over his arm.

"Frijja," he said again. He said "Frijja," a 3rd time, v. quiet, imploring.

In desperation, as we again heard the creaking, he muttered: "What's happening in there?" He bawled: "Frijja, are you all right? Can you say something?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to murmur, "Maybe she can but she won't." With a great effort I didn't. The poison dribbled back down my throat.

Connor thrust against the door with his shoulder. It was a good ordinary deal hotel-room-door. It cracked instantly. Connor took a running kick at it. It cracked some more. Kick, kick. Slowly it gave, groaning away from its hinges. The metal 4 fell off the number-plate, and left a space with rusty nail-holes. The hinges screeched spitefully. The door splintered inwards across the floor of the room. It was completely empty. The double bed with its puffy pink eiderdown didn't have a crease on it. No one had even sat on it recently. The window-frame creaked in the hot twilight.

There hurried up behind us the rows of hotel staff who had heard their door spificated. We turned and saw them behind and round us in two serried rows.

A door above us opened. There, looking down on us, were the man (in a gold brocade dressing-gown) and Frijja.

Frijja was wearing a long emerald-green chiffon negligée with black marabou low on the shoulders. The marabou all rippled and froned as the breezes of everyone's shock stirred. Connor's ribbons hung. They hung.

Connor didn't say a word when we was stuck in the little nasty room, a little annexe in which we was locked. I thought he

night never say a word again. He had had a relapse. He had elapsed into his non-talk.

I kept my eyes away from his face. His face was like some savage blow right in my cringing guts if I looked at it. He weren't looking at me. It weren't his eyes that harmed me. It were his whole brooding brutality.

It was a rotten little room. It had a sink in, for the maids to fill buckets at when sloshing out the lino of the servants'-quarter corridors. It had no rug, or mat, or window, or chair, or stool, nor nothing else.

We didn't know what they was going to do with us; nor where, nor when. We didn't comment on our ignorance to each other.

They had took our trusty old knives and Connor's gun off us. They had took my FR (Fascist Rail) torch off me too, so I couldn't use that as a cosh on whoever barged in the door.

Connor folded up the nightdress still shimmering and filmy and sweet and laid it under his head as a pillow. He put his head down on it and shut his mean eyes. Then he took it out from under his head, then he opened his eyes, then he ripped it in shreds. Then he stood up, walked over to the light-switch and turned the light off. Then he came to me and said, "Take out the light-bulb and hand it down to me."

I put my feet in his hands and in the dark he lifts me. I took out the light bulb. It was bloody hot, even when I wrapped my big dirty hanky round my hand, I managed to drop it as I jumped to the floor. Instantly I reeled back from Connor, my ears and eyes stinging, my hand up to protect my eyes, before I realised he hadn't instantly hit me.

"All right," he said. "All right. I want it broke."

We picked up the broken glass off the floor. Some bits was quite large. Connor kept 2 and gave me 1. "We'll do damage with these," he says. His satisfied voice is v. ugly. He's in a slashing tearing mood.

"What if it's Frijja who walks in the door?" I says to test him.

"So? In the dark we won't see who it is," he says. He's hoping, in fact, it will be her who comes in and if he rips her up a bit, he won't have it on his conscience since it's dark and so he couldn't *know* it was her. I have cut people up too often myself to think I've got the old, entire, total Connor back as he used to be. I know how you feel after you cut someone weaker than you

– that’s assuming for the sake of argument that Frijja ambushed in the dark with broken glass can be classed as weaker than Connor. It’s a lovely feeling, after you done it, your heart rattling along lighter and 90 years off your age, but you do no obsessions no good with it. You only dig them in deeper into your physical set-up. And whether Connor knew it or not, all he would do after he carved Frijja would be to fuck her, croon over her and even cry. Not even mingling his tears with hers, because like as not she wouldn’t cry.

So I sat there in deep depression, in my wisdom unelated by the present prospect of Connor’s menacingness. Dark and pitchy it was, and the little silver globe whizzed past me quite noticeable before dancing to rest, humming and revolving a little, between us.

Connor pulled his foot back pretty fast before it could touch it.

In the white little light we could see each other’s face lit from below black and silver.

“Beautiful,” I breathed in worship.

“Is it for you or for me?” Connor demanded as the thing continued to ‘sit’ there.

“Oh, for you, I expect,” I said off-handedly congratulatory, as though it couldn’t possibly choose otherwise. Then I realised he could of just as easy asked the thing direct. He was in uneasy awe of it. Ever the good lieutenant and not the leader, he hoped it weren’t for him no not *him* Connor out of all the other people in the world.

The thing’s humming increased to a whine. Like a musical drill-saw, or a bell too close to you when you’re in the belfry with it, the sound hurt our eardrums. Then the tension eased, though far from completely, as a sort of ‘speaking’ emerged.

Actually, although the *sound* was odd, and it was made possibly electronically or even mechanically, but not by a voice, still, it was done pretty well. They’ve studied our breath-pauses, our slang, minor colloquialisms and all. They even, rather skit-tishly, speak a goodish Highland Scots, and a passable Brum when they feel it will make them better understood, serve their purpose all the more for them to do so. You got to hand it to them. That’s what Frijja hates about them, their thoroughness even more than their cleverness – pressing in around us every whichway like iron claustrophobia.

“The man DarVid is dangerous, you must get your companion



away pretty quick from him, pretty quick away from the pret-ty danger," it sang and then was silent.

"How is he dangerous?" I asked (Connor's mouth just hung open) but the little globe had gone dead. And how did you get in, I'd wanted to reproach it. A new tentacle of your Alien know-how eh. Learning all the time. I picked it up, it was still hot, pleasantly so as the tingle died out of it, and I tossed it from hand to hand as I mused.

"We must go get Frijja from that—" says Connor, about to throw himself at the door. "She don't realise what danger she's in."

"Is DarVid the way it says David?" I murmur. "We don't even know the bloke's name. Yeh, you can bet he is dangerous – to the As. And even more so when he's teamed with her."

Connor paused.

"You mean it's a trick?" he says, casting a menacing look at the globe, which simply couldn't care less.

"You'd sooner think the As are chewing their extra-terrestrial psychedelic nails over the possible fate of adorable little Frijja?" I answer, ironical-like. "And you a Fascist lieutenant? I thought the very reason you adopted the Aliens is to signify your admiration of their all-for-power, nothing-for-sentiment principles? You and my little cousin, little Frijja," I says, "are opposite sides of the fence, Connor, and you're up the pole. You're enemies. She had a safe-conduct, you had her. So now she's with her anti-Alien millionaire hustler, and God knows what they're planning against you."

"God won't let *her* hurt *me*," Connor said, "if what you say about Him is true."

I hate converting people. It always comes up against me later. "God is keen on letting the Aliens enjoy free will," I says solemn. "In fact the As are nothing but a great force of Free Will, because we all do what we secretly intimately really want, haven't you noticed, just because of the As, the way we never could or would before. The As is all things to all men – Fascist to you, Stalin to the Comms, Marx to others, Roddy McCorley to the IRA, the Grand Hallucination to Mickle, and an excuse to all of us every last one. And the Aliens may let Frijja hurt you, to show you not to let her get away with her evil machinations against them. It's your duty to *stop* her."

"Evil?" says Connor with a frown.

"I thought," says Connor, "it was us supposed to be evil." Here I was in a conundrum.

"Don't you reckon our side is in the right?" I says.

"I didn't think *you* did," remarks Connor in surprise. Here I am in danger of losing my reputation for omniscience.

"You been reckoning all along," I says, "she's right and we're *wrong*?"

"Not exactly wrong," says Connor, and is a little uncomfortable. "I just reckoned, like, as us being on the side of might and she on the side of Right."

"Good God," I says, breathing out through my nostrils.

Then I says, "Connor. I'm not exactly *might*. Are you calling me *evil*?"

"Let's leave you out of this, Pelham," says Connor.

I screamed: "Leave me out of it? Where have I ever been?"

Connor stared at me. He didn't have no emotion, he just looked.

"I'm a curiosity, ain't I?" I yelled. "That's all I am, some little slimy sort of freak. I can get you out of trouble, I can see you along through all the danger and the trouble where it's needed to step wary and only I can lead where to tread, but still I'm Rat, I can be kicked because I ain't *no one*."

"Yes," affirms Connor expressionless.

"I've helped you and helped you," I screamed, my spit going in his face. "But for me you'd be dead or tortured by now. I've seen you through, you oaf. But to both of the pair of you I'm just something small and nasty."

"Well, yer," says Connor uneasy. "But that's what you're supposed to be, innit?"

I suppose he thinks that's no slur whatsoever. Nastiness is my profession, my career. I always done my very best to be nasty, any cabbage I ever made was from being nasty, and if people ever came to me for help, it was because they were relying on me, trusting me to be rotten.

He hasn't noticed how sweet and loving and – yes – GOOD I been lately. In the last 3 days, hour by hour and incident by incident, I curbed my tongue and gentled my instincts yes my instincts. And who's noticed? I might just as well not have done it.

I might of gone on for some time with these bitter reflections, when who should sneak in and rescue us? Yes of course. Pam,

the v.p.r., and she snuck in with one pearlised fingertip to her lips. She took Connor's arm and then as an afterthought she beckoned me too. Little does she know I'm her long-lost brother. I shan't tell her till she proves herself. She don't deserve to know.

Connor never even said "Good girl" to her nor give her a little hug. He's so used to birds doing things for him.

"What's all the row?" I asks her as we emerge into the upper reaches. The noise going on is tremendous and everyone is rushing around in a right old state filling saucepans and kettles and chambers and baths with cold water.

"What's up then?"

"The As have sent globes to us and all the neighbourhood," she says agitated. "Saying how they've discovered how to deal with us."

"Didn't know they wanted to."

"They're introducing a germ into our water-system within the next 24 hours which will induce dementia in us all." She gabbles it off, just as the globes must have, just as they're all doing - I can hear the words *dementia*, *induce*, *24 hours* being gabbled everywhere.

"A good old mind-bender, eh? Might make us all much happier," I said.

I knocked the Mother's hand as we come up beside her (my mother) and she glared and shrieked. "My God look at that! You've made me spill a whole chamber of precious water! You ignorant sod!"

"How thoughtful of them to tell us in advance they're going to do it, instead of just doing it," I says. "Them As, they wouldn't fool a child. Of course they fool you, but a child they couldn't."

She paused. "What the hell you 2 doing out anyway?" she grates. "The Master gave orders you're to be shut up till further orders."

"It's him we're trying to find," grimly says the man with the shot-gun who hunts for the pot, coming up with a hot little globe just spoke its message into his ear. "The germ will go in the water-supply *unless* we get the female called Frijja away from the Master and hand her over to the Aliens."

He flourishes his boring shot-gun, also his corny knife he uses



I suppose for skinning and paring the DDT-impregnated deer before they can be hotel venison.

"She's dangerous to the Master! The female is danger for the Master!" cry others running up with their freshly-spoke globes.

How many globes are the Aliens squandering on the urgent matter of separating Friija from the man?

"Where have they gone?"

"Shall I tell them, the National Albert Docks, Pelham?" asks Connor's voice into my ear.

"Now you want help, you come whining back for it as though you never insulted me before," I says.

"Who's whining?" says Connor amazed.

"*They're* her friends! Look, they was with her when she arrived here to abduct away the Master!" say the servants, and the residents take up the cry: "They're her familiars!" and they all converge. On us.

How we got away I don't know so don't ask me. We wouldn't of done it, have done it I mean, without the 2 women who still didn't know they are My Mother and My Sister Pam.

They decided in their sentimental way they couldn't stand by and see us lynched.

So they whipped us up a dark side-landing and into their little dorm. And when we emerged presently down more back-stairs where the frenzied Colonels and their ladies was still running around deprived of their protector who had created for them an artificial eye of calm and comfort in the hurricane, it was as 4 stalwart females that we hurried down through the reaches of the hotel.

"It's the pattern of our fate," says I, "to escape by the skin of our teeth from houses full of idiots holloaing after our blood."

"Twice lucky. Wait for the 3rd," darkly says Connor hitching up his skirt and cursing his high-ish heels.

The rottenest storm I ever experienced, it was that broke over the valley. The rain rained into the winds. The old thunder went thundering around the sky right around the whole large sky and then back again right round it come.

"I'm soaked to my corset"; Connor can't help grinning, he ain't of course wearing anything like that, he stuffed some pad-

ding down his front in the form of a small ladylike tasselled cushion but it's slipped, but if we'd had time to do more than tug on dresses (Connor in the Mother's, too loose on him, me in the sister's, too large on me) and headscarves pulled low and laddered tights and high heels all wobbly, I suppose we would of borrowed bras and stuffed handkerchers in.

"Why are you bothering with that thing?" I says to him as he struggles with his cushion. "I've chucked mine away."

"I got ladders in my tights already," says Connor. "I'm not going to be *flat!*"

"We're very idealistic," I sourly says, "or have we forgot we seem to approve these days of thin birds?"

"That old Colonel reckoned me, eh Pel?" Connor remarks. "Get the glint in his eye when I swaggered past him? He couldn't hardly contain himself," Connor said with a filthy snigger.

"Lucky he didn't touch you up," also giggled my long-lost sister Pam who didn't yet know she was long-lost and the more I saw of it the less I reckoned on telling it.

"Now you know," she says, "what we girls suffer when we get pinched and mauled all the time."

"What do you mean, *all the time?*" I says. "If you look like you, you must be lucky if it's even part of the time," I sourly says, I rile up seeing Connor smiling and enjoying himself with other people. He sometimes did with our Lot, when they was all engaged together on some nasty exercise, but that was different, they was Us.

"Come on," I says, "let's stop art-farsing about and get on with it."

"You're stammering," says my supercilious sister. "And wouldn't you," I says, "if you were in danger of being lynched by a load of eejits. A shot-gun is a fun-experience, I suppose?"

"It's ruddy freezing," chuckles the Mother. "Can't you slow down to my pace, you beastly kids? Take my hand, young Connor."

"Ah, let him alone, ma," says Pamela. "You had it too soft so long. You can't moan if you want to keep up with our generation you know. We're the Alien generation. You want to keep up to our speed?"

"Do you want to keep up with me?" says the Mother, suddenly serious and poking out her jaw at the girl. "You smug little piece.

I been thru 2 world wars and a depression, ducky, and carried too through most of it when your Dad, you never knew him, all he had to do was walk with his own weight on his heels. Where we going anyway?"

"London." Connor hunkers down in the rain under a tree and seizes the woman's handbag also a couple bracelets off her wrist.

"I don't like these," he says looking at them critically. "Heart-shape charms? I'll keep this enamel one."

"Oh I never seen anything like it," she sobs with laughter as she watches him use the mirror to dab this and that out of her make-up-mess on his face.

"You look bleeding 'orrible," I says. "Who do you think is going to fancy you with that on you?"

"At least I don't look like me," Connor with satisfaction says. "Give me a lipstick, I'll rub it in under my eyes."

"I've got proper rouge," she wheezes, laughing so she can hardly speak. "Here then. Mary Quant Waterproof."

"Ain't you going to make up, Pelham?" asks the girl.

"No I ain't," I snaps. "What do you think I am?"

"Make up," Connor growls, no smile no more in his eyes like pewter. My belly contracts and it takes me a minute before I can shrug nonchalant and sigh: "If it's that important."

Connor stands up and that instant everything goes white. Our world burns. Crack! On the tree, the branch that was over Connor's head has been struck by lightning. It don't in fact drop off, but it is black and white like something in negative, and the air is shocked.

"Nasty," remarks Connor, and off we go, our shoes in our pockets, towards a shimmering of lights so swayed and reflected by the gusted rain that they shift, sometimes here, sometimes there, nevertheless fairly westerly.

"It's a little country hamlet," I says.

A garage with black-market-petrol pumps, a boozier with a home-distillery to eke out what the State-owned breweries allow, and a couple of 3-storey cottages one with hens in the garden selling eggs to the other off whom it buys milk from a garden-goat.

"You knock up the petrol-bloke," Connor orders the Mother, "and ask him to hire us a vehicle. While he's showing it us, I'll



touch him on the head and we'll get in it. We'll make London by sun-up."

"If there is a sun-up." I shivered.

Mother, savouring her obedience to the male in charge, knocked at the garage door. Out come a little grey bloke with a nervous tic of whom she requested a motor for hire. *He* won't be much to dispose of, I thought pleased. "We ain't got one in the yard at this moment," he says in some distress. "But come in and wait, ladies. My Bert will be along any minute with the old bus. He'll drive you wherever you want to go."

Pamela stumbles. Connor has poked her in the small of the back. "Will Bert drive us to London?" she squeaks.

"London, is it?" says the little bloke, his tic jumping but still unsuspecting (ah, it's great to be a bird, I bet birds have a great time never getting people on their guard till it's too late). "Ah, I daresay," he says, "though it'll cost you girls a bit."

"Will it?" mutters Connor.

"Come in for a cuppa while we're waiting," he says.

In we go to a big parlour with grandmothers and people sitting round the edges. They are all bottling liquid, from quart flagons into bottles labelled GIN and bottles labelled WHISKY, obviously a good going concern, a home industry, wherever they obtain the original quart gin from. It's all the same stuff going into each bottle, except for a topping of water (distilled, I presume) in each, and a little colouring of cold tea in the ones to be marked WHISKY.

We can hardly hear ourselves speak, for the click and shplutter of the rain falling through the ceiling and into the buckets stood around to catch it.

"I won't say *Come in out of the rain*," giggles the little bloke. "It's so hard to get a thatcher or tiler now, for love nor money, not though you offer him ever so. Gladys, that bucket is full, go empty it quick before a puddle gets heavy enough to pull through the lino. All them old arts is coming back in favour now, eh. Can't say I'm glad to see it."

"It's the Aliens forcing their will on our own Natural Order," Connor without a blink echoes a maxim of Frijja's. I peer at him under his paisley scarf. He don't notice.

The little bloke luckily don't register the gravel of Connor's speaking-voice what with the rain and buckets and grandmothers.

He yacks on: "And dowsing too, that's worth its weight in gold again now for wells, since the Water Board lost control."

I spluttered with sniggers in the middle of all this water to think of a soul paying a dowser.

The radio is on. Soupy dance music playing *Sing Something Simple* (about all anyone here would be capable of singing) is interrupted by a soupy voice. All radio voices is soupy now as they hope to cheer us up and make us feel we are all one big family in these times of peril.

"Here is a Radio Essex announcement. Two men have broken out of Hotel Davide where they were being held following a break-in. They are armed and dangerous. Both are aged about 22, and one is tattooed with an eagle on his left arm. The public is urged to shoot first and ask questions later."

A woman in overalls handed me a mug of tea with a scum of powdered milk but I spilled it over her as a bloke rushed through the door shouting, "Blubber! Blubber down on the west cove! There's whales washed up stranded by the harbour and our Jack says the soap factory over the hill will pay a fiver a ton for good blubber!"

We was tumbled out and into the lorry in which he'd arrived, the ignition left on. "You girls coming?" we was yelled at. "Do you good, a little outing, eh?" I had never been spoke to in such a good-humoured way, nor yet such a condescending way, as though to be patronised was just exactly what I was for. It really struck me as absolutely odd, like being in a different world without having moved an inch, and I could tell it jarred on Connor too, whereas of course the Mum and Sis didn't notice one bit at all except to register vague pleasure at being spoke to with cordiality by a stranger, and possibly to feel glad we'd got out of having to offer to help all the other ladies with supper-time.

"The kiddies can come too," says the woman in overalls, "though really they shouldn't be up so late except for an outing."

The inside of the lorry-back is dark and we all smell. I feel something funny on my leg. It is a big hand on my knee. It does little good-humoured strokes around my knee-cap, then on up under the hem of the Sis skirt (which I am wearing). I tried to remember who was sitting beside me and what he looked like. Any road, he stunk nearly as bad as me. I'll wait and see what

happens for the interest of it, I think, till I hear Connor on my other side punch away a similar exploring hand so I don't wish to let down the side and I do the same.

"You girls watch it," said a voice. "We've been very good, bringing you along, wasting our black-market petrol on you."

I was full of smart replies, but dare not trust my voice, not even pitched high.

"When people are kind to girls, the girls ought to remember their place and appreciate it," snuffled on the agricultural voice. "You think you're Princess Summat, do you?" The man's cloth cap poked at Connor who glared under his paisley scarf through the smell of onions, breath and beer with vinegar-flavoured crisps. "Think you're too fucking good for us, just because we've been kind to you? Let me tell you, honest prostitutes is more use in the world and in the sight of God and man than your upright started-up little *drawers*."

The lorry jolted to a stop on a sand-hump. People started scrambling out. Connor couldn't bear it no more. He turned on the lecturer, and grated into his self-satisfied face, "I wouldn't sleep with you if you was the last petrol-pusher on earth." As the bloke stared at this vicious unfairness and ingratitude from the big lass with such a husky voice, Connor pulled his cloth cap down over his gaping little eyes and we scrambled away.

The harbour is lit, more or less, because everyone is rushing around everywhere with flares and torches. There are vast wallows like hills shiny chocolate-grey hills heaving on the shingle with the waves flopping around on them unable to reach their pinnacles and everyone running about up and down the slopes wielding butchers' knives. *They're alive!* This I hadn't expected. I just somehow thought whales automatically died out of water. The hill I climb on to is heaving. It is panting. My foot slips and I am suddenly staring into an odd thing, a pit with moveable intelligent jelly in it. It is regarding me. It is upside down, but an eye it is. Looking at me, thinking about me, as its flanks yards away try to move and push off the butchers and roll itself back farther into the life-giving tide which is only retreating leaving the great bulks holed in the hollowed shingle which shifts but sucks. It is not slimy, the great bulk. It is warm. Down pours the rain. The wind roars, and squeals, and here is a mighty hissing everywhere. Children are dancing around up the slopes, feet in whales' eyes for useful foot-holds,



and sliding down again, pocket-knives in their happy hands fancying themselves as Kirk Douglas the fearless harpoonist in *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*. "There is not a thing the whales can do so we are quite safe," I urge Connor. "Let's get a bit of blubber while we can to sell." Piping hot blood spurts on my nylon leg from a busy bloke nearby, he wears a uniform with a foreman's cap and badge and urges on his flock. Slices of blubber are piling up tossed down to the beach below. A viscous bubbling gut is revealed. Two jolly little pink-faced agricultural men is urging on their dogs and laying little florin bets as to which will tear out most first.

"This whale is weeping," Connor's voice says.

"And well it might," I wisecracks.

"It's a Mother," says Connor's voice from the tearing rain.

"Look, there's a young beside it."

"A young? I suppose it is eh. Funny little thing, size of a elephant. An elephant. Here's my knife. From the hotel."

"The factory they all think will buy the blubber is 180 miles away," says Connor. "The blubber will be stinking with flies by the time they cart it there. The factory will laugh at them."

I dutifully giggle at the hilarity of the situation.

Connor looks at me.

Connor adds, "There's a boat by the buttress wall. No one is looking at it. We'll get that."

A woman is slicing up some panting groaning grey flesh. She looks up as we pass. "Here, you lasses shouldn't be out without your coats," she says. "You'll catch your deaths. Here, take my shawl." She unwinds her shawl and drapes it motherly round Connor.

Our feet slide and stick in the blood. We get down on the shivering shingle. I see a large whelk-shell with a whorl running leftways (not rightways) in the sand, but I forbear to stoop for it. I deny myself. Mum and Sis squelch obediently behind us. There is a bloke sat in the boat, but no one else is watching. Connor kills him. Then he takes off his clothes, old denims, and gets into them shucking his soaked scarlet and crimson skirt, and we push the boat out into the tide and manipulate the oars in their noisy rowlocks. "Hug the cove," says Connor, shouting into the screaming wind. "Round the cliff and into the harbour canal."

"Where we going?" the Mother shrieks.

She is all lit up (and so is the whole beach-scene we're leaving now as a series of energetic red sparks in a black void in a certain distance) by a huge shivering wave whose white spume lights our faces.

"London," remarks Connor.

The boat capsizes. We are tugged under by roaring water in the process of envelope-ing and folding over its own self in big troughs and tunnels closing on themselves at a swift rate. My nose fills with water. I see my own vomit racing away from me up a peak of water as I emerge on a surface of sorts. I start breathing deep and keeping my hands hard down hoping to float and stay upright.

Connor was shouting at me. I couldn't hear the shout, but it looked like he was smiling, only he wasn't, the sort of word that pares your teeth. He was pointing at me down in the water, then he started reaching with one hand to unbuckle his belt while with the other hand he supported Sis who was bobbing about like a cork, clinging to him with both her arms.

*Jeans* he was saying. We was both to take off our jeans and do like we used to swimming in the canal in the old days when we wanted to shoot the weir - turn them into a life-belt by waving them about till they was chocked with air and then tie them in a ring to keep our shoulders afloat. I only had a skirt but it only needed a few extra knots. Quick as a flash, to amaze Connor with my competence in the moiling tide, I had pulled my skirt off and dragged it, heavy as it was, above the fierce lumpy surface. I was proud to see it took Connor longer, though of course he was hampered by that sister of mine. He had barely un-tipped his self when the air directly over our waves juddered and we looked up. There was a Sea Rescue helicopter with a bloke unreeling a rope ladder down at us and gesturing. A steel-weighted tip-end of the ladder's hem hit me on the ear and it stung.

"They've rumbled us," I squeaked.

"Balls, they're rescuing us," snarls Connor.

So I start up the ladder, but his arm pushes me aside. "They can only take 2," he says.

"Well—" I says. I don't see no argument.

"Two blokes together?" he says. "With that call out for us on the radio, probably the radio station owned by DarVid, they fucking will rumble us. It's got to be just the one of us."

"But who can help you best to get to London – and my cousin?" I reasons there in the fuming water God all I was feeling was longing to be out of it and wondering why we was wasting time when we could of been up the ladder and warm and dry.

"Not you," Connor says.

"Connor? Not me?" I repeats. A vicious spray blinded me. There was salt all up behind my nose and eyes. I felt ghastly.

"Having difficulty?" shouted the voice of the pilot down to us.

"She hates you," says Connor. "You done all you can to worry her."

"But she's my cousin," I says. "Blood is thicker than water. We're *family*. I have some influence over her. And she don't hate no one. What do you mean, she hates me?"

"So is these 2 related to her," says Connor.

And he indicates my Mother. And my gasping half-drowned slithery sister still squashing herself on him.

"Take her then," I jeers though it's all I can do to pump up enough breath to make speech and shape my tongue and teeth right to form words. "See how that slimy bitch puts you in wel with our cousin, whether she's related to her or not. Having her along will give *just* the right impression to get you *just* what you're after."

"I shan't take her," he says. "I'll take your Mother."

"My Mother?"

The 2 women could hardly follow what we was saying. On the edge of my vision (and like a vision it was, a bottomless pit yawning out open to engulf me) I saw their rolling eyes and fearful faces. The waves howled. Hissed. Hurt. The pilot kept the 'copter and dangle-ladder in position above us, patient knowing we was having natural difficulty, deciding.

I made a ghastly effort.

My lungs seemed to be bleached out.

"Look, Connor," I says. "We can be all 4 in that 'copter. We've only to kill the pilot. You can fly a 'copter. We can smash his radio. They can't send out after us. We can outfly them. We'll make it to the Docks. We'll find Frijja, bless her."

"I'll do better on my own," Connor says.

"But I seen you through it all . . ." I cried. "How will you get on without me? I seen you through all the bad times. We're mates in this, we have been from the beginning."



"I don't want you with me," Connor says.

He got himself away from my sister, rebuckled his belt securely, re-disengaged my sister's arms which had whipped straight back round him like rubber, got an arm round my ma and hauled her up the salty rope.

I flung myself on him before he was up, sobbing I was dragging his boots back in the waves.

"You don't want me!" I said. "You don't want me!" It was a terrible accusation.

I would have pulled him back. I would have kept him with me for ever. He kicked me. I hung on his ankle. "You don't take me? You don't take my Mother!" I shrieked. I heard my voice all gurgly. I could feel the tears puff my nose and he looked at me and I knew he saw the tears making my little eyes swell backwards into my face too close either side of my ferret nose. "Leave me!" I scrabbled at his feet, his solid real calves that were leaving me in unreality with a wet incorporeal hungering nothingness of sea and flabby female. "Leave her!"

I think I was begging him, shrieking at him to leave Frijja but he said: "Leave your Mother to you? You don't even want her. You'd hold her like you hold your piss. You don't know what a mother is. You're not worth a mother. You're not worth this mother! You even killed your old man! He wouldn't be dead now but for your poxy tongue."

I doubled up. I gasped in the waves. Connor's boot-soles disappeared up into the wet air. The rope-ladder rolled up behind them. I was left in the sea with my sister. She put one iccold arm, the hairs all on end, around me, then the other. I was in my underpants alone in the wide wide sea all alone in my Aertex shorts which is worse than alone.

The 'copter droned in above Wandsworth. Sis looked at me and then smiled at the view. She looked pretty avid. "I warn you," I reminded her. "The place won't be like home. It will be swarming with the Lot."

"That's all right," she smiled gentle.

"Like flies breeding in meat that's been left too long," I says.

She leans forward eagerly behind the pilot to see the house if she can. She's picturing herself queening it over the virile Lot all those men all those bodies waiting to be subjected by her beauty.

"You landing on the Common?" I asked the pilot.

"We can land right in your back garden," he jovially replies. "I bet there'll be a few people here at home thrilled to see you alive and safe – which you only just where, mates, when I picked you up in that raging sea back there."

"That first helicopter left us to drown, fat lot he cared," Sis bitterly said as if the pilot had a *right* to pick us up, always supposing he could've.

"Now, now, it was him that sent us out to get you," this pilot rumbles. "Shame we couldn't land you in the Docklands area as you asked. But it's all cordoned off, and they've got hold of a whole fleet of pirate machines there that rise like a hornets' nest to greet anyone attempting a visit, more than our lives are worth."

It was near to dawn. We was alone, my sister and me among the nettles and hen-runs once the little chopper droned away. Up to the back door we went. I didn't like my new jeans but they was better than my shorts would've been in the nettles. The Lot would like my new jeans actually, they had fancy studs on. "Will they want to kill you?" she suddenly asked, breathless, just before we strode over the step. She'd not previously mentioned any danger, as though there just couldn't ever be any such thing, and now she got the word out in a fast-rushed gallop.

"Connor they would of wanted to kill (if they could) last they saw him," I says. "Me, it's my gaff. Why should they want to kill me in my own gaff?"

"Mine too," chirrups my sister and slips her arm through mine.

I turns to regard her. "Not so much of that patronising friendliness," I says v. *sauve* and with a light nonchalant lift of my casual lip off my teeth, but for 2 pins I'd've bashed her brains in, I felt so reckless and alone. "Who cleaned and polished and kept the rents straight all these years? You?"

We had a slight difficulty opening the door seeing as there was no handle on it. "Trust them not to screw it back on after knocking it off," I muttered. We walked in to the kitchen surveyed by an uncheering audience of 3 pairs of eyes.

"Hullo, Glor. Hullo, O'Shea. Hullo, my own darling little Sweetness," I says. "Meet my long-lost sister Pamela."

"Where's Connor?" Sweetness takes time off from gum-chewing to inquire at once.

"How should I know?" I shrug.

Sweetness stares at me in utter disbelief.

"Whatyoumean, you don't know?" she drawls.

"Put the coffee on, Glor," I invite.

"You trying to tell me, you don't know where Connor is?" Sweetness asks.

I turn slowly, full to her, to give her a slow stare and then shrug again.

Glor just flicks her eyelids lazily at me. She is good-humoured and welcoming but smells sweet. A cigarette, and I mean cigarette, is dangling from her fingers. She couldn't get the energy to walk across the room if her chair was on fire.

Pamela is looking disgusted and bitchy and is about to burst out when she sneaks a look at O'Shea as a sample of the manhood populating the old place, and a saintly look prims her mouth and she goes to the stove and finds the matches and tries to light the gas but it goes Buloop and refuses to take. O'S gets up and slouches over to help her. His hairy arm goes round her as he says, "Won't it do what you want sweetheart? Let's give it what for shall we eh!" "It's all clogged with dirt," Pamela says out in a friendly voice as though dirt is just one of the things you find in everyone's kitchen like kettles and formica.

O'S takes out his knife and starts poking with it.

Little Tarkwin, a 4th pair of eyes I hadn't till now noted, sidles out from behind a dresser, over to his mother giving O'S and myself a wide berth as he expects a kick or bash from all blokes in the world.

"Have some toffees, little boy," invites Pamela in a voice of utter darlingness for O'S's benefit. She brings out the bag of Toblers toffees she always totes round in her cardigan pocket and she detaches a bit of cold-cream-smearred Kleenex from a coffee she extends enticingly to little Tarkwin. "Oo, give us one too," says Sweetness, whose constantly-licked lips are surrounded by little sores and whose restless thirsty jaws are always on the chomp.

"You're back solid on the pills, ain't you," I says.

"Got to keep interested somehow, ain't I?" It's her turn, she reckons, to give me an insolent stare as though her boredom and her remedies for her boredom are all my fault.



"When's that nosh ready, Sis?" I orders.

"Are you giving me orders?" she raises her brows. "We are a bit peckish, now Rat mentions it," O'S growls with his absent-minded hand under her twin-set. "I only just got here," my sister Pamela is furious. "I don't know where anything is, do I? I've had a long journey to a strange place and I'm tired and cold and stiff." "We can soon remedy that har har," remarks the jovial ham-hand now, to judge by my sister's prim smile, at the bra-hooks.

Glor rouses herself to notice we've just come in, and also to recognise me too. She already done this 5 minutes ago but since forgot.

"Hi, Pelham," she says. "Where's that Connor?"

Pamela looks at her carefully, and sums her up, but all wrong. *A Tart*, she thinks: *negligible rival*. "He's with my Mother," she says.

"With your Mum? And what's she then?" hoots O'S.

"You can tell what her Mum must be," Sweetness manages to say gleefully after preparing her lips for motion by licking them all round.

"My Mother is the legal owner here," Pamela says since I won't say it for her.

"Rat is," snaps O'S.

"He's my brother," Pamela without a flicker accepts my nickname.

They all stare at us except Glor who hasn't the necessary vigour, vim, sparkle and ebullience to stare at anyone.

"Eggs and bacon, darlin," O'S tells Pamela. "Since you're the landlady." He is not properly and, as I would I suppose have wished him to be, flabbergastedly in recognition of the fact I have a relative. A relative no longer long-lost. "I like them sunnyside up," he leers.

"There are two healthy girls here making themselves at home and perfectly well able to cook you a meal and me too, which no one never even thought of till we come in though you all been lolling around here all day by the look of it," coolly says my sis.

They really stare now. They ain't used to this kind of calm superiority. Little Tarkwin sneaks to her skirt and touches her hem, then holds on to it, ensconsing himself as at a new hearth-side.

"I never knew you had anything but your Dad, Pelham," Sweetness says to me.

Pamela looks up.

"Where is my Dad?" she says.

They regain ground. They are in fact encroaching. They creep almost physically nearer, and every one, not just my Sweetness, is licking their unwashed lips. "Ain't you told your sister, Pelham?" asks O'S.

"Told me what?" Pamela inquires.

I shrug and go out.

"He's going for a wash," gloats O'S.

It is in fact exactly where I'm going. I feel frowsty. I want to get at my toothbrush, my nail scrubber, my emery boards, my pumice, my tweezers. I hope that Lot ain't gone and mucked up all my nice little personal neat gear. I could even do with a shave, fluffy though my 'beard' ha ha usually is. I step over various bodies who stare at me dully with or without dull recognition. You'd think I'd left only yesterday. As a matter of fact I suppose now I come to think of it it was only a day or so ago.

I get to my 2nd floor bathroom. Door leans on mangled hinge. I go in. Just a gaping space in the plaster where the bath been. It's all been ripped away. The pipes been sawn-off. They dangle obscene. It's all obscene. It's obscene that there's no bath here in my little neat personal bathroom. What is this place anyway if a man's personal belongings can all be took including his own lease-held BATH?

"Where's my bloody BATH?" I yelled.

"We didn't like to take the old bloater out, have to handle him like, after you killed him, Pel," says Weasel leaning in the doorway behind me. "It's not a nice task, handling some poor old corpse someone else is responsible for."

"My Dad - dead?" Pamela is staring whitely at me. She's so possessive, she can't say Dad, got to say *My Dad*.

"We just took the whole bath out and carried it down to the yard rather than soil our hands taking him out," says O'S coming up the stairs behind my sister.

"Soiled your hands?" I repeated. "And I bet you left it as long as you could till he was crawling."

"Cowards, we are," the Glasgow turk grins appearing from a yawning refuse tip that used to be Mickle's study. They all

stand around me, grinning, before me, to the side. Behind  
Eyes. Hands.

"Lazy, that's what you are," I explodes. "Lazy, shiftless,  
irresponsible and DIRTY. Take this place over? You couldn't  
take over a nunnery now."

They stare at me, taken aback.

They shuffle foot to foot.

"We piled earth on 'im in the bath once it was in the yard,"  
volunteers O'S.

"That's better than nothing," I grudgingly says. "Hardly  
call it *good enough*, though, can you?"

"Did you kill my Dad Pel?" my sister suddenly screams.

"Yer," I says swaggering. "I killed him. I told him what a  
stupid useless slobber-lipped old git he was who mattered no  
place. He couldn't take it, cos he couldn't take the truth. I have  
a great value for the truth."

They fell into place behind me, as in the old days grateful to  
be able to identify themselves as actually existing by hearing  
themselves scarified.

As we passed the lounge, O'S stopped, and he hesitated.  
"What's up, O'S?" I snaps briskly. "The wireless," he says.  
"It's time for Tommy to read Oliver." "Tommy?" I snaps.  
"Tommy, Tommy Courtenay," they says, crowding eagerly  
around me. "He reads Oliver, a new bit every day. How Olive  
gets away from Sykes. How Sykes tries to harm poor Oliver."  
"I was a kid like Oliver once," says O'S and Herlihy simul-  
taneously. "No, I keep telling you, *I* was," Weasel shrieks at  
them. "Last week," says the Blackhill turk, "it was Terry  
readin' Lorna. You missed that, Rat."

"Well, today we miss Oliver," I assures them. "In fact, we  
miss it every day from now on. We got better things to do,  
should imagine, than a roomful of grown blokes sitting round  
identifying with tears in their eyes with sob-fiction."

Behind me they trooped, winking to each other with toleran-  
indulgent amusement at me, but in reality almost mistaking my  
blistering nag nag nag for leadership. A grateful Lot I led on a  
tour of inspection of my rightful premises.

So out in the garden. The cans, the smells. The flies quivering  
thick like maidenhair fern over the rubbish. I was home again.  
This was home. This was my Folks. I am not leader here, which



is just as I want it, thank you, people watch leaders and wait to kick them in the shin. I don't want to be a leader. I want to be a shit. That's rightness for you. That's the nicest best thing in the world and really when you come down to it which you got to sooner or later for all your Airs and Graces it is what we all want eh. Isn't it that? The summit of man's ambition is cosiness, contentment, and how do you get it? Let's forget the words and the horizons and all the let's pretend here we go round the raspberry bush. Let's face it my darlings we are all happy to be comfortable, like I am, just that little bit sneakier than the others so we can make them jump our way.

We stood and looked at the bath.

Sis was slightly petrified of me, cowed she had been the proud Pamela. She stood well to my left, over by O'Shea's strong solid humus of male reassurance, and she wouldn't look at me as she stared fascinated into the peeling bath standing there on its curly rust-distemper legs on what used to be the mint-patch.

"What's that stuff all over the earth?" I says.

"The birds been," says Weasel. "They dropped seeds and all that lark."

I stared intently. The earth in the bath, lumpy pallid brown earth the colour of old sellotape, was indeed full of husks and seeds and droppings and such. It looked perfectly ordinary earth in a perfectly ordinary bath. Why not? You would never of thought there was anything underneath.

But wait! What was this? A bit of paper sticking out a definite corner.

And an interesting, rare, esoteric, in fact unusual thing - written writing in definite Biro on the paper.

I reached and pulled it out.

"What?" they said. "Read it us, Rat," they chorused as in the old days crowding round like infants for a bedtime tale from Rat.

But I paused and the pause continued.

"Deer Freeezier," the letter read. "I don't know how to put this but will give it a try anyhow."

Then there was nothing. Just a lot of crossing-out, very heavy and black. Underneath I could make out something about "I would like you to meet my mother."

Ended abruptly. Really, after that which was probably only a sample draft of the never-received missives he must have been

writing her in the days before the fight and the helicopter-flight and which he must have been chucking away in brute despair. right left and centre the garden was probably rotten with them. no wonder the flowers never grow they never got a chance to breathe BREATHE, what else was there to add after such softness?

"O'Halloran," I said very quiet.

"Rat?"

"You got something there. What you holding?"

"A little book o' pictures, Rat. Van Goff."

"Where you get such stuff?"

"Mickle gave it to me, Rat. Van Goff was a right hard nut. He—"

"Mickle still here?"

"Oh, yes. He's just gone up the library, likely."

"He can start to think again then. Giving you all this rubbish. It's weakening."

I don't like to see the Lot demeaned in this way, their status as what they so thoroughly *are* – mocked. Who's he to consider they need his slop?

Pam, who was standing near enough to see Connor's heart in my hand, I'd forgotten she could read at least, she said: "He does love his Mother."

"He ain't never had one," I jeered. "You think Connor knows what love is, was, ever shall be?"

"She was the one they had to take him away from," Sister says. "Mum told me it all the other night after we met you. That Connor, Mum says, he's been a bad influence on our Pel, say my Mum."

"How she knows it all!" I sneer. "It's *me* been the bad influence on *him*."

"Connor being with you, sexy swine though he is, that was one of the reasons we didn't want to go letting on to you that you was our long-lost Pelham. My brother, Mum's boy. Leave well enough alone, we thought, especially when we noticed you bullying and interfering with people in the street, if you don't mind my mentioning it, Pel. Anyone mixed up with that bitter Connor, Fascist brute, we got to keep clear of, says Mum, bar a little pleasantry maybe seeing as we are female in a hard world. What's he got to be bitter over, I says to Mum. (Got everything

in his lap, I should make my guess, I says.) No, she says. He hates women.

“He don’t even know it, what’s more dangerous still, Mum explained. Cos he’s convinced himself he’s got an obsession of love and grief for his darling Mama he wronged. That’s the stuff of pure sadists and prison-camp sergeants, says Mum. And she told me it all, how it happened about the time you was a twinkle in Dad’s eye, Pelham. Want to hear it, Pel? Yes, you do, Pel.

“He was brought in to hospital, three years old, couldn’t say a word, didn’t know any words only mumbles, and his eyes and every hole in his body was all scarred where she’d twisted a wooden pencil-stump whenever she reckoned he was naughty, or whenever I suppose she reckoned he was getting boring. She and her boyfriend, they use to have nothing to do sometimes to while away an afternoon, so they’d stick things in as much of Connor as they could. *Who did this to you? Who shoved the pencil in your eye?* the hospital asked him. *Mummy does*, he drooled – he could do a sort of infant jabber – they classified him mentally retarded.

“It was the scandal of the neighbourhood, Mum was telling me. Suddenly everyone was saying they’d always guessed it, all the other mothers around was saying they’d always guessed she was up to no good with her kid when no one hardly ever saw him and there was often such screams and moans and such tiny whimpers going on a long time but tiny from the house, not healthy tantrums ever, said the neighbour. But she’d never gone in because it’s not your place to interfere, is it, and Connor’s mum always complained he was a naughty little boy and gave her such a time.

“The health visitor always got told he was never in, till one day she thought to go upstairs and there she saw him, in his cot, matted to the bedclothes.

“They put his mother in prison. They took her away from him and he realised she’d gone, somewhere awful. He was told from the time he could understand that it wasn’t she’d *left* him – the Institution matron told Mum he missed his mother terribly, her being his one bit of family in his voidy world – he was to understand *he sent her away.*”

I hate her for talking like me. She’s not really related to me. I’m sure, in fact I know, it’s all a mistake that gangling simperer Pamela Cecilia *Gawfield* related to me Rat. “Voidy world” –



that's the way I talk. Yet she never heard me to copy me. Heredity and genes. She's trying to prove blood matters.

"He's all right now," I says after no pause at all because a pause of shock and revolted pity at Connor's twisted-up infancy and presumably his feeling he told on his mother, and locked the Holloway gates on his own mother, was just what she was complacently expecting of me. What about my childhood any way? All right, all right, I'll believe we are all shaped by our childhood and all that; and nothing I ever done is my fault because look at me – if anyone ever had a warping childhood, what about *me*?

"He's all right?" she squeaks. "We don't even know where he ruddy *is*."

"He's in the Docks with little Saint Frigida. He's stolen our Mother too, Pamela. He sent his own Mother to prison and now he's got all our family, yours and mine, Pam. He's had our Mother away. She'll be his Mum now. He's all right, he's got his fucking mother-figure. But what about us, you and me, eh, Pamela? Where is she? Our Mum that should be here with us?"

Tears appeared in the grimy pilled-up eyes of the Lot gathered around us.

"And our cousin, eh?" I says. "He's had her away, hasn't he?"

"And our Dad?" says Pamela staring at me.

"Don't look at me like that," I snapped. "Just don't you look at me like that. Yes, it was all Connor's fault there was a atmosphere right through the house and Helmut lost control and the old bloke done himself in after just a word or 2 from me. Always trying to cheer him up I was but he refused to look on the bright side."

"He didn't like *us* being here in his house, did he?" guffawed O'S, nudging Weasel. "Not partial to us, was he?"

"Ah," I says, quick to placate their pride, "he didn't know you. He didn't give himself a chance to know you. He was a stand-offish old git he was. He wasn't hospitable."

"He never made us feel welcome," complained the Blackhill turk.

"No more he did," I agreed with civil sadness, "the old bugger."

"He weren't a bad old bugger though," Sweetness licks her mouth and can say.

"He were my Dad anyway," I says forgivingly. "Whatever he was, I won't forget he was my Dad whatever else. I'll never hear a word against him. So let's forget the past and simply say Rest his soul. However sour he may have been. Rest in peace, Dad, wherever you are."

I could feel gentle, unbitting, forgiving tears spring up in my eyes. But before they fell, the rain sparkled down – out come the sunshine, delicate rainbowy sunshine, and down come the rain.

"See! Even the day is weeping on his grave!" I says.

The Lot all stare.

"No!" cries Sweetness through her plum-pink mouth that people use to pay to use. "It's not mourning! It's gladsome! See what's gone! Just take a look at what's gone!"

The sky seemed clearer.

Clearer.

Clear.

"The A craft! They're gone! The Aliens are gone out of our sky! They're not over Battersea! They're vanished! What do you reckon has happened to them?"

Down fell the wet rain. Down came a million little silver globes revolving in the rain, rain-beads slicking all over them, the air was like a slick of silver PVC, and all the little globes was singing together and in descant as they fell: "We-have-left-your - unsalubrious - star - your - star - is - not - for - us - your - soil - is - poison - your - meat - is - poison - your - psychology - is - warped - we - find - you - unhygienic - we - have - reluctantly - come - to - the - conclusion - civilised - life - is - an - untenable-proposition-on-your-unhygienic-star."

"They're insulting us!" I cried. "They're calling us grubby!"

"They're singing!" says Sweetness, holding out her hand to catch one, and then another, and another. "They're so glad to be leaving us." And sure enough by the next day so many ruddy globes had fell all over the nation their price was rock-bottom even for curio-value.

"Singing!" says the Blackhill turk in amazement and he gives a cackle and starts battling the globes from him to O'S and back again and they're all at it like an insane game of volley-ball.

"We've got America back again! We've got Australia back! We've got Calais back!" yell the joyous apes. "Ringo Starr will come walking back in the door of his house again."

The rain sparkles on the rubbish-dump. It sparkles in the creeper on the broken boards of fence. It sparkles in the tree, and on all the old split Durex hanging caught in the leaves and twigs of the tree outside the house top-windows, where they've caught and hung after being chucked out on busy nights. Each old Durex is shining like a transparent mesh of sparkle, glad tidings fluttering in the tree, and the leaves are asparkle like so many sixpences, and like sproutz too are the dizzy drops of rarin rain and those bloody balls.

"We - have - left - your - unsalubrious - star / proposition / untenable / unsalubrious - star / your - psychology - is / star / unhygienic" sang all the balls as they fell and as still asparkle they fell.

"So we're not good enough for you?" I yelled into the falling sparkle. "So?"

"Ho," sighs little Tarkwin staring up and clinging from between them to Glor's unsteady wide-braced legs.

"We're our own masters again eh?" says Glor, it slowly dawning on her.

"Own masters!" I yells. "No, you poor cretinous dupes. We're back to where we always were, pushed right back in our rightful slime. We was masters of the world, wasn't we, when the Aliens was up there? No law but ours! The police was scared of us, the man in the street jumped when we spit. Now where are we? The Government is back, the law is back, and we watch for their spittle just like we always done."

"Frijja was wrong then," says Pamela slow. "Frijja was wrong. We aren't noble savages rejecting the Aliens. We're filth, rejected. She's a fanatic. Connor's chance of being a normal bloke is gone. He's with her now. I thought you was a bit nervy about her and her 'ideas' but she is going to suck every bit of that nice ordinary boy's soul."

"Soul!" I draws on my cigarette. I smile a satirical smile. "Soul? Connor was all man. Connor was Man."

Was? Why am I putting Connor in the past tense?

Yes, so he's shrugged me off, even me, though I can stick like shit. He's left me. But he's the future. Connor is. He and Frijja have *done* something. The minute *they* reach the Docks . . . off the Aliens have gone. It's all their fault the Aliens have gone.

I remembered how we'd flown over the Docks in the 'copter



very early this morning, not allowed to land nor to hover. I'd stared down into the pitchiness till I got the spots in front of my eyes and couldn't see nothing even if it was there to see? Somewhere there Frijja was with the man she had known held an answer, was a complement to whatever plan she held. She'd used the Man, as she'd used Connor, to get where she wanted to get. I hadn't slept even when offered rest after rescue. My eyes had closed but I'd seen the vague shadowy imagined Docks rising, warehouses and cranes, cranes like giant Crosses, silent gangs of men bent on unimaginable destructions, raising now and again their floating terrible whoop of warning gang between gang, Frijja there somewhere, Connor there somehow tracking her down. How would they meet? Had Frijja really given *herself* to the man? Very doubtful, she gives nothing. Would she be brutal with Connor? Would she order her creatures destroy Connor? Would Connor already have found men? Would she be small and trembling when she realised with shock that Connor had found her? Would she be tongue-tied, terrified of the treacherous joy he'd discovered to her? Would she take Connor and fill him with her ideas, imprint her own joys on him, getting him to read *Crime and disgusting Punishment*, weakening him as Mickle has tried to weaken the Lot? I had peered with my eyes burning over the Docks. But the spots cleared only when we'd passed.

No response from Pamela. I look down aside at her. She is staring in the odd old bathtub. And there from it she is watching the springing of flowers. Little delicate growths, like mushrooms or starry lichens, have sprung up as the rain touched the earth rich as plum-pudding with its layers of bird-dropped seeds and spores among the old fag-ends.

"Yer," I says, "a touching incident 'n it," and I stare soulfully at the sproutings.

"Don't you dare weep from your crocodile-eyes," shrills Sister. "You're not sorry about Dad. He was my Dad you know. You're not sorry Pelham. You never stood up for him. I'm sorry I turned round in the sea," she said, "and told you I knew you was my brother ever since I seen your name you wrote in the hotel register. I knew you weren't worth telling, but I thought as we was about to die I would tell you. You never," she sobbed, "stood up for him when he needed you."

"Ah shut your whine," I says.

She gives me a terrible look.

I took my cigarette out my mouth. I had nowhere to stub out. I stubbed it out on Pam's wrist.

I went back in the house and got the mop and polish.

Connor never did get to beat me up ever. Connor never punched me, kicked me, put his boot in. I never had kind words from Connor and I never did have foul ones neither. I never did good to Connor, for all I told him I had, and I never did him harm. Will he ever remember me, will he ever think of me and say to himself, if he can be taught to find the way, "Pelha tried to get close to me but he didn't know how to like me for my own sake not his?" And there are no Aliens in the sky watching my actions any more and thinking *That Pel, he's worth watching, what things he does, we'll keep an eye on him.* No one to show off to any more, no one we know really is there. Connor and I never touched each other in our revolutions. But something I been waiting for. Was it Connor I was waiting for? Was I waiting for Connor? Was I waiting for someone to turn me into a lovely person? They've all left me alone with myself now. It's me I've been left alone with. The Aliens knew what I was waiting for. You, dear reader, you precious lovely person, know you're wise, I know you're wonderful, don't be afraid of my eagerness, don't leave me alone, I'm trying to reach you, I'm trying to get at you, I'm trying to come off this page and be with you and be your friend and stick with you.

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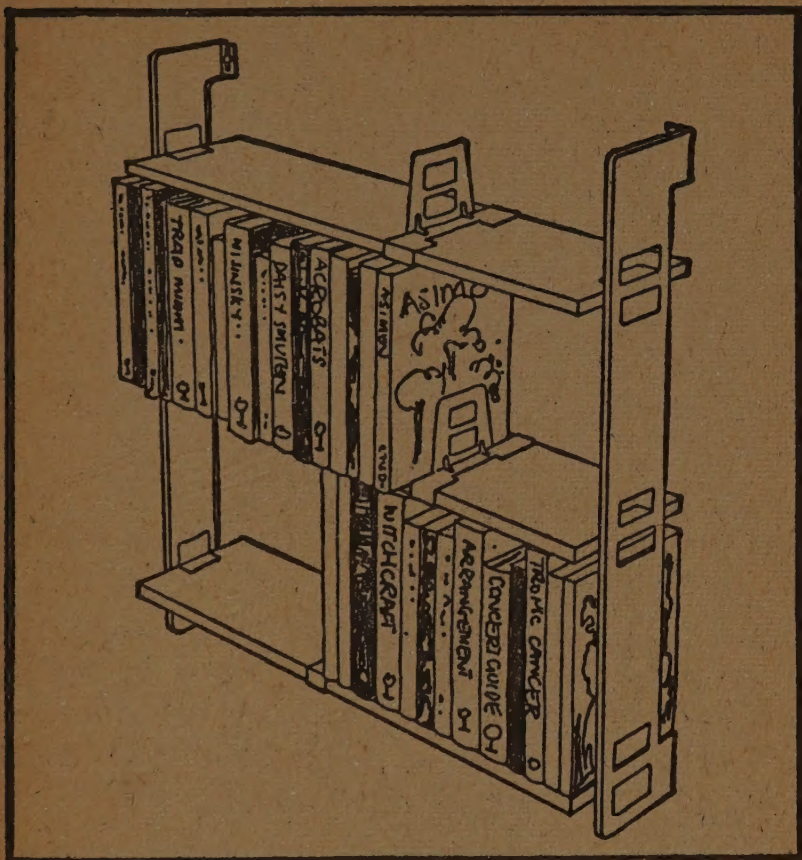
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