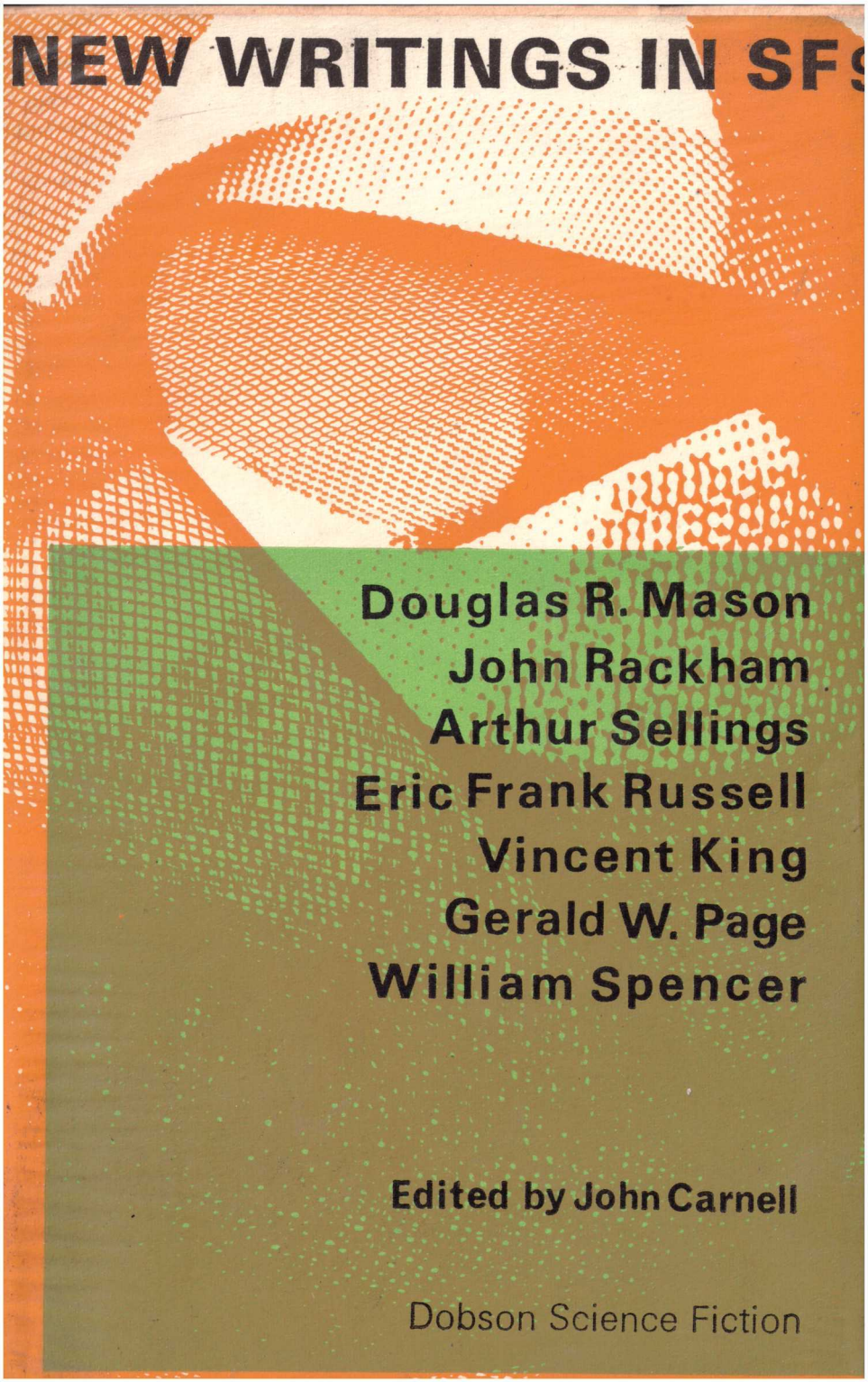
NEW WRITINGS IN SF
Douglas R. Mason
John Rackham
Arthur Sellings
Eric Frank Russell
Vincent King
Gerald W. Page
William Spencer
Edited by John Carnell
Dobson Science Fiction

NEW WRITINGS IN SF9

edited by

JOHN CARNELL

The ninth volume in this now well-established series, NEW WRITINGS IN SF, brings once again to lovers of the genre, new stories written specially for the series by well-known as well as new authors. These collections are the next step forward in expanding the SF short story from the limitations it has suffered during the past thirty years and presents international authors writing for a far wider audience than ever before. This ninth volume includes stories by Gerald W. Page, John Rackham, Douglas R. Mason, Arthur Sellings, William Spencer, Eric Frank Russell, Vincent King.

NEW WRITINGS IN SF9 lives up to its name and does not present old material already published many times.

Jacket design by ERIC AYERS

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By the same Editor:

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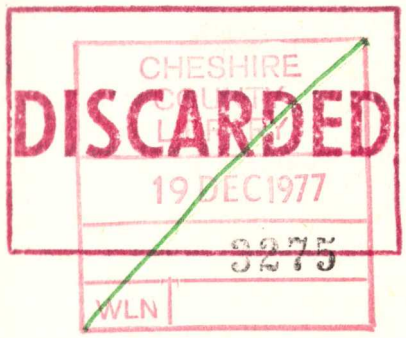
Gateway To Tomorrow
Gateway To The Stars
The Best From "New Worlds"
Lambda I And Other Stories
Weird Shadows From Beyond
New Writings In S–F 1 to 8

NEW WRITINGS IN S-F
9

Edited by
JOHN CARNELL



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All the characters in this book are fictitious
and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Second Genesis by Eric Frank Russell, copyright 1952 by McCall Corporation, New York, and reprinted by permission of the author.

FOREWORD

by JOHN CARNELL

WHILE it was never intended to use individual volumes of *New Writings In S-F* to emphasize "themes" in science fiction—our primary intention is to present a widely divergent selection of new and exciting stories in the genre —it is interesting to note that quite inadvertently this is happening. No. 6, for instance, had an underlying theme concerning mental powers; No. 8 was devoted mainly to space. This present volume deals largely with different aspects of over-population and the many facets such a problem is bound to have in the immediate future.

This preoccupation with "things that might happen" has been part of the stock in trade of all good science-fiction writers and it is natural that they should see trends faster than most people—science fiction being largely a literature of prophecy, the writer has to be one jump ahead of current events all the time. Little wonder, then, that the world's expanding birthrate, coupled with increasing mechanization and computerization, is taking up more time than the possibilities of Man landing on the Moon or Mars within the next decade.

For instance, John Rackham in "Poseidon Project" visualizes that we shall soon have seriously to consider living under the sea and this means taking our environment with us and, as his experimental group discover, this also means taking along the human problems as well. On the other hand, William Spencer sees the overcrowded city of the future as an Orwellian ogre in "The Long Memory", where everything is seen, heard and recorded. In lighter vein, Gerald Page only infers the background in "Guardian Angel" and proceeds to depict his action all in one room—Man versus Machine. Arthur Sellings, on the other hand,

sets "Gifts Of The Gods" right here in the present day—but it is a present day hedged in with a far-reaching problem.

To the far future is but a step in Vincent King's novelette "Defence Mechanism", probably one of the most colourful and imaginative stories we have yet published, where so many questions are asked and so many different answers come up that it is unwise to take anything for granted until the end of the story. Off the "theme" but just as exciting are the two character study stories—"Second Genesis" by Eric Frank Russell and "Folly To Be Wise" by Douglas R. Mason.

In either category, good entertainment for an expanding population!

JOHN CARNELL

June 1966

POSEIDON PROJECT

by

JOHN RACKHAM

Working in a closed environment beneath the sea, a preselected group of human beings find that not all the perils facing them are outside their dome.

POSEIDON PROJECT

ONE

ALMOST to the day, it was six months after his wedding that Peter Sentry realized he was in love with his wife. The knowledge came out of the silent recesses of his mind as surprisingly delightful as finding a pearl in a plateful of dinner oysters. According to the gentle bleat of his alarm it was 0530, time to climb out and make ready for his day-watch in the power house. Other mornings he had tolerated this untimely summons from sleep, to grumble but submit, knowing it had to be done, but this special morning his irritation melted in the glow of his new find. He slid from bed carefully, adjusting the coverlet so that Belle would still be warm, shuffled to the meal-nook to switch on the pre-programmed breakfast, then moved into the bath cubby to endure the gasping semi-torture that would set him up for the rest of the day.

As he smeared depilating cream, manipulated the tooth-brush, squirmed at the impact of ice-cold needles of water, and then stood to let the hot dry blast finish him off, he revolved his new discovery in his mind like a man who knows he has found something valuable but is not quite sure what. That he knew the date was the least wonderful aspect, as everyone here in Poseidon counted the days. Here on the ocean bed eight hundred and eighty yards below the surface, every day passing was a day won and to be marked off the calendar. But that it had taken him six months to discover that he did, after all, love Belle, was a discovery as moving and significant as the astonishing fact that it was true. His next wonder was whether she felt the same?

Out of the shower and zipping up his thin cotton cover-alls while he supervised the last moments of breakfast, he let his mind drift back to the start of it all. And even before

the official start, which had been, symbolically, on the 1st of January, he had been a part of the preparations. The master design and all the planning had begun much farther back still, but he knew very little of that. Sentry had first come to the project by applying for and getting a job with the contractors who had undertaken to build and lay a floating island in mid-ocean half a mile across. All he knew at that time was that it was being done just for the hell of it, to see if it *could* be done. He had a degree in solid-state physics and was particularly interested in the currently exciting developments in fuel-cell power, but he was only twenty-five and vigorous minded enough to be attracted by the chance to take part in something new and challenging.

He'd had two years of it, two years of hard work and hazard, and he had enjoyed every minute of it. Looking back now he could pinpoint precisely the moment he had realized there was something more to "Island" than was being let out for public consumption. The tug-fleet had assembled an enormous concourse of steel cylinders, each twenty-five feet long, hexagonal in section and hollow. These, bolted and hinged together at their edges, had made a vast heaving carpet of buoyancy to support a floor of synthetic rubber a yard thick. And then, over the rubber, struggling men had contrived to lay one more surface, of laminated and rubberized concrete of a carefully calculated flexibility. They had then bonded the whole area with a perimeter wall. It had all made sense, except for one item. Every one of those buoyancy cylinders had a tap-outlet at the top, and it was curious that great care was taken to keep those tap-outlets clear and free when the carpet was laid. He had wondered why, and he had an engineer's mind.

A tap-fitting could mean only one of two things. Either you wanted to pump something in, or out. And whichever it was, once you did that you lost your buoyancy. You had to. And, as "Island" had only six or seven feet of freeboard by the time the perimeter wall was up, and the intention was to put in place a complex of "dwelling units", the whole thing would sink!

Sentry collected the breakfast on a tray, grinning at his own struggles to believe the incredible, so long ago. At that moment the notion of sixty selected people deliberately choosing to live for a year on the sea-bed, half a mile below the surface, never occurred to him, and if it had he would have hooted at it. Yet here he was, doing it. He went into the bedroom, swung a spidery table into place, laid the tray on it and shook Belle.

"Come on!" he said, without ceremony. "It's just on six. You want any of this, or shall I put it in the oven?"

The humped coverlet stirred, gave a long sigh and ten finger-tips appeared, pushing it back to reveal a tousled mass of blonde, almost silvery hair, and two enormous blue eyes. They were the biggest and bluest eyes he had ever seen, and on those alone, Belle was beautiful. The rest of her was non-spectacular, was comfortably homely.

"I never heard the alarm," she mumbled, sitting all the way up and stretching luxuriously.

"Remember me?" he scorned. "I live here. You've been lying there just waiting for me to bring this in. You don't fool me, Tinkle."

"It's not fair!" She finger-combed her hair from her face and grinned as she reached for her cup. "I've no secrets any more."

The idea that anyone so transparently honest and candid could ever have secrets at all was ludicrous enough to make him chuckle, but as he perched on the bedside to take up his own cup his mirth died away.

"Perhaps you do still have one. I know I have. Something I discovered only a few minutes ago."

"Conundrums at this hour? What have you discovered?"

"That I am in love with you, Tinkle." He said it quite seriously. "The buzzer woke me, and there it was in my mind. Utterly obvious. And wonderful."

She gazed at him over the rim of her cup, then moved it enough to say, "Now what am I supposed to do? You'll be off to work in twenty minutes!"

"Just forget you're a biologist for a moment. You might

tell me whether some similar sort of conclusion had reached your mind or not? That's what really matters, isn't it?"

"Right." She nodded. "You always do know, exactly, what it is that matters. The important things. I noticed that about you a long time ago, and I've been in love with you for a long time. Doesn't it sound odd? But I didn't tell you, because it wouldn't have been right."

"That's true. You'd never try to influence me. That's your way. But I had to tell you, because that's my way."

"I'm so glad you did. Can you remember just what it was that made it go click in your mind?"

Sentry harried a small heap of pressure-cooked sea-greens and pondered the point. "Something like this. Six months gone. Six months to go. And then all over bar the studies, the appraisal of data, the reports, the tedious abstracts. But this, this life down here—all over and finished. All of us free to go our separate ways and pick up normal life again. You know? And it hit me then. I didn't want it. I just couldn't imagine the future without you as part of it. And then I knew."

"That's a good way," she murmured, spearing a last piece of white fishmeat with her fork. "With me it was a long time ago, and sudden. The first big black-out, remember?"

Sentry remembered very well. That had been the colony's first major fright, and a combination of circumstances engineered by malicious coincidence. With a pressure of millions of tons per square foot to keep at bay, steady power and throbbing machinery were absolutely essential, and potential defects were chased and corrected rigorously. One ring-main was out of service for a periodical inspection, the other perfectly capable of carrying full load and a bit over. But—just as Sophia Menin, in Biochemistry, moved the switch to activate the big centrifuge, so, at that precise moment, the marine biology team under Luis Sanchez had rapped the button to start opening the armoured outside door to Sea-Lock Two, so that they could get back in from an expedition across the sea-bed. "B" ring-main could have

accepted one surge, but not both. Protective trips went into action automatically. Instant blackout, a kind of silent death.

Sentry had just been leaving Power-West, was barely out of the entrance when the "night" fell. Running like a madman, he had managed to get back in and up to the control-room just in time to stop his relief, Charlie Snow, from throwing in the big breakers by hand.

"Charlie! For God's sake—no!" He could recall Snow's face now, and how it had gone sick-white in the feeble glow of emergency battery-power.

"Sorry," he mumbled, "I wasn't thinking. I just wanted the power back."

"All right. But let's do it right. Lighting circuits first. You get on the visiphone and warn all the labs and everybody else—operate their 'off' switches on anything using heavy power. Go on!"

Within half an hour everything was back to normal, lights, circulators, temperature-coils, atmosphere-plant and then the heavy stuff, section by section, and no harm done apart from frayed nerves. But Sentry had spent a further valuable hour hammering home the lesson to be learned and circulating it to all departments. "In the event of another major power failure, switch off all major current-consuming plant immediately."

"That was a lulu!" he grinned. "If Charley had thrown that switch, and fed all that load straight on to the generators—well, we wouldn't be here right now to talk about it. We were all pretty much on edge in those days. It couldn't happen now."

"That's not the point, Peter. I was as scared as anyone, at first. But I knew you should have been on your way home. You didn't come. The power came back, all normal, and still you didn't come. Then I realized I was still afraid, but not for myself, for the dome, for anything else except you. You mattered more than anything else in the world. That's when I knew."

"But that was four months ago. You've known all that time? Belle, am I slow?"

"Not really," she smiled. "You're a man. It's different for you."

"Whatever that may mean," he scoffed. "All the same though, it does make a difference."

"What kind of difference?"

Sentry got to his feet hastily. "Oh no," he said, "you're not getting me involved in a philosophical discussion. I haven't that kind of mind. Let's just say I consider it a bonus, and myself the most fortunate of men." He put out his wrist to see the time and gasped. "Fortunate or not, Charley will have blood in his eye if I don't get going!" He stood a moment in awkwardness then stooped to kiss her, very gently. " 'Bye now. See you tonight."

For a long while after he had gone, Belle Sentry sat quite still in her bed, dreaming and feeling supremely and foolishly happy. For six nerve-taut months she and Peter had lived together as man and wife, had grown to know and respect each other, with many shared surprises and delights, but that was the first time he had ever kissed her goodbye just like that. Then she too caught sight of the clock and made haste to rise and dress and attend to her household chores before leaving to carry on with her own work in Biology.

Two

It was 0630 as Sentry cleared the cluster of buildings that made up the dome centre and set away to walk to Power-West, out at the rim. He was in good time and didn't hurry himself. At his back was the orderly array of dwelling units, conference and recreation rooms, stores and supplies, all set around the central column that was the emergency-escape tube and decompression-chambers. It was a pile that towered like a temple, reaching to the blue-grey "sky" up there, that layered bubble of acryllic resins and rubbers and foamed concrete that was the edge of this little world. It

glowed now with the diffuse blue of "night". He knew that in an hour and a half from now there would be a mass exodus from the centre as the colonists tackled the problems of yet one more day under pressure, and the light would change to brightness. He had little eye for it this morning, or for the disciplined flower-beds and vegetable plots that hugged the path, all grown on synthetic soils and humus won from the sea out there. Ahead of him and all round the rim were the workshops, the laboratories, the busy places where the colonists toiled with all the wit and resource they could bring to keep this isolated world a going proposition.

He could remember how the true extent of the project had unfolded itself to him stage by stage. Because he had felt certain "they" were going to sink the "Island" and couldn't imagine why, and was tantalized by that, he had volunteered to stay on for the "building programme". Among various unspecified prefabricated sections coming in by freight he had seen the unmistakable contours of what had to be a power-generating plant. And then another. And of advanced design, too. He had applied at once to the site-superintendent.

"Those power-plants," he said, "are they for show, or use?"

McTaggart had told him, "Just as soon as ever we can get them operating, we will. Make our own juice. Why? You looking for a better job, mister?"

"If there's one going, yes. I've a degree in that stuff. Want to try me out?" He hadn't cared whether McTaggart was getting a power-engineer cheaper that way than by hiring one from shore. That didn't matter. What did matter was that he now had a job he could get his teeth into, plus the assurance that he would stay with the project until the end, whatever that was. And so he had been on hand at the unfolding of the next stage. Looking about him now, at the warm dry quiet, it was hard to recall what it had been like when open to the winds, the lash and whip of sea-spray and the continuously unsteady rippling motion of the great

waves. He would never have called it a place to live, not by choice.

"To live? Here?"

"Yes, Mr. Sentry. People will live here." It was his first meeting with Dr. Andrew Kingsley, who headed the little group of serious-faced men who had come to inspect progress on the vast heaving disk. Kingsley, leonine and quietly assured, had gone on. "Imagine this entirely enclosed. Assume sixty people, their needs and an extensive provision of workshops and equipment for research, all within this circle. Assume, as we are doing, a load of about fifty megawatts overall. Now, in your opinion, if you were asked to depend on this power-plant as installed, would you? If it was your life at stake?"

It was put in a way to make Sentry think hard and he did. But he knew the plant by that time, had nursed it through teething troubles. "You've two stations," he said. "Either one can carry a hundred megawatts alone, comfortably. I'd say there was a generous safety factor. I'd trust it, personally." But he had added the caution. "The finest plant in the world is no better than the people who run it, mind. You want the right people."

"You may leave that point to us," Kingsley had smiled, and the implications had provoked Sentry into asking further questions. The answers had stunned him only slightly more than the utter conviction in Kingsley's manner, a degree of conviction that made doubt seem an impertinence.

"I can go along," Sentry declared, "with the idea of inflating a dome over this thing. And even with the idea of multi-layering it to withstand pressure. And of course it will sink, and it can be steered down and secured by anchor cables. All that is possible. But how in the name of sanity do you intend to persuade sixty sane people to try to live inside the thing in those conditions?"

"Persuade is hardly the word, Mr. Sentry. The colonists will be taking part in a tremendous experiment, under strenuous conditions. The research results will be invaluable

and the prestige enormous. I anticipate ten—no, a hundred times the numbers we will be able to use. Only those who can pass the most rigorous testing will be acceptable even for consideration in the first instance. I have already spent some considerable time and thought, with the best expert advice, on the screening process. There'll be no shortage of applicants, I assure you. Our difficulty will be in deciding who to leave out! Give a genuine scientist just the hint that something special is afoot in his own particular line, and you try and keep him out!"

"They'll be all scientists, then?"

"Of course. I want keen and inquisitive young people, trained to be objective, versatile and ingenious, with a sense of adventure. And it will be quite an added inducement for them to know they will have a whole year's handsome salary waiting for them, untouched, on completion. I'll get my sixty. Fifty-eight, rather, for myself and my wife will make two for a start."

Kingsley had been absolutely right. Long before the pressurizing details of the Island cover-dome had been finalized the applicants began to flood in. Sentry was able to guess the extent of the flood by what happened to his own application. After a lot of hard thought and deciding he had as good a set of qualifications as anyone, perhaps better than most, and impelled also by sheer curiosity, he had completed a form, attended a strenuous interview—only to discover that he was a long, long way down the waiting list in his own field. It was a shock, and a spur. When the second-stage qualifying literature reached him he tackled it much more intently, dredging his mind for all the additional qualifications he could think of. He ran into one question that shook him.

"Are you prepared to be formally married and to accept as a living-partner for the duration of the project period, a person of the opposite sex who will be chosen by sociological tests as being maximally compatible with yourself, this in order that the project may simulate as far as possible

a normal Earth colony? Answer yes or no. If already married, mark X."

He hesitated a long time and then the thought of the dozens, possibly hundreds, who lay ahead of him decided the issue. After all, what was a year of sharing research with some stranger? She would be a rational, sane person, and a scientist. Was it so terrible? He marked "yes" and went on to complete the paper. Just like that!

He shook his head in wonder at the thought as he reached the entrance to Power-West and passed inside. At once the unusually vigorous song of power from the banked thyristors caught his ear. Overload? He ran up the corkscrew stair to the control-room, to where Charley Snow sat, reading.

"Hi!" he said. "We're shoving it out a bit, aren't we? What's new?"

"Hi, Peter!" Snow got to his feet and stretched. "Nothing much. Bit of trouble over East. About an hour ago Alex reported severe blockage and drop in water-flow on first and second inlets, so we switched the load over to us, so as to give him a free hand to deal with his troubles."

Sentry nodded thoughtfully. "Two inlets at a time, eh? That's new. Any word on results?"

"Not so far. Doesn't sound like weed."

"No. All right, Charley, away you go. See you at seven."

Snow went away whistling. Sentry spent a routine ten minutes checking over the arrays of instruments and tell-tales, just to satisfy himself. Over the months much of the plant-operation business had been given over to the central computer for automation, bit by bit. In an emergency the computer could have taken over entirely, but all eight of the power-engineers had agreed, early on, that it was better that they kept some routine duties under their own hands, if only to give a man something responsible to do. Satisfied that all was in order he moved to the visiphone and buttoned for Power-East. As the square, hard-planed face of Georgi Solkov stabilized on the screen it creased into a friendly grin.

"Good morning, Peter. We have fishes, I think."

"Georgi! You're satisfied it's not weed, then?"

"I think not. On the chart it shows sudden and severe drop on inflow at 0510, on two inlets, for a moment. And then again at 0604, but remaining this time. I think it is fishes. A shoal."

"Could be. You've tried reverse flow?"

"Alex was on that when I took over. I have just checked. No better. I shall now try reverse flow with injected repellents and toxins."

"Right. Give it about an hour and I'll check you again about 0800, to see if there's any luck. If it's no better I'll contact Luis Sanchez and ask him to take a squad of scuba-boys and investigate it from the outside. Meantime I'll carry the load here." Solkov nodded, cut the picture and Sentry sat back, automatically reviewing the control board. Two generator sets were more than adequate to bear the present load, and he had two more that would take care of the peak demand, from 0830 onwards. No worry there. The next decision could wait until 0800 hours. Out of the blue it occurred to him to wonder if Georgi had made a comparable discovery in his domestic circumstances? In the same instant he knew the futility of such a question. Here in the dome, the word "domestic" had grown to be almost magical in portent. With sixty people practically living in each other's pockets, that one tiny area of privacy was jealously guarded. Everything else was rigorously researched, investigated and recorded, but no one asked questions about inter-pair relationships. Even the twelve-strong psycho-social team approached it delicately and with oblique and impersonal symbolism. Once every two weeks, each and every colonist had to submit to a thorough mental-stability test, for the record, but those interviews had all the safeguards and respect of a confessional.

Letting his trained reflexes take care of the job, Sentry ranged his mind back, following the train of thought that had started with his pleasant awakening. Kingsley had planned well and with great care. Because this was much

more than just an experiment at living under pressure, under the sea. That kind of thing had been done before, by Cousteau and others. Kingsley had broken it to them at the last important interview.

"We are the chosen ones," he said, and then smiled at once to apologize for his dramatics. "From thousands of applicants, we sixty people are about to live for a whole year beneath the sea, autonomously. All the tedium of examinations, interviews-in-depth, embarrassing incursions into privacy, that is all over. All that mass of information has been codified and digested by the best available logical machines and we are the result. You may feel that I am over-stressing this, that you are all sufficiently dedicated, prepared to be your own guinea-pigs, eager to make the experiment a success. But this is not, of itself, enough." Kingsley had made a dramatic pause before resuming.

"There is something much more important at stake, nothing less than the future of Mankind. Like it or not we must face the fact that the pollutions of civilization are reaching the point at which they affect our lives. Soon the result will be to curtail them. Yet we go on spawning in ever greater numbers and sprawling our noxious cultures ever more widely across the face of the Earth. Apparently we are unable to arrest, let alone reverse the trend. By the time the situation becomes a matter for panic action it will be too late. Some think it is already too late. Whatever your opinion on that, let me assure you that in the foreseeable future this—life at the bottom of the sea—is absolutely essential if civilized man is to continue. So this brave project of ours has *got* to work. It is up to us to meet the hazards, the hard problems and the snags, and overcome them. And we must do it without looking for outside help."

That was the shattering bit, Sentry mused. The vital importance of this research was bad enough, but that they had to do it, if it was humanly possible, without recourse to the rest of mankind, up there, was enough to screw up the tension to fever point. They did have a link with "upstairs", just one. From the central computer there ran a thigh-thick

cable that carried all the data they were gaining. Duplicate records of everything, because they were precious. But it was tacitly agreed that if they ever decided to use that link to call for help, it would be an open admission of failure and it was just as readily agreed that things would have to be pretty desperate before they came to that pass. Sixty people, paired and matched for multiple abilities, character stability and compatability, by computer-logic, determined to make a go of it, if it was humanly possible. Three pairs had been already married before application. The Kingsleys, of course, Andrew and Helen, both highly skilled sociologists. Robert Vance, marine biologist and one of Luis Sanchez's team of "scuba-men", and his wife Alice, in Biochemistry. And Luis Sanchez himself, and his wife Maria, who was in the Diet and Culinary section.

The rest of the group had congratulated these happy pairs on their successful application, but no one among the rest had complained at the computer's selections. Good scientists and sane people all, they had buckled down to the formidable task ahead in good spirits. Sentry grinned now as he recalled that someone had quoted Mark Twain to the effect that everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. And now it was almost too late to do anything about the "weather" up there. Poseidon *had* to work, and there were a dozen or more anxious-faced groups up there constantly in touch with the day-by-day results as they were relayed through that single cable.

THREE

SENTRY got to his feet, went for a little walk-tour around his domain, to inspect everything. Although it was carefully pushed back in his mind, the momentary difficulty over in the East plant made him restless. Tension was never very far away from any of them, at any time. He remembered how it had been in the first few wire-taut weeks, with people calling in every few minutes or so to assure themselves that everything was going well. One man could

keep adequate watch on this plant. Eight men kept watch on both power-plants on an eight-week cycle of twelve-hour watches, an arrangement that gave them plenty of time off and was quite satisfactory. But in those first anxious days there had been no lack of extra people, all eager to help "keep an eye on things". Sentry had to laugh to himself as he came back to his solitary vigil by the master control board.

There had been some anxious moments, right enough. He himself had said that he considered these fuel-cell generators reliable enough to depend on for his life, but he had not envisaged operating them under a constant pressure of two-and-half atmospheres of He-O-N. Joints and glands, operating levers and seals that were perfect at atmospheric pressure tended to develop bugs at two-and-a-half times that, and helium was the very devil to keep under control, but they had to have it, or go into delirium from nitrogen-narcosis. And no matter how you tried, you could never forget the thousands of tons per square inch of crushing death that lay constantly in wait beyond the frail walls of the dome. Crises had been met headlong and defeated one by one; little by little, some measure of confidence had grown, but you could never forget——

He started, now, as the visiphone buzzed for him. Solkov's expression was calm but grim.

"It does not work, Peter. The toxins and repellents have achieved nothing at all. First and second inlets are still blocked."

"Right! Keep that reverse flow going. Keep a sharp eye on the other two inlets, just in case. And put up a red caution. All load demands switched through to me here. I'll warm up my other two ready to take the peak and then I'll see if I can catch Luis Sanchez and get his gang on it."

Solkov cut the picture again and Sentry moved the controls to liven up his remaining pair of generators. Then, when the pyrometers showed stable, he put them on interlock and returned to the visiphone, glancing at the clock. 0814 hours. Sanchez should be still at home, with luck. He

was. The picture showed him with a scowl on his dark face, and irritation thickened his voice.

"Sentry! I am late with breakfast this morning. Is it urgent?"

"I'm afraid it is, Luis. I'm on watch at the moment. Trouble on the East plant. First and second inlets blocked solid and nothing we can do will clear them. Doubt very much if it's weeds or small fry."

"I see!" The irritation melted away as Sanchez grasped the situation. "You want me to go for a swim and take a look, eh?"

"If you would. Better make it a squad. This sounds like something a bit bigger than usual."

"Very well. It will take perhaps three-quarters of an hour to be ready. I will let you know."

"That's fine. Thanks, Luis. I'll chase up Kingsley and put him in the picture while you're rounding up the boys."

Sentry swept the screen clear and buttoned this time for Director Kingsley's home. A few minutes delay set his teeth on edge, then Helen Kingsley showed in the screen. In her late thirties, Helen had the kind of gaunt, high-cheeked beauty that would still be there long after her blonde hair had turned to grey. A queenly women, but she offered Sentry a warm smile.

"Peter. Something I can do for you?"

"I was after Andrew. We've a small crisis in Power-East, and he ought to be kept in touch. Any idea where I'll find him?"

"Not the slightest," she made a face. "You know how he is, a law unto himself. Could be anywhere."

"All right. If you locate him before I do, have him call me back here, would you?" He broke the connection, wasted a moment in a scowl. No matter how you tried, you couldn't kill gossip altogether, and gossip had it that all was not as well as it might be in the Kingsley menage. He shrugged the thought away, reminding himself that those two had more problems on their minds than anyone else in the colony. As co-directors they were responsible for every-

thing collectively. Who would blame them for buckling a bit under the strain? As his fingers poised to button for the Sociology Centre, Kingsley's special domain, the visiphone call-signal buzzed and he accepted it abruptly, frowned again as Belle's face appeared.

"Not a personal call, Tinkle, please. I'm busy!"

"Me too. Look, we want to start up another fermentation-plant, and you have a red caution showing. Is it serious?"

"Bad enough. I'm afraid you can't have any extra power for a while." He had hardly done saying it when her image was shouldered aside, and Kingsley appeared, leonine and imperious.

"See here, Sentry, we must have that fermentation process started at once. A delay now will set us back hours! What's all this nonsense about a power restriction?"

"No nonsense. I just rang your home to advise you, but you weren't there. Severe blockage on water inlets, Power-East. I have just asked Luis Sanchez to take out a scuba party to investigate "

"The devil you have?"

"Yes, the devil I have!" Sentry retorted, hardening his voice. "I'm not asking you to explain what the hell you mean by leaving home without a tracer, or what you're doing in Biology. That's your affair. This is mine. With East out of service, we are pushing close to our safety margin. Or do you want me to draw you a diagram?" Kingsley flushed, then mastered himself. The expression on his strong face presaged a growl, but his voice was soft as he spoke.

"Yes. You're quite right, Sentry. Sorry. It was a rather important experiment, but it can wait, and you were quite right in seeking to inform me at once. Now, is there anything else to arrange?"

"Sanchez might need help assembling his team. You should find him by Sea-lock Four. I forgot to warn him to make a telephone link before going outside. You should catch him."

"Yes. I'll do that right away."

The screen darkened, leaving Sentry to his thoughts,

which were not as pleasant as they had been earlier. Rumours and gossip had no appeal for him, but he couldn't dodge them altogether. In the beginning the two Kingsleys had been a driving force, an inspiration to all. Now there were signs, small straws in the wind, that the position was reversing itself. As the rest of the group gained in confidence and co-operation, so those two seemed to have lost theirs. There were stories of rows and ugly scenes, raised voices and temperamental displays. Sentry had paid little attention, because his work seldom brought him in direct confrontation with the research side. But now he had seen some of the signs for himself. And he had reacted. He did not feel happy about it.

The visiphone caught him hurriedly from a quick survey of the mounting load demand. It was Sanchez, from Sealock Four.

"Myself and four, ready to go out. We should be at the first inlet in ten minutes. Check?"

"Right. Reverse flow in progress, should help. Have you contacted Kingsley?"

"Yes. He is here and will stand-by the telephone."

"Fine. Luis, take care. Those inlets are thirty feet apart and the stoppage was simultaneous, so it could be something big."

Sanchez grinned as the connection went and Sentry sent a call to his opposite number. "Georgi! Keep the circulators running in reverse. There's a scuba team just leaving, should be there by 0915."

"Good! Peter, I was thinking. It would help, perhaps, if I put on a helmet and went down into the pipe from inside? Through the manhole?"

"Not on your own, you don't," Sentry said, and Solkov chuckled.

"That is all taken care of. Charlie Snow just happened to call in, and he will stand-by while I go down the pipe. All right?"

"Fair enough. You know what to do." Solkov chuckled again, went away and Snow's grinning face appeared.

Sentry had already reasoned out the chain. Moira Snow was in Biology along with Belle. She must have rung Charley and he had "just happened to call in" to see what was going on.

"What's wrong with you?" he demanded. "Can't you sleep?"

Snow ignored the thrust. "What d'you reckon this is, Peter?" he asked. "There's a back-pressure on those two circulators. I've never seen that before. Usually anything gets stuck on the outside screens, it washes away again as soon as the flow reverses."

"No idea," Sentry shrugged. "We'll know, soon. You'd better switch your visiphone link to the circulator chamber, so you can keep an eye on that manhole when Georgi goes down. Let's not take any chances."

That was Sentry's dominating urge, now. He could visualize the scuba-men paddling cautiously around the squat outside bulk of the dome and knew this was nothing to them. In small groups, they went out daily to study their fish farms, collect weed samples, take soundings of currents, mud-cores and plankton densities. It was a strange and weirdly wonderful world out there, but they were used to it and would take care. He was far more concerned with Solkov, in his pressure-helmet and with a four-foot chrome-steel lance, as he wriggled and squirmed along the inlet-pipe to the screens. That pipe was eight feet in diameter, but it could seem like a constricting trap to a man confronted with danger. He caught himself mentally checking the items of equipment, life-line, headlamp, lance, helmet—and shook his head in irritation. This could be the way Kingsley had begun to crack, by getting too involved with another man's hazard. It was the devil to give orders and be compelled to stand-by and wait, unable to do anything effective.

It must be the same with research, he mused. The biologist just had to assume that the biochemist knew what he was doing with his part. The physiologists had to assume that the psychologists and sociologists were on the ball. Diet and Culinary had to take for granted the chemical

analyses supplied them. There was a chain there, he thought. The marine biologists, familiarly called "the farmers", went out and caught it or found it, the chemists analysed it, the horticulture group tried to grow it in synthetic soil or breed it in tanks, the physiologists examined it for edibility or nutritive fractions, the dieticians tried to cook it or prepare it in some way—everybody dependent on everybody else. And all the data so laboriously garnered went in a steady stream into the greedy maw of the computer storage.

The visiphone buzzer jerked him out of reverie. He made a reflex inspection of his control-board as he pressed the "accept" button. This time the face was an utterly unexpected one.

"Emmy!" he said. "What can I do for you?"

Emmeline Addy was Ghanaian, as black as polished jet, and easily the loveliest girl Sentry had ever seen. She gave him a shy but dazzling smile.

"I just wanted to know how much longer the load restriction was going to last, Peter. We would like to use the big oven as soon as we can."

He glanced at the clock and saw 0933. "I'm sorry, Emmy. It's one of those things. Trouble outside. No telling when we'll be clear. Why?"

"It's not urgent. We've a new flour substitute we want to try out as a cake-mix. It can wait."

"Not a minute longer than it has too," he promised. "Save a sample for me, won't you?" She smiled again and switched off. Her lovely image had barely left the screen when the buzzer sounded again. It was Kingsley, wide-eyed and shouting.

"It's a squid, a giant squid! It's caught on the screens!"

"That's from Sanchez? Are they all right out there?"

"It's a hell of a mess! They can't get near the thing, can't see—the sea's thick with ink. It's enormous!"

"Calm down," Sentry snapped. "You won't achieve anything by getting hysterical. You still in touch with them?"

"Yes. Of course!"

"All right. Call them back in, right away. Warn Luis to leave the thing alone and come back. Leave it there. We'll have to deal with this from the inside!"

"But how, man? How?"

"Let me handle that end of it. You get the scuba-gang inside, out of danger." He cut off the wild-eyed Director and put his hand on a button that had not been used in many weeks. He pressed three times, slow and strongly, then took a moment to clear his thoughts. That alarm would bring all the rest of the power engineers on the run, regardless of what they were doing. Snow was on picture from the East plant within seconds.

"What's up, Peter?"

"Get Georgi up out of that pipe, fast. There's a giant squid outside, stuck on the screens. Move!" Snow vanished, leaving the screen open. Two minutes later Alex McKay, Percy West and Mike Ryan all together came jostling to the instrument. Over his shoulder Sentry heard heavy steps, and turned to see Eben Addy and Hans Goring, both breathless. He put them all in the picture in brief words.

"Those screens are thirty feet apart, so you can guess how big the creature must be. It's out of the question for any bunch to tackle it on its own terms. It's up to us. I've got as far as thinking we ought to give it a jolt, clamp a couple of earthing cables on those screens and shove a few thousand volts through it. Anybody want to take it from there?"

"It's a four-man job just fixing those cables," McKay offered. "One man down the pipe and one standing by. Let's get that bit done right away."

"Right! You've two men already on Number One inlet. You and Mike can handle Number Two." The screen now showed Percy West's thoughtful stare.

"We can't deliver much of a jolt, Peter," he murmured. "Not without stepping it up somehow. I assume we want to kill it, not just make it mad?"

"I was thinking about that," Eben Addy rumbled, leaning over to get in the scope of the picture. "How about those

heavy-duty condensers we used for that ionization job? You still have 'em over there?"

"Stacked in the motor room. About a dozen. We could hook 'em up in cascade, easily. Peter?"

"That sounds all right, but those damn things are heavy. You'll need help, Percy."

"Me!" Hans Goring grunted. "I will go, right away."

"Me too!" Addy grinned. "Betcha I can outrun you!" As they departed, Sentry turned back to Percy West.

"You know what to do. Hook up your cables direct to the main bus-line. Then those condensers, one, two, four and eight, if you have enough. Run up the other two generators ready. I'll pull out all the loading here except lights and essentials. Then when we're ready we'll throw all six generators into those lines——"

"We might just burn out all our plant, Peter. You thought of that?"

"It's a chance we have to take. The overload trips ought to save us, though. And there's this. Unless we cook that squid, once and for all, it is just big enough to tear out those screens and come wandering inside looking for pickings. This is the only way."

West went away, Sentry broke the call, moved a switch that changed the red "caution" to "emergency" and then proceeded, swiftly but systematically, to withdraw all heavy power supplies from each section at a time, watching carefully to see that the automatic output controls took care of the generator settings. Power-East became gradually quieter and quieter. As he worked he wondered whether Percy West had guessed right, or would the surge trips act in time to save them.

Four

In less than half an hour not one watt more than was absolutely necessary was leaving the power-plant. The clock stood at 1017. Sentry took a moment to seize paper and pencil and work out how long it would take the cascade of

heavy condensers to build up to overload and flash over. He made it eighteen seconds. He had a vivid image in his mind of the furious activity that would be going on in the other plant. He was poised and ready for the call when it came. Eben Addy's sweat-gleaming face grinned at him.

"We need a couple more minutes," he said, "to clamp down those manhole covers extra good."

"Why?"

"Man, have you thought what's going to happen when we smash out all that power? We're going to vaporize several tons of ambient water, crack it into hydrogen and oxygen. It will be like a bomb!"

"Two bombs!" Sentry snapped. "You're quite right, Eb. Make sure you all keep well clear."

"That's all done. Another thing, Peter. If this comes off, d'you reckon it might be a good notion to hook up juice lines to those screens for permanent? That way we could give them a jolt regular, say every night watch. Then we'd have no more trouble with weeds or anything."

"That's a good idea. We'll work it out later. Batteries, maybe."

He saw Addy tilt his head aside to some sound off screen then nod and grin. "That's it, Peter. Ready when you are."

"Right. I'll switch it from here. Starting now." On the relay board he twisted controls, two at a time, that sent East's two generators humming up to full output. He stepped smartly from there to his own panel and did it again, two at a time, then again. There was only the muted whine of the fuel pumps to indicate that anything was happening. The unit output gauges swung and climbed in smooth silence as a hundred and fifty megawatts of power hurled itself into a condenser, defeated its attempts to hold, overflowed into two more, flooded those and burst on into four more. Sentry watched the seconds sweep past. He could imagine the cracking pressures and the seething stresses on these condensers as they struggled frantically to contain the torrent of energy. Fifteen—sixteen—seventeen —he counted in his mind. Then it all went, lights, power

rotors and motors, fans, indicators, everything died for one desolate second.

In the dark he moved urgently to twist back the controls, and as he did so the sounds of life came back with shrill whines and flickering lights. He let out a long breath, set the last pair of controls to minimum and went back to the screen. If there had been any discernible shock, he had missed it in the cacophony of restarting machinery. As he waited for a face to show in the screen he checked and double-checked his panel, making sure that everything was back to normal. It was five minutes before Percy West appeared again, panting but jubilant.

"That was a hell of a thing, Peter! The shock-wave rattled us here like beans in a can, and we have eight, maybe nine, heavy-duty condensers that will never be any good any more. But those inlets are free and clear, we've just tried them. Inflow normal."

"Thank the Lord for that. Next thing is, did we kill it, or did we just send it away mad? But that's not our problem. Sanchez and his boys can take care of it."

"Better him than me," West grinned. "We're all back to normal here. I'm off, with the rest, and Georgi can take care of it. All right your end?"

"Everything's fine. Thanks for the help. Pass it on to the others, would you?"

The time was 1042. By 1100 hours all power supplies were back to the standard normal. By noon the incident was a cautionary memory, just more data for the computer. Sentry went up and out on to the narrow balcony that overhung the entrance to take a short breather. From here he could look up and see the blue-grey wall of the dome close to, could let his eye follow the slow upward and outward sweep of the curve as it went away to form the "sky". Radiant panels studded it at regular intervals, giving off the bright shadowless glare of "noon". Before him the whole colony lay arranged in neat order, a world in microcosm, almost. The emergency of the morning had been a bad one, and only an inscrutable fate knew how many

more lay ahead, but he thought it was safe to say that the little colony was well on the way to establishing itself as a practical possibility.

Not quite a copy of the outer world, he thought, as he idled. They had no traffic problems, no economic tangles, no politics. And no dirt, either. That had been a completely unforeseen bonus. This atmosphere was precisely controlled at an equable temperature and balanced humidity, and it was clean. Like everyone else, he wore thin cotton coveralls at work to protect him from hard edges and uncomfortable machinery. But the material was treated to keep its shape and repel soiling, so the most he or anyone else ever had to do was rinse and hang out to dry. And when they were not actually at work they wore as much, or as little, as fancy dictated. In this ideal climate it didn't matter much.

Over to his right he could see the Biology laboratories, and beyond them Biochemistry, the buildings tucked in alongside the dome wall. To his left was a general-purpose machine-shop, then Diet and Culinary and then Sea-lock Two. Hardly in keeping with the world outside, he had to admit. But virtually self-contained and independent, and growing more so every day. They synthesized their own fuel. They were able to extract enough metal from the sea water to meet any reasonable future demand. They had the food and drink question well in hand. He thought of Emmy Addy's new cake-mix, and grinned. She was a whiz at her job. They all were, in "Cook and Eat", as they had come to call it, and had done wonders with unpromising materials. He would have taken bets that some of them were, even now, contemplating some way of making edibles out of the corpse of the squid, if it was in fact killed.

Not just survival research, he mused. They were actually making useful discoveries. Belle had told him that in her department, in Biology, they were hot on the trail of an entirely new type of drug-chemicals that they were tentatively calling "super-proteins", because they seemed to act in a way that reinforced natural functions. Thinking of Belle, it seemed utterly appropriate that he should cast his

eye to the right and see her come striding along the outer ring-path to call on him. She had a plasti-bag tucked under one arm, and he knew what it was. She was bringing lunch. He had protested about it several times, insisting that he could quite easily carry a packed meal, or even whip something up for himself on the hot-ring they used for coffee-making. But she had insisted.

"You're on a twelve-hour shift, and liable to get caught up in all sorts of duties. I can just imagine you forgetting all about your meal. As I'm only ten minutes' walk away, why shouldn't I bring my lunch over and eat it with you?"

He watched her now, greedily savouring the precious moment, wondering anew at his own good fortune. Belle Wrigley, brilliant biologist, sailing through all the gruelling tests to qualify for this project, only to be picked out by a mindless computer as the person best qualified to be compatible with Peter Sentry. He had thought it a necessary evil at the time, something to be endured because there was no cure. They'd been candid and resigned, right from the start, willing to be good friends and rub along. But now—she glanced up and saw him, waved, and he waved back and ran in and down the corkscrew staircase to meet her in the motor-room.

"I'm a little overwhelmed," she said, as they went arm in arm up to control, "to be the wife of a hero."

"Who, me? What did I do?"

"If you can keep your head while all around are losing theirs——" she quoted, and he snorted amusedly.

"Ridiculous. I helped build this place. I know a bit more about it than most, that's all. Any of the others would have done the same in my place. Perhaps not quite so quickly, that's all."

"I was thinking of Dr. Kingsley. I've just left him. He's a mass of nerves."

"That's understandable, Tinkle. After all, he has to carry the entire load for everybody. Incidentally, what's he doing in Biology? Something big coming up?"

Belle got that look on her face that he had learned to read

as something she would rather not discuss. Before he could think of something to change the topic there came a cheery hail from below.

"Peter? You up there? Is it all right if I come up?"

"That's Emmy Addy," Belle said, her voice unusually sharp. "What does she want here?"

"Easy way to find out." Sentry raised his voice. "Hello, Emmy. It's all right, come on up!" In the seconds of waiting he shot a cautious side-glance at Belle, puzzled by a look on her face that he had never seen there before and couldn't interpret. Then a glossy black corona of hair appeared, followed by a gleaming smile as Emmeline Addy came into the control room. The smile winked out as she turned her head and saw Belle.

"Gosh, I might have known you'd be here too. Did I interrupt something? I can leave it——"

"It's all right. Have a seat. What's that, cake?"

"You did say you wanted to try a piece. Well, here it is." Emmy unwrapped a small bundle and Sentry nodded.

"It looks good, all right. Enough there for two. You try a piece, Tinkle. Got time to stay for a cup of coffee, Em?"

Belle stood up, still with that curious expression on her face. "I feel a fool," she said, "and that's what I needed to open my eyes to something. Emmy, I think it's only right that we should tell Peter what's going on. I know the taboo on gossip, but this thing could grow by default until it's too big to handle. You know what I mean, about Andrew Kingsley."

Emmy's lovely face became apprehensive. "I know what you mean, but I don't want to be the one to start anything."

"Then I will, if you'll back me up. Somebody has to do it."

"What are you two talking about?" Sentry demanded, and his wife fixed her big blue eyes on him resolutely.

"Do you want to know what was the first thing I felt when I heard Emmy's voice, just now? Jealousy and suspicion. Oh, I know it's ridiculous, and it went as soon as it

came. I won't even bother to apologize. Emmy will understand. You see, when you drop a little poison into a biological system it spreads and infects the whole. And that is what's happening here. I'm talking about Andrew Kingsley. Over the past few weeks he has been developing into a goat. A nasty, sneaking, perverted satyr!"

"That's the truth." Emmy sighed as Sentry stared aghast. "Only last month I had a big row with him over it. Kept snooping round C. & D., pretending it was official and getting a bit too familiar with me. Then calling on me at home when Eben was on power-watch."

Sentry forced a smile. "In your case who could blame him for being interested. Me too, only Twinkle watches me too closely."

"You can say that in fun and I don't mind. We all make that kind of joke at times. But Kingsley wasn't fooling around, not with me he wasn't. I had to tell him flat, in the end, that if he didn't mind himself, Eben would find out, and he would wind up dead, fast. You know that's right, Peter."

Sentry sighed. Ebenezer Addy was a big man in every way, big in body, in enthusiasm, in his appetite for work. He would be enormous in anger.

"You too?" He turned to Belle, and she nodded gravely.

"Just like all the rest, I didn't want to tell anybody, least of all you, and you know why. In the early days it didn't matter so much. We were all keyed up, tensed up, sharing a common danger—and strong emotional involvements were something to avoid. We were all pretty free and easy and no harm done. But it's different now. We've settled down. We have private lives. We've all made the adjustment. All except Kingsley, it seems. And he has been walking this path for some time now. It's got to be stopped."

"That's easy to say," Sentry muttered. "But not so easy to do. Why does it have to be Kingsley, of all people? As the Director, he's virtually our inspiration and guide. If that image breaks it could smash the whole project, ruin everything!"

"Maybe it isn't all that bad," Belle hazarded. "After all, a man can't be a successful satyr without some measure of co-operation, and so far as I know, he's not getting it."

"Not from me, he isn't, anyway," Emmy declared. "I like a bit of fun as much as anybody, but Eben's my man and that suits me fine."

Her words stirred a response in Sentry. He put out his hand to her.

"You too?"

She looked from him to Belle, and back, and her smile was a beautiful thing. "We've known for a long while. That computer certainly decided right for us two. And you?"

Belle nodded, happy now. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Five

Wonderful or not, the seeds of unease had been sown in Sentry's mind, and it was a problem that, while it concerned him acutely, involved him in matters outside his competence. He was a physicist. This was a problem that belonged properly to the sociology section. But the head of the sociology section was Andrew Kingsley. So where did you go from there? The colony had established its own routine for dealing with wild problems. It took the form of a regular quiz, once every two weeks. Everyone attended except the two men on power-watch, and even they kept in touch by visiphone. Questions were put up, debated, considered by whoever was expert in that field, decisions were taken, future action planned, reports made—it was a very important piece of administrative machinery. But the chairman, again, was Andrew Kingsley, and Sentry could just imagine the uproar there would be if he threw this little bomb into the works. Gossip! Where was the substantial evidence? Would any of the others back him up? And how could he ask around beforehand without lighting the very fuse he was afraid of?

The more he thought about it the more he saw how impossible it was. His own immediate contacts were, natur-

ally, with the seven other men who made up the power team. They were all good friends, but they never mentioned personal or private matters. Their talk was always "shop", or social activities. The choir, the games tournaments, the art-class, chess problems—or some repair-job, the cosmic-ray count, radiation factors in the latest water sample, the plankton drift—but never one's private affairs. A sensible rule had grown to be a habit, a stranglehold that Kingsley was using to his own advantage. The frustration nagged him, was still nagging him as he ended his watch, turned the job over to Charlie Snow and made his way home by the playing fields to pick up Belle.

She was in the concluding stages of a foursome of tennis with the other three biologists, partnering Karen Wilby against Moira Snow and Sylvia Kiggel. In the next court four of the marine men were engaged in a ding-dong tussle, and Sentry joined the little group who were watching them. Giuseppi Vitelli gave him a rueful smile.

"This is much safer than the job you handed us this morning, Sentry. Never have I seen such a beast!"

"I can imagine. It never occurred to me it was all one animal. Still, that kind of thing won't happen again, now we know how to discourage them."

"Just as well somebody was on the ball." The comment came from a great blond oak of a man by Sentry's left. "Kingsley was practically gibbering in hysterics. A bloody poor show, in my opinion." Sentry eyed the speaker, Robert Vance, and wondered if the comment carried any deeper significance. Vitelli chuckled, tried to dismiss the matter.

"You are too hard on him, Robert. It was a bad moment, and we were enough to frighten the devil himself, all smeared with that filthy ink. You were scared, go on, admit it!"

"Of course I was, but I was one of those who had to go back out and tackle the damned thing. Kingsley wasn't in any danger."

"We were all in danger," Sentry interposed mildly. "If that stunt of mine had backfired we'd be in a hell of a mess

now." He turned away as the women's foursome ended and Belle came trotting over to him, arm in arm with her partner. Both were breathless. Karen Wilby, a good three inches taller than Belle, pantomimed exhaustion and clutched Sentry's shoulder.

"Am I glad that's over. She runs me into the ground!"

"You're overweight," Belle remarked, flatly and without malice.

"Only in the best places, I hope," Karen retorted, panting hugely and making the most of her magnificent endowments. Sentry joined in the laugh, knowing that Karen was irrepressibly extrovert, and quite harmless, but his mirth shrivelled as Vance inserted himself into the conversation, speaking to Belle.

"I'm hoping to be lucky enough to draw you for the mixed doubles," he said. "You're the kind of partner I need."

"We'll see how it goes," she smiled offhandedly. "Come on, Peter. See you tomorrow, Karen." She took Sentry's arm and marched him away. As soon as they were clear he murmured,

"Is this thing beginning to get me, or is he another of those?"

"He's another," she said, very quietly. "The poison spreads."

"But"—he hesitated on the words—"how do you know? Isn't there a chance that this is all just imagination?"

"Don't be daft," she said, and there was complete conviction in her voice. "A woman always knows."

He had to be content with that. He tried to banish the problem and the simmering rage that came to him whenever he thought of it, with the thought that it was not his field. He would have been justly indignant had one of the sociologists tried to tell him how to operate the powerplant. Every man to his own job, he decided. But the problem reared up and struck at him, three days later, in a way he just could not ignore. He had just begun the night watch for the second time in his cycle. Prior to subsidence a lot of

hard thought had gone into planning various routines so that everyone was used to the utmost of his abilities, yet each had ample free time for leisure. In the special case of the eight power-men, who had to be available twenty-four hours a day, a twelve-hour watch cycle had been chosen as ideal. It meant that each man did two day watches, from 0700 to 1900, then two night watches, from 1900 to 0700, and then had four days completely free to study, rest, play or catch up on whatever activities he fancied.

For this final night watch, while the rest of the community slept and only Solkov, on the East side, shared his vigil, Sentry had saved a delicate little job. On a work-table before him, so arranged that he could see the control board merely by looking up, stood the complex parts of a tiny TV camera, one of the hundreds that were to be found almost everywhere in Poseidon. Most of them were sizeable and linked directly in to the computer, to be put in action whenever anything was done that needed to be recorded, but this particular one was a tiny portable, one of the dozen or so that the outside party were in the habit of carrying whenever they went exploring the sea-bed. Camera maintenance was Sentry's "other" job, and he enjoyed the work, but these tiny portables were teasing things to handle. This one had been bashed in the recent fracas with the squid and the interior was sticky with sepia-and-water.

He had fully expected an all-night session with the thing, but this time good fortune was on his side. With the sticky ink washed out and the battery replaced, his test-gauges showed that it ought to work perfectly. The blow had cracked the seals and let in water to short-circuit everything, but that seemed to be all. Hopefully, he smeared epoxy-resin on the matching edges of the casing, marked the time exactly, and shuffled everything into place so that he could press it all together when the time was right. On the five-minute mark precisely he held his breath, slid the sections together, pressed and waited, and then let go.

"That ought to do it," he muttered, "until some ham-handed clown goes mad with it again." Which was unfair,

but there was no one to hear. He set it to stand on top of a multipoint recorder, where the warmth would help the resin to spread and ensure the seal, switched the control to action-on and let it run. It had capacity for an hour of sound and vision, but five or ten minutes ought to be enough for a trial. That done he turned to go and warm up some coffee before making a routine, on-the-hour check—and jumped with surprise as he saw someone watching him from the doorway.

"Did I startle you?" she asked, smiling. It was Helen Kingsley, her heavy blonde hair unbound and brushing her shoulders. One glance showed him that all she wore was a cobwebby pale-blue robe, a nightdress of some kind, he assumed, and that her feet were bare. No wonder he hadn't heard her come.

"I certainly wasn't expecting to see you, or anybody else," he managed a smile and comparative ease. "Something I can do for you?"

"Not professionally, perhaps, no. I'm not intruding on anything?"

"Hardly. No secrets here. Nothing you haven't seen before."

"Then you won't mind if I stay and talk to you for a while." She came all the way in, selected a low stool that was used mostly for the kind of job where a man would have had to crouch otherwise, and settled on it with apparent indifference for the inadequacies of her semi-transparent attire. Sentry felt a sudden chill, and the need for caution.

"I was just about to warm up some coffee. Want a cup?"

"You're very kind." She watched him, accepted the cup, smiled her thanks and murmured, "You have the best of it, here. Always something meaningful to be getting on with."

"You're joking, of course! Ninety per cent of what I do is routine that the computer could handle far more efficiently. I'm practically redundant, right now."

"Aren't we all?" she countered, sighing. "Here we are, all of us, just going through the same silly motions, day in and day out. So boring."

"Boring? Do you think so?"

"Oh come, Peter, you must feel it. That little fuss we had, three days ago, was exciting, yes. But how often do we get anything like that now? It was different in the beginning. So new, so demanding, so different, with a fresh hazard and thrill every day. We lived then." She sipped at her cup, staring at him. "Remember? There was a tingle in the atmosphere, a zest! Remember when Sea-lock Two jammed up, with a half-a-dozen scuba-boys trapped outside? And when Duggie Haig brought that odd weed in and we all caught a rash from it? And the time the nitrogen percentage got too high and we were all sozzled for a while until we found out what it was and fixed it?"

"It wasn't funny at the time."

"No, perhaps not. But it was exciting. And we were all so close then, like good friends facing a common threat. We lived life right up, because we could never be sure there was going to be a tomorrow. You know what I mean?"

Sentry knew. He saw the colour coming to her cheeks, and her growing animation at her own memories. "Adrenalin," he said, matter-of-factly, "is all right in small doses, but I'd hate to live like that, at full-throttle, all the time. I'd be just as pleased if the next six months were dull."

"Oh no!" she protested. "You don't mean it. Not that I want to see dreadful things, I don't. But I couldn't bear it if we settled down like some dreary little humdrum village on the surface. We're not that kind of folk."

"Oh, I don't know. We're just people!"

"Silly!" She got up and moved a step towards him. "We are not just people. We're different. We aren't bound by conventions. We don't need little-people rules to tell us 'right' from 'wrong'. Why shouldn't we make our own excitement? We're not sheep!"

"We aren't goats, either. At least I'm not." He stood up to face her, trying to keep calm. "I almost said 'Why don't

you try your seduction bit on somebody else?', but on second thought I suggest you forget it altogether."

"You're afraid of me?" she challenged, hands on hips, her body thrust arrogantly forward. "I wonder why? I won't bite!"

"Once again," he said, "I think you're joking. I'm not afraid of you, but I am scared of what you might do. You may think this life boring, and that's your opinion. You may think we're immune from rights and wrongs, and that's your opinion again. But if you try upsetting any more domestic peace just for the sake of a few cheap thrills, you are going to get a lot more than you bargain for, and that's no opinion, but a fact."

She came closer, not in the least abashed. "You're strong minded, Peter. I like that. I've had a fancy for you for a long time. Does that shock you, that I can be so candid? But why not? What can you do? You daren't talk to anyone about it because it would be your word against mine. And I'm the psychologist, remember? My story would be that you invited me here, tried to seduce me—and failed. That makes your story the result of rage and frustration and the urge to get revenge."

"My story? Who said I was going to talk?"

"Of course you won't. I'm just showing you the whip and assuring you that I'll use it unless you play with me. I mean to have you, Peter."

"You're crazy!"

"In that way, yes! It's a glorious feeling. I'm going to have you, steal some of you away from that pug-nosed dump of a housewife of yours and that makes it all the sweeter. That self-satisfied grin of hers sets my teeth on edge at times. You're wasted on her."

"And you're wasting your time on me!"

"Oh no I'm not, dear man. You'll play with me—or I'll ruin you, your name, your domestic bliss and your professional integrity. Had you thought of that? You, in a position of trust and responsibility, a watcher-by-night, neg-

lecting your duties for amorous dalliance—think how that would sound! Passion in the power-plant!"

"Here?" Sentry glanced round at the severe lines of the control room.

"Why not? It will add spice. But not now!" She went back two tigerish steps. "There's an art even to this and anticipation is nine-tenths of the delight. You will be on this watch again"—she narrowed her eyes in thought—"in seven days' time. So there it is, darling. A date. Something to look forward to."

"Just a minute," he growled, as she turned to go. "Apart from anything else, why me?"

"Hah!" her eyes sparkled as she laughed at him. "Several reasons. In the early days when we were all so busy comforting each other, you didn't indulge. I noticed that. You're proud. And strong. The dominant type. And Belle obviously adores the very ground you walk on. That must mean something. I intend to find out what."

As he slumped before his control board there was a faint trace of her perfume, enough to assure him this thing had really happened and was no nightmare. But he felt anything but dominant, at that moment. He glanced automatically at his gauges without seeing them. He was caught, trapped as surely as a man in chains. What hurt more than anything was the obviousness of it. Belle had said it took two to make a man a satyr. So, with a relationship shattered, there had to be two bits, both Kingsleys. And, if Belle was also right about Bob Vance, there went two more. Where would it end? And what was he going to do? He glanced up at his board again, purely by reflex, and an odd eye caught him. He looked again, and sat up straight, staring at it. There, completely forgotten, was the round unwinking eye of the little portable TV camera. For a moment, Sentry was too stunned to grasp that he had been saved. Helen Kingsley had known, as everyone else did, that the power-plants were virtually the only places where cameras were not fitted, where all the precious readings were taken direct from pressure gauges and flow-

meters and pyrometer points. And, this time, she had been wrong.

He reached out and took down the little camera, handling it reverently. For the rest of that long watch he sat and thought, hard and carefully, to work out exactly what he had to do.

Six

THE mid-month quiz came three days later. Timed for 1300 hours, it took place as usual in the main assembly room and again, as usual, the two Kingsleys held the chair between them, flanked on either side, on the rostrum, by the remaining ten of the sociology section, women one side, men the other. There was never any need to count heads or be formal. Kingsley went straight to the main matter.

"I think we're all agreed that the giant squid has given us our hardest shock since last session, so let's deal with that first. Prime consideration must be present danger. Sentry?"

"Solkov can tell you better. He's East side."

"So far as we can tell," Solkov stood to report, "nothing serious. A slight increase in seepage water. A slight loss in pressure in the inlet chambers. These we will seek out and deal with on the next routine overhaul."

"What about recurrence?" This from Yvette Briand, of Horticulture and Botany. Sentry stood for that one.

"We are in process of fitting cables to each of the screens, permanently connected to battery power. Routine electrification should prevent any further incidents. It's for the outside party to say how likely it is that we'll get more squids."

Douglas Haig climbed to his feet. "I'd say another squid was unlikely. Cephalopods are my field. This is not their kind of locale, at all. That one, so far as I could tell from the remains, was injured before it reached us, I'd say in conflict with a predator, probably shark. Its behaviour was uncharacteristic, in that it should have lifted off when we approached. For the record, this is the biggest I've ever seen, although there are bigger specimens in the literature."

The biochemists had their turn, Alice Vance reporting that squid was considered a delicacy in some cultures but that this one was too old and tough to offer much scope. "However," she said, "we found no toxins or contra-indications, so we passed it along to Diet and Culinary."

Emmeline Addy stood to report that they had tried all of a dozen ways to tenderize the flesh but without success. It was left to Elsie Haig, for Horticulture and Botany, to assure the gathering that the carcase would be rotted down and processed for humus and fertilizer. Kingsley took the floor again, an odd expression on his face.

"I hope the meeting will permit me to make an apology, almost a confession. I'm afraid I rather lost my head in that crisis. I regret it. I can offer no excuse other than the feeble one that we seem to have progressed to the point where crises are no longer common. I imagine I had allowed myself to relax into over-confidence——"

"This is quite unnecessary," Alan Asquith interrupted from his right. "No one is criticizing you, Andrew. Forget it."

Sentry, keenly watching the faces on the platform, saw general agreement, with two exceptions. Paul Briand and Josip Isvolsky did not join in the chorus. They seemed aloof and watchful. He rose to his feet abruptly.

"I wish to challenge the chair," he said. All noises faded away until the room was thickly silent. Kingsley brought his head round very steadily.

"Challenge the chair? What may that mean?" He tried a laugh that came more like a bark. "Were you suggesting there should have been a few words of commendation extended to you, Sentry?"

"Save it. I challenge the chair because I have a question or two to ask on matters you're not competent to judge on."

"Questions?" Kingsley lost his superior manner at once. "What questions?"

"Oh no," Sentry retorted. "Not for you."

"Do you expect me to vacate the chair?"

"And the room. And Mrs. Kingsley as well, please." Sentry put down his hand to push away Belle's anxious clutch on his sleeve, but kept his eyes hard on the platform crew. Aileen and Alan Asquith spoke almost in concert.

"This is ridiculous!" they said, and then hushed. The rest remained quiet until Helen Kingsley rose, pale and furious.

"Come, Andrew," she snapped. "You'll recall us, of course, when Mr. Sentry has done making a fool of himself!" Her husband's snarl was audible in the hush as he leaped up and marched from the platform. Asquith stood watching them go, then turned a blistering eye on Sentry. With his neatly clipped moustache and aristocratic air, he could appear commanding. He did now.

"I suppose you'd want to appoint a new chairman? Yourself, perhaps?"

"Not you, anyway. I haven't cancelled one bias just to make room for another. I'll be happy to accept either Paul Briand or Josip Isvolsky."

After fifteen silent seconds for thought, Briand sighed. "Very well, Mr. Sentry. What is this momentous matter?"

"A general question, first. You people up there are responsible for keeping an eye on our mental health. We all have to take a personal stability test once every two weeks. We do. Who tests you?" Asquith snorted, but Briand was calm.

"We test each other, of course. Very discreetly. Was that your big question?"

"Just a preliminary. Tell me now, who last ran a test on Kingsley?"

"Hah!" Asquith grunted. "And then you'll demand to know the results of that test, eh? No no, Sentry. That data is confidential, as you know."

"I wish you wouldn't keep on screaming before you're hurt," Sentry snapped. "I only asked—which one of you last ran a test on Kingsley?" Asquith sat, shrugged a sneering glance at Briand, then at Isvolsky. Then David Repington frowned at Larry Kiggel. They frowned at each other. The tension grew as the enquiring looks crossed the plat-

form to the distaff side. Aileen Asquith shrugged, glanced to Olivia Cadorna. Hilda Ryan and Ruth Nivelle exchanged glances. Irene Ibbot put a hand to her mouth. Sentry was guessing ahead of them all now. "While you're at it," he suggested, "who last ran a test on Helen Kingsley?"

From the floor someone called out. "They've tested each other, perhaps?"

"No!" Isvolsky scowled. "That is not good practice."

Sentry sagged. His hopeful scheme had come unstuck. "That's it," he shook his head. "I withdraw the question. You'd better call back those two."

"A moment," Briand put up a stern finger. "It is not so easily dismissed. There are implications——"

Before he could complete the sentence the lights winked out. A fraction of a second later the floor shook just a thought ahead of a distant booming explosion. Sentry didn't remember beginning to run. He was out of the room and into the open before his slower reasoning processes had worked out how he knew, instantly, that it was Power-East. The sound, the direction of impact, the pattern of light failure and flickering recovery, he analysed it as he ran, reaching the plant entrance well ahead of anybody else. Inside, the motor-room was silent. Up the corkscrew ladder he went, to find the control-room vacant, all instruments zeroed except the cross-over monitors, which were up to attention. The visiphone bleated. He slapped it alive. Eben Addy's face looked out, tensely alert.

"What the hell was that, Pete?"

"Dunno. Just got here. Who's on?"

"Percy West. Ain't he there?"

"Not in sight. Leave this link open, I'll go look and call you back." The stink of fried insulation caught Sentry's nostrils. He tracked it, let it lead him up and around another ladder, up to the switch-house. With the scorched insulation came the sweet reek of hot oil. Percy West lay sprawled on the tile floor, feebly trying to wriggle to the door. The walls were dripping with oil. Of the several rows of heavy-duty switches, one line was a wreck, their box-

casings burst open like so many bombs. Sentry went down on his knees.

"Take it easy, Percy. What happened?" His touch told him that West was badly burned, at least.

"I'm all right, Pete. Just flash!" Tiny flakes of scorched skin broke and fell from West's face as he tried to grin. "Switch-house temperatures began dropping about an hour ago."

"Dropping? Getting cooler?"

"Right. Figured it out afterwards, too late. Came up to see why. Must have made a spark of some kind."

"Free hydrogen! From the fuel-store lines."

"Right. We must have loosened the seals when we blew the squid. But we don't have hydrogen monitors. Silly, isn't it?"

There came a clatter from below and Sentry raised his voice. Twenty delicate minutes later West was out and on the cool grass outside where the medical team could make hasty and temporary attempts to ease him. As a rule, Men's Medical handled male accidents, but Sally West was head of the women's section, and no power on earth or under the sea would have kept her from Percy's side at that moment. Sentry noted that even while he was busy making arrangements for repair and replacement of the damaged switch-gear. There was a lot to be done, most of it hard and heavy labour, and he was thoroughly weary by the time he was able to leave it and get home. He was angry, too. As he said to Belle,

"It's high time we turned this whole business over to automation. The computer would have diagnosed free hydrogen in a flash, as soon as those falling temperatures showed. The heat-exchange factor is well known. Percy, of course, still had his head full of the giant squid business and I don't blame him. It is the human factor that is going to wreck us unless we do something about it."

Another "human factor" awaited him the next morning. At 0830 hours he had a visiphone call from Paul Briand, informing him that he was to attend a special committee

meeting of the entire sociology section, in camera. Belle made no secret of her distress.

"Andrew is after your blood, Peter. He's going to build a cross and nail you to it. He's the type."

"Don't worry, Tinkle. I don't break all that easily. This might be the way to achieve what I was after, anyway."

The twelve were gathered in their own interview room, where the long table made a "U"-shaped area for Sentry to stand. He felt as if on trial. Kingsley put on the look of a headmaster about to admonish a brilliant but difficult pupil, an air of amused tolerance thinly layered over severity.

"Well now," he began, "this is an extraordinary situation, isn't it? Are we to have an explosion?"

"Perhaps. Tell me, do you know what was said, yesterday, after you left the quiz?"

"I can guess the general drift. The purpose of this meeting is that you will now make your accusations against me in my presence. Fair?"

"That's fine. Only I didn't make any accusations. I'm surprised your colleagues didn't tell you that!"

"We don't gossip," Asquith growled. "You have the floor. Get on!"

"All right. Here's that question again. When did you last take a personal stability test, Kingsley?"

"Stick to your last, cobbler," Kingsley smiled. "You're making a fool of yourself. I have a test every other week, just like anyone else."

"No no," Briand murmured, and there was instant hush. "That is not true, Andrew. Not true."

"Are you calling me a liar, Paul?" Kingsley's indignation was well done. "You should check the records before making a statement like that, you know."

"But I did. I checked very carefully, for ten times. Twenty weeks. And always the same—exactly the same—results. Similar, perhaps I could say possible. But exactly the same? Never."

"I agree," Isvolsky murmured. "It seems Paul had the same idea as myself, and found the same results. Ten dupli-

cate records, and all signed by Helen Kingsley. Furthermore——"

"Damn it, those records are confidential!"

"Rubbish!" Isvolsky brushed the objection aside with a precise gesture. "I am as professional as yourself. I disclose no secrets. I say, furthermore, that Helen Kingsley's records show precisely the same pattern. It is now mid-July. Since twenty weeks back, neither one of you has taken a test, simply handed in copies. Comment, please."

Kingsley went red in the face, tried to laugh. "Good God!" he burst out. "Anyone would think it was a crime! I am, after all, the Director. I have a thousand things to attend to. Does it matter that I chose to code in 'same as last time' results, instead of going through the rigmarole and wasting someone else's time? Surely no one questions *my* stability?"

"I do," Sentry stated flatly. "You can call *that* an accusation, if you like. We can start with the fact that you and Mrs. Kingsley have been conspiring between you to dodge the tests for the past twenty weeks."

"Just a minute," Asquith protested. "That's a bit too strong. Conspiring? Come now, Sentry!"

"Husbands and wives aren't supposed to check each other anyway, you've said so yourselves. So what else is it?"

Helen Kingsley came to her feet, shivering with rage. Sentry watched her the way he would watch a strain-gauge climbing to danger point.

"Be careful," she warned. "I wouldn't push this thing too far, in your circumstances." She let it hang there and he kept his bleak gaze on her until he thought the moment was ripe.

"A threat?" he murmured. "Is that how you propose to demonstrate how sane and stable you are, before these witnesses?"

She went white. Her laugh came shrill and unsteady. "You fool, to try psychological tricks on me. As Andrew

said, stick to your last. Try your filthy accusations on me and I'll see that you regret it, you conceited clown!"

"Now look here," Kingsley slapped the table, "first you accuse me of psychosis. Then you snap at Asquith. Now you're picking on Helen. Can't you see you are demonstrating the very imbalance you're accusing others of? Persecution tendency. Possibly slight megalomania. Wouldn't you say, Briand?"

Helen Ryan broke in before Briand could speak. "My husband works in Mr. Sentry's area of operations. And I was the last one to run a test on him. I submit that he shows every sign of stability and control. I reject Dr. Kingsley's implications. Peter, I would like to hear the substance of your evidence as it relates to——"

"Let me tell it first," Helen came up to her feet again, eyes blazing, "and then let him lie, if he dares!"

"Then there is substance to it?"

"Only this. That man is riddled with erotic fantasies, hatched in the long solitude of the night watches. Heaven only knows how many other women he has made the target of his urges, that remains to be seen. I do know that when he approached me and suggested—no, insisted—that I should visit him in the night, told me of his perverted imaginings and assumed that I would enjoy taking part in their fulfilment, I was shocked and disgusted. However, as part of my professional obligation, I was prepared to humour him up to a point. Frankly, I had not arrived at any hard decision. I think I would have sought advice from one of you, given the chance."

"Then you never actually kept an assignation with Sentry?" David Repington asked. Kingsley looked murderous. Helen lifted her chin sharply.

"I am prepared to carry out professional obligations, but I don't think anyone would expect me to go that far."

"Well!" Kingsley growled, deep in his throat. "And this is the man who dares to accuse me—me! My God!"

"May we now hear Mr. Sentry?" Hilda Ryan's voice was coldly calm, and Paul Briand nodded.

"Exactly. We must have it out."

"I'd rather not listen to his lurid imaginings," Kingsley shouted. "There are limits, you know!"

"You'd better stay," Sentry told him. "You won't hear anything lurid, not from me." He turned to face Ruth Nivelle. "Three days ago your husband Georges brought me a job to do. The following day I gave it back to him and asked him to hang on to it for a while. Did he say anything to you about it?"

She thought a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I remember. Georges gave the—it to me to put away for him. In my desk file. It is still there."

"That's fine. Just to prove there's been no chance to fake or tamper." Sentry swung back to the co-chairman again. "The thing we were talking about was a camera. Georges had busted it. I had just repaired it. And it was on my control panel, watching and listening to you, Mrs. Kingsley, three nights ago when you came to call on me. It saw everything, heard everything——"

He halted as he saw her stagger and then go down in a dead faint. Her husband stared down, frozen for the moment, the veins standing out on his neck, then he spun, snarling, and threw himself bodily across the table. Sentry was caught completely flat-footed by surprise and the sheer animal ferocity of the attack. He had one hideous close-up of a grinning maniacal face, then the hard floor met the back of his head and he saw stars, felt a cracking pain and then darkness.

SEVEN

CONSCIOUSNESS crept back to him through the sound of groans and a fog of pain. He realized that it was he himself who was groaning, stopped it and opened his eyes very cautiously, wincing at the bright lights of the sanatorium. A face came to look down at him. Luigi Cadorna smiled.

"Be still, now. It is only a bump on the head and some bruises, not severe. My Olivia told me all about it."

"What happened?"

"As you might expect. Kingsley is unsafe. Also his wife. Both are under sedation right now. In a little while, three or four days perhaps, we begin to shut down the project and return to the surface. A pity."

"What for? Why are we quitting?" Sentry tried to sit up, and another face came to frown at him. Stephen Wilby.

"Lie still, man. You've had a hell of a crack. Looks as if Kingsley tried to shove your skull right through the floor."

"Never mind that. Steve, why are we deciding to quit. Who made that decision, anyway?"

"I dunno. The sociology boys I guess. They're in charge. Now you take it easy. Belle's outside, waiting to see you."

Her approach was characteristically calm and casual. "I always said you had a hard head. Now everybody knows."

"It doesn't feel all that hard right now," he admitted, and she put a sympathetic hand on his arm.

"Peter, whatever did you do? Half the sociology section are nursing cuts and bruises, Kingsley's in a strait-jacket and there's talk about us closing the place down. You look as if you'd been trampled. What's been going on?"

"All I did was challenge an axiom," he sighed. "Tinkle, would you ask Paul Briand to come and see me as soon as he can, before anybody takes any big decisions, please?"

Briand came late that evening, just as Sentry had heard good news about Percy West, that his colleague was suffering only from lesser burns and shock and would be fit in a day or two. But Briand looked grim.

"You showed us our weakness, Sentry," he admitted. "In time, I hope."

"What's this talk about shutting the project down?"

"But what else?" the Frenchman shrugged. "We are in a new kind of danger, now that we know the testing machinery is not reliable. Anything else we could cope with, but the human factor was always the big riddle. And we have been wrong somewhere, that much is now obvious."

"I have a theory about that, Paul. No, wait, I haven't done so badly up to now, have I? This time you can check

me out beforehand. A prediction. But I want a little data first. Tell me, what actually happens to our test records, afterwards?"

"They are stored, filed, in the computer. What else would you?"

"All right. Now, let's say you have just put me through the battery and you have all the results down there. What, exactly, do you do next?"

Briand frowned. "Do you expect me to give you a lesson in test evaluation in six short words? I look, I think, I judge. There are thirty-eight variables. I look for abnormalities, from my experience!"

"I'm an engineer-type," Sentry said. "In my job one looks for anything out of line, anything that changes without some good reason. You?"

"But, of course. Sentry, this is elementary."

"It certainly is. Look, I want you to do something for me. Get hold of Hans Goring. Or Sophia Menin, from Biochemistry. Either of those, or anyone else who knows how to set up a computer programme and set up a routine on the machine that will retrieve and inspect all the personality test-data for each and every one of us, compare them over elapsed time, and isolate any significant changes. Know what I mean?"

"A machine!" Briand made a face. "No machine can do the work of the human mind, my friend."

"That's the axiom I wanted to challenge. Will you do it? There'll be no danger of revealing confidential material. You're the only one who will see the final figures. And one thing more. Let me have a piece of paper and a stylus." Briand got out a notebook, tore out a page. Sentry scribbled on it, folded it and gave it back. "There, you keep that until after you get the machine results and then look. Here's my prediction. Most—almost all—the records will show no significant change. Some will, however. Those I've written down there. If I am right——"

"You have the Kingsleys here, of course."

"No. You're not thinking. Their records are fake, re-

member? No. If I've picked them right, then I've proved my point. And the project need not be thrown out as a loss. It will take only an hour or so to prove it."

Briand got up. "Very well," he sighed, "if it will preserve this wonderful experiment, I will try anything."

Sentry slept well that night, but it was more sedation than satisfaction. His gamble seemed to be on more and more tenuous grounds the more he looked at it. He was awake and anxious long before there was any need, next morning. His answer came in the shape of all ten of the sociology section presenting themselves at the medical centre to talk to him. Stephen Wilby, under protest, allowed them the use of the Medical conference room. Briand took the floor.

"It is obvious," he said, "that Mr. Sentry knows something we do not." He described the suggested computer analysis and its results. "My friends, all night I have puzzled over this, but without the 'aha!' of understanding. The machine results show that all of us have remained reasonably stable and adjusted, over the period, except four. The four which Mr. Sentry wrote down here. I will name them, within this confidence of professionals. They are Robert and Alice Vance, and Luis and Maria Sanchez!" There was immediate if controlled uproar and incredulous voices. Briand waited for quiet.

"Now, Mr. Sentry, you will please tell us how you knew?"

"Gladly," Sentry nodded, "but you'll have to let me do it my way and lead up to it by stages, because you're not going to like this. We're all scientists together. You'll agree, I think, that in the past half-century whenever we've applied the scientific method to our problems we've succeeded pretty well and whenever we haven't, we've pretty well failed. Now this was and is a scientific problem, this project. And one of the main props of the scientific method has always been to minimize the possibility of human error. In my field it is fairly simple. I rely on instruments all

the time. I take decisions, yes, but on the best possible evidence, provided for me by a non-involved machine of some kind."

"We deal with people," Asquith interrupted. "Not machines!"

"Agreed. There's a difference. Emotions, feelings, inspiration and intuition and so on, all come into it. Precious abilities that no machine has. But deadly, if and when they fly directly in the face of fact. You have to have hard facts first. People make mistakes when they think they are better than the facts. That's how I was able to predict those four. Paul, may I ask you a personal question? Are you in love with your wife, Yvette?"

Briand grunted. "Another trick? If so, it fails. I am sorry to disappoint you, Sentry, but the answer is yes, I am in love with Yvette."

"No disappointment, Paul. I was gambling on that. Look, when this project was being put together, the really hard part was selecting sixty people who would be fit for it, have the necessary combinations of skills and abilities, and be compatible with each other at the same time. We, all of us, were analysed right down to the last toenail and idiosyncracy. And the computer shuffled us and selected those who would stand the best chance of rubbing along together, both as a community, and as life-partners. For the sake of a very important and exciting project, we co-operated, made a go of it. But we were selected for compatibility only. Nobody said anything about love, or emotional involvement, or even affection, because we have no objective measurements for such things."

"On the whole," Hilda Ryan murmured, "we have done very well. What are you getting at, Peter?"

"Let me be poetic a moment. I suggest to you that love is not the seed that is planted, but the flower that blooms afterwards—if, and only if, that seed was well planted and allowed to grow in good soil. In other words, given compatibility and willingness to begin with, love follows. As it has done with us. All of us, except the four people men-

tioned and the Kingsleys. Because, don't you see, they were already married before they applied for the project, before the computer could analyse them for pair-compatibility. Their names were entered in as 'married', which, to the machine, *means* 'compatible'. So the machine accepted that as a datum given and went on from there. And they were the only ones to fail. The rest of us are all right!"

Six months later, when the Second Poseidon Group had gone down, and the pioneering First Group reached the surface after a tedious week of careful depressurization, there was a swarm of avid newspapermen there to welcome them to the light of day and the unfamiliar feelings and sounds of the retrieval vessel. Sentry became the focal point for one little group. With his arm around Belle, he smilingly disclaimed any claim to genius or brilliance.

"Just a hunch, at first," he declared, "based on a thing I once read by Bernard Shaw. Two people under the powerful influence of biological urges and sentimental emotions are in the worst possible condition to make sensible decisions which may affect the rest of their lives. Or something like that. It's true, anyway. We were lucky. We made the rational decisions first and fell in love afterwards. We made it work."

One newsman turned to Belle, and asked her amid a lightning-storm of flash-bulbs. "Do you feel that it will go on working, Mrs. Sentry?"

Belle smiled. "I'm ready to spend the rest of my life working at it," she declared, with confidence.

FOLLY TO BE WISE

by

DOUGLAS R. MASON

The enquiring female mind is often enough to drive a man to the edge of frustration—but that is when he usually makes his most interesting discoveries.

FOLLY TO BE WISE

LIGHT was faint in the east. A pallid bar, which came briefly and was drowned out. An uneasy pallor lost as the black tide flowed again. Etiolated echo of the infinity of dawns which had blazed and gone.

No human consciousness made its heartbeats the measure of the time it took to turn. There was no time. Only a slow separation. But light grew, gathered in the countless million lenses of an inert atmosphere. A notional eye would have seen a small grey planet troubled and tortured by rebirth.

The seas had not entirely died. Tiny, rod-like organisms stirred in their depths, felt the warmth of the light and exploded into productive life. The spiral screw began to turn once more which in the term of years measured by an atomic clock would throw up a conscious mind.

Dragged by its heavier neighbour into the long orbit round the new sun, a satellite moon took its share of light. On the parent planet, life complicated itself. Cells burgeoned, divided, became specific in function. Life crawled ashore again from the ancient seas. Forests rose and sank. The planet's raddled skin expanded in the new heat, threw up new mountains, ran its oceans to new shores.

Out of the dialectic came man. Conscious of a new *now* and carrying his ancestry in a sealed bag in his head, an unsuspected handicap.

An immense plain of yellow-ochre sand streaked with white patches of granulated marble was brilliantly lit from a huge fire-wheel of sun, almost vertically overhead. Zara only recognized that the reflection made her eyes ache and that the heat was beating down on her polished, cobalt-blue skin with a tangible depressive weight.

She called out, "Kaalba, Kaalba," in a deep, throaty

voice, which was projected by the sounding board of sheer cliff at her back and rolled, echoing, over the flat beach.

Far off, at the indeterminate edge of the sea, a diminished figure, shimmering in the heat haze, turned and waved both arms in acknowledgement and then bent again to continue whatever he was doing.

Zara's large, expressive eyes narrowed with impatience and the first real irritability she had shown since they left the clan. In substance, without the form of words, she was thinking, "The fool, he must know that I meant him to stop and come to meet me. I know he's there, and he knows I know he's there. So why wave? It is to assert that whatever he is doing is more important to him than I am."

Standing still for this analysis, in the stupefying heat, she felt it flow along the curves of her body like heavy syrup. Except for a narrow, plaited thong of yellow snakeskin, circling low on her hips and anchoring a minimal loop of red cloth, it had an uninterrupted, switchback run.

They had reached this open plain and its boundary of sea after twenty days' journeying through the forest. Usually, two people on their proving time stayed near the clan. A day's distance away, just out of range of the farthest-roaming hunter or food-gatherer. But Kaalba had decided that they would be different. With a hundred days to fill, he said they should go out in a straight line until they had counted fifty days or found some great marvel—whichever was the sooner.

Still, she could hardly complain about that. It was his quality of being different which had made her agree to be his partner. She could have had any of the young men of their age group. Or, indeed, any of the unpaired elders. No other woman in the clan had received more formal requests. No one had such luminously black hair, such velvet skin, round breasts and long slender legs. Almost as tall as Kaalba, she walked with a queen's grace and as a bonus was skilled in all the work which a woman should do.

Trudging sulkily forward towards him, she told herself that she must have been mesmerized by words and by his

quick, eager voice. Why had she come? He was not really good-looking, even. Just persuasive. Getting his way by a gift of the gab.

For days they had walked together, not a handsbreadth ahead or behind the other. Hand in hand, through the endless forest. At night, Kaalba had made a booth of saplings, working with neat economical strokes of his obsidian axe. She had gathered bracken and moss for their bed.

Food almost fell into their outstretched hands, curious fruits, edible fungi, the tender tips of certain bushes. It was her special contribution to know what was good and what was not. There was precedent of a whole clan being wiped out by injudicious sampling.

That was something, too. She stopped again to think about it. There was the river fish which was good to eat if you took off its skin and removed the roe, ovaries and liver. Leave any one of these items by careless preparation and you handed your guest a certain and painful death. That was a mystery. However did anyone find out that it was good to eat since the first person to try would surely be killed? Somebody like Kaalba no doubt. He would find a way round it. She would ask him.

He was thigh deep in clear water, axe raised and then chopping down at a grey mass which was in a churning turmoil. As she said, "Kaalba," the duel ended, and a grey hemisphere floated up to the surface.

Kaalba, stocky, powerful, with the broad high forehead of a thinker, began to wade ashore towing his catch by a stumpy, reptilian tail.

"Kaalba."

"What is it?"

He had found out in the last twenty days that it was not all bliss to be alone with the beautiful Zara. It was not her endless questioning so much; because he liked explaining things to her, but the assumption that he was there present for that purpose. A kind of chief minister, court chamberlain.

She had managed to keep their love-making on a slightly

analytical level, as though it was one more thing that a girl ought to know about.

"Why did you run on and leave me?"

"Why do you always answer a question with another question?"

"Do I?"

"Help me to drag this animal ashore."

"Is it an animal? Isn't it a fish?"

"Living creature then. Just pull."

In the shallow water, it was harder to move. Although it was small, it was very compact. Three-quarters of a sphere, on a flattened base an arm's length across; almost the weight of a man. When it was stranded in a hand's depth of water, they were ready to squat back on their heels and rest.

Zara said, "What will you do with this fish? It has a very hard shell and how can we tell if it is good to eat? I expect it would taste like a lizard, if you could get at the meat, which you can not."

"Help me to turn it over."

When the dome of the shell was in the water, he began to chip at the base with his axe and Zara lost interest. She walked farther on until the water reached her waist, then she plunged forward and began to swim with a powerful, overarm stroke.

Totally preoccupied with his task, he did not see her circle round and then drift down towards him, floating on her back and watching three white birds wheeling and gliding against the distant cliff.

The first clue that she was once more in his midst came from behind his knees. A voice saying, "It is easier to swim here than in the river. Why is that?"

Kaalba checked a down stroke which might have ended her chat for all time and looked at her. Hair a shining black skull-cap, emphasizing the proportions of her oval face, water glistening on her skin like blue jewels.

He said, "Where there is nothing, a stone will fall easily; where there is solid ground, it will rest. Between the one and the other, there is a range of thickness. This water is

thicker than river water and does more to prevent you falling through it."

"Why is it that you always have an answer?"

"I do not always have an answer, but so far you have not framed the questions which I cannot answer."

"What are they?"

"How can I know that?"

"You are laughing at me."

"And nobody should laugh at the beautiful Zara?"

Her heels had grounded in soft sand, so she sat up and changed the topic.

"What are you going to do with that shell?"

Kaalba had cut neatly round the thick base and levered it off. He had severed thick sinewy tissue which held the body in its house. Now he was ready to tip the mess out. When he did so, the sea was stained red and Zara moved away in disgust.

"Do you have to do that?"

"Now we have a large, empty vessel. Very strong. There are many uses for such a thing."

"What for instance?"

"Not just now perhaps. But in the clan. We are expected to take back with us one beautiful thing and one useful thing. Since the most beautiful thing there is, came with me out of the clan, I shall have difficulty with the first; but this could well do as the second."

"That was a nice thing to say. Now I know why I agreed to come with you."

"Were you still in doubt?"

It was a rhetorical question. He knew in his heart that the answer was "Yes". But she did not make an overt statement of it and as he knelt beside his shell, scooping water into it with both hands, she joined him, suddenly good humoured. Even began to prod out some remaining fragments of flesh with a sharp, narrow-bladed knife from her belt.

Now it was light enough to carry and they walked out of the sea on to a bar of white sand.

"But what can you use it *for*?"

"Water storage. Grain. A mortar. A cradle." He rocked it experimentally. "It may turn out to be a beautiful *and* a useful thing. I can bore holes along the rim and fit thongs as handles. Then we can carry it between us."

"Meanwhile it is very awkward."

"Meanwhile we should choose our place for tonight. In fact for several nights, because we have gone as far as we can go in a straight line and we have also found our marvel."

Facing them, the cliff became a wall as they approached. Higher than the tallest tree in the forest. It was amazing now that they had found a way down it. Their route showed as a pale zig-zag against the brown stone face. It stretched away left and right in an unbroken line until the curves of the headland took it away out of sight.

Zara said, "What is that black shadow over there?" Her outstretched arm was vividly modelled, blue velvet against sand and cliff. Looking along it, he found that he was looking at it and was distracted.

When he did not answer she stopped suddenly and the clumsy shell dropped to the sand between them. Her eyes were all pale gold iris with the pupils narrowed to a point against the glare.

"You're not looking."

"I prefer to look at you."

"Oh that." She was indifferent about her own image, being used to it and not yet moved to be glad that he should care about it. Recognizing that it was so, Kaalba shaded his eyes and looked more closely at the cliff.

"It is an opening. Dark where the light can not reach. A place to stay, if we can get to it."

"It looks no harder than the way we came down."

Inside the cave it was cool. They sat just inside the shade line and looked out over a greater distance than they had ever imagined to the far horizon. The shell was against one

wall chocked between stones and half-filled with clear water.

Saplings and bracken and moss were heaped ready to make a bed. Fruits, birds' eggs and the carcase of a small tree bear filled the larder. Wood for a cooking fire. Their own possessions—Kaalba's blowpipe and pouch of small deadly darts tipped with a paralysing nerve poison; his flint striker to make fire; Zara's multi-link necklace of red, yellow and green stones which she would wear again when they made their ceremonial re-entry to their village.

It was unusually quiet in the cave. Even granted that they were in a kind of acoustic booth, which shielded them from the familiar clatter of the forest above. Only a faint, rhythmic swaying sound—as regular as breathing—from the sea directly ahead.

The silence was almost oppressive and Kaalba moved uneasily to the cave mouth. Up above, the forest had in fact gone still.

Zara said, "You should be very grateful that I found this cave, it will save you a lot of work, and we shall be more comfortable here than in a shelter."

It was a strong position and one likely to remain as a lifelong talking point, if not rigorously undermined from the outset. As if on cue, dissent came on a cosmic scale and Kaalba was some seconds before he recognized that he would survive to benefit.

The floor of the cave lurched suddenly to the left in a spasm of activity, which he saw was carried in a deep-moving wave across the sand and into the sea. This picture he carried with him as a mental still as he slid back and joined the trash pile brought up against an inner wall.

He could only blame himself. Twice in the span of their memory, similar phenomena had disrupted the clan's living space. Earth tremors had shattered every house in the village with corresponding havoc in the surrounding forests. In this confined space it was infinitely more threatening. But no serious damage was done. Zara was sit-

ting among the rubble of sticks and food, dazed but seemingly unharmed

From the depths of the cave there was a grinding rumble which reached a period with a flat, percussive smack, as though a slab had fallen from a great height on to a flat threshing floor. Air rushed out of the tunnel, dust-filled, carrying small fragments of debris.

Thinking that part of the roof was breaking away, Kaalba heaved himself clear in a total concentration of strength and swung Zara from where she was, until she was between himself and the firm wall and shielded by his own body.

As much as anything the sheer power of this move surprised her, and the overwhelming force of the grip which continued to hold her so that she could not move. It was indeed the first time in her experience that she had been so constrained to do something without being consulted, and though it was patently intended to be in her own interest, in a confused way, it seemed to be a kind of betrayal.

"You're hurting me."

Large golden-brown eyes, very wide open, very close. Foreheads touched flatly, warm and smooth, as he pushed her head back against the wall with his own. Before he released her, he suddenly moved and kissed her lips.

"You're still hurting me." But this time the voice was softer and uncertain. Illusions are the hardest thing to give up, but her armour of self-sufficiency had been given a shrewd knock.

Kaalba helped her to her feet. The ground was steady now and there was no sound from the depths of the cave. From the forest, a muted clatter had started up as though an all-clear had been given. Brilliant light showed up a hanging dust cloud. Rhythmic surge from the distant sea. Except for the litter on the cave floor, it might have been a shared hallucination.

Zara said, "You will have to make a shelter in the forest after all. I am sorry. It was not a very good idea."

Such generosity deserved to be met.

"It will not happen again."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"It never happens twice together. Now we know that this place will be safe for many days. It was a very good idea."

Challenge, however, was in the air. From the depths of the cave, out of sight, round a syphon-like bend came the amplified sound of further movement. Drag and stop, scrabble, slide and stop. Some self-mobile thing was coming out towards them from the darkness.

Zara, who had begun to sort out the heap was back beside Kaalba in two strides. It was the first time she had turned to him instinctively for protection and the significance of it was more important to him than his own fear of what was about to happen. He had sudden insight into the wisdom of the idea of this proving time. A hundred days was bound to throw up circumstances which would make the partners recognize their dependence on each other and set them in a right relationship.

He said aloud, "Whatever it is, it is coming very slowly. Dig out my blowpipe."

When she had found it, he said, "Now go out on to the path and wait."

"I will stay with you."

It was said as an appeal rather than a contradiction.

"As you will."

They went back to the entrance and stood flat against the wall, so that the light went past them down the bend. Movement quickened as though its maker was gaining strength.

Looking along the wall at the height of a man's head, they missed its first appearance. When Zara said, "What is it?" in a voice riddled with *angst*, it was already in full view. A grey shape, dragging itself along the floor, like a moving shadow. Now they could distinguish that it had in some measure the shape of a man.

It had stopped in the light and Kaalba had the feeling that it was absorbing light, drinking it in like liquid food. Zara began to tremble against his arm as it began to move

again. Fascination with what he was seeing made him forget the blowpipe and the dart, poised ready to fly.

Slowly, the shape separated itself out. First, it was on all fours; head weaving from side to side like a stunned man. Then it sat back on its haunches. Rising to full height, taller than Kaalba by a head, it filled the cave from floor to ceiling. Perfectly proportioned, smooth as polished obsidian. Such a man as they had never imagined.

It was clear enough that, under their film of dust, those limbs owed nothing to flesh and blood. They were nearest in texture to Kaalba's shell.

Zara said, "Look at its head."

She had a point. It was a smooth ovoid structure, bland, hairless, pale silver below the dust. No mouth or nose or ears destroyed the continuity of line. Set where eyes should be were palm-sized disks, glowing with changing colour as their photo-chromatic crystals altered composition in the strengthening light and filtered its intake of energy.

As she spoke, the head turned to the sound. It saw them and stood still. There was a strange wait to a count of five and then it spoke.

No visible movement identified a source of sound, but it appeared to come from the head. Faintly at first, then gathering strength. A deep, melodious tone, incomprehensible; but with the unmistakable, rising inflexion of a question, repeated again and again, followed by a short statement as though it was identifying itself. Eye-disks rippled with changing colour and glowed now as though they had collected enough light to make them an outgoing force.

It stretched out its hands palms upward in the eternal mime of non-aggression.

Kaalba took a decision. He stepped forward and spoke, "I am Kaalba. This is Zara. What do you want? Where have you come from? Who are you?"

The words came back like an echo, "I am Kaalba. . . ." in a voice of such timbre, that their language seemed more musical and full of subtlety than they had believed.

Gathering confidence, Zara spoke and the eyes watched

her in a ceaseless flux of colour and pattern. Her words were repeated. Then the figure took time off for thought. In its indestructible core, millions of circuits were dredging up their mites of learning, whipping them along in nano-seconds for the attention of its computer mind. Data suggested an immense passage of time. Here was a new and unfamiliar species. Near enough though for recognition to the pattern of man. The woman's voice had a tone almost exactly that of the briefing clerk who had dictated behaviour codes into his frontal bands.

However, these two seemed harmless enough. In any event, they could be no threat. There was no need to make any demonstration of force by using the laser tube in the middle finger of his left hand. Self-consciously aware that it was a shade theatrical, he went to Zara and inclined his head. Then he knelt down in token of submission. There was precedent enough in his fiction bank for this courtly gesture and he had no reason to be dissatisfied with its effect.

Zara said, "Look, Kaalba. It's deferring to me. Isn't that wonderful? This will be the most amazing thing that anyone has ever taken back to the clan. I shall call it, Tros."

When it began to repeat her words, she said sharply, "Stop doing that." The voice cut off, but there was a feeling that the repetition was still going on, just below the threshold of audibility.

Five days later, they had their first two-way conversation. Cleaned of dust, sparkling in the bright light, a smooth shell of an unknown and beautiful metal, Tros accepted his name and followed them like a patient dog, listening to every word they spoke. When it had heard enough and was stocked with the requisite number of identified speech units, its computers went into action and gave it a translation key.

Zara was standing at the cliff edge, looking over the sea to the distant horizon. The sun was a white glare. Tros had cut down intake of light and his eye-disks were opaque

plates of pale gold. He stood a pace to the rear like a respectable retainer. She said, "In the forest, we could never see as far into the distance as the eye could reach, except into the sky where nothing is. Looking out here, the sea curves away to left and right. Why is that, Kaalba?"

Tros, now ready to get into the act, said, "It is because the surface of the planet is curved. It is a sphere. You are seeing an arc." He went on at some length, glad to break his infinity of silence. Using the limited vocabulary in a way which would have delighted the technocrat who had designed him.

The voice was well-modulated and deferential; but carried utter conviction, although what it said was an unbelievable thing. Zara said, "Did you hear that, Kaalba? Isn't Tros clever? Now all my questions can be answered."

Kaalba only wanted the answer to one, which was how to switch the man off. He saw only that he was likely to be displaced in the one field where Zara had turned to him and at a time when she had seemed about to step from behind her self-preoccupation and move towards him. On a wider issue, he was also aware that this smooth-speaking, tin man could be a serious menace.

This last he saw at first on a psychological level though he would not have so identified it. A feeling that to be told every answer would undermine the very foundations of his mind. Almost immediately, there was supporting evidence that even on practical grounds it could be dangerous.

Mainly herbivores, the big animals of the forest were not a great threat to man. Only one in their experience constituted an ever-present threat. Even though a well-placed dart could settle his hash, he was always ready to have a go. Pea-brained and vicious, a semi-reptile, twice a man's height, blood-flecked eyes and permanently slavering mouth.

One such had moved silently from the edge of the forest and was near enough to poke with a long stick when Zara sensed danger and turned to look. Kaalba had a moment to think that even here Tros had been a danger; because thoughts about him had inhibited the free play of instinct.

He should have been more alert. His blow pipe was down below in the cave. He stretched out an arm to grab Zara and make a run for it when Tros got the adrenalin-loaded message.

Not triggered for safety-seeking flight like its flesh and blood counterparts, Tros took two paces towards the towering monster and pointed at it with his left hand like a helpful guide.

Silence erupted in a roar which was just as abruptly cut off when an invisible axe sliced through horn and bone and flesh and bisected its vibrating voice-box. It peeled apart in a welter of blubber and gut into two throbbing red mounds.

Zara, poised to run, felt a deflating sense of anticlimax. Danger brushed aside with such contempt was humiliating. She said uncertainly, "How did you do that?"

"I can send out a thread of light, which moves so fast that it can cut through anything."

"Will it cut stone?"

"Yes."

Tros pointed at a boulder and a line of chipping appeared on its face.

Zara was treating him as a flesh and blood person. She said, "Well, thank you, anyway. That was a very dangerous beast."

Kaalba, with sensibility heightened by the crisis, saw that it had been killed by a potentially more dangerous one; but he kept the reflection in his own head. Even then the great golden eye-disks were turned speculatively on him as though something of this thought had been picked up.

From that moment on, Tros and Zara were left alone much more and Kaalba sought seclusion to think this thing out. When present, he listened with growing alarm to the answers Zara was getting to her never-ending questions.

Stored in Tros's memory banks was all the unimaginable detail of a vanished culture, which diminished them indeed to the status of a poor, forked animal. Marvels too many to digest. Tros had no personal reticence and ran through his own statistics with the same objective thoroughness. He

was the ultimate in androids, requiring only light to give him power. Virtually indestructible. More completely stocked with information than any one of the men who had created him.

Certainly it would be valuable for the clan to have such a source of knowledge. Though much of it was as remote and extravagant as fable. Immense cities, space probes, power from plasma. Rationalizing, in the human mind's constant effort to think well of itself, Kaalba thought, "But these clever men could only live and then die. Their wars were terrible. All that movement made no one happier, in itself."

When Tros regurgitated an account of a particularly long and hazardous expedition to a far planet, Kaalba asked, "What did they do when they got there, which they could not have done on this planet?"

For the first time Tros was disconcerted, and after a digestive pause said, "Repeat the question."

Repetition, however, was no help. Except that it proved that he had heard it correctly. Finally, he said, "I do not know," with uneasy, avoiding motions of his head, and Kaalba scored himself a palpable hit.

That night, when light level had fallen and Tros was lying in the cave like a stone figure on a catafalque, Kaalba took Zara outside.

"This android is no good for our people. We must not take him back."

"You are jealous, because he knows more than you do. Of course we will take him back."

"It may be that in the time to come our people will also do the things he speaks about. But it is not good to know in advance. It must come slowly. Step by step. Indeed I doubt whether it is wise to go that way at all. What more did knowledge bring them than is possible for us? Knowledge in itself is nothing. It is the gathering of it which is important. Discovering is more important than discovery. Short cuts will decrease opportunity for our people to grow in stature and understanding to match the new develop-

ments. They would raise a structure that they could not inhabit. Besides, nothing will ever be more beautiful than you are. Being with you is potentially as great a pleasure as any reasonable man could want."

"Except for the last bit which is just flattery to make me agree, I don't know what you are talking about. Of course we will take him back. We will be the most important people in the clan."

"In two days we must set off for the return. Then we will decide."

"I have decided now."

He let her have the last word. Determined in his own mind what had to be done. When Zara was turned aside to sleep, he looked across at the motionless metal figure. Very carefully, without disturbing her, he went to its side. Surely whoever had built this machine would have had means to control it?

Silver light brightened the cave mouth. Soon it would be strong enough for him to inspect the android. He carried the shell to the entrance and emptied it, then he put it over the oval head and packed leaves round to make a light seal. Then he waited.

Zara was first to be lit by the pale glare. Profile, shoulders, breasts and long smooth sides startling in silver. Then the cold perfect form of the machine. Shadows at this angle drew attention to surface detail which had been invisible in direct light. A dark line and a ring, grooves, chasing.

Kaalba pressed with sensitive fingers. Not knowing precisely what he was looking for. Nor did he know how he had done it, when, for a hand's breadth the metal skin slid aside. In the cavity so revealed, three small protruding pegs, hinged to move downwards. It had to be something to do with control. But clearly Tros could prevent anyone touching them when he was acting under power. Not so easily, though, if the cover remained off. He took some chips of stone and wedged them between the thicknesses of metal, so that the plate could not slide back. Then he removed the leaves and the cowl and went to bed.

In the morning, he beat Zara to the question by asking Tros what was the purpose of the switches on his chest.

Tros treated it as routine and went into a prepared statement. "This small console has three switches. The left one is a complete shut down of all circuits for adjustment or maintenance. The centre one cuts out my own local control and puts me under direction by voice. The third is a delayed action sequence."

"And what does that mean?"

"It would be possible to use me in a terminal way to destroy." Tros stopped and seemed reluctant to amplify the bulletin.

The panel remained open. Kaalba felt that he was that much ahead of the game. He set himself to annoy Tros with silly questions which could have no answer. "How can a man pick two melons with one hand? What will happen if a force which can not be stopped meets an object which can not be moved? How long is a piece of rope?" Childish puzzles.

Tros showed impatience and began to make random avoiding movements to escape a situation in which he was uncomfortable. In one such, he pushed against Zara and she felt all the impersonal power of his metal frame. It would have been all the same if she had been standing at the edge of the cliff. She became thoughtful.

Long neglect took its toll. Frustration tolerance was no longer adequate. Kaalba kept up the pressure. Tros's "I do not know," became an insane scream. Then there was frenzied movement as though a link had broken and he began to circle at random making jerky, unco-ordinated arm movements.

Zara was the nearer. As though reaching a decision, he seized her and put her over his shoulder and walked to the edge of the cliff, checked momentarily and then went sure-footed along the path which led to the beach below.

Contrite, Kaalba would have gone back on his decision if this would have made her safe. Then he realized that even this he would not do. There was importance in this issue

that transcended even the importance of Zara to him or even of him to himself. It was a moment of truth which conferred a kind of freedom.

It did not mean, however, that he would not hazard himself to help her. Tros, looking neither left nor right, was marching on towards the sea at a pace twice that of a walking man. Kaalba struck a jog-trot which brought him a man's length behind and hung on. If Tros felt threatened, he might use his annihilating light. There might only be one chance. He could not afford to fail.

Zara had stopped struggling and lay inert over the smooth metal shoulder, arms hanging limp, hair straight down, black silk over silver steel. Kaalba pressed forward and shouted another question in the notional ear, "How long will it take?"

Tros hesitated in his stride, aware that the data was incomplete and forced by the logic of his construction to ask for more. Then as the head came round and the golden eye-disks identified the questioner, a circuit on the blink went into a flutter and threw him on to the short easy answer of violence. His free left arm came round in an arc with a line of sand kicking up as the laser beam sliced out.

Leaving it to the last second and with a kind of exaltation in that he knew that he could win, Kaalba threw himself out of the path of the invisible axe and ran in to the right. As Tros attempted to twist his head off to follow the target, the man had gathered strength, in a total concentration of effort, and sprung to close the gap and throw the key in the open chest cavity.

Tros stopped like a method actor in training and Zara slipped to the sand. Kaalba lifted her clear. Then without giving himself time for thought, he slipped the middle switch to local control and the right-hand one to delayed action sequence. Before putting Tros back into action he went over to Zara who was sitting up and watching him with enormous eyes.

"Move back to the cliff before I do the next thing."

"Why?"

"Never mind, 'Why?' Do as I say."

"I will stay here with you."

"Do as I say."

For a long count, Zara looked at him and he met the golden-brown gaze without heat, almost without interest in his new freedom of spirit. She could only see determination.

When she lowered her eyes and said in a small voice, "Very well," he was touched to the heart.

When she was starting up the path, he threw the last switch and as Tros straightened himself up, he said clearly, "You are to go straight ahead into the water. Go forward and do not stop until your destructor mechanism is activated."

Tros was erect and still and repeated the instruction. Then he began to walk.

From the top of the cliff, they watched him wade out and finally disappear.

Zara said, "Will the water cut off the light?"

"Not until it gets very deep."

A column of water rising from the sea and reaching far above the level of their heads made a period. There was a roar of following sound and a damp gust of flung spray.

Zara was standing close and put her arm tentatively round Kaalba's waist. Then her head was warm silk against his shoulder.

He picked her up and began to carry her down the path to their cave.

GIFTS OF THE GODS

by

ARTHUR SELLINGS

It is a well-worn but apt cliché, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth", but in this instance Framley New Town was being used as a type of Trojan Horse—and the inhabitants were in for something of a shock

GIFTS OF THE GODS

BRYAN DUDLEY went on sipping his coffee and scanning the morning paper, only a cell or two of his subconscious having registered the fact that his wife had drawn back the curtains and spoken.

"I tell you, there's something in the garden."

"Uh-huh."

The garden she called it! They were renting the house monthly—the latest of a long line, by the look of the place. It had the hostile impersonal air of rented houses—paintwork that shade of stone that nobody surely picks for himself to live with, wallpaper of the desperate pattern one sees only in end-of-season sale windows. The garden was a straggle of plots where a succession of tenants had salved their consciences by doing *something* anyway. Gwen was always hailing, with the ecstasy of the new exurbanite, the appearance of some flower or another among the weeds, some unusual bird that was always gone when *he* looked.

He found himself gaping at the coffeepot. He blinked up. Gwen was holding the crumpled newspaper in front of her.

"I'm sorry, dear. What is it—that yellow wagtail again?"

She shook her head slowly, glowering.

There was nothing else for it. He got up from the table and peered out of the window. Something gleamed in the morning sunlight.

"I'll see what it is," he said.

He came back with his arms full. He inclined them over the tea trolley. A small cascade of metal objects rattled on to it. One rolled over the edge, but he caught it before it reached the floor, feeling a certain pride in his reflexes. He handed it to his wife.

Gwen turned it over in her palm. It was about nine

inches long, a delicately fluted piece of metal, rather like a skittle. It had a lustrous, anodised kind of finish. But this was silkier than any anodised household article she had known. The surface seemed to *glow* with a soft golden light, as if illuminated from within. But it couldn't be, surely; it was opaque metal. The silky touch of it in her hands was suddenly eerie, like the flesh-like, too human, feel that some dolls have. She thrust it back at her husband, shivering slightly and then laughing nervously at the absurdity of her own disquiet.

Bryan looked at her.

"What *are* they?" she asked, noticing with a pang of awareness that he too got rid of it quickly, putting it down with the others.

"Search me."

"But who could have put them there? And *why*?"

He shrugged. "Whoever it was must have been a bit of a neurotic. You know, the kind that has to have everything dead straight and in order. They were standing on end—the nine of them—in a neat diamond."

"It must be some kind of a joke."

"Joke? A joke has to have a point. This seems completely pointless." He picked up one of the objects again. "Fascinating feel, though. And *light*. Maybe it's hollow." He held it up, turning it in his hands.

"Perhaps it unscrews?"

"The fluting, you mean?" He tried to turn one end against the other, first anticlockwise, then clockwise. But nothing happened, and when he tried harder his hands only slid over the slick surface. "No, there'd have to be some kind of a join that you could see. Unless . . ."

"Unless?"

"Well, there *are* surfaces so smooth they join almost invisibly. And grip. Pete showed me a couple of blocks like that once. That's it! Pete's the boy for this. I'll take one in to him." He looked at his watch. "I'll be late if I don't hurry."

"I——"

"Yes, dear?" he asked impatiently, grabbing for his briefcase.

She fished out an empty carton from a cupboard. "Take them *all* in to Pete, will you?"

He looked at her, then smiled. "All right, sweetie."

He left the carton in his car, wrapped one of the things in a Kleenex and took it with him to his office in Accounts. As soon as he had dealt with the morning mail he went down to the lab block.

The red light was on above the door, and through the dark-shielded window Bryan could see a crouched masked figure, faintly illumined by what looked like a dull mauve acorn of light. He knocked, screwed up his eyes tight and went in. The air crackled and reeked with metal fumes.

"That you, Pete?" he called out. "Am I interrupting anything?"

The crackling died, the intense light stopped beating on his eyelids. He opened them.

"Hy, Dudders," said Pete, lowering his mask. Bryan winced. "Are we spending too much money again?"

It was all a ritual. Bryan gave response 2 (c).

"What's money? We make it, you burn it."

Pete put his mask down on the benchtop. "Division of labour, lad. What can I help doing for you?"

Bryan held the thing out to him. Pete unwrapped it and held it up.

"What's this a prototype of?" he asked after a moment's perusal.

"That's what I want to know."

Pete looked at him quizzically. "*I?* Not the good old company *we*? What is it—homework?"

"You could call it that. I found it in my garden this morning."

"That's the worst of these cheap seeds—you never know what'll come up."

"One of these days they'll find a pile of ash in your furnace."

"Only my jest, lad. What do you want me to do?"

"Find out what it is. What it's made of, at least."

"Certainly. The lab is in one of its rare periods of redundancy. What do you think the red light was in aid of? I will subject this *objet trouvé* to the most minute analysis known to man. It won't look so pretty, though, by the time I've finished with it."

"Don't worry. I've got eight more in the car." He turned at the door. "How long will it take?"

"Depends. I'll give you a buzz." Pete was stroking the thing in his hand as if it were a pet. "Funny *feel* it's got."

The buzz came at a quarter to five that afternoon. Bryan went back to the lab. Pieces of the golden object were strewn over a bench, parings of it in dishes, the largest piece a complete half sheared clean across like a cut apple.

Pete read off from a notepad:

"It's solid and homogeneous. An alloy, of course—zinc, magnesium, copper, traces of beryllium and caesium. Nothing extraordinary in the way of properties. Except for the odd feel of it, but that could be only a by-product of its manufacture. Which, to me, is the most interesting thing about it."

"How so?"

"Well, I described it as solid, and so it is—in a way—i.e. it's not hollow. But it's got a specific gravity of only half what it should have by analysis. It's a kind of foam metal."

"There is such a thing?"

"As shorthand for various processes—yes."

"Would it have any practical use?"

"Difficult to see any. It isn't particularly hard or of high tensile strength. In brief, I can't see why anybody would have made the alloy in the first place. Nor cast it in this particular, admittedly cute but completely unfunctional—as far as I can see—shape."

"Well—thanks anyway." Bryan turned to go. He had reached the door when Pete called after him.

"One small thing I forgot to mention, but it was the first thing I did. Ran over it with a geiger counter. It's clean."

Bryan got home to find Gwen in the garden. He caught sight of her orange smock moving among the trees at the bottom, and he walked down the cracked stone path to her. It was so overgrown with moss that his shoes made little noise. He was quite close to her before she heard him. She straightened up with a start.

"Oh, Bryan, it's you!"

"Who did you think it was?" He kissed her. "Botanizing?"

She smiled wanly. "No, just——" She faltered. "What happened about the—the *things*?"

He tried to sound offhanded. "Oh, *them*. Pete analysed one. Simple enough alloy. He couldn't identify the process of manufacture. And he had about as much idea of what they could be as I have. That's about all. Oh—and they're not radioactive."

The last sentence didn't sound so reassuring, somehow, as he intended it to be.

"What have you done with them?"

"What do you mean, *done* with them? They're still in the car. Except for the one that Pete cut up."

"Get rid of them, Bryan. I——"

"What's the matter, honey? They're quite safe. Eight hunks of metal. They're locked up in the boot."

She shivered. 'I don't want them around the place any longer than I can help. Promise you'll get rid of them tomorrow."

He put his arm around her and led her gently back towards the house. "All right. It's odd, I admit that. One of those unexplainable things. But it's nothing to be upset about. If you're worried because somebody got into our garden in the night—well, whoever it was didn't do any harm. And"—he laughed—"if we've got some funny kind of ghost, just tell yourself that in a few weeks' time we

move into a brand-new house. And new houses don't have ghosts."

She snuggled against him. "Don't mind me. I know I'm being silly." They reached the back door. "But you will get rid of them tomorrow?"

"Promise. In Pete's furnace." He exaggerated a small gesture of annoyance for her benefit. "No, I can't do that. Tomorrow's Saturday. The place will be closed. But I'll get rid of them."

In the morning he drove his wife into town.

Framley was a New Town, planned from the first brick. Land prices had been fixed to tempt industrialists and their employees away from London. *Clean Air For Your Children—100% Home Loans—Why Commute?*—the slogans had gone out, backed by battalions of figures. And the first firms had moved in—Keld Industries among them, and Bryan Dudley of Keld Industries Accounts.

The shopping centre—all terrazzo and traffic-free avenues and slab glass and fountains and brave new statuary—was opened. Town-planning experts came to admire and make notes and depart to set up Framleys in Nigeria and New South Wales and Anatolia. Now, with one year gone and two to go, the programme was getting into top gear, Framley spreading furiously over the surrounding countryside to its appointed boundaries. Soon the last of the houses of the old village would be demolished before the bulldozers. Ring roads were being pushed through, with helicopters whirring overhead and mobile traffic lights being shunted across the landscape like pieces in a giant chess game. Every other day Bryan had to make a new detour on his way to the office.

He parked the car now, arranged to meet Gwen in an hour and left her to go shopping. He got the carton from the back of the car and set off with it under his arm. He wasn't sure just how he intended disposing of its contents. He leaned over the barrier round an excavation site and was tempted simply to drop the carton into the mud be-

neath. But there were too many people about. Besides, he felt that it would be somehow anti-social.

He walked on, and had passed the shop before the idea solidified.

He turned back and looked in the window. It was filled with lamps, ashtrays, table mats, prints of *Red Horses*, the odd Klee, Blue Period Picassos. It was a brand-new shop and its sign read *The Modern Home Gallery*, but underneath in small letters: (*formerly The Nook*) and he remembered the old shop, all chintz and warming pans. It was a miniature symbol of the change that had been wrought in Framley. After a moment's hesitation he walked in.

A reedy man in a velvet jacket came forward.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Perhaps you can." Bryan set the carton down on a glass-topped table and took out one of the things. "Thought you might like to stock a few of these."

The other looked slightly pained. "But what are they?"

"Nice shape, don't you think?" Bryan countered blandly.

The proprietor grimaced. "Don't tell me—it's a *thing*. When you ask people what it does and they say look at the shape, it's a thing. Well, I've got plenty of things. Young people just moving in want functional objects first."

"Like Picasso prints?"

"Great art has an aesthetic function," the other said primly. "But *this* . . ."

"Feel it," Bryan said, thrusting it into his hand. The man gave a small start at the touch of it, but soon proffered it back to Bryan.

"Not a bad shape. Perhaps it *would* fit in a modern setting, but as I said——"

"You don't have to *buy* them. Just take them on sale or return."

"Hm-mm." The other turned it over in his hand. "How much?"

Bryan thought quickly. If one put too cheap a price on something people were inclined to be suspicious. "Four

guineas apiece to you. You can choose you own selling price."

The other looked really pained now. "For a piece of metal?"

Bryan picked up a Swedish glass shape and turned up the price sticker on its base. "Six guineas for a piece of glass?"

The man sighed. "How many have you got?"

"Eight."

"All right. But only on sale or return. What's your name and address?"

Bryan gave it to him and got out quickly.

The telephone rang at six o'clock that evening. Bryan answered it.

"Hello. Mr. Dudley? This is the Modern Home Gallery. Those—er, things—have you any more?"

"Don't say you've sold them all?"

"No, but there's been quite a little run on them. I've two left, but five people have said they're coming in next week to buy one."

Bryan blinked. He hadn't thought seriously that they would be merchandise . . . not to that extent.

"*Can* you supply more?" came the voice from the other end. "Three dozen, say?"

"Well . . . they're craftsman-made," Bryan said, telling his conscience that they must be. "I can't hold out any immediate prospects, but . . ." He was glad to get off the line.

He pondered, sorry that he couldn't tell Gwen. He had told her that he had got rid of the things, without saying how. She might think that loading them on to an art-and-craft shop was an evasion of a promise. Gwen was inclined to be literal-minded. Then he smiled at a sudden thought. Eight times four was thirty-two guineas. If he couldn't tell her, he could surprise her. A new dress for the house-warming party . . .?

It was he who got the surprise, the next morning. He got up to make the coffee, as he always did on Sundays. He put

the percolator on, drew back the kitchen blinds—and blinked. There—in the garden—was a whole cluster of the things.

He thought quickly. Gwen had been still sleeping when he got up. He turned the percolator down, threw on a coat and went out into the garden. He piled the things into a wheelbarrow, counting roughly. One load was over sixty. He had to make three journeys to the garage, stowing them into the boot of his car. Then he went back to the house.

"Where's the coffee, darling?" came his wife's voice from upstairs. "You've been down ages."

He exhaled in relief. "Just coming, sweetie."

It was only while they were drinking coffee together that he began to think clearly. He had been moved only by the need to get rid of the things before his wife saw them. But now he began to see the possibilities of the affair. You didn't look a gift horse in the mouth, nor ponder too long on the mysterious—not when you would soon be moving into a new house, with all its attendant expense. If one small shop in one half-built town could order three dozen of the things, then he shouldn't have any difficulty in selling two hundred. And two hundred times four . . .

He drove in to the Modern Home Gallery in his lunch hour the next day, feeling pleased with himself. He had packed three dozen of the objects into a carton. He walked in briskly.

"Well, here we are," he called out. "Three dozen you ordered, I believe?"

The proprietor came forward with a curious look on his face.

"Quick work, isn't it, three dozen in a weekend? For craftsman-made objects?"

Bryan felt a quick disquiet. "Well, maybe I don't actually *make* them. They're more"—he remembered Pete's very accurate description of the things—"*objets trouvés*. They're still highly saleable merchandise, evidently."

"And highly *trouvable*, too," the other said, looking sour.

He slid back doors. There, on shelves, stood row on row of the golden things. "Those turned up on my drive some time last night. Five hundred of them."

Bryan tried to make the best of it. "Well, all you've got to do is advertise nationally. Maybe the source of supply *is* mysterious, but——"

"And it's unpredictable. So is demand in this trade." He grimaced. "Here's a cheque for twenty-four guineas."

"How about these?"

"You can leave them if you want to—on the same sale or return terms. But I'm not guaranteeing any price."

"But——"

"Take it or leave it, Mr. Dudley."

Bryan took it.

When he got back to his office the switchboard girl called out to him, "Message for you, Mr. Dudley. Your wife rang up twice. She wants you to get back home as quick as you can. She sounded pretty upset."

He didn't stop to phone, but got straight back in his car and drove the five miles back to their house as fast as earth-moving machinery, ramps and traffic signals would allow.

Their house stood on its own at the end of a rough road. The road curved just before it got to the house. As he turned the bend, already anxious, he got such a shock that the car, hitting a bad spot at that moment, almost got out of his control.

He eased it to a stop—and stared.

He could hardly see the house for golden metal. It was like the house in the fairy story that thorns grew over and covered. But this was covered in . . . there must have been millions of the things, all stacked up and forming a wall feet thick. And the thorns in the fairy story had taken years to smother the house. This had happened in the few hours since he had left that morning.

He ran towards the house, calling, "Gwen! Gwen!"

Her face appeared at one of the bedroom windows. Her voice was hysterical.

"It went all dark suddenly. I went to open the front door . . . and they came flooding into the hall."

"Hold on, darling. I'll soon get you out."

He tore at the barrier to the front door, the things raining about his head. He went more carefully as the stacks on each side threatened to fall upon the path he was clearing. Finally he got to the door. He picked his way over a mound of the things in the hall. Gwen stood on the landing, shaking.

He dashed upstairs and took her in his arms.

"There, *there*. They can't *hurt* you." He led her back to the bedroom. "Sit down while I get you a drink." He came back with two large whiskies. "Now, take a good swig. When you've got over the shock, get a few things packed. I'll fix up somewhere for a night or two. And I'll chase up the builders and see if they can't get a couple of rooms, at least, ready in the new house. Meanwhile I'll report this to the police."

She was recovering by now. She even managed a wan smile. "And what will you tell them?"

"I'll simply tell them that——" He broke off.

"Exactly. When I couldn't get you *I* started to dial the police, but . . ."

"I see what you mean. But I'll have to report it. It's up to them what action they take. But there's something awfully funny going on. They might even be——"

He stopped.

"Even be what?"

"Nothing." He had had the thought that they might be some kind of secret weapon—and that was the last thing to say to her. It was absurd, anyway. They couldn't be dropped from the sky as neatly as this. And they seemed harmless enough. Pete had had one apart, hadn't he? Or had that only been a dummy run? And these . . .

He thrust the thought from his mind. "You get packed while I call the station."

He dialled. He told the facts briefly. The voice at the

other end said, "I'll see what we can do. But it sounds more like a civil case. Trespassing, or violation of privacy."

Thank the Lord for the mental processes of the law! Bryan thought gratefully. Even something as weird as this they translated into mundane terms. The touch of normality was reassuring. They probably thought he was some kind of a crank or practical joker.

"All right, I'm not asking you to do anything. I just want you to put this on record." He had to press his name and address on his reluctant auditor.

He rang off and then called the hotel in the old village of Framley. It would be closed when the new green glass monster in the New Town was ready, and its present capacity was severely strained, he knew, with all the people coming to the town. He wasn't optimistic. But he was lucky; they had had a cancellation.

Gwen came in with her bag packed. He flung a few of his own things into a holdall and they tiptoed out of the house to the car.

He felt Gwen relax beside him as they turned the bend out of view of the house. He lit a cigarette. It had been raining, off and on, but now the sun broke through, raising steam on the road. He turned to smile reassuringly at his wife, then reached to switch on the radio. A Viennese orchestra playing Strauss . . .

"Watch out!" Gwen screamed.

In front of them loomed a high red wall . . .

His foot leaped from the accelerator to the brake pedal. And the back started to drift to the right, gathering momentum. He flung the wheel to the left. The impossible red wall hurtled towards them.

He had driven into the skid too quickly. The car spun—but, spinning, saved them. They missed the wall by inches and came to rest in a ditch, pointing back the way they had come.

The air in his lungs came out in a shuddering sigh as he saw that Gwen was all right. Her knuckles were white against the seat where she still sat crouched against impact.

"It's all right, dear. We missed it. I should have been watching the road."

She straightened up.

"It wasn't your fault. It was a clear road. Then—then——"

They were suddenly conscious of the red light filtering into the car.

"Stay here," he said. He got out.

The barrier must have been twenty feet high and stretched across the road, not quite reaching the near side. But on the other it extended beyond, and there, its base no longer on a flat surface, it had tumbled. For it was made of blocks. He crossed the road and picked one up.

It had a hexagonal section, with a flat top and bottom. About a foot across and in depth, but very light. Each one exactly the same size and shape. Matt red. Some kind of plastic.

He was aware of the sound of an engine. It stopped. Two figures in blue picked their way round the other end of the barrier.

"What's going on here?" one of them asked.

"You tell me," Bryan said grimly.

The policeman pushed his cap back and scratched his head.

"We get called out on a few things, but . . ."

His mate said, "We were on our way to check on a report by some nut that he had found his house surrounded by a lot of——"

"That nut was me," Bryan told him.

"Name of Dudley?"

Bryan nodded.

The policeman coughed. "Sorry, sir. That was what we thought before we saw *this*."

"Forget it. It's not people who are going crazy."

The policeman gestured to the car. "Are you all right? And the lady?"

"We're all right. But I'd like your help to get our car back on the road. On the Framley side of *that*."

The other policeman said, "Easier said than done, sir, I'm afraid. That barrier's yards thick. We'll give you a lift into Framley. I'll report this and they'll probably get a squad out here to shift it. Thank heaven it's not on the main road. But we'll certainly get your car back to town."

Bryan shrugged. "All right." There was nothing else for it.

He told Gwen and they transferred their bags to the police car. When they got to the hotel he handed his car keys to the police driver. He rang in his firm and told them not to expect him back that day. At least, he started to, but the switchboard girl was too panicky for him to pursue the matter. Five minutes ago a mountain of green had materialized on Keld Industries' doorstep.

At six thirty that evening, Bryan was doing his best to be coherent to a B.B.C. television interviewer about the piles of objects that were appearing in and around Framley. The newsmen had latched on to him as being the first to have reported the things.

"Mr. Dudley—you say that these things aren't dangerous?"

"No. I simply said that the object I had analysed wasn't dangerous." He had already given that information to the authorities. "That was the first lot, the golden metal things."

"And the red plastic cubes?"

"Hexagons. At least, they had a hexagonal——"

"Ah, yes." The interviewer riffled news slips. "We've since had reports of pink plastic cubes. No, sorry, they were metal."

"The red plastic things seemed harmless. Like a child's building block, only several times bigger."

The interviewer—he wore heavy-rimmed glasses and a bow tie; Bryan had seen him often on television—said:

"Do you have any idea at all what these things can be?"

"I've told you—no."

"But now that you've had time to think?"

"I haven't had any time at all to think."

"Do you think they're some kind of——"

And he stopped, in front of several million viewers, just as Bryan had in front of his wife. But now Bryan followed it through.

"A weapon?" The other flinched. "No, I don't think so. I'm sure not."

The interviewer breathed out in relief. "And why do you say that?"

"They couldn't have been dropped from the sky. All the things I've seen have been too . . . too geometrically placed. More like goods stacked up in a warehouse than weapons." He had a wild thought. "Like a lot of parcels from Oxfam."

The interviewer seized on the notion. "Gift parcels? Do you think they *could* be that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"It's an interesting thought. *Gifts*. But where from?"

Bryan was getting ragged. A hectic day was beginning to catch up on him. "How the hell do I know? Some benevolent American manufacturer distributing samples? Some company demonstrating a means of instant transport? God?"

"God? Are you a churchgoer, Mr. Dudley?"

Bryan felt a fleeting sympathy for the man. Confronted with the inexplicable, he still went through the motions, the stock questions.

"God . . . any of the gods . . . take your pick."

"The gods? Ah, gifts of the gods!"

And that was the phrase everybody woke up next morning to find spread across the front pages of their newspapers, followed by one or more question marks according to the paper. Everybody, that is, except a large part of the population of Framley itself. For by morning the distribution of *anything* in the town had become difficult. Through the night the spate of objects had continued. It was like a town cut off by a blizzard. Bryan took one look out of the

window and decided, although the police had delivered his car to the hotel within a few hours of the incident of the red shapes, to walk to the office.

He told Gwen to rest, and set off.

People were flocking the streets to greet the sudden appearances of the things. Until, as was inevitable, some materialized too close to people for comfort, and then the more timorous fled, having visions of being engulfed in a mountain of blue pyramids or orange cylinders.

That didn't happen quite. But, a few hundred yards down the road from the hotel, Bryan witnessed a car meet the fate that he had only just missed the previous day. The crowds were thinner here away from the centre of the town and a frustrated driver had just opened up. He was doing about thirty-five when a multi-coloured wall materialized in front of him.

Bryan winced as brakes screamed.

The car ploughed straight into the wall—and emerged on the other side. The reaction came yards beyond it; the car jumped like a nerve and Bryan saw a white face turn back for an instant. For seconds afterwards a rainbow snow settled over the street and its houses. Bryan picked up a piece. It was a helix, gossamer light. But when he tried to pull it apart in his fingers, he found that it was surprisingly tough. He tucked it in his pocket and walked on.

He got to Keld Industries to find that a narrow way had been cleared through the green mountain. Inside, only a skeleton staff had reported for duty.

Guest, the manager, summoned him to his office and seemed disappointed when Bryan confessed that he knew little more about the things than anyone else.

"But you were on television. The only paper I've seen this morning has got a picture of you on the front page. You got one of those things analysed, didn't you? Where did you get that done?"

Bryan coughed. "That wasn't difficult."

Guest shot him a suspicious glance. "Well, next time at least mention the name of the company."

"I hope there won't *be* a next time," Bryan told him and went back to his office. But everything was too disrupted to carry on with normal work. Telephone calls from customers and suppliers were all questions about what had happened to Framley and kidding congratulations on his having become a celebrity. At noon he packed up for the day.

He got back to the hotel to find Gwen with the jitters. The radio was broadcasting a news bulletin as he entered the room. She looked up, relief at seeing him back only retaining for a moment her near panic.

"Let's get out! It's getting worse."

"Calm down, dear. It's not as bad as that. Nobody's in any danger."

"No? Then why are they sending troops in?"

"Troops? You must be——"

"It came over the radio!"

He took her hand. "Only to help clear the mess. I bet that's all they're for."

"They're sending all kinds of experts. They wouldn't do that unless——"

"*Quiet* then. Let me hear."

"—repeating the bulletin on Framley." The news reader cleared his throat.

"Four days ago, objects started appearing in and around Framley New Town in Sussex. Yesterday they began appearing in larger and more frequent quantities. The first report came from a Mr. Bryan Dudley who——"

"It's been terrible with all the reporters. They've been——"

"*Please!*"

"—testing stations, and all analyses indicate that none of the objects—and so far thirty-nine different kinds have been reported—is toxic or dangerous in any way. Their appearance is only an inconvenience. Motorists in the area are asked to keep their cars off the road, or—if their journey is absolutely necessary—to drive at no more than five miles per hour, to avoid the risk of collision. No bad accidents

have been reported. A milkman, on his round this morning, drove his float into a stack of black objects which materialized in his path. He was taken to hospital suffering from shock, but from nothing worse.

"Souvenir hunters are warned to keep away from the objects. Several cases of minor injury have been reported from the stacks being disturbed and falling. All steps are being taken to clear the area and to cope with continuing arrivals of the objects.

"The Leader of the Opposition accused the Government in the House of Commons this morning of, as he put it, 'running round in circles' over the incident. The Prime Minister replied that, despite its unusual nature, the incident was under control. Service units had been rushed to the spot——"

"There you are," said Gwen accusingly. "What did I tell you?"

"Quiet!"

"—into operation. Forklifts from local factories and bulldozers and lorries from the firms engaged in the development of Framley have been commandeered. Every government department has been alerted. The Prime Minister named, as specialists who have started to arrive in Framley: engineers, salvage experts, security agents—anybody whose speciality might be of use in the matter. He named particularly—to laughter and ironical cheers from both sides of the House—crown assessors of treasure trove and customs officers. We asked Mr.——"

Bryan reached over and switched off the set.

"Customs men!" He put his arm round his wife's shoulder. "You see—there's nothing to fear. I know it's crazy, what's happening, but the experts will come up with an answer."

She looked at him like a repentant child. "I know I'm being silly. But I'm not the only one. A woman in the next room went into hysterics. They took her away."

"Well, you didn't. And you won't. Come on down to the bar. I'll buy my favourite girl a drink."

Over whiskies he suddenly remembered the spiral thing he had picked up. He took it out of his pocket.

"There you are," he said, holding it up. "There can't be any danger in things like this." It shone prismatically. "Make a fine ornament—an earring or something." He held it out towards her, but she flinched from it. He put it back in his pocket and didn't mention, as he had intended to, the incident of the crash that hadn't been. Instead, he said:

"You know, I'm beginning to think that what I said to that TV chap isn't so far off the mark. It just came into my head. Afterwards I thought it must have sounded silly. But what else could it be? Somebody's trying to make contact with us. Somebody——"

"Who in their right minds would want to send anybody presents like these things?"

"I don't know. Somebody in another world. Another *place*."

"Place? What kind of place?"

"I don't know. Drink up and have another one." He signalled to the waiter. "Some place very much different from this, that's obvious. Going by their choice of gift."

"But all these *different* things?"

"Well, they wouldn't know what we would like, would they? They're just experimenting. That's it."

"In millions?"

"Perhaps they're generous people."

"*People?*"

"All right—creatures."

She shivered slightly. "And how will they know when they've sent us something useful? Send a squad to check?"

He was grateful for the waiter's coming over at that moment. Over fresh drinks he said: "Don't mind me. Just random thoughts. There's a better explanation, I'm sure. You see what the experts have to say."

But by next morning the only theory the experts had come up with was an amplification of his own surmise. The news bulletin gave the recorded voice of some space expert

who said that the objects were obviously the products of a superior science to our own, as was the means of their transportation here. It was possible that a race on some other star system had found a means of matter transmission. But it was more likely that the race existed very close to Earth—invisible to us in another dimension. The speaker hailed with enthusiasm the fact that the human race at last knew of the existence of another intelligent species in the universe. One obviously benevolent, however alien. Contact had been made. It now remained to Earth scientists to discover the nature of the link. Then perhaps we could return the compliment.

He smiled at Gwen a trifle smugly.

"What Dudley says today . . ."

Gwen smiled wanly. "All right, Bryan. But it's still crazy. Let's get out of Framley."

"I can't, honey. I've got my job to do."

"But you told me yesterday that you couldn't get on with anything."

"That was yesterday. Things will get back to normal."

He hadn't got very far on his walk to the office before feeling that normality was receding at an ever-increasing rate. Many more stacks of things had appeared. Battalions of men were working at removing them into queues of lorries. Many of the men were in uniform. On the outskirts he saw something which was more disturbing. Troops were arguing with the burly civilian driver of a lorry—and they were armed. The lorry was half-filled with a multi-coloured freight.

Bryan saw the name on its side as he passed: *Barney Lee, Scrap Merchant, 633 Portobello Road, London W.11.* The sight of the homely, rough-painted letters served to dispel his disquiet at seeing armed troops. The profit motive might not be the worthiest of human characteristics, but its appearance here was a welcome aspect of normality. The troops would stop arguing when they realized that scrap merchants could only help the process of trying to keep Framley clear before the tide.

It even had its humorous aspects. It was ironical, certainly, that this should have happened in a half-completed new town. If it *had* been a weapon—a nuisance weapon—whoever used it couldn't have picked a better site for maximum effect.

He was within sight of the works gates before the full implication hit him. He stopped in his tracks. Then he turned about and hurried back to the hotel.

Gwen was still in a dressing-gown.

"Come on," he told her. "We *are* getting out—and quick."

"Thank heaven! But what's happened? What's made you change your mind?"

"Just get your clothes on and get packed. I'll explain as soon as we get clear."

It was like a slowed-up sequence in a nightmare, getting out of the town. They had not gone far before he had to back and take a side road. That petered out into mud, where contractors had cleared the first earth for a connecting road. Bryan took the car through it, only to come up against a pile of violet things standing athwart what there was of road. He gritted his teeth and sent the car bumping over the countryside.

He got the car back on the track and, shortly after, back on the main road to London. They were only a half mile from the town centre and had taken three miles and fifty minutes to get there, but they were out of the main snarl of Framley. Though he could see multi-coloured mounds dotted over the countryside like slagheaps.

The opposite lane was choked with lorries. It was clearer his side, but he still had to obey the injunction to go slow. The lorries were going at the same snail's pace.

Five miles out he pulled into a layby. He breathed easier. There were no alien stacks in the countryside around or ahead of them.

"Well?" said Gwen.

"All right." He lit a cigarette. "Did you notice the names on those lorries?"

"Names?" She looked puzzled.

"Half of them belong to junk merchants."

"I don't see——"

"Don't you? Nor has anybody else yet. Except these lads who are pouring into Framley looking for pickings. That's what all these things are. Not gifts—*junk*. This race in another dimension has found a nice solution to a problem that's been bothering *us* more and more. They've found a perfect place to dump their scrap."

"But—can't they do the same as we do? Don't we melt things down to use again?"

"If it was as easy as that, *we* wouldn't have any problem. Don't you remember that copse we came across when we went for a walk in the country round Framley? Looked like a poet's dream from outside. Inside, it was a pile of old cookers, fridges, dumped cars. Things not worth anybody's while reclaiming."

"But these things—they aren't machines."

"All right, they're offcuts. Of some unimaginable manufacturing processes. There was plenty of industrial scrap too in that copse, between the rusting cars and the other worn-out machines. Now these creatures have found a way through we've probably got *their* worn-out machines to come."

"I see." She paused, her face anxious. "That's not all, Bryan, is it? That's not enough to make you change your mind about getting out of Framley."

He hesitated. "No, that's not all. I don't like speaking of it. It isn't a fact. Only a hunch—but I've got a horrible feeling it's the truth."

"What, Bryan—*what?*"

"Well—if this *is* junk, it's junk from a civilization far in advance of ours. One that's got the same problems we have—only bigger. A mass civilization that would make ours look like a peasant economy by comparison. Mass production isn't an isolated phenomenon, a game a few

bright boys play on machines. Mass production implies mass consumption, and mass consumption implies . . . mass population. Now they've found a place to dump their junk, what's to stop them sending over their surplus population?"

He threw his cigarette away and restarted the engine.

"Beware of the Greeks bearing gifts. Even if these things *had* been gifts . . ."

He had said he would explain, and he had explained. He didn't finish his sentence . . . not aloud. But it ran on in his brain:

Even if they had *been gifts. But how would they treat the inhabitants of a junk heap?*

And as he engaged gear his hand started to shake. Only slightly at first.

THE LONG MEMORY

by

WILLIAM SPENCER

The computer's memory was a long one. In fact, it could see all in the City, hear all and even tell all to Harben its attendant—but Harben's mind was another thing altogether...

THE LONG MEMORY

THE light was dim in Harben's tiny recording booth. He sat as usual, hunched forward, intent on the data screens, muttering almost soundlessly to himself.

There was just enough room for him to crouch between the control consoles and monitor panels. His little recording cubicle was far down in the depths of the earth, buried deep below ground level, if it could be said that there was any longer a "ground level". The gigantic City, throbbing far above his head, towered loftily into the air and burrowed deep underground in its endless search for more space to spread itself.

Hemmed in as he was by equipment, Harben could just manage to turn his head, if he really wanted to, or stretch out his arms to reach the controls. But much more than that he could not do. Apparatus crowded him in on all sides. He was like an astronaut in one of those early primitive spacecraft, jam-packed with essential, bulky gear.

Some people might have found the situation oppressive . . . even claustrophobic. But Harben loved his work. That was the main thing, he told himself. If he simply *had* to get out, there was always the escape hatch behind him. All he had to do was press a button and wait ninety seconds while his chair rotated slowly backwards. Then by wriggling and squirming he could squeeze himself with an effort into the long narrow tunnel. Along this he had to crawl for about three hours, like a pot-holer in the darkness, to reach the escalator leading to the upper levels.

Perhaps it was fortunate that Harben was a short, slightly built person. He was not exactly a dwarf, but certainly undersized. That saved a little more vital space.

Of course Headquarters had many times tried to persuade him to accept more spacious working quarters. They'd

offered him a roomy, well-lit office which he could pace around when things got too much for him. Or even a little rest-room or lounge. It was decent of them to make the gesture. But they knew, and Harben knew, that it was no more than a gesture. Underneath their generous, lavish offer and Harben's polite, briefly-worded refusal, there lay the bitter realities which everyone knew made any improvement impossible. What dominated all other considerations, all planning, was the relentless pressure on space of the Records themselves.

Every day the space needed for the Records increased. The spools lay row upon row, snugly nestling against each other in the long automatic racks which permitted high-speed consultation of any section of any spool. Every day, something like a hundred thousand new racks were filled with newly recorded spools. And every few days a huge new storage building or underground cavern had to be brought into commission, to house the next crop of spools.

The space requirement for Records was now far and away the most important factor in City planning. The ever-multiplying spools steadily ate into the space allotted to the human population. Harben had seen, in his monitoring of life on the upper levels, the new flats being built to replace those which had been pulled down to make way for Records storage depots. The flats were smaller than ever before. They allowed each inhabitant only a fraction of the space considered to be the absolute human minimum only five years ago. Desperate little rat-holes they were . . . but necessarily so. The Records must have priority, that much was obvious to everyone.

And the unpalatable reality had to be faced that things were going to get even worse in the future. So much was clear, to Harben if to no one else.

He was in serious mood as he went on with the dictation of his monthly report to Headquarters.

Phrases shaped themselves in his mind, words arranged themselves in order, and thoughtfully he spoke them into the slender microphone poised like an insect's antenna

below his chin. He became a little breathless and found it an effort to articulate clearly, after being alone and mute for so long:

"The tape now being used is 0·1 micron wide and, with data accumulating at the present rate, storage-space requirements are increasing at the rate of 2 cubic kilometres per week."

That should give them something to chew on, Harben thought wryly. Two cubic kilometres per week was over a hundred cubic kilometres per year. But they didn't need a computer to work that out.

"With the additional stereo monitoring of supersonic frequencies, plus 3-D infrared surveillance, required under new Statute from the first of next month, it is estimated that storage requirements will increase by at least twenty cubic kilometres per year."

Good. Let Headquarters mull that over.

It was obvious, really, even before they brought in the new channels.

Place a colour TV camera and stereo sound mikes in every room in every building in the City. Place one in every doorway, at every junction, every few metres along every roadway and walkway at every level. Suspend cameras in mid-air. Watch everything, from every angle, record every movement of everybody, every instant. Capture every word spoken, casual or profound, trivial or tragic, gay or gruesome. Record at all moments the expression on everyone's face. See what they are doing, and how, and with whom. All that is obviously going to call for a lot of recording tape, and a lot of space in which to store the completed tape, with its priceless irreplaceable record.

Harben switched off the message-channel for a moment to ponder his next sentence. He liked to end his reports on a thoughtful note. Possibly even in a somewhat philosophical vein. It helped to round off what otherwise tended to be a rather forbidding mass of facts and figures.

In a few minutes he had composed his thoughts, and began dictating again, but more slowly:

"Paragraph. From time to time, in the past, there have been improvements in the packing density of information. It may be worth considering what further achievements are likely in this direction.

"Improvements have almost invariably been made by reducing the cross-section of the recording tape. At present our standard recording tape is a filament which measures 0·1 micron wide by 0·008 micron thick. This replaced, three years ago, the previous standard, which was more than double these dimensions."

Harben cleared his throat rather nervously. Now came the piece he'd long been brooding over. The punch-line of his report:

"It may be interesting to speculate on the ultimate possible packing density of information. It is thought that the limit will be reached when we have a recording filament which is only one molecule in cross-section. In other words it will consist of a string of single molecules joined end to end.

"It is clear that a physically viable tape could not be less than one molecule thick. Each bit of information would then be recorded by an individual molecule polarized in one direction or the other."

Harben rubbed his chin with satisfaction. Good, that. One molecule thick. Kind of a continuous whisker. Give them something to work on. However, it didn't do to let Headquarters get too optimistic. One had to be careful, or some starry-eyed theorist would run away with the impression that the storage problem was licked.

The next thing one knew, they would be adding extra channels to the monitoring spectrum. So perhaps he'd better end his report on a note of caution:

"A hypothetical filament as slender as this, if it proved

technically possible, would represent a considerable economy in cross-section, compared with the present filament. However the gain would be less than at first appears.

"Since each bit of information would consist of a single molecule polarized in one direction or the other, information could be stored only in binary form. The present filament, on the other hand, permits recording in analogue form, with the result that in principle more information can be stored in a given length of tape. This difference in the form of the recording would offset to a considerable extent the gain resulting from reduced cross-section."

Harben switched off the message channel and chuckled. He felt he had the H.Q. people in a cleft stick. They were mostly non-technical. Loads of paper qualifications, of course, but no real grasp.

He pictured them running to consult their own research boys about his report. A fat lot of good that would do them. His reasoning was sound, his conclusions were valid and there was no way round them.

Now for the final sting in the tail of his report. A last twist of the knife. He switched on again.

"It would thus appear that we are working close to the ultimate packing density for information, and any gain from thinner filaments would be quickly swallowed up by the absolute daily increase in information. Furthermore, much space would be required for converters to translate existing information to the new standard.

"Finally, if it were felt necessary to monitor more channels, for example in the ultraviolet or X-ray bands, this could completely wipe out any temporary gain from the adoption of a more slender filament. End."

There, he'd said it. Harben reached forward and switched off the message channel with a gesture of finality, almost with a flourish.

All right. He'd told them. Perhaps he'd gone too far this time. If they didn't like the tone of his reports, they could always replace him. But he reckoned they wouldn't find it too easy to locate someone else who would stay cooped up, day after day, week after week, in this rabbit-hutch.

He'd meant to get in that stab about monitoring extra bands, come what may. Let them know (not *know*, but get a very faint inkling of the trouble he'd been caused, by their completely arbitrary decision to include supersonic and infrared bands in the spectrum of monitored frequencies. The new equipment he'd had to order at short notice. The almost fantastic ingenuity needed to fit the extra gear into the available space. Nobody at Headquarters appreciated any of these difficulties. They simply issued their pompous orders and then sat back in their plumply padded chairs and waited for the results to come in.

Harben passed the back of his hand wearily across his brow. Sometimes, these days, he felt tired. Perhaps it was all getting too much for him, what with all the reorganization and worry caused by the new bands. Perhaps he really needed to be replaced . . .

Also, nowadays, there were these blurred zones in his mind. It was as though there were something indistinct on the edge of his mind that he was trying to get clear, but couldn't quite bring into focus. He suspected, although he couldn't produce any evidence for it, that there were blank periods in his consciousness that he couldn't account for. It was almost as though, for hours at a time, he had nodded asleep.

But no, that was impossible. Harben, like ninety-five per cent of his fellow citizens, had undergone the rather simple operation which made sleep and (in the ordinary sense) food, unnecessary. He drew his energy directly from the electric circuits which powered the monitoring equipment. He was only a rather more complex zone of the involved electronic circuitry that surrounded him.

So now, perhaps, he had better get on with it, and do some monitoring.

Harben flicked a switch, and an entire panel of the idle screens in front of him flashed into life. The muted babble of a score of conversations blended together in his ears. Harben could, at will, bring forward any one conversation to the threshold of audibility, if it sounded interesting.

And very often it did sound interesting. That was the fascination of his job: to be able to peer into human life at every level, to see into every room, overhear every whisper, every word spoken in boredom or tenderness, in anger or passion.

Of course, in theory, he was supposed simply to check correct operation of the monitoring equipment throughout the City. That was what he was there for. But the system was largely self-correcting, and any major breakdown would have been instantly notified to him by the automatic circuits.

So he was free to be a wandering will-o'-the-wisp: to be here, there and everywhere, fleeting from one end of the City to the other as the mood took him.

There he was, effectively a prisoner within the enormous network of recording equipment, wedged in with kilometre upon kilometre of spools of recording tightly packed in the long racks, stretching in every direction, a solid block of information denser than honey in a well-stocked hive. There, somewhere near the centre, he sat hemmed in, scarcely able to move. So it seemed. But in reality he was everywhere, he was at every street-corner, in every doorway, in every room. He heard and saw everything, if he wished. And he could move with the speed of thought from one end of the City to the other, passing through closed doors as easily as a phantom, ascending and descending to every level at will.

He could even move through time. In the serried ranks of the Records lay everything that had happened since the very beginning, back to those earliest years when the monitoring was first started. No recording was ever destroyed, no ripple of significance erased, nothing faded from the huge memory.

In a matter of moments he could recapture any instant, any incident, from those innumerable past years. He could bring it back to life, glowing vividly on the coloured screens, and review it from many different angles simultaneously. So there were certain moments of time, vintage moments as it were, which he loved to revisit and re-live. Hunched in his little chair, he trembled with emotion as he participated vicariously in some moment when life seemed to declare itself, to be lived vividly and to the full.

Then, the secrets he knew. Sometimes he would follow the activities of the same person for days. Shamelessly. There was no escape from his all-seeing eyes, his eavesdropping ears. His victim, totally unaware of being the object of such thoroughgoing scrutiny, would lay bare the pattern of his life.

Harben loved to study the goings-on of nobodies, people who counted for nothing in the world. He found them fascinating, their lives full of unsuspected depths, and strange complications.

Harben watched also the public figures, the great men. He saw how in private, when the mask was laid aside, they showed the same little weaknesses, the same pettiness, as lesser men. There was not so much difference, after all.

Lovers he watched with a kind of clinical interest, tinged with prurience, and saw how their basic selfishness worked itself out. He saw the little cruelties and the big cruelties. The little infidelities and the big infidelities.

This was why Harben was dedicated to his job, why it gave him so much joy and satisfaction. He found it hard to understand why some people were said to be opposed to the monitoring system, and the whole apparatus of the Records.

Most citizens accepted the surveillance of the monitor cameras with a shrug of the shoulders. It was one more manifestation of modern society. It had to be taken in one's stride, like the shortage of living space, the high rents and the crippling income-tax on couples who were unwise enough to produce children.

It was not pleasant, of course, to know that every detail of one's life was being watched and recorded. Apart from the lack of any real privacy, which was embarrassing, to say the least, there were the things one did or said in moments of thoughtlessness or anger which one would prefer to be forgotten, not immortalized for all time.

There were compensations, for law-abiding citizens at least. And few citizens were not law-abiding. Crime had become almost unknown: it could not possibly pay. Who would attempt, for example, to rob a bank, when every detail of the planning, the crime itself and the "escape", would be faithfully recorded on video-tape? The police had only to look up the relevant Records and make their arrest. There was no question of looking for "clues", when a complete colour tape was available for use by the prosecution.

Equally, it was impossible to lose anything. One might mislay something temporarily, that was all. For example, a girl might leave her handbag on a park bench. No one would be so foolish as to attempt to pilfer the contents. As soon as the loss was discovered it was simply a question of tracing the girl's movements back to the moment when she was last in possession of the handbag. No problem at all...

He was busily engaged in his normal occupation of roving from level to level, when his eye was caught by a red light on one of the consoles.

It showed that an emergency police check was being made on the Records. Alongside the red light there was a digital display which read 523–301–446. Out of curiosity Harben switched to the relevant channel and located the suspect on one of his screens.

Citizen 523–301–446 was a middle-aged man who looked ordinary enough, a minor technician in the Electricity Supply Department. At the point of time where Harben joined the channel, he was going about his normal affairs in what seemed a harmless-enough manner. But Harben thought that there was a tense look about his brows, as though he were preoccupied with some secret problem.

For some time he followed the man's activities, without gaining any insight into his motives. It was necessary, of course, to skim rapidly through most of the Record at high speed. To follow it at normal speed was enormously time-consuming. Every day of the man's activities would take twenty-four hours to survey in full.

The police had developed a technique to overcome this problem. They would employ a team of a thousand Investigators (or more if the case demanded it), each of whom would be given a slice of the suspect's Record to survey at normal speed. In this way they could get through almost three years of tape in twenty-four hours. Significant passages of the Record were then noted and played back to the Chief Investigator, who might have to spend a whole week going through them, if the case proved involved.

Harben's technique was different. He had no team of Investigators at his disposal, and his interest was strictly casual. So he simply ran forward through the Record at high speed, stopping to study any passage which looked interesting.

He was skimming through a sequence in which Citizen 523–301–446 was leaving his apartment, alone. Harben had already gleaned, from some brief snatches of conversation he had listened to, that the man had the personal name of Ford.

Harben switched to Autochase, a setting of the controls which automatically followed the movements of the designated person, cutting from camera to camera as necessary to get the best view. But he still kept the tape running at high speed.

There was something ludicrous about the way the man rushed like a maniac up an escalator and into a Superway car, which moved off as a rapid blur. Harben saw Ford emerge at the other end and plunge into an elevator, the doors of which closed with guillotine speed.

At the seventy-first level, Ford tore along the corridor and paused only the briefest fraction of a second to ring a doorbell.

The door burst open, and a dark-haired attractive girl instantly appeared in the doorway. Ford gave her a lightning peck on the cheek and then plunged headlong past her into the tiny, neat apartment.

After the briefest twitter of conversation, the man flung himself down on a chair, while the girl poured him a drink —or rather, seemed to slosh the sherry with lunatic suddenness, but unbelievable accuracy, into a glass, which she then jerked under the man's nose without spilling a drop.

The grotesque effect was to some extent lost on Harben, who had run through more recordings at high speed than he cared to remember.

Their lips were fluttering again, and Harben turned up the sound. The result was a loud, shrill gibbering, like demented monkeys at play. More or less at random, to sample their conversation, Harben decided to switch over to normal speed. He seemed to have blundered on to an interesting bit.

"... you wouldn't be such a fool!" The girl's eyes flashed icily, and she made no attempt to conceal the note of disgust in her voice.

She got up and walked a step or two away from the couch on which she had been sitting. There was a long silence in the softly lit room. Ford was sitting bent forward, gazing down at the floor, his head slumped between his shoulders.

He glanced up suddenly. His face wore a look of strain, as though conflicting emotions were tugging at him.

"I'm convinced it's possible," he muttered slowly, almost doubtfully.

"Then why has no one ever succeeded in the past?" Her rejoinder was swift and rather biting.

"Probably didn't go about it the right way."

The girl made a little movement of impatience. "So you are so clever that you are going to succeed where everyone else has failed!"

"There's a chance."

"What possible chance is there, when you're being

watched all the time. You're being watched now." She gestured towards the recording camera.

The man looked tired.

"They can't watch everybody all of the time. There are ten thousand million people in the City. It would take another ten thousand million people, working full time, to watch them. They can't do that."

"But once they suspect . . . it's all there in the Records."

"Exactly. But there won't *be* any Records."

Harben tensed forward in his contoured chair with an almost convulsive movement.

No Records!

He turned the sound up louder, eager not to miss a word.

The man, at this moment, seemed to have convinced himself by his own argument. He now wore a look of dedicated fervour, the look of the heretic about to go to the stake.

Fantastic! thought Harben. Could Ford then be a member of S.A.D.A.R., the mysterious, almost legendary, underground movement, which was said to call itself the Society for the Abolition and Destruction of All Records? This secret society had never been proved to exist. Harben felt the thrill, electric and disturbing, yet gratifying, of stumbling upon the edge of the unknown.

Ford was exactly the man to be a member of S.A.D.A.R.: inconspicuous, completely normal, a boring nonentity whom the police would never bother to watch.

A moment later Harben was brought down to earth with a jolt.

The girl was speaking again.

"So you'd do all this just because of the baby coming? I've told you he'll accept it as his. He knows nothing about our . . . friendship."

Her voice trembled and almost broke on the last word. Quite clearly, the impending arrival of a baby had caused the "friendship" to turn somewhat sour.

"When he finds he's paying double tax, he'll want to know the reason why. You know that every husband has

the statutory right to consult his wife's Records. Only a complete swine would invoke that right. But by your account, Trafford is just such a swine."

"I never said he was a swine." The girl was almost in tears. "At least he's sane, which is more than you seem to be."

"Sane!" Ford was clearly needled. "Look, I've explained the whole thing to you in detail. The magnetic bomb . . ."

"How do you know it will work?"

"The thing is absolutely straightforward. Conversion of heat energy to magnetic energy. Any schoolboy could construct a device. In this case the heat energy is released by a thermal charge."

"All right. But how do you get it into position?"

"Inside the Records Centre? That's the only part which is at all tricky. I shall simply pose as a technician working in the supply tunnel . . ."

Harben relaxed. *That* old ploy . . . !Nobody had ever got into the Records Centre as easily as that. The guard on the perimeter was absolute. It was a well-kept secret that no human being could ever penetrate the Records Centre and live. There was a zone of destructive radiation which screened every approach, above, below, all round. Only mechanisms could ply to and fro, bringing in the necessary supplies. Harben was the only living thing to exist deep inside the lethal zone.

"No, my friend," thought Harben, as he casually switched off the channel, "you'll have to do better than that."

It was evident, from the fact that the police were checking his Record, that Ford had not done better than that. By now he was, no doubt, the late unlamented Ford. The police were merely making sure that he had no fellow conspirators, that he was not in fact linked to the legendary S.A.D.A.R. network of saboteurs.

Ford was nothing more than a clown, a clumsy bungling buffoon. But the thought of S.A.D.A.R. sent a shiver down Harben's spine. The destruction of all Records!

It was not so much that Harben himself would probably perish in a holocaust of the Records Centre. That was an abstract consideration which did not worry him unduly. What really hurt were the emotional implications: the fact that anyone could *want* to destroy the Records.

To Harben the Records were sacred, the most beautiful and precious things in the world. His Records! He lived only for them. He was a mere human, with a life-span of two centuries at the most. But the Records were eternal.

Harben felt a warm gush of almost religious emotion as he contemplated the ageless beauty of the Records. May they last for ever, their preciousness increasing from age to age.

Where was he? That strange shifting of consciousness again.

Whenever Harben became lost in contemplation of the transcendental beauty of the Records, he was liable to lose track of time. Did he go into some kind of trance, in which he lost normal consciousness? He looked at the softly glowing face of the clock. Three hours unaccounted for.

But why did he have the metal fuser in his hand? His knees and elbows felt sore, as though he had spent hours crawling along the narrow corridors which penetrated the Records Centre in all directions. The corridors were there mainly for the maintenance mechanisms to whirr along. But Harben also had the freedom of the corridors, supervising the activities of the robots. He could crawl along a maze of narrow tunnels for vast distances, right up to the fringes of the lethal perimeter zone itself.

He had to check, at intervals, the work of the maintenance mechanisms. They were supposed, in theory, to keep all the equipment in tip-top condition, and they did just that. But there was always the faint possibility that someday, somewhere, an unforeseen failure would occur. It was almost a formality, but one couldn't be too careful where the Records were concerned.

So Harben made routine checks at intervals to see that

everything was in order. It entailed several days of tedious crawling along the narrow tunnels, peering and squinting into the complex wiring system, searching for the faulty connection or unserviceable sub-assembly that was never there. Harben tended to feel as if he were looking for a non-existent needle in an infinitely large haystack.

This was not a job which Harben ever undertook eagerly. But his almost fanatical devotion to the safety of the Records drove him to perform it with agonizing thoroughness. Anyway, the next routine check was not due for another two months, so why the bruised knees and elbows? The facts just didn't add up, or make any kind of sense.

While he was musing on this problem, a disagreeable interruption occurred.

The large screen to the right of his chair flickered and glowed into life. An oversized three-dimentional image of the Sub-Assistant Overseer of Records looked squarely at Harben. His huge, oval, rather self-satisfied face appeared to be less than arms-length away.

Harben flinched. He always resented these intrusions into what he considered the privacy of his recording cubicle. He himself preferred to use the impersonal medium of the message tape when he wanted to get in touch with Headquarters. The time-lag entailed was negligible.

The Sub-Assistant cleared his throat portentously. If he was aware of Harben's resentment at his using the visual channel, he gave no hint of it. His beefy face conveyed the unsquashable, bouncy good-humour of one who is accustomed to issuing orders and having them instantly obeyed. The synthetic friendliness of the Overseer's manner made Harben recoil inwardly.

"And how are we, Harben, old man?" he said breezily. "Ticking over smoothly, I trust."

"Thank you." Harben's voice was clipped, hovering only just on the verge of politeness. "You have read my report for the previous month?" He was getting breathless again.

"Of course, of course. Admirable document. There was

just one tiny point I wanted to raise. Very much a routine query."

The Overseer paused, expecting some sort of response, even if it were only a raised eyebrow. But Harben remained impassive, waiting.

"A small matter of ten thousand metres of connecting wire."

Harben still remained silent.

"It was delivered on your order 7259/87, but there's no record of its having been used, nor is it held in your Maintenance store."

Harben blinked. His brain rapidly flickered backwards, groped for some explanation and found none. He was at a loss, acutely embarrassed at being caught on the wrong foot by H.Q. Normally, everything in the Records Centre functioned with the infallible accuracy of an auto-maintained computer. Anything less than that was a painful blow to Harben's self-esteem.

"The matter will be looked into, Overseer. A report will be made in due course."

"Thank you, Harben." There was just a tiny edge of menace in the Overseer's final remark. Prolonged confinement in refrigeration chambers . . .? Exile on an isolation satellite . . .? Naturally the Overseer would not wish to impose the full rigour of the law. But he had the authority, if it were needed. Harben got the message.

The Overseer's big face faded from the screen. Harben was left groping for an explanation. Ten thousand metres of cable? Why on earth would he . . .? Harben couldn't recall any need for such an order.

It was too absurd. And yet he couldn't quite dismiss from his mind the nagging feeling that he knew something about it. The explanation, like a forgotten name, hovered just beyond the grasp of his mind.

For some reason, Harben now found his eyes wandering towards the big clock, with its five dials and its number patterns rippling and changing ceaselessly. He watched the flickering displays chopping the seconds into milliseconds,

and tried to understand why he had suddenly become fascinated by this instrument.

The clock had always been one of the most prominent objects in his little cubicle, but beyond consulting it when necessary he had never given it a second thought. Until now.

The idea came strongly to Harben that if only he could understand its message, the clock had some connection with the missing lengths of wire. But what? He wished he knew. He wrestled with his memory, but could get nothing coherent out of it. Whatever the link was, he felt that it was important. Very important. This much he sensed from the pressure which he now felt coming from some level of his mind which he could not quite bring into conscious awareness.

"Twenty fifty-nine," he thought.

"Twenty fifty-nine."

That was the time. That was the moment. Fifteen seconds to go.

His mind gave a huge lurch, a leap upwards. It was strange and frightening. But somewhere, deep down, Harben felt the surging of a savage joy, a nameless sense of triumph which made his ordinary little worries fade into insignificance.

Five seconds to go.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

There was a sharp whiplash crack, of energy suddenly released, and the light in the cubicle winked and dimmed. By the fading light he saw instrument needles and gauges on the control panels falling away limply towards zero.

Harben looked at the clock. It had stopped at precisely 2059 hours.

A strange gurgle of joy came from Harben's throat. "I've done it, done it," he shouted. What had he done? Suddenly he knew: he had destroyed the Records. He, Harben,

guardian of the Records, had utterly destroyed them. What so many had tried to achieve, and failed, he had splendidly brought off.

Working from within, he had worked cunningly. So complete had been the concealment of his efforts, that not even his conscious mind had been in the secret.

On the surface of his mind, Harben had fretted over the safety of the Records, had fussed over routine reports, had faced the Overseers with a mixture of cringing and superciliousness. Meanwhile, the dark Harben, the unknown Harben, the real Harben, had laid his plans and carried them out in the deep unsurveyed tunnels of the Records Centre.

It was all so simple. He saw quite clearly now. There had been no need for a magnetic bomb. The Centre itself was potentially its own magnetic generator, with its millions of metres of wire, its billions of watts of energy already on tap.

It was simply a matter of making the right connections... Or rather, of preparing for connections which should all be made simultaneously at the programmed instant. Then the entire energy of the Centre was released in a huge electric whirlpool, a coiling current which generated its own gigantic pulse of magnetism, wiping clean every record.

Wiping away the memory of everything.

Harben dwelt for a moment peacefully on that thought as his body began to relax.

The circuits which supplied him with life had also been torn asunder in the huge wave of energy. But it did not matter. As Harben sank slowly towards unconsciousness, wondering whether the police would reach him in time, he knew only one thing.

The slate had been wiped clean.

GUARDIAN ANGEL

by

GERALD W. PAGE

As machines become more and more complex, Man's basic problem will be to retain mastery over them. The take-over bid may become more insidious than we think.

GUARDIAN ANGEL

SLOWLY he began to realize that he didn't like the painting he was working on. For years he had depicted machinery and wiring diagrams and he was the leading and most successful exponent of his school of art. His annual exhibit netted him a considerable income and he made enough to be in the top ten per cent income bracket, with first-class citizenship rights, such as voting, but as he finished *Bevel Gears in Lavender,* Douglas Copeland was forced to admit to himself that there was something he didn't like about the work. It was good—each and every cogwheel was drawn with mechanical precision and the light and shadow effects made outstanding use of the limitations of lavender. The painting would quite probably sell for more money than any of his previous ones. The critics would quite probably call it his masterpiece. But it wasn't a painting he could be happy about, and that wasn't anything he could explain to himself.

"Is something wrong?" Peter asked in his mellow voice. Peter was Copeland's Guardian Angel. He took up the whole west wall of Copeland's studio and looked after him. There was a note of fatherly concern in Peter's voice.

"Nothing's wrong," Copeland said, touching up a cogwheel.

"I understand," said Peter. "The artistic strain. You've outdone yourself this time, Douglas. Lavender is my favourite colour, you know, and the poetry of this painting is superb. Superb! This may well be your masterpiece."

Copeland tried to look engrossed in his work so that he wouldn't have to answer Peter. The Guardian Angel merely hummed, like the elaborate thinking machine it was, as Copeland put on the finishing touches. Copeland had promised Marty Apery twenty paintings for the next ex-

hibit, which was only a month away. This was number sixteen. Copeland took a spray can of drying agent and applied it to the painting, varnishing and drying it all in one simple press of a spray nozzle. He took the painting from the easel and propped it face against the wall with the other fifteen. Four more paintings to go and only a month to do them in.

Well, that wasn't much of an obstacle. He could do four in a week. But even so, the prospect of having to do four more paintings of cogwheels and axles and cotter pins was depressing. He stood wiping his hands needlessly with his wiping cloth and staring at the back of the painting he had finished.

"Are you going to start another one tonight?" Peter asked brightly.

"No, it's late," Copeland said. "I'm going to bed."

"On the contrary, it's early," said Peter.

But Copeland went to bed anyway.

When he awoke the next morning, the clock greeted him with the jovial announcement that it was Thursday and that the world ran smoothly. Copeland groaned. Thursday. That was his privacy day—the day Peter was turned off so that Copeland could enjoy the ministrations of solitude.

He ate breakfast sombrely and planned his day. Four more paintings of cogwheels.

He could finish one by the weekend, he reminded himself.

After breakfast he set a canvas up on his easel and took out his sketches. He found the one he wanted to do next, a nice symbolic design showing a large cogwheel surrounded by clusters of smaller cogwheels, all in a complex geometric design. He thought about the colours for a moment. He was tempted to paint it in loud and clashing hues, but he didn't really want to. He rather preferred a more subtle, perceptionistic scheme in his works. He was good at colour and skilful colour work was about the only challenge he found to this sort of work. He finally decided to paint the cogwheel in the upper right-hand corner in red and gradu-

ate through the spectrum, ending up with blue in the lower left-hand corner. The background would have to be either black or purple. He decided on purple. Peter would like this painting. He seated himself at his easel and picked up the pencil.

That was as far as he got. He stared at the blank canvas and didn't begin drawing. The room was too silent. There wasn't even the humming that Peter made when he was running. This was privacy day, so Peter was turned off and Copeland was free to be alone, to do as he pleased. He threw down the pencil and left the studio to find a party.

He found one at the estate of an acquaintance he knew only as Charlie. Charlie had bought a couple of Copeland's paintings and greeted him enthusiastically. Copeland didn't particularly like Charlie, but a party is a party, so he dialled a drink, not paying much attention to what he was getting and went off to find a corner to drink in.

He found the corner and tasted the drink. A voice said, "Do I know you?"

The drink had a will of its own, but that surprised him. It took Copeland a minute to realize that it hadn't been the drink which had spoken to him. He looked around and saw a pair of amused grey eyes.

"No, I don't guess I do," the girl said. "I wasn't sure. You can never be sure at parties like this. My name's Philomene Bemis. What's your name?"

"Douglas Copeland."

"I like that," said the girl. "Are you famous? A lot of Charlie's friends are famous."

"I'm an artist," Copeland said.

For a moment Philomene looked puzzled. "Oh," she said, catching on. "You mean you paint and draw. Are you any good? How about getting me a drink?"

Copeland got her a drink and tried to refill his own now empty glass. He wasn't sure what he had got before, but the substitution was almost as interesting. He and Philomene talked, and before he knew it, she was interested in his work. Copeland was amazed to learn that she had never

seen any of his paintings. She had never been to Charlie's European estate, where two of Copeland's paintings hung. She was very apologetic about it and after his third—or maybe it was his fourth—drink, he invited Philomene to his studio.

She looked around the studio, grey eyes large with amazement. She wore a tight, revealing yellow dress and had beautiful nearly black hair. "What's that?" she demanded, pointing at the wall that housed Peter.

"That's Peter. My Guardian Angel. Don't you have one?"

"Heavens, no," Philomene said. "I can't afford one. Besides, who'd want one of those creeps around all the time. You do these paintings?" she asked, picking up *Bevel Gear in Lavender*.

"That's right."

"You must get paid real good for this sort of thing," she said frowning at the painting. "I mean having a Guardian Angel and all. Does this kind of painting bring in very much?"

"Yes."

"Could I see some of your others?"

"They're right there," Copeland told her.

She looked at the others, one or two with some interest, but for the most part rather cursorily. "Is this all you do?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Well, the colour's nice," she said, getting to her feet, "but don't you ever paint people?"

"Of course not."

She regarded him strangely. "Why not?"

"Well, because—well, people are—common."

"So are cogwheels," she said.

"Yes, but people are drawn for comic strips and you can see them in photographs and TV and on the streets. Art's not like that."

"Isn't it supposed to be like real life?"

"Yes, of course," Copeland said. "Only art is more like real life than—than——"

"Than people?"

"You don't understand," Copeland said with agitation. "You just don't understand the nature of art."

"And who does?"

"I have my admirers. I get thousands of dollars per painting. People like my work. Peter is constantly praising it."

"I thought that was it," Philomene said. "Peter. Your Guardian Angel. You do paintings of cogwheels the same as all the other artists, and you sell to people with Guardian Angels—just like you've got. Guardian Angels to tell you what to think and feel. Did it ever occur to you that Peter might like paintings of cogwheels and wiring diagrams because it's a machine?"

"Peter has my best interests at heart."

"He doesn't even have a heart," Philomene said, "and he wouldn't know your best interests from a short circuit. What about your love life?"

A little indignantly, Copeland said, "Peter is well aware that human beings must occasionally have certain releases from the anxieties that come from the pressures of modern society——"

"Anxiety hell," she said and she kissed him. "How was that for releasing pressure?" She kissed him again, longer this time.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well——"

"You're a fool," she said angrily. She walked over to the easel and took the covering cloth from the blank canvas. "You haven't started this one yet?"

"I was thinking about it," Copeland said. He found his sketches and showed her the one he had selected.

"More cogwheels," she said with distaste.

"I was going to start here and paint this one red and work through the spectrum to blue here——"

"Does it mean anything?"

"It symbolizes the order of the universe."

She looked at the sketch solemnly, taking it and holding it off for a better look. "Is that what you think the universe is?"

"Of course. Doesn't everybody?"

"I'm certain that I don't," Philomene said. "It would be a horrible universe if it were like that. Where would all the questions be? And what's a universe without questions?" She looked at him cryptically. "Don't you have any questions you'd like to ask?"

"You just don't understand art," Copeland said, taking his sketch back.

"Don't you want to paint something else? Aren't you tired of all this?"

"Of course not. I'm happy and content. It's just that——"

"Ah ha!" cried Philomene.

"I only meant that I need a vacation," Copeland said.

"You mean you're tired of painting cogwheels," Philomene said, triumph gleaming in her eyes. "Admit it."

"Well, so what? Maybe I am."

She came up to him and put her head on his shoulder. "Of course you are."

"But it doesn't mean anything."

"Of course not," Philomene said, her hair brushing Copeland's cheek.

"So lots of people take vacations. It doesn't mean anything."

"Of course not," Philomene said. "Didn't you ever paint people at all?"

"A long time ago in school."

"Why not again? You said you needed a change. What could be more of a change?"

"But I don't have a subject," Copeland said. "You've got to have a model to paint people."

Philomene kissed his cheek. "You have me," she said.

Copeland looked at Philomene. Her features were even, her complexion smooth and creamy, her figure nice—well, he decided, watching her breathe, maybe "nice" was too

mild a word for it. Her hair was dark and lustrous and her grey amused eyes were fascinating. Copeland glanced at Peter, then remembered that this was Privacy Day and for twenty-four hours Peter was shut off. But Peter had often eulogized the value of an occasional change——

"All right," he said. "I'll do it."

"I knew you would," she said and kissed him again. "I'm proud of you."

Copeland rummaged around for a moment before he found his sketching pad. He took his pencils out and turned back to see Philomene taking off her dress. He opened his mouth to say something, but he wasn't really sure what to say, so he just left his mouth open. Philomene looked up at him, quizzically. "Don't you want me to pose undressed?" she asked.

"Well, that is . . . I mean . . ."

She smiled. "All right then. We'll only swim in shallow water this lesson." She put the dress back on. "Zip me up please," she said.

Copeland zipped her dress up and Philomene perched herself atop a stool to pose for him. "I'll bet you're sorry already that I'm posing clothed," she said.

"It's more artistic this way," he mumbled.

Philomene only smiled.

Copeland's first sketches were stiff and self-conscious but to his surprise he found himself gradually getting the hang of it. By the time he had done six sketches he considered asking her to pose nude, but he saw her smiling at him and decided not to. Besides, her dress didn't leave that much to the imagination. Her legs were smooth and well formed, her breasts firm and rounded. By the time he had finished the seventh sketch he was actually having fun. He hadn't had fun drawing in years.

She posed patiently for him, but finally had to remind him that she had to eat to maintain the strength to exercise enough to keep her weight down—and that she was a little cramped from not moving for two or three hours. Apologetically, Copeland suggested they break for dinner.

"Now do you agree with me?" she asked, climbing off the stool rather stiffly. Normally Copeland would have been gentleman enough to help her off, but he was busy spreading the sketches out on the table.

"Not really," he said.

"Those two are good," she said, indicating the last two he had drawn.

"Oh, they're all right," he said.

They ate and Philomene agreed to pose again. This time Copeland sketched on the canvas until he had the pencilling for a painting. Philomene stretched while Copeland gathered his paints and prepared for the actual painting. Then she struck the pose again and Copeland began work.

The next morning, Copeland overslept. As he entered the studio, where breakfast was waiting, Peter greeted him with his usual cheerful, "Good morning, Douglas."

"Morning," Copeland answered, sitting down at the table.

"You seem cheerful this morning," Peter said, "and on top of oversleeping. Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

"Yes," Copeland said between mouthfuls.

Sunlight streamed in through the studio window and Copeland felt great. He glanced at the easel where the half-finished painting was covered so that Peter hadn't seen it. He ate an extra large breakfast before getting to work.

Remembering Peter, he moved the easel around so that the painting would be turned away from Peter's sensory scanners. Then he removed the cover and regarded the painting a moment before picking up his brush.

"Why did you do that?" Peter asked.

"Do what?" asked Copeland. "Oh. Move the easel—the light's better here."

"But there is less light at that angle," Peter said. "Is something wrong?"

"What could be wrong?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But why else hide the painting from me?"

"Hide? Oh, it's a surprise. I'll show it to you when I finish it."

"It must be quite special," Peter said pleasantly. "I look forward to it. But you'll have to go some to improve on *Bevel Gear in Lavender*. That should make you rich in itself. You almost have a full quota for the exhibit, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes . . ."

Copeland became intent on his work and was completely lost in himself when the door announced a visitor that afternoon. The door had to repeat the announcement. Copeland blinked and asked, "Who?"

"Mr. Apery from Reality Gallery," the door said.

Copeland hastily covered the painting and told the door to admit Apery. Apery was Copeland's agent and the owner of the gallery where most of his work was exhibited. Apery was a big gorilla-like man who favoured large and malodorous cigars.

"How's it coming?" Apery asked, slapping his paw into Copeland's hand. "The exhibit lined up yet?"

"Just about," Copeland said, pointing to the paintings against the wall. "See for yourself."

Apery poured forth a cloud of stagnant smoke and began examining the paintings one by one, occasionally whistling in admiration at those which would probably bring large commissions. "These are great," he said when he had seen them all.

"Of course they're great," Peter said.

"Is this another one?" Apery said, indicating the painting covered on the easel.

"No!" Copeland said, but it was too late. Apery pulled back the cloth and stared at the painting.

"Hey, what's this? Don't I know this dame?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon," said Peter.

"You've probably seen her around," Copeland said.

"Oh yes," Apery said. "Name's Bemis. She's quite a doll, isn't she. Hey, you have quite a line here. I never realized just how handy it must be to be an artist."

"Is that a painting of a young lady?" Peter asked coldly.

"Her?" Apery asked.

"I only wanted to do something a little different," Copeland said.

"May I see it?" Peter asked.

Copeland moved the easel around so that Peter could pick up the painting on his scanner sensors. "She's real nice," he said. "You'd like her."

"I'm certain I would," Peter said coldly. "Will you finish this today?"

"Yes," Copeland said.

"What about the rest of the exhibit?" Apery asked.

"I can do four more cogwheel paintings in a couple of weeks," Copeland said.

"Good," Apery said. "We've got a month. Those I just looked at are great. Bring in a mint." He headed for the door.

"Whatever prompted you to do a painting like that?" Peter asked when Apery was gone.

"I don't know. I'm getting tired of painting cogwheels."

"Cogwheels? Is that all you think of those works of art? Douglas, you're forgetting the poetry of the machine that you've so often captured in your works. Think of the basic simplicity of the universe!"

"I've done that. I want to do something else. I'm not so sure there's any basic simplicity to the universe anyway."

"Douglas!"

"I'm tired of painting cogwheels. Let me finish this."

"Very well," Peter said. "There is, after all, the strain of being a great artist. I'll permit you to indulge yourself therapeutically this once."

Copeland finished the painting of Philomene that evening. He set it against the wall with the others but face out where he could see it. The next morning he took a blank canvas and the sketch of the cogwheel design he had been thinking of doing. He thought for a moment about colour, then picked up his pencil to begin the drawing for the painting. As he did so, he saw the canvas of Philomene. It was very good that painting. For a moment, he debated

with himself, then he took out the sketches he had made of her and selected one. He began pencilling it on the canvas. Peter said nothing.

A couple of days later, when he had finished the painting, he stood both of them side by side and looked at them. "Peter," he said. "I've done it."

"Done what?"

"Painted for the ages."

"You have, Douglas," said Peter. "*Bevel Gear in Lavendar* is your masterpiece."

"I don't mean that," said Copeland. "I mean these two of Philomene."

"Oh, please, Douglas. Those are, after all, only paintings of a woman. Finding her desirable is one thing, but to idealize her in this way is preposterous. Call her up here and go to bed with her. That'll satisfy you so that you can go back to your paintings."

"I'm thinking about marrying her," Copeland said.

"You can't afford to get married," Peter said. "Not to her. It would affect your financial standing. You could end up without the right to vote."

"I've been thinking about that and it seems that I usually vote the way you tell me to. Why don't you vote instead of me."

"Douglas!" said Peter horrified.

"I mean it."

"But your vote is almost as important to you as your painting," Peter said.

"Maybe I'll change that. I'm pretty sick of painting cogwheels. I'd rather paint figure studies. Philomene offered to pose nude——"

"That is enough, Douglas! I'll not hear any more of this. I absolutely forbid you to consider marriage to her. You have four paintings to do for your exhibit. Do them at once. Do you hear?"

Copeland stared at the wall that housed Peter, but said nothing.

"At once," Peter said firmly.

Copeland took out his cogwheel sketches.

The next day, the door announced Philomene.

"Send her away," said Peter.

"Send her in," Copeland told the door. He turned back to the painting and applied yellow to a cogwheel. The door opened and he heard feminine footsteps on the floor behind him. "Hello," he said.

"Hello yourself," Philomene said. "Are you mad at me?"

"No," he said.

"Then why don't you face me?"

Copeland put down his brush and turned. She was wearing a form-fitting blue dress and her hair was fixed in a new way, piled apparently haphazardly on her head. "I'm working on an important painting," he said.

"It doesn't look right," she said.

"Nothing is wrong with it," Copeland said.

Philomene pressed the tip of one forefinger under her lower lip and studied the painting, then extended her arm and pointed. "The colour doesn't look right," she said. Copeland caught an almost devastating whiff of her perfume.

"You don't understand art," he said without conviction, but he looked back at the painting, and sure enough, the colour looked wrong. The yellow was too yellow, too soon. It ruined the red to blue shading effect. "Well, so maybe it isn't perfect," he said.

"Douglas," said Peter, "your art is very good. You mustn't let this young lady undermine your confidence like that."

"Is that your Guardian Angel?" Philomene asked.

"Yes."

"Oh," said Philomene. "Did you finish the painting of me?"

"It's over there," Copeland said, pointing towards the wall.

"Oooohh," Philomene said. "You did two of them." She knelt down and picked up the second canvas. "I like this."

"You may have both of them," Peter said, "if you promise not to divulge the name of the artist."

"Shut up," Copeland said. He knelt down next to Philomene and picked up the other painting. She turned her head and kissed him impulsively. "Thank you," she said, looking back at the painting.

"You're welcome."

"Are you going back to the other kind of painting now?"

Copeland considered his answer before saying, "No. I think I'd like to do another of you."

"Undressed?" she asked.

"This has gone far enough," Peter said. "I was willing to let you play around with those two paintings and even to go to bed with her but I cannot permit you to jeopardize your entire career with so radical a painting. That young lady is nothing more than a tramp."

Copeland stood up. "I'm going to marry her," he said angrily.

"You are?" Philomene asked with amazement.

"You are!" Peter said. "I'll have you committed first. This is a rash act of insanity——"

Philomene walked across the room to Peter and pointed to a lever. "What's this?" she asked.

"That's the on–off switch."

"I thought so," Philomene said. She pulled the lever down. There was a shriek from Peter, then silence. "He can be sold as junk," she said.

"But——" said Copeland. "But—but——"

Philomene came back and kissed him. This time more firmly and longer.

"You really want to marry me?" she asked. "When?"

"How about today?"

"But won't a honeymoon interfere with getting out the rest of the paintings for the exhibit?" she asked.

"I've had a clever idea," he said. "I could do two more of you and have the right number. We could bill the four of you as radical departures."

"How radical?" she asked suspiciously.

SECOND GENESIS

by

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

Here is a little known Eric Frank Russell story which we feel is more than worth bringing to the notice of readers. Vintage Russell at his best, in fact

SECOND GENESIS

THROUGH the foreport the vault of the night could be seen with its vivid scattering of stars, the cross-hairs being lined on a minor orb dead ahead. Yes, a minor orb, small, red, of little importance relative to the mighty host around and beyond it.

From end to end of space gleamed the mighty concourse of suns—blue, white, golden and cherry-coloured. Some were giants burning in colossal solitude. Others huddled in groups like fiery families. Many were more gregarious, flaming in close-packed ranks to fling sparkling curtains across the dark, or form glowing clouds of inconceivable dimensions, or rotate themselves in mass to create titanic swirls beyond which lay others and again still more.

Amid all this, one small red sun burning modestly as if overawed by the vastness around it—maidenly shy and conscious of its own insignificance. But the cross-hairs on it selecting it for special attention, choosing it as the one true beloved from a myriad of greater beauties. There was reason for this special attention: its name was Sol—and that was almost another word for home.

The man behind the cross-hairs, keeping the tiny ship steady on its drive, was called Arthur Jerrold, a pilot-engineer by profession, a near-suicide by choice. His light grey eyes contrasted with his pure white hair. His features were a mass of fine lines, a living map of where he'd been. He was thirty years old, also two thousand and thirty years old.

It was that latter fact that filled him with anxiety and a good deal of nostalgia as he looked at the sun called Sol. Three years ago he had hurtled outward, leaving it behind his tail, deserting it as one throws away his heart when others beckon more enticingly. Now he was coming back, and Sol was some two thousand years older.

"Think carefully," they had warned him, "lest later you are racked with vain regrets. Within that ship you will be in a tiny artificial universe of your own; you will be in your own space, your own peculiar time. There is no other way to reach so far."

"I know."

"Nor will you meet another of your kind in some strange far-off field. This is one of those experiments that are not repeated until we have weighed and estimated the results of the first."

"Somebody has to do it first. I'm ready."

"When you return—if ever you do return—the world you knew may be well-nigh unrecognizable. You will be a relic of its past. Perhaps none will remember you even by hearsay. All those you once held dear will be so long gone that their names will have vanished from the book of life, and their resting-places will be beyond anyone's power to find. You will have been away *two thousand years*."

"I'm ready, I tell you."

So they had feted him and made much of him, and launched him amid a worldwide thunder of huzzahs. After that, he'd been on his own, just he and the ship, with Sol sinking and shrinking unseen behind the tail.

Now he was coming back. All he had to show for his Odyssey was his data on soundings of the great depths, a long, magnificent story of flaming orbs and whirling spheres, and the rise and fall of far-away civilizations and strange, almost incomprehensible barbarities.

Plus, of course, the countless seams on his face matched by the longitudinal scars on his ship. They were young and vigorous and full of intense vitality, he and the little ship; yet both were incredibly old, stamped with the mark of long years and great experiences.

Pluto was the outpost, that pointed down the starry lane. He swooped over it in a high arc and bulleted onward. Uranus was on the other side of Sol, and Neptune—far to his left; but Saturn was only slightly off his course, and Jupiter loomed almost straight in front. Maybe they were

settled now, to what extent humans could settle them. Much can happen in twenty centuries.

For a moment he toyed with the notion of transferring the ship to normal time and making a swift circumnavigatory inspection of Saturn and Jupiter's satellites. It would be good to see outcroppings of slanty roofs and tall towers that identified the haunting-places of mankind.

But he resisted the temptation. To jump out of his own superfast time-rate would delay things unbearably. In the neighbourhood of Mars would be the proper place to change over. He contented himself by curving over the big planets and again marvelled at the way in which temporal ratios made them appear to whirl and move at tremendous rates. Even after three years of it, he was still amazed that he could discern any features of space at all, much less distortedly; for one hour on the ship was roughly one month on Earth. So relatively fast did the sands of time run out in the exterior universe that his course for Sol described a fine curve which compensated for the system's Vegadrift.

Jupiter swung grandly to the rear, it and its circling children seeming to move at some seven hundred times their accustomed velocities. The Asteroid Belt had similar acceleration, its multitude of rocks and midget worlds appearing elongated by the sheer rapidity of their passing. Then Mars, the home world's next-door neighbour, pink and shining, like a lightship telling the far voyager of coming landfall.

Here was the point of readjustment. Jerrold braced himself and flipped a knife-switch. A terrible blackness momentarily encompassed his mind; a fragmentary but powerful nausea seized his body. It was as if multi-million submicroscopic feet had stamped down hard to put the brakes on every vibrating molecule of his being. The effect was always the same, despite that he had used the switch times without number while scouting an army of distant suns. There was no getting hardened to it; one could only take the strain and wait for it to pass.

So it came, and tore at him, and went away, leaving him

shaken but whole. Another line had been written upon his face. Another hair might have been whitened had it not already been silvery.

Now Mars was slowed to its old familiar pace. Its minutes were ship's minutes, its hours ship's hours. By contrast with former hugely zipped-up motions, the whole cosmos had suddenly become sedate. One could look forward and downward and see Phobos and Deimos circling the Red Planet like temple dancers rotating around a bland and silent god.

There were people on Mars that day two thousand years ago. Not many of them; just a small colony of metallurgists and mining engineers with their wives and families. A little redstone town with twenty streets, one oxygen plant and a widening ring of boreholes and quarries had formed their touch of Terrestrial civilization. They had called the place Lucansville after an aged, toothless nosey-poke who had first discovered osmiridium in the Plains of Whispering.

In that long-gone day when the ship gleamed fitfully overhead before switching on to the endless trail, the folk of Lucansville had fired a dozen gigantic star-rockets in his honour. Shooting balls and wavering streamers and wide cascades of brilliant green had illuminated the heavens for half a minute—and that had been man's last farewell to man.

If the riches of Mars had held out, the boreholes reached new treasures, the quarries continued to surrender wealth, Lucansville might well be a metropolis by this time, a replica of the best that home had to offer. A place of wide avenues between splendid edifices. A city whose people could walk in pride, knowing their own mightiness.

He went down to see them.

They were not there.

The vessel went three times round, travelling low while grey eyes searched the landscape. From the Crown of the Snow King to the Crown of the Snow Queen, they were not there. From the Mountains of Desire to the Plains of Whispering, they were not there.

Only the red earth, the blue-green lichens, the eastering dust-clouds and an eerie inward voice murmuring: "Nothing, nothing, nothing."

Jerrold lifted the boat, pointed for Terra. He was both phlegmatic and hopeful. It had been so easy to expect too much of Mars despite that there had never been a lot to recommend it. Coldness, dust-devils, thin air and the need to carry oxygen flasks wherever one went. A brief whiff of reviving gas whenever the lungs became tired. A world of sniffers established to cope with odd veins of rare metals good for only as long as they lasted, and likely to give out at any time. Lucansville had served its purpose, been abandoned and dissolved into the red dust. Once again Mars had lost its higher life and was left to float in the cosmic cold with its deserts, its dust and its mystery-pylons the origin of which no man knew. But Terra lay ahead.

It could be seen now as a thin white halo a fraction to one side of Sol. Near it, the smaller gleam of Luna. There was home. There was the world that had dreamed the ship, and planned it with clever brains, built it with cunning hands. There was the vital sphere that had provided the metals, the dielectrics, the instruments, the courage, determination, optimisms, the very life-form that was its pilot.

Both of them, man and vessel, strained eagerly forward as the target grew larger. Art Jerrold felt an overpowering urgency while his damp hands mastered the controls and his gaze remained fascinatedly upon the halo. The ship seemed to sense it also. The engine purred with delight; the wake-flame grew long, steady and brilliant; the control-responses were prompt and willing.

Luna dropped beneath, then fled sideways, crater-pitted and pale. Earth loomed up large, its continental outlines clearly defined as the ship sped round to the sunward side. Next, the vessel was skimming the fringes of atmosphere, dipping in, heating up, going out and dipping in again. This roller-coaster technique was the normal deceleratory pro-

cess, providing neither the time nor the place for closer looks at the destination.

One and a half times round was sufficient. Velocity fell low enough to avoid a burn-up through thicker air. The boat went down, penetrating a thick layer of cloud and flattening out level with the expanse of whitecapped heaving sea.

This descent upon a world had been performed so often that Jerrold handled the controls subconsciously. He had done more of it than any man living, could swoop and draw close and examine a million square miles of terrain while the vessel seemed to fly itself in sentient co-operation. One could have a surfeit of worlds and—after the hundredth or two-hundredth—become cool, calculating, undisturbed, even somewhat lacking in the capacity for surprise.

But this was different. This was Terra. He had never felt so excited in his life.

The seas raced past. He kept wide-eyed watch ahead, fingers moist and nervous, queer little thrills running up and down his back. His mind was in turmoil.

Here there are no deadly dart-beetles, no strangler-trees, no wave-lattice life-forms like uncommunicative, incomprehending ghosts, no searing sun, no host of maddening moons. Here the ship was made and I was born and a mighty audience cheered us on our way. Here lurked the little school in the woods, and the swimming-pool where Rudy stayed down seventy seconds and scared the wits out of us all.

A deep frown corrugated his forehead, and he chewed at his bottom lip. Of course, the school would not be here. Nor Rudy either. Joe and Jean and Mimi and little low-voiced Sue, they'd gone for keeps.

It's hard to think they're gone—but I got fair warning. Mustn't think of such things. I've only myself to blame.

There will be plenty of other folk around, some of them remarkably like Rudy and Mimi and the rest. There will be other little schools and candy-shops and warm, clanging smithies where the sparks fly upward. Why the deuce do I

think of things like those? I'm thirty. I'm grown up. Be your age, Jerrold!

All right: there will be bright little homes with windows shining in the dark. And woodland walks scented with pine-resin and herbs. I'll make new friends and settle down. Somewhere there will be a girl waiting for me, though she doesn't realize it, and I don't either. We will know it only when we meet each other. Perhaps later on . . .

Four tiny islands broke the monotony of ocean, rushed beneath, fled backward. He caught no more than the briefest glimpse of unbroken surfaces of treetops, ragged rings of silver beaches, outer rings of reefs and foaming breakers.

It would have been nice to land and breathe the air, pat the earth, smell the leaves, admire the flowers, whistle at the birds, shout and sing. A preliminary letting off of steam before the final sit-down.

Nice, but it could not be done. Not enough room. The slightest over-shoot would take him nose-first into a coral barrier or plunge him into the deeps.

More islands in a long string suggestive of an underlying mountain range. All jungle-covered, green and moist, with the eternal seas nibbling at their edges.

They came and went far too quickly for him to gloat over the possibility of seeing a palm-roofed village, an upturned face, a waving hand.

All he could see were splashes of colour, green surrounded by white and blue. Would there still be palm-roofed villages after two thousand years? Why not? At the time he went away, they had already existed through four thousand. Besides, in the most efficient and greatly developed world, they would preserve sanctuaries of simplicity.

Land and a great mountain! The ship gained altitude, engines humming, tubes drumming. Seas and trees and the big black mountain! Fiery-tailed, the vessel soared over a jagged peak, breaking into a cloud and coming out again.

It was not continental land; merely another and bigger

island. Plenty large enough to have a main anchorage, a busy port and perhaps a dozen fishing villages.

No sign of active communities from what little he could see. At present velocity his minimum circle would have been radius of thirty miles: too great to permit a proper survey. The alternative was to reduce the circle by cutting down velocity, and he did want to do that.

A metropolitan centre of civilization was his goal, preferably one near to his original point of departure, near the places so long remembered though now forgotten by a world.

The eventual rise of a continental land-mass showed familiar outlines. Nearer, he became certain: it was the great wall of the Andes. There was a song in his heart as he let a side-tube blast, and the ship's nose swung round to point north.

Seas and islands for hundreds of miles, and then a neck of land with a wide gulf beyond. At this point the first spasm of uneasiness came over him. Clearly defined by the noonday sun, the isthmus below was that of southern Mexico. He looked at it as he arrowed across, and the song inside him faltered and died away.

The hills were brown, the valleys green with thin glistening streaks showing where rivers wound down to the sea. But something was wrong; something was not as it had been two thousand years ago and still should be today.

He was already over the gulf when he identified the missing feature: there were no checkered patterns on the surface of the earth. A uniform green crept along the valleys, enjoying the shelter of the hills and the moisture of the streams. Nothing broke it up into variegated squares and oblongs. No walls, no fences, no irrigation systems, no contrast of differently coloured crops. No paths, no roads, no habitations of any kind. On the rim of the gulf should have stood the one-time city of Vera Cruz. It was gone, entirely gone.

At least, he thought it was gone. Lacking the navigational

instruments of landbound vessels, Jerrold had to depend solely upon memory of past topography. He could be wrong—yet he remembered Vera Cruz with a wealth of detail. In the manner of his high-flying kind, he could picture it with fair accuracy, from above, as seen at a cloud-base.

Speed gave him little time to ponder that problem. He was across the gulf with the mainland rushing under the foreport just as his mind registered the worrying fact that he had seen no surface ships or air machines.

Land swept by. Bending forward, half out of his seat, he studied it anxiously. Miles of it, leagues of it, rolling by at tremendous pace. The ship went lower, so that it had to leap occasional hills, buttes and ridges. It jumped a mountain range, swung to follow a valley, traced a river to the sea, drummed across a harbour, over a headland and went back into deep country.

Like a hopelessly confused pigeon seeking the way to its loft, the boat scoured the territory in huge circles, zig-zagged east–west and again north–south. At dusk it landed on a smooth plain, sliding towards the rim of the dying sun, cutting a long brown rut in the virgin green.

Jerrold came out and watched the sun go down without really seeing it. The feel of earth beneath his feet went unnoticed, completely devoid of its anticipated thrill. Neither did he perceive the waving grasses, the distant trees, the pink streamers in the sky. He was as one blinded by a vision of the impossible.

This was Terra, and yet not Terra, because there were no Terrans. Hereabouts, as nearly as he could tell, had been his launching-place, with seven towns just over the horizon, and a hundred roads radiating from them, and steel rails running from one to the other. Great stone towers and lattice masts and a spiderweb of power lines had marked the landscape, while countless air machines roared above. There had been fields of wheat and corn, barley and alfalfa, painting the scene in straight-edged jigsaw patterns.

Strong men in blue denims and women with sunbonnets

had worked around here. You could stand and listen and hear for miles the sound of their voices, the clatter of their machines. Oaths and laughter—a voice calling to another across three fields. Smells of turned earth, warm crops, hot metal, engine oil and an occasional whiff of tobacco.

Now all were gone. The plain stretched undisturbed way back to the far hills. Grasses rustled in a breeze that bore no human sounds, no odours of life. Clouds drifted along with cold indifference. The sun went down at last, sucked away its streamers. Purple darkness encompassed the plain, the ship and the man—and there were no windows to light the way....

With the morning Jerrold felt better. Lack of sleep encourages morbidity. Early to bed and long hours in the bunk made up in large part for what he had missed on the homeward trip. The sun smiled out of a clear blue sky. The grass was fresh with dew. Small birds chittered querulously outside the lock, urging him to get up and come out.

Emerging, he stretched his arms, combed his fingers through white hair. Thrilled anticipation came back, driving out remnants of disappointment and feelings of tragedy. After a meal he perked up enough to whistle a gay little tune as he walked around the ship and examined its outer condition.

The world is a big place; two thousand years is a considerable slice of history. Maybe they've discovered how to live without the bother of cultivating foodstuffs. Maybe they've reduced their numbers and clustered together some place else, enjoying companionship freed from the necessity of toil, independent of agriculture. Perhaps they've concentrated themselves in six, twelve or twenty supercities, and are having one heck of a good time.

Satisfied that the boat stood in no need of repair, he went inside, closed the lock and went up in further search of his kind.

He headed first for New York—but there was no such place: only two rivers parted by a woody island. London,

Paris, Belgrade, Madrid, Peking, Sydney, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, all were empty names that had become as if they had never been. All over the world the good earth had become the property of vegetation, insects, birds and small animals. Of men there were none.

Eight times round the ship went, and found not a house, not a human. But here and there, in places part shielded from eroding elements, were vague signs that men had been within the scheme of things. Here and there were traces as baffling as the mystery-pylons of Mars.

From a great altitude could be detected faint square shadows in the sands where once the Pyramids had stood. Slight, almost imaginary criss-crossings of discoloration in the grass marked the one-time sites of London and Des Moines. At twenty thousand feet Jerrold felt sure he could define the avenues and streets of Cincinnati.

Seven areas in the world were scarred by groups of gigantic craters, old and overgrown, quite without radioactivity. First views of these irresistibly suggested a bloody holocaust that might have wiped out a large portion of humanity. The sight of the last such place made him think again.

There a cluster of twenty-eight craters linked two rivers, formed a string of reservoirs and effectively drained a huge area of marshland. This made him go back for a second look at the others. They were the same. Manifestly, all had been blasted with calculating care designed to effect some big improvement to adjacent terrain.

On a sheltered cliff-face in the south of France he discovered what was left of a once deeply carved message now dissolved to near-invisibility. It could be seen and read only from a very flat angle when the morning sun's rays struck across the surface.

Later, he found it again, in identical lettering, repeated in twelve places far distant from each other. Also more that looked as if they might have read the same had they not eroded beyond decipherability. He made a careful note of the message, warning, slogan or whatever it might be, in-

tuitively feeling that once it had been displayed everywhere, without cease, all over the world.

It read: WAR Q!

Hope cannot live without nourishment. Raking a planet for what it has to offer was nothing new to Arthur Jerrold, but this time he was seeking his own. There were none to find, not one.

He made sure of this. He made doubly sure. He scoured the Earth from pole to pole, gave particular attention to remote hiding-places where possibly any remnants of a great disaster might yet linger, even sought evidence of flight underground. And after all that, he took the ship out to Luna, then to Venus, made another search of Mars and came back. A pathetic desperation had kept him going until in the end the flame of hope flickered and sank low.

Then and only then did he plant his little craft for keeps, and grimly review his own unique position.

The ship lay in a gentle valley where, so far as he could tell, the path had run down to the railroad crossing where he and Rudy and Sue had sat on the fence and waved at friendly engineers. That had been far back in memory's misty dawn. Two thousand years ago!

Now humanity was no more. One could be certain of that. They could not have transferred themselves elsewhere, not three thousand millions of them. Such a mighty exodus would take far longer than he had been away, even if an immense armada could shift them at the rate of a million a year.

He sat on a smooth, tilted rock, his back to the vessel that had served so well, his white hair stirred by a warm breeze. The grey eyes that had kept calm and steady in the face of a thousand dangers were still calm, undefeated, but immeasurably sad.

Something had happened beyond imagining. What, he did not know, could not discover. There weren't any clues, because it had occurred long, long ago; and the hand of time had obliterated causes and effects.

Or there was one possible clue, useless since it was un-

translatable. Taking a slip of paper from his pocket, he pondered over the copy he had made.

WAR Q!

The only plausible guess he could suffer was that some line-up of circumstances had precipitated a series of major conflicts ending with humanity's end. Possibly they had lettered the outbreaks alphabetically, the seventeenth one—Q; being the last. Maybe this was a slogan, part of the accompanying spate of propaganda to maintain the morale of people doomed to extinction.

He could not have been more wrong, but he was never to know it. Semantic modifications and linguistic changes over many centuries had turned him into a comparative illiterate, and he would never know that, either. The now-archaic language which he still used misled him hopelessly so that he could not recognize the clipped form and simplified spelling of the word BEWARE; neither could he identify a long-discarded capital letter as the stylized drawing of a hateful bacillus.

He could never know that humanity had left the stage of life non-explosively, more or less accidentally, and mostly as the unfortunate result of making something not theirs to create. Some experiments are for Man, some for Another.

So he sat on the stone, elbows on knees, chin on hand, lonely, sick at heart, bitter, resentful and yet strangely full of fight. Whatever had occurred, he decided, made no difference in the fact that he was the last man, the very last.

Ultimately there had to be a last man, anyway, but it could have happened more gloriously and at later date. It could have happened to someone changed beyond dreaming by countless millennia, so old that he was tired, content to sleep forever while the rest of humankind roamed among the stars. It need not have happened now, when the last man had come bearing gladsome news to a world that had always yearned for space.

His fists were tight, his knuckles white as he made decisions with grim disregard for the futility of battle.

All have gone but me. There are no others. But while I live, mankind still lives. I will build myself a rock house and give it a chimney. I will warm it with log fires, and the chimney will send smoke towards the skies, and the stars will peer down and know that Man still lives. There will be one home, one window glowing through the night, one garden worshipping the sun by day—because Man still lives.

Then, for the briefest moment, reaction set in, and he covered his eyes and murmured: "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

And when it had passed, he looked slowly along the grass and saw the mighty feet.

He could not gaze upward. If he had summoned every fibre of his being, he could not look up. The feet!

Nothing like these existed within two thousand years of space-travel. He knew that beyond doubt, for it was he of all men who had been to see. And he dared not let his eyes follow the feet upward to some colossal height and unbearable culmination. It would be more than human spirit could stand.

The feet could be sensed rather than seen. They stood before him, shapeless yet shaped, immaterial yet undeniably there, of no estimable size or proportions, compounded of the stuff of thought, and of mists and of far-away star-clouds. Their surfaces embodied multitudinous elusive, eye-twisting planes, almost as if while standing there they were simultaneously standing in a thousand other dimensions.

Jerrold had more than enough experience of lower, or equal or stupendously different life-forms to know when he was in the presence of a higher. The effect was hypnotic. The strength within him was not enough to save him from being paralysed by a mighty awe—though still he had no fear, no fear at all. Man is not afraid, not even the last man.

The little house. A chimney giving forth smoke. I am the last, but I will show them. I will tell the stars.

"Sleep!" came an order into his mind, an irresistible order: "Sleep!"

He slumped on to his back, his lidded eyes staring where they dared not look when open.

The feet moved a fraction, their countless planes shifting and angling into each other. Came a long-drawn sigh susurrating from the very limits of the space-time continuum. It expressed infinite patience.

"Nothing for it but to try again."

He took something from the sleeper's side, extended its cellular structure of blood and flesh and bone, shaped it, and breathed into it the breath of life.

Leaving the woman to await the man's awakening, the Stranger went away.

DEFENCE MECHANISM

by

VINCENT KING

New Writer Vincent King produces so many problems and surprises in this suspenseful story that it seems strange not to have seen his work before. Here, indeed, is a different "sense of wonder" story.

from the sun, but what happened then he couldn't make out. I can see him now, hunkered down staring at the great structures, scratching himself, out there in the too brilliant light. After a bit he said, "Come on, son," and we went back on down. He didn't speak all the way.

So you see how it is. The Camerons are above us and the Aliens are below. As they come up so we will be forced into the Camerons. My grandfather told me that one time, when he was a boy, the Farm Lands were above the living Chambers. That means we've been forced up maybe four Levels in fifty years. If the water or the vent fans fail we'll be in real trouble. That's why I'm trying to make a breech loader. They say the Aliens are active again, pushing over to the east.

That's where I was when it all started; when the shout went up. In the smithy, pressing in the bearings on Peter's gun, thinking about my breech loader.

"ALIEN! ALIEN! Alien on the Level!" Peter's daughter came scampering in and hid behind the water trough. All you could see were her big dark eyes and the muzzle of her gun.

I said: "You stay there. Shoot if it shows here. But make sure of it. I'll tell your dad if I see him." She was a pretty little girl, was young Pete. I hoped the Alien wouldn't find her.

I grabbed my over and under, the shot pouch and the food pack I had ready. I went out to the Assembly Chamber. I was on the Duty that week.

Occasionally, once in a while, an Alien gets up into our Levels. They come up to steal food, or just to raid; you can't fathom their minds, they aren't like us. Somehow they get past the Patrols, then get spotted in the Farm Lands; you can't shoot among the algae tanks so they make it up to the next Levels. The Patrols are below them so all they can do is go on up and try to get through the women and children before we can get organized. They're pretty savage when you corner them. Tough and fast too. We get as many as we can; that's the idea of the Duty men,

always ready to drop everything and go after any that get through.

As I went into the Assembly Chamber there was a hoarse scream and a crashing of shots out to the west. I ignored the messenger waiting for me and ran in the direction of the shots.

When I smelled the powder smoke I unslung my gun and set the firing wheels. I was running in an easy controlled lope, I had to save myself, I might have miles to go. These Hunts could go on for days.

When I got to where the firing had been I could smell the Alien's sweet reek over the acrid powder smoke. It was a shambles.

Old Henry had got his. His head was practically off his shoulders. There was blood everywhere. One of his sons was lying in the blood waiting for someone to straighten his broken leg. His gun was over against the Corridor wall The Alien had taken time to break the stock against the wall before it went on. Down at the end of the Corridor I could see shot marks on the wall. There was a pool of something and the light down there was broken. I thought they might have hit the Alien when I saw the pool but it turned out to be water from a holed pipe.

I looked to Henry's son.

"Jumped us," he said. "We were a bit ahead of the rest. Got the old man before I knew it."

"Did you get a shot in?"

"Naw. It had me and threw me against the wall before . . . It scrammed before it could finish me . . . heard the rest coming."

"How far ahead?"

"Ten minutes."

"Did you see it properly?"

"Yeah. It's a big one, good condition too. Plenty fast."

"The others after it?"

"Yeah. Five minutes ago. . . . They got a shot in."

"You hang on," I told him. "They'll pick you up on the way back." I gave him old Henry's unfired gun and ran on.

I didn't think the Alien would be back that way, but you never really knew anything about what they might do—except you had to stop them before they did.

As I padded on down the Corridors I tried to work out the best thing to do. As Senior Duty man I had to give the orders and organize the Hunt. You might think we would be certain of getting the Alien only by taking as many men as possible on the Hunt. That's as may be, but you can't spare as many as all that from the Levels, from the Perimeter. Say we went out with nine or a dozen men and boys. It wouldn't be long before the Camerons found out all that, and it wouldn't be much longer before they mounted an attack. It isn't that twelve or so men is such a big number, we've got maybe ninety men on the Perimeter at any time, it's that they would leave gaps. Each Perimeter man has to keep the next in sight the whole time. Or else someone filters in and gets at our food or women. You got to guard every vent, every stair and every shaft. It could be terrible, the Aliens might get through in strength; and you know what they are like.

I think three are plenty on a Hunt anyway, if they are good men. My idea is that if one man goes a bit ahead then the other two can get a shot if the Alien jumps him—more often than not before he gets it. It's better than huddling about in a great crowd. You don't have room to move then, you drown any noise the Alien might make and with more than a few men you can't smell them. Anyway you're just as likely to shoot each other as the Alien.

I got a special team. Me, Sim and the Boy Peter, that's old Peter's youngest son. We work together well. The Boy goes in front, then me about fifteen feet back with Sim a few paces behind, guarding the rear. We've been on about eight Hunts like that. The Alien only got the Boy once and then it was dead before it could do him much harm. Sim got that one, I had a miss-fire. Mostly it's us that jump the Aliens though. They've got a tendency to go west, into the Dark Areas, hide up there for a few days, then try to find a way down through the Levels to their own regions. If the Hunt

gets more than about three Levels below ours it's very dangerous, you can't go too low.

I caught up with the rest in the Big Chamber to the west of our Levels. The Lights begin to get a bit sparse out that way. The Chamber is big. Thousands of yards long and wide, the lit places edging off into the long distances.

The men were standing in a loose group under one of the lights. They weren't talking, just peering into the half light around them, their guns in their hands. You didn't want to look too ready, someone might think you were scared. You tried to hold your gun as if you didn't know it was there, but so that it was ready just the same. Now the first anger of the chase was over they were beginning to feel a bit uneasy. They would be glad to get back to the Levels now, back to the Perimeter; and leave the Hunt to us.

As I came into the Chamber the white faces and dark gun barrels swung towards me. Sim and the Boy stepped forward.

"All right men." Sim raised his gun in salute. "It's him. Senior Duty Man." The men relaxed.

"Which way and how long?" I was in a hurry. An Alien could make maybe ten miles in an hour and their endurance and strength were legendary.

The Boy gave me the facts. He thought that there were two Aliens. He hadn't told the men, they were jumpy enough as it was. So was the Boy, two to three is long odds. The Aliens were about fifteen minutes ahead and still going west. The men had glimpsed an Alien in a far light, well out of range, as they entered the Chamber. So they had waited for me, rather than plunge into the uncertainty of the near dark.

Sim had dismissed the men by now. I could hear their low talk as they hurried home. I released the wheel springs on my gun. The Alien, or Aliens, were far on now, there was no immediate hurry; it would be a long Hunt.

Sim wanted to catch my eye. Good old Sim. He was unusually tall, nearly six feet, cool calm face, leaning his bulk on his gun. He whispered to me:

"There are two of 'em. Don't speak loud, the Boy doesn't know yet."

"It's O.K., Sim. He knows very well.... He's getting good."

The Boy had a look of suppressed triumph on his face. Sim grinned at him and turned to scan the darkness. You don't turn your back for too long on a Hunt.

I gave them their Hunt Badges. White disks they are, you can turn them round to show the dark face when you didn't want to reveal yourself. The other Clans recognized them, if you showed the Badge they wouldn't shoot so quick; they might even help you. They would give you an escort through their Levels anyway, partly to help and partly to watch you. On the Hunt the Old Hospitality still applied, they would most likely feed you too.

We checked our food and shot pouches. We went on then, in our Hunt formation; the Boy ahead, Sim and I behind—keeping in the shadows while the Boy crossed the broad islands of light. The Hall was the best part of three miles long and almost as wide. It was tall too. Far up on the walls we could see tiered balconies, picked out by the occasional pattern of still functioning lights. Every so often we came to the Great Columns set solid on the floor. Occasionally there was a stream coming from some shattered, forgotten pipe, running in shallow beds cut through the dust into the plastic. We saw the muddy marks where the Aliens stopped to drink—they foul everything they touch—and drank upstream of that place. Sim gathered some of the yellow-white stringy plants for use later. They make a good soup if you add some algae block.

We followed the soft pad marks in the dust out of the Great Chamber and into the Corridors. We camped that night ten miles on from there in a small room we picked because it had only one door and vent. We blocked them with the old furniture we found in the room. The Boy broke some shards of plastic from the walls and lit a small fire. We boiled our water and made the soup. Sim had a flask of the wood spirit from Food Plant. We sat and drank.

I took the first watch. I sat in a dark corner near the door. The lights dimmed for the Night hours. Our fire cast a flickering glow on the wall opposite me. I didn't have a lot of trouble keeping awake. The Aliens were too close ahead for easy sleep. Of course it took us longer to trail them than for them to go on. If they had been going at fullstretch they would be half a day ahead already. They were still going west. All day we had been seeing the marks of their passage. The disturbed dust where they rested, their excrement and sometimes, in the damp areas, the fresh cut white fungi where they had stopped to eat.

We would come up on them slowly, by taking less and less rest. We would aim to catch them in about three days. We wouldn't talk now, and in future would light no fires. With any luck they would think we had abandoned the Hunt. We would get them by surprise.

Two hours later I woke Sim and he took over the watch. I took my two hours' sleep and we moved on again. The Boy was lucky that night, he got four hours.

A few hours later and we were in the Dark Areas. It took us three days to get through there. We had to be sure the Aliens weren't lying up somewhere in the Darks, like they usually do. But they weren't, not this time. The trail ran straight on, still going west. It was more dangerous in the Dark. The Boy went ahead with an asphalt torch. Sim and I followed in the shadows watching and waiting. We came to the end, out into the lights again much quicker than I expected, I know we weren't the first to penetrate the Darks but we were the first since my father's time.

It was wonderful. The other side was just like our own. The walls were the same colour, the dimensions and lay-out identical. The stairs had the same number of steps. It was wonderful how the Order, the Logic goes on through the City. The City is eternal Logic, home, Uniformity; a safe place for man in the Chaos outside. . . .

Soon after we got into the Light the trail went up a Level. We went on to the next stairs and went up there instead. The Aliens had probably waited back along the track ready

to take us as we laboured up the first stairs. Sure enough, when we backtracked, we found a disturbed area in the dust, scattered with fungus rinds, and reeking of Alien. They had been there quite a while waiting for us. We figured they were no more than an hour ahead of us now. After we had rested we went after them, very cautiously and in total silence.

We had a hold-up then. Suddenly, out of the walls it seemed, a party of armed men materialized. They were very small, on average smaller than the Boy. Very hairy too. They had guns, but they held them one-handed and fingered in their other hands wicked looking hatchets. Sim dropped on his belly and swung up his gun. The Boy was down there too. Mostly because I was still standing, the thought came that I was getting slow. I spread my legs, held up the Hunt Badge and shouted the formal Hunt Greeting.

"Peace. All Men are Brothers. We hunt the Foul Alien!"

The Dwarfs, I'm sure that's what they were, but they called themselves men, were spreadeagled about the Corridor, their guns centred in on our little group. You couldn't have got more than one with a shot. We faced each other, frozen. I repeated the Greeting. Sim saw how hopeless it was to fight and slowly stood up, leaving his gun on the floor. I carefully leaned mine against the wall.

One of the men stepped forward. He lowered his gun and spoke. He had a soft deep voice.

"All men are Brothers. We acknowledge the Hunt. Come and be welcome to us." This was the formal reply to my Greeting. It could mean anything, almost. It might mean a fine feast or an armed escort to the other side of their Levels. All we could be certain of was that they would not kill us—yet, and that we must not refuse what they offered.

"Pick up your weapons, Hunt Men." The first one spoke again. "Come to our Levels and we will rest and feed you."

"We Hunt Aliens. We are close behind them." I picked up my gun. There was an involuntary rustle of movement among our new friends. I ostentatiously unset the firing

wheels and blew out the primer charges. Sim and the Boy did the same. Our captors relaxed. They made show of slinging their guns but they still kept their hatchets ready in their right hands.

"Your Aliens are gone on. Three hours." He held up three fingers to make sure I got the point. "We have watched them from our Levels. A Hunt party pursues them."

I could figure that. Who wanted a bloody fight, with stranger's slugs breaking your Algae tanks, killing your people, when you could settle it quietly outside your own Levels, with your own men? Much better keep the strangers in your own Chambers, feed and guard them while your own Hunters finished the Aliens.

We got to know the Dwarf Men pretty well in the next few days. The first day was spent in one long feast. We had real meat. Dog it was. You don't see much of that in our Area. Some of the food was green leaves. I wondered about that. It tasted very strong.

The women came to us in the firelight. They had good willing women. Sim did really well. He had three that first night and two in the morning. The Boy was doing all right too. I made do with one at first. I had another later on. It wasn't just that I was feeling tired, old, after the long Hunt. I wasn't too sure of the way some of the young men were looking at us. No one likes to see strangers using their women. I edged over to the Elder, the one who had spoken to us first.

"A good night, Elder." I tried to keep my eyes off the young men over there, across the fire, the light glinting on the hatchets.

"Warm." The Elder grinned at me. "What's wrong with the woman?" I'd left her lying there, her thighs spread white in the fire light. She looked a bit disgruntled. When I looked back to the Elder he was watching me out of the corners of his eyes. I saw the fire glint in them, under his bushy brows.

"You going to refuse our Hospitality?" He nodded his

head sideways at the girl. I couldn't see if he was grinning or not. I wished I could.

"I was wondering if it might not be healthier not to." I indicated the young men over the fire.

"No disease here." He knew what I meant though. I caught Sim's eye, he released his girl and felt about for his gun. The girl put her arms back round his neck and hung there, her face buried in his chest. He waited, watching over her shoulder, the long pale hair was plastered down her glistening back. The Boy was out, dead drunk across a couple of girls. I turned back to the Elder. He took a swig from his jug.

"It's not that," I said, watching him closely.

"I know. Don't worry about them. I'm the Elder . . . and they know it." He grinned goatishly. "Go on man . . . there's no risk."

"You sure?"

"I can handle it. They know it's necessary. And the women are enjoying themselves . . . not complaining . . . are they?"

"Necessary? What does 'necessary' mean Elder?"

"O.K., Hunt man. You win." He paused, took a pull from his jug and went on. "Have you noticed the children here?" I shook my head and waited. "We're degenerating. We had six albinos born this year so far. You know, the ones with pink eyes. There are more idiots now, every year. There's some who if they cut themselves take a week to stop bleeding. We've bred too close. My father had two children by his own sister. There wasn't anyone else. That's why we give you our women. We want your blood."

I believed him at once. Thinking back I could see the same trouble coming in our Clan. We needed fresh blood too. Perhaps we could get some women from the Camerons. I realized with a sudden shock that young Pete, the Boy's sister, was my cousin.

"We don't like it, especially the young men." The Elder was quite sober now. "But we understand we must."

I nodded to Sim and we got back to our women.

Later we all went to sleep on the spread rugs. I watched the fire die down. Except for the odd sigh, a stirring in the darkness, there was silence.

Much later we woke. The fire was a pile of black curled plastic. I had a bad head from the wood alcohol. No one moved for a bit. The women stretched their naked limbs, they pulled their rags to themselves. Now the lights were on you could see their pure white skins. The young men, silent at first, stirred themselves and re-kindled the fire. They brought food and more of the drink. Fresh women came in. The Boy hadn't moved yet. Pretty soon we were off again. Drinking, eating and making love. The lights dimmed again soon after that.

The second night was even better than the first, if a little slower. When the sleep came again I kept awake. I lay still until there was silence, except for the breathing. I moved gently over to the Elder. I woke him and whispered close in his ear.

"Time to go. We'll be off now . . . we'll go quietly while your men are asleep." The young men were getting restless. The hangover was not improving their tempers. The Elder was a bit unwilling at first, but he saw what I meant in the end. He said he would guide us out.

I woke Sim and the Boy. It took a bit of time to find the Boy's gun. I had mine tied to my waist, the Boy would know better next time. We crept out over the tumbled bodies. I hoped we were not too far from the Aliens.

The Elder guided us out past the Perimeter guards. We went on to the west. When we were a few yards clear of the last guard the Elder whispered a few words to me in the darkness.

"The Aliens camped a few hours on from here. We watched them. All the time you were on our Levels. They moved on an hour or two ago."

"You watched them?" I was horrified. Watching Aliens! I didn't see how you could do a thing like that. I mean . . . *watching Aliens.*

"Don't think we enjoyed it. We don't have the men to fight Aliens . . . not now."

I grunted, I suddenly didn't like these people any more. Sure they would miss even one man bad. But just sitting there, *watching Aliens*!

"Sure . . . sure, Hunt Man . . . I know how you feel . . . I feel it too. Anyway . . . you'll get them, Hunter man, you'll get them. . . ."

I said: "Come on, Sim." We moved off down the Corridor. We didn't look back.

We went on in silence. We soon picked up the Aliens' trail. Sim reckoned they were about four hours on. From the careless trail we knew they were confident that we had abandoned the Hunt. They were still going west. We would move with care and silence to take them in about three days. We were far out now, no one had been this far west.

About the end of the second day after leaving the Dwarfs I began to feel a bit ill at ease. Something was not quite right. It was a bit like being in the Big Chamber where you can't see the ceiling. There was something wrong. I tried to figure out what it was. After a bit I paused for Sim to catch up and signalled the Boy to stop. When Sim was close he slowly shook his head, he watched me from under his brows. After a bit he spoke, very softly, the way you do in the Corridors.

"There's something," he said. "Something's wrong, Leader man. . . ."

We hunkered down in the dust and sat silent, trying to figure out what it was that was out. In the end it was Sim that spotted it. He jerked his thumb up the Corridor.

"Look at the floor edges."

I looked and after a while I saw what it was. The edges should run in perfect perspective to the Corridor end. These didn't. Very slightly they moved to the south and up. One side ended slightly higher. The Corridor was warped, twisted. I looked back the way we had come; the Corridor ran as straight as an arrow, the way it should.

After a while it seemed safe enough. So we moved on.

When we got to the Corridor end, to the corner, we stopped again. The next Corridor was even more bent and twisted. As we moved up it I actually had the sensation of walking up hill. Sim didn't like it too much. I'd never seen him so worried. I don't blame him . . . I was pretty worried myself. The Place wasn't natural . . . you've no idea. At the end of the Corridor the cracks began.

The next Corridor was actually broken. It went down at first, quite steeply. About half a mile down there was a crumpled sort of gap and then the rest of the Corridor went up. It was twisted more, too, we were soon leaning on the wall as we pushed on. I wondered how soon we'd be walking on it.

When we got to the break Sim grounded his gun and halted. He was silent for a while, then he looked away.

"It's far enough. I don't like this Place. I think we should go back." He spoke very softly, I could hardly believe my ears.

"What about the Aliens, Sim? Remember who's in charge here. . . . We should go on. We must get them." Whatever the risk and cost we had to get those Aliens. We must never let them get away with coming up to our Levels; if they ever thought they could do that, then it was all over, we were as good as lost.

"Damn this place . . ." Sim, old brave Sim, was in a bad way. I realized suddenly that he was fighting to control himself; he was on the verge of breaking down. As he spoke his voice trembled. "This Place . . . it's not right. . . . It's Alien. All the Order—the Structure's gone. It's Limbo . . . Chaos. Let's get out . . . please let's get out! It's *dirty*."

"But, Sim, we *must* get them—we have to go on and get them." I was pretty shaken myself by now, what with this twisted, perverted Place and old Sim's breakdown. But we had to go on. Sim didn't say a thing. He turned his head away, I thought I heard him sob. I turned to the Boy. He was watching us wide-eyed. I could see his knuckles white round the stock of his gun. He was as far gone as Sim.

"Boy," I said, "you go back with Mr. Sim. Wait for me a

day or so back, this side of the Dwarf Men. If I'm not back in a week go on home if you like ... you can tell them what happened—if you want to." By rights I should have killed them both. But I couldn't do that, not to old Sim. He was crying. I could see the wet on his cheeks. They turned and went back down the Corridor.

I went on. I was the Leader. I couldn't go back, not yet. Someone had to get those filthy Aliens.

Large sections of ceiling were down. The floor was splintered too. Later the walls were blackened, like with a fire, but all over; the plastic was bubbled and cracked.

The Place got worse and worse. A few hours later I came to a point where the roof came down until it nearly reached the floor. I struggled through the gap and found myself sitting in a few inches of very cold water. I was in a very big Great Chamber indeed. There were no lights to speak of. Far over across the water I could see a few glinting over the oily surface. I started to splash towards them. After about ten paces the water was up to my waist. I'd never met water more than ankle deep before, except in my trough at the forge, so I turned back and set out round the edge of the lake. If it hadn't been for the lights over there—and if I could have found where I came in, I think I would have gone home then.

As I went on round the shore my eyes got a bit better in the dark. I began to see the sort of place I was in. The Roof was far off, very high. There were only one or two lights in it and they were dimming as the night came on. The lake itself must have been a couple of miles across. The roof got lower farther on, all the way it sloped down in a great sagging arc. About a mile ahead I came to a point where it was within a few feet of the water. I crouched and stepped in and on. I got ten paces before I looked up and saw the Stars.

The roof ended suddenly, jagged. The water went on. Far away I could hear a whisper of falling water. Above were the Stars. I hadn't seen them for twenty years, then only

once. I'd remembered them as beautiful, but they weren't, they were *terrible*. Awful—millions of them—and so far ... all that volume. Empty ... the absence of a ceiling. Infinity above you is a terrible thing. You feel so naked ... unprotected ... *small*. Over across the calm dark water I could see the black mass of the City reaching on and up, looming up into the sky. The lights ran in stratified layers into the distance on the left. Opposite me the Order broke down. The Levels were twisted and scattered. There were many fewer lights in that part. To the right the Chaos continued. It didn't go as far, the broken Order ended and the Stars began again.

I was afraid to go out in the Open just then. I searched about and found a broken Corridor. I found a well enclosed room with the dimmed light still working and settled down to wait for day to come. I didn't light a fire. I ate the last of the scorched rat meat the Dwarf Elder had given us. I still had some of the algae block, but not much now.

I woke with a jerk in the blinding Sun Light. There was a crack about two inches wide in the roof. The Sun was getting in through there. It was hell for a few minutes. Then I found I was getting used to it. I had a headache all the time I was out of the City though, even though I kept in the shadows all I could. Even now the City lights look dim to me, I'm sure that Sun outside spoiled my sight. I fixed up a sort of shade for my eyes and moved outside. I found a place out of the Sun and looked the Place over.

The lake was even wider than I thought. It was brilliantly light now and blue. In the shallow parts I could make out the dim shapes of the flooded Corridors. A few yards out I could see the edge of what I took to be a flooded Great Chamber. It was the biggest I'd ever seen. The water was very deep and dark there. Dotted about it ragged masonry or plastic broke the surface. On the far shore the wall of the Great Chamber formed the edge of the lake. Farther to the right it dipped and the water overflowed it. That was where the noise of the falling water came from. Behind the fall a plume of white vapour pushed up into the

Sky. Far beyond that again was the Green. I could see the misty luxuriance of the Forest stretching away for ever and ever, on and on until it met the Sky. To the west and behind me lay the bulk of the City. Broken here, it was a vast layered honeycomb of Corridor ends, more and more broken as they neared the Lake Place.

As I looked back towards the waterfall a movement caught my eye.

It was the Aliens. As I watched they moved to the right and dropped out of sight. At last they were going down, following the water to their own Levels. I grabbed my pack, checked the loads in my gun and set off into the Sun.

It took me the rest of the day to reach the far side of the water. It was rough going. There was a sort of path some of the way, but there were long stretches over great tumbled slabs of floor and roof. There were plants too, growing wild, with thorns. There was water everywhere. I fell in twice and had to stop to reload my gun. The Sun was very hot. While it was high I stopped and tried to sleep in a fairly good fragment of Corridor I found. My legs were scratched and my feet bleeding, there was no soft dust here.

When the Night came I was on the very edge of the path down. Mostly it was a chain of steep mossy slopes, but there were some stretches of stair. It plunged down and down, a great vee cut in the side of the City, right to the Forest of the floor below. The thunder of the falling water was terrible.

A mile or so down I could see the red glow of the Aliens' fire. A day's march and they would reach the floor. I decided to catch a few hours' sleep and get on down after them. The Moon had just come up and I could see there would be plenty of light.

I woke an hour later in agony. My whole skin was on fire. It was so stiff I could hardly move. It felt swollen—it was as if it was going to lift off. Later when the light came I found that instead of the natural white I was bright red. The straps over my shoulders had left white painless paths

on my skin. I had the Sun Burn. My father had warned me about that, but I hadn't thought it could be as bad. Later blisters came up. I rubbed in all I had left of the rat fat and that seemed to ease it a bit. My skin never got to be its right colour again—it's still a bit off-white. I started off at once, to take my mind off the pain. In a way I was glad the Burn had woken me—I would get to the Aliens all the quicker.

As I went down it got wetter and wetter. The roar of the waterfall filled my head now, everything was soaked from the drifting spray. There were many more plants now, the whole ground surface was covered with the moss.

My ankle turned, I fell. A stone lifted out of the moss bed and rolled, bounding down the steep slope. I watched it with horror. That was all I needed. A warning to tell the Aliens I was coming. The stone gave a final leap in the air and disappeared over the lip into the depths. I crawled down to the edge and peered over.

It was terrible. Straight down for thousands of feet to the Green top below. Clouds of vapour from the fall, layer upon layer, moved slowly across the space below. My mind reeled. All that infinity of space above was nothing to the drop in front of me. I rolled back from the edge. I lay on my back and watched the Sky. I tried to shut my eyes but couldn't. I didn't dare move for an hour after that.

In the end I pulled myself together and went on down. I wondered if the Aliens could have noticed the falling rock, I didn't think they would have heard it in the water noise, but you never know with an Alien.

When the Sun came up I was quite well on. The Sun didn't seem so strong down here. Perhaps because it had to come through the banks of spray. The dark mass of the Green gained texture and colour. The mist down there cleared, the air warmed.

About half way through the afternoon I came to a flatter area—mossy and almost level. As I stepped out on to the springy surface a movement behind and to my right caught the tail of my eye.

It was one of the Aliens. I tore the wrapping from the breech of my gun, set the wheels and swung the weapon to my shoulder. There was another entrance to the glade and that was where the Alien was waiting. It had guessed wrong. As I completed my aim it charged.

The wheel spun, rasping on the flint. The primer charge took in a splash of sparks and smoke. The Alien was flying at me. It seemed to run a few inches off the ground.

At last the gun fired. The thud of the recoil was a message from Heaven.

The slug tore into the Alien. Its run broke. It all seemed to happen very slowly. The Alien swung to the side. It tottered on the edge of the water chasm. A stone shifted and it disappeared over the lip.

I dropped on one knee and reloaded the fired barrel. That other Alien was about somewhere. When I had the gun ready I moved across the glade and made sure the first Alien was gone.

It was.

As I turned from the fall I saw the second Alien standing in the bushes down the slope. The range was long but I fired anyway.

I hit it—I saw a spurt of flesh. The brute went down, but it didn't do a lot of damage. It was one of the times I wished I still had a long barrel on my gun.

I ran down to the edge of the bushes. The plants were thrashing about down there. I waited, when I caught a glimpse of the Alien I fired again. The thrashing stopped.

I carefully reloaded my gun. It took a bit of time. My fingers were nervous and I dropped one of the flints. It took me a time to find it again and then I had to fit it. Altogether it was about ten minutes before I was ready.

I went down very cautiously but I might as well have saved my time. The Alien was gone. Later I caught a glimpse of it far ahead going swiftly down to the Green. I knew I had hit it once. I thought I had hit it twice, but it didn't seem to have slowed up at all. They just don't feel pain . . . they're different.

And that's how it went. I followed the thing down in the thunder of the falling water, through the drifting spray. At length I was on the last approach to the Green.

The last three hundred feet of the path was a great channelled path of rubble jutting out of the City into the Green. To the right was the huge round pool of the waterfall.

The water came cascading down in steps from the Lake on top. The last bit fell a straight thousand feet, touching nothing. The water fell down into this great pool, it was very deep. A stream ran away to the east, along the City wall.

From the top of the rubble I could see the fins of the Aliens' Ships sticking up out of the Green. The plants in the Green were much bigger than they looked from the Top, two or three hundred feet high, some of them. I looked back up at the great safe bulk of the City. The great vee gouge ran back into it. The Top was lost in clouds.

The Alien's trail was easy to follow now. It ran east along the sandy shore of the waterfall Lake and then north, towards the first of the wrecked Ships. I cut straight through the Green, direct to the Ship.

That Green is a funny place. The plants, "Trees", I suppose they are, come straight up out of the ground, like the columns in one of the Great Chambers. Round the bottoms the ground is broken up in great slabs, like it was floor once. The slabs have a sort of thick, moist brown dust over them, made up of the rotten leaves off the tree things. In this there are smaller plants, they aren't white like the City ones either, none of them are Outside, it's very strange till you get used to it. There's no Order either, the trees are sort of random, not like the City at all. There are animals too. A bit like the dogs, except they're bigger and some have horns. They're not mangy either. They run in packs though, like the dogs.

When I started to get near the Ship the Place seemed to change. The Ship lay on its side in the centre of a rough circle. The floor was better here. There weren't so many of

the trees and where it was broken the floor was much thicker. It was all covered with grass. The Ship lay on its side about a mile from me, it was a very big Place.

The Ship was big too. I doubt it would have fitted into one of the small Great Chambers. In the Green around the circle were one or two Machines. I couldn't see what they were for, they were very old and falling to bits with rust. The plants were growing right through them. In one of them were some man-bones. Rotten they were, the plants were growing right through them too.

I started out towards the Ship. It was shining silver in the Sun Light. From the City it looked pretty perfect, new, but as I got near I could see the metal was buckled and torn. In places whole plates were torn off. Towards the far end was a particularly big hole, the Ship was especially buckled there. The edges were soft and gobbed, like they had been melted. Bits of bright metal were scattered all about the Ship. It wasn't quite straight either, its back was broken. I kept low, below the level of the plants as far as I could. They got fewer and fewer as I moved towards the centre.

I was right about the Alien going for the Ship. When I was about a hundred yards off the centre the Alien broke cover on my right. As it saw me it began to move real fast. I broke into a run and we raced for the blasted port.

The Alien was going to get there first. I was about thirty yards away, well within range. I fired both barrels from the hip, one after the other. The Alien went over like a nine pin. It flung against the side of the Ship and rolled, falling into the Ship. It ended half in and half out of the entrance. You don't go far with two ·75 slugs in you.

I stepped in through the coils of powder smoke and looked down at the Alien. It wasn't quite dead.

It's funny how they bleed red like us. It spoke to me. Very calm it was, but very weak too. It had a soft, gentle sort of voice. It's funny how like us they are. Apart from being black that is.

"Wait! You don't have to kill me . . . I'll soon be dead. This is the truth. I've no reason to lie."

The Alien lay sprawled. The first shot had broken one arm, the second had gone in just below the breasts, it was a young female. I didn't have a load left in my gun so I let it talk. You don't touch Aliens or I would have finished it with my knife. It would soon be dead. Meantime it went on talking.

"Look in the Ship . . . On the second bulkhead . . . look . . . and tell me what you find."

I went into the Ship, I didn't turn my back on the Alien, you don't do that, ever.

The floor of the Ship was gently curved and deeply ribbed. There was some sort of second skin but most of that was gone. The deep spaces between the floor ribs were filled with fine sand. There were hardly any plants here. I stubbed my foot on something in the sand. I dug it out, it was a half skull. There were other bones too, most of them were broken or charred. The part of the Ship I was in was open to the weather. The distorted metal was washed clean, eroded. I searched and found the bulkhead the Alien had told me about.

It was sheltered so there was still some paint on it. After a bit I made out some letters on it. My father had taught me how to cypher, it's handy if you're going to be a smith. I traced it out. It said "EXPLORATION CORPS" then underneath and bigger "MAIN LOCK". Farther down a rusty lever was labelled "EXHAUST".

I turned away and began reloading my gun. I was just spitting in the last slug when it dawned on me. If I could read a cypher on the Ship, there as it was when the Ship came, then it couldn't be Alien. The Ship was ours . . . of the City . . . Human.

If the Ship wasn't Alien then who had I just shot? If there were no Alien Ships then there were no Aliens. And the bones too—they were Human enough.

My mind was in an uproar. I thought and thought. The cabin swam. In the end I thought of the Alien. She would know something.

She was still lying where I'd left her. She had a sort of

white cloth thing and was holding it against her body wound. There was a piece of dark blue paper with a white and red cross on it near by on the ground. She didn't seem a lot weaker, but she was pretty badly hit.

"Pull my boots off," she said. After a bit I found out how they worked. I undid the lace things and pulled them off. She had me tie the white cloth thing behind her back. It took me a while to understand her clothes but I managed it in the end. Then she made me get a tube thing from her haversack and press the contents into her arm. She seemed a lot easier after that. I moistened her lips from my water bottle and she started to talk.

"You've worked out there are no Aliens?" I nodded. After a bit she gathered her strength and went on. "The Ships are Human—yours and mine. They are the Star Ships ... Exploration Corps.... Do you know how far the Stars are? ... Millions upon millions of miles. The Sun is a Star ... ninety-four million away ... near. The others are much, much farther. It took the Ships a hundred years to get to the nearest—and another hundred to get back ... When they did, conditions had changed. The City cultures began centuries ago ... by the time the Ships got back they had reached their full development and begun to decline—break down. Did you know a billion people lived in that one—in yours? They never went out, no one ever left the City. Self contained. The machines and power lasted quite well for a century or two ... some still work. Then the breakdown started ... the disease ... the riots ... the end of order. There aren't more than ten thousand people in the whole City now and less and less every year ... a lot you'd hardly call human. It hadn't gone as far when the Ships came back, but Exploration Corps was long forgotten ... your ancesters blasted them when they came to land ... they thought it was an invasion ... or missiles from another City. They didn't bother to find out—and they didn't care. The Mayorality may have known ... or guessed ... but they were only politicians. One of the Ships crashed into the City ... the power unit exploded ... it did that...." She

meant the great rift in the blank side of the City, the way we had come down.

There was a long pause then. She was a lot weaker—I think she slept for a bit. When she woke I said: "Why are your people different?"

"Segregation. We always had the worst of it. The machines and power went first where we were. We were on the lowest Levels . . . we went outside when the power went. We have a good community now."

"Why do you bother? Why invade us?"

"To look for the machines . . . we want to study them . . . and to find books. We try to contact your people . . . we would treat you with our medicines . . . educate . . . we are missionaries. We want you to come outside . . . it's better out here . . . if you will let us bring you out."

"Where's this community?"

"North of here. By the river. We have a university there . . . it's not like the old ones . . . not yet . . . but we work."

I checked up as well as I could, of course. You don't believe an Alien, not as easy as all that. I wondered how many I could get if I went to the Community. But even then I more than half believed her.

She died a little after that. I was away at the time, poking about in the other Ships. They were all the same. In them all I found the forms and order of the City. I had seen it all before, it was familiar, the proportions of the stairs, the writing on the walls, the rooms were all of the City. I found one door that was unbroken, the cabin behind hadn't been opened since the Ships came. I blew it open with the spare gun-powder from my pack. The corroded metal gave a lot easier than I thought it would. I had to wait for the smoke to clear. It was a small room, more of a cupboard really. There were a lot of papers there. Among them I found a diary and some old pictures. I could read and understand most of what was written in the little book. It was full of references to "the City", "Earth" and "Home". It had belonged to a man called James Cameron, I wondered if it was the same Cameron. I knew then that all the Alien had

told me was true for sure. One of the pictures was of a woman in clothes like the Alien's, nearly. She was white, but not as white as we are. I wonder if we can ever be like the Aliens.

I went back and stood near her corpse. The tall grass moved gently in a warm breeze; the air was dusty with pollen in the Sun Light; the trees were green-blue over on the edge of the forest, butterflies made staggering patterns of brilliant colour against them. I could hear the bees humming and some birds were singing. My feet were crushing small bright flowers in the short mossy grass. I brushed the insects from the cuts on her legs and from her eyes.

It was then I found out why the Aliens smell so. In her pack was a packet of something labelled "Lilac Soap". It smelled like her. They wash in it. She didn't have any of the ring-worm and I never saw an Alien with the itch. I think the soap did that.

I buried the body in one of the gaps between the cracked floor slabs. I raised a pile of stones and yellow sand to mark the place. I turned my back on the City and headed north into the Green.

On the edge of the Green I turned and looked back. Dust and floating seeds followed my path, where it was flattened the grass shone back at me. Some were slowly springing back into place. The City Top was mostly hidden in clouds. Through a gap I could see the water catchments my father had shown me. Then they had been to the west, now they were far to the east. I had come a long way.

One of the deer creatures came out of the Green and began nosing about a few yards away. My gun came up. But I didn't kill her.

I left my gun against the first tree and went to the north.

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