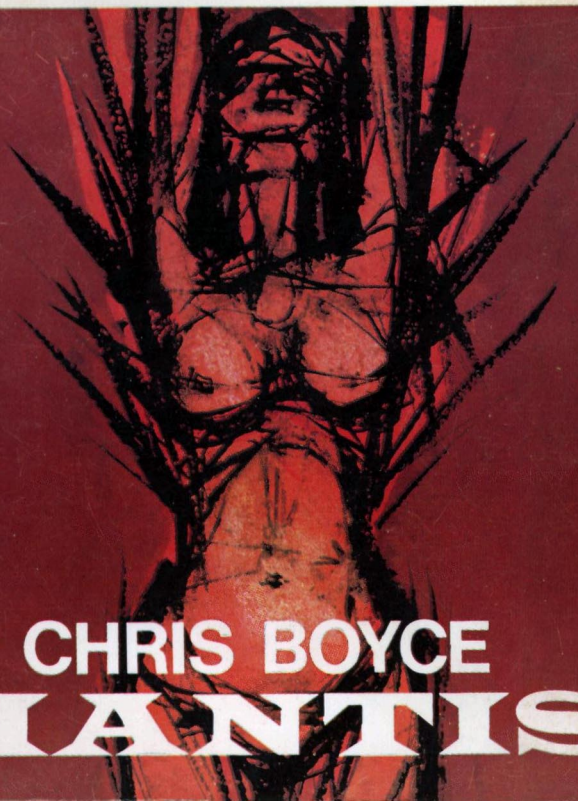


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sf impulse

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**CHRIS BOYCE
MANTIS**

sf impulse

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CONTENTS

STORIES:

MANTIS <i>by Chris Boyce</i>	6
GREEN EYES <i>by Richard Wilson</i>	40
THE SHRINE OF THE TEMPTATION <i>by Judith Merril</i>	55
COINCIDENCE <i>by Chris Hebron</i>	73
GRUTCH <i>by Pete Hammerton</i>	80
THE ICE SCHOONER (conclusion) <i>by Michael Moorcock</i>	90

FEATURES AND ARTICLES:

EDITORIAL	2
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR	47
BOOK FARE	51

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THE FICTION IN SCIENCE FICTION

Editorial by
HARRY HARRISON

It appears that the science in science fiction is well able to take care of itself. No one can pretend that sf can be read in the place of scientific texts, or that there is any science at all in a good deal of this brand of fiction. But the writers who write "hard" science fiction—people like Blish, Anderson, Clarke, Asimov—have been trained in one or more of the sciences so they write from both knowledge and respect. There also exists, among the readers, a number of trained scientists who are quick to pounce when terrible mistakes are promulgated. Dr. John R. Pierce's letters often make better reading than the stories they so neatly take to pieces.

I wish that the same could be said for the fiction in science fiction. The reasons for the neglect are pretty obvious. The readers of sf, for the most part, don't give a thought to the quality of the fiction they are reading—nor should they—and the critics outside the field look on it only with a great deal of contempt as something a cut above a western but well below a good mystery. This attitude will never have any effect upon sf other than keeping it locked in its ghetto. This is a crying shame, because sf is *not* a restricted medium like the western or detective, which is one of the reasons that it is so hard to produce a satisfactory definition of just what it is. **GREYBEARD** and **SPACEHOUNDS OF IPC** are both sf, as are **A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ** and **A FALL OF MOONDUST**, **THE BIG BALL OF WAX** and **LITTLE FUZZY**. No other field of writing contains such diverse material—including mainstream fiction—and this should never be forgotten. We should really stop being jealous of the successes and critics outside the field

and face the fact that we have a diversity that they will never attain. That's the correct ghetto attitude: include them out because we're better.

That doesn't mean there is no room for improvement. It means that there is tremendous room for development and it is the writers who are going to have to do it. It always comes back to that, a single myopic individual crouched over a typewriter and feeding glaringly empty sheets of paper into it and then, from the wrinkled convolutions of his quivering brain, pulling forth the string of words that will entertain. What that writer feels about what he is doing at that moment will determine its worth. *How* he uses these determines the nature of his writing. If he feels that *sf* is crud and a way to turn a quick quid he will, with racing fingers, earn a quick quid by producing crud.

This individual—male or female—is the only one who counts. Agents and editors and publishers are just the means of setting his work before the reader. Critics, writing courses, teachers and reviews are just ways of supplying him with information and attitudes for him to make use of. This is the true importance of the critics. There has never been a writer yet who improved his work by reading his reviews—though a lot have been ruined by it. Out of personal need F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *THE GREAT GATSBY*, a tremendous book that deserved all the praise that it received. So then Fitzgerald struggled for years to produce what he *knew in advance* would be the great American novel, telling people while he was still writing it that, "It's good, good, good. When it's published people will say it's good, good, good." When it was published people turned away from it—and with good reason since it is one of the dullest and most self-conscious volumes ever produced.

I am sure it will be a number of years before any *sf* writers are destroyed by the critics' praise, but all of them would surely be helped by a critical change in attitude. If the critics, editors and reviewers generated a feeling that there was a great deal of worth and the possibility of good craftsmanship in this field the writers would be aware of this, and those of them who were capable of improving would improve. All of us, readers, editors and writers,

would be better off for it. One of the best things about sf has been the fans, the dedicated readers, who write letters, edit fanmags and attend conventions. Their existence raises the writer's morale and convinces him that he is not writing in a vacuum.

Yet the average writer produces in a critical vacuum. This situation is far worse in the United States than in Britain—but most of the producing writers live in the United States. The sf mags print reviews—months or years late—of only a microscopic percentage of the books, and the reviewers themselves are idiosyncratic to say the very least. Or, to be very blunt, they are individualistic and biased with critical standards to match. But at their worst they are far better than the newspapers which simply copy the jacket blurb from the book, if and when they do any reviews. The major journals of literary criticism and book reviews—of course—ignore sf completely. The result is that the U.S. writer produces books into a version of null-space. The book goes out to the publisher, some cheques and some copies arrive eventually and that is that. Inspiration quotient—zero.

This situation is so depressing that a few years ago James Blish requested fans and readers to write him letters of criticism. And recently Gordon Dickson has tried another way of making contact with his readers. His latest book is *MISSION TO UNIVERSE* (Berkely Books, New York, 50c.) and review copies have been sent to all members of the Science Fiction Writers of America along with a note requesting comment from his fellow authors. It is in the nature of an experiment to gain contact, and I hope it will be a successful one. When it is concluded we look forward to publishing a report in these pages. Meanwhile, I am only too happy to join in the experiment.

This is a pleasant task because I enjoyed the book. It is a second-generation sf novel whereby an old theme is retold—with a new dimension added. The theme is the "sub-space" ship that leaves the Earth against orders, contacts strange races, then returns to save the day. The new dimension is that of character and character conflict. In the good old round-the-galaxy novels the mere act of getting the ship spaceborne and flitting around the alien worlds was enough to make the book. The characters were all

flat as cardboard with interchangeable names and descriptions. Dickson has improved upon this—but just barely. The leader of the expedition, Ben Shore, comes across as an individual, but at the expense of the rest of the characters. Their life juice has been drained away to round him out and, fat and solid, he walks in and around the flat people. This cannot be entirely blamed on the author, since an awful lot of story has been jammed into about 60,000 words. So much of the time has been taken up in moving the yarn along that the people never have a chance for the real interchange of personality. To flesh out the secondary characters would have required a book twice as long.

What bothers me most about *MISSION TO UNIVERSE* is the violence. This is not unique to this volume—or to all of sf for that matter—but is the theme behind all of Dickson's books. He chronicles histories of violence and fighting men, and more power to him—this always sells and the fans love it. But here the violence is more obvious. It is the answer to every problem that arises and Dickson loads the dice so that it is the only one that works. All of the characters are civilians yet they completely accept the assumption that military discipline is the only kind that works. It is not, and in fact it is the only kind of discipline that does *not* work with scientists and the higher ranks of technicians. I do not know if Dickson is a professional soldier, or just in love with the military, but he surely writes like one. Therefore I make one small suggestion. Mr. Dickson—why not set out to tell a story without violence just once? Or better write a story so plotted that violence cannot possibly win and another solution must be sought. Whether the story succeeds or not, you will surely gain more scope as a writer.

Small details. The opening is just talk and nothing really happens. I'm sure you know better. A reader can never be *told* anything—he must be shown. And when the Golden aliens' weapons are introduced they are described as javelins. I cannot picture a javelin shorter than a yard, therefore I was not convinced when a human character later pulls one out of his sleeve. Either your javelins must become rods or some such, or you are going to need an

(continued on page 46)

Readers of sf IMPULSE will already be familiar with the offbeat and colourful stories of Chris Boyce. First discovered by Kyril Bonfiglioli, Mr. Boyce confirmed his early success with THE RIG (sf IMPULSE 7), a vivid and macabre tale that revealed nonetheless depths of understanding and compassion only too rare in science fiction. We are pleased now to present what we feel is his best work to date ; a scarifying (and funny) glimpse of a wild but entirely plausible future.



MANTIS

by Chris Boyce

One . . .

Two . . .

Three.

Then she's back.

Naturally she's back.

Invariably she comes back.

Every time she leaves you tell yourself that she will come back. And you have been correct every time for almost three quarters of a century. But on each occasion you really believe that she has gone forever, and spend weeks, months, and sometimes years in torment. Then just when you are beginning to recover . . .

She comes back.

You hear the wheeze of air entering as the fibre wall parts to admit her and the hard smell of the sea. Then it seals over and you hear the three dull heartbeat sounds as the tumblers of the personality lock fall into place. Then her footsteps across the hardened floor of the living area pod above. Slapping soft and wet. She has been swimming.

She halts.

"Eric?" Calling up into the sleeping and pleasure pods which were once your workshop.

"Eric I'm home. Where are you?"

"Down here." In a guttural voice.

She descends the spiral and stands peering into the darkness. You lie on the struct couch at the other side of the room.

"Eric I can't see you. Aren't you glad I'm home?"

Keep quiet.

"Eric!"

Ignore her.

Show her who's boss.

"Hmmmph!"

So she's sulky.

Too bad.

"A delightful welcome I must say. Just what one would expect from a husband whose wife had been separated from him for eighteen years. Perhaps if I'd stayed away from you for six or seven years longer your reaction to my homecoming might have been a shade more exuber-

ant. Like it was the time before last. Thirty-four years that time I believe. Well?"

"SHUT UP. I'm working."

"What? Did you tell me to—"

"And since you're back make me a meal."

"A meal?"

"That's right. I've cancelled the food production pod and grown a kitchen one in its place. Took a considerable amount of delicate cultivation, but I must admit I've made rather a fine job of it. Caused a mild sensation. Even had a couple of biotechnicians down to study it. They're becoming quite the rage now I believe. Ah yes."

"Kitchens? They're primitive."

"Possibly, but I'm hungry. So you'd better start going primitive yourself in that case, and quickly!"

"Eric." In a small weak voice. "Be nice to me."

"To the kitchen, woman!" What marvellous words. Kitchens should have been retained if only for the excuse to shout about them.

"I've been so lonely, Eric."

Mustn't weaken.

"I've missed you terribly."

Don't look at her.

Standing in the single column of light. Goldilocks. Big green eyes. A girl tall and so slim. Pouty lips. A tear-sparkle on yonder smooth cheek. Head bent forward like a disgraced schoolgirl.

Oh, well, here we go again.

Disconnect yourself from the couch and saunter over to her. Big sigh. Put your arm round her shoulders.

Pat. Pat.

"There there."

And she lets rip the Great Warbling Wail. Burying her face in your daring real cotton shirt. Hair tastes damp and sea-salt sweet. Pull the trembling delicacy closer and whisper soothings into that bronze petal ear. While she sobs. Sobs. And sobs. Which makes you glow with the effulgence of a swelling male ego.

Idiot. Snap goes the trap. Every single time you fall for it. And regret it. You should know by now that it won't last, that within the decade, within the month even, she will swing in the boot. She'll meet some emotionally

crippled young male and then *kaboomph*, anything can happen. Last time she almost killed you for arguing with her lover. Well of course she may have thought that you were trying to decapitate him with that axe. Naturally you explained to her that you were merely illustrating tree cutting techniques employed by nineteenth century lumberjacks. But the sight of her paramour cringing below a table and behind a blue strength force shield was too much for her, and only your lightning fast reactions and the fact that you slipped on some of his accidentally spilled blood saved you from an untimely demise when the spear dart which she fired at the upper left chamber of your heart merely pierced your shoulder. Even then the hospital pod had a difficult job removing the missile and grafting in nice clean tissue. But you didn't even reprogramme the personality identification lock in the outer wall. You never do. You always tell yourself that when she has torn her current lover to mental and emotional shreds, leaving him unfit for anything but a psychic repair shop to experiment on, she will return to you. Because you are the only man whom she has loved and been unable to destroy. So why take her back? At your age you should know better.

One hundred and thirty six this March.

Not young by any standard.

Senility would have definite advantages.

But longevity and youthful bodies are fashionable among centenarians these days.

She's no spring chicken either.

One does not inquire after a lady's age, but she must be hitting the hundred mark at least. Funny world where stripling males in their virile twenties chase curvy eighty-year-old dames. Ah, but it's a commonplace.

She's stopped crying now. Started rubbing noses with you. Purring.

"Hello kitty."

"Miaow."

O she is lovely.

A big hug and a big kiss.

Mmmmmmm.

"Aaaah." Looking up with eyes wide, lips parted. "Now that is what I would call a really waaarm welcome." Giggling. "All right, I'll cook for you, Michaelangelo."

"You can cook?" Aghast.

Half way up the spiral she stops, smiles brilliantly, and hoods the eyes. "I can do . . . everything."

Grruff . . .

Trickle of laughter as she prances away into the pods above. She really can cook! Wow. That one certainly backfired in your teeth, eh? But what a pleasant surprise.

Now back to the old grind. Don't ask her what happened to the other guy, the details will be too sickening for your weak gut. Back to the couch, connect yourself up and start sculpting. Hew, chisel and chop meaningful images from great masses of chronically undisciplined thought energies. Arduous work, but it's a living. You are talented after all. There is no doubt about that. In the eyes of the world now. Although at times you wonder if maybe you aren't just conning them. And maybe yourself as well.

Always sculpting the one subject. Your wife. Mrs Eric Summerscale, known to all as Ursula Peters. Urs. The only model of whom you did not grow tired after the first two or three works. Who could grow tired of living with a hungry tigress? Tired just is not the word. Remember your first sculpting of her moods? *Witchling*. The critical acclaim. More work with her and then the exhibitions, the popeyed public, and the money. It was marvellous. And you deserved it all. Now you wallow in the awe of millions. An accepted genius for almost eighty years, and still going great guns. Though now they are beginning to take you for granted. There was a time when you watched the faces of other young sculptors coming into the gallery and eyeing your latest piece, their expressions changing from surprise to astonishment and finally to frustration with their own meagre capabilities. That was a good feeling. It was rumoured that Castiges and Deijk contemplated suicide after your third General Exhibition. Compertomini of course actually did blow his head off at the fourth, right in front of your masterpiece *Circe*. O how you laughed with joy at the news. The tragedy of it, the scandal, the Inquiry. The publicity! O that was a good feeling. Of late however they simply smile and nod to one another, pleased that you are still managing to turn out "reasonably competent work." Huh. The trouble is that they are unable to peel away the infinite layers of subtle

meanings in your work. It is beyond them. Too refined for their coarse intellects. There have been some infuriating rumours about you "going down the hill of late." And what about that impudent pup who came right out to your face with "Bah, you're only living on your name and everybody knows it!" So now you have decided to put paid to that. Ha Ha. No sweetly seductive work this time, and only one piece to be exhibited:

Mantis Religiosa.

You are casting monochrome sketch forms on the screen when Urs comes down the spiral carrying lunch. She is clothed. Well well. She must regard this as something of an occasion to actually wear garments for it. Or is she just trying to excite you? Still there is nothing actually wrong with her being dressed. Probably quite a number of people secretly wear clothes in the privacy of their own pods. In fact you have heard it said that in some parts of the globe daring young men are flying in convention's face by wearing shirts in public. This is understandable. There is something primitive and faintly rousing about seeing a member of the opposite sex covering their bodies. It adds a dash of excitement and mystery. Or something. Why when you were an adolescent you kept a hidden collection of photo-slides of fully clothed women and used to slip these into the figure animator in college when pretending that you were studying the muscular reactions of frogs to electrical stimuli. But of course everyone dresses for special occasions. Of course! It's almost a second Honeymoon for her, and who ever saw a Honeymoon couple going off without a couple of suitcases bulging with clothes? Har har!

"I thought I might dress for lunch, Eric." Teasingly.

"Heh heh heh. . . ."

"A meal never tastes the same if you are naked, don't you think?" Rustling of those petticoats.

"Heh heh heh. . . ."

"Now what shall we eat?"

Disconnect the lead from the sculpting lobe at the base of your skull, unstrap yourself and walk over to the cork fungoid bench which has just grown out of the floor. Still rustling she sets the food upon it and the two of you begin to eat. All through the soup course you smirk at her. She

smirks back. Wow. Through the meat and fruit course there are low sniggerings. Coffee and biscuits and you are laughing loud and lewdly.

"Really, Eric. You have the most disgraceful mind."

"Heh heh heh. . . ."

BZZZZ BZZZZ

The wall buzzer.

"Good grief! No one must catch me like this!" Whizzing up the spiral.

BZZZZ BZZZZ

So you resentfully walk out to the outside communication unit.

"Go away."

BZZZZZZZZZZZZ

"Get away while you can. This podplex is infested with Martian black testicle virus. Ooooo. Leave us to die in peace. Aaaaa."

BZZZZZZZZZZZZ

Have to give him something more convincing than that. . . "AAAlllllll. O O OOOH. EEEaaaarch. AAAAArr. Leave while you still can I tell you. Leave. . . ."

Tud . . . Ud . . . Ud.

As all three tumblers of the personality lock fall aside. But that's impossible. The fibre wall was programmed only for you and Urs. What's going on here? Looking as this supposedly foolproof panopoly of a wall, which cost you three years earnings to install, pops open to disclose the intruder. A tall man standing in the drizzle with a maser-key in his hand and lank brown hair flopping from his scalp in the wind.

"Where did you lay your hands on that thing young fellow? May I remind you that the unlawful possession of a maser-key is punishable by instant senility? However should you remove yourself from the premises immediately I may overlook the matter for a little while and take my time notifying Condominium Security about the matter. Be off!"

He stands there. One eyebrow raised.

"I am Condominium Security."

"C-Condominium Segugagug?"

"Correct." Stepping inside and sealing up the wall behind him with the key. Now only he can open it again.

"D-Do do come in. Feel Ffffree." Coughing.

"I am in."

Cheeky.

"The name is Major Bardolph Jacks. Anatolian Security sector five, in charge of division Omega."

Impressive, but what the Hell is he here for?

"And what in Hell are you here for?" Urs' voice from behind. "There are no Conclavists or sympathisers here."

"A standard investigation, madam."

"And why are we being investigated, soldier?" In her best ice-pick tones.

"Whenever the enemy is suspected of having spies in an area a random search is made daily throughout that area, the dwellings to be investigated being selected on a chance basis by computer."

Disgraceful. Must communicate with the Overbrain about this. Take up a devil-may-care stance by the com-link pod.

"What do you think you are doing, Summerscale?"

"I, my dear major Babcoz—"

"Bardolph!" snappily.

"I am going to open a communication link with the Overbrain to see what it has to say about this outrageous carry on." So there!

"That should be amusing."

"Ignore him, Eric. Go ahead." She stands beside the spiral, respectably unattired.

You pull the pad from the wall, place your index finger upon it, then lift the finger away in a tight helix. It comes alive.

"Put me in touch with Overbrain, please."

"No."

"Huh?" Since when did roboids answer back?

Can't have this. Get tough with it,

"Less of the chat out of you, tinlips. The Overbrain and hurry!" Shaking it threateningly.

"Until you are otherwise notified all communication will be cancelled as from this moment moment mo . . ."

Poomff and a cloud of white smoke as it disintegrates.

"What the . . .?" Singed fingers, that's what.

"A mere precaution in case you tried to influence any Conclavist friends about. . . ."

"Friends? Friends? I have no bloody friends, you idiot. And I don't want to communicate with anybody or anything except the Overbrain. I just want you out of my house. Clear off. Beat it. Get out. Scram!"

"I only wish I could comply." Smiling and looking at Urs. "However duty is duty."

"How long will you be?" She is irritated by the obviousness of his attraction for her. Well, in a naked society you just can't hide anything.

"As long as it takes." Still smiling. Dull fellow this is, and she cannot stand dull fellows.

"An exceptionally penetrating observation, soldier." As she hurries aloft to the pods above.

"Your wife, she's . . . yes, she's beautiful." Smiling now at you. "She's really the woman you portrayed in those sculptings!"

"Of course she is." Man must be weak in the beanbox. "That's not getting us much further with your investigation is it?"

"Every bit as fiery as she appears in your works." Grin grin. That smile would look better with half the teeth knocked out of it.

Undersexed and overfed, that's his trouble. Eats masses of protein to build up big reserves and then has nothing to release them on in this woman-scarce society.

He's more to be pitied than cursed at, the bastard.

"You're on Incredibly Lucky Man." He says it with capitals. "Some men would kill for a woman like her."

"Really?"

"Like yourself for instance." With a funny look in his piggy eyes.

"Listen pal, don't try to threaten me with those killings. . . ."

"O I'm not."

"I took out A1 Murder Warrants on both of them before I even laid a fingernail clipping on either, and I have the records to prove it."

"I was merely illustrating my point, Summerscale."

"You must have searched pretty far back to come up with that old history about me." Almost seventy years back.

"Yes I have." Smile gone. "I know you very well now."

I even know the name of the genetician who fed your programme into the Inebolu gestation batteries. I know that you were among the only survivors when they burned down seven months later. You were stillborn in that blaze and brought to life on the spot by another genetician who died trying to rescue more babies from the fire. I know your history better than my own. Your friends, how they one by one abandoned you; your two rivals in love whom you destroyed. I know of your every habit, your egomania, your six foxhounds which could not stand you and ran away, your favourite breakfast. . . ."

"What is my favourite breakfast then?" You can see that he wants you to ask.

"Devilled kidneys with black olives."

Show-off.

"Very clever, Major. Then you'll know that I am secretly harbouring a colony of bacterium people from one of the plants of the Cephid variables. They are in the air at this moment with a microscopic laser cannon aimed at your head. Ha ha!"

"Tell me, Summerscale." Ignoring your sarcasm. "How long has your wife been at home today?"

"Since about an hour before your rude and inopportune arrival."

"And you had not seen her for eighteen years, four months, and six days previous to that?"

"I'll take your word for it. But how did we get back to the subject of my wife?"

"But you didn't think of reporting it when she came back?" He walks over to the spiral leaving that maser-key on the floor.

"Report it? Are you crazy? She's left me and returned more often than I've been to the rejuvenation centre!"

You follow him down into the workshop. Watch what he does down here. Don't want him damaging any of the equipment. It's all damned expensive stuff.

"Careful how you go, soldier. Everything down here's fragile and delicate." Including oneself.

He kicks aside a fringe rectifier. Pig.

So he's taking no notice of you, eh? Well maybe he is over six feet tall but when you draw yourself up to your full five feet eleven and a bit he doesn't look so big.

Narrow the eyes. Stick out the lower lip aggressively. Stay in command.

"I ought to dump you outside on your backside. Security or no Security."

He chuckles absentmindedly, engrossed in the technicalities of the struct couch. OK then, this scoundrel is asking for it. We'll see if he laughs at a spring slam to his kidneys. Aha. Tense for it. Take aim.

Now!

There is a scream of pain.

Yours.

As his hand chops you across your tender shin.

"I wouldn't advise you to try that again, Summerscale."

You won't.

"Now that we're down here I'll tell you why I'm really here. It's your wife. We're worried about her."

A cold pang,

"Urs?"

"The last man she was involved with was spying for the Conclavix."

"O."

"And there is a chance that once in their hands she may have . . . changed."

"Changed? You mean been indoctrinated? But why?"

"Not indoctrination. She may be an android."

"An android? Urs a Fake?" This character takes his work too seriously. His brains are coming loose.

"Yes. We believe that is exactly what that woman upstairs is."

"But a perfect android? It's impossible."

"Not if the models for the mind and body are perfect."

"But if they duplicated her mind as exactly as that they'd . . . they'd kill her in the process, so then how would they be able to create a physical reproduction with a corpse on their hands?" He smiling again. Coldly. "Likewise if they tried to duplicate her body where would they find a duplicate for the mind which would be destroyed in the process?"

"Where indeed, Mr. Eric Summerscale!"

O NO!

"Yes, Mr. Summerscale."

YOUR PSYCHO-SCULPTINGS.

"Even you would be unable to tell the difference and a mind prober would not be able to find any hypnotically or hypersyntonically induced compulsions in a mind where those compulsions had been present at birth. They had only to alter your sculptures slightly before using them as models."

A spark of hope.

"But Major, where would they get the sculptings? They are all locked up in National Galleries the world over!"

"A sculptor like Eric Summerscale? Reproductions are so easy to come by."

True, true.

"But then the only way to make sure is, oh no, the hospital pod's dissector?" Please say no.

"That way could be definite and quick, but it would also destroy her. No, my superiors have given me a plan."

A plan!

That sounds heartening. It's always good to have a plan. Makes one feel secure.

"This woman, if she is an android, has a compulsion to become the mistress of men whose knowledge is valuable to the Conclavix, right?"

"Obviously."

"But your wife does not have the compulsion to do this; she has her own personal preferences in men, right?"

"Get to the point."

"Then we must present to her the man who would be irresistible to her as your wife but whom she would never dream of looking at twice if she is an android."

"Yes. Yes that's a terrific idea."

Happiness happiness.

But wait a minute.

"What if she runs off with this fellow?"

"Not a chance, Mr. Summerscale. He's under strictest orders not to take advantage of the situation."

"Do I know him?"

"You're looking at him."

"You?"

"What of it?" Defensively.

O the giggles. Many merries. Him. Ha Ha hahaha.

"You find the situation amusing, Summerscale?"

"Very. Very very. Tee heeeeee."

"It may surprise you to know that I too, remarkably enough, have had my moments, sir!"

Aww, you've hurt him.

"No doubt you've been a proper gay blade in your day, Major." Choking back the torrent of laughs.

"In my day? I'll have you know that I am merely one hundred and twenty six and that my name was linked with none other than Celia Astor during her three day tour of Anatolia." Pompous to the scabs on his feet.

A howl of mad mirth as you double up on the floor spilling tears of joy.

A burst of surprising anger from those military lips.

"We're not all like you, Summerscale. We all know what your sort are like."

"My sort? What the Hell do you mean, my sort?"

"Venery mad!"

"What!"

"That's how all your sort keep your women. Indulging in acts of vileness and degradation to satisfy them. Acts which no clean-thinking citizen of the Condominium would consider for a moment. That's why the women come back to you, because they know that your type are desperate enough to step low enough to do anything they desire."

He spits.

On your beautiful clean floor.

"Gg-f-kklmmm. Mmmmm mmmm. . . ."

"Are you trying to say 'moo', Summerscale?"

"Mmm-my God, some people are ignorant!"

You are shaking. Furious. Eyebrows jumping mobile across the forehead.

"Understand this soldier; you are an ignorant BUM. The facts about this matter are clear. Women are of no more biological importance to the propagation of humanity than this couch is." Slamming your fist on it.

"Women are defunct!"

"The only human contribution to the birth of a child these days is the programme drawn up and fed into the gestation batteries by the genetician. Other wise the Over-brain controls everything, right?" Now it's your turn to use the adjective.

"Right, so. . . .?"

"So since males have a predominance in constructional

creative work the 'brain turns out more of them. To offset the physical need of a man for a woman the 'brain has supplied us all with pleasure simulators which give much more gratification than any female ever does."

"Get to the point!" Where have you heard that before?

"I am not a pervert as you seem to believe. I still find more pleasure in a low power simulator than in my dear wife—"

"Hah!" of disbelief.

"True, true. It's just that I'm a spouse type."

"A what?"

"A spouse type. Few men have been around enough women to become used to them. That is why so many of us are emotionally vulnerable to their actions. But I was around females for the first twenty years of my life because the Overbrain ordered it to be so. In my pre-natal conditioning I had been prepared as a sculptor of the female mind. My purpose was and is to illustrate it to mankind, therefore I had to be constantly in their company.

"So I am not vulnerable."

"And that makes you a spouse type?"

"Yes, when a woman comes across a man she likes and who is comparatively invulnerable she asks him to marry her." Smile. "Just as Urs asked me to marry her."

"But it's what you've got that makes them like you." Sniggering. Filthy minded gutterbrain.

"That's a bundle of lies! Women are as different from one another as men are, and they have just as many likes and dislikes about their men as we have about our women."

"Huh?"

O this specimen is thick. Dense.

"Look you don't have to be a spouse type to get a woman. All you need is for her to like you. But you have to be a spouse type to keep her if she does. All women have their preferences. Take my wife, Urs, as an example. She is basically attracted to two types of male: first of all the creative delicate type who brings out her maternal instinct, that's partly me; secondly the carefree athletic adventurous man, also me in some respects. You are neither."

"I am athletic."

"But not carefree or adventurous or in any apparent need of mothering."

"No."

"Well you'll have to find someone else."

"I can't." Depressedly sitting on the floor.

"What?"

"I've been ordered not to leave the podplex until the matter has been resolved one way or the other. They're afraid that if I open the wall Conclavix will send a colony of roboid virus in to destroy her, and we need that android alive. There are ambulance units outside ready to spray every inch of the podplex with sterilisers and foam the second I open that door. So the problem had better have some solution when I do open it or I'm for the boot in the pastorals."

Look at him. All glum. This probably meant promotion too. Which is hard indeed to come by. And his face, all defeated and sad as he sits on the fungus stool growing slowly up under him from the floor. Aw forget about him. Is he worth the thought energy? Walk up and down. That's better. Exercise the think stuff. Those scintillating mental processes of yours should be coming up with the answer to this dilemma any moment now. A brilliantly simple solution to this entire complex intricate problem; that is the hallmark of genius.

"My lovely career." He is on the verge of a weepy. "All up the disposal nozzle. Maybe even . . . the senility induction chambers."

"Stop burbling, we'll find a way out." Sighing again, bravely. "Or I will."

"Right now I wish I was someone else. Anyone else."

Why doesn't he do something about that moaning—
Wait a moment.

Ha ha. Got it.

"Got it! My dear soldier, did you really mean that about wanting to be anyone else?" Licking your anticipatory lips.

"Well, I suppose so. In a manner of speaking. . . ."

"I can do it!"

The revelation falls on the stony ground of a barren imagination.

"Do it? What?"

"Change-your-person-ality." Explaining nice and slowly.

"Huh?"

It's like lecturing the mentally infirm.

"I'm a psycho-sculptor, right?"

"Uh-huh."

A distant glint of intelligence there?

"I sculpt personality models, correct?"

"Yeeees."

At last!

"I normally shape electronically created personality energy masses. But I can try to temporarily reshape your own living personality, eh?"

He bounds from the stool clapping his hands and chuckling.

"You're a genius, Summerscale, a genius."

Common knowledge to the *cognoscenti*.

"How do we do it then?"

"We do nothing! *I* do everything!"

"Of course. Is there anything you want me to do, or anyplace you want me to stand?"

"Well, let's see now." Appear calm. Knit the brows. Pout thoughtfully. "Stand behind the large work screen in the far corner."

He scurries away and you move over to the couch. Strap your torso down. Connect the link with the sculpting lobe. Wow, living material to work on. It's never been done before. You'll make history. Doubly famous. One's insides are hopping around like a randy kangaroo. The couch starts humming. Everything ready.

Activate the screen.

"Will I feel anything?" Head peering round the screen at you.

"No no. This won't hurt a bit." Probably.

Stand by. Personality now forming in patches of light. Mainly blues and reds. Peculiar web structures in there. Take a look at those sensational neurosis whorls. Flamingo pink every one. Must do something radical about them. Wrap them up—so! Then tuck them away inside out of sight. Now for this long strong coil of azure inhibitions. Tease it up from the mass with a fondling stroke or two. Like this. And this. Ah yes, you can see it enjoyed that. Try another couple. Oh yes, very effective. And another. Up it comes for more. Grab it. Well done. Tie a few knots in the wriggling vermian pest. Then tuck it inside out of

the way too. A couple of weeks at least before it squirms free. Then it'll play Hell with his guilt complexes. Ha ha. Serves the greasy pig right. Now let us see if we can mould the scarlet conscience auras correctly. They flow so easily in any direction you care to indicate. Mustn't set up too great a current or else the whole lot are liable to dissolve and take days to reform. Keep those saffron ghosts of memory steady while you start applying new torque to the personality core. Watch it flame up. Hey now, what a blaze. That ought to put a bit of zip into him. But it highlights those heavy blue-black depression centres. Oh oh! They are beginning to expand. Can't have a manic depressive running around, dear me no. An increase to the mass of the core should do the desired trick. What can he sacrifice then? What about that pulsing hatred-reaction system in there? With all those vibrating emeralds and mauves it must be pretty weighty. Try to pull it away and *oomph*. It is heavy. But you can budge it. *Heeave*. And again. *Heeave*. Yes that's done the job. Now it is completely dislocated from its old rigid position and spinning faster, faster, straight into the core.

Fa-lash!

And we have a temporarily stable personality. But burning up nervous energy at about four times the rate that it was before. Still you can always return it to normal later. Or you think you can.

Add a few aesthetic touches here and there to justify the redistribution of colour and tone. Then it is done.

Kill the screen and disconnect yourself from the couch.
"Yeow!"

A shock. Setting your sculpting lobe atingle. But of course There must be some small measure of electrical feedback when working with animate substances.

Stretch and yawn. O that took a lot out of you. Overworked and underappreciated, that is the common tragedy in the life of every artist.

"How are you, Major Jacks?"

No reply.

Does one have a dead member of the Condominium Security on one's hands? One sincerely hopes not. Things like that can ruin one's reputation.

You proceed across the workpod with haste to the back of the screen where he lies curled up on the floor.

His eyes wide open and his tongue protruding from bluish lips.

"OO NOO."

Already you can feel yourself being dragged kicking and screaming into the senility induction chamber, pleading and weeping. Ugh, the degradation of it all.

"Oooo." You might as well weep. Who wouldn't?

A moan on the floor.

He's alive.

Lovely lovely. Kneel beside him. Deal a couple of brisk slaps across the jaw. Stimulates the circulation. Grab him by the shoulders. Shake him about a little.

Shaky shake shake.

"Hey hey hey. What you d-d-doin'?"

Shaky shake shake.

"Leg-go me or I will mince you into a pattie of highly refined yak butter. Indubitably!" Springing upright. Knocking you aside. He starts streaking about doing press-ups and the occasional daring handstand against the wall.

"Ah yes, what a pick-me-up was there my diminutive friend. Indeedy. I am all ready. Doubleready. Let everything happen with Joyous Jacks right here in command. The action will start from this point forward!" Somersaulting.

Stand aside, aghast at his gymnastic abilities.

"Ha yes, the physical man must be in tune twenty four hours a day, twenty five even. Twice Area Champion in the Anatolian Sector Acrobatics Competition you know. And now to work. Where is the morsel of succulent femininity waiting to be enthralled by my fiery blasts of crazy animal magnetism?"

"Well my wife is in the sleep pods. . . ."

"Lead on MacSummerscale. This idea of yours is super-brilliant at least." Jumping onto the spiral. "Above is where I must go. And am gone. . . ."

And indeed he is gone.

Leaving bewildered you standing gaping up at where he had stood talking a moment before. Apparently he's decided not to wait for slow old Summerscale, one-time

acrobatics champion of nothing, to show him where the sleeping pod is.

There are crashes on high and peals of masculine laughter. Loud splashes. Wet goorglings. He has stumbled across if not into the lav. Suddenly he appears on the spiral again. Grinning and drippy and chattering compulsively.

"There is one ever so bumpy point which we must have as absolutely clear as the proverbial sparkling crystal, my superbrilliant genius friend. Now this android or woman or whatever that deeeeeelectable image is who calls herself you better-by-far half must, and this cannot be overstressed my little friend, must be afforded every encouragement by you to get out, clear off, scram. As I believe you so truly eloquently put it."

"I . . ."

"I knew you would agree." Leaping down and clapping you on the back. And I am glad. I am ecstatic. You are more than proving your incalculable worth to the glorious Condominium. Indubitably you are. The Sector Commander, old Hairy Teeth Pearson himself, shall hear of this from me personally. This is the least, the very least that I can do to repay you. My very good and brilliant friend." As he cartwheels across the workroom and back again.

Good Jesus, if he carries on like this he'll probably wreck the whole workpod. You're afraid to even think what the delicate toilet pod must be like. Even now you can hear water galloping down the spiral into the pods above. Owww.

What have you done?

Bring the exuberant fireball to heel.

Breath in deeply. Put a steely aspect in the eye. Show him who is master of the situation.

"Major Jacks!" In your Admiral-of-the-Fleet voice. Out-rank him vocally.

"No no. Cut the formalities from here . . ." Smacking a fist into a palm. ". . . on in. I am Bounding Bardolph of the original Jumping Jacks!" He squeals with laughter. "Get it? Haha ha ho ho." Very funny you don't particularly think.

"Get it? I wish I could get rid of it." Muttered quietly. He has popped it. No doubt at all.

And you are unable to call for help. What are you going to do? Imagine what it will be like sealed in here. You and Urs and this screaming moron till death. The food running lower day by day and you gazing at her with a hunger that's got nothing to do with the digestive tracks, and all the while him leaping over the bloody furniture.

Is this Purgatory?

Or Hell?

"What's going on down there?" Her voice.

"Join the party. The pods are really popping down here my petulant Miss Peters. Even Eric is truly effervescent."

"Who is that?"

Does one detect a trace of fascination in that tone?

"This is your swinging security officer from the cool Condominium authorities."

"Did you say 'swinging security', 'cool Condominium?'" Descending the spiral.

"That there is the message, the very true message. Do not waste your priceless company on the unappreciative folds of a sleep pod when everything is coming up flares and Roman candles down here." His voice is verging on the hysterical. Most unbecoming. The military have definitely lost that breeding they displayed of old. Discipline is no longer in the blood.

"What's going on, Eric?"

And then an indelicate exclamation.

She has just caught sight of the ruptured toilet pod. It must be a nasty mess.

"Who did this? It's terrible."

"A minor mishap. Nothing to have frets about, my lustworthy ladyship. A few nippy words into a bio-technician's ear and it will be better than ever. Not to worry." Quite happily.

Enter the heroine from above, wet with scented water and glistening with pink sud bubbles. He is at her side in a mini-second. All jolly smiles and gay glinting teeth. What a dentist this boy must have. He picks her up in his arms and whirls around the spiral executing myriads of little ballet movements ending with a dazzling pirouette. And puts down the astounded Urs. She steps back, eyes widened, with dawning admiration.

"Hey that was neat, exceptionally neat. Where did you pick up the spare dancing lessons, soldier boy?"

Soldier boy, now!

"All part of the modern military training, my sizzling vixen. A man like you must be able to carry himself through any situation including the entertainment of enthralling irresistible ladies such as yourself." Kneeling at her feet.

"Why thank you, kind sir. Pray rise and show me what else you were taught on that interesting subject."

"There were a number of topics, but principally this!"

He quite literally sweeps her off her feet. Then down onto one knee he goes and straight into the passionate plus clinch.

Cough and study the fine workmanship in the shaft of the couch's vacuum coil. Most embarrassing situation. One does come to expect some diminutive quantity of decorum in the armed classes even these days. This is quite deplorable. She may be a Fake but there is every likelihood of her being your own dear wife. You'd think he'd have some consideration for the position you are in. After all.

She comes out of the enforced embrace.

Speechless.

Ha ha, just give her a moment to recover, Mr. Major. Then she'll cut you into strips and tatters, you Condominium Cassanova you.

"Well!"

Here it comes.

"Now that is what I would pass with full marks as class one woman bait. Anytime."

What!

And down they go for the second round. Him nibbling at her sensitive left earlobe. Where did he learn about that? And running his finger down her spine. Gently. Yeeek. He knows all her weaknesses. Mustn't panic. Control yourself. Grit the teeth and start breathing deeply.

They separate.

She is laughing and ruffling his long oily hair.

"He's a regular rogue. Isn't he, Eric?" Not even looking at you.

"Hmmmmph!"

"O Eric. It's only a little fun. Don't be so crabby." Pouting.

"Fun! I suppose I'm not to be consulted about who jumps on my wife and paws her in my own home before my very eyes? Really, it's too much." Turn away from her.

She walks round to face you with the sickening soldier babbling into her ear. More pouts. Suddenly she leans up and deftly rubs noses with you before you can withdraw. Nose rubbing, her primary tactic for the twisting of Eric Summerscale around her finger. But this time you are in no mood to succumb to her wiles. No, this time you shall most certainly show her.

"Come on, Eric. Where are those little witticisms, the grin that braves all weathers? Coochy coochy coo." Tickling you under the chin. Damned if you'll give an inch.

"Mustn't sulky wulky now." Still the ludicrously loquacious Jacks beside her.

Then she rattles a finger off her vibrating lips.

"Brrobbidibrroobridi. . . ."

And you laugh.

Damn you!

"That's better. Now we're all friends. Big kiss now to make up." And she pecks you lightly on the chin.

Then Jacks starts barking.

Surprised Urs turns round to see him on all fours affecting a very passable imitation of a canine, which, all things considered, should be quite easy for the likes of him. Of course Urs finds it vastly amusing.

"Beg boy, beg." In giggles.

"Urf, urf, ooof." With a wagging backside and then panting complete with flapping tongue. And this thing was accusing you of self degradation!

Of course she thinks it all so terribly clever.

This is the breaking point.

"I." In a loud declarative voice. "I refuse to be a . . . what's the word . . . party. A party to this disgusting exhibition, which would be distasteful to the sensibilities of any person of dignity and breeding."

Aha. That bit about breeding struck home.

Throw back your hair and spin on your heel.

"Breeding!" As she finds her breath. "Tell me what

breeding you hold claim to outside the neurotic whim of some genetic programmer with a twisted sense of humour!"

Sniff and start up the spiral.

"Answer me!" With Jacks cavorting about her like a hot flea.

"Breeding, madam, always shows as does the obvious lack of it. You are a case in point for the latter."

"Pompous mediocre balloon!" She is at your side with wild eyes ready to spring from that pretty face. She is madly attractive when upset.

Wham. She lashes out with a hand, fingers arched. Leaving ugly red nailwork across your left cheek.

"Bestial woman, resorting to the level of crude physical violence." And then you realise how much it will cost to replenish the hospital pod's supply of face tissue once it has done a first class repair job on this freshly scarred flesh.

"Bloodybitch!"

Giving her a hearty blow to the perfect aquiline nose, bending it a little maybe.

She starts bawling all shades of murder.

"Desist." Jack hopping in between you. "Harm one cell of this beauteous creature's body and I shall dispatch you to the land of Lethe, sire, immediately, forthwith, if not sooner." With a sharp finger-jab to your tender solar plexus to underline the statement.

Uffing and ooffing you cross the room you take up a stance befitting the persecuted artist, right hand over left breast, other hand on hip, head up and feet well apart.

"You have gone too far, Major. The situation has deteriorated to the point where I feel that I can no longer participate. If I may be excused I shall retire to the pods above. Goodbye."

"Participate in what situation?" Her bawling cut short. Inquisitive eyebrow arising. She jumps in front of you.

"I refuse to address you, madam. Kindly step aside and permit me to ascend." Flicking the wrist with aristocratic aplomb.

"What situation, Eric?" Words tough and clipped short. "Something is beginning to stink and I don't mean your cheap talc either." The merry Major putting up no mean display of backsprings for her benefit. All ignored.

"My dear Ursula, I have not the foggiest what you're nattering on about. May I please pass?" Girl's suspicious.

"You're doing some kind of dirty on me again. Aren't you?" Baring her teeth. Bad sign that. "You're wearing that guilty look, I know it too well."

"Guilty? Me?" Backing away carefully so as not to trip over anything on the floor and place yourself in a position of horizontal disadvantage. Which could prove disastrous. "The only guilt I feel is for having struck you so severely, my dear, and made your nose bleed."

"Rubbish. Now Eric if you aren't going to tell me, I'm going to attack you." Quietly spoken, so she means it.

Then the flying miracle whizzes over your right shoulder unleashing a couple of smacks to the spine.

Aaaaa. Thump flat on your face.

Instantly your wife is down on your back whipping a strong half nelson into position.

Gasp.

"Charming, you realise that you could be charged with breach of the peace for this. *Aaaaa.*"

"What is the big secret, Eric?"

"Get off my back, woman!" In more ways than one.

"Is it something to do with our ebullient friend here perhaps? He is acting somewhat out of character now that I come to think of it."

"Not at all, he's perfectly in chara-aaaaa. . . ."

"Of course I am, your ladyship." From the figure gyrating on the couch.

"Talk!"

"*Eeeek!*" As pain rushes up through the arm and shoulder and belts into the brain. One may as well decide to co-operate.

"Ask him. He'll tell you. It's all his fault."

Great sighing of your relief as she releases you and steps over to where the Major is cartwheeling once more. You must start your jerking chassis from the floor, the task being punctuated by numerous grunts.

"Really, Summerscale, I thought that you were made of stronger mettle." Vaulting over the vacuum coil.

"Start singing, new-found-friend." In her Lucretia Borgia voice. "What is this 'situation'?"

She could very probably tear him apart too so you

gingerly begin sneaking away. Effect a nifty exit. She'll never wrench top secret information from a member of the Condominium Security. They're trained to withstand all tortures and truth drugs. Even vibra-electric shocks and the paring of exposed nerve centres. You've heard tales. Chuckling quietly you move away to where the spiral waits to carry you aloft. And then just as you are leaving the workpod behind you. . . .

He starts to tell her everything.

In the cosy tones of a little *tête-à-tête*.

You idiot, you gave him the personality form of Urs' favourite kind of man. But her favourite kind of man cannot hide the truth from her!

Awkward. There she is down there clenching and unclenching her fists. Becoming increasingly enraged. Better do something diplomatic, something logically and psychologically correct to save this situation, or at least yourself.

Hide.

If only there was a way out of this pod prison. Escape. Beautiful escape. But you can merely scuttle up the spiral seeking sanctuary before the impending torrent of female fury breaks into shrill pursuit. Skip past the shocking ruin of the toilet pod. Indispensable it was. What if you are stuck in here for weeks, months perhaps, with no toilet pod to take care of the little physical necessities that arise from day to day? Ghastly thought. Only one thing to do. Into the pleasure pod and seal it up for an indefinite period. She'll never reach you in there. And if one has to die then surely the only civilised way to go is wrapped up in the most expensive of pleasure pods.

"ERIIC!"

The hunt is on.

Leap gracefully over the spreading spicy pools of toilet chemicals bubbling colourfully all around. Past the muskiness of the sleep pod. Oh it's comfy enough in there, but not unassailable unfortunately. Past the tangs and meaty smells from the chubby little kitchen pod. There is the rumble-sloshing of cutlery and crockery being washed automatically. Archaic but cute.

"ERIIC!"

Getting closer.

And here is the luxury of the pleasure pod at last. Pull it

open. A sucking sound as the folds unravel. Soft and pink with jolly little tendrils waving invitingly. Set the time lock at infinity. Grin and dive in. Goodbye cruel world, etc. . . . And just as the last folds are knitting themselves over your face you see Urs standing there trying vainly to pull them open. Grin even wider.

"*ERIIC!*"

"Bye bye."

And she is gone.

Then those intimate feelers are groping for your spine. Big luscious surge of sonic massage. A dream pattern forming low rhythmic pulses of music like laughter. Thrilling tickles through every nerve as pleasure centres are stimulated. O lovely lovely. The crisp smells of the sea and a sky intensely blue with high feather clouds. The flavour of hot grass on the breeze which plays cool between your fingers. Go down from your villa to where the hard white breakers beat a slow tattoo on the long pale beach. These hewn stone steps are warmly rough to the feet. Gulls bay-ing sweetly above. Over there against the horizon the distant cumuli are bunching for an assault somewhere to the west. Just as you reach the sea the water deepens in colour to a rich purple. You halt and look on, puzzled. Now it is thickly red with bubbles of scarlet foam for surf. Blood! Stagger back. A slender reedy neck lifts high from the gory waves and the head at the top of it belongs to Urs. An Urs of bedraggled hair, wide lunatic eyes, and long canine teeth. Moving greedily in your direction. Yelp and retreat. But the villa is in flames, and the steps are turning into great green slugs. Also crawling towards you. Flee along the sands and your feet are caught in gossamer-fine threads which tangle your feet. You fall. Up pop giant spiders bobbing jerkily, tiny black eyes sparkling in the palsied yellow sunlight. You are going to throw up. The cliff face at your side splits open and a tiny hand appears reaching for you. The arm stretches out growing longer and thinner. Incredible. Fascinating. The fingers suddenly grasp you painfully by the hair and start pulling you violently towards the dark clammy gap in the rock.

Jerk.

And you are sprawling at Urs' feet.

There is the charred ruin of the pleasure pod, smoke

belching from the shrivelled folds and blackened feelers. Poor thing. It was only trying to make you happy, and then along comes Urs with the maser-key, the metal tip glowing blue with heat.

The acrid stink of ozone and burned pod flesh attacks your nostrils making you sick again.

She kicks you.

"On your feet."

"I'm ill. Dying perhaps."

Another kick. Harder.

"On your feet, you human snakepit."

"Pity. Have you no pity? Where is the sweet Urs of yesteryear—owwwch!" As she bangs her heel down on two rudely surprised toes. This encourages you to follow hobbling as she leads the way down to the workpod.

"Eric, you are a fool. If you wanted to get out of here the maser-key will open anything in seconds."

"But the ambulances outside?"

She laughs.

"Wait till you hear what Bardolph has to tell you about all that."

Have you boobed again?

"And as for all that rubbish about me being an android, well . . ."

"Well?" As you reach the spiral and begin to spin slowly down.

"Well, in case the information does not seem to have passed your way let me tell you that it would take from twenty to fifty years to produce a perfect android and the expense involved would be astronomical. Even the Conclavix would be hard put to scrape that much up amongst themselves."

"Oo no!"

"Yes."

You have boobed again!

"Then why did Major Jacks think you were a Fake?"

"He didn't."

"O." That explains everything?

Proceed classically in stupefied silence.

Down now to the noise of the inexhaustible, now suspect, security officer.

"All right. Explanations, Jacks." Spoken in your cracking

voice, but with subtle undertones of menace calculated to chill him to a standstill.

No effect. He smiles amicably and continues running on the spot. This drives one to a point of near insanity.

You bawl.

"Bumph! It was all bumph! About androids! I'll see you cashiered for this. C-Cashiered. You see if I don't." Brandishing the fist with many an aggressive flourish.

He strides over.

"O no." Shaking his still smiling head. "Then you might tempt me to use the maser-key to unlock your poor skeleton from that prison of miserable flesh which surrounds it." Much laughter but not from you.

"Y-You wouldn't dare. I'm not entirely without admirers. Questions would be asked." Maybe.

"I just say you were a Conclavist and I'd get away with murder. Literally. A ha ha ha." Distasteful noise.

Urs folds her arms.

"All right, soldier, tell my husband what you've just told me."

"OK I will. My dear beguiled sculptor, I'm perfectly aware that your wife is no Fake. Anyone with a crumb of common sense would have seen that. Which explains why you didn't. A-hahaha.

"But let us fly to the root of the situation. Forty years ago I had my first love affair. Oooo, disastrous it was. I was in a mental rehabilitation shop for months afterwards." Eyes wide open and fingers clawing down his cheeks. "Then I saw that psycho-sculpting of yours, *Dryad*. Then I made up my mind that she was the woman for me. Heee he he. My every movement from that day onwards was for the fulfilment of that wish.

"I joined the Condominium Security and volunteered for immediate active service duty on graduating from the military academy. Straight into battle, boom boom. Ha ha. Then thirty-seven years of front line duty. Twelve medals for outstanding courage and one hundred and five mentions in dispatches. Three straight field commissions. One commission at the hands of Pearson himself when I came here at my own request on retirement from active duty. A nice quiet job this. In charge of sector five. Your sector.

"I knew that I had no chance of catching your wife with

my personality and hers being so opposed. But I also knew that it was theoretically possible to alter a personality by psycho-sculpture; and since you are the greatest living artist in this field and also the man who knows more about Urs than anyone else, you were the obvious choice. A-ha ha ha. You mug you.

"Now I'm irresistible. Aren't I? He he he." Pirouetting.

And nestling, sure enough, grudgingly on her lips a small appreciative smile.

"A very flattering tale don't you think, Eric? And he is almost irresistible. Almost."

Heeh heh, who's laughing now?

"But being a woman and a twisted creature I resent the thought that I cannot resist someone. So you now have another subject for psychological overhaul on your hands."

"Wha . . . huh?" Bewildered.

"You are going to change my likes and dislikes so that I shall not give a damn about him. All clear?"

"But then you won't even like me anymore."

"You've lived without me before. Come on!"

"NO."

"Eric, if you persist in refusing I shall leave here with Major Jacks . . ."

"Go ahead. See if I care."

" . . . but before I do I'll ask him to kill you very slowly with the maser-key."

"O well actually." The athletic wonder bounces over the said instrument in hand. "Actually I'm going to do that right now."

Smack as her foot snaps up clipping him neatly on the jaw. Well done. My my, she is in good condition.

"All right, Eric, let's see if you can do as good a job on me as you did on him. Better if possible."

She goes behind the screen and you strap yourself onto the couch, connecting the lead to the sculpting lobe. The screen begins to flow with fiery vermilions, mosaic bricks of tangerine, familiar drifts of lilac crystals and flakes of glittering topaz, slivers of copper colour. An undulating glow with a revolving core of fire. All Ursula.

Now you can deal in a few basic ironics. Sift out the blues, spilling them through the yellow extravagances erected like webs of architectural whimsy around and

through her conscience structure. *Wheeee*, goodbye conscience. Scatter the mosaic and build the bricks into a rugged little wall about yonder core. Melt down the topaz flakes in the smelting furnace you have thus created and blend them with the coppers. Stretch and expand the new material throughout the whole personality. Let cool. And watch those wonderful vermilion die into a battleship grey.

Heh heh.

Ironie. Heh heh.

The woman now behind the screen shines with the dull brilliance of brass, military brass. The type of woman who would have been crazy about Jacks in his original state. The warrior bold.

Who has the last giggle?

You-hoo-hoo hoho ha ha.

Cut off the power to the screen and disconnect the lead, prepared this time for the surreptitious stab of feedback energy.

Then tread hastily over to where she lies in a foetal position, asleep. Well she's still alive, and when she awakens the wild soldier lad will merely be an object for her to despise, as you will be yourself.

Cold low laughter from behind.

"Yes, a very pretty display that was, Summerscale." Whirl about to see a slightly groggy Jacks standing a few feet away. He is also regarding her with some interest. Note that hazy gleam in his eye, and the frown, both out of character with the personality you have given him. More like . . . his old self. He looks up at you, chilly and unsmiling. Not even running on the spot. Just shivering.

One's tum feels a trifle cold.

It's impossible.

The personality you imposed upon him has collapsed. And not in the weeks it should have taken but in half an hour. And if Urs wakes up and finds him like this she'll be devoted to him. What can you do? Knock him off? Use the maser-key on him? Must act quickly. Of course. Sneak back onto the sculpt couch and return Urs to her old self, ha ha.

Just as you are about to reconnect the link Jacks picks up the feed line from the energy cell and yanks it free, lifts

it up above his head and hurls it through that king's ransom in delicate craftsmanship and electronic engineering which is the work screen.

Your jaw swings down in a gawk of unbelieving.

"Can't have you spoiling everything now, Summerscale. After all I've spent decades on this. That was the trouble with your wife; she was too good at throwing over men she knew adored her and coming back to you, the man she adored. Now I couldn't have that, could I? So I had to have her changed so that the man she adored was not you but me. It was no use her being merely attracted to me. She had to love me for what I am. And now you have arranged all that. I knew you would, you see. I know everything about you, even your delight in irony. Which I played on."

Which he finds amusing.

But you are too busy to laugh. Your hand is seeking under the couch for that seventeenth century Scottish claymore. You have it. Raise it high and rush forward with the thirsty blade intent on cleaving the villain in twain. Give the ancient chilling clan battlecry.

"EeeeeHagggaaaarrrAach . . ."

The weapon sweeps down fiercely neatly splitting tiny molecules of oxygen and nitrogen all the way but contacting no human flesh whatsoever.

"Surely you realise that I am not the easy target which I appeared to be to your wife's foot?"

He chops the edge of his hand across your wrist and the great sword clatters to the floor. Get the maser-key and unlock his skull! Where is the thing?

O dear.

He is holding it.

"Aren't you interested in how I recovered so quickly from the personality switch?"

Anyone can see that he is just dying to show off again.

"No." Sulkily.

"Then I'll tell you. Pre-doses of drugs and hypnotic suggestion."

Yeeeech. How crude can you get?

"It may sound a little barbaric . . ." Huh. A little! ". . . but as you see it was effective. I came here completely prepared." Lightly pressing the maser-key against

the struct couch. Watch as it collapses into a shambles of wax and ductless plastoids.

You are going to weep.

"Even the Overbrain approved of my plan, you know."

"What!"

"Naturally." Indignantly. "I would never have dreamed of going through with this unless every step had been checked out by the brain. And it gave me full permission plus lots of classified information about you and Urs."

"But . . . why?"

"My service record, naturally. In return, quite literally, for services rendered."

"And for this I am paying taxes!" You are screaming.

He crushes a complete set of fringe rectifiers to dust under the electro-pressure applicator, which cracks up itself in the process.

"So now I have what I want." Laughing.

He shrieks with glee, hammering the giant glass resistor panels to crystal powder. He pushes the energy cell to the floor with his foot and throws the remains of the vacuum coil into it.

Boom and flames.

Smoke lying thickly throughout your shattered little world.

What a look in that mad eye.

Are you next on the crunch list?

Immediate retreat is once again in order, but how do you snatch the maser-key from out of those great sabre-toothed hands? Quickly apply pressure to the think thing for a dazzling snappy solution.

He spies your holographic sketch plate skulking against the darkness of the far wall. Well if he thinks that he's going to destroy that he's in for a big heartbreak. Picking it up he smiles and touches the key to the controls. *Boing*. It bounces out of his hand and clatters to the floor a few feet away, intact. He gawks. Again he tries. *Again boing*. Ha ha ha and a ho. The sketch plate was made to your own specifications from a superior grade poly-ceramic, the best no less. One can surmise that he is considerably distraught from the strained voice he is using to counsel the plate on its shoddy ancestry while trying vainly to pound it to crumblets with the shaft of a shambled vacuum coil.

Breathless he stops, contemplates for a moment, and then giving you a chilly grinful of ice-white teeth starts adjusting the key to laser frequency. So now he intends melting it down or burning it up, eh? This should be good for a wee laugh, a pocket-sized giggle. He stands back feet apart, aims, and fires carefully. The intense thread of fire hits the plate. Dead centre . . .

. . . and *Flash*.

He leaps back yelping.

As the glittering garnet swirl of holograph blazes suddenly before him.

A flame figure bigger than himself and jerking frantically about like a hysteric with hiccups. But only for seconds. Then it is sober steady. He recognises the same old sculpted form of Urs and shakes his dazed head because surely this can't be her? But it is. Only here is no *Witchling*. Here is *Mantis Religiosa* where the colours are rich wet purples of dark bloodlust and the wild raw reds of passion in passionate hatreds. Shrinking away he stares into the beauty of the bone white face with its eyes asparkling peppermint green. He drops the key. Do nothing rash. Just pick it up anon. Has he seen you moving closer? No, the sketch holds him entranced with that comely curving body taut as a preying claw. Look at those hands with the hard locked fingers arched over a breast of carnivorous pink. Below this, and clear to view, is a lie generator shaped like a giant walnut kernel and beating out cruel illusions of tenderness. He sees the soul of Woman ready to destroy a society which made her defunct by destroying Man who conceived it. He whimpers. Be bold. Pick up the maser-key . . . now!

Got it.

Slowly, very slowly, slink towards the spiral. Stop. A movement behind you. But it is only Jacks reeling and turning slush pale on seeing the steel jaws steadily masticating, and an acid saliva secreting steamily, anticipating a mawful of loved one. So you start ascending. The sketch begins gradually fading and the snow pure bridal robes change to her mourning wear; a deep Atlantic blue night cape with dragon designs in scarlet stitching. She smiles. Those teeth are ragged concrete grey.

Then the cowering Major is left eyeing emptiness and sobbing fitfully. He tries not to believe what he has just seen

but fighting reality is obviously too much for such slight minds as his. So when the wakening Urs looks lovingly up at him and speaks . . .

“Ahh. Bardolph darling . . .”

He bellows and throws himself at her.

Fortunately you are now out of the workpod. Step slickly over to the fused personality lock. Listen. What nasty noises from below. Roaring and shrieking. Grindings and tearings. Is he perhaps dismantling her, limb from limb and all that? But how, you have the maser-key up here. Goodness, he must be using his bare hands.

Tud . . . ud . . . ud. As the wall peels aside you sprint out into the cold moss and bitter rain away from the towering green heap of fat veined egg shapes that is the podplex. Boom goes the brine to your left. Marvellous the effect of that holograph on Jacks and it was merely a preliminary job. What will the finished sculpture do to men throughout the galaxy? And, which is even more interesting, what will the men then do to the women?

Hmmmmmm?

You'll go down in the annals of the history of mankind as well as the history of art.

Immortality!

Yip yipeeee.

Head for the beach and contact the Mental Aberration Division from the speakdesk on the shoreline. Have soldier-boy put tidily away. Fast.

Keep running.

You can still hear her cries fleeing down the hill.

Strange

How you've known her for decades

Yet you never did think

Of her as having

A two toned

Scream

Before.

— CHRIS BOYCE

SF IMPULSE 1 featured Richard Wilson's *DESERTER*, an unusual and compelling story set against the background of the war between men and women. *GREEN EYES* is another macabre little incident that didn't make the despatches.

GREEN EYES

by Richard Wilson

Gordon was on tranquillizers. Essop was under analysis, Auswitz was immobile after a heart attack and I was on gin. That left the business somewhat less than fifty per cent effective because Gordon wasn't giving much of a damn and I was looking for more ice. I found some in Essop's private bar-fridge.

"Want a drink?" I asked Gordon, who was looking out the window and smiling.

"Don't need one, old boy," he said. "Have a pill instead of that stuff. Better for you."

"No, thanks. I'll stick to the old tried and true. Do you have any ideas?"

"Bursting with them, Vern," Gordon said. "Simply bursting with them."

I made myself a gin and nothing. "Such as?"

"Such as taking the little ladies and going to my place at Sea Island. Let the sun and sand work on us for a week or two."

Gordon's latest little lady was a green-eyed blonde from the bootleg sec-pool. He hadn't been to bed with her yet, but probably only because he'd been too tranquil up to now.

I don't know who he had in mind for me to take to Sea Island. Not Marge, of course.

Marge was my wife. She'd joined up at the first sign of trouble—even before hostilities began—and she hadn't been the militant type at all. She was all woman, Marge

was, and what made her forsake me and all other men was something I could never understand, much less forgive.

I remembered the last time I'd seen her. She was wearing the blue silk dress I liked so well and she gave me a kiss to end all kisses. It ordinarily would have been just the beginning, but this kiss was the end.

"The next time I see you I'll do my best to kill you," Marge had said.

No one knew then, of course, that there wouldn't be any killing; at least not official killing. They'd worked out the stun gun by then, just in time, apparently, to prevent the race from committing suicide, and battle victims merely went into an indefinite sleep; suspended animation for the duration, as it were.

"So take care," Marge had said. "I don't want to kill you, my hated love, but I'll be trying."

Then she was gone and the radio was counting off the minutes. "Truce warning," it said. "Forty minutes of Truce remain. Hostilities commence at midnight . . . Thirty-nine minutes of Truce—"

And then the war was on. The Greatest War, some called it, or the Impossible War. The War—removed at last from the jokes and cartoons into actuality—Between Men and Women.

So obviously Gordon didn't mean that I should take Marge to Sea Island. My private life was no secret to him any more than his was to me.

"Great," I said. "Then we'll all be nice and tan when they come to take us away—if they give us that much time."

Gordon transferred his smile to me. "You're a worrywart, Vern. We don't have to go anywhere, if we don't want to. They've got nothing on us."

"Us," of course, was Gordon, Essop, Auswitz & Vernon, Importers. We imported, all right. We smuggled the girls—4-F's' deserters, whatever we could get—into this male-held city for the males whose minds were not entirely on the war. We even had our dichotomy trade—men who fought women all day but who at night put aside any prejudice against fraternizing with the enemy.

I don't know where the sec-pool kept their girls—a higher type, they claimed—but we kept ours in a suite that duplexed with our office.

"Nothing except a colliaboration rap," I said. "This is no simple little vice ring. Not any more, Gordon. It might even be treason, if they want to set an example. I favour running—fast and far."

"No one can touch us, Vern. We've got protection—up to here." He put his hand flat under his chin. It was the first motion he'd made in ten minutes.

"We *did* have protection," I said. "But you seem to forget—our Commissioner is in Sing Sing, our General's been transferred to the Rockies and our Senator has decided he'd better play holy for a while. He's even given up his mistress."

"I forget nothing." Gordon was unperturbed. "Three down. But we still have our ace in the hole. Our friend at court—our White House connection. He hasn't hit the panic button. And until he does, Mr. Doom and Gloom, my advice to you is: rest tranquil."

"You've had one pill too many, Gord," I said. "Even assuming we're still safe from the law, there are the Viggies to think about. They don't play by the rules, those boys. And I have a feeling they're on to us."

Gordon almost frowned. "Those fanatics," he said. "Those professional woman-haters. They haven't really tumbled, have they?"

"I don't know. It's just a hunch. I don't trust the assistant starter, for one. And that boy from the sandwich shop—the one with the acne—he could be another. You've been careful, haven't you?"

Gordon did frown this time, reprovingly.

"What a question," he said. "I'm hurt you should ask. You know I'm Mr. Go-Lightly himself. Speaking of which, it wouldn't irritate me too much to have a once-over-lightly with my new friend Green Eyes." He looked speculatively at the intercom on his desk, as if wondering if it were worth the effort to rouse himself enough to press the button.

He apparently decided it wasn't, and I took a big swallow in relief. Things were complicated enough without Green Eyes, who was so new as to be an unknown quantity.

These collaborators had a way sometimes of being more trouble than if they'd joined their sisters and fought us openly. It could be subconscious with them. I'm sure they

hated us men just as much. Even more, probably, because they must have hated themselves. The women who were our avowed enemies could picture us through rose-coloured glasses of memory and desire but the collaborators saw us as we really were. And sometimes I even admitted to myself that we weren't very pretty.

"They tell me the President has a Little Friend," Gordon said. He was looking out the window again.

"Are you saying it's a phony war?" I put another ice cube in my glass and a little more gin.

Gordon shrugged. "If it's condoned in high places . . ." He let it trail off.

"It's probably just scuttlebutt," I said. "The President's old enough to be virtuous."

"Nobody's virtuous at any age. The body may be old, but vanity remains. It's a damnable state of affairs, Vern, any way you look at it. Goes completely against human nature."

"That's why we're in business, isn't it? Supply and demand. We go back to first principles, don't we, Gordon? That's why there's so much money in it."

"You have a crass mind, Vern. You're lacking completely in aesthetics. You're a human adding machine. No soul at all. Not that we don't need your type."

"Thanks," I said bitterly. Sometimes Gordon put himself just too far above it all.

He gathered up enough energy to reach the desk to the intercom.

"Come in, Phoebe"—that was Green Eyes' name—"and take a little dictation."

A non-tranquil glint had come into his eyes. "Vern—would you mind?"

"Mind what?" I said, knowing damn well.

"A little private correspondence," he said. "Nothing to do with the firm."

"You know I don't approve of mixing pleasure with business," I told him, not getting up.

Gordon's voice sharpened. The tranquillizer seemed to have worn off completely. "I don't ordinarily throw my weight around," he said, "but I do happen to be senior partner. Now get out."

"All right," I said. I stood up and started toward my own office at the back of the suite, taking my glass with me. "But be careful, Gordon, will you? See that the hall door is locked?"

He waved me away as Phoebe came in. She was tall and exceedingly curved. Her dress was short, coming to just above the knee, but high-necked. She wore her blonde hair long and I thought she used too much make-up.

"You wanted me to take some dictation, Mr. Gordon?" Her voice was a low contralto. Phoebe put her notebook down on top of Gordon's desk, smiling expectantly at him. I watched, my hand on the doorknob. She was altogether too transparent for my taste but Gordon seemed quite taken with her.

"Yes, Phoebe, my dear," he said, giving her the fatherly tone. He looked at me in irritation and I turned the knob.

But Phoebe said to me, "Oh, Mr. Vernon, before you go—will you countersign those cheques?"

"Can't it wait?" Gordon asked.

"It'll just take a minute," Phoebe said. "They're right on my desk."

She went out. When she came back the Viggies were with her.

There was no chance to do anything. There were five of them and each had a gun—the old-fashioned lethal kind.

Gordon had had a silly expectant smile on his face as he waited for his Green Eyes to come back and it faded slowly. I considered, but only briefly, trying a dash through the door behind me. Two of the guns were aimed at me.

"I thought there were four of them," one of the Viggies said. He needed a shave and wore a pair of slacks and a sweat shirt. They all wore the lightning-slashed V armband. They were a rough-looking crew.

We might have had a chance with the police—even with the military police—considering our White House connection, but the Viggies answered to nobody.

"The other two are out sick," Phoebe said. "You can get them at home."

Gordon's stupid grin had vanished now. He seemed ten years older as he looked from gun to gun and then to Phoebe as she leaned casually in the doorway, hard-faced in her betrayal, almost ugly.

Things seemed to be moving very slowly. It was almost a tableau. I had a feeling of slow-motion doom.

"Phoebe," Gordon said, gesturing vaguely, "I don't understand. I just don't get it."

I didn't get it either. It would have made some kind of sense if Phoebe had let in a female raiding party—a suicide squad who had somehow infiltrated the male-held city. But for Phoebe to have put herself at the mercy of the outlaw Viggies, her sworn male enemies, merely to dispose of Gordon and me—it didn't make sense.

It made even less sense for the fanatically anti-female Viggies to use a woman to trap us. This chink in their virtue was affording me some small cynical comfort when one of the Viggies laughed.

"Explain it to them, Phoebe," he said. "It'll worry them to the end of their days if they don't find out. Not that they have many days left."

Phoebe pushed herself away from the door and walked insolently over to Gordon, swinging her hips. "Better yet," she said, "I'll show them." One of the Viggies stepped close to Gordon and pushed a gun into his ribs.

Phoebe stopped a pace away from Gordon. "How about a little kiss good-bye, big boy?" she said. "Seeing as how we didn't get to have that private dictation session."

Gordon drew back in distaste. "Get away from me, you Jezebel—you traitor . . ." As he groped for the proper word I saw his look turn to one of disgust. "What *are* you, anyway?"

Phoebe answered by reaching up high behind her back. Her dress unhooked and fell away and she stood in girdle and bra.

I saw her in profile, still smiling. It was more than an evil smile, somehow. It was—unnatural. I wondered what subtle torture she thought she was inflicting on poor old Gordon, standing a touch away from her but drawing back now, almost cringing.

The Viggies, I noticed, were watching Gordon and me, not Phoebe. They were smiling too now, but less evilly than she.

She reached behind her again. In a swift motion she unhooked her bra and, holding one end of it, snapped it across Gordon's face.

Two hemispheres of foam rubber fell to the floor.

I was too young to have seen the great Julian Eltinge but as I recalled T. C. Jones and the other female impersonators of my own generation I noticed that "Phoebe" had hair on his flat male chest.

— RICHARD WILSON

EDITORIAL—(continued from page 5)

18 foot tall man. And on page 111 you have two "meanwhiles" practically touching. This indicates that a little more attention to proof-reading before submission was called for.

And, for all our sakes, make an angry noise when next you write your publisher about there being two spaceships on the cover when only one ever appears in the book. If we all keep after publishers we may someday make them more cover-conscious.

I hope you get a lot of detailed comment on your book and I sincerely hope that it cheers you on when you sit down to tackle the next one. I'm looking forward to reading it.

— HARRY HARRISON

CORRECTION

Science Fiction Book Club regret that in their full-page advertisement in the November issue, EIGHTH SEAL was inadvertently printed as originally published by Gollancz. The correct publisher is, of course, DOBSON.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Great Tubb Argument rages! And this month, interestingly, we have two letters from reader-authors both of whose work has appeared in sf IMPULSE and our sister magazine NEW WORLDS. Mr. Langdon Jones, of Ealing, W.5, writes:

Dear Sir,

I was interested to read E. C. Tubb's comments on sf stories dealing with sexual subjects ("sex" being used, presumably, in its narrowest definition). Mr. Tubb, in his article, gives the impression that he shares the same attitudes as many enthusiastic sf readers, in that he appears to be unable to distinguish between writing about sex and writing commercial pornography. It is this attitude that caused the controversy that has, much to my astonishment, made "I Remember, Anita . . ." the most widely-known story I have written. It is obvious that for an aspiring writer to achieve eminence in the field in a matter of months, he has only to write erotic sf.

A rather depressing thought.

But all this is part of a general attitude today which seems to regard sf as something apart from the rest of the world, and seeks to bind it in stifling limitations. The inadequacies of all attempts to define sf, even in the days when it was much more limited than it is today, show that it is something which cannot and will not be neatly categorised and pigeonholed. The only really satisfactory definition of sf that I know is "science fiction", a term which means all things to all men.

Nowadays the medium is losing some of the shackles which have hobbled it in the past, and immediately hands are thrown up in horror. Perhaps a lot of the new science fiction is not very much like that of the past ; this in itself is nothing new. What would Gernsback think of Sturgeon? (Come to think of it, what would Mr. Tubb think of Sturgeon?) The field is losing its restrictions and is developing nicely, despite the horrified cries of those who resent the incursion of reality into their cosy escapist fantasies, and it will continue to develop as it must.

Certainly, stories are written whose only virtue is that they are advanced in treatment, and apart from this are complete failures ; certainly stories are written which treat sexual relationships in a weak and juvenile manner ; certainly Ballard's influence can be seen in writers who should model themselves rather on Enid Blyton ; but all this is to be expected. What is important is that science fiction is also producing stories that are new and exciting. The failures do not matter, they are soon forgotten.

I feel that sf is now less open to definition than ever before, and as definition always tends to be limiting, we should be glad enough to read the stuff and enjoy it.

— LANGDON JONES

And now a sharp blast from north of the border. Mr. Chris Boyce of Baillieston, Glasgow, writes:

Dear Sir,

Among those delightful Tubby truisms in August's *IMPULSE* was an observation that the older sf reader at least derived some entertainment from his diet of space opera. Is this a point which many of our "modern" writers are missing out on? Surely a writer of fiction is primarily an entertainer and secondly, if at all, a philosopher. And to hell with these literary pretensions which so many stories bristle with today ; if a story is moving or gripping or funny then who worries over its lacking leitmotiv?

But is E. C. Tubb correct to rake all the sex out of sf? I must oppose his opinion for the simple reason that I have recently sold you a story in which "the man and girl jump into bed and roll around for a while". Admittedly

it's overemphasised in literature and overrated as an entertainment in general but sex has at least as valid a place in sf as it has in the individual writer's environment, which is not to infer that I am oversexed. As soon as you introduce mixed company into a story you upset characters' hormone balance no matter how cardboard those characters or hormones may be. Take a story in which ravishing Zelistha the Battlemistress and Arch-Empress of the Galactic Second Spiralarm falls ferociously for Lieutenant Mark Clodface of the opposing Federation of Free Worlds. (Notice how the good guys always belong to communist sounding organisations?) This always makes me snigger over what the miraculous Mark must have which Zelistha's thirteen billion soldiers don't. *A story in itself no doubt!*

Which brings me to these people who are rooting for suppression of the space story. Just because there has been a dearth of good fiction in this field lately does not mean that the medium is played out. The usual moan is that the space ship is being pushed further from us in fictional space and time by the advances of science. This is rubbish! In a recent *Spaceflight* is an article on the possible existence of a Martian cryosphere, underground. *Science Journal* ran a piece on the wireless transmission of energy a couple of months back. Combine the two and you have scores of gigantic solar generators in close orbit around the sun and beaming energy across one hundred and forty odd million miles to melt the ancient submerged ice oceans of Mars. I munificently give this idea to anyone who has the time to write a story around it although I can't imagine it being published this side of the Atlantic.

Britain seems to have left the s in sf in the capable but hardly adequate hands of Arthur Clarke who is probably more popular in the 'States than here. The fact of British sf's present popularity in the U.S. looks to me like another hangover from the Anglomania that swept America during the Kennedy administration and is now fortunately dying. The British school is all Aldiss and Ballard these days whereas over there there is an apparent preference for writers of the Bradbury, Bester, Vonnegut stamp. I think that they hold a twenty-year lead over us in some aspects of imaginative fiction. Not that they are all little gods. Far

from it; I am still looking for a friend who agrees that somebody ought to bury Burroughs, quietly but quickly.

So let's not kid ourselves about having the two best science fiction writers in the world. Would our golden talents have received such laudations had they come from Illinois instead of England? I fear not. Much of what we pretend is British sf is rapidly deteriorating into a riot of babbling ballads becoming tragically blinded by the brilliance of their own imagery!

—CHRIS BOYCE

Well, that's it for this month. And we must admit we're rather pleased with the progress of our first real controversy!

BOOK FARE

BRIAN ALDISS

reviews

THE GENOCIDES

by Thomas M. Disch

Anyone wishing to write a paper on science fiction might well begin by examining the moods of optimism and pessimism that have prevailed in it from time to time.

In the world of fashionable literature, pessimism has had an extended reign, perhaps as reaction against the long faceless cheeriness of the middle echelons of Victorian fiction. But sf is in general always insulated against influence from wider fields, so that on its hope/despair graph can be read other messages than literary fashion.

The thirties were, in the main, a time of facile optimism for sf. Even the generous way in which whole planets were destroyed spoke of the prodigality of nature in providing more. The millennium was around the streamlined corner. Atomic power, a mystic force controlled directly by the mind, would bring wealth and happiness to all mankind—particularly those living in the western hemisphere. A scientocracy would soon be established, the politicians ousted by old sages in lab coats; when the science fiction giants were young, they dreamed of being ruled by grey-beards, unlike the teenagers who have succeeded them.

In the forties, the second world war sobered things up a great deal. H. G. Wells—he who brought the tablets down from the holy mountain of technology—died of disgust after Hiroshima; the pulps turned to stories of mutation and megadeath. I fancy this was opportunism as much as pessimism, but obviously good cheer had the skids under it.

Recently, the general tone has been a little lighter. The smaller the sf field seems, the more earnest and pompous its writers become; but now a few of them here and there perceive that hopefulness is not too far from godliness, nor solemnity essential for seriousness. The newer writers seem to be distinctly perky, finding other topics than the big bore of the Bomb and the Cold War.

Yet the notion that a down-beat ending is best prevails. It has become a purely commercial attitude, containing little of what the writer really thinks or feels. Now, I believe, a genuine pessimist of a new writer has come along, to delight us with an unadulterated shot of pure bracing gloom.

Thomas Disch has had few stories published as yet, although I gather that the astute Michael Moorcock over at *New Worlds* has bought several which may even appear before this review. Disch's "Nada" appeared in the fourteenth "Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction"; while Judy Merrill—who by disregarding her misses scores some resounding hits—scooped Disch's excellent "Descending" into her tenth annual "Year's Best Sf". Now Berkley have produced his first novel, "The Genocides". If I were a British publisher, I would have a juicy offer through Mr. Disch's door by now, and be bringing out "The Genocides" hardcover for the British market next spring.

Disch is an American. "The Genocides" is curiously English. It is another story of a dwindling community which has survived a catastrophe, although Disch handles it in his own way.

By his own way, I mean that he tells his story in rapid bursts, leaving out sections of the tale that possibly bored him, so that often the effect is of watching a number of stills flashed onto the screen, rather than a moving film. Personally, I somewhat incline to this staccato style; some may find it "modern", others regard it as the mark of a

beginner ; for all I know, both sides may be right but, in either case, one soon becomes accustomed to the delivery.

The chief characters are sharply outlined. The wretched remnants of the township of Tassel are led by Anderson, a strong-willed bigot with two married sons, Buddy and Neil. Buddy is the clever one, Neil is slightly stupid and has incestuous desires for his younger sister, Blossom, approaching puberty. Most of a raiding party on Tassel is captured and eaten, except for an old nurse and a rather clever-dick Jeremiah Orville, who hatches dark schemes against Blossom to revenge himself on Anderson, her father.

These people, and others round them, stay in focus, and their affairs are genuinely interesting, as well as being worked out without too much psychological explanation—a rarity in science fiction.

The other chief protagonists are the giant trees. These have been sown all over earth. They cover it, they kill all the other trees, as well as most insects and animals. We are introduced to them in close-up, with human figures toiling minutely below them, so that we hardly see the universal wood for the trees ; but as Disch gradually alters his focus until we can see for ourselves the unbeatable problem the trees present, with their massive communal roots growing down into the mantle of the earth, the effect is majestic indeed, amounting to as credible a menace as I ever came on.

Intelligent beings have sown the trees. These, presumably, are the aliens whose reports crop up rather unconvincingly now and again through the book. They burn down all terrestrial life, making existence so hazardous that the remains of Anderson's community have taken refuge in the hollow roots of the trees. Here, they go into decline. These scenes are nightmarish but not the most effective in the novel ; those come throughout the first half, with the slow attrition of human values, the descent into cannibalism, and the abolition of privacy, man's first social invention. For all that, Disch's portrayal of mankind reduced to parasitism on the very growths that have defeated him is done with a sort of clinical glee that generally keeps the fantasy within harness.

One must mention that the general picture of disaster is

spoilt occasionally by too heavy touches, by melodrama introduced to point to the possessiveness and silliness of women and the instability of men that also finds an echo in the two short stories referred to earlier, of which Neil's love affair with a decomposing human head is the most ludicrous and Tourneuresque example. They are a product of Disch's pessimism. I finished reading convinced that he was not merely anti-science but anti-humanity.

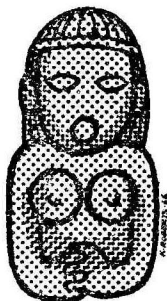
One can cheerfully forgive such faults in one's capacity as reader rather than critic (reading being partly an act of surrender, reviewing partly an act of judgement). I enjoy pessimism; gloom cheers me; it reminds me by contrast how happy and unexpectedly wonderful the world is. I enjoy the way Disch makes his great trees stand as analogues of some otherwise uninterpretable thing, as if growth and life and change were terrible things bringing always their opposite, destruction, paralysis, death. The effect, I repeat, is majestic.

I also enjoy the awful creepy elements and sex symbols (Tassel indeed!) that Disch filters into this, his first novel. There are enough of them for "The Genocides" to put Philip José Farmer in the shade and to allow us to hope that we shall be treated to many more descents into the Dischian abyss.

— BRIAN ALDISS

* *The Genocides* is published by Berkley Books at fifty cents.

Judith Merrill, world-famous anthologist and First Lady of science fiction, surely needs no introduction from us. Here she gives an inimitable and evocative glimpse of a very unusual culture.



THE SHRINE OF TEMPTATION

by Judith Merrill

The name his own people called him was Lallayall. That was, of course, just his calling-name, and because it meant almost the same thing to us, we called him Lucky.

This was no transgression of courtesy, or culture-arrogance on our part. His true name, after the fashion of his people, was already long, and growing, a descriptive catalogue useful only for records and ritual occasions. A calling-name may be anything derived from the whole, so long as it suits, and the called one will answer it. Lucky was delighted to have a new nickname from us, in our language.

He was, when we came to the island, just eight years old—as we reckon. His people count differently; to them, he was halfway through his Third Decade; in five more seasons, he would undergo the Apprenticeship Rites that would end his First Age. Either way, he was just past the

midpoint between babyhood and puberty. Like most of his race—and all others but us on the island—he was brown-skinned and dark-eyed, black-haired. Like most of his age, he was eager, questioning, rational, mystical, obedient, rebellious, clumsy and courteous, graceful and quick; like too few of them, he was generally happy and always healthy, serenely certain of parental love, highly intelligent and well-informed.

Certain of these things, and all of them to a degree, were the product of Shrine island culture. Lucky lived in a world he accepted as having been designed primarily for his own benefit and, largely, it had. Among the Island children, there were no fears, hungers, troubles or questions that could not be voiced—and none within the limits of the island's capacity—that would not be answered to the best extent of the child's understanding. All children were swift and bright; but among them, Lucky was especially blessed. Thus, his name.

He was the first in his age group to find his apprenticeship. When we came, he already knew what he wanted. Until a short time before that, he had spent his days, like the others, wandering from hunters to planners to makers to teachers to planters to singers, spreading his wonders and askings impartially. The others still wandered, multiply curious, questioning weavers and fishers and carpenters, healers and painters and crafters of food. It would be three or four seasons before, one by one, they singled out the preferred occupations to which they'd be bound in training at First Rites.

But Lucky already knew what he wanted. Before we came, he went, day after day, to the Shrine or the House of Shrinemen, squatting patiently in the courtyard, waiting for the chance to carry sand (for stone scrubbing) or water or polishing cloths or firewood for a Shrineman, listening in silence to such talk as was carried on in his presence, storing up questions to ask them, *hallall*, when the time should be ripe. Part of each day he sat at the feet of the Figures, self-hypnotized by gleaming amber and blue, spinning out glorious fantasies of the Rebirth.

(His own fascination with the Shrine and Shrinemen, and the weight of mystery he gave to some words and phrases—

which I have tried to translate with capitals and occasional sonorous phrases in this account—led us later to a misunderstanding of some proportion. But, *hallall* . . .)

His persistence was already recognized in the village. The other children first, then his mothers and fathers, had noticed his absence from forest, fields, and shops. Then the Shrinemen began teasing him with familiar fondness at evening gatherings and restday games, so that everyone started to realize what he had chosen. And if it was something of a shock to parents and teachers, the boy did not know it.

Perhaps because we settled as close to the Shrine as we dared (just over the edge of a hill with a clear view of the courtyard between the shrine and the House of Shrinemen), perhaps out of the same fascination with the unknown that had drawn him to the Shrine—Lucky was our first and most frequent visitor, and became, either in his own person or as interpreter, our chief source of information about both the Shrine and the islanders. He did not, at first, realize that our preoccupation with the Shrine was as great as his own; we did not share his confident artlessness in questioning-asking. I do not know just how he explained us to himself at first, or whether he even tried to. Perhaps he just waited to learn what he wanted to know—*hallall*.

It was not passive waiting, anyhow. The first day, after his first attempt to speak with us, he sat in what must have been stunned bemusement for several hours, pondering the incredible fact of a second language. (We saw the squatting inward-turned boy as “a stolid impassive indigene.” I blush to admit that the phrase is from my own notebook.) Then, having fully accepted that the phenomenon was not—obviously—impossible, but only previously unknown, it was he who approached us with the second overture.

We were just setting up the hand bellows for blowing foam into the camp wallforms. Lucky walked over, watched, walked away, and came back with a round stone, flattened on one side, just right to prop up the foot that kept slipping.

He held it out. We all stopped and stared. George Lazslo was quickest. He reached out and took the stone, smiling.

"Thank you," George said.

The boy touched the stone. "Sannacue?" His small brown face seemed to turn gold with the joy of his smile. "Mertz," he said, tapping the stone. "Mertz—sannacue?"

Henry started to correct him, but Jenny and I both realized at the same time that it was better to let the error ride, and not confuse the issue. (Starting as a joke, we all got to where we found *sannacue* as natural a word as *stone*.)

The principle was established, and it was astonishing to us how rapidly he learned. Jenny was our linguist, and predictably proved quicker than the rest of us in learning the island language, but when they sat exchanging names and phrases, it was she, far more often than he, who had to be told twice. Once he heard it, and was sure he understood, he simply did not know how to forget. (For her fascinating account of the process, see pp. 324-359, in "Language in the Isolated Culture," Dr. Jennifer R. Boxill, S&S, 1985).

As soon as the bare minimum of mutual language was effective, Lucky (again) initiated the next step in cultural exchange. He had been showing up at the camp just after breakfast each morning; this day he came an hour earlier, with a basket of woven reeds on his arm. It was my day for KP, and I was opening a can of bacon when he came up and touched my arm, showing me the basket. "Try my food?" he said.

The basket was filled with fresh steamed fish, still hot, each on its own new-baked half-loaf of native meal bread. At the bottom, five small pots of blue clay—the same stuff the Guardian Figure was moulded in—held a savoury vegetable sauce to be poured over fish and bread.

It was very good, but that seemed, at the time, irrelevant. The greatest significance of the gift was learning that our self-appointed guide and mascot was, it seemed, fully accredited in his friendship by the—so far—invisible parents and elders of the village.

I should say, "parents *or* elders," because we were uncertain. When we asked if he'd prepared the food himself, he laughed uproariously and then said, with ostentatious patience, "*Mothers* cook food." Whether he meant mothers

as a class (and in this case *his* mother), or several women of the class, mother, we did not know.

Both assumptions were wrong, as it happened. He meant *his mothers*.

It took us most of six months, to reach a level of communication at which mistakes of this sort could be cleared up. And from that time on, it seemed as though most of our discussions consisted of substituting closer approximations for old misconceptions. The more we learned, the more complex was what we had to learn. As for Lucky's wrong assumptions about us, they took even longer for him to recognize, and more time yet for *us* to realize he'd had them. We had been on the island the best part of a year before we gained any comprehension of the extent to which our presence had affected the boy himself. And through all that time, we so carefully leaned over backwards to avoid showing special interest in the Shrine, that we had never learned of Lucky's particular infatuation with it!

All through our second season on the island (by their time reckoning), we were pumping a steady flow of information out of the boy. We learned the basic economy and social structure of the island; how to reckon seasons, and count age and status. He explained the system of education and apprenticeship, the courtship and marriage customs. When he did not know answers to what we asked, he would say, "*Hallall; hallall* you will know." And next day, or next week, or even next season, he would come back with the answer. Most answers, that is. Sometimes the second answer too was, "*hallall*." But then, he would add, "*Hallall, I shall know, and then you too*."

We worried, occasionally, about what was happening to Lucky, in his own village—whether his contact with us singled him out for better or worse. What we never imagined was the delight of his parents (He had nine at the time; Dr. Henry Cogswell's article in *Anthropological Review*, II, 1983, pp. 19-26, gives a brief comprehensive analysis of island family relationships) and teachers and the older people in general at the effect we had on him.

In the pursuit of the knowledge we asked, Lucky had gone back to learn himself all the things he had scorned to

observe before we came: Now, he watched weavers and planters and netters of fish, masons and flutists and arrow-makers, with a concentrated attention that he had reserved before only for matters concerning the Shrine. The older people watched, and were pleased. They had always thought well of the boy. He was marked as lucky from birth. When it had seemed clear he would be a Shrineman, they had been not disappointed so much as surprised. It did not seem quite suitable for one so lavishly endowed. Now he was learning, as they had expected, all matters of concern to the people. If it were what he wished, he would of course be a Shrineman; but they began speaking of him now as a future Firstman.

The pinky strangers ("Pinkies" was what they called us) whose advent was otherwise inexplicable and perhaps a bit disturbing, had perhaps been sent to train a leader among the people, as the people themselves had not known how to do—

So they reasoned; at the least, they decided, we *were* causing Lucky to learn what they had hoped he would, whether that was our purpose in coming or not. At the very least, it was indirectly due to us that they had made sure of his extraordinary capacities, which had been indicated as probable by various features of his birth and growth, but had never before been fully displayed. (The eidetic memory was as impressive to them as to us; and his intelligence was high, even in that high-average society. Chapter X of Dr. G. M. Lazslo's, "Environment and Intelligence," S&S, 1987, deals with our findings on the island, for those who are interested).

Two of his fathers came to thank us.

It was the first visit we had from anyone but Lucky. Out of simple courtesy, no adult would have come into our camp without some such cause. Out of simple caution, we might never have entered their village without that prior visit. It was our opening contact with the group as a whole.

The fathers were overjoyed to discover that Jennie spoke their language with some proficiency. That made it possible to dismiss Lucky, and thank us without requiring him to translate praise of himself or of his friends. We told them in return how much we admired and relied on the

boy—and how very pleased we were to learn that our influence had helped him adjust to his own world, and not put him out of tune with it.

That is what we meant to say, but Jennie did not know any word in their language for “adjust” or “maladjusted”. She tried “out of season”, and got only smiling puzzlement. She made a long speech full of metaphor and analogy, and finally one of them said, “oklall?”

Oklall, Lucky had told us, was the opposite of *hallall*. They seemed to think we had been concerned about Lucky yesterday, but not tomorrow. We let well enough alone at that point, and offered food instead of conversation. Lucky rejoined us, and took obvious pride in piloting his father’s way through the strange meal. When they left, we had our invitation to visit the village—paradoxical, when we thought of it, since what had occasioned the thanksgiving was our previous inability to go in person.

If the fathers had the same thought, it would not have worried them. If we understood as we thought we did, what *hallall* meant, we would have known they’d see no cause to worry. They had seen his potential, displayed clearly, and were naturally content to let Lallayall’s nature take its own course. *Hallall*, he would learn all he needed to know. *Hallall*, he would grow to his proper adult place. If he needed help or encouragement, they would provide it. The expectations they had begun to have before his preoccupation with the Shrine, expectations based on his birth and early growth, now seemed once again probable. Perhaps, as time grew closer for a Rebirth, it was necessary for a future Firstman to know more of the Shrine than was usual. His unlikely interest in Shrinemen might then mean only that he would be Firstman at the time of a Rebirth. Lallayall—Lucky—indeed! He was well-called.

As for us, we were too busy and excited with our new observing privileges, and more than that, with the news of Lucky’s special concern with the Shrine, to think of the oddity of that *tomorrow-yesterday*, misunderstanding. We assumed, from his fathers’ manner of mentioning it, that the Shrine was not taboo in discussion. It seemed we might also hope, eventually, to be allowed to examine it in person: if a child could spend his time there freely, when his

parents disapproved, it was not unreasonable to hope that visitors might be invited.

One other assumption, based on our experience of Lucky's learning powers, proved unfounded: there was almost nothing he was able to tell us about the Shrine or Shrinemen, except just such visual descriptions as we now dared to hope might be redundant. He described the Figures, the blue Guardian on the Window of Light, and the amber Lifegiver on the scroll pedestal. He painted a vivid word picture of the reptiloid grace of the Lifegiver, the menacing power of the Guardian. About the Shrinemen and their lives he knew many minute details—but none of significance. They ate thus, slept so, conversed in the courtyard; they were celibate, wore brown robes with a design patterned on the Window of Light; they had daily rituals to say; they performed certain calculations. *Hallall*, they would officiate at the Recurrence, the Rebirth.

From the Oldest Men in the village, of whom there were three, in their Seventh Age, we learned more—if what we learned was fact. They could all recall, in young childhood, seeing the Life of the Shrine then extant. There had been no Recurrence since then, nor had it occurred in their lives, but before they were born.

In twenty-five decades, they said, the Life would Recur. It was soon, soon . . .

And saying so, they glanced significantly at Lucky. *Hallall*, a Rebirth . . .

That word again—*hallall*. In the village and fields, we heard it incessantly. It was the only no-answer a child ever got. No question was forbidden for young ones to ask—but some were not answered in First Age, and some not in Second. *Hallall*, they were told, *hallall*, ye shall know.

"When do we plant firstseed?" a child might ask.

"In the day following the third full moon of Seedfall," he would be told.

"Which seed is firstseed?"

And he would be shown.

"What comes of it?" "When do we harvest it?" "How is it stored?" "Who plants it?" "Who knows the full moon?"

All these would be answered and fully, readily. The

people would lay down their work, if need be, to go with a questioning child and show him the answer.

But—"Why does it grow?" "How does the Firstman know which round moon is the *full* moon?" or "Why do people seed themselves all year round, but fawns and fish only in Green-growth Season?"

Then the answer was always, "*Hallall*," given with a glad smile for the child who was thinking ahead of his years. First age children were to learn only what could be seen, touched, smelled, or heard. *Why* and *wherefore* were for Second Agers, the adolescent apprentices. So—

"*Hallall*, little one . . ."

It was listening to the teaching of children that we finally came round to understand what the word meant. We had thought it was "tomorrow"—or "later", vaguely. Then for a while we thought it just an evasion, a sort of "I don't know either; perhaps some day we'll both find out." But what it meant, precisely, was, "In the fullness of time."

The distinction is not nearly as much in the words as in the kind of thinking that must lie behind them. Shrine Islanders, for instance, fear death less than any society known—and this with no trace of belief in discrete immortality. In the fullness of time one is born, grows and learns, loves, weds, and begets, rears children, teaches the younger ones, acquires status, grows feeble and dies. If death comes, then one's time is full.

From the answers that were and were not given youngsters in Lucky's Age Group, we also came to understand how we must have troubled him with our determined questioning about the Shrinemen. Here, too, we had progressed through a series of dead-wrong assumptions. Because Lucky told us of books and calculations, of ideographs on the Shrine (which he could reproduce flawlessly, but with no comprehension); because he had never seen books in the village, or never spoke of them; because he, the brightest of his Age group, went daily to the House of Shrinemen, we first took for granted that the Shrinemen were priestly scholars, perhaps the guardians of an ancient culture, their role symbolized by the red-maced blue Guardian Figure protecting the "Lifegiver"—a goddess, clearly, but perhaps of wisdom rather than fertility. The reptilian

appearance suggested this strongly. Henry got very enthusiastic about the correlation of snakes and divinely protected knowledge. "Rebirth" could imply a predictable renaissance—and that suggested the ugly thought that the secrecy of the Shrinemen's rites and formulae was that of an unplanned bureaucracy perpetuating itself by withholding the knowledge it had been set up to protect and disseminate . . .

When we understood what *hallall* meant, we had to revise this unhappy picture, for much of what Lucky did not know was not secret at all—just *hallall* at his age. By that time, also, we had heard from the three Oldest Men such mutually confirming details of the appearance and function of the Life of the Shrine, that the whole notion of a usurping bureaucracy became absurd. "Rebirth" was no symbol, but a literal incarnation of new wisdom, presented at intervals of roughly—by our time—eighty years. The incarnation took the form of a froglike creature at least roughly resembling the statue and relief Figures at the Shrine. (The old men recalled an identical appearance, except for colour, which was grey—but they were old and remembering a strongly suggestible childhood).

So the Shrinemen became shamans, half-ignorant half-wise witch-doctors applying without understanding some ancient formulae designed to release increments of knowledge slowly to a population reverted—for what strange intriguing reasons?—to barbarism. The near-idyllic society we saw was the planned result of this programme; and the quiet patience of the *hallall* philosophy made sense now; *hallall*, all would be known. We need only wait; *hallall* . . .

But for witch-doctors, the Shrinemen were poor showmen. Neither did they do healing (any more than they governed; both of these were functions of all *other* people who lived into the Second Decade of the Sixth Age). The shaman theory began to fall apart the night George found out the man next to him at a haybringing dance was a "shaman", off duty for the party; the putative witch-doctor invited us all, very casually, to visit him at the Shrine. There had never been any taboo; no one suspected we might be interested.

We found the Shrinemen, as we had first assumed they

would be, educated and cultured, in the bookish sense, far above the level of the other islanders. They were intelligent men devoted to a faith, or more, to a duty. When Rebirth occurred, it was necessary that they be on hand, trained in the formulae of sacrifice. Without their precise weights and measures and chants, the Life of the Shrine would be monstrous and harmful.

The Oldest Men, we suggested, were saying it was near *hallall* for Recurrence . . . ?

The Shrinemen nodded. They brought out a register, a long papyrus-like scroll. One fourth of its length was filled with ideographs—like those on the Shrine itself, tantalizingly like, but unlike, three different ancient languages Jenny *did* know . . .

On this scroll, they said, was the listing of dates and persons connected with Shrine Life. The first entry, in barely legible, long-faded ink, went back—they said—almost 350 decades, nearly 1200 years, as we reckon. One of them spread the scroll on a lectern, and began intoning with such singsong regularity it was evident he was reciting by rote, and not actually reading.

Yet there was an air of authenticity about their list; whether it was in the scroll or not, whether they could read the symbols or not, we somehow believed that the time intervals—ranging from nineteen to thirty decades between Recurrences—were legitimate history.

The question was—history of *what*?

The answer, of course, was—*hallall*.

If our supplies lasted until the Recurrence, we'd know what it was. Not *why*, or *wherefore*, but *how* and *what*, *when* and *who*. To the Life of the Shrine, it seemed, we were all as First Agers. . .

Thus we arrived at our last misconception regarding the Shrinemen. They were—obviously—an especially non-virulent academic breed of priest, serving their temple with civilized pleasant lives devoted to learning, discussion, and ritual. *Hallall*, what they re-memorized every day would be of not just use, but great need . . .

Happily, we understood Lucky by that time at least better than we did the Shrine; as a result, we did not plague him with our latest errors—and plaguing they would have

been, to say the least. Religion, as we know it, had no words in the Shrine Island language. *Sin, priest, faith, morals*, were not only, in complexity, subjects suitable only for adults—they were concepts unknown to the people. We did not intend to introduce them.

Since it would have been Lucky to whom we expressed these thoughts first, it is doubly fortunate we did not do so, for Lucky *was* lucky. From the time of his birth on, it was the outstanding trait of his young life.

In the calendar of the Shrine Islanders, there are three seasons to mark the year's circuit: first is Greengrowth, when the soil is renewed, when the creatures of forest and river renew life, a time of thriving for all young things. Then comes Ripening, when fawns, fish, and fruit come to full size and plumpness. Last, there is Seedfall, when pods and clouds burst to shower the land with the next season's new life, when bucks rage in combat throughout the forest, and such spawning fish as survived the nets of the Season of Ripening spawn by the thousands far up the river.

The calendar of events, of people's lives, is composed of these seasons, in sets of ten. Each Decade of Seasons has separate significance in the course of a life-time. Three Decades make up an Age of Life.

It is auspicious among the people, to have Greengrowth for the ruling season of one's First Age. Lucky, born lucky in Greengrowth, would come to his First Rites, dividing childhood from apprenticeship, innocence from approaching courtship, just as the seasons changed from Greengrowth to the appropriate Ripening. Three decades later, his Full Manhood Rites would coincide with the change of the natural world from Ripening to Seedfall.

Such children were known to be fortunate in their growing, somehow in tune with the world more than others. In Lucky's case, each sign at every stage of development had confirmed the extraordinary augury of his birth on the first morning of a Greengrowth season. And it was for the same reason that his early interest in the Shrine had so startled his elders; a child of his sort was seldom attracted by abstraction or mental mystery; certainly, the children of Greengrowth were too much in tune with the soil to make likely celibates.

There is a certain innocence, when you think of it, implicit in the idea of luck. A truly *lucky* person has, always, a certain natural and glorious naïveté—a sort of superior unconsciousness, which can do for some people, in their acts and impulses, precisely what the well-trained, reflex reactions of a star athlete do for his body. The special ability to seize the right moment with the right hand is as vulnerable to conscious thought as the act of high-jumping would be to a man who tried to think each muscle separately into action.

So it is well that we did not force on Lucky the exercise of the metaphysical part of his mind that his keen intelligence could never have refused, once offered.

We had been almost five full seasons on the island, when the second ship came. Lucky, of course, with his rare instinct, was walking in the woods when it landed, not half a mile from where it came down.

Three people emerged—three more Pinkies! Rejoicing, the boy ran to greet them, one thought predominant in his young mind: here at last was the making of a Pinkie family! Seven is the minimum number of adults in an island household. We had never attempted to explain our marriage customs to him; frankly, living on the island, we had come to feel a little ashamed of confessing our one-to-one possessiveness. We had simply allowed them to keep their first misimpression that we did not have children because we were too few in number for a proper household.

With these thoughts in mind, he ran forward and greeted the strangers in clear pure English, offering to guide them immediately to our camp.

They seem to have managed a rapid recovery, when one considers the shock this must have provided. Politely, they excused themselves, and announced they had come, not to join us (whom they had never heard of, of course) but to pay their respects to the famous Shrine.

Lucky led them there. On the way, they talked pleasantly with him, pleasantly but wrongly. They did not sound like Pinkies—not like the Pinkies he knew. Vaguely, he sensed something *oklall*—unripe, green, out of place and time. Gradually, his answers to the oversweet probings of the

female among them became less clear, so that by the time she asked the two crucial questions, he was almost incoherent.

They did not find out how many Pinkies were on the island nor how many others spoke English. If they had known there were only four of us, unarmed academics, and only Lucky besides ourselves who would ever know how to tell the world outside what happened, they would surely have been less precipitate. As it was, they were on edge.

He took them directly to the Shrine Window. This in itself was odd; it was bad etiquette; he should have presented them first to the Shrinemen. But he was already acting under the impulse of that strange quality of luckiness that ruled his life.

Then he found himself staring at Lifegiver, terribly torn and uncertain, not knowing why he had done such a thing, or why he had spoken to them softly, in false friendship. The amber figure glowed in double light: sunlight cascading from the unroofed courtyard, and the golden glow from inside the Window.

He—I believe it was he—said later that he did what he did just because she was beautiful: a simple act of adoration. I suppose he was confused, aware of a responsibility too large for his young shoulders, and seeking guidance of some sort. That at least is more rational than the notion that he acted then out of the pure unconsciousness of his special—lucky—nature. I know, because I watched it happen, that he moved forward in an almost trancelike manner.

(Everything from the moment of the meeting in the forest up to this point I know only from having been told. What occurred in the courtyard I saw for myself. It was almost time for the Shrinemen's evening ritual, and Henry and I were on the hilltop, with binoculars, watching.)

This is what happened:—

Lallayall stepped forward and fell to his knees before the statue of the Lifegiver. He reached up, and his lanky arms were just long enough to wrap around her smooth stone legs. He gazed up at her, and then bent his head, resting it against the carvings at the top of the scroll pedestal.

At the instant of contact, the mace fell from the hands of the Blue Guardian.

The two men were fast. One jumped for the mace, one for Lucky. While the second one held the boy still, the first studied the rod and the Figure, and then reached out with the red mace and seemed to be twisting it against something on the Window. (After much discussion and examination, we came to the conclusion that it was the Guardian's eye he was twisting. The open end of the rod is exactly the shape and size of the opal eye of the Guardian.)

We did not see the Window open. It opened inwards, and our angle of vision was wrong. But we knew what was happening from the oddly expressive way the three intruders stood and stared, at the Window and at each other—questioning, triumphant, frightened, uncertain. We also saw the Shrinemen coming, a split second before the woman did. We saw her point and heard her cry faintly from down below.

The other turned to look, and all three lost their irresolution. They moved as one, taking Lucky with them. All four vanished (from our angle of view) inside the Shrine.

The Shrinemen came to a full stop in front of the Window. Had it closed again? I looked at Henry for the first time, and found him turning to look at me; it suddenly occurred to us that we ought to be doing something to help.

"You stay," he said. "I'll get the others, go on down. Keep watching."

It was the sensible way to do it. We were both torn between having to see it all and the need to help. This way we did both.

I nodded, and put the glasses back to my eyes. Incredibly, the Shrinemen were arranging themselves in their evening ritual position, as calmly as though it were any sundown; they formed their semicircle in front of the window, and brought forth the shining silver-tipped quills that were their badge of office, held them up like dart-throwers, as they always did, and began their sundown chant!

Perhaps the Window had not closed before. If it had, it opened again. My first thought was that the Guardian Figure had fallen. But it was not a Figure. It was alive.

It was blue and glistening, and it sprang down to the ground, crouched, alert, so clearly menacing in its intentions it was not necessary to see the face to understand the inherent malice. It had barely touched ground when a quill—a *dart*, rather—from the first Shrineman in the semicircle caught it in the face. (The eye, I have always assumed—the same left eye that must be the key to the Shrine?)

By that time, another had leaped out—and the next dart brought it down. It went so almost-casually, so rhythmically, so soundlessly, and with such economy of motion on both sides, that it seemed unreal. There were ten of the blue things altogether; at the sixth, I took my eyes from the glasses, blinked, shook my head, and looked back, unbelieving. I saw the same thing.

But remember—I did have that moment of doubt.

Without any break in the rhythm, the eleventh figure came out of the Shrine. It was not blue, or crouching or perilous; it was brown-gold of skin, and leaped like a dancer, and as it landed the Shrinemen who still held their darts poised, dropped them, and the whole semicircle burst into a chant of tremendous, overwhelming joy and welcoming.

They faltered just once—when, still in the same timing, the twelfth creature came forth, a twin to the first gold-brown incarnation of the Lifegiver. For perhaps two beats of the song there was obvious confusion; then it rang out again, louder and more joyous.

But those who had dropped unused darts retrieved them.

They finished the song, the two Lives of the Shrine standing inside their circle, apart from the heap of lifeless blue bodies. Then—the Window must have closed meantime; they clearly knew the Rebirth was completed—four of them walked to the two shining creatures, bowed to them (in the islanders' bow of courtesy—not one of reverence), and led them into the House. The others approached the dead entities, picked them up, and carried them off, around the House, out of sight.

My stage was empty. I waited till dark, but saw no more. Not till I started down to the camp did I even wonder what

had become of Henry and the others, who should have had time to arrive at the scene before the chant began. I found out when they joined me a few minutes after I got back to camp: the gates of the Shrine courtyard had been closed and barred; they had knocked and called out and waited—also till dark—without answer. They had heard the chant of rejoicing; they had seen nothing.

I told them what I had seen. I told it hesitantly; I did not completely believe my own memory. When, next day, and the days after that, all our questions and probings produced only mildly startled or baffled replies from villagers and Shrinemen alike, we decided I had been the victim of some extraordinarily powerful hypnotic illusion.

We felt fairly sure of what part of it Henry and I had seen together; and this was further supported by the presence of a strange ship in the forest, with no passengers—and by Lucky's disappearance.

We left the island a few weeks later. Our supplies might have lasted another month, but we all felt restless, and we missed Lucky, both personally and in our work. We knew there were answers we could not get from anyone, about what happened. But we saw no likelihood of getting them by staying longer. And we had to report the strange ship.

We agreed that as far as we knew—as far as four so-called scientists could claim to know anything—four people had entered the Shrine; a watcher on the hilltop (Henry's article so describes me) experienced an extraordinarily vivid hallucination or hypnotic illusion afterwards, during the ritual chant.

For the others, that agreement was sufficient. *They* hadn't had the "hallucination."

I went back. And of course, we had left too soon. Our questions had been, naturally, *oklall*. The Life of the Shrine is never revealed until the next Rites . . .

This time it was a tremendous revelation; never before had twin Lives occurred.

I stayed two full seasons on the Island, that second trip. This time, I lived, in a special visitor's capacity, with Lallayall's family. I learned to speak their language much

better, and I spent many hours in talk with the Shrinemen and with the Lives.

The Lives told me about Lucky's meeting with the strange Pinkies ; they told me how he felt when he fell on his knees before the Lifegiver ; they told me they were reborn of him in the Shrine.

They told me how it felt, but could not tell me how or why it happened. They did not know. We all speculated—the Lives, the Shrinemen, and I—on what the Shrine itself might be, and what sort of force could produce ten glistening blue demons from three evil humans, and two golden angels from one lucky boy.

With all the speculation, and all I was told, I came back with not one shred of scientific evidence that anything of the sort happened. For all I know, the Lives may still be an hypnotic illusion produced by the Shrinemen ; they may be some sort of periodic mutation. They may be Lucky Reborn.

They do not know, any more than I, how the Shrine came to be there, or what happened inside a chamber which they describe only as "filled with great light".

I tried approaching the Lifegiver, as Lucky had. The Shrinemen gave full permission, clearly amused. Nothing happened, though I tried it often, with minute variations of head and hand positions.

I may have missed the exact pressure points ; I may have had the wrong attitude. I believe, myself, that I simply do not have the kind of unconsciousness Lucky had.

My own tendency, also, is to believe that the Shrine is a sort of outpost of some other planet—but why this should feel any more "scientific" to me than the Shrinemen's belief in an ancient lost magic, I don't know.

The Shrinemen, by the way, are still worried over some things. The weight of the entering bodies was never ascertained, they point out. If there was unused mass left inside the Shrine, they cannot say what may come forth the next time a pure innocent embraces goodness for her own sake.

— JUDITH MERRIL

Chris Hebron, as we have remarked before, is an expert in Communication. Here he tells the cryptic story of an experiment gone wrong; an experience in communication both vivid and harrowing.

COINCIDENCE

by Chris Hebron

Tuesday, October 20th

Well, we're finally under way. The last member of the I.B.Y. team has arrived today—a Dr. Ruth Maskelyne. Molecular biology's not my field, of course: but even I know she's a damn good biochemist. But I didn't expect her to be quite so young, nor to be accompanied by a husband and two children. I gather he's got a teaching post—in Maths, I think it is. Also she *will* pronounce my name English-fashion, 'Johannes'. Still, she seems personable enough. I think the team should work pretty well. A bit of resentment from the native University staff—still, I must say, we're a pretty motley crew for a sleepy Victorian place like this. Oh, well . . .

UNIVERSITY OF STAMFORD

School of Comparative Literature

STAMFORD, LINCOLNSHIRE

Professor: Ernest Maclean, M.A.

Senior Tutor: Benjamin Haslop, M.A., PH.D.

October 7th

My Dear Ruth,

Please excuse the headed notepaper—I can't find my airmail pad. So you arrived all right? That's a relief. I must say I miss you at the InterDisciplinary Conferences—and the continental coffee in the prep room! So, in default of coffee, I'm staying in my own Department and

working, too. You and Johannes Ericssen don't have the monopoly of intellectual effort, me duck!

As a matter of fact, this might interest you. Ernie and I have a suspicion up our sleeves. You may perhaps remember the work the late Robert Graves did, back in the '50s, on the grammar of symbology (no, of course you wouldn't—not your field—but I'm sure you've heard of it, if only from me!) He supposed the factor that determined the nature of poetic shorthand was *cultural*—a hang-over from the Bronze Age mother-goddess cults in W. Europe. But if that's so, how is it that so much non-European poetry moves one so deeply? Now, E. and I would like to try a sort of Fromm approach on this one—you know, cultural psychoanalysis and all that stuff. (Not to mention Jung, and the Swiss chappie—forgotten his name, sorry—who gets basic symbological patterns by stimulating brain synapses to fire—oh what is his name—I should know it!)

Anyway, suppose—just suppose—that poetic symbology is *not* cultural, but one of the facts of man's psychic nature? Quite an exciting idea, no?

—And now I think of it, you can be of some use to us after all, even in Dunedin. Can you get hold of any collections of Maori folk-poetry (preferably originals *and* a good translation)? E.'s taking the Chinese and Indian stuff: I'm up to my neck in Old Icelandic. Nobody here speaks Maori. And if you want some amusement o' nights, you might get hold of a copy of Graves' 'White Goddess' and read it, so you can see where we're starting from—it is very readable, I may add.

Oh, by the by, Sarah started work today: only a Research Assistant's job, but it'll give her a chance to get back in harness, now the kids are in school. My regards to Arthur, and your brood.

Yours,

Ben.

November 4th

Another good day. If things keep up like this, we should do wonders. The team works like—like one being. Dr. Maskelyne in particular is quite remarkably efficient. But then, she's something of an unusual person: I've discov-

ered we share a common interest in music—Bartók in particular. And believe it or not, she reads high-powered literary criticism in her spare time—for fun! Arthur Maskelyne's a nice little man; a bit abstracted, like all these mathematicians, but basically a very gentle man, if nowhere near as brilliant as his wife (I wonder why she married him?) The children are delightful: I particularly like the elder one, a little girl.

Memo: Ericssen, buy some fireworks tomorrow. Dinner party.

Same Old Place.
November 17th.

My Dear Ruth,

I'm glad you enjoyed the Graves. I agree the Beast bit is barmy—but pleasant-barmy. His main thesis is what interests me though. Thanks for the Maori stuff. We're analysing it now—really it is extraordinary how this all fits in. It looks as if Fromm was right, and Graves was only considering a special case. We shall soon have enough to give the creativity boys over in Psychology: I wonder what they'll make of it?

You say I forgot to tell you what Sarah's been doing. The R.A.s job is with the Parapsych people: I gather they're gnawing away at the relationship between E.S.P. and music—apparently they're fairly closely connected. I wonder if I ought to try *them* with this symbology stuff, too?

This gives me an idea. It's totally unscientific, of course, but it might be fun. At some time during a two week period after you get this, I'll play—only once—oh let me see, what do we both know and like?—Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra should do. All you have to do is put yours on at the same time—whenever you think that is—and let me know. Willing to try it? We might even get E.S.P. across 23,000 miles—now that would be quite something!

I'm glad you and Ericssen get on so well. He's brilliant, but he had the reputation in Uppsala of being a bit unpredictable.

Regards as ever,
Yours,

Ben.

Same Old Place.

December 12th

My Dear Ruth,

How extraordinary! Do you know, when I corrected the time for longitude, we seem to have put our records on at *exactly the same moment*. Of course, it's only coincidence. I haven't told Sarah: anything so unrigorous would have convinced her my brain was turning to jelly. By the way, I'm mailing you a copy of 'Seven Days in New Crete' for a Christmas present. It's a bit of a rarity, so take care of it! The family get surprises.

Yours,

Ben.

S.O.P.

January 20th.

My Dear Ruth,

Don't you think you're taking this joke a bit far? Graves and Tolkien, yes; and existentialism I heartily approve of—but a birthday party dressing itself up as a meeting of the Society for Resurrecting Witchcraft—*do* remember you're in New Zealand, me duck. Their puritan consciences will object, I'm sure.

Still, I must admit your request for an 'invocation' amused me. So 'please find enclosed herewith' a little construct of my own. If Ernie's latest theories are right, it should contain enough emotional dynamite to blow a hole in the top of everyone's head: you wanted witchcraft, no? Whether you use it or not is your business. Seriously, it'll probably give everyone the shivers if you do, though: spooky stuff. If you don't want that, don't use it.

I'll drink a toast to you on the 17th.

Yours,

Ben.

February 18th

What has happened? What is it? I can't—whatever possessed me? I've never before—I mean—

It was the party last night. I must try and put this down accurately. Ruth was reading an invocation she'd made up, over a moa's skull she'd got from somewhere. We were

all rather tight, and sitting on the floor listening. And then, suddenly—

I can't describe it. A sort of whirling spiral darkness. In the middle of it, Ruth reading—but it wasn't Ruth—it was—I don't know—something else—

I could still hear *her* (Ruth, I mean) reading: but the *other* Ruth was reading *something different*—I can't make sense of this.

The other Ruth had bare breasts, and was reading the wet spiral of darkness, and the words pressed down, down, sucking into the dark—

I must have been blind drunk. Arthur tells me I jumped up, knocked her over, and passed out. I can only remember the vomiting afterwards. And somebody playing music.

Music? There wasn't any music switched on.

— This is ridiculous. Forget it, Ericssen. You were drunk.

February 19th

I have avoided Ruth all day. I can't look at her—whatever is the matter with me? I keep seeing her breasts, proud, high, the nipples rouged.

Get hold of yourself, Ericssen—sex fantasies yet, at your age.

I've placed the music, though. Bartók. Concerto for Orchestra. (I must get a good night's sleep, really. Of course it's Bartók—we both like him.)

February 20th

I finally plucked up courage to call on Ruth today; I couldn't tell her why I've been doing all my work with her by memo, though. Thank God, she is her normal self. I almost ran away, wondering what I would see, before she came out.

But I keep hearing the music again. What a peculiar business this all is! I would go and see the quack, but it's all so ridiculous.

February 21st

... She is everywhere. She is the only reality I see, and when I am away from her I see nothing that is reality. No use seeing anyone about this, now. I have to face it: I

love her. And I keep hearing the music, too: the strange interior serial music of a vanished world.

Oh Ruth, I love you . . .

Oh God, *she has snakes round her throat . . .*

February 23rd

It is no good. I cannot see anything any more. Even over this diary there play, brown and wet, the dark sucking spirals of the womb of time, rotating, screwing, through what?

I cannot even see her, my Ruth: *you* would have thought I never lay with her, last night. Only the spirals now, over everything, turn and turn, down into forgotten time. And the music, and the voice. And who is the man, the small dark Celtic man, who stands in the middle, speaking, with an axe?

Who am I? What is happening? He is coming closer. No—I am not your meat. I am Johannes Ericssen—Johannes.

Ahh, Perseus, I AM KERKYON.

Now I know what I have to do. *Potnia Mou, I am I am coming . . .*

University of Stamford.

March 17th.

My Dear Ruth,

My dear, I am so sorry. A tragedy like this is always a terrible shock. But there was nothing you could have done. Poor Ericssen was always rather unstable, they tell me, and the pressure of running the I.B.Y. investigation must finally have overturned his reason. Please accept my sympathy—though I know that that won't help much. But at least you did what you could. I don't know many women who would have stayed up all night with a man they didn't love, the night before he committed suicide, trying to talk him out of it.

By the way—the letter came before I could answer your last one. I'm naturally disappointed you didn't use my invocation—I even read it out, here, at the appropriate time, plus a genuinely Eleusinian drink of wine and cake and cheese, so as to be 'with you in spirit'. It was only a piece of verse, you know—honestly, you scientists take

everything so seriously! But at least you won't have to worry, now, in case your stagecraft set anything off. The copy of the one you made up is prettily done, but absolutely innocuous. Believe me, you weren't to blame at all. Besides, the 'I am Kerkyon' they found in his diary comes from Mary Renault, not Graves. He must have read the novel at some time. Odd, the things our subconscious will get hold of.

I suppose you'll be coming home soon? I think I would advise it. I'll have a retort of coffee set up for you. Our research project is just about tied up, here.

Love, as always,

Ben.

— CHRIS HEBRON

Mr. Hammerton herewith extends a cordial invitation to you all to join him in his shadow-world. A delightfully funny episode from a new and zany talent . . .

GRUTCH

by Pete Hammerton

No sense in plugging your ears. Your best bet is a handful of stinging nettles ; that ought to keep your mind off 'em. So you get this wooden box, see? And you stand on it and hold your breath. And when the smoke starts coming out you turn the handle till it rattles. Then you run like hell because if they catch you they'll put you in here, and you wouldn't like it here. The place is full of lunatics.

Me, I've been trying to get out for six months but nobody's listening. I mean, they listen all right, but they're not taking it in ; they're trying to analyse you all the time. Like if you say it's raining they think : Hullo, that's interesting, that indicates a congenital depression of the libido. And all you're trying to tell them is there's water coming through the ceiling.

So finally I decided to write to you, Mr. Editor, and ask you to publicise my case. Because it does make sense really, if people would only listen.

For instance, you *must* have a wooden box, because if you tried standing on a cardboard one you'd fall right through. That's reasonable, isn't it? And you have to stand on it or the little devils would all get out, and then you'd be back where you started. The nettles are to keep you from listening, because once you start listening they'll talk you into anything.

They talked me into this place.

The trouble started one evening last summer when I was working on my Sunday crossword. I was aware of this mouse perched atop the empty rum bottle sneering at me, but for about twenty minutes I'd managed to ignore him. Finally he twitched his whiskers and squeaked, "Four across is 'reed.'"

That did it. That's one thing I just can't tolerate, so I shouted, "Why don't you shut up and mind your own damn business!"

He scuttered down the bottle to watch me write. "Double e," he said. "Not e-a."

I slung the pen at him. "If you're so smart," I bawled, "Why don't you go find someone intelligent to talk to?"

He shrugged—that was the funniest bit yet, a mouse shrugging—and said, "You just happen to be the only decent telepath in this city."

Then I realised that half a dozen of the little brutes had followed him onto the table. It was too much. Poking my finger at the leader's chest, I announced firmly, "You are not a mouse, you are an hallucination. Species delirium tremens. I know, because mice can't speak."

"Not on this planet," he agreed. Then he put me in the picture. Seems they weren't mice at all but Martians. Go ahead, laugh. I smacked the table and bellowed myself when he told me. But then he started talking Martian dialectics, and pretty soon he had me convinced.

According to him they'd been stranded here on Earth after an experiment went unstuck about a year before, and had been trying to get back ever since. It had taken them all this time to find a human they could communicate with. Seems very few people are telepathic enough, and even then their perceptions have to be in that peculiar condition brought on by fasting or taking drugs like mescaline. In my case alcohol seems to have been pretty effective . . .

I asked why with their advanced technology they hadn't found some other way of getting across to people, but Brutus—that was his name—explained that they had no machines. They did everything by psionics, whatever that

is. To return to Mars, by telekinesis or something, would require the co-operation of a sensitive human being on the right wavelength. Somebody with a generous nature and lots of patience . . .

At this point I got the message. "Sorry boys," I said. "Try next door. They *like* animals."

Brutus showed his sharp teeth in a wicked little grin. "We'll stick around. Maybe you'll change your mind. Maybe you'll *want* us to go home."

He knew what he was talking about.

Their strategy was simple. Working in relays, they set up a barrage of continuous chatter. They talked about the weather and the international situation and the theory of relativity till I threw down my paper in disgust and took to bed. Then they nattered Shakespearian sonnets into my dreams.

By morning I was so tired I just wanted to lie there and forget the shop, but I knew I couldn't do that. Business had been falling off lately, and I knew why: I was getting old, losing my charm.

I suppose you could say I run a junk shop—well, no, not exactly; it all depends. If I'm buying it's junk, but if I'm selling it's antiques. That's one way of looking at the matter. Or you *could* say that I don't sell either of those things. What I really sell is myself. My personality. And that would be nearer the truth.

It's the ladies I rely on to keep me in booze, the middle-aged wives of middle-aged salesmen and bankers and insurance agents. They come to buy an old clock or a quaint umbrella stand for the hall, but what I really sell them is a taste of romance. I pull out a colourful tale from the ragbag of my life, with a wink and a nod and a hint of intrigue.

Oh, the women are suckers for intrigue!

Each customer I play differently. Sometimes I flirt and sometimes I give the sympathetic ear. But my favourite technique is with the sigh and longing glance. Somehow I manage to give the impression that the only thing keeping me from pouring out my love is the ring on the dear lady's wedding finger. With this treatment the customer

goes away feeling almost guilty for my suffering. And she comes again, with hard cash, to purchase further dreams.

So it's not just handing over the goods and ringing up the change, is it? And you can imagine what a stream of chatter could do to me in this delicate profession, especially when nobody else could hear it. The mice weren't silly. They kept out of sight, so there was no obvious explanation for my flashes of irritation or my sudden snarl of, "Blasted mice!" That day I collected a lot of funny looks, and there were some fast exits.

And I kept on drinking. This was half the trouble. I knew that the longer I left off the booze the harder it was for the mice to get through to me—Brutus had been right about that—but I couldn't stop. It was a vicious circle, with the voices themselves driving me to drink.

I'd already decided to put up the shutters and call it a day when I saw Mrs. Medhurst toddling across the lane, her fat legs wobbling. I rushed out the back to splash water on my face and upend the rum bottle in my mouth, then hurried in to open the door for her. Because this was my very best customer. All I had to do was listen to half an hour of her worries, with a sympathetic nod now and again, and she would lay out a guaranteed twenty-five bucks on some hideous old hatstand or lampshade.

"Hello Luke," she croaked. "Chilly today."

"Ah," I sighed. "Sets the old lumbago going, eh?"

She nodded wearily.

A voice in my head said, "Have you noticed the way her chins concertina when she does that?"

I stared, fascinated, while she continued to nod her head in a sad, mechanical way, the folds of her neck going in and out, in and out.

The voice said, "It's a wonder that mole survives."

She had one of those black marks with hairs sprouting out of it, and as her head nodded it kept bobbing in and out from between two of her chins. Suddenly my face wanted to smile, and I had to turn it away as I slipped behind the counter.

She hadn't noticed. Her eyes fixed wearily on mine while she plunged into the sad catalogue of faithful old pains and treacherous new twinges.

Somehow I kept my face straight though the voice in my head kept slinging up the craziest speculations about Mrs. Medhurst's private life, including some pretty unlikely explanations of some of those aches. In the end though, I felt another grin coming and had to drop my eyes from her bobbing mole to her heaving blouse.

She was saying, "Somehow it makes you feel so small and helpless . . ."

And the voice chimed in, "I wonder what size bra she takes?"

The laugh broke out before my hand could choke it. Her eyes snapped wide. "Why Luke," she exclaimed. "You're laughing at me!"

I tried to apologise, to make out that I was coughing, but it wasn't any use. Every time she opened her mouth the voice would mimic her words, and I'd splutter out another chuckle. Finally, in desperation, I yelled, "Shut up, will you!"

And of course Mrs. Medhurst took this as the last insult. With a final glance of ice and acid, she waddled from the shop.

She hadn't spent a dime.

Down the lane I watched her stop and talk to a neighbour and saw them both turn to look in my direction. Then despair hit me and I slumped into an armchair.

Brutus showed himself between the lips of the stuffed moose. "Well, how about it?" he asked. "Are you going to help us?"

I heaved something heavy and yelled, "Go find yourself another telepath!"

He reappeared behind an antler. "But Luke, old friend, there is nobody else. You're the only one who gets our messages."

Funny, I thought. But why? Surely not just because I was permanently souped up? There were plenty more drunks around. Still, it was clearly a big factor . . .

Yes! I sat up grinning, suddenly remembering the way the voices had faded to a faint twitter by the time I woke that morning. It wasn't till I'd had my first rum that they returned to full strength. Why, if I could give it up for twenty-four hours I'd probably get shut of the little devils!

Laughing like a madman, I hunted out my anti-booze capsules and dosed myself up. As soon as the stupid feeling began I went to bed.

The sun awoke me early to a feeling of peace. My head was clear like brook water, and the only voices that rippled there were my own thoughts.

Tentatively I said, "Brutus?" There was no reply.

"Ha!" I shouted. "That's fixed 'em!"

Obviously the elation wasn't going to last—I wanted a drink too badly. Still, there was always the turkish delight, I consoled myself. But when I opened the box my lips twisted with annoyance, for the mice had been there, nibbling all over my favourite confectionery. I slammed the lid shut and stomped into the shop.

Once more my irritability was bad for business. But it was the middle of the afternoon before the mice launched their new attack.

I had almost persuaded Miss Drury to buy a muff of ostrich feathers. She was standing by the mirror preening herself, a long skinny pole of a woman, while I watched and made admiring noises.

Then a movement caught my eye. On the shelf above her head a tall vase was toppling, its rear end lifted by a couple of mice. Instinctively I lunged forward, and tripped over something that hadn't been there a moment before. I finished with my arms wrapped around her and a silly expression on my face as I tried to grunt out the explanation.

Her eyes followed mine upwards to the vase, which was now of course quite motionless. "Why, Mr. Varm!" she said coyly.

Then as I straightened myself, still clutching at her for support, she squeaked and put her hand over mine. Sneaking a look, I saw Brutus grinning back at me from his perch on her skirt. As I watched he again bit through the cloth, right beside my fingers.

"Don't!" giggled Miss Drury, her arm slipping round my shoulders.

Oh Lord! I thought.

She snuggled close and kissed me.

Actually, she wasn't nearly so horse-faced when you got

to studying her. As a matter of fact, that figure wasn't quite the lamp-post I'd taken it for either . . . Soon I observed that my palm was making circles on her back.

"Luke," she said tenderly.

"Yes, Ida?"

"Do you think I could lie down for a minute?"

I threw open the door and gestured to my bed. With a sigh, she arranged her length on it, then turned to smile from under lowered eyelids.

Kneeling by the bed I stroked her waist. My lips lay against her throat, and I noticed that she smelled faintly of lavender. Well, I've got no prejudice against lavender.

She sighed again, and there was a kind of dreamy feeling in the air.

Then it was shattered as I opened my eyes and found a mouse sitting on her blouse giving me a leery wink. I lunged, but it dived beneath the pillow. I yanked this from under Miss Drury's head then started punching hell out of the bedclothes.

She rolled onto the floor and sat there squeaking indignantly.

"Don't worry," I grunted. "It's only a mouse."

"A mouse!" She jumped about ten feet into the air and came down with the skirt wrapped so tight about her legs a microbe couldn't have got up there.

I went to soothe her but got distracted by another mouse bobbing out from behind the clock. As I charged at it there was a sharp pain in my ankle and Brutus darted away. I barged around the room like a maniac, yelling and throwing things, while mice kept popping in and out of every possible hiding place. It was like something out of a fair-ground.

Then I realised that Miss Drury was screaming. I stopped and peered at her, and she quietened a little.

"Luke," she gasped, "What on earth's come over you? You've been shouting about talking mice." There was a plaintive quiver in her voice. "Mice can't talk, Luke."

"Not unless they're Martians," I agreed, moving towards her with a reassuring smile.

Suddenly she screamed and darted for the door. I chased

her through the shop but wasn't quick enough—an express train wouldn't have been quick enough the way she was travelling. So then I just stood in the doorway watching her vanish over the horizon with her hands clapped to her ears, and I wondered who would ever buy that muff now.

Wearily I shuffled to the back room. It was a shambles. The mice had made their point all right. With or without telepathy they could exert pressure. Two more weeks of this and I'd be ruined.

Absent-mindedly I reached into the box of turkish delight and pulled out a lump. Then my eyes focused on the nibbled shape of it and a vicious thought came to me.

The can of rat poison wasn't labelled. The mice couldn't know what I was doing as I chopped up the confectionery and stirred some in. Casually I pretended to eat some of the mixture, then shut up shop and went for a walk.

In the town people kept breaking off their talk as I passed, and everywhere I had the feeling of eyes on my back. It wasn't the best atmosphere for solving problems. By the time I let myself in the back door, an hour later, I was feeling no easier, my mind was no clearer.

There were three mice in the middle of the floor, one almost motionless but twitching, the other two running in frantic circles. At a distance the rest of the group sat staring at me, their eyes hostile and accusing.

Self-disgust hit me as I realised what I'd done ; for these were no ordinary vermin, they were intelligent beings from another world.

Kneeling beside the victims, I said, "Oh hell, boys, I'm sorry ; I'm sorry." But it was no use. Without telepathy they couldn't understand.

Then I saw Brutus by the inner door, beckoning, and followed him into the shop.

On the floor was a mound of broken glass. Every teapot, every mirror, every porcelain ornament in the place lay shattered in a heap. Half my entire stock was there, smashed.

I made a helpless gesture. I didn't feel angry. Just immensely sad and weary.

Then I saw the brand new bottle of rum standing beside

the wreckage. Probably poisoned, I thought. But I sat on the floor and pulled out the cork and swilled it back.

Presently Brutus said, "Shall we talk?"

What they wanted me to do was simple enough, but just stupid to my way of thinking. Brutus said it was all very rational and had to do with the Earth's magnetic field and ethereal vibrations, if that means anything to you, but it still sounded crazy to me.

After a lot of experiment they decided that the ideal condition for transmitting was for me to stand with a birdcage in my hand and my head on one side (because of the angle of my semi-circular canals or some such twaddle). And every twenty seconds I had to murmur at exactly the right pitch and tone a certain noise, which finally came out as, "Grutch".

So evening after evening I would go through this performance, wondering whether I was right in the head, while over in the north-east corner of the room the mice fiddled with some equally ludicrous contraption of their own.

They had insisted that it would be very dangerous for me as well as for them if I broke off during a session, so when my landlady walked in one day I just kept right on.

She stood in front of me and put her head on one side like mine and suggested, "Rent".

In a high little voice, I said, "Grutch".

Frowning, she asked, "Can I get you something?"

I shook my head. "Grutch".

She took a pace back and stood eyeing the birdcage in my hand.

"Grutch," I explained, breathlessly.

Then she got mad. "Just don't think I'm taking grutch for rent!" she shouted, and slammed the door.

Later the men from the hospital came for a discussion.

After they left I went out and spent the week's takings on whiskey and rum and stuff. I don't recall the exact combination, but whatever it was it put me in a highly receptive state, and on the way back I learnt just how to get rid of those Martians. For good.

Which is what I've been trying to tell you, just in case you should ever have the trouble I had.

You see, you take a wooden box and a handful of stinging nettles. You lure the mice underneath, and then you stand on it . . .

It works like a charm. They had all vanished by the time the men in the white coats called for me.

I learnt the secret from a Venusian. Venusians are the natural enemies of Martians. You probably call them cats.

—PETE HAMMERTON



THE ICE SCHOONER

by Michael Moorcock

CONCLUSION

The time is the distant future, the place Earth ; an Earth covered by the white mantle of the Fourth Ice Age. Across the frozen wastes skim the strange Ice Schooners, relics of a once-rich culture.

Ship captain Konrad Arflane saves the life of the Lord Pyotr Rorsefne, ruler of Friesgalt, greatest of the cities of

the Matto Grosso. From the old man he accepts a strange commission: to sail Ice Spirit, flagship of the Rorsefne fleet, to the half-legendary New York, where it is said the Ice Mother herself holds court. Arflane is deeply attracted to the beautiful Ulrica Ulsenn, daughter of the old Lord; at first she returns his love but later, conscience-stricken, rejects him.

Rorsefne dies; but Ice Spirit sets sail, commanded by Arflane and with Ulrica, her husband Janek and the enigmatic Manfred Ulsenn as passengers. Also on board is the strange harpooner Urquart, bastard son of Rorsefne and fanatical devotee of the cult of the Ice Mother. Ice Spirit successfully negotiates the great plain of the Matto Grosso but later comes close to foundering in an ice-break. In the confusion Arflane searches for his passengers; but it seems they are no longer on board.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Ice Break

THE MONSTROUS SHIP lurched heavily again, swinging Arflane backwards into the doorframe of Ulrica Ulsenn's cabin.

Manfred Rorsefne's door opened. The young man was dishevelled and gasping; blood from a head wound ran down his face. He tried to grin at Arflane, staggered into the gangway and fell against the far wall.

"Where are the others?" Arflane yelled above the sound of creaking and shattering ice. Rorsefne shook his head.

Arflane stumbled along the gangway until he could grab the handle of the door to Janek Ulsenn's cabin. The ship listed, this time to port, as he opened the door and saw Ulsenn and his wife lying against the far bulkhead. Ulsenn was whimpering and Ulrica was trying to get him to his feet. "I can't make him move," she said. "What has happened?"

"Ice break," Arflane replied tersely. "The ship's half in the water already. You've all got to get overboard at once. Tell him that." Then he grunted impatiently and grabbed

Ulsenn by the front of his jacket, hauling the terrified man over his shoulder. He gestured towards the gangway. "Can you help your cousin, Ulrica—he's hurt."

She nodded and pulled herself to her feet, following him out of the cabin.

Manfred managed to smile at them as they came out, but his face was grey and he was hardly able to stand. Ulrica took his arm.

As they fought their way out to the swaying deck Urquart joined them; the harpooner shouldered his lance and helped Ulrica with Manfred, who seemed close to fainting.

Around them in the black night slabs of ice still rose and fell, crashing on to the deck, but the ship slipped no further into the break.

Arflane led them to the rail, grasped a dangling line and swung himself and his burden down the side, jumping the last few feet to the firm ice. Dimly seen figures milled around; over his head the mooring lines running from the rail strummed in the darkness. Urquart and Ulrica Ulsenn were somehow managing between them to lower Rorsefne down. Arflane waited until they were all together and then jerked the trembling form of Janek Ulsenn from his shoulder and let the man fall to the ice. "Get up," he said curtly. "If you want to live you'll help the men with the lines. Once the ship goes, we're as good as dead."

Janek Ulsenn climbed to his feet; he scowled at Arflane and looked around him angrily until he saw Ulrica and Manfred standing with Urquart. "This man," he said, pointing at Arflane, "this man has once again put our lives in jeopardy by his senseless—"

"Do as he says, Janek," Ulrica said impatiently. "Come. We'll both help with the lines."

She walked off into the darkness. Ulsenn scowled back at Arflane for a second and then followed her. Manfred swayed, looking faintly apologetic. "I'm sorry, captain. I seem . . ."

"Stay out of the way until we've done what we can," Arflane instructed him. "Urquart—let's get on with it."

With the harpooner beside him he pushed through the lines of men heaving on the ropes until he found Hinsén in the process of hammering a mooring spike home.

"What are our chances?" Arflane asked.

"We've stopped the slide, sir. There's firm ice here and we've got a few pegs in. We might do it." The bearded second officer straightened up. He pointed to the next gang who were struggling to keep their purchase on their line. "Excuse me, sir. I must attend to that."

Arflane strode along, inspecting the gangs of sailors as they slipped and slithered on the ice, sometimes dragged forward by the weight of the ship; but now her angle of list was less than forty-five degrees and Arflane saw that there was a reasonable chance of saving the *Ice Spirit*. He stopped to help haul on a line and Urquart moved up to the next team to do the same.

Slowly the ship wallowed upright. The men cheered; then the sound died as the *Ice Spirit*, drawn by the mooring lines, continued to slide towards them under the momentum. The ship began to loom over them.

"Get back!" Arflane cried. "Run for it!"

The crew panicked, skidding and sliding on the ice as they ran. Arflane heard a scream as a man slipped and fell beneath the side-turned runners. Others died in the same way before the ship slowed and bumped to a stop.

Arflane began to walk forward, calling back over his shoulder. "Mr. Urquart, will you attend to the burial of those men?"

"Aye, aye, sir." Urquart's voice replied from the darkness.

Arflane moved round to the port side of the great ship, inspecting the damage. It did not seem to be very bad. One runner was slightly askew, but that could be rectified by a little routine repair work. The ship could easily continue her journey.

"All right," he shouted. "Everybody except the burial gang on board. There's a runner out of kilter and we'll need a working party on it right away. Mr. Hinsen, will you do what's necessary?"

Arflane clambered up a loose mooring line and returned to the poop deck. He took a megaphone from its place in the wheelhouse and shouted through it. "Mr. Petchnyoff. Come up to the bridge, please."

Petchnyoff joined him within a few minutes. He looked enquiringly at Arflane. His deceptively foolish look had increased and, seeing him through the darkness, Arflane

thought he had the face of an imbecile. He wondered vaguely if, in fact, Petchnyoff were unstable. If that were the case then it was just possible that the first officer had himself altered the course and for no reason but petty spite and a wish to create trouble for a captain he disliked.

"See that the ship's firmly moored while the men make the repairs, Mr. Petchnyoff."

"Aye, aye, sir." Petchnyoff turned away to obey the order.

"And when that's done, Mr. Petchnyoff, I want all officers and passengers to assemble in my cabin."

Petchnyoff glanced back at him questioningly.

"See to it, please," Arflane said.

"Aye, aye, sir." Petchnyoff left the bridge.

Shortly before dawn the three officers, Petchnyoff, Hinsen and Urquart, together with the Ulsenns and Manfred Rorsefne, stood in Arflane's cabin while the captain sat at his table and studied the charts he had brought with him from the wheelhouse.

Manfred Rorsefne's injury had not been as bad as it had looked; his head was now bandaged and his colour had returned. Ulrica Ulsenn stood apart from her husband who leant against the bulkhead beside Petchnyoff. Urquart and Hinsen stood together, their arms folded across their chests, waiting patiently for their captain to speak.

At length Arflane, who had remained deliberately silent for longer than he needed to, looked up, his expression bleak. "You know why I have these charts here Mr. Petchnyoff," he said. "We've already discussed the matter. But most of you others won't understand." He drew a long breath. "One of the charts was tampered with in the night. The helmsman was misled by it and altered course by a full three points. As a result we landed in the ice break and were almost killed. I don't believe anyone could have known we were heading for the break, so it's plain that the impulse to spoil the change came from some irresponsible desire to irritate and inconvenience me—or maybe to delay us for some reason I can't guess. Manfred Rorsefne was seen in the wheelhouse and . . ."

"Really, captain!" Manfred's voice was mockingly offended. "I was in the wheelhouse, but I hardly know one

point of the compass from another. I certainly could not have been the one."

Arflane nodded. "I didn't say I suspected you, but there's no doubt in my mind that one of you must have made the alteration. No one else has access to the wheelhouse. For that reason I've asked you all here so that the one who did change the chart can tell me. I'll take no disciplinary action in this case. I'm asking this so I can punish the helmsman on duty if he was bribed or threatened into letting the chart be changed. In the interests of all our safety it is up to me to find out who it was."

There was a pause. Then one of them spoke. "It was I. And I did not bribe the helmsman. I altered the chart days ago while it was still in your cabin."

"It was a foolish thing to do," Arflane said wearily. "But I thought it would have been you. Presumably this was when you were trying to get us to turn back."

"I still think we should turn back," Ulsenn said. "Just as I altered the chart, I'll use any means in my power to convince either you or the men of the folly of this venture."

Arflane stood up, his expression suddenly murderous. Then he controlled himself and leant forward over the table, resting his weight on his palms. "If there's any more trouble aboard of that kind, Lord Ulsenn," he said icily, "I will not hold an enquiry. Neither will I ignore it. I will make no attempt to be just. I will simply put you in irons for the rest of the voyage."

Ulsenn shrugged and scratched ostentatiously at the side of his face.

"Very well," Arflane told them. "You may all leave. I expect the officers to pay attention to any suspicious action Lord Janek Ulsenn might make in future, and I want it reported. I'd also appreciate the co-operation of the other passengers. In future I will treat Ulsenn as an irresponsible fool—but he can remain free so long as he doesn't endanger us again."

Angered by the slight, Ulsenn stamped from the cabin and slammed the door in the faces of his wife and Manfred Rorsefne as they attempted to follow him.

Hinsen was smiling as he left, but the faces of Petchnyoff and Urquart were expressionless, doubtless for very different reasons.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Urquart's Fear

THE SHIP SAILED on, with the crew convinced of their skipper's outstanding luck. The weather was good, the wind strong and steady, and they made excellent speed. The ice was clear of glaciers or other obstructions as long as they followed old Rorsefne's chart closely and thus they were able to sail both day and night.

One night, as Arflane stood with Urquart on the bridge, they saw a glow on the horizon that resembled the first signs of dawn. Arflane checked the big old chronometer in the wheelhouse. The time was a few minutes before six bells in the middle watch—three in the morning.

Arflane rejoined Urquart on the bridge. The harpooner's face was troubled. He sniffed the air, turning his head this way and that, his flat bone earrings swinging. Arflane could smell nothing.

"Do you know what it means?" he asked Urquart.

Urquart grunted and rubbed at his chin. As the ship sped closer to the source of the reddish light, Arflane himself began to notice a slight difference in the smell of the air, but he could not define it.

Without a word Urquart left the bridge and began to walk forward, hefting his harpoon up and down in his right hand. He seemed unusually nervous.

Within an hour the glow on the horizon filled half the sky and illuminated the ice with blood-red light. It was a bizarre sight; the smell on the breeze had become much stronger; an acrid, musty odour that was entirely unfamiliar to Arflane. He, too, began to feel troubled. The air seemed to be warmer, the whole deck awash with the strange light. Ivory beams, belaying pins, hatch-covers and the whale skulls in the prow all reflected it; the face of the helmsman in the wheelhouse was stained red, as were the features of the men on watch who looked questioningly up at him. Night was virtually turned to day, though overhead the sky was pitch black—blackier than it normally seemed now that it contrasted with the lurid glare ahead.

Hinsen came out on to deck and climbed the companionway to stand beside Arflane. "What is it, sir?" He shuddered violently and moistened his lips.

Arflane ignored him, re-entered the wheelhouse and consulted Rorsefne's map. He had not been using the old man's original, but a clearer copy. Now he unrolled the original and peered at it in the red, shifting light from the horizon. Hinsen joined him, staring over his shoulder at the chart.

"Damn," Arflane murmured. "It's here and we ignored it. The writing's so hard to read. Can you see what it says, Mr. Hinsen?"

Hinsen's lips moved as he tried to make out the tiny printed words that Rorsefne had inscribed in his failing hand before he died. He shook his head and gave a weak smile of apology. "Sorry, sir."

Arflane tapped two fingers on the chart. "We need a scholar for this."

"Manfred Rorsefne, sir? I think he might be something of a scholar."

"Go fetch him please, Mr. Hinsen."

Hinsen nodded and left the wheelhouse. The air bore an unmistakable stink now. Arflane found it hard to breathe, for it carried dust that clogged his mouth and throat.

The light, now tinged with yellow, was unstable. It flickered over the ice and the swiftly-travelling ship. Sometimes part of the schooner was in shadow, sometimes it was illuminated completely. Arflane was reminded of something that had frightened him long ago. He was beginning to guess the meaning of old Rorsefne's script well before Manfred Rorsefne, rubbing at his eyes with one finger, appeared in the wheelhouse.

"It's like a great fire," he said and glanced down at the chart Arflane was trying to show him. Arflane pointed to the word.

"Can you make that out? Can you read your uncle's writing better than us?"

Manfred frowned for a moment and then his face cleared. "Fire mountains," he said. "That's it. Volcanoes was the old word for them. I was right. It is fire." He looked at Arflane with some anxiety, his air of insouciance gone completely.

"Fire . . ." Arflane, too, made no attempt to disguise the horror he felt. Fire, in the mythology of the ice, was the arch enemy of the Ice Mother. Fire was evil. Fire destroyed. It melted the ice. It warmed things that should naturally be cold.

"We'd better throw out the grapples, captain," Hinsen said thickly.

But Arflane was consulting the chart. He shook his head. "We'll be all right, Mr. Hinsen, I hope. This course takes us through the fire mountains as far as I can tell. We don't get close to them at all—not enough to endanger ourselves at any rate. Rorsefne's chart's been good up to now. We'll hold our course."

Hinsen looked at him nervously but said nothing.

Manfred Rorsefne's initial anxiety seemed over. He was looking at the horizon with a certain curiosity. "Flaming mountains" he exclaimed. "What wonders we're finding, captain!"

"I'll be happier when this particular wonder's past," Arflane said with an attempt at humour. He cleared his throat twice, slapped his hand against his leg and paced about the wheelhouse. The helmsman's face caught his attention; it was a parody of fear. Arflane forgot his own nervousness in his laughter at the sight. He slapped the helmsman on the shoulder. "Cheer up, man. We'll sail miles to starboard of the nearest if that chart's accurate!" Rorsefne joined in his laughter and even Hinsen began to smile.

"I'll take the wheel, sir, if you like," Hinsen said. Arflane nodded and tapped the helmsman's arm.

"All right, lad," Arflane told him as Hinsen took over. "You get below. You don't want to be blinded."

He went out on to the bridge, his face tense as he looked towards the horizon.

Soon they could see the individual mountains silhouetted in the distance. Red and yellow flames and rolling black smoke gouted from their craters and luminous crimson lava streamed down their sides; the heat was appalling and the poisoned air stung and clogged their lungs. From time to time a cloud of smoke would drift across the ship, making strange patterns of light and shadow on the decks

and sails. The earth shook slightly and across the ice came the distant rumble of the volcanoes.

The scene was so unfamiliar to them that they could hardly believe in its reality; it was like a nightmare landscape. Though the night was turned almost as bright as day and they could see for miles in all directions, the light was lurid and shifted constantly, and when not obscured by the smoke they could make out the dark sky with the stars and the moon clearly visible.

Arflane noticed that the others were sweating as much as he. He looked for Urquart and saw the outline of the harpooner forward, unmistakable with his barbed lance held close to his body. He left the bridge and moved through the weird light towards Urquart, his shadow huge and distorted.

Before he reached the harpooner, he saw him fall to both knees on the deck near the prow. The harpoon was allowed to fall in front of him. Arflane hurried forward and saw, even in that light, that Urquart's face was as pale as the ice. The man was muttering to himself and his body was racked by violent shuddering; his eyes were firmly shut. Perhaps it was the nature of the light, but on his knees Urquart looked impossibly small, as if the fire had melted him. Arflane touched his shoulder, astounded by this change in a man whom he regarded as the soul of courage and self-control.

"Urquart? Are you ill?"

The lids opened, revealing prominent whites and rolling orbs. The savage features, scarred by wind, snow and frost-bite, twitched.

To Arflane the display was almost a betrayal; he had looked to Urquart as his model. He reached out and grasped the man's broad shoulders, shaking him ferociously. "Urquart! Come on, man! Pull yourself out of this!"

The eyes fell shut and the strange muttering continued; Arflane furiously smacked the harpooner across the face with the back of his hand. "Urquart!"

Urquart flinched at the blow but did nothing; then he flung himself face forward on the deck, spreadeagled as if in cringing obeisance to the fire. Arflane turned, wondering why so many emotions in him should be disturbed. He strode rapidly back to the bridge saying nothing to Manfred

Rorsefne as he rejoined him. Men were coming out on deck now; they looked both frightened and fascinated as they recognised the source of the light and the stink.

Arflane raised the megaphone to his lips.

"Back to your berths, lads. We're sailing well away from the mountains and we'll be through them by dawn. Back below. I want you fresh for your duties in the morning."

Reluctantly, muttering among themselves, the sailors began to drift back below decks. As the last little knot of men climbed the companionway to their quarters Janek Ulsenn emerged from below the bridge. He glanced quickly at Arflane and then moved along the deck to stand by the mizzen mast. Petchnyoff came out a few seconds later and also began to make his way towards the mizzen. Arflane bawled at him through the megaphone.

"To your berth, Mr. Petchnyoff! It's not your turn on watch. The passengers can do what they want—but you've your duty to remember."

Petchnyoff paused then glared at Arflane defiantly. Arflane motioned with the megaphone. "We don't need your help, thanks. Get back to your cabin."

Petchnyoff now turned towards Ulsenn, as if expecting orders. Ulsenn signed with his hand and in poor grace Petchnyoff went back below. Shortly afterwards Ulsenn followed him. Arflane reflected that they were probably nursing their imagined wrongs together, but as long as there were no more incidents to affect the voyage he did not care what the two men said to each other.

A little while later he ordered the watch aloft changed and gave orders to the new look-outs to keep a special eye open for any sign of an ice break or the steam that would indicate one of the small warm lakes fed by underground geysers that would doubtless occur in this region. That done, he decided to get some sleep himself. Hinsen had been roused well before his turn on watch was due to begin, so Manfred Rorsefne agreed to share the morning watch with him.

Before he opened the door of his cabin, Arflane glanced back along the deck. The red, shadowy light played over Urquart's still prone figure as if in a victory dance. Arflane rubbed at his beard, hesitated, then went into his cabin and closed the door firmly behind him. He stripped off his

coat and laid it on the lid of his chest, then went to the water-barrel in one corner and poured water into a bowl, washing himself clean of the sweat and dust that covered him. The image of Urquart preyed on his mind ; he could not understand why the man should be so affected by the fire mountains. Naturally, since fire was their ancient enemy, they were all disturbed by it, but Urquart's fear was hysterical.

Arflane drew off his boots and leggings and washed the rest of his body. Then he lay down on the wide bunk, finding it difficult to sleep. Finally he fell into a fitful doze, rising as soon as the cook knocked on the door with his breakfast. He ate little, washed again and dressed, then went out on deck, noticing at once that Urquart was no longer there.

The morning was overcast and in the distance the fire mountains could still be seen ; in the daylight they did not look so alarming. He saw that the sails had been blackened by the smoke and that the whole deck was smothered in a light, clinging grey ash.

The ship was moving slowly, the runners hampered by the ash that also covered the ice for miles around, but the fire mountains were well behind them. Arflane dragged his body up to the bridge, feeling tired and ill. The men on deck and in the yards were also moving with apparent lethargy. Doubtless they were all suffering from the effects of the fumes they had inhaled the night before.

Petchnyoff met him on the bridge. The first officer was taking his turn on watch and made no attempt to greet him ; Arflane ignored him, went into the wheelhouse and took a megaphone from the wall. He returned to the bridge and called to the bosun who was on duty on the middle deck. "Let's get this craft ship-shape, bosun. I want this filth cleaned off every surface and every inch of sail as soon as you like."

Fydur acknowledged Arflane's order with a movement of his hand. "Aye, aye, sir."

"You'd better get the grappling anchors over the side," Arflane continued. "We'll rest in our lines for today while she's cleaned. There must be warm ponds somewhere. We'll send out a party to find them and bring us back some fresh seal-meat."

Fydur brightened up at the prospect of fresh meat. "Aye, aye, sir," he said emphatically.

Since they had been becalmed Fydur seemed to have avoided the company of Ulsenn and Petchnyoff, and Arflane was sure the bosun was no longer in league with them.

At Fydur's instructions the sails were taken in and the grappling anchors heaved over the side so that their sharp barbs dug into the ice, gradually slowing the ship to a stop. Then a party of mooring hands were sent over to drive in the pegs and secure the *Ice Spirit* until she was ready to sail.

As soon as the men were working on cleaning the schooner and volunteers had been called to form an expedition to look for the warm ponds and the seals that would inevitably be there, Arflane went below and knocked on the door of Urquart's small cabin. There was a stirring sound and a heavy thump from within, but no reply.

"Urquart," Arflane said hesitantly. "May I enter? It's Arflane."

Another noise from the cabin and the door was flung open, revealing Urquart standing glaring. The harpooner was stripped to the waist. His long, sinewy arms were covered in tiny tattoos and his muscled torso seemed to be a mass of white scars. But it was the fresh wound, across his upper arm, that Arflane noticed. He frowned and pointed to it.

"How did this happen?"

Urquart grunted and stepped backward into the crowded cabin that was little bigger than a cupboard. His chest of belongings filled one bulkhead and the other was occupied by the bunk. Furs were scattered over the bunk and on the floor. Urquart's harpoon stood against the opposite bulkhead, dominating the tiny cabin. A knife lay on top of the chest and beside it was a bowl of blood.

Then Arflane realised the truth; that Urquart had been letting his blood for the Ice Mother. It was a custom that had almost died out in recent generations. When a man had blasphemed or otherwise offended the Ice Mother then he let his blood and poured it into the ice, giving the deity some of his warmth and life. Arflane wondered what particular blasphemy Urquart felt he had committed; though

doubtless it was something to do with his hysteria of the previous night.

Arflane nodded enquiringly at the bowl. Urquart shrugged. He seemed to have recovered his composure.

Arflane leaned against the bunk. "What happened last night?" he asked as casually as he could. "Did you offend against the Mother?"

Urquart turned his back and began to pull on his matted furs. "I was weak," he grunted. "I lay down in fear of the enemy."

"It offered us no harm," Arflane told him.

"I know the harm it offered," Urquart said. "I have done what I think I should do. I hope it is enough." He tied the thongs of his coat and went to the porthole, opening it; then he picked up the bowl and flung the blood through the opening to the ice beyond.

Closing the porthole, he threw the bowl back on top of the chest, crossed to grasp his harpoon and then paused, his face as rigid as ever, waiting for Arflane to let him pass.

Arflane remained where he was.

"I ask only in a spirit of comradeship, Urquart," he said. "If you could tell me about last night . . ."

"You should *know*," Urquart growled. "You are Her chosen one, not I." The harpooner was referring to the Ice Mother, but Arflane was still puzzled. However, it was evident that Urquart did not intend to say anything more. Arflane turned and walked into the gangway. Urquart followed him, stooping a little to avoid striking his head on the beams. They went out on deck. Urquart strode forward without a word and began to climb the rigging of the foremast. Arflane watched him until he reached the upper yards, his harpoon still cradled in his arm, to hang in the rigging and stare back at the fire mountains that were now so far away.

Arflane gestured impatiently, feeling offended at the other's surliness, and went back to the bridge.

By evening the ship had been cleaned of every sign of the ash that had fouled her, but the hunting party had not returned. Arflane wished that he had given them more explicit instructions and told them to return before dusk, but he had not expected any difficulty locating a pond. They had taken a small sailboat and should have made good

speed; now the *Ice Spirit* would have to wait until they returned and it was unlikely that they would travel at night, which meant that the next morning would doubtless be wasted as well. Arflane was to take the middle watch again and would need to be on duty at midnight. He decided, as the watch rang the four bells terminating the first dog watch, that he would try to sleep to catch up on the rest he had been unable to get the previous night.

The evening was quiet as he took one quick tour around the deck before going to his cabin. There were a few muffled sounds of men working, a little subdued conversation, but nothing to disturb the air of peace about the ship.

Arflane glanced up as he reached the foredeck. Urquart was still there, hanging as if frozen in the rigging. It was more difficult to understand the strange harpooner than Arflane had thought. Now he was too tired to bother. He walked back towards the bridge and entered his cabin. He was soon asleep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Attack

AUTOMATICALLY, ARFLANE AWOKE as seven bells were struck above, giving him half an hour before his spell on watch. He washed and dressed and prepared to leave his cabin by the outer door; then a knock came on the door that opened on the gangway between decks.

"Enter," he said brusquely.

The handle turned and Ulrica Ulsenn stood facing him. Her face was slightly flushed but she looked at him squarely. He began to smile, opening his arms to take her, but she shook her head as she closed the door behind her.

"My husband is planning—with Petchnyoff—to—murder you, Konrad." She pressed her hand against her forehead. "I overheard him talking with Petchnyoff in his cabin. Their idea is to kill you and bury your body in the ice tonight."

She looked at him steadily. "I came to tell you," she said, almost defiantly.

Arflane folded his arms across his chest and smiled. "Thanks. Petchynoff knows it's my turn on watch soon. They'll doubtless try to do it when I'm taking my tour around the deck. I wondered if they had that in mind. Well . . ." He went over to his chest, took out the belt that held his scabbarded fenching cutlass and buckled it on. "Perhaps this will end it, at last."

"You'll kill him?" she asked quietly.

"There'll be two of them. It's fair."

He stepped towards her and she drew away. He put out a hand and gripped the back of her neck, drawing her to him. She came reluctantly, then slid her arms around his waist as he stroked her hair. He heard her give a deep, racking sigh.

"I really didn't expect him to go this far," Arflane said after a moment. "I thought he had some sense of honour."

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "You've taken it all away from him," she said. "You have humiliated him too much . . ."

"From no malice," he said. "Self protection."

"So you say, Konrad."

He shrugged. "Maybe. But if he'd challenged me openly I would have refused. I can easily kill him. I would have refused the chance. But now . . ."

She moaned and flung herself away from him on to the bunk, covering her face. "Either way it would be murder, Konrad. You've driven him to this!"

"He's driven himself to it. Stay here."

He left the cabin and stepped lightly on deck; his manner was apparently casual as he glanced around him. He turned and ascended the companionway to the bridge. Manfred Rorsefne was there. He nodded agreeably to Arflane. "I sent Hinsen below an hour ago. He seemed tired."

"It was good of you," Arflane said. "Do you know if the hunting party's returned yet?"

"They're not back."

Arflane muttered abstractedly, looking up into the rigging.

"I'll get to my own bunk now, I think," Rorsefne said.

"Good night, captain."

"Good night." Arflane watched Rorsefne descend to the middle deck and disappear below.

The night was very still. The wind was light and made little sound. Arflane heard the man on watch on the upper foredeck stamp his feet to get the stiffness from them.

It would be an hour before he took his second tour. He guessed that it would be then that Ulsenn and Petchnyoff would attempt to stage their attack. He went into the wheelhouse. As they were at anchor, there was no helmsman on duty; doubtless this was why the two men had chosen this night to try to kill him; there would be no witness.

Arflane climbed down to the middle deck, looking aft at the distant but still visible glow from the fire mountains. It reminded him of Urquart; he looked up to see the harpooner still hanging high above in the rigging of the foremast. He could expect no help from Urquart that night.

There was a commotion in the distance; he ran to the rail to peer into the night, seeing a few figures running desperately towards the ship. As they came closer he recognised some of the men from the hunting party. They were shouting incoherently. He dashed to the nearest tackle locker and wrenched it open, pulling out a rope ladder. He rushed back to the rail and lowered the ladder down the side; he cupped his hands and yelled over the ice.

"This way aboard!"

The first of the sailors ran up and grabbed the ladder, beginning to climb. Arflane heard him panting heavily. He reached down and helped the man aboard; he was exhausted, his furs torn and his right hand bleeding from a deep cut.

"What happened?" Arflane asked urgently.

"Barbarians, sir. I've never seen anything like them, skipper. They're not like true men at all. They've got a camp near the warm ponds. They saw us before we saw them . . . They use—*fire*, sir."

Arflane tightened his lips and slapped the man on the back. "Get below and alert all hands."

As he spoke a streak of flame flew out of the night and took the man on lower foredeck watch in the throat. Arflane saw it was a burning arrow. The man shrieked and

beat at the flames with his gloved hands, then toppled backwards and fell dead on the deck.

All at once the night was alive with the blazing arrows. The sailors on deck flung themselves flat in sheer terror, reacting with a fear born of centuries of conditioning. The arrows landing on the deck burned out harmlessly, but some struck the canvas and here and there a furled sail was beginning to flare. Sailors screamed as arrows struck them and their furs caught light. A man went threshing past Arflane, his whole body a mass of flame. There were small fires all over the ship.

Arflane rushed for the bridge and began to ring the alarm bell furiously, yelling through the megaphone. "All hands on deck! Break out the weapons! Stand by to defend ship!"

From the bridge he could see the leading barbarians. In shape they were human, but were completely covered in silvery white hair; otherwise they seemed to be naked. Some carried flaming brands; all had quivers of arrows slung over their shoulders and powerful-looking bone bows in their hands.

As armed sailors began to hurry on deck holding bows of their own and harpoons and cutlasses, Arflane called to the archers to aim for the barbarians with the brands. Further down the deck Petchnyoff commanded a gang forming a bucket chain to douse the burning sails.

Arflane leant over the bridge rail, shouting to Fydur as he ran past with an armful of bows and half a dozen quivers of arrows. "Let's have one of those up here, bosun!"

The bosun paused to select a weapon and a quiver and throw it up to Arflane who caught it deftly, slung the quiver over his shoulder, nocked an arrow to the string and drew it back. He let fly at one of the brand-holding barbarians and saw the man fall to the ice with the arrow protruding from his mouth.

A fire arrow flashed towards him. He felt a slight shock as the thing buried itself in his left shoulder, but if there was pain he did not notice it in his panic. The flames unnerved him. With a shaking hand he dragged out the shaft and flung it from him, slapping at his blazing coat until the flames were gone. Then he was forced to grip the rail with his right hand and steady himself; he felt sick.

After a moment he picked up the bow and fitted another arrow to the string. There were only two or three brands to be seen on the ice now and the barbarians seemed to be backing off. Arflane took aim at one of the brands and missed, but another arrow from somewhere killed the man. Arrows were still coming out of the night; most of them were not on fire. The silvery coats of the barbarians made them excellent targets and they were beginning to fall in great numbers before the retaliating shafts of Arflane's archers.

The attack had come on the port side; now some premonition made Arflane turn and look to starboard.

Unnoticed, nearly a dozen white-furred barbarians had managed to climb to the deck. They rushed across the deck, their red eyes blazing and their mouths snarling. Arflane shot one and stooped to grasp the megaphone to bellow a warning. He dropped the bow, drew his cutlass and vaulted over the bridge rail to the deck.

One of the barbarians shot at him and missed. Arflane slammed the hilt of his sword into the man's face and swung at another, feeling the sharp blade bite into his neck. Other sailors had joined him and were attacking the barbarians, whose bows were useless at such close quarters. Arflane saw Manfred Rorsefne beside him; the man grinned at him.

"This is more like it, eh, captain?"

Arflane threw himself at the barbarians, stabbing one clumsily in the chest and hacking him down. Elsewhere the sailors were butchering the remaining barbarians who were hopelessly outnumbered.

The noise of the battle died away and there were no more barbarians to kill. On Arflane's right a man was screaming.

It was Petchnyoff. There were two fire arrows in him; one in his groin and the other near his heart. A few little flames burned on his clothes and his face was blackened by fire. By the time Arflane had reached him, he was dead.

Arflane went back to the bridge. "Set all sail! Let's move away from here."

Men began to scramble eagerly up the masts to let out the sails that were undamaged. Others let go the anchor lines and the ship began to move. A few last arrows rattled

on the deck. They glimpsed the white forms of the barbarians disappearing behind them as the huge ship gathered speed.

Arflane looked back, breathing heavily and clutching his wounded shoulder. Still there was little pain. Nonetheless it would be reasonable to attend to it. Hinsen came along the deck. "Take charge, Mr. Hinsen," he said. "I'm going below."

At his cabin door Arflane hesitated, then changed his mind and moved along to pass through the main door into the gangway where the passengers had their cabins. The gangway joined the one which led to his cabin, but he did not want to see Ulrica for the moment. He walked along the dark passage until he reached Ulsenn's door.

He tried the handle. It was locked. He leant backwards and smashed his foot into it; the exertion made his wounded shoulder begin to throb painfully. He realised that the wound was worse than he thought.

Ulsenn wheeled as Arflane entered. The man had been standing looking out of the port.

"What do you mean by . . . ?"

"I'm arresting you," Arflane said, his voice slurred by the pain.

"For what?" Ulsenn drew himself up. "I . . ."

"For plotting to murder me."

"You're lying."

Arflane had no intention of mentioning Ulrica's name. Instead he said: "Petchnyoff told me."

"Petchnyoff is dead."

"He told me as he died."

Ulsenn tried to shrug but the gesture was pathetic. "Then Petchnyoff was lying. You've no evidence."

"I need none. I'm captain."

Ulsenn's face crumpled as if he were about to weep. He looked utterly defeated. This time his shrug was one of despair. "What more do you want from me, Arflane?" he said wearily.

For a moment Arflane regarded Ulsenn and pitied him, the pity tinged with his own guilt. The man looked up at him almost pleadingly. "Where's my wife?" he said.

"She's safe."

"I want to see her."

"No."

Ulsenn sat down on the edge of his bunk and put his face in his hands.

Arflane left the cabin and closed the door. He went to the door that led out to the deck and called two sailors over. "Lord Ulsenn's cabin is the third on the right. He's under arrest. I want you to put a bar across the door and guard it until you're relieved. I'll wait while you get the materials you need."

When Arflane had supervised the work and the bar was in place with the door chained to it to his satisfaction, he walked down the gangway to his own cabin.

Ulrica had fallen asleep in his bunk. He left her where she lay and went to her cabin, packing her things into her chest and dragging it up the gangway under the curious eyes of the sailors on guard outside Ulsenn's door. He got the chest into his cabin and heaved it into place beside his; then he took off his clothes and inspected his shoulder. It had bled quite badly but had now stopped. It would be all right until morning.

He lay down beside Ulrica.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Pain

IN THE MORNING the pain in his shoulder had increased; he winced and opened his eyes.

Ulrica was already up, turning the spigot of the big water-barrel, soaking a piece of cloth. She came back to the bunk, face pale and set, and began to bathe the inflamed shoulder. It only seemed to make the pain worse.

"You'd better find Hinsen," he told her. "He'll know how to treat the wound."

She nodded silently and began to rise. He grasped her arm with his right hand.

"Ulrica. Do you know what happened last night?"

"A barbarian raid, wasn't it?" she said tonelessly. "I saw fire."

"I meant your husband—what I did."

"You killed him." Again the statement was flat.

"No. He didn't attack me as he'd planned. The raid came too soon. He's in his cabin—confined there until the voyage is over."

She smiled a little ironically then. "You're merciful," she said finally, then turned and left the cabin.

A little while later she came back with Hinsen and the second officer did what was necessary. She helped him bind Arflane's shoulder. Infection was rare on the iceplains, but the wound would take some time to heal.

"Thirty men died last night, sir," Hinsen told him, "and we've six wounded. The going will be harder with us so undermanned."

Arflane grunted agreement. "I'll talk to you later, Mr. Hinsen. We'll need Fydur's advice."

"He's one of the dead, sir, along with Mr. Petchnyoff."

"I see. Then you're now first officer and Urquart second. You'd better find a good man to promote to bosun."

"I've got one in mind, sir—Rorchenof. He was bosun on the *Ildiko Ulsenn*."

"Fine. Where's Mr. Urquart?"

"In the fore rigging, sir. He was there during the fight and he's been there ever since. He wouldn't answer when I called to him, sir. If I hadn't noticed his breathing I'd have thought he was frozen."

"See if you can get him down. If not, I'll attend to it later."

"Aye, aye, sir." Hinsen went out.

Ulrica was standing near her trunk, looking down at it thoughtfully.

"Why are you so depressed?" he said, turning his head on the pillow and looking directly at her.

She shrugged, sighed and sat down on the trunk, folding her arms under her breasts. "I wonder how much of this we have engineered between us," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Janek—the way he has behaved. Couldn't we have forced him to do what he did, so that we could then feel we'd acted righteously? Couldn't this whole situation have been brought about by us?"

"I didn't want him aboard in the first place. You know that."

"But he had no choice. He was forced to join us by the manner of *our* actions."

"I didn't ask him to plan to kill me."

"Possibly you forced him to that point." She clasped her hands together tightly. "I don't know."

"What do you want me to do, Ulrica?"

"I expect you to do no more."

"We are together."

"Yes."

Arflane sat up in his bunk. "This is what has happened," he said, almost defensively. "How can we change it now?"

Outside the wind howled and snow was flung against the porthole. The ship rocked slightly to the motion of the runners over the rough ice; Arflane's shoulder throbbed in pain. Later she came and lay beside him and together they listened as the storm grew worse outside.

Feeling the force of the driving snow against his face and body, Arflane felt better as he left the cabin in the late afternoon and, with some difficulty, climbed the slippery companionway to the bridge where Manfred Rorsefne stood.

"How are you, captain?" Rorsefne asked. His voice was at once distant and agreeable.

"I'm fine. Where are the officers?"

"Mr. Hinsen's aloft and Mr. Urquart went below. I'm keeping an eye on the bridge. I'm feeling quite professional."

"How's she handling?"

"Well, under the circumstances." Rorsefne pointed upwards through the rigging, partially obscured by the wall of falling snow. Dark shapes, bundled in furs, moved among the crosstrees. Sails were being reefed. "You picked a good crew, Captain Arflane. How is my cousin?" The question was thrown in casually, but Arflane did not miss the implication.

The ship began to slow. Arflane cast a glance towards the wheelhouse before he answered Rorsefne. "She's all right. You know what's happened?"

"I anticipated it." Rorsefne smiled quietly and raised his head to stare directly aloft.

"You . . ." Arflane was unable to frame the question. "How . . . ?"

"It's not my concern, captain," Rorsefne interrupted. "After all, you've full command over all who sail in this schooner." The irony was plain. Rorsefne nodded to Arflane and left the bridge, climbing carefully down the companionway.

Arflane shrugged, watching Rorsefne walk through the snow that was settling on the middle deck. The weather was getting worse and would not improve; winter was coming and they were heading north. With a third of their complement short they were going to be in serious trouble unless they could make the best possible speed to New York. He shrugged again; he felt mentally and physically exhausted and was past the point where he could feel even simple anxiety.

As the last light faded Urquart emerged from below the bridge and looked up at him. The harpooner seemed to have recovered himself; he hefted his lance in the crook of his arm and swung up the companionway to stand by the rail next to Arflane. He seemed to be taking an almost sensual pleasure in the bite of the wind and snow against his face and body. "You are with that woman now, captain?" he said remotely.

"Yes."

"She will destroy you." Urquart spat into the wind and turned away. "I will see to clearing the hatch covers."

Watching Urquart as he supervised the work on the deck, Arflane wondered suddenly if the harpooner's warnings were inspired by simple jealousy of Arflane's relationship with the woman who was, after all, Urquart's half-sister. That would also explain the man's strong dislike of Ulsenn.

Arflane remained needlessly on deck for another hour before eventually going below.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Fog

AUTUMN RAPIDLY BECAME winter as the ship moved northwards. The following weeks saw a worsening of the weather, the overworked crew of the ice schooner finding it harder and harder to manage the vessel efficiently. Only Urquart seemed grimly determined to ensure that she stayed on course and made the best speed she could. Because of the almost constant snow storms the ship travelled slowly ; New York was still several hundred miles distant.

Most of the time it was impossible to see ahead ; when the snow was not falling fogs and mists would engulf the great ship, often so thick that visibility extended for less than two yards. In Arflane's cabin the lovers huddled together, united as much by their misery as their passion. Manfred Rorsefne had been the only one who bothered to visit Janek Ulsenn ; he reported to Arflane that the man seemed to be bearing his imprisonment with fortitude if not with good humour. Arflane received the news without comment. His native taciturnity had increased to the point where on certain days he would not speak at all and would lie motionless in his bunk from morning to night. In such a mood he would not eat and Ulrica would lie with him, her head on his shoulder, listening to the slow bump of the runners on the ice and the creak of the yards, the sound of the snow falling on the deck above their heads. When these sounds were muffled by the fog it seemed that the cabin floated apart from the rest of the ship. In these moments Arflane and Ulrica would feel their passion return and would make violent love as if there were no time left to them. Afterwards Arflane would go out to the fog-shrouded bridge to stand there and learn from Hinsén, Urquart or Manfred Rorsefne the distance they had travelled. He had become a sinister figure to the men, and even the officers, with the exception of Urquart, seemed uneasy in his presence. They noticed how Arflane had appeared to age ; his face was lined and his shoulders stooped. He rarely looked at them directly but stared

abstractedly out into the falling snow or fog. Every so often, apparently without realising it, Arflane would give a long sigh and he would make some nervous movement, brushing rime from his beard or tapping at the rail. While Hinsen and Rorsefne felt concerned for their skipper, Urquart appeared disdainful and tended to ignore him. For his part, Arflane did not appear to care whether he saw Hinsen and Rorsefne or not, but made evident efforts to avoid Urquart whenever he could. On several occasions when he was standing on the bridge and saw Urquart advancing he hastily descended the companionway and disappeared below before the second officer could reach him. Generally Urquart did not appear to notice this retreat, but once he was seen to smile a trifle grimly when the door of Arflane's cabin closed with a bang as the harpooner climbed to the bridge.

Hinsen and Rorsefne talked often. Rorsefne was the only man aboard in whom Hinsen could confide his own anxiety. The atmosphere among the men was not so much one of tension as of an apathy reflected in the sporadic progress of the ship.

"It often seems to me that we'll stop altogether," Hinsen said, "and live out the rest of our lives in a timeless shroud of fog. Everything's got so hazy . . ."

Rorsefne nodded sympathetically. The young man did not seem so much depressed as careless about their fate.

"Cheer up, Mr. Hinsen. We'll be all right. Listen to Mr. Urquart. It's our destiny to reach New York . . ."

"I wish the captain would tell the men that," Hinsen said gloomily. "I wish he'd tell them something—anything."

Rorsefne nodded, his face for once thoughtful.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Light

THE MORNING AFTER Hinsen's and Rorsefne's conversation Arflane was woken up by the sound of knocking on the outer door of his cabin. He rose slowly, pushing the furs back over Ulrica's sleeping body. He pulled on his coat and leggings and unbolted the door.

Manfred Rorsefne stood there; behind him the fog swirled, creeping into the cabin. The young man's arms were folded over his chest; his head was cocked superciliously to one side. "May I speak to you, captain?"

"Later," Arflane grunted, casting a glance at the bunk where Ulrica was stirring.

"It's important," Manfred said, advancing.

Arflane shrugged and stepped back to let Rorsefne enter as Ulrica opened her eyes and saw them both. She frowned. "Manfred . . ."

"Good morning, cousin," Rorsefne said. His voice had a touch of humour in it which neither Arflane nor Ulrica could understand. They looked at him warily.

"I spoke to Mr. Hinsen this morning," Rorsefne said, walking over to where Arflane's chest stood next to Ulrica's. "He seems to think the weather will be clearing soon." He sat down on the chest. "If he's right we'll be making better speed shortly."

"Why should he think that?" Arflane asked without real interest.

"The fog seems to be dispersing. There's been little snow for some days. The air is drier. I think Mr. Hinsen's experienced enough to make the right judgment by these signs."

Arflane nodded, wondering what was Rorsefne's real reason for the visit. Ulrica had turned over, burying her face in the fur of the pillows and drawing the coverings over her neck.

"How's your shoulder?" Rorsefne asked casually.

"All right," Arflane grunted.

"You don't appear well, captain."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Arflane said defensively. He straightened his stooped back a little and walked slowly to the bowl by the water barrel. He turned the spigot and filled the bowl, beginning to wash his lined face.

"Morale is bad on board," Rorsefne continued.

"So it seems."

"Urquart is keeping the men moving, but they need someone with more experience to make them do their best," Rorsefne said meaningly.

"Urquart seems to be managing very well," Arflane said.

"So he is—but that's not my point. You know it's not."

Surprised by the directness of Rorsefne's implication, Arflane turned, drying his face on his sleeve. "It's not your business," he said.

"Indeed, you're right. It's the captain's business, surely, to deal with the problems of his own ship. My uncle gave you this command because he thought you were the only man who could be sure of getting the *Ice Spirit* to New York."

"That was long ago," said Arflane obliquely.

"I'm refreshing your memory, captain."

"Is that all your uncle wanted? It would seem to me that he envisaged very well what would happen on the voyage. He all but offered me his daughter, Rorsefne, just before he died." In the bunk Ulrica buried her head deeper in the pillows.

"I know. But I don't think he completely understood either your character or hers. He saw something as happening naturally. He didn't think Janek would come with us. I doubt if my uncle knew the meaning of conscience in the personal sense. He did not understand how a sense of guilt could lead to apathy and self-destruction."

Arflane's tone was defensive when he replied. "First you discuss the condition of morale on board, and now you tell me what Ulrica and myself feel. What did you come here for?"

"All these things are connected. You know that very well, captain." Rorsefne stood up. Although actually the shorter he seemed to dominate Arflane. "You're ill and your sickness is mental and emotional. The men understand this, even if they're too inarticulate to voice it. We're desperately short-handed. Where we need the men doing the work of two, we find they'll scarcely perform what were their normal duties before the attack. They respect Urquart, but they fear him too. He's alien. They need a man with whom they feel some kinship. You were that man. Now they begin to think you're as strange as Urquart."

Arflane rubbed his forehead. "What does it matter now? The ship can hardly move with the weather as it is. What do you expect me to do, go out there and fill them full of confidence so they can then sit around on deck singing songs instead of mumbling while they wait for the fog to lift? What good will it do? What action's *needed*? None."

"I told you that Hinsen feels the weather's clearing," Rorsefne said patiently. "Besides you know yourself how important a skipper's manner is, whatever the situation. You should not reveal so much of yourself out there, captain."

Arflane began to tie the thongs of his coat, his fingers moving slowly. He shook his head and sighed again.

Rorsefne took a step closer. "Go round the ship, Captain Arflane. See if the sailor in you is happy with her condition. The sails are slackly furled, the decks are piled with dirty snow, hatch covers left unfastened, rigging badly lashed. The ship's as sick as you yourself. She's about ready to rot!"

"Leave me," Arflane said, turning his back on Rorsefne. "I don't need moral advice from you. If you realised the problem . . ."

"I don't care. My concern's for the ship, those she carries, and her mission. My cousin loved you because you were a better man than Ulsenn. You had the strength she knew Ulsenn didn't possess. Now you're no better than Ulsenn. You've forfeited the right to her love. Don't you sense it?"

Rorsefne went to the cabin door, pulled it open and stalked out, slamming it behind him.

Ulrica turned in the bunk and looked up at Arflane, her expression questioning.

"You think what he thinks, eh?" Arflane said.

"I don't know. It's more complicated . . ."

"That's true," Arflane murmured bitterly. His anger was rising; it seemed to lend new vitality to his movements as he stalked about the cabin gathering his outer garments.

"He's right," she said reflectively, "to remind you of your duties as captain."

"He's a passenger—a useless piece of cargo—he has no right to tell me anything!"

"My cousin's an intelligent man. What's more he likes you, feels sympathetic towards you . . ."

"That's not apparent. He criticises without understanding . . ."

"He does what he thinks he should—for your benefit. He does not care for himself. He's never cared. Life's a game for him that he feels he must play to the finish. The game must be endured, but he doesn't expect to enjoy it."

"I'm not interested in your cousin's character. I want him to lose interest in mine."

"He sees you destroying yourself—and me," she said with a certain force. "It is more than you see."

Arflane paused, disconcerted. "You think the same, then?"

"I do."

He sat down suddenly on the edge of the bunk. He looked at her; she stared back, her eyes full of tears. He put out a hand and stroked her face. She took his hand in both of hers and kissed it.

"Oh, Arflane, what has happened . . . ?"

He said nothing, but leant across her and kissed her on the lips, pulling her to him.

An hour later he got up again and stood by the bunk looking thoughtfully at the floor.

"Why should your cousin be so concerned about me?" he said.

"I don't know. He's always liked you." She smiled. "Beside—he may be concerned for his own safety if he thinks you're not running the ship properly."

He nodded. "He was right to come here," he said finally. "I was wrong to be so angry. I've been weak. I don't know what to do, Ulrica. Should I have accepted this commission? Should I have let my feelings towards you rule me so much? Should I have imprisoned your husband?"

"These are personal questions," she said gently, "which do not involve the ship or anyone aboard save ourselves."

"Don't they?" He pursed his lips. "They seem to." He straightened his shoulders. "Nonetheless, Manfred was right. You're right. I should be ashamed . . ."

She pointed to the porthole. "Look," she said. "It's getting lighter. Let's go on deck."

There were only wisps of fog in the air now and thin sunlight was beginning to pierce the clouds above them. The ship was moving slowly under a third of her canvas.

Arflane and Ulrica walked hand in hand along the deck.

The browns and whites of the ship's masts and rigging, the yellow of her ivory, all were mellowed by the sunlight. There was an occasional thud as her runners crossed an irregularity in the ice, the distant voice of a man in the

rigging calling to a mate, a warm smell on the air. Even the slovenliness of the decks seems to give the ship a battered, rakish appearance and did not offend Arflane as much as he had expected. The sunlight began to break rapidly through the clouds, dispersing them, until the far horizon could be made out from the rail. They were crossing an expanse of ice that was bordered in the distance by unbroken ranges of glaciers of a kind Arflane had never seen before. They were tall and jagged and black. The ice in all directions was dappled with yellow light as the clouds broke up and pale blue sky could be seen above.

Ulrica gripped his arm and pointed to starboard. Sweeping down from the clearing sky, as if released by the breaking up of the clouds, came a flock of birds, their dark shapes wheeling and diving as they came closer.

"Look at their colour!" she exclaimed in surprise.

Arflane saw the light catch the shimmering plumage of the leading birds and he, too, was astonished. The predominant colour was gaudy green. He had seen nothing like it in his life; all the animals he knew had muted colours necessary for survival in the icelands. The colour of these birds disturbed him. The glinting flock soon passed, heading towards the dark glaciers on the horizon. Arflane stared after them wondering why they affected him so much, wondering where they came from.

Behind him a voice sounded from the bridge. "Get those sails set. All hands aloft." It belonged to Urquart.

Arflane gently removed Ulrica's hand from his arm and walked briskly along the deck towards the bridge. He climbed the companionway and took the megaphone from the hands of the surprised harpooner. "All right, Mr. Urquart. I'll take over." He spoke with some effort.

Urquart made a little grunting sound in his throat and picked up his harpoon from where he had rested it against the wheelhouse. He stumped down the companionway and took up a position on the quarter deck, his back squarely to Arflane.

"Mr. Hinsen!" Arflane tried to put strength and confidence into his voice as he called to the first officer, who was standing by one of the forward hatches. "Will you bring the bosun up?"

Hinsen acknowledged the order with a wave of his hand

and shouted to a man who was in the upper shrouds of the mainmast. The man began to swing down to the deck ; together he and Hinsen crossed to the bridge. The man was tall and heavily built, with a neatly trimmed beard as red as Arflane's.

"You're Rorchenof, bosun on the *Ildiko Ulsenn*, eh?" Arflane said as they presented themselves below him on the quarter deck.

"That's right, sir—before I went to the whaling." There was character in Rorchenof's voice and he spoke almost challengingly, with a trace of pride.

"Good. So when I say to set all sail you'll know what I mean. We've a chance to make up our speed. I want those yards crammed with every ounce of canvas you can get on them."

"Aye, aye, sir," Rorchenof nodded.

Hinsen clapped the man on the shoulder and the bosun moved to take up his position. Then the first officer glanced up at Arflane doubtfully, as if he did not place much faith in Arflane's new decisiveness.

"Stand by, Mr. Hinsen." Arflane watched Rorchenof assemble the men and send them into the rigging. The rat-lines were soon full of climbing sailors. When he could see that they were ready, Arflane raised the megaphone to his lips.

"Set all sails!" he called. "Top to bottom, stem to stern."

Soon the whole ship was dominated by a vast cloud of swelling canvas and the ship doubled, quadrupled her speed in a matter of minutes, leaping over the gleaming ice.

Hinsen plodded along the deck and began to retie a poorly spliced line. Now that the fog had cleared he could see that there were many bad splicings about the ship ; they would have to be attended to before nightfall.

A little later as he worked on a second knot, Urquart came and stood near him, watching.

"Well, Mr. Urquart—skipper's himself again, eh?" Hinsen studied Urquart's reaction closely.

A slight smile crossed the gaunt harpooner's face. He glanced upward at the purple and yellow sky. The huge sails interrupted his view ; they stretched out, full and sleek as a gorged cow-whale's belly. The ship was racing as she

had not raced since the descent of the plateau. Her ivory shone, as did her metal, and her sails reflected the light. But she was not the proud ship she was when she had first set sail. She carried too many piles of dirty snow for that, her hatches did not fit as snugly as they had done and her boats did not hang as straight and true in their davits.

Urquart reached up with one ungloved hand and his red, bony fingers caressed the barbs of his harpoon. The mysterious smile was still on his lips but he made no attempt to answer Hinsén. He jerked his head towards the bridge and Hinsén saw that Manfred Rorsefne stood beside the captain. Rorsefne had evidently only just arrived; they saw him slap Arflane's shoulder and lean casually on the rail, turning his head from left to right as he surveyed the ship.

Hinsén frowned, unable to guess what Urquart was trying to tell him. "What's Rorsefne to do with this?" he asked. "If you ask me, we've him to thank for the captain's revival of spirit."

Urquart spat at a melting pile of snow close by. "They're skippering this craft now, between them," he said. "He's like one of those toys they make for children out of seal cubs. You put a string through the muscles of the mouth and pull it and the creature smiles and frowns. Each of them has a line. One pulls his lips up, the other pulls them down. Sometimes they change lines."

"You mean Ulrica Ulsenn and Manfred Rorsefne?"

Urquart ran his hand thoughtfully down the heavy shaft of his harpoon. "With the Ice Mother's help he'll escape them yet," he said. "We've a duty to do what we can."

Hinsén scratched his head. "I wish I could follow you better, Mr. Urquart. You mean you think the skipper will keep his good mood from now on?"

Urquart shrugged and walked away, his stride long and loping as ever.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Green Birds

IN SPITE OF the uneasy atmosphere aboard the ship made excellent speed, sailing closer and closer to the glacier range. Beyond that range lay New York ; they were now swinging on to a course E. by N., and this meant the end of their journey was in sight. The good weather held, though Arflane felt it unreasonable to expect it to remain so fine all the way to New York.

Across the blue iceplains, beneath a calm, clear sky, the *Ice Spirit* sailed, safely skirting several ice breaks and sometimes sighting barbarians in the distance. The silver-furred nomads offered them no danger and were passed quickly.

Urquart began to take up his old position on the bridge beside the skipper, though the relationship between the two men was not what it had been ; too much had happened to allow either to feel quite the same spirit of comradeship.

Leaving twin black scars in the snow and ice behind her, her sails bulging, her ivory decorated hull newly polished and her battered decks tidied and cleaned of snow, the ice schooner made her way towards the distant glaciers.

It was Urquart who first sighted the herd. It was a long way off on their starboard bow, but there was no mistaking what it was. Urquart jabbed his lance in the direction of the whales and Arflane, by shielding his eyes, could just make them out, black shapes against the light blue of the ice.

"It's not a breed I know," Arflane said, and Urquart shook his head in agreement. "We could do with the meat," the captain added.

"Aye," grunted Urquart, fingering one of his bone earrings. "Shall I tell the helmsman to alter course, skipper?"

Arflane decided that, practical reasons aside, it would be worth stopping in order to provide a diversion for the men. He nodded to Urquart, who strode into the wheelhouse to take over the great wheel from the man on duty.

Ulrica came up on deck and glanced at Arflane. He

smiled down at her and signed for her to join him. She sensed Urquart's antipathy and for that reason rarely went to the bridge; she came up a little reluctantly and hesitated when she saw that the harpooner was in the wheelhouse. She glanced aft and then approached Arflane. "It's Janek, Konrad," she said. "He seems to be ill. I spoke to the guards today. They said he wasn't eating."

Arflane laughed. "Probably starving himself out of spite," he said. Then he noticed her expression of concern. "All right. I'll see him when I get the chance."

The ship was turning now, closing with the land whale herd. They were of a much smaller variety than any Arflane knew, with shorter heads in relation to their bodies, and their colour was a yellow-brown. Many were leaping across the ice, propelling themselves by unusually large back flippers. They did not look dangerous though; he could see that before long they would have fresh meat.

Urquart gave the wheel back to the helmsman and moved along the deck towards the prow, taking a coil of rope from a tackle locker and tying one end to the ring of his harpoon, winding the rest of the rope around his waist. Other sailors were gathering around him, and he pointed towards the herd. They disappeared below to get their own weapons.

Urquart crossed to the rail and carefully climbed over it, his feet gripping the tiny ridge on the outer hull below the rail. Once the ship lurched and he was almost flung off.

The strange-looking whales were beginning to scatter before the skull-decorated prow of the huge schooner as, with runners squealing, it pursued the main herd.

Urquart hung grinning on the outside rail, one arm wrapped around it and the other poising the harpoon. One slip, a sudden motion of the ship, and he could easily lose his grip and be plunged under the runners.

Now the ship was pacing a large bull whale which leapt frantically along, veering off as its tiny eyes caught sight of *Ice Spirit* close by. Urquart drew back his harpoon, flung the lance at an angle, caught the beast in the back of its neck. Then the ship was past the creature. The line attached to the harpoon whipped out; the beast reared, leaping on its hind flippers, rolling over and over with its mouth snapping. The whale's teeth were much larger than Arflane had suspected.

The rope was running out rapidly and threatened to yank Urquart from his precarious position as the ship began to turn.

Other whaling hands were now hanging by one arm from the rail, drawing back their own harpoons as the ship approached the herd again. The chase continued in silence save for the noises of the ship and the thump of flippers over the ice.

Just as Arflane was certain Urquart was about to be tugged from the rail by the rope the harpooner removed the last of the line from his waist and lashed it to the nearest stanchion. Looking back, Arflane saw the dying whale dragged struggling behind the ship by Urquart's harpoon. The other harpooners were flinging their weapons out, though most lacked the uncanny accuracy of Urquart. A few whales were speared and soon there were more than a dozen being dragged along the ice in the wake of the ship, their bodies smashing and bleeding as they were bounced to death on the ice.

Now the ship turned again, slowing, and hands came forward, ready to haul in the catches. Ice anchors were thrown out. The schooner lurched to a halt, the sailors descended to the ice with flensing cutlasses to slice up the catch.

Urquart went with them, borrowing a cutlass from one of the hands. Arflane and Ulrica stood by the rail looking at the men hacking at the corpses, arms rising and falling as they butchered the catch, spilling their blood on the ice as the setting sun, red as the blood, sent long, leaping shadows of the men across the white expanse. The pungent smell of blood and blubber drifted on the evening air, reminding them of the time when they had first embraced.

Manfred Rorsefne joined them, smiling at the working, fur-clad sailors as one might smile at children playing. There was not a man there, who was not covered from hand to shoulder with the thick blood; many of them were drenched in the stuff, licking it from their mouths with relish.

Rorsefne pointed at the tall figure of Urquart as the man yanked the harpoon from his kill and made with his right hand some mysterious sign in the air.

"Your Urquart seems in his element, Captain Arflane," he said. "And the rest of them are elated, aren't they? We were lucky to sight the herd."

Arflane nodded, watching as Urquart set to work flenching his whale. There was something so primitive, so elemental, about the way the harpooner slashed at the dead creature that Arflane thought once again how much Urquart resembled a demigod of the ice, an old-time member of the Ice Mother's pantheon.

Rorsefne watched for a few minutes more before turning away with a murmured apology. Glancing at him, Arflane guessed that the young man was not enjoying the scene.

Before nightfall the meat had been sliced from the bones and the blubber and oil stored in barrels that were being swung aboard on the tips of the lower yards. Only the skeletons of the slaughtered whales remained on the stained ice, their shadows throwing strange patterns in the light from the setting sun.

As they prepared to go below Arflane caught a movement from the corner of his eye. He stared up into the darkening scarlet sky to see a score of shapes flying towards them. They flew rapidly; they were the same green birds they had encountered several days earlier. They were like albatrosses in appearance, with large, curved beaks and long wings; they came circling in to land on the bones of the whales, their beady eyes searching the bloody ice before they hopped down to gobble the offal and scraps of meat and blubber left behind by the sailors.

Ulrica gripped Arflane's hand tightly, evidently as unsettled by the sight as he. One of the scavengers, a piece of gut hanging from its beak, turned its head and seemed to stare knowingly at them, then spread its wings and flapped across the ice.

The birds had come from the north this time. When Arflane had first seen them they were flying from south to north. He wondered where their nests were. Perhaps in the range of glaciers ahead of them; the range they would have to sail through before they could reach New York.

Thought of the mountains depressed him; it was not going to be easy to negotiate the narrow pass inscribed on Rorsefne's chart.

When the sun set the green birds were still feeding, their

silhouettes stalking among the bones of the whales like the figures of some conquering army inspecting the corpses of the vanquished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Wreck

THERE WAS A collision at dawn. Konrad Arflane was leaving his cabin with the intention of seeing Janek Ulsenn and deciding if the man really was ill when a great shock ran through the length of the ship and he was thrown forward on his face.

He picked himself up, blood running from his nose, and hurried back to Ulrica in the cabin. She was sitting up in the bunk, her face alarmed.

"What is it, Konrad?"

"I'm going to see."

He ran out on deck. There were men sprawled everywhere. some had fallen from the rigging and were obviously dead, the rest were simply dazed and already climbing to their feet.

In the pale sunlight he looked towards the prow, but could see no obstruction. He ran forward to peer over the skull-decorated bowsprit. He saw that the forward runners had been trapped in a shallow crevasse that could not be seen from above. It was no fault of the look-outs that the obstruction had not been sighted. It was perhaps ten feet wide and only a yard or so deep, but it had succeeded in nearly wrecking the ship. Arflane swung down a loose line to stand on the edge of the opening and inspect the runners.

They did not seem too badly damaged. The edge of one had been cracked and a small section had broken away and could be seen lying at the bottom of the crevasse, but it was not sufficient to impair their function.

Arflane saw that the crevasse ended only a few yards to starboard. It was simply bad luck that they had crossed at this point. The ice schooner could be hauled back, the run-

ners turned and she would be on her way again, hardly the worse for the collision.

Hinsen was peering over the forward rail. "What is it, sir?"

"Nothing to worry about, Mr. Hinsen. The men will have some hard work to do this morning though. We'll have to haul the ship backwards. Get the bosun to back the courses. That'll give them some help if we can catch enough wind."

"Aye, aye, sir." Hinsen's face disappeared.

As Arflane began to clamber hand over hand up the rope Urquart came to the rail and helped him over it. The gaunt harpooner pointed silently to the north west. Arflane looked and cursed.

There were some fifty barbarians riding rapidly towards them. They appeared to be mounted on animals very much like bears; they sat on the broad backs of the beasts with their legs stretched in front of them, holding the reins attached to the animals' heads. Their weapons were bone javelins and swords. They were clad in furs but otherwise seemed like ordinary men, not the creatures they had encountered earlier.

Arflane dashed to the bridge, bellowed through his megaphone for all hands to arm themselves and stand by to meet the attack.

The leading barbarians were almost upon the ship. One of them shouted in a strange accent, repeating the words over and over again. Arflane realised, eventually, what the man was shouting.

"You killed the last whales! You killed the last whales!"

The riders spread out as they neared the ship, evidently planning an approach from all sides. Arflane caught a glimpse of thin, aquiline faces under the hoods; then the javelins began to clatter on to the deck.

The first wave of spears hurt no one. Arflane picked one of the finely-carved javelins up in either hand and flung them back at the fast-riding barbarians. He in turn missed both his targets. The javelins were not designed for this kind of fighting and the barbarians were so far proving a nuisance more than a positive danger.

But soon they began to ride in closer and Arflane saw

a sailor fall before he could shoot the arrow from the bow he carried.

Two more of the crew were killed by well-aimed javelins, but the more sophisticated retaliation from the decks of the ship was taking its toll of the attackers. More than half the barbarians fell from their mounts with arrow-wounds before the remainder withdrew, massing for a renewed attack on the port side.

Arflane now had a bow and he, Hinsen and Manfred Rorsefne stood together, waiting for the next assault. A little further along the rail stood Urquart. He had half a dozen of the bone javelins ranged beside him on the rail and had temporarily abandoned his own harpoon, which was more than twice the size and weight of the barbarian weapons.

The powerful legs of the bearlike creatures began to move swiftly as, yelling wildly, the barbarians rushed at the ship. A cloud of javelins whistled upwards; a cloud of arrows rushed back. Two barbarians died from Urquart's well-aimed shafts and four more were badly wounded. Most of the others fell beneath the arrows. Arflane turned to grin at Hinsen but the man was dead, impaled by a carved bone javelin that had gone completely through his body. The first officer's eyes were open and glazed as the grip on the rail that had kept him upright gradually relaxed and he toppled to the deck.

Rorsefne murmured in Arflane's ear. "Urquart is hurt, it seems."

Arflane glanced along the rail, expecting to see Urquart prone, but instead the harpooner was tearing a javelin from his arm and leaping over the rail, followed by a group of yelling sailors.

The barbarians were regrouping again, but only five remained unwounded. A few more hung in their saddles, several of them with half a dozen arrows sticking in them.

Urquart led his band across the ice, screaming at the few survivors. His huge harpoon was held menacingly in his right hand while his left gripped a pair of javelins. The barbarians hesitated; one drew his sword. Then they turned their strange mounts and rushed away across the ice before the triumphant figure of Urquart shouting and gesticulating behind them.

The raid was over, with less than ten men wounded and only four, including Hinsén, dead. Arflane looked down at the older man's body and sighed. He felt no rancour towards the barbarians. If he had heard correctly the man who had shouted, their whale hunt had destroyed the barbarians' means of staying alive.

Arflane saw the new bosun Rorchenof coming along the deck and signed for him to approach. The bosun saw the corpse of Hinsén and shook his head grimly, staring at Arflane a little resentfully as if he blamed the captain for the barbarian attack: "He was a good sailor, sir."

"He was, bosun. I want you to take a party and bury the dead in the crevasse below. It should save time. Do it right away, will you?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Arflane looked back and saw Urquart and his band hacking at the wounded barbarians with exactly the same gusto with which they had butchered the whales the evening before. He shrugged and returned to his cabin.

Ulrica was there. He told her what had happened. She looked relieved, then she said: "Did you speak to Janek? You were going to this morning."

"I'll do it now." He went out of the cabin and along the gangway. There was only one guard on duty; Arflane felt it unnecessary to have more. He signed for the man to undo the padlock chaining the door to the bar. The broken door swung inwards and Arflane saw Ulsenn leaning back in his bunk, pale but otherwise apparently fit.

"You're not eating much food they tell me," he said. He did not enter the cabin but leaned over the bar to address the man.

"I haven't much need for food in here," Ulsenn said coldly. He stared unfalteringly at Arflane. "How is my wife?"

"Well." Ulsenn smiled bitterly. There was none of the weakness in his expression that Arflane had seen earlier. The man's confinement appeared to have improved his character.

"Is there anything you want?" Arflane asked.

"Indeed, captain; but I don't think you would be ready to let me have it."

Arflane understood the implication. He nodded curtly and drew the door close again, fixing the padlock himself.

By the time the ice schooner had been set on course again the men were exhausted. A particularly dreamlike atmosphere had settled over the ship when dawn came and Arflane ordered full sail set.

The ship began to move towards the glacier range that could now be made out in detail.

The curves and angles of the ice mountains shone in the sunlight, reflecting and transforming the colours of the sky, producing a subtle variety of shades, from pale yellow and blue to rich marble greens, blacks and purple. The pass became visible soon, a narrow opening between gigantic cliffs. According to Rorsefne's chart the place would take days to negotiate.

Arflane looked carefully at the sky, his expression concerned. There seemed to be bad weather on its way, though it could pass without touching them. He hesitated, wondering whether to enter the gorge or wait; then he shrugged. New York was almost in sight; he wanted to waste no more time. Once through the pass their journey would be as good as over; the city was less than a hundred miles from the glacier range.

As they moved between the lower hills guarding the approach Arflane ordered most of the canvas taken in and appointed six men to stay on watch in the bows, relaying sightings of any obstruction back to the wheelhouse and the four helmsmen on duty.

The mood of dreamlike unreality seemed to increase as the *Ice Spirit* drifted closer and closer to the looming cliffs of ice. The shouts of the bow look-outs now began to echo through the range until it seemed the whole world was full of ghostly, mocking voices.

Konrad Arflane stood with his legs spread on the bridge, his gloved hands gripping the rail firmly. On his right stood Ulrica Ulsenn, her face calm and remote, dressed in her best furs; beside her was Manfred Rorsefne, the only one who seemed unaffected by the experience; on Arflane's left was Urquart, harpoon cradled in his arm, his sharp eyes eagerly searching the mountains.

The ship entered the wide gorge, sailing between tower-

ing cliffs that were less than a quarter of a mile away on either side. The floor of the gorge was smooth ; the ship's speed increased as her runners touched the worn ice. Disturbed by the sounds, a piece of ice detached itself from the side of one of the cliffs to starboard. It bounced and tumbled down to crash at the bottom in a great cloud of disintegrating fragments.

Arflane leaned forward to address Rorchenof, who stood on the quarter deck looking on in some concern.

"Tell the look-outs to keep their voices down as best they can, bosun, or we might find ourselves buried before we know it."

Rorchenof nodded grimly and went forward to warn the men in the bow. He seemed disturbed.

Arflane himself would be glad when they reached the other side of the pass. He felt dwarfed by the mountains. He decided that the pass was wide enough to permit him to increase the ship's speed without too much danger.

"All plain sail, Mr. Rorchenof!" he called suddenly.

Rorchenof accepted the order with some surprise, but not query it.

Sails set, the *Ice Spirit* leapt forward between the twin walls of the canyon, passing strange ice formations carved by the wind. The formations shone with dark colours ; elsewhere the ice was like menacing black glass.

Towards evening, the ship was shaken by a series of jolts ; her motion became erratic.

"It's the runners, sir!" Rorchenof called to Arflane. "They must have been damaged more than we thought."

"Nothing to worry about, bosun," Arflane said calmly, staring ahead. It was getting colder, and the wind was rising ; the sooner they were through the pass the better.

"We could easily skid, sir, and crash into one of the cliffs. We could bring the whole thing down on top of us."

"I'll be the judge of our danger, bosun."

The trio beside him on the bridge looked at him curiously but said nothing.

Rorchenof scratched his head, spread his arms, and moved back forward.

The ship was wobbling badly as the sky darkened and the great cliffs seemed to close in on them, but still

Arflane made no attempt to slow her and still she moved under full sail.

Just before nightfall Rorchenof came along the deck with a score of sailors at his back.

"Captain Arflane!"

Konrad Arflane looked down nearly serenely. The ship was shuddering constantly now in a series of short, rapid bumps, and the helmsmen were having difficulty in getting sufficiently fast response from the forward runners.

"What is it, bosun?"

"Can we throw out anchor lines, sir, and repair the runners? At this rate we'll all be killed."

"There's no fear of that, bosun."

"We feel there is, sir!" It was a new voice; one of the sailors speaking. From around him came a chorus of agreement.

"Return to your posts," Arflane said evenly. "You have still to understand the nature of this voyage."

"We understand when our lives are threatened, sir," cried another sailor.

"You'll be safe," Arflane assured him.

As the moon rose the wind howled louder, stretching the sails taut and pushing the ship to even greater speed. They jolted and shuddered along the smooth ice of the canyon floor, racing past white, gleaming cliffs whose peaks were lost from sight in the darkness.

Rorchenof looked about him wildly as a precipice loomed close and the ship veered away from it, runners thumping erratically. "This is insanity!" he shouted. "Give us the boats! You can take the ship where you like—we'll get off!"

Urquart brandished his harpoon. "I'll give this to you unless you return to your posts. The Ice Mother protects us—have faith!"

"Ice Mother!" Rorchenof spat. "All four of you are mad. We want to turn back!"

"We cannot turn back!" Urquart shouted, and he began to laugh wildly. "There's no room in this pass to turn, bosun!"

The red-bearded bosun shook his fist at the harpooner. "Then drop the heavy anchors. Stop the ship and give us

the boats and we'll make our own way home. You can go on."

"We need you to sail the craft," Arflane told him reasonably.

"You *have* gone mad—all of you!" Rorchenof shouted in increasing desperation. "What's happened to this ship?"

Manfred Rorsefne leaned forward on the rail. "Your nerve has cracked, bosun, that's all. We're not mad—you are merely hysterical."

"But the runners—they need attention."

"I say not," Arflane called and grinned at Urquart, slipping his arm around Ulrica's shoulders, steadying her as the ship shook beneath them.

Now the wind was howling along the canyon, stretching the sails till it seemed they would rip from their moorings. *Ice Spirit* careered from side to side of the gorge, narrowly missing the vast ragged walls of the cliffs.

Rorchenof turned silently, leading his men below.

Rorsefne frowned. "We haven't heard the last of them, Captain Arflane."

"Maybe." Arflane clung to the rail as the helmsman barely managed to turn the ship away from the cliffs to port. He looked toward the wheelhouse and shouted encouragement to the struggling men at the wheel. They stared back at him in fear.

Moments later Rorchenof emerged on deck again. He and his men were brandishing cutlasses and harpoons.

"You fools," Arflane shouted at them. "This is no time for mutiny. The ship has to be sailed."

Rorchenof called up to the men in the shrouds. "Take in the sail, lads!"

Then he screamed and staggered backwards with Urquart's massive harpoon in his chest; he fell to the deck and for a moment the others paused, staring in horror at their dying leader.

"Enough of this," Arflane began. "Go back to your posts!"

The ship swerved again and a rattling sound came from below as the steering chains failed momentarily to grip

the runner platform. The ice cliffs surged forward and retreated as the helmsmen forced *Ice Spirit* away.

The sailors roared and rushed towards the bridge. Arflane grabbed Ulrica and hurried her into the wheel-house, closed the door and turned to see that Urquart and Rorsefne had abandoned the bridge, vaulting the rail and running below.

Feeling betrayed, Arflane prepared to meet the mutineers. He was unarmed.

The ship seemed now completely at the mercy of the shrieking wind. Streamers of snow whipped through the rigging, the schooner swayed on her faulty runners. Arflane stood alone on the bridge as the leading sailors began to climb cautiously towards him up the companion-way. He waited until the first man was almost upon him then kicked him in the face, wrestling the cutlass from his grasp and smashing the hilt into his skull.

A sheet of snow sliced across the bridge, stinging the men's eyes. Arflane bellowed at them, hacking and thrusting. Then, as men fell back with bloody faces and mangled limbs, Urquart and Rorsefne re-emerged behind them.

Urquart had recovered his harpoon and Rorsefne was armed with a bow and cutlass. He began, coolly, to shoot arrows into the backs of the mutineers. They turned, confused.

The ship rocked. Rorsefne was flung sideways; Urquart barely managed to grasp a ratline for support. Most of the sailors were flung in all directions and Arflane slipped down the companionway, clinging to the rail and dropping his cutlass.

Once again the ship was racked by a rapid series of jerks. Arflane struggled up, his jacket torn open by the wind, his beard streaming. With one hand he held the rail; with the other he gesticulated at the sailors.

"Rorchenof deceived you," he shouted. "Now you can see why we must get through this pass as fast as we can. If we don't, the ship's finished!"

A sailor's face craned forward, his eyes as wild as Arflane's own. "Why? Why, skipper?"

"The snow! Once caught in the main blizzard we are blind and helpless! Loose ice will fall from the cliffs to block the pass. Snow will gather in drifts and make move-

ment impossible. If we're not crushed we'll be snow-bound and stranded!"

Above his head a sail broke loose from its eyebolts and began to flap thunderously against the mast. The howl of the wind increased; the ship was flung sideways towards the cliff, seemed to scrape the wall before it slid into the centre of the gorge again.

"But if we sail on we'll smash into a cliff and be killed!" another sailor cried. "What have we to gain?"

Arflane grinned and spread his arms, coat swirling out behind him, eyes gleaming. "A fast death instead of a slow one if our luck's really bad. If our luck holds—and you know me to be lucky—then we'll be through by dawn and New York only a few days' sail away!"

"You *were* lucky, skipper," the sailor called. "But they say you're not the Ice Mother's chosen any more—that you've gone against her will. The woman . . ."

Arflane laughed harshly. "You'll have to trust my luck—it's all you have. Lower your weapons, lads."

"Let the wind carry us through. It's our only chance." The voice was Urquart's.

The men began to lower their cutlasses, still not entirely convinced.

"You'd be better employed if you got into the shrouds and looked to your sails," Manfred Rorsefne shouted above the moan of the wind.

"But the runners . . ." a sailor began.

"We'll concern ourselves with those," Arflane said. "Back to work lads. There'll be no vengeance taken on you when we're through the pass, I promise. We must work together—or die together!"

The sailors began to disperse, their faces still full of fear and doubt.

Ulrica struggled through the wheelhouse door and struggled along the dangerously swaying deck to clutch Arflane's arm. The wind whipped her clothes and the snow stung her face. "Are you sure the men are wrong?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be best . . .?"

He grinned and shrugged. "It doesn't matter, Ulrica. Go below and rest if you can. I'll join you later." Again the ship listed and he slid along the deck, fighting his way back to her and helping her towards the bridge.

When she was safely below he began to make his way forward, leaning into the wind, the snow stinging his face and half-blinding him. He reached the bows and tried to peer ahead, catching only glimpses of the cliffs on both sides as the ship rocked and swerved on its faulty runners. He got to the bowsprit and stretched his body along it, supporting himself by one hand curled in a staysail line; with the other he stroked the great skulls of the whales, pressing his fingers against the contours of cranium, eye sockets and grinning jaws as if they could somehow transmit to him the strength they had once possessed.

As the snow eased slightly ahead he saw the black outlines of the ice cliffs in front of him. They seemed to be closing in, as if shifting on their bases, crowding to trap the ship. It was merely a trick of the eyes, but it disturbed him.

Then he realised what was actually happening. The gorge really did narrow here. Perhaps the cliffs had shifted, for the opening between them was becoming little more than a crack.

The *Ice Spirit* would not be able to get through.

He swung himself desperately along the bowsprit, conscious only of the careering speed of the ship, gasped and staggered across the deck till he reached the great gland of the steering pin and seized the heavy mallet that was secured beside it, began swinging at the emergency bolt. Urquart swayed towards him; he turned his head, bellowing across the deck.

"Drop the anchors! For the Ice Mother's sake, man—drop the heavy anchors . . . !"

Urquart raced back along the deck, finding men and ordering them to the stanchions to knock out the pegs that kept the twin blades of the heavy anchors clear of the ice.

Arflane looked up, his heart sinking. They were nearly into the bottleneck; there was hardly a chance now of saving the ship.

The bolt was shifting. Driving his arms back and forth, he swung the mallet again and again.

Suddenly the thing flew free. There was a high-pitched

squealing as the runners turned inwards, ploughshare-fashion ; the ship began to roll and shudder violently.

Arflane raced back along the deck. He had done all he could ; now his concern was for Ulrica's safety.

He reached the cabin as the ship leaped as if in some monstrous orgasm. Ulrica was there, and her husband beside her.

"I released him," she said.

Arflane grunted. "Come on—get on deck. There's little chance of any of us surviving this."

There was a final violent crash ; the ship's shuddering movement subsided, dying away as the heavy anchors gripped the ice and brought her to a halt.

Clambering out on deck Arflane saw in astonishment that they were barely ten yards from the point where the ship would have been dashed against the walls of the cliffs or crushed between them.

But *Ice Spirit's* motion had not ceased.

Now the great schooner began to topple as her port runners gave out completely under the strain, snapping with sharp cracks. With a terrifying groan the vessel collapsed on to her side, turning as the wind caught the sails, flinging her crew in a heap against the port rail.

Arflane grabbed Ulrica and curled his hand around a trailing rope.

His one concern now was to abandon the ship and save them both. He slid down the line and leapt clear on to the hard ice, dragging the woman with him away from the ship and against the wind.

Through the blizzard he could see little of either the cliffs or the bulk of the schooner.

He heard her crash into the side of the gorge and then made out another sound from above as pieces of ice, shaken free, began to slide downwards.

Eventually he managed to find the comparative shelter of an overhang by the far wall of the gorge. He paused, panting and looking back at the broken ship. There was no way of telling if any of the others had managed to jump free ; he saw an occasional figure framed near the rail as the curtain of snow parted and swirled back. Once he heard a voice above the wind. It sounded like Ulsenn's.

"*He wanted this wreck ! He wanted it . . !*"

It was like the meaningless cry of a bird. Then the wind roared louder, drowning it, as a great avalanche of ice began to fall on the ship.

The two huddled together under the overhang, watching *Ice Spirit* as she was crushed by the huge collapsing slabs, jerking like a dying creature, her hull breaking, her masts cracking and splintering, disintegrating faster than Arflane could ever have believed ; breaking up in a cloud of ice splinters and swirling snow against the towering, jagged walls of the ice mountains.

Arflane wept as he watched ; it was as if the destruction of the ship signified the end of all hope. He pulled Ulrica to him, wrapping his arms about her, more to comfort himself than for any thought for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Trek

IN THE MORNING the snow had stopped falling but the skies were heavy and grey above the dark peaks of the glaciers. The storm had subsided almost as soon as the *Ice Spirit* had been smashed, as if destroying the ship had been its sole purpose.

Moving across the irregular masses of snow and ice towards the place where the gorge narrowed and where the main bulk of the wreck had come to rest Arflane and Ulrica were joined by Rorsefne and Ulsenn. Neither man was badly hurt, but their furs were torn and they were exhausted. A few sailors stood by the pile of broken fibre-glass and metal as if they hoped that the ship might magically restore itself. Urquart was actually in the wreck, moving about like a carrion bird.

It was a cold, bleak day ; they shivered, their breath hanging white and heavy on the air. They looked about them and saw mangled bodies everywhere ; most of the sailors had been killed and the seven who remained looked sourly at Arflane, blaming his recklessness for the disaster.

Ulsenn's attitude to Arflane and Ulrica was remote and

neutral. He nodded to them as they walked together to the wreck. Rorsefne was smiling and humming a tune to himself as if enjoying a private joke.

Arflane turned to him, pointing at the narrow gap between the cliffs. "It was not on the chart, was it?" He spoke loudly, defensively, as much for the benefit of the listening sailors as anyone.

"There was no mention of it," Rorsefne agreed, smiling like an actor amused by his lines. "The cliffs must have moved closer together. I've heard of such things happening. What do we do now, captain? There isn't a boat left. How do we get home?"

Arflane glanced at him grimly. "Home?"

"You mean to carry on, then?" Ulsenn said tonelessly.

"That's the most sensible thing to do," Arflane told him. "We're only some fifty miles or so from New York and we're several thousand from home . . ."

Urquart held up some large slivers of ivory that had evidently come from broken hatch covers. "Skis," he said. "We could reach New York in a week or less."

Rorsefne laughed. "Indefatigable! I'm with you, captain."

The others said nothing; there was nothing left to say.

Within two days the party had traversed the pass and begun to move across the wide ice plain beyond the glacier range. The weather was still poor, with snow falling sporadically, and the cold was in their bones. They had salvaged harpoons and slivers of ivory to act as poles and skis; on their backs they carried packs of provisions.

They were utterly weary and rarely spoke, even when they camped. They were following a course plotted from a small compass which Manfred Rorsefne had found amongst the things spilled from his shattered travelling chest.

To Arflane space had become nothing but an eternal white plain and time no longer seemed to exist at all. His face, hands and feet were frostbitten, his beard was encrusted with particles of ice, his eyes were red and pouted. Mechanically he drove himself on his skis, followed by the others who moved, as he did, like automata. Thought meant simply remembering to eat and protect oneself from

the cold as best one could ; speech was a matter of monosyllabic communications if one decided to stop or change direction.

From habit he and Ulrica stayed together, but neither any longer felt any emotion for the other.

In this condition it would have been possible for the party to have moved on, never finding New York, until one by one they died ; even death would have seemed merely a gradual change from one state to another, for the cold was so bitter that pain could not be felt. Two of the sailors did die ; the rest of the party left them where they fell. The only one who did not seem affected by exhaustion was Urquart. When the sailors died he had made the sign of the Ice Mother before passing on.

None of them realised that the compass was erratic and that they were moving across the great white plain in a wide curve away from the supposed location of New York.

The barbarians were similar in general appearance to the ones who had attacked them after the whale killing. They were dressed all in white fur and rode white, bear-like creatures. They held swords and javelins ready as they reined in to block the little party's progress.

Arflane only saw them then. He swayed on his skis, peering through red-rimmed eyes at the grinning, aquiline faces of the riders. Wearily he raised his harpoon in an attitude of defence but the weight was almost too much for him.

It was Urquart who yelled suddenly and flung one harpoon then another, swinging his own weapon from his shoulder as two barbarians toppled from their saddles.

Their leader shouted, waving to his men ; they rode swiftly down on the party, javelins raised. Arflane thrust out his own harpoon to defend Ulrica but was knocked backwards by a savage slash across the face, losing his footing in the snow. A blow on his head followed and he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Rites of the Ice Mother

THERE WAS PAIN in Arflane's head and his face throbbed from the blow he had received. His wrists were tied behind him and he lay uncomfortably on the ice. He opened his eyes and saw the barbarian camp.

Hide tents were stretched on rigid bone frames; the riding bears were corralled to one side of the camp and a few women moved about among the tents. The place was evidently not their permanent home; Arflane knew that most barbarians were nomads. The men stood in a large group around their leader, the personage Arflane had seen earlier. He was talking with them and glancing at the prisoners who had been bound together at the wrists and lay sprawled on the ice. Arflane turned his head and saw with relief that Ulrica was safe; she smiled at him weakly. Manfred Rorsefne was there and Janek Ulsenn, his eyes tightly closed. There were three sailors, their expressions wretched as they stared at the barbarians.

There was no sign of Urquart; Arflane wondered vaguely if they had killed him. Some moments later he saw him emerge from a tent with a small, obese man, striding towards the main gathering. It seemed then that Urquart had somehow gained their confidence. Arflane was relieved; with luck the harpooner might find a way to release them.

The leader, a handsome, brown-skinned young man with a beak of a nose and bright, haughty eyes, gesticulated towards Urquart as he and the short man pushed through the throng. Urquart began to speak. Arflane gathered that the harpooner was pleading for his friends' lives and wondered how the man had managed to win favour with the nomads. Certainly Urquart was considerably taller than any of them and his own primitive appearance would probably impress them as it impressed all who encountered him. Also, of course, he had been the only one to attack the barbarians; perhaps they admired him for his

courage. Whatever the reason there was no doubt that they were listening gravely to the harpooner as he spoke, waving his massive lance in the direction of the captives.

Eventually the three of them—the leader, the fat man and Urquart—moved away from the other warriors and approached Arflane and the rest.

The young leader was dressed all in fine white fur, his hood framing his face; he was clean-shaven and walked lithely, his back held straight and his hand on the hilt of his bone sword. The fat man wore reddish furs that Arflane could not identify; he pulled at his long, greasy moustachios and scowled thoughtfully. Urquart was expressionless.

The leader paused before Arflane and put his hands on his hips. "Ha! You head north like us, eh? You are from back there!" He spoke in a strange, lilting accent, jerking his thumb towards the south.

"Yes," Arflane agreed, finding it difficult to speak through his swollen lips. "We had a ship—it was wrecked." He eyed the youth warily, wondering what Urquart had told him.

"The big sleigh with the skins on poles. We saw it—many days back. Yes." The youth smiled and gave Arflane a quick, intelligent look. "There are more—on top of a great hill—months back, eh?"

"You know the plateau of the Eight Cities?" Arflane was surprised. He glanced at Urquart, but the harpooner's expression was frozen. He stood leaning on his harpoon, staring into the middle distance.

"We are from much further south than you, my friend," grinned the barbarian leader. "The country is getting too soft back there. The ice is vanishing and there is something yielding and unnatural beneath it. We came north, where things are still normal. I'm Donal of Kamfor and this is my tribe."

"Arflane of Brershill," he replied formally, still confused and wondering what Urquart had said at the barbarian conference.

"The ice is really melting further south?" Manfred Rorsefne spoke for the first time. "It's vanishing altogether?"

"That's so," Donal of Kamfor nodded. "No one can

live there." He gestured with his hand. "Things—push up—from this soft stuff. Bad." He shook his head and screwed up his face.

Arflane felt ill at the idea. Donal laughed and pointed at him. "Ha! You hate it too! Where were you going?"

Arflane again tried to get some sign from Urquart, but the man refused even to meet his eye. There was nothing to gain by being secretive about their destination and it might capture the barbarian's imagination. "We were going to New York," he said.

Donal looked astonished. "You seek the Ice Mother's court? Surely no one is allowed there . . ."

Urquart gestured at Arflane. "He is the one. He is the Mother's chosen. I told you that one of us is fated to meet Her and plead our case. She is helping him reach Her. When he does, the melting will stop."

Now Arflane guessed how Urquart had convinced the barbarians. They were evidently even more superstitious than the whaling men of the Eight Cities. However, Donal was plainly not a man to be duped. He nudged the fat man's shoulder with his elbow.

"We do what this Urquart says to test the truth, eh?" he said.

The fat man chewed at his lower lip, looking bleakly at Arflane. "I am the priest," he murmured to Donal. "I decide this thing."

Donal shrugged and took a step back.

The priest turned his attentions from Arflane to Ulrica and then to Manfred Rorsefne. He glanced briefly at the sailors and Janek Ulsenn, began to tug at his moustaches. He moved closer to Urquart and laid a finger on his arm. "Those are the two, then?" he said, pointing at Ulrica and Rorsefne.

Urquart nodded.

"Good stock," said the priest. "You were right."

"The line of the highest chiefs in the Eight Cities," Urquart said. "No better blood—and they are my kin." He spoke almost proudly. "It will please the Ice Mother and bring us all luck. Arflane will lead us to New York and we shall be welcome."

"What are you saying, Urquart?" Arflane asked uneasily. "What sort of bargain have you struck for us?"

Urquart began to smile. "One that will solve all our problems. Now my ambition can be fulfilled, the Ice Mother mollified, your burden can be removed, we win the help and friendship of these people. At last it is possible to do what I have planned all these years." His savage eyes burned with a disturbing brilliance. "I have been faithful to the Mother. I have served Her and I have prayed to Her. She sent you—and you helped me. Now She gives me my right. And I, in turn, give Her Hers."

Arflane shivered. The voice was cold, soft, terrifying.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "How have I helped you?"

"You saved the lives of all the Rorsefne clan—my father, his daughter and his nephew."

"That was why you befriended me, I thought . . ."

"I saw your destiny, then. I realised that you were the servant of the Ice Mother, though at first you did not know it yourself." Urquart pushed back his hood, revealing his bizarre hair and his dangling bone earrings. "You saved their lives, Konrad Arflane, so that I might take them in my own way at my leisure. The time has come for vengeance on my father's brood. I only regret that he cannot be here, also."

Arflane remembered the funeral outside Friesgalt and Urquart's strange behaviour when he had flung the ice block down so savagely into old Pyotr Rorsefne's grave.

"Why do you hate him?" he asked.

"He tried to kill me." Urquart's tone was distant; he looked away from Arflane. "My mother was the wife of an inn-keeper. Rorsefne's mistress. When she brought me to him, asking him to protect me as is the custom, he had his servants carry me on to the ice to expose me. I heard the story years later from her own lips. I was found by a whaling brig and became their mascot. The tale became known in the top-deck taverns and my mother realised what had happened. She sought me out and found me eventually when I was sixteen years old. From then on I planned my revenge on the whole Rorsefne brood. That was more than a score of years ago. I am a child of the ice—favourite of the Ice Mother. The fact that I live

today is proof of that." Urquart's eyes burned even brighter.

"That's what you told these people to make them listen to you!" Arflane whispered. He tested the thongs holding his wrists together, but they were tied tightly.

Urquart moved forward, ignoring Arflane. He drew his long knife from his sheath and stooped to cut the lines tying Ulrica and Manfred to the rest. Ulrica lay there, her face pale, her eyes incredulous and terrified. Even Manfred Rorsefne's face had become grim. Neither made a move to rise.

Urquart reached out and pulled the trembling woman to her feet, sheathed his knife and grabbed Rorsefne by the front of his tattered coat. Manfred stood upright with some dignity. There was a movement behind Arflane. He turned his head and saw that Ulsenn's hands had come free. In cutting the thongs, Urquart had accidentally released the man. Donal pointed silently at Ulsenn, but Urquart shrugged disdainfully. "He'll do nothing."

Arflane stared up unbelievably at the gaunt harpooner. "Urquart, you've lost your reason. You can't kill them!"

"I can," Urquart said quietly.

"He must," the fat priest added. "It is the bargain he made with us. We have had bad luck with the hunting and need a sacrifice for the Ice Mother. The sacrifice must be the best blood." He smiled a trifle sardonically and jerked his thumb at Donal. "We need this one—he is all we have. If Urquart performs the ritual then the rest of you go free; or we come with you, whichever we decide."

"He's insane!" Arflane tried desperately to struggle to his feet. "His hatred's turned his brain."

"I do not see that," the priest said calmly. "And even if it were true it would not matter to us. These will die and you will not. You should be grateful."

Arflane struggled helplessly on the ice, half-rising and then falling back.

Donal turned with a shrug and the priest followed him, pushing Ulrica and Manfred Rorsefne forward. Urquart came last. Ulrica glanced back at Arflane. The terror had left her eyes and was replaced with a look of helpless fatalism.

"Ulrica!" Arflane shouted.

Urquart called without looking at Arflane, "I am about to cut your chains. I am paying the debt I owe you—I am freeing you!"

Arflane watched dumbly as the barbarians prepared for the ritual, erecting bone frames and tying the captives to them so that they were spreadeagled with their feet just above the ice. Urquart stepped forward, cutting expertly at Manfred's clothing as he would skin a seal until the young man was naked. In a way this was a merciful action, since the cold would soon numb his body. Arflane shuddered as he saw Urquart step up to Ulrica and begin to cut the furs from her until she, too, was bare.

Arflane was exhausting himself in his struggles to get to his feet. Even if he could rise there was nothing he could do, for the thongs firmly held his wrists. As a precaution there were now two guards standing nearby.

He watched in horror as Urquart poised the knife close to Manfred Rorsefne's genitals; he heard Rorsefne shriek in pain and thresh in his bonds as Urquart cut his manhood from him. Blood coursed down the young man's thighs and Rorsefne fell forward, head hanging limply. Urquart brandished his trophy, hands reddened with blood, before tossing it away. Arflane remembered the old, savage customs of his own people; there had not been a ritual of this kind performed for centuries.

"Urquart! No!" Arflane screamed as the harpooner turned to Ulrica. "No!"

Urquart did not appear to hear him. All his attention was on Ulrica as, with her eyes mad with fear, she tried unsuccessfully to shrink from the knife that threatened her breasts.

Then Arflane saw a figure leap up beside him, grab a javelin from one of the guards and impale the man. The figure moved swiftly, turning to slice at Arflane's bonds with the sharp tip of the javelin while the other guard turned bewilderedly. Arflane was up then, his fingers grasping the guard's throat and snapping his neck almost instantly.

Ulsenn stood panting beside Arflane, holding the bloody javelin uncertainly. Arflane picked up the other spear and

dashed across the ice towards Urquart. As yet no one had seen what had happened.

Then the priest shouted from where he sat and pointed at Arflane. Several barbarians leapt up, but Donal restrained them. Urquart turned, his eyes mildly surprised to see Arflane.

Arflane ran at him with the javelin, but Urquart leapt aside and Arflane only narrowly missed sticking the weapon into Ulrica's body. Urquart stood breathing heavily, the knife raised; then he moved his head slowly towards the spot where his own huge harpoon lay, ready to finish the pair after the ritual.

Arflane flung the javelin erratically. It took Urquart in the arm. Still Urquart did not move, but his lips seemed to frame a question.

Arflane ran to where the many-barbed harpoon lay and picked it up.

Urquart watched him, shaking his head bewilderedly. "Arflane . . . ?"

Arflane took the lance in both hands and plunged it into the harpooner's broad chest. Urquart gasped and seized the shaft, trying to pull the weapon from his body. "Arflane," he gasped. "Arflane. You fool! You kill everything . . ." The gaunt man staggered backwards, his pain-filled eyes still staring unbelievably; and it seemed to Arflane then that in killing Urquart he killed all he had ever held to be valuable.

The harpooner groaned, his great body swaying, his ivory ornaments clattering as he was racked by his agony. Then he fell sideways, attempted to rise, and collapsed in death.

Arflane turned to face the barbarians, but they did not move. The priest was frowning uncertainly.

Ulsenn ran forward. "Two!" he called. "Two of noble blood. Urquart was the man's cousin and the woman's brother!"

The barbarians murmured and looked questioningly at their priest and their chief. Donal stood up, rubbing his clean-shaven chin. "Aye," he said. "Two it is. It is fair. Besides, we had better sport this way." He laughed lightly. "Release the woman. Attend to the man if he still lives. Tomorrow we go to the Ice Mother's court!"

Ulrica wept like a child as they cut her down. Arflane took her gently in his arms, wrapping her in her ripped furs. He felt strangely calm as he passed the stiff corpse of Urquart and carried the woman towards the tent that the priest led him to. Ulsenn followed him, bearing the unconscious body of Manfred Rorsefne.

When Ulrica lay sleeping and Manfred Rorsefne's wound had been crudely dressed, Arflane and Janek Ulsenn sat together in the close confines of the tent. Night had fallen but they made no attempt to rest. Both were pondering the bond that had grown between them in the few hours that had passed ; both knew in their hearts that it could not last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

New York

IT TOOK THEM two weeks to find New York and in that time Manfred Rorsefne, his nervous system unable to withstand the shock it had received, died peacefully and was buried in the ice. Konrad Arflane, Ulrica Ulsenn and Janek Ulsenn rode in a group, with Donal and his fat priest close by ; they had learned to ride the huge bears without much difficulty. They moved slowly, for the barbarians had brought their tents and women with them. The weather had become surprisingly fine.

When they sighted the slender towers of New York they stopped in astonishment. Arflane felt that Pyotr Rorsefne had been peculiarly uneloquent in describing them. They were magnificent. They shone.

The party came to a straggling stop and the bears scratched nervously at the ice, perhaps sensing their riders' mixed feelings as they looked at the city of metal and glass and stone soaring into the clouds. The towers blazed ; mile upon mile of shining ice reflected their shifting colours and Arflane remembered the story, wondering how tall they must be if they stretched as far below the ice as they did above it. Yet his instincts were alarmed and he did not know why. Perhaps, after all, he did not want to

know the truth. Perhaps he did not want to meet the Ice Mother, for he had sinned against Her in many ways in the course of the voyage.

"Well," Donal said quickly. "Let's continue."

Slowly they rode towards the many-windowed city jutting from the ice of the plain. As they moved nearer Arflane realised what it was that so disturbed him. An unnatural warmth radiated from the place; a warmth that could have melted the ice. Surely this was no city of the Ice Mother? They all sensed it and looked at one another grimly. Again they came to a halt. Here was the city that symbolised all their dreams and hopes; and suddenly it had taken on a subtle menace.

"I like this not at all," Donal growled. "That heat—it is much worse than the heat that came to the south."

Arflane nodded. "But why can it be so hot? Why hasn't the ice melted?"

"Let us go back," said Ulsenn. "I knew it was foolish to come here."

Instinctively Arflane agreed with him; but he had set out to reach New York. He had told himself that he would accept whatever knowledge the city offered. He had to go on; he had killed men and destroyed a ship to get here and now that he was less than a mile away he could not possibly turn back. He shook his head and goaded his mount forward. From behind him came a muttering.

He raised his hand and pointed at the slender towers. "Come—let's go to greet the Ice Mother!"

The riding bear galloped forward; behind him the barbarians began to increase their speed until all were galloping in a wild, half-hysterical charge on the vast city, their ranks breaking and spreading out, their cries echoing among the towers as they sought to embolden themselves. Ulrica's hood was whipped back by the wind; her unbound hair streamed behind her as she clung to her saddle. Arflane grinned at her, his beard torn by the wind. Ulsenn's face was set and he leaned forward in the saddle as if going to his death.

The towers were grouped thickly, with barely enough space between the outer ones for them to enter the city. As they reached the great forest of metal and glass they

realised that there was something more unnatural about the city than the warmth that came from it.

Arflane's mount's feet skidded on the surface and he called out in amazement, "This isn't ice!"

The stuff had been cunningly made to simulate ice in almost every detail, but now that they stood on it they could tell that it was not ice; and it was possible to look down through it and make out the dim shapes of the towers going down and down into darkness.

Donal cried: "You have misled us, Arflane!"

The sudden revelation had shocked Arflane as much as the others. Dumbly, he shook his head.

Ulsenn charged forward on his mount to shake his fist in Arflane's face. "You have led us into a trap! I knew it!"

"I followed Pyotr Rorsefne's chart, that was all!"

"This place is evil," the priest said firmly. "We can all sense that. It matters not how we were deceived—we should leave while we can."

Arflane shared the priest's feeling. He hated the atmosphere of the city. He had expected to find the Ice Mother and had found instead something that seemed to stand for everything the Ice Mother opposed.

"Very well," he said. "We turn back." But even as he spoke he realised that the ground beneath them was moving downwards; the whole great plain was sinking slowly below the level of the surrounding ice. Those closer to the edge managed to leap their clumsy animals upwards and escape but most of them were left in panic as the city dropped lower into what was apparently a huge shaft driven into the ice. The shadows of the shaft's enormous sides fell across the group as they milled about in fear.

Arflane saw how Donal and Ulsenn were staring at him and realised that he was to be their scapegoat.

"Ulrica," he called, turning his mount to plunge into the mass of towers with the woman close behind him. The light grew fainter as they galloped through the winding maze; behind they heard the barbarians, led by Ulsenn and Donal, searching for them. Arflane knew instinctively that in their panic they would butcher him and probably Ulrica too; they had to stay clear of them. He had two dangers to face now and both seemed insuperable. He

could not hope to defeat the barbarians and he could not stop the city sinking.

There was an entrance in one of the towers ; from it streamed a soft light. Desperately he rode his beast through it and Ulrica came with him.

He found himself in a gallery with ramps curving downward from it towards the floor of the tower far below. He saw several figures lower on the ramps ; figures dressed from head to foot in red, close-fitting garments, wearing masks that completely covered their faces. They looked up as they heard the sound of the bears' paws in the gallery, and one of them laughed and pointed.

Grimly Arflane sent the creature half-sliding down one of the ramps. He glanced back and saw that Ulrica had hesitated but was following him. The speed of the descent was dangerous ; twice the bear nearly slid off the edge of the ramp and three times he nearly lost his seat on the animal's back, but when he reached the floor of the tower the masked men were gone.

As Ulrica joined him, looking in awe at the strange devices that covered the walls, he realised that the city was no longer in motion. He stared at the things on the wall. They were instruments of some kind ; a few resembled chronometers or compasses while others were alive with flickering letters that meant nothing at all to him. His main interest at that moment was in finding a door. There seemed to be none. Was this, after all, the court of the Ice Mother and the red-clad creatures ghosts? From somewhere came faint laughter again, then from above an echoing yell. He saw Ulsenn riding rapidly down the ramp towards him ; he was waving a flenching cutlass while Arflane had only a javelin.

Arflane turned to look into Ulrica's face. She stared back at him then dropped her eyes as if in consent.

Arflane rode his bear towards Ulsenn as the man lunged at him with the cutlass. He blocked the blow with the javelin but the blade sheered off the head of the spear, leaving him virtually defenceless. Ulsenn swung clumsily at his throat, missed and was taken off balance. Arflane plunged the jagged shaft into his throat.

Ulrica rode up, watching silently as Ulsenn clutched at the wound, then fell slowly from the back of the bear.

"That is the end of it now," she said.

"He saved your life," Arflane said.

She nodded. "But now it is over." She began to cry. Arflane looked at her miserably, wondering why he had killed Ulsenn then and not earlier, before the man had had the chance to show that he could be courageous. Perhaps that was why; he had, towards the end, become a true rival.

"A fine piece of bloodshed, strangers. Welcome to New York."

They turned. A section of the wall had vanished; in its place stood a thin figure. Its overlong skull was encased in a red mask. Two eyes glittered humorously through slits in the fabric. Arflane jerked up his javelin in an instinctive movement. "This is not New York—this is some evil place."

The figure laughed softly. "This is New York, indeed, though not the original city of your legends. That was destroyed by a single bomb almost two thousand years ago. But this city stands close to the site of the original. In many respects it is far superior. You have witnessed one of its advantages."

Arflane realised he was sweating. He loosened the thongs of his coat. "Who are you?"

"If you are genuinely curious, then I will tell you," replied the masked man. "Follow me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Truth

ARFLANE HAD WANTED the truth; it was why he had originally agreed to Rorsefne's scheme; but now, as he stared around the luminous chamber, Ulrica's arm on his, he began to feel that the truth was more than he could accept. The red-masked figure left the room. The walls gleamed blindingly bright and a seated man appeared at the far end of the chamber. He wore the same red garments as the other, but he was almost a dwarf and one shoulder was higher than the other.

"I am Peter Ballantine," he said pleasantly. His pronunciation was careful, as if he spoke the words of a language he had recently learned. "Please sit down."

Arflane and Ulrica seated themselves gingerly on the quilted benches and were startled as the man's chair slid forward until he sat only a foot or two away from them. "I will explain everything," he said. "I will be brief. Ask questions when I have finished."

There had been a full-scale nuclear war. When it was over the human race was all but gone and the majority of the survivors were in the areas largely unaffected by any direct attack—the polar bases of the South Antarctic International Zone where Russian, American, British Commonwealth, Scandinavian and other research teams lived; and Camp Century, the city the Americans had established under the Greenland ice cap. Nature, unbalanced by the war, had swiftly begun to draw a healing skin of ice over her ruined surface. What had precipitated the ice age was primarily the bombs and the sudden change in the various radiations in the atmosphere. The men of the two polar camps had communicated for a while by radio but the radiation was too great to risk personal contact. For one reason and another, forced by their separate circumstances, the two groups of survivors had chosen different ways of adapting to the change. The men of the Antarctic learnt to adapt to the ice, making use of all their resources to build ships that could travel the surface without need of fuel, dwellings where one could live without need of special heating plants. As the ice covered the planet, they moved away from the Antarctic, heading towards the Equator until, at length, they reached the plateau of the Matto Grosso and decided that here was an ideal location for permanent camp. In adapting to the conditions they had neglected their learning and within a few hundred years the creed of the Ice Mother had replaced the second law of thermodynamics which had shown logically what the people now believed instinctively—that only ice eternal lay in the future. Perhaps the adaptation of the Antarticans had been a healthier reaction to the situation than that of the Arcticans who had tended to bury themselves deeper and deeper into their

under-ice caverns, searching for scientific means of survival that would preserve the way of life they knew.

Among the last messages to be sent by the Arcticans to the Antarcticans was the information that the northerners had reached the stage where they could transport their city-complex further south and that they intended to site it in New York. They offered help to the Antarcticans, but they refused it, stripping their radios to make better use of them. They had grown to feel easy with their life.

So the Arcticans refined their science and their living conditions until the city of New York was the result, and having done this did what mankind had done in the past and wondered why they had to adapt any further to the environment when it was now possible to adapt the environment to suit themselves. They developed techniques capable of driving back the ice and revealing the surface of the healed planet as it had existed two thousand years before. The rapid growth of the ice could now just as rapidly be reversed; this they were doing with special instruments sited in selected locations on other continental land masses than their own. At the same time they were conducting biological experiments to produce animals that would help develop the new ecology; the green birds were one example. These would replace the ice-dwelling creatures, most of which would not have time to adapt to the rapid change in climate.

"It will take at least another two hundred years before any great area of land is cleared," Peter Ballantine explained. "We are using the continent of Africa as our main experimental area. The results make us optimistic. Africa was never entirely ice-bound and there was wild-life there which helped us considerably in our biological experiments."

Arflane and Ulrica had received the information almost expressionlessly. Arflane felt that he was drowning; his body and mind were numb.

"We welcome visitors, particularly from the Eight Cities," Ballantine continued. "Whereas the animals will not be able, for the most part, to adapt, your people of course will easily survive." He glanced at them and added thoughtfully, "Physically at any rate."

Arflane looked up at him then. "You would destroy our whole way of life," he said, without rancour.

"Your way of life is no more natural than ours, enclosed as we are in our mechanical womb, sharpening our brains and forgetting our bodies. We are physically enfeebled, all of us, but mentally strong. Your people are almost better balanced, for minds can be nurtured more easily than bodies."

Arflane nodded gravely. "But there are many of us who do not want what you offer. I am one."

"We offer only knowledge. What is wrong with that?"

"I don't know," Arflane said slowly. "Nothing, I suppose. I can see that future generations will benefit from it—but, you see, I'm not adapted here," he tapped his heart and then his head, "to believing that there will be many future generations. I believe in the ice eternal, the doctrine that all must grow cold, that the Ice Mother's mercy is all that allows us to live."

"But you can see how wrong that idea is," Ballantine said gently. "Your society created those ideas to enable them to live the way they did. They needed them, but they no longer need them now."

"I understand," Arflane said. The depression that filled him was hard to overcome; it seemed that his whole life since he had first saved Rorsefne had led to this point. Gradually he had forsaken his old principles, allowing himself soft emotions, taking Ulrica in adultery, involving himself with others; and it was as if by forgetting the dictates of the Ice Mother he had somehow created this New York. Logically, he knew the idea was absurd but he could not shake himself clear of it. If he had lived according to his code, the Ice Mother would be comforting him, not Peter Ballantine disturbing him; if he had listened to Urquart, last of the Ice Mother's true followers, and gone with him, they would have found the New York they expected to find. But he had killed Urquart in saving Ulrica's life. 'You have killed everything,' Urquart had said as he died. Now Arflane understood what the harpooner had meant. Urquart had tried to change his course for him, but the course had led inevitably to Peter Ballantine and his logic and his vision of an earth in which the Ice Mother was dying, or already dead. If he could find Her . . .

Ulrica Ulsenn touched his hand. "He is right," she said, "that is why the people of the Eight Cities are changing—because they sense what is happening to the world. They are adapting in the way that animals adapt, though most of the animals—the land whales and the like—will not adapt in time."

"The land-whales' adaptation was artificially stimulated," Ballantine said with some pride. "It was an experiment of ours that was incidentally beneficial to your people."

Arflane sighed again, feeling completely dejected. He rubbed his sweating forehead and tugged at his clothes, resenting the heat of the place. He turned and looked at Ulrica Ulsenn, shaking his head slowly, touching her hand gently. "You welcome this," he said. "You represent what they represent. You're the future, too."

She frowned. "I don't understand you, Konrad. You're being too mysterious."

"I'm sorry." He glanced away from her and looked at Ballantine as he sat in the moving chair, waiting patiently. "I am the past," he said to the man. "You can see that, I think."

"Yes," said Ballantine sympathetically. "I respect you, but . . ."

"But you must destroy me."

"It does not need to be seen in such dramatic terms," Ballantine pointed out reasonably.

"I have to see it so," Arflane sighed. "I am a simple man, you see. An old-fashioned man."

"You need time to think," Ballantine told him. "We will find accommodation for you both while you do so." He chuckled. "Your barbarian friends are still chasing around on the surface of the city like frightened lice. We must see how we can help them. In their case our hypnomats will doubtless be of more use than conversation."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

North

THE NEXT DAY Peter Ballantine walked in the artificial gardens of the city with Ulrica Ulsenn. Arflane had looked at the gardens and declined to enter. He sat now in a gallery staring at the machines which Ballantine had told him were the life-giving heart of the city.

"Just as your ancestors adapted to the ice," Ballantine was saying to the woman, "so you must re-adapt to its disappearance. You came north instinctively because you identify the north with your homeland. All this is natural. But now you must go south again, for your own good and the good of your children. You must give your people the knowledge we have given you; though it will take time they will gradually come to accept it. If they do not change they will destroy themselves in a reversion to savagery."

Ulrica nodded. "I see . . ." She looked with growing enjoyment at the multitude of brightly coloured flowers around her, sniffed their scents in wonder, her nostrils the keener for never having experienced such perfume before. It made her feel lightheaded. She smiled slowly at Ballantine, eyes shining.

"I realise Arflane is disturbed just now," Ballantine continued. "There is a lot of guilt in his attitude; but there is no need for him to feel this. Literally—no need. There was a need for all those inhibitions, but now it does not exist. That is why you must go south again, to tell them what you have learned."

Ulrica spread her hands and indicated the flowers. "This is what will replace the ice?" she said.

"This and much more. Yours and Arflane's children could see it if they wished to journey even further south. They could live in a land where all these things grow naturally." He smiled, touched by her childlike enjoyment of his garden. "You must convince him."

"He will understand," she said confidently. "What of the barbarians? Donal and the rest?"

"We have had to use less subtle and possibly less lasting methods on them. We have machines that can mould the mind, teach it to think new thoughts. We have used these on the barbarians. Some of the new thoughts they will forget after a while, but with luck many will remain. They will help spread the ideas."

"I wish Arflane had not refused to come here," Ulrica said. "I'm sure he would like it."

"Perhaps," said Ballantine. "Shall we return to him?"

When Arflane saw them come back he rose. "When you are ready," he said distantly, "I would like to be taken back to the surface."

"I have no intention of keeping you here against your will," Ballantine said. "I will leave you together now."

He left the gallery. Arflane began to walk back to the apartment that had been set aside for them. He moved slowly, Ulrica beside him.

"When we go back to Friesgalt, Konrad," Ulrica said, taking his arm, "we can marry. That will make you Chief Ship Lord. In that position you will be able to guide the people towards the future, as Ballantine wants us to. You will become a hero, Konrad, a legend."

"I do not trust legends," he said. Gently he took her hand from his arm.

"Konrad?"

He shook his head. "You go back to Friesgalt," he told her. "You go back."

"What will you do? You must come back with me."

"No."

The city rose to ground level and they disembarked. A storm was beginning to rise over the iceplains. The wind whistled through the tall towers of the city. Peter Ballantine helped Ulrica into the cabin of the helicopter that would take her most of the way to Friesgalt.

There was a general confused bustling as the barbarians mounted up and began to turn their steeds towards the south. With a wave Donal led his men away across the plain.

Arflane watched them as they rode. There were skis on

his feet, two lances in his gloved hands, a visor pushed up from his face ; on his back was a heavy pack.

Ulrica looked out from the cabin. "Konrad . . ."

He smiled at her. "Goodbye, Ulrica."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He gestured into the distance. "North," he said. "To seek the Ice Mother."

As the rotors of the machine began to turn he pushed himself around on his skis and dug the lances into the ice, sending his body skimming forward. He leaned into the wind as he gathered momentum ; it had begun to snow.

The helicopter bumped as it rose into the air and tilted towards the south. Ulrica stared through the glass and saw him moving swiftly northwards. His figure grew smaller and smaller. Sometimes it was obscured by drifting snow ; sometimes she glimpsed him, the lances rising and falling as he gathered speed.

Soon, he was out of sight.

— MICHAEL MOORCOCK

THE END

(This is a shorter version of the book of *The Ice Schooner*)

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