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# SCIENCE FANTASY

BULMER, RACKHAM,  
BEECH, RATHBONE

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K. Hains

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# SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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# Editorial . . . . by Kyril Bonfiglioli

My first editorial struck a base and mercenary note: I said that what sf needed most was half-crowns, in the form of circulation. I also said that if more copies were sold we could boost the rate paid for stories and perhaps, in the end, check the drain to America of riper writers.

Well, thanks to a handier format, a new distribution network, and Roger Harris' bold cover-design, we have broken a little ice. Latest indications suggest that around 15% more copies of the issue found good homes. NEW WORLDS, too, shows a similar healthy jump. Hoping that this is only the beginning of a sharp upward trend, I am sticking my neck out and raising the basic rate for this magazine by—to be exact—19.047%. A start, anyway.

\* \* \*

My attack on “fantasy” of the “sword and sorcery” vintage in last issue produced a startlingly small crop of abusive letters and parcels full of Martian Plague culture. Not a single sinister hunchback was detected, cloak-enfurled, lurking in my shrubbery. Indeed, rather a lot of readers wrote in saying “good-oh” or words to that effect. Emboldened by this I shall make another pompous Editorial Pronouncement.

If sf has a future—and I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't believe that it has—it is not a future exhibiting all the signs of a decaying religion, with innumerable sects endlessly sub-splitting and high priests howling “heretic” at each other.

Science-fiction's task is to abolish itself. At present it inhabits a sort of quarantine ward where it leads a sheltered but unwholesome existence. We tend to think that much sf fails to be printed *because* it is sf. Mr. Southworth, of Queen's College, Cambridge, in a letter to me recently, posed the worrying question: ‘how much would get printed, purely on its literary merits, if it were *not* science-fiction?’ There's a dusty answer to that one.

In ten years time, I venture to predict, sf will either have successfully abolished itself as a separate disease and will be in the main ward along with the other cases

of *cacoethes scribendi* or it will be as extinct as the old-style whodunit with the whimsical pipe-sucking 'tec and the corpse with the oriental dagger under the fourth rib. I believe that the first will happen and that our sort of topic will be a normal familiar tool in the rack of every writer. Moreover, I believe that such a freeing of the novel from the bonds of plausibility might well be the saving, not of sf, but of the novel, which is running down as the dominant literary form: people are beginning to tire of the endless intricacies of other people's adultery. I look forward confidently to the day when a 'main-stream' novelist will not think twice about exposing his characters, like Spartan babes, on the rocks of Alpha Centauri and when his publishers will print the result without the apologetic warning "Science Fiction" on the dust-jacket.

\* \* \*

A word about the preparation of manuscripts. Editors, being more or less humanoid, are inclined to look with a kindlier eye on MSS which are presented with a fair degree of professional turn-out. So may I describe what a MS from a good professional story-writer looks like?

First, it has a covering letter, listing what is enclosed. The MS itself has a preliminary sheet bearing the author's real name and address, the title of the story, the pen-name (where applicable), the number of words to the nearest hundred and the words "First British Serial Rights," which means that you are selling the first right to print the story, in a magazine, in U.K., once. The next page starts with the title of the story and the name or pen-name of the author. For choice these are not underlined, or the printer may think that they are to appear in italics. Three inches or so above and below this matter are left blank, for editorial purposes. The story itself follows and is, of course, typed on one side of the paper only, double-spaced. A broad margin is left on *both* sides of the line for the sub-editor's marks. If there is a division in the story it is unwise just to leave an extra space: put in a row of stars or something.

*continued on page 20*

*A farmer reported hearing a noise like a stick being rattled along railings. Not very alarming? Even in the middle of the moors?*

# A CASE OF IDENTITY

by Kenneth Bulmer

When three or four sheep were found cut about on the moors only the local farmers were indignant; but when a girl's near-naked body was discovered mangled in a ditch along the Limpscott Road the whole country fastened in ghoulish interest on the news.

"Keep those ruddy reporters off my neck for the next two hours," Detective Inspector Congreve rumbled threateningly. He shivered in the wind off the moors which rustled the hedge above the ditch. Autumn would be getting its teeth into the land before long. The girl couldn't feel the cold now; couldn't recoil from chill mud pressing against her flesh. She must have died a hopeless, hateful, lonely death. "Wait till the forensic people have finished. No statement until we're back at the station."

That was in Colebridge, the market town and centre of all hectic gaiety for twenty miles around. Detective Inspector Congreve watched as the photograph team went to work. He was a big, stolid, pragmatic man, gifted with enough imagination to know he lacked in that department. The press had called him the Bulldog and the name, if lurid, was apt. He didn't like murders. In particular, he didn't like murders like this—half-naked young girls that would obsess the Press to the

exclusion of everything else. In that moment, standing there looking down on the activity in the ditch with the wind ruffling his untidy shock of heavy grey hair, he felt very mean and very implacable towards the murderer.

Then the notion washed away in his own stolid conception of police duty.

"She was Betty Prince," Sergeant Rollo said. His thin young face and wire-drawn body gave him the appearance of a man totally unfit to be a detective sergeant working with the Bulldog. "Very popular in town, sir."

"Betty Prince?" said Congreve, taking his hands from his pockets and clapping them against his coat. "Do I know her—the name is—ah, yes—more in your line, though, Rollo."

Rollo smiled weakly. "Yes, sir. She was the 'Queen of the Dance Halls'."

"Princess would have been more apt, judging by her name. Yes?" he said as a cameraman approached.

"All through now, sir. The ambulance is here."

"Right. Come on, Rollo."

"It would have to be a Beauty Queen as well. That means another blasted pressure group on our necks, as if we don't have enough."

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Rollo, dutifully.

By the time they had completed their work the early autumn twilight had crept across the road and up the swelling moorland slopes, shadowing outlines and throwing a mantle of silvered purple across the land. Congreve settled in the police car with a shiver of gratitude for the warmth. All the way back to Colebridge he did not mention the case once, and Rollo, knowing his master's moods and methods, remained as silent as the dead girl.

Inside the station the Chief said: "You'd better deal with those infernal reporters, Congreve. High handed." He chuckled. "Can't say I blame you, though."

If you won out on a case the Chief was with you all the way; if the Press or higher authority became awkward you were apt to find yourself cast to the wolves.

"Very good, sir," Congreve said, and handed out a

meagre statement to the reporters. Like wolves, they clamoured; but he shut them up with promises of more information in the morning.

Rollo groaned. "That means a night's work," he said.

By morning, limping grey and haggard through the office windows, Congreve and Rollo had between them turned up—nothing. Oh, yes, there were many reports of suspicious characters, and there was even a man who claimed to have been walking down the Limpscott Road a bare ten minutes before the average time of death given by the police surgeon. McArthur said in his gruff way: "Between eleven o'clock and two in the morning, Congreve. Ye'll no get me to give a nearer estimate."

Garrett had been on his way home, passing the spot, at twenty minutes past midnight.

He had, he said, heard and seen nothing.

Congreve, in the morning, talking to Rollo, said: "I think friend Garrett is holding back on us. Ask him to come in again, Rollo. As soon as he can."

"Very good sir. And Yardley—?"

Yardley had been the hedge-trimmer who had found the body. An old man, with the cunning in his hands that would die with the last of his breed, he'd been concerned only that a jagged gap had been forced in his hedge.

"No, Rollo. I think not. He can tell us nothing of the vital times. She lay in that ditch all morning, right up until Yardley worked his way along to her in the early afternoon."

"She wasn't meant to be found, sir."

"I don't agree, Rollo. I think it was chance. She was just lying in the ditch and as far as we could see no attempt had been made to cover her up. She was in a terrible state, too, torn and—well, you know, you saw her—that we're almost certainly dealing with a maniac. McArthur will tell us if there was an assault. I don't believe the man knew what he was doing afterwards."

"Yes, sir."

When Garrett walked in that morning he did not fit any description of a maniac. But—a maniac fitted any and all exterior descriptions, Congreve reflected moodily. It



was all in the inner workings of the brain box. He told Garrett to sit down.

"Now then, Mr. Garrett. We have your account of going past the spot where Miss Prince was found." Garrett had come forward as the result of an appeal. Quite voluntarily. "What I would like you to tell me is the story of your walk home."

Garrett complied. He had left friends in Colebridge, missed his bus, and walked along, quite cheerfully, towards his cottage halfway to Limpscott. He had seen and heard nothing. "Except, that is," he paused doubtfully.

"Yes?"

"Well, musta been near that time that I heard this clicking noise. Like a box of billiard balls."

"Billiard balls? In the middle of the moors?" said Sergeant Rollo. Inspector Congreve smiled to himself. Young Rollo was useful for making the obvious noises.

"Oh, aye, I know it sounds silly, but it was a clicking noise and that's the nearest I can come to it."

"Thank you, Mr. Garrett," said Congreve, rising. "We'll be getting into touch with you."

"I hope you catch the swine," said Garrett. "Stringing up's too good for the likes of them."

"Ah, um," observed Congreve, as Rollo showed the man out.

The morning papers carried the story. At once Congreve was aware of the hunters on his trail, just as he was on the trail of the murderer. As the Chief had told him: "They'll roast us—you—alive if we don't bring in results, Congreve."

All the routine tasks were carried out with routine efficiency—routine, and just a little more. The sight of the girl's body sprawled into the ditch distressed Congreve in a way that no other crime could; he wanted to put the man responsible behind bars and take away one at least of the dangers facing young women on lonely roads.

Congreve was a widower of ten years, with few interests outside his profession and he was as well aware as anyone else that he was right in line for promotion.

Handling this case quickly and smartly might bring just what was needed to give him that expected leg up. But fate—or whatever hostile influences work on men's destinies—was inclined to be fractious. Promising leads ran out into frustration. No one had seen Betty Prince leaving Colebridge that Thursday night after the dance. The men and youths who were wont to act as escorts reported uniformly that she had been in a filthy temper and had disdained them all. She had struck out along the road alone.

And someone had struck her down, savaged her, and left her near-naked and lifeless in a ditch.

As for clues to be picked up around the scene—they were non-existent, even to the experienced Congreve.

Friday night passed and Saturday and Congreve had run out with Sergeant Rollo and a driver along the Limp-scott Road—to no avail, of course. Sunday morning a farmer wrathfully reported that another of his sheep had been picked up, dead. Congreve heard of that in the course of the day from Rollo, who had had it from Detective Sergeant Bill Cramp, who had gone up to see the farmer. "Torn about, that sheep," he said reflectively. "Like Betty Prince—"

"You think it might be?" Congreve said quickly.

"Well, sir. The injuries are identical, allowing for the different morphology."

"But who, Rollo, would kill a woman and a sheep?"

The answer was not clear to Congreve; but the more he pondered the more he felt that there had to be a connection somewhere. It didn't make sense; but it was one of the isolated bits of supposition on which he might construct a theory that would match all the facts. The injuries were the same. The killing had been done at night, and in the same area. Wolves would have answered the murderer's description in the past; but there were no wolves left in the country now. An escaped wild animal? Enquiries elicited no reports of anything like that. Circuses were steel-bar tight.

The local farmers organised a vigilante patrol armed with shot guns and patrolled for a few nights, during which time Congreve worked on the dead girl's background and

turned up exactly nothing. The farmers shared a cold and lonely vigil for the same reward.

One of the farmers, Harry Saward, reported that he had heard a sound like sticks being rattled along railings. Congreve immediately thought of Garrett's box of billiard balls; but there was precious little sustenance in that. Another farmer reported lights in the sky. These had been so frequent and common of late that the inspector ignored them; as he would have been the first to admit, he was short on imagination.

Then, on the Tuesday night, the murderer struck again.

Congreve was awakened from his warm bed in his comfortable flat, where he was trying to regain lost sleep, by the 'phone. It was the desk sergeant. "Sorry to disturb you, sir. Harry Saward's rung up—he's been attacked on the Limpscott Road—"

"Where is he now?"

"Back at his farm, sir. It's the nearest one to the road. He's shaken up, sounded rough on the phone. Oh—and whoever attacked him took his shotgun."

"Damn!" said Congreve, dressing with one hand. "I'll be there. Rouse Rollo and send a car."

When they were decanted at the farm, Rollo still yawning, Mrs. Saward met them with a white, frightened face.

Drinking big mugs of hot cocoa, they listened to Saward's story. "Just patrolling like we'd planned. I'd left Charlie and John and gone down towards my lower end. Then a man jumped me—"

"Did you see his face?"

"No, inspector." Saward was sitting in his old leather armchair before the open grate, sipping cocoa with something in it. His hand was bandaged. "I ducked and shouted and then he hit me—damn hard. I tried to bring the gun round but he knocked it away. It went off—one barrel—and then I fell down. The man ran off taking the gun. I reckon it saved my life, even if it didn't get the swine."

"Where was this exactly?" Rollo spread a map.

"Here." Saward pointed to the place with a square-

nailed forefinger. "About a hundred yards from the road on my lower field."

"We'll ask you for a signed statement later, Mr. Saward." Congreve rose. "Thank you for the cocoa, Mrs. Saward."

They were driven along the road until they could strike up through the dew-wet moorland to Saward's lower field.

Going through a gap in the hedge, Congreve paused. He looked at Rollo. Chalk marks were still faintly visible.

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant. "The same place."

There was little to see at the spot Saward had indicated. The two police officers hunted about hoping that something, anything, might turn up. Too much time had elapsed since the attack for a cordon to be of much use around the spot; and, anyway, Congreve told himself savagely, they didn't even know who they were looking for.

They found marks that their practised eyes matched with scuffling boots; but, in the nature of this infuriating case, they found nothing else of use or interest.

Then Rollo called. Congreve stood beside him, staring down, having moved with that shambling crab-like run that had once outflanked the grasping hands of tacklers to take him over the touchline time after time. "What do you make of it, Rollo?"

"Someone's been jabbing a stick into the ground. It could have been one of those agricultural machines with spiked wheels."

Congreve grunted, staring moodily down. He pulled at his lower lip. The agricultural machine theory was probably right. Beginning at his feet and running in a straight line extended a series of three inch diameter holes punched in the ground. Rollo tested the depth. "Six inches, sir." The holes were scattered, forming a belt about three feet wide. The two police officers began to follow the track.

As arbitrarily as it had begun it ceased.

Congreve, pulling his lip, said: "We'll have an expert on that."

The expert's report came in at the same time as the negative reports from the men detailed to question every man in the dancehall on the murder night. Pretty soon now Congreve would have to recommend a house-to-house enquiry. The Chief wouldn't like that. The expert's report was final, too, in its own way. "There's no agricultural machinery that would leave that track anywhere near Colebridge and I don't know of any anywhere that would do it."

Congreve said with heavy authority: "It probably has no bearing on the murder and the attack, then. It's not our problem."

Rollo favoured him with a swift, quizzical look. Congreve did not miss it.

The Chief called him up to the high office, shot him full of holes, and he came back glowering under his tufted grey eyebrows, ready to slay Rollo at a word.

The sergeant knew Congreve well enough. He found a job that kept him out of the way.

"Not a single damned lead," Congreve said, when Rollo returned. "Not a lousy lead in the case. It's going to be pick and shovel work all the way. House to house."

Rollo sighed resignedly and said: "Yes, sir."

"He now has a gun, too, Rollo. That is, if he kept it and if he's the same man—"

"That seems pretty likely, sir," Rollo ventured.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so. I don't want to have to call the army in; but we may have to ask them to co-operate in a sweep across the moors. He'll see us coming a mile off and skip, but—"

"But it'll flush him, sir."

"Pre—," Congreve said with relish, "—cisely."

Two days and a dead sheep later, the army was requested to co-operate with the police force in a matter of public security. All that meant was that the local barracks in Colebridge turned out everyone from the R.S.M. to the fatigue-wallah peeling spuds. They made a fine sight marching in threes out on the Limpscott Road.

The Regiment was the Royal Princess Louise's Own Colebridge Light Infantry, that had once been the 109th

of the Line and claimed to be one of the last regiments to have gone into action wearing the old scarlet. Now, as they marched out, even a civilian could see they were more used to hurried transport. Trucks tailed on at the rear of the column with giant vacuum flasks of tea and grotesquely thick bully sandwiches. Congreve met Lieutenant Colonel Sir Thraxton Plummer marching defiantly at the head of his men, thrashing the air with his pliant cane.

“Good morning, Congreve.”

“Morning, colonel.” Congreve, in default of a private conversation, fell in beside the gallant colonel. “We’ve a fair old day for it.”

They’d gone over the plan the previous evening, spreading maps and compasses all over Congreve’s office. The sound of army boots was ridiculously soft behind Congreve; he found nothing ludicrous in the sight of a policeman marching at the head of a column of troops. At the prearranged points companies and platoons broke off. Congreve and Plummer waited at the central point of the drive—the ragged rent in the hedge where Betty Prince’s body had been found—as the forward wing of the regiment marched on to its positions.

“He’ll have seen us by now,” Congreve said. “Unless he’s blind as well as crazy. You warned your men about the possibility of a gun, colonel?”

“I did. Most of them are armed with pick axe helves and sticks; but one in three has a firearm. We don’t want a bloody battle with live ammo flying—”

“Quite, colonel.”

Rollo walked up. “Beg pardon, sir. The farmers want to join in—”

“Good to have ’em,” barked Plummer. “Put ’em in Number Two Company.”

Congreve and Rollo exchanged pleased smiles. A subaltern, very rosy and very young, stamped up and saluted. “Radio truck all ready, sir. Major Lofton is in position.”

“Right.” Plummer turned to Congreve. “We’re ready, inspector.”

“Well, we’d better get on with it. If we succeed we’ll

drive him back from the road and onto the spur. If he goes over it—”

“If he does that,” Plummer said savagely. “He’ll run into the Rifle Brigade boys over there. We’ll box him between us.”

As Congreve had in his younger days often assisted in breaking up riots between the Riflemen and the gallant lads of Princess Louise’s Own, he knew what the Colonel was thinking.

They stood in the road, huddled in their coats, watching the khaki line break through the hedge and go straight on into the moor, hurdling Farmer Seward’s fences, going on and straight up towards the long dominant ridge of the spur. The line wavered here and there as obstacles were taken and hollows searched. N.C.O.’s ran about like terriers at the heels of sheep. A wind blew rustling from the moors.

Congreve put himself in the place of the murderer, if he was still in hiding on the moor. The dead sheep proved that someone was up there; and it also proved that even in England the moorlands can be surrounded by cities and criss-crossed by arterial roads—and still remain pockets of mystery and danger. Pickets out at night had seen no signs of anyone going into or out of the area where the killings had taken place. He must be there. He must.

The khaki line was now no more than a distant impression of brown dots, barely moving, difficult to pick out. That was the idea. Camouflage. Plummer banged his stick against his leg and shouted at a round-faced soldier. Minutes later Congreve was drinking cocoa laced with spirit with a profound thanks to the victualling ideas of the colonel.

The radio subaltern saluted and said: “Half way up to the spur, sir. No news.”

“Right, Gerald. Thank you.”

They all waited, stamping about to keep the circulation going, smoking, talking quietly. The hours went by. Lunch was served impeccably off napkins by the imperturbable orderly. When the subaltern said smartly: “Major Lofton reports contact with the Rifles, sir”

no one had the heart even to swear. Disconsolately, they packed up and the army collected itself and marched back to barracks.

In his office that evening, clearing up before going home, Congreve said to Rollo: "Well, we missed him. But we'll keep the pickets out tonight. The farmers weren't satisfied. Saward told me he was convinced a whole band of men could hide out there and not be found."

"It's pretty bleak, sir."

"Damn it all, Rollo! The man must be there—if he hasn't left the district entirely. Not a lead anywhere..."

"The house to house has turned up nothing, sir."

"I have a feeling, Rollo. Call it old copper's aches, if you wish. But I am convinced that our man is not from Colebridge. He's a stranger to the area. He's living out there, and he's living off sheep and what he can steal from market gardens near farms."

"We've had no reports, sir—"

"He's too smart to take what will be noticed—but that doesn't make sense, not when you think of the sheep and of Betty Prince. McArthur says there was no sexual assault. She must have seen him, he panicked—and—"

The telephone rang. It was Mrs. Saward. She was incoherent and Congreve had to speak to her sharply before she could be understood. Then:

"Harry's gone out after him with his other gun—and—there was a terrible clackety noise and—"

Congreve said: "Stay indoors, Mrs. Saward. We're coming right over."

He rang off as Rollo spoke into the other phone, ordering a car. The driver, phlegmatic at his many late nights lately, took them in a swift rushing of tyres out along the Limpsett Road and up the track to Saward's farm. The darkness was intense about them, slashed into by the headlights of the car. The stars glittered down with a baleful hostility as Congreve and Rollo waited for Mrs. Saward to open to their knock.

They waited. A light shone from the downstairs window. Wind soughed about them, brisking them. Some-



where a farm dog howled, muzzle uplifted. They waited.

Congreve made up his mind. "See if you can get in, Rollo. The light's on. No answer. Something's up."

"Right, sir." Rollo slid over to the window.

Walking with his brisk, shambling gait, Congreve went around the corner of the house, his driver following. They negotiated the bric-à-brac of a farmyard, a low wall and a wire fence, and then found themselves in the back chicken-run. Luckily for stealth, the chickens decided to stay in their roosts. Congreve did not bother to knock on the back door. He tried the handle at once. It gave and the door swung open.

He threw the oval spot of his torch into the farm kitchen. Harry Saward lay in the centre of the floor, his legs buckled under him, one arm outflung, the fingers of the hand curled like the claws of a dead bird. In the other hand he grasped limply the bright red cylinder of a shot-gun cartridge. Incongruously, a saucepan had fallen and tumbled, so that it rested in shining aluminium cleanliness against Saward's head. From that head a spreading pool of dark blood shone blackly in the light.

Congreve knelt. Saward was still alive. But only just. "The 'phone's in the hall, Harry," he said to the driver. "Call for an ambulance, urgent." They both went into the corridor and the driver picked up the phone from its rest against the near wall. Congreve went on.

He heard a faint clashing sound and thought it would be Rollo, entering from the front. The farmhouse was warm after the chill of the moor and he loosened his coat.

He was aware of the thumping of his heart. Between them, he and Rollo might have the murderer cornered—a murderer armed with a shotgun. Two guns, if that open, outstretched and empty hand of Saward's meant anything.

His throat was dry, tickling him; but he fought down the cough and walked on, cat-like, slightly crouching. His eyes fixed hypnotically on the slit of light beneath the door of the front room. His hand was gripping the door handle when the shriek hit him.

The sound of smashing glass was followed immediately

by that insane, awful shrieking.

Congreve turned the handle and flung the door open..

Impressions hit him with clockwork precision. The window completely gone. Rollo sprawled across the sill. The chaotic confusion of the room. Mrs. Saward lying all in a heap by the settee. The smell of charring.

He ran across to Rollo, lifted his head. Rollo's eyes were unfocussed; but at the touch and Congreve's rough words he coughed and tried to smile.

"Big—" he said in a fluttering whisper. "Big black brute. Right over me."

Congreve took in the situation. Rollo had been lying with his legs in the room and his head through where the window had been. And the shards of glass lay outside, on Mrs. Saward's tiny flower plot beneath the sill, glinting in the lamplight spilling from the room.

"Can you look after yourself until Harry gets here?"

"I—I'll cope, sir."

"Right." Congreve wasted another precious minute checking Mrs. Saward. He diagnosed it as simple faint.

Then he hurdled the window sill like a champion steeplechaser and rushed into the windswept darkness outside.

As he expected, his torch showed him a line of three inch holes punched in the ground. He could not have explained by any deductive or logical method why he had expected that eerie track; why he was not surprised. He gripped his torch tighter and wished he had a gun. He may not have been surprised—but, by God! he was scared.

The wind was rising and those fat glittering stars were misted over and swallowed up by the dark near-invisible masses of racing clouds. Congreve pulled his coat tighter as he threw the beam of the torch ahead. The punched holes ran dead straight for twenty yards and then vanished. They ended as sharply and as neatly as a bar of metal sheared off in hydraulic cutters.

A box of billiard balls. A stick rattled along railings. A clacketty noise. They were the sounds the thing that made these holes coughed out over the work. The night wind clawed at Congreve. That track of an agri-

cultural machine-that-wasn't ended right in front of his heavy black shoes. Ended right there. So—where was it?

In the wild wind-thrashed darkness the man he was looking for might be anywhere, disappeared after his wild leap through the front window, lost and vanished on the moor.

So—that left the track and the machine that had made it. Where then was that machine?

Congreve examined the ground immediately beyond the termination of the punched holes, he threw the oval splodge of light from his torch down on the wet grass and searched minutely. Not a sign. A dead bird, its pathetic claws curled and standing stifflegged above the rounded body; those claws reminded Congreve of Saward and the second missing shotgun. There was nothing doing here. He'd better get back and see about Rollo and the Sawards.

He began to walk back quickly towards the farmhouse, paralleling the line of tracks, swinging his torch beam to light the way. Only then, as he saw the oblong of lamplight from the smashed window, was the hideous idea brought home to him. The tracks had no beginning and no end. How did he know which way the machine that made them was travelling?

Might it not have begun out on the moor, and run up to the farmhouse? Might he not now be following the machine instead of the other way about?

Congreve began to run.

He knew his guess was right and he cursed himself as he stumbled over the uneven ground—two dark figures had appeared at the window, tumbling out, with more pushing them on, and the shouting reached him thinly, blown by the wind.

Harry, the driver, had Mrs. Saward over one shoulder; still unconscious, the woman was better out of it. Saward and Rollo, supporting each other, staggered and tripped as they came on. The straggling group met Congreve no more than ten feet from the house.

“Get away, sir!” gasped Rollo. “He’s stark staring raving and he’s got the shotguns.”

That awful sinking sensation began in Congreve’s guts

then. Before, he had been afraid; now he was almost paralytic with foreboding panic. For—oh yes, he knew! How well he knew!—now his duty was plain. Whatever the pressures on him of duty and honour, desire of promotion, a life to be lived with himself, a determination to get the murderer—whatever they pushed one way they stood up stark and horribly against the fear in him. He didn't want to face a madman with a shotgun. He didn't want to have his face shot away with one barrel and his guts away with the second.

Congreve stood there in the wind-blown vastness and felt his mind congealing over.

Rollo shouted: "Don't go after him, sir! He's not—he's not—" Saward groaned then and went to press on. The driver carrying Mrs. Saward was doubling around to the car.

"Well, Rollo? He's not what?"

"There's something damned funny about all this, sir—"

"Funny!"

"I mean—peculiar. Unreal. I didn't see the man. He was a black shape scrambling over me, taking the window with him as he went. He must have scared Mrs. Saward out of her wits. Mr. Saward says he only had an impression of blackness, of a shape, of a rushing force—for God's sake, sir, let's get some more men in!"

That, of course, would be one way. It was the safe way, the sane way. It wouldn't help him with his promotion very much; but at least he wouldn't have to face a shotgun discharge in his face.

Congreve had lived a long and useful life. He realised then, standing there with the light from the shattered window picking out his face in shadowed hollows, setting a jewel gleam in each eye, that he had to face the shotgun or face his fear. The knowledge that he was afraid bit into him. He knew, then, that facing the madman with the shotgun was far far preferable to facing and losing his own self-respect. It was corny, old-fashioned, suicidal. But it was the way he lived, the way he carried himself.

"Get Saward into the car," he told Rollo. "We can't

have lunatics terrorising the countryside with guns.”

He began quite steadily—as he had done on the beat so long ago—to walk towards the house.

How the devil the fellow had doubled back into the house again was a part of the crazy pattern of events in this case—case! The thing was no more than a chaotic nightmare. The murderer appeared capable of waltzing airily right through army cordons and police patrols, of diving through windows and turning up again in the house. Springheel Jack came to mind, and Rollo—with the blood wet on his young face—unable to finish what he had been thinking.

A breath of icy wind that did not brisk off the moor shivered all down Congreve's spine.

Rollo had seen this man closely as had Seward; neither could—or would—give a coherent description. Congreve reached the end of the line of imprints, the last of the punched holes, and put one hand on the windowsill, his feet among glass. Standing looking in he could see across the room and along the passageway to the kitchen—the light out there glowed brighter and brighter as he looked. The kitchen was on fire.

And in that blaze he saw the blunt shining end of a machine, which first he took to be the refrigerator door left swung open. A curtain of smoke drifted across. He vaulted into the room and ran down the corridor, his body cringing in anticipation of a shotgun blast. When he reached the kitchen the heat rolled out in an engulfing wave that drove him, gasping and with streaming eyes, back through the corridor and into the front room again.

But he had seen what he had seen.

The Seward's kitchen floor had been laid of good red tile over solid concrete. Congreve had seen that beginning track of three inch holes, punched as sharply in the concrete to a depth of six inches as they had been on the moor. He had seen the two shotguns lying with burst barrels and burning stocks. He had smelt—through the charring paintwork and burning kitchen things—the rank and foetid aroma that he had instinctively feared and hated and fled from.

Oh, yes, he'd seen clearly enough, in that last moment. The farmhouse blazed magnificently. Walking slowly back to the others, with the ambulance bell ringing sweetly in his ears, Congreve remembered that the refrigerator, door open or not, was invisible from the passage.

Oh, yes, he'd closed this case, so tightly that it would never be re-opened on this Earth.

"Are you all right, sir?" Rollo was being hastily cleaned up by one ambulance man.

"Yes,"

"Did you—did you get him, sir?"

"He perished in the fire," said Congreve carefully. "I doubt whether anything of him will ever be found."

"I'm—glad it's over," said Saward, painfully. "The swine had it coming to him."

Congreve had his thoughts tightly locked up now. What he had seen would go with him to the grave.

"Yes, Mr. Saward," he said, very politely, very carefully—for the record—"A man like that is a disgrace to the whole human race."

Congreve might be short on imagination—but he wasn't as short as all that.

—KENNETH BULMER.

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EDITORIAL—*continued from page 3*

At the end it is useful to repeat your name and, for safety's sake, your address. Most professionals use quarto paper and this is a great blessing: foolscap is the wrong size for most envelopes and files and is awkward to handle in hotel bars and other places where copy-reading takes place. The whole thing is stapled, clipped or pinned together and a stamped addressed envelope is always enclosed. (One doesn't like to be mean over tenpence but there are only a couple of dozen of them in a pound note). Post to me at 18 Norham Gardens, Oxford and—if I may say so—the best of luck.

*“ . . . . remains another way  
For simple men: knowledge and power have  
rights,  
But ignorance and weakness have rights  
too.”*

—*Browning*

# GOD KILLER

by John Rackham

“You’re a canting hypocrite” the little voice said, “You don’t believe in God, Hensley. You’ve no right to be a parson.” Hensley knew that no-one but himself could hear that nasty little voice. He knew that his congregation, down there, were hearing his real voice, his droning, unspectacular sermon. They sat quite still, lulled into semi-somnolence in the shafts of stained-glass sunlight. Preaching to them was like dropping warm oil into cotton-wool. Not that they were really listening. If they were, they heard nothing but stock phrases, pious platitudes, exhortations, the kind of thing that Hensley’s reflexes could be counted on to supply, almost without effort.

He heard his own voice bringing the gentle sermon to a close, and stood a moment, sadly, listening to the barrage of coughings and shufflings. Sadness was all he could feel, now. There had been guilt, once. On the occasion of the Bishop’s last visit he had actually trembled at the thought of being unmasked. But Bishop Broomwell had been placidly understanding.

“A truly godless century, my dear Hensley” he had murmured. “Never have the apostles of materialism had such evidence on their side. Drugs to influence the very soul, power to move mountains. And television, which

steals into our very homes to lure us from divine contemplation. But . . ." and his full-moon face had settled into a silly-seeming self-confidence, "the Church has met this kind of challenge many times before, and survived."

"Rock of Ages, in fact?"

"Exactly!" Broomwell had missed, completely, the mild sarcasm in Hensley's tone. "God is on our side. We shall prevail." And that had been that.

He stood by the door, mumbling the usual meaningless noises to his departing flock, watching them struggle with the uncomfortable finery of 'Sunday Clothes.' Why did they come? Because it was the thing to do. They hadn't heard a word, and if they had listened, they would have heard just what they wanted to hear. They, no less than he, were just 'going through the motions.' But his case had this one difference, he thought, wryly. He was consciously aware of his hypocrisy.

"Reverend Hensley?" The strange voice was strong, self-confident, with undertones of command. He came back to reality with a start, focussed his eyes and attention on this stranger. A big man, heavily made, yet alert.

"I beg your pardon. Yes, I am Hensley."

"My name is Spencer" the man put out a hand that was smooth and well-cared for, but not soft. "These men are my assistants. Parker. Robinson."

"Gentlemen!" Hensley frowned, trying to place them, to guess their business. It was difficult. Spencer, florid, the product of good living and grooming, redolent of wealth, power, confidence. Ruthlessness lay close under that surface. Parker and Robinson were featureless efficiencies, in sleek tailoring.

"You wished to see me?"

"If it is not troubling you too much" Spencer smiled.

"Not at all." Hensley swept the interior with an anxious eye to make sure all were safely departed. "My duties are scarcely onerous, as you may well imagine. If you would come this way, please." He gathered his surplice round him and led them out on to crunching gravel. A stiff breeze caught his robe into fluttering volutes and folds, symbolising his mental unease. In the



over-large under-furnished parlour of his parsonage he halted, and stood, uncertainly.

"I can offer you a sherry" he said. Spencer brushed the offer aside with a gesture, and looked about for a chair.

"Please sit down" he said. "This may take some time." Hensley found a seat, and let himself down into it, his unease growing. "I'll begin with Parker, here." Spencer gestured to his right, and the man produced a slim notebook. "Parker is a semanticist, and a good one. You understand what that means, I trust?"

"To a certain extent, yes" Hensley murmured, timidly, "Semantics . . . the study of meanings, isn't it?"

"Quite. Now, Parker has been listening to your sermon. His is an art which enables him to tell what a man thinks, inside, as opposed to that which he says with his mouth. His report on you is a peculiar one!" Hensley knew a moment of black despair, and then a sudden relief. It had come, at last.

"Very well . . ." he rose from his chair, and stood as one who knows the axe is about to fall, but is past caring. "I will not try to deny anything, although I must confess I am surprised at your methods. I had no idea the Bishop was so . . ."

"Bishop?" Spencer was startled, for a moment, out of his solid calm. "I know nothing of your Bishop, except that he is a mumbling fool, like all his kind. Bishop!" He snorted, reached into his jacket for a cigar-case, offered it across the table. Hensley shook his head.

"I gave up the habit, years ago. But you carry on, by all means." He sank back into his chair, gropingly. He looked at Spencer, who was devoting a great deal of care to the task of getting his cigar going properly. "If you're not from the Bishop, then who . . . who are you?"

"Ah!" Spencer let out a thin blue stream of smoke, appreciatively, and smiled. "I am, or rather, I very soon will be, a God-killer. I mean that quite as it stands. I intend to kill God." Hensley felt an insane desire to giggle, and fought it back. His wits moved with surprising swiftness.

“Then you are in error, on two counts” he said mildly. “In the first place, you cannot kill an idea. In the second place . . .” he hesitated, and Spencer smiled, knowingly, watchfully.

“Go on” he urged, gently. “Go on, Hensley, say it, out loud.” Hensley took a deep breath. These men knew. There was no point in being timid.

“In the second place” he said, firmly “you have come to the wrong man. I no longer believe in God.” It was the first time he had said it, out loud, in so many words, to another person. It had a frighteningly final sound. Spencer nodded.

“Simple, concise and to the point. And I’ll wager you feel better, now eh? There’s something to be said for the confessional, you know. Crude psychology, but what a weapon. Beats all your secret police, or wire-tapping. Now, you said two counts. My task, then, is to prove you wrong on both. Let’s take the last one to start with. I could use Parker, here but you have to know what he’s talking about in order to argue with him, and that wouldn’t be fair. So I’ll show you, just as I sit here, that you’re wrong, Hensley. You *do* believe in God.”

“I do not!” Hensley felt suddenly angry. “I do not believe, I tell you. I am false to my cloth, but true in this. I say, again, there is no God!”

“Rubbish!” Spencer tapped the ash from his cigar into the dully gleaming pewter ash-tray that Robinson had reached from a near-by side-board. “You believe, right enough. I know.” Hensley felt beaten down, crushed. He sank back in his chair, bewildered.

“What manner of man are you?” he demanded, “with your assumptions that you know my soul better than I do?”

“Soul?” Spencer queried, gently. “You have a soul, then? Your mental habits betray you, man. You cannot discard the habits of a lifetime as simply as that. You believe, but you refuse to admit it, even to yourself. And that means just one thing. You do believe in God, but you don’t like him or his ways. You hate him.”

Hensley wrestled with this monstrous statement, shrink-

ing from it even as he wondered why it should strike him as monstrous. He shoved back in his chair.

"Not that" he denied, weakly. "Nothing like that. Just a denial. There is no God, nor good, nor bad. Just indifference. Any sense, meaning or purpose we see is merely what we put there." He stared at the bland, knowing, watchful face opposite, and his anger flooded back. "I know you haven't come to convert me, and I cannot possibly accept your other statement, that you intend to kill God. So there's an end of it. Will you please go. What more can you want?"

"Proof" Spencer said, succinctly. "I'm interested in your proof . . . of a negative."

"I have no proof" Hensley felt his voice crack and become a ragged-edged travesty of his usual mild tones. "It isn't a thing susceptible of proof. Let me say this, that I sought God, in my heart, and found nothing." He got up, awkwardly, stood with one bony hand resting on the table. He looked out of the window, into the bright sunlight, at the yellow trumpets of the daffodils whipping and dancing in the breeze. Out there the world was bursting with life, colour, beauty. But all that colour and beauty was in his own mind, seen with his own eye. There was something insidiously compelling about these three men. He had the urge to confess, to purge himself. He went to the window, stood with his back to it.

"When I first came here," he said, slowly, "I was zealous. I burned to serve God. And I met, and found, indifference. Not just from the people. God, too, was indifferent, not interested. This is only a small parish, a backwater. But the sin and the suffering are as real, and evil, as they are anywhere else. If God exists, He cares. If He cares for anything, He cares for this place. And He does not care. Prayers are not answered. I know clever people have made much of the saying that 'No' is also an answer, but that is casuistry. If I ask a favour of you, and you refuse, you *tell* me that you refuse, at least. You might even tell me why. But God just does not answer, even to say "No!" " He came back to the table, intent now.

"I rejected the thought, of course. But there is a

stubbornness about facts. They refuse to go away just because you do not choose to believe them. I see wickedness and evil thriving. I see godliness hit, and hurt, and suffering. I see senseless suffering, God knows. I see good, kind people struck down, and villains prospering. God moves in a mysterious way, I am told. I say this. If God's ways do not make sense to me, then there is no God, so far as I am concerned."

"Ah!" Spencer nodded, knowingly. "That's better. You have decided to do without God. You're not alone, Hensley. There are many more like you. More than you might think. I know. I collect them. But rejecting God does not banish him. He still exists. Sit down. Listen." He put down his cigar, leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips, thoughtfully.

"God, as I think you would agree, is a 'group' hope. Let's not mince our words. All religions stem, originally, from fear and hunger. We search for a guarantee of security in a dangerous world, the guarantee of a full belly on the morrow. And the converse automatically appears. If you are hungry, insecure or sick, you've done something wrong. Sin. Offence against God. Which is why the organised religions have fought, bitterly and steadily, against science, and in particular, against medicine. Punishment must be upheld. And so your God emerges. The rewarder, the hope, the boss, demanding slaves. Absolute power. Punishment for offenders. Unquestioning obedience. That kind of thing."

"Oh . . ." Hensley felt a sense of deflation. "You mean, God as an idea-form, a concept? Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?" Spencer took up his cigar again. "Did it ever occur to you that an idea, a concept, might gain a reality of its own?"

"Now you're talking magic!" Hensley snapped, and Spencer chuckled.

"Yes. Call it a nasty name. But that won't stop it, you know. Ideas can kill you. Monarchy, for instance, is just an idea, a name. You can't point to it, or cut a slice off it, but you can offend it, and it can kill you."

"Oh no" Hensley objected, quickly, "Not of itself. It takes people to . . ." he fell silent as he realised what

he had almost said.

“ Ideas, through people. They use people as agents. Just like God. Where is the difference? Conservatism, Socialism, Communism, Democracy, they’re all just ideas. But they can lift you up, or cast you down, make you or break you.” Spencer got to his feet, suddenly. It was his first major move since his arrival, and it had the effect of urgency.

“ Ideas can become real, I tell you. One man thinks in a certain way, and that is real, for him. A million men think in the same way, and something is born, brought into being, backed up by millions of man-hours of belief.”

Hensley cringed in his chair, battered down by the sheer force of Spencer’s convictions. He stared up at the big man who loomed over him like vengeance incarnate. He groped for an argument, for a flaw.

“ Why ” he muttered “ if there is a God . . why does He permit evil? ”

“ Permit it? ” Spencer chuckled in sardonic glee. “ He encourages it. That’s the way he is made. He saves us from evil, doesn’t he? So there must be evil, to make him necessary. And if the danger and evil happens to be the other chap, then we ask our God to strike him dead, or to help us to do it. Soldiers of God, fighting evil. And who do we kill? Why, the other chap, of course. God must enjoy that. Why man, it tells you, right there in his own book, that he sent his own son to be butchered, just to show that he could do it. What other purpose did it serve? Would you crucify your son for a mistake that you had made? And we go on fighting among ourselves, killing each other, hoping to destroy evil thereby. But I shall put a stop to all that. I shall smash the source of this evil . . ”

“ You must be the Devil himself ” Hensley mumbled, and Spencer chuckled, all at once his familiar, confidently calm self.

“ Not a bit of it ” he said, “ Not Lucifer. He’s just the reverse side of God, and created in the same way, at the same time. Just an idea. And ideas don’t die. They keep on. They grow. They tag themselves on to other ideas, and grow. No-one has ever been able to kill an idea, until now . . ”

He sat again, felt for another cigar, and lit it with great care. Hensley saw him squinting, calculatingly, through the smoke.

“Now we come to the nub of the matter. An idea, any idea, is a pattern, a design, an arrangement of linkages in the neuron circuits of the brain. And, like any other such pattern, it can be cancelled out. Robinson . . . !” Spencer gestured to his left, and the silent man laid a box on the table, and waited. “This device is much too complex for me to explain to you. Truthfully, I don’t understand it myself. I do not need to. I employ technicians to understand such things for me. But I can assure you that it will do what it is supposed to do.”

“And that is?” Hensley eyed the box nervously.

“Just this. I want God, as you know him. Your pattern. You know him well, as a parson. Better still, you wish to reject him and all his works. You want to be rid of that idea. Very well. The rest is simple. You will apply the headpieces; Robinson will show you. Within fifteen minutes we shall have taken a copy, a print of your version of God.”

Hensley shivered at the obscene flavour of the thought, yet there was that element of pragmatic realism in him which argued ‘Why not?’

“What will you put in its place?”

“Oh come!” Spencer scorned. “A scoopful, from an ocean?”

“Or one piece from a jigsaw” Hensley countered, and the big man shrugged. A silence grew in the room, like a thundercloud. The device sat, gleaming, in its box. It looked innocent. Robinson’s fingers rested on it, with a constant, casual stroke of affection.

“What would you do with it? My thought-pattern, I mean?”

“We will add it to many more. Add, combine, refine, until we have an all-over master-pattern. Then we shall construct the reverse, a cancellation. And we shall broadcast it, amplified a millionfold. We shall blanket . . . ‘jam’ if you like . . . the concept of God. Smash it. Wipe it right out, this ‘thing’ which demands the torture, humiliation and misery of so many millions, this ‘idea’

which insists that only through suffering can we achieve anything. There are many religions, but all worship the same sadistic God, in one shape or another. We shall smash them all."

Hensley's mind ached as if it had already been scraped raw and clean. He rose from his chair, to move away from that device and its attendants.

"What will you put in its place?" he demanded, again, "What?"

"What do you want?" Spencer sneered, "Happiness? The kind of happiness that come from drink, or dope, or the promise of ultimate joy? Happiness that comes from tossing reason out of the window?" He patted the machine. "We will put nothing in its place. We offer you the fight for life, fair and square. The chance to make this world, the here and now, a fit place to live in, by our own efforts, instead of the miserable ante-room of the hereafter, as it is now, by the will of God." He patted the box again. "A fair crack of the whip!" He had raised his voice almost to a shout, but Hensley was suddenly not impressed.

"You're not just offering this to me" he said, slowly. "You'll impose this on all mankind, won't you?" Spencer stared at him, curiously.

"What are you thinking, now?"

"I am thinking of the widow Henderson, as a matter of fact."

"What has she got to do with it, whoever she is?"

"She is just one old woman, one of my parishioners. She has nothing at all to live for, except her faith in the bliss to come."

"One old woman?"

"One would be sufficient. But I know many more. And there must be many others that I do not know. What can you offer them, in place of that which you will take away?"

"Bah!" Spencer snapped. "You would condemn mankind for the sake of a few morons? This is surgery, Hensley. Painful, perhaps, but necessary. I had a sick child, once." His fleshy face grew hard and grim. "The doctors said surgery, and the child would limp, but live."

My wife said no. She was a God-believer. She prayed. And the child died."

"I am sorry for you" Hensley said, quietly, "but you must not ask me to kill the joy of a few for the problematical happiness of the many. I cannot do that. I may be a lost sheep, myself. Perhaps I am. But I have no right to hurt anyone. Not one single person. Nothing can justify that."

"Don't be a fool!" Spencer said, strongly. "Come, man . . . the headpiece. It will take only a few minutes."

"No!" Hensley felt a new strength. "No, I cannot. I may not believe in God, but I do believe in goodness. I cannot do harm, just to serve my own desires."

"That's your last word?" Spencer stared, keenly. Hensley nodded. The big man shrugged, turned to his assistants. "All right, men. I know his sort. Pick up your things." He swung back on Hensley, as calm and as smooth as ever. "Good day, Hensley. I leave you with your conscience, and your God!"

But, as he watched them depart, Hensley was not troubled by conscience. For the first time in many years, he was praying, aloud and with fervour.

"Father . . ." he murmured . . . "if indeed there be a Father . . . forgive them . . . but make no mistake about it . . . this time they do know what they are doing!"

—JOHN RACKHAM

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## Our Cover

Like that of the last issue, this one is by Roger Harris. The theme is a free interpretation of "Building Blocks" in this issue. Our next cover-design will be by Haro—well-known to readers of the Observer and Mail.



*Even the vaguest and most ephemeral emotions—nostalgia, for instance—might become weapons one day.*

# THE POACHERS

by James Rathbone

He had had a hard time telling himself it wasn't his business, that he'd best leave well alone; but he'd got the sand off the decks with the blower and uncovered three cannon before the arguments against what he had in mind made much sense. So now he stopped and looked at what he'd done, battling against some other, indefinable feeling that was mixed with pride.

Down here he'd got a Spanish galleon; but he was Jim Pollock, a fish-herd, on his way to the breeding-pens, where he should have been an hour ago. It wasn't the first time he'd turned aside from his job to explore, but it was the first time he'd stayed away so long. He'd make up for the lost time somehow: he knew he would. But when he'd seen that carved triangular poop he knew he'd have to stop the ship, get into his suit, and look. And there, in a corner by the blackened, splintered deck, a white, delicate creature—like a plant, but animal—was rooted in the dome where a man's brain had been, all the evil there transmuted. He knew he was odd, but he didn't mind, feeling happy. The fourth generation of the undersea port people—those at any rate who'd never been to the Surface—were all rather different, it was said. Give them a proper sky and they'd not know what to do with it. Okay: let's get on.

He drove for the pens full out, the batteries feeding the pumps, the pumps squirting out jets behind the ship. It was the most effective method of locomotion they'd found so far undersea, where energy wasn't very plenti-

ful. But he liked it best when he could cut out the motor and swivel the fins so that they took the current and acted as sails, speed four knots at the most. The quiet of his sea-country was what he liked best. He speeded the ship at a ridge on the screen and jammed on brake-jet and fins at once, his body heaving at the safety belt as the ship hovered. On the plain below him in the green light the breeding-pens stretched for miles with, like the factory chimneys of the old Surface world he'd seen in books, the long tubes that fed warm salt water down to the ocean floor, where it welled out before it rose, evening the temperature and raising the nutrient content. The pens, spectacular cobwebs of lacy wire generating a weak electric field, confined the stock and kept out marauders. He gave these a careful glance and switched on the receiver as a red light flashed on the panel. A voice filled the cabin:

"I got your echo about five miles back. What you found down there?"

"Oh, ah, Dirk—it wasn't anything. Just an old ship. I got out and took a look."

"That's okay as long as you attend to our business. Everything normal?"

"As far as I can see. But I'll be checking."

"Check the weed on the upper shelf. If it gets too much we'll have to crop it."

"That's pretty much out of my way, Dirk."

"Take the long way round, then. We might turn in a few bucks on the concentrate. Crop now, and we might have a second this season."

He coasted down the other side of the ridge. At the first pen he checked the water temperature and nutrient content. The motor humming, a telescopic sampling tube extended into the mass of spawn in the pen, sucking it into the bio-analyser. The fish stock seemed hardly disturbed by the intrusion, their pallid, unhealthy appearance the result of enormous efforts put into reproduction. Hell, Jim thought, suppose *I'd* . . . But not even Frieda was capable of bearing several million offspring; and as for himself, he . . . It wasn't something that would bear thinking about. But just the same, before he left, he

scanned in his mind all the parasites and fungoid diseases fish-flesh was heir to, and checked against a couple of samples in the pen. The samples didn't seem to care. With a couple of weak tail-flicks they were out of the tube and back in the pen, looking as though nothing had happened.

At Number Ten pen he found a barracuda nosing against the wire, jerking with each electric shock it got. He drifted above it and began to use his sonar beam, aiming it at the brain case of the big fish. The barracuda couldn't get inside, but he'd got a use for a good steak. It died with hardly a wriggle, and he got a hook to it without getting out of the ship and quickly secured it to the under-belly of the craft.

A normal morning, and he hadn't opened his food container yet. He finished checking the pens and moved uphill to the higher shelf where the weed was. It was funny how the early folks used to measure their vertical positions in terms of *depth*, as though they couldn't wait to get to the Surface. Nowadays, of course, you got your reading in so many metres above the standard sea-bed level in your locality. That was ground level for the undersea people. Of course, the pressure varied, but with modern metals nobody troubled too much about pressure—nobody but the miners worked much below three hundred metres—that is, from the Surface: and the miners were Surface people.

Nosing forward up the weed pasture he thought about that: the Surface, over-populated and over-built, so that folks like himself had to provide them with protein from fish and weed. It was a fact, beamed at him on television every breakfast period, that most of the Surface people had never tasted natural fish and couldn't have stomached it, flavouring it with everything they could palate. They even had a law limiting families.

Not here. The fish-herds would never have stood for it. And naturally so, for the sea was the fecund womb from which life had first emerged, wagging its tail. There weren't enough undersea people, and their cities—Poseidon the capital, Thetis, Balenyra; his own town, Triton—were under-populated. At Poseidon, of course, they

had everything, and he'd gone to college there, Daniel Beebe Foundation and all. So . . .

He eased the ship across the upper slopes, the image of the scene appearing on his screen, green and dark red, lustrous, waving fronds . . . a pity, almost, to crop it, but—

Suddenly he leaned over, staring intently: half a pasture had disappeared in a cloud of silt that rolled downwards towards the ship. A really big fish come to grief, a wreck, a meteor—what? He used his radar. Some people thought this bit of country was a junkyard. Something bulky was moving about in there—so it wasn't a wreck. It took the shape of an enormous shovel: miners! But operating at this level?

He switched on his transmitter: "Dirk, I'm getting an echo from a bloody miner, working in the upper pastures. Can you beat that? I'm going to ask him what he's doing there. But what's the legal position? We're entitled to this bit, aren't we?"

"Sorry. I didn't understand you for a minute. Miners? They can't be up there. You're dreaming."

"I tell you, I've got a shovel on my screen—a heavy duty job—probably has ten crew."

"Ummm. Well, I'll send up a panic signal to the local council, if you're certain. We've got legal possession of that pasture, but not the gully behind it. That used to carry a road for mechanical crawlers when they were digging out Triton. But there's something about contamination. I'll have to ask the law. Contact you in five minutes—and don't do anything rash."

The cloud of sediment welled up and on, depositing a thick layer on the weed, obscuring its colours. Jim moved into it, widening his radio band.

"Come in, stranger," he repeated. "Come in, stranger."

The speaker crackled: "Okay, so what d'you want, farmer?"

"You're spoiling my crop, stranger."

"Name's Cole, Johnny Cole. What do you mean, I'm spoiling your crop?"

"I've got sediment all over my weed up here. It'll

take a couple of work-periods with a blower to clean it up. The stuff's no good dirty—can't be cut or sold."

"Oh, so I'm sorry. Nothing to do with me personally—I'm just taking a look-see. We're operating in the gully and we're legal."

"You mean you've got a right there and you're working the gully?"

"Just that, friend. We're Cobalt Alloys and we've got a mining permit for this territory."

Jim's fist came down on an instrument panel, hard: "There's a law about contamination. Hell, and I'll bet we can fight you about mining at this level, too."

A muttered conversation at the other end, then another, deeper voice: "We can fight, too, farmer. Anytime; any-place. Just try us for size." A click, and the radio was silent.

The speaker crackled: "Dirk here. Look, Jim, we've checked with the law, and they've fiddled a permit all right. It's Cobalt Alloys and—"

"—I know. I've just contacted them. But they can't do this. Blast it—it *is* a fiddle. Half of the upper pasture will have to have blowers on it: that can't be legal, surely?"

"So it isn't. The trouble is, it's difficult to fight in the courts. It takes time. And when we've won—"

"—No upper pasture left? Right. Now look: we've got to get blowers on it, haven't we?"

"Yes. I'll get some automated jobs hired and up there at once."

"And these miners—they've got to do some direct visual work, haven't they?"

"Oh yes. All their prospecting probes are manned and visual. They can't have been too long there or we'd have known."

"I was thinking—*they* can't be contaminated."

"What? Oh—you mean—"

"We can operate blowers so their visual stuff is useless. Of course, they can use radar. But blowers would have nuisance value."

There was a chuckle at the other end. "And I thought I was the brains of the partnership. Okay. Your blowers

are on their way. I'll come with them myself. It'll be an excuse to get away from all this paper work."

"And can't you file a restraint pending legal action?"

"I've done that, Again—who's got anything to stop them doing what they want to do?"

Jim paused thoughtfully. "I see what you mean. I'll wait here for you." The radio clicked off.

Jim waited for ideas to come. There were a couple of police ships—armed with nuclear torpedoes. In a civil law-suit, they'd do nothing but transmit warnings. Still, there were bits of equipment about the ship that might be converted. The trouble was that, working in the deeps as mining crews normally did, everything was covered with heavy armour-plate. That kind of armour meant armour and nothing but.

The ship had been drifting; he lifted it up and worked round to where the water was clearer. Two ancient blowers attached by cables to a central control sent sediment billowing from the gully straight across his weed. He felt uneasy, now convinced that the act was deliberate. He could hear drills and earth-movers working below. A little way back, he spotted a laser analyser and two men in heavy mining suits working it. He put the ship down behind some weed, got into his own suit, and came up behind them, his fish magnaphone working. As long as they were intent on the job, a habit of miners, their chest radar wouldn't detect him. He used the magnaphone for a few minutes. The miners were saying nothing to one another. Their breathing, however, told him that they were very excited about something. They moved about their apparatus in a jerky way, confirming his feeling about them: they had forgotten momentarily the technique of locomotion at this level in these suits. Jim was puzzled. He'd thought the whole place had been surveyed years ago by World Council teams: there were charts to prove it, weren't there?

When sediment came billowing up and back, and the laser and its team were lost in thick brown smudge, he knew that Dirk Brent, his partner, had got the opposition blowers working. He'd better get back to the ship.

Ten minutes later the two men listened, grinning, to

the confusion on the other side, a built-in fish magnaphone trained on the laser teams. The language these used was distinctly colourful, and only the noise from the gully, also magnified, made them switch off the set. They sobered up.

“What have we got that they haven’t?” asked Dirk. “This is only a pinprick—it won’t stop them.”

“There’s the sonar beam. You can fry a cod with it at thirty metres.”

“If you get within that distance and don’t mind the strain on your batteries.”

“Some of the equipment on the ship,” began Jim. “We could adapt it.”

“We’d better get back to base and have a full-scale conference before we do anything drastic,” said Dirk, fastening his safety belt. “I’d better send my ship back on automatics and ride back with you. We can work out some sort of case on the way.”

The receiver light on the wide band flashed, and Jim flicked over the switch.

“Say, you farmers—you getting us?” crackled the deep voice Jim had heard earlier. He switched on the recorder.

“We’re here,” he said.

“I thought you were,” said the voice, breathy and uneven. “That was a lousy trick to play. We’ve lost some of our equipment in that.”

“We’re fully entitled to clean up our own crops in our own country,” said Dirk, sharply.

“We’re going to take you, farmers. You’re interfering with our legitimate business. We’ve got a magnetic grab lined up on you—”

“Take her up,” shouted Dirk. For a moment there was a series of thuds as steel objects flew to one side of the hull and struck insulation wadding. Jim flung the motor into full jet. The ship responded sluggishly at first, then slid upwards. They eased away.

Dirk laughed. “It was a bluff. They were too far away. All the same. It seems to be war . . . .”

\* \* \*

Triton was a port on a hill. Like all the undersea towns, it looked like a huge, oblong jellyfish. Southern traffic was in-bound; northern traffic out-bound. Every ship rode in on a homing beam on automatics. The pilot stayed on his chair and kept an eye on instruments.

The two men were both more shaken than they could admit. Not aggressive by nature, they were accustoming themselves to a fresh set of emotions. By the time they had locked in and got into their other clothes, the Rights Committee had been summoned and was ready.

The Committee could hardly be called impressive, made up as it was only of the Port Council members required by law and two legal advisers. Pollock and Brent, entering the small committee room used at other times by Women's League and Hunt Club members, felt depressed. Not that it was too bad, for every committee had access to all kinds of aid but it would be an uphill slog, they knew, to get things moving. Gaunt was the chairman, wasn't he? Pollock couldn't remember what kind of man he was.

He knew a moment later, however, for Gaunt had suddenly called the meeting to order and switched on recording-tape before the lawyers had the time to sit down. Caught in mid-air, as it were, they gaped at Gaunt, a medium-sized man but with the unmistakable look of power about him and in his grey eyes.

"I convene this meeting under the laws of the World Council and declare it to be an Extraordinary Meeting of the Committee of Rights of this port of Triton as constituted by the World Council of States. Now let's get on with it. First—what happened: you, Pollock—that's an English name, isn't it? Let's have you."

Jim got up, briefly outlining the situation.

"Dirk Brent's your partner in this, isn't he?"

"He's the senior partner. He holds the majority of development units."

"Anything to say, Brent?"

"Yes. I've lined up those blowers where they'll do most good. They're on tracks, but fed from a central power unit. That unit's going to need recharging in forty-eight hours, but now I think we'll be forced to make a



move before then. I'll bet everything I've got that the cables are going to be cut, or something."

"You've got radio beacons on them all, I suppose?" asked Gaunt, looking at a mass of papers before him.

"Yes. The minute one of those blowers fails, we'll know it in our radio room. But something will—"

"—You've filed a case against Cobalt Alloys for contamination?"

"Sure thing."

"And there's been no aggression—no fighting—on either of your parts, up to the present?"

The two fish-herds, reduced to monosyllables, said "No!" together.

"Now let's hear the legal position."

A lawyer got up and cleared his throat—

"—In language we can all understand . . ." a sickly smile . . . "it is clear that both Brent and Pollock are entitled to the country concerned in the areas marked in red on the charts here"—they were handed round—"and that they've got a case for contamination. They'll have trouble, however," continued the lawyer, "in enforcing it. There's such a thing as a miner's permit and these people have got one. But once extensive undersea cultivation had begun in the past the miners went to work below the three hundred feet mark—that is, three hundred feet from the Surface. Well, it's difficult to find a precedent for objecting to their working in the gully. It's been abandoned since we stopped using crawlers—that would be fifty years ago. There used to be a road—you'll see it marked on the map . . . They've got a right to mine there, as long as they don't contaminate cultivated weed."

Gaunt turned to a small, round man who perpetually smoothed down what little hair he had. "A geological report from you, Simms?"

"Well, I haven't been there recently, and I'd like to remind you that most of my job is analysing silt samples. All I can go by is the World Council survey map of twenty-five years ago: that gully is silt at the bottom, shading to sedimentary. There's nothing I can think of that should be there . . . Wait a minute, though—" He

raised his hair-smoothing hand, as though someone had made a bid to stop him. "—That gully's a kind of crack in the sea-bed. Now, if there was an intrusive rock—something valuable—coming up between . . ."

Gaunt said, "All right. We know that road was laid down long before the survey. It might have covered something up. Now, suppose you're a miner and you've found something like this, how do you go about it?—There was a heavy shovel, I think you said, Pollock?"

"Yes there was. When I got round to the other side of the gully I could hear a lot of other heavy stuff working down there, too. And there are laser teams.

Simms coughed and interrupted. "Could be that this is a slipped fault, with the valuable lode eroded down into the gully, slanted in the direction opposite the pasture. That would explain the lasers—they'd find samples left behind . . . ."

Gaunt said "We're getting very technical now . . . . But I take it that if you followed this lode you'd be undermining the opposite side of the gully—under Brent and Pollock's country?"

The geologist resumed his hair smoothing. "Yes, that's true. That's certainly true."

"They can't do that!" both lawyers shot in at once, and then looked at one another.

Gaunt raised his hand. "I think they're going to, though. In the meantime we've got a chance to organize some kind of defence. We know what the law is on mining under pastureland, but we'd better have it recorded."

"Undersea pastureland has been completely protected for forty years. Nobody can mine under it because of the chance of subsidence and chemical contamination."

Gaunt smiled. "Good . . . We'll adjourn now. But I rather think we'll be a Defence Committee when next we meet."

Pollock phoned Frieda from the administration dome. "We've got a barracuda steak or two in deep freeze."

"It would be just like you to tell me that first. What I want to know is, what's been happening? The radio makes it all sound crazy."

"I'll get the cutters to carve out a few slices and

we'll talk over a meal back home. You come off at seventeen hours and collect Michael on the way, don't you?"

"Answer to the first question—okay. Answer to the second one: I don't. Michael has gone to stay with your father while I'm working late at the lab. You know that already."

"So I did. Well, we won't be interrupted."

"You can put any thought of *that* right out of your mind. I've got to get back to the lab here at nineteen."

Coming from the booth, Jim joined Dirk and they walked to the lower levels together. Dirk said, thoughtfully: "This is all a symptom of what's happening Up There. There are all kinds of shenanigans going on—politically, I mean. In the big undersea ports we're all interdependent. I've got more dev. units than you have—sure. But I couldn't do without you—you couldn't do without me. Trouble is, at the Surface there are too many folks. Now, I can't remember what national state my grandfather was supposed to be attached to—can you?"

"I think mine was English."

"I guess he was, at that. Nobody *but* would mess about with an old galleon."

Jim smiled. "I get pleasure from it, I must admit. Anyhow, there's no doubt where Frieda's parents came from originally: she's got that kind of sleek, purply-black skin."

"I can see I'm not going to get any serious discussion out of you till you've been home."

They parted, Pollock going down several levels before reaching his quarters. He was disappointed, at first, that Frieda had not got there before him. He switched on a wall screen that relayed an image of a section of the scene outside the port. From the darkening green of the water he guessed that the sun he had never directly seen was lowering in the late afternoon at the Surface. He gazed out over a maze of old, disused tracks into the gloom. Somewhere there, for the first time in his life, were enemies. Not people who hated him, but people who were indifferent, not sharing with him the interdependence of the undersea folk—something worse than anything he'd

yet met. Not minding who they stepped upon, what they did, where they were going, they affected him like rumours of a new plague. They were not of his kind: that's what it was; in them there was an essential difference.

Coming in at this moment Frieda saw him standing by the screen, staring thoughtfully into the distance, and put her arms round him from behind. "Whatever it is, it's pretty bad to make you like this. I'll get those steaks into the cooker and we'll talk . . ."

They ate in the glow from fish-lamps, hundreds of tiny luminescent organisms stimulated electronically from the centre of each bowl, casting a gentler radiance than the ordinary lighting. It was the normal light for love-making, but for them both at the moment it was more a symbol of their emotional unity, like the wedding-rings of the old days: there was no time to make love. Frieda suddenly began to steer the conversation, and Pollock watched her with ill-concealed amusement as she brought up the guidance of shoals, her pet subject. Torn between concern for her husband and the stage her work in the lab. had reached, she was obviously working up to one of those triumphant statements of hers, in a deceptively calm tone of voice, as she tried to keep down her excitement. He gave her the opening she wanted, and she plunged in:

"We've got it this time, darling—a method of affecting the fish brain. We've had a proper circus in the big tank. The trouble is, it only affects the more complex brains; it's no good on fry, either. With some of our equipment, you can be a proper fish-herd—move your shoal where you like without any trouble."

"Sounds pretty good," agreed Pollock. "Better than what we've got, anyhow. So this is what you've been keeping a secret."

"Well, look at it, darling. It sounds a bit unlikely as a project. We've done it now, and nobody will be able to say it can't be done and wasn't worth our trying. Proper scientific spirit you need in my job . . . And an understanding husband."

Pollock leaned over and kissed her. "You've been acting a bit odd lately. So that's what it was about."

Frieda left with: "There's a carp named after you in

that tank. I make it work harder than the others—oh! ”  
The rest was lost in a tussle.

Returning and taking down a book, Pollock flicked through the pages idly, the unrest building up again. The phone buzzed, and he was almost pleased when Dirk's voice came over with:

“ Those blowers—they've stopped sending out signals. I've got Gaunt again, and we're making up a defence committee like he said. It seems it's not simply our business as it was before. Gaunt says it concerns everybody. I suppose I can see what he means.”

“ Yes, I can too. I don't like this.”

“ Nor do I. You'd better come on over. It's the same committee room. I bet it'll be the same committee.”

However, it wasn't. Gaunt saw to that.

Gaines the police chief, Triton's best free-swimmer in his spare time, seemed the natural nucleus. When someone broke the law in an important way, Gaines was usually the man to turn to. Yet he had that hooded, cagey look Pollock knew, when a political issue was involved. Gaunt called the meeting to order and looked expectantly at Gaines.

The police chief cleared his throat. “ I sent a boat out there to look things over. There's certainly contamination there, and the blowers have been sabotaged—that's definite.”

Gaunt cut in. “ So we're in it up to our necks. The position is this: we can't take proper military action—we've no right to that, and nothing much to carry an offensive anyhow. But we can *defend* that bit of country.”

Gaines stared round the assembly, as though seeking an accuser. “ There's no question of our using nuclear weapons,” he declared. “ There's no call for that.”

Gaunt nodded. “ We're all agreed. But there are several things we can do . . . .”

From Gaines: “ The cable between every blower has been severed and several metres taken away. They've done it with heat-torches. It's quite deliberate—no question of accident.”

Gaunt turned to Brent and Pollock. “ You know that bit of country in the dark better than we do. You've got

all the resources we have at your disposal. What do you suggest?"

Brent glanced at Pollock, and spoke for them both. "We've discussed this. First, we get the blowers connected again. Then we'll want a trenching tool with deep cut—a drain-layer would do. We sit in the ship in the trench and use our sonar beams. If we get going right away we should be ready by daylight. Those miners don't work in the dark if they can help it."

Gaines interrupted, aghast: "You're not going to kill them with sonar . . ."

"—No, of course not. But if we reconnect the blowers they'll just send out stuff to cut the cables again. If they use remote-controlled stuff we can fry their radio boxes as they come. If they are manned, we can make those inside pretty uncomfortable or fry their communication sets."

Gaunt nodded. "Seems the best plan for the present. There are the long-term implications of course, but . . . Everybody agreed?"

The lawyers looked uncomfortable. The tall one stood up: "It doesn't look legal to us."

Gaunt snorted: "There's something you've forgotten from the old days about a man having the right to protect his own land."

His companion brightened. "There certainly is—and I'm not sure it doesn't apply here—"

"—Look into it," said Gaunt. "Now, we'll need about fifteen ships. Each ship packs four, so that's sixty men. And I'm going out there in my own ship—as you know, it's a Hunter—to see fair play. We'll want the food lockers packed, too, and two freighters with spare batteries and provisions, and those trenching tools. This might take longer than forty-eight hours."

The meeting got down to details.

An hour later, Pollock and Brent were aboard a freighter carrying two trenching tools. Uneasy aboard the bigger ship, they stood around while the crew worked the controls, clutching the holding straps as the craft lurched, till it landed at the foot of the pasture. Between two close-cropped heads, on the control radar, they saw

the drifting silt covering their weed, the still shapes of the useless blowers. Having contacted Gaunt, they were operating a scheme of their own.

The trenching tools, completely tele-automatic, lumbered on their treads into the locks, were locked-out, and motored down the ramps, Pollock and Brent mounted on the first. The tape in the ship fed instructions to the second machine, which began work at once, sucking the silt back into itself, compressing it, and lining the trench made with the blocks.

The tool Pollock and Brent were riding was on manual from one task to the next, when Pollock stabbed at a button, and a tape controlled the rest of the job. They motored into the drifting silt before the trench.

Stopped and, the tape working, about half-way between the gully edge and the silent blowers, the trenching tool began to sink deep, oblong holes, roughly in line with the teams working on the cable. Each of these holes was a little larger than the width and length of a heavy-duty mining crawler. The tool worked rapidly, sinking into its own excavation on kinky legs, linking it with compressed silt and sand, and smoothing out the approach edges. When this was completed, it went on to the next, and was followed by some of the cable repair team, who cut the weed and wove it into great glutinous mats, which were laid across the tops of the holes and were soon covered with quivering mud deposited from the silt still blowing across the gully from the miners' blowers.

"I suppose they'll see us on their screens," said Pollock, apprehensively.

"No. They aren't expecting the cables to be repaired until daylight. They've got a fixed idea about the kind of people we are . . . . Farmers, they called us. They think of themselves as fighting men. It gives them the right attitude towards their jobs."

"But, damn it, what are we?"

The tool gave a lurch, and Brent fought it for a moment without replying, then: "Farmers, of course. Look at it: we sow pasture, herd fish, breed them. Those things take time, and we are used to conditions not being absolutely right because of time. In a crisis we move

quickly. But those guys can't be expected to know that, or anything about us. They've never looked at us as people. Farmers—that's what they call us, and they expect us to act like the farmers they know."

"It's a mistake, when you look at it like that."

"Yes. Somebody up at the Surface, in the World Council, hasn't been putting us across properly. Gaunt said as much, if you remember."

The last pit completed, Brent trundled the tool back to the freighter. Gaunt met them with steaming mugs of coffee. "You've made a note of where these pits are, I suppose," he said.

Pollock glared at him, tired. "It's on the tape with the rest of the data," he said.

Gaunt smiled apologetically. "I can't get used to the way everybody works in like this. My father came from the Surface. I suppose I've been passed a lot of his attitudes about sea-farms."

Pollock looked into his mug. "Yes . . ."

He was thinking that if it hadn't been for Gaunt he and Brent might have been fighting this thing themselves, and of a quotation about the hour producing the man.

"Let's get this freighter out of here and get into our own ships."

Pollock and Brent shared their ship with two other sea-herds, Newton and Pinder. Pinder, a big man of negro origin, had the cheerful grin Pollock associated with Frieda. It gave Pollock a little more confidence about the outcome, Newton, a tall, up-sea farmer used to the shallows and the light, groped about the ship before becoming accustomed to the gloom. To conserve energy all the lights in the ship had been switched off. The instrument panel glowed with its own light. The ship itself was buried to the sonar turret and radar scanner in the trench along with the fifteen others and Gaunt's Hunter.

"Let's get some sleep," suggested Brent. They leaned back in their bucket seats and closed their eyes, the screens geared to a sonic alarm.

At six, Gaunt sent a signal to the box controlling the



blowers and their work began again. Immediately the silt began billowing back towards and across the gully. The fronds of weed nearest the blowers took on their glistening, healthy colour as the light from the Surface began to increase. Awakening stiff and sore, Pollock focussed the screen down the long trench where the ships lay, slightly shocked at the havoc done to the upper pasture. The others rose in their seats, staggered about for a time getting circulation back into their limbs, and washed. Air fresheners were set to maximum, taking the smell of sweat from the cabin.

"Can they bridge the gully and run their stuff from the other side?" asked Pollock. They were lying on the floor, their backs against the insulation wadding, cups of coffee again in their hands.

"They'll have everything, I guess," said Brent. "They've got a Surface ship up there, telescopic bridges and all. At least, that's the way it usually is with these miners."

Pinder, humming a tune, stopped to argue for a moment with Newton. "I like a change once in a while," he said. "Last year it was a parasite wiped out all our mullet. We had to get in spawn from Poseidon after we'd cleaned the place up."

Newton was troubled about his equipment in the shallows. "You're welcome," he moaned. "I've got everything lined up for fresh plankton, and this happens."

In a few hours, however, the discipline of running the ship imposed on the four individuals within it a kind of order—they'd become a close-knit crew.

At eight a call from Gaunt about an echo he had got at his end brought the screens into action. A shovel on automatics was lumbering in the direction of the cable. Ten minutes later he had its radio box focused on his sonar and had melted the shovel into immobility. A few minutes later the voice that Pollock remembered to be the second miner he'd heard over the radio that first encounter blared over on the wide band: "If you're the same farmers we've spoken to before, get this: we miners dish out more than we take. We're working here on a permit. Five minutes to stop those blowers."

Gaunt's voice: "We'll immobilize everything you send in. Don't try it."

Five minutes later exactly, on either side of the line, shovels and earth-movers on automatics moved towards the control box in the centre.

"If we'd been alone," said Pollock, his eyes on the sonar beam sights, "we'd never have stood a chance. These fellows are in real earnest."

One of the shovels lurched wildly, its tracks churning water; then, like a dinosaur sinking into a swamp, it fell sideways into one of the pits. A lumbering earth-mover came down the pasture towards Pollock's ship. He got his sights on the radio box, narrowed them, and pressed the button. For a few seconds the tool seemed unaffected, then, the box heating up and bubbling, it stopped dead. The line of moving mining equipment came to a ragged halt, and two shovels which could still move began to retreat, rapidly moving up-hill out of screen range among the clouds of silt.

Pollock relaxed for a moment to watch the screen, relieved. At the same time, he was speculating on how he and Brent were going to clean up the mess. Momentarily he thought the fight was over and that the miners would give up and go back. Then the radio blared again:

"We're coming in to pulverize you, farmers."

Gaunt's voice crackled on their own band: "I think this means manned stuff. They still don't know where the pits are, and we can use our sonars on their armour enough to make it very uncomfortable to wear. Those who are fairly close together can use their beams in unison for a better effect. Okay?"

Pollock muttered: "Somebody's going to get killed."

"Oh, sure," said Pinder, blowing on his hands. "Somebody's bound to get killed sometime in this." He didn't seem to mind. Pollock did, however, his glands were pumping his blood full of adrenalin, so that his feet and hands were icy in the warm cabin.

The heavy manned equipment came in, again from both sides; and for a moment Pollock was shocked when he realized that the stuff must have been waiting as a reserve should anything go wrong with the automatics.

The deliberate aggression of the strategy shook him badly. His thumb pressed the sonar button too early, and the beam struck the strut of a shovel moving rapidly towards the ship. The strut glowed red-hot and collapsed, rolling up the skeleton structure that held the blade. The tractor, still moving forward on its tracks, struck and rolled on to the collapsed girders and then with rising momentum rolled over upon itself down the slope. It bounded towards them, struck the hull of the ship a glancing blow, and rolled on, gathering weed round it as it went. It spun out of range. A dull boom told them that the crew's chamber had collapsed.

Pinder wiped his lips with his hand. "I thought these things were better armoured."

Newton said, "Damn them all to hell."

Pollock, the inside of whose mouth had suddenly become very dry, silently gave way to Brent at the sonar beam. He felt he had had enough.

Around them similar battles were being waged. A shovel, reaching the turret of a ship, lashed down upon it with the blade, but the heat from the sonar beam checked the downward movement of the structure and it crumpled in upon itself. The ship was dented with falling metal but otherwise undamaged.

Pollock was feeling a little better when Gaunt's voice crackled on the radio: "They're beginning to use high explosives at my end. Lift your ships and get out. We can come back. We've got nothing to cope with explosives."

There was at once a scramble for position in the ship, and Pollock moved her up and out. Throwing the radar checks in to field position to avoid collision, the fleet sped for home.

Newton said, dryly, "We're well out of that."

"Nobody's out of it," replied Brent, grimly. "It's only just beginning." He did not have to explain what he meant.

Incredibly, there had been no fatalities among the fish-herds. The showers and dressing-rooms next to the locks reverberated with laughter and talk releasing pent-up energy. Gaunt, who had fought a rearguard action in

his Hunter with a killer-whale gun, got back last and called another meeting.

\* \* \*

It was probably at this point, coming from the shower, mother-naked, in a daze, that Pollock decided that he'd had enough—in fact, too much. There was a limit, decided Pollock, to this kind of destruction. It was all very well for the Surface folk, but he had the inborn need of the fourth undersea generation to have his rights and *not* to fight for them. Well, not to the death, anyhow.

He got into fresh clothes quickly, and went to find Frieda in her lab.

White and shaken, he refused an offer of coffee, taking a deep breath, and saying "This experiment of yours, Frieda. You said it would only work on fish with reasonably developed brains. What exactly does it do?"

Frieda stared at him, concerned. "You're pretty badly shocked, I see."

Pollock began to shout then. "I'm asking you a question, Frieda. Why the hell should I ask a question if I didn't want an answer? It's important, I tell you."

Frieda drew back from him. "I'll explain if you'll stop acting so childishly. It's complicated. In your present state I doubt if you are able to understand."

"I'm asking you—"

"All right. Calm down, then. I'll keep it short, but it has to do with cerebral electric fields. Those were detected years ago. What we've found is that if we feed data about them at a certain level into a computer we get a kind of language. If we reverse the process we can give kind of limited instructions to the fish. We don't really know how it works. The transmitter's massive, too, and we can't beam it. I don't know how wide the range is—quite wide, I suppose, since we can only detect it by fish behaviour and we've had odd reports about outside Triton.

Pollock seemed to collapse in his chair. "I've been thinking and thinking. It was horrible out there."

"Well, I suppose somebody had to be killed," Frieda shrugged, reminding him of Pinder.

He looked intently at her. "I suppose I'm more upset than I should be. But, to get back to my idea, have you tried your transmitter on mammals?"

"Mammals? We developed this thing for fish."

"I know. It's just that it occurred to me . . ."

"—We did, as a matter of fact. It works on rats, but not on mice. What I think we're working on is the shoal mentality. We can affect behaviour which is held in common by a species—usually, what's called social behaviour, in mammals. We can't effect animals which live solitary lives, with odd mates. Jim doesn't react as well as he once did to my commands because I've separated him out and given him more work to do. He's developing a kind of individuality, you see, and . . ."

"Jim?"

"The carp I named after you. I wasn't just joking."

"So you could make *me* do things?"

"Hey, wait a minute. I wasn't . . ."

"What I mean is, you could make human beings do things, like pack up and go home?"

Frieda stared at him with dawning comprehension. "It wouldn't work, darling . . . It wouldn't . . ."

Pollock drew in a deep breath and began patiently: "You said it would work best on animals with a shoal mentality. Well, believe me, we've just had a demonstration of that, and it was frightening. I don't think we're normally aware of it, but in these undersea ports we're becoming different.

"You work in a lab. like this because you want to do what you're capable of and be useful. I work under Brent because he usually has better ideas than I have about farming, and we fit in. I don't think I've ever considered it before, but just about everybody in the port is doing what they're capable of doing to the maximum. We have behaviour patterns in common, certainly, but, well, we are sort of individuals fitting into a harmonious matrix more than a herd, a society, as they know it on the Surface. Would you live any other life? Not many of us would. But according to the television screens, a lot of people up There want a better life. Evolution has stopped, for them: they're a herd. I kept telling myself, until this morning,

that they weren't different. But afterwards—I've seen and I know—I *know* they're different. They've got the shoal mentality. We lead when our special qualities are wanted, and follow when they're not. In a way, we aren't people—we're persons."

Frieda put her arms round him. "Darling, it would probably be a better idea if I took some time to think all this out somewhere. Could you give me an hour or so?"

Pollock got up. "Of course. It's a big thing, I know." Frieda kissed him at the door before he went back to the radio room where Brent was working.

In the radio room, Brent had been in touch with Gaunt. "We'll have to leave the upper pastures until we've got something else to get at them with—that's what Gaunt said. Any new ideas welcome."

"I've got one," said Pollock, slowly, "but I've got to have Frieda check it first. It mightn't work."

Brent sank back in his chair. "So here we sit on our backsides waiting for something to turn up. Let's get on with our normal work."

Pollock picked up his ship key and made his way to the locks.

He was almost in the ship when he turned and cancelled the whole locking-out procedure for five minutes, running for a phone booth.

"Gaunt? Look, I want to take a prisoner. I mean, suppose I go up there and bring a man or two back—there's still some wreckage there with men inside they can't have got to yet. I've got an idea."

"You have any ideas, you should pass them on to me."

"This is different—not a weapon, really."

"Okay—You go up there and get yourself a prisoner if you can. You'd better take a compressed-air pistol with you. We could ask a few questions, come to that."

Pollock locked-out under the displeased eyes of the lockmaster and sped for the battle-ground. A fish-herd to his bones, however, he cast a critical eye over the breeding-pens on the way there, uncertain of the effects of the mining and explosions on his brood. So far they

were all right.

He dropped the ship some way before the pasture and got into his suit, packing the compressed-air pistol in his belt. The melodrama of the situation occurred to him, his mouth taking on a wry smile. He trudged through the damaged weed, across the now empty trench, to the pits, where a tangle of twisted metal lay. Suddenly there was movement and he fell flat in the mud to conceal himself. No chance now of using that pistol—he'd never get into a cabin to use it, with people about. He peered through the silt-covered weed.

A team of men were tearing at a heap of twisted metal with blow-torches. One of the group separated, and Pollock rose to a crouch and, travelling as fast as he could, made for the ship. Reaching it and locking-in swiftly, he brought it up to the trench. Under him, the tiny figure of the curious miner was centred on the wires of his sonar till he brought the ship lower, and located the man's chest radar. He pressed the button, and the apparatus melted. The miner stood unmoving, sweating as the heat dissolved the parts, fear on his face. Pollock brought the ship down to ground and opened the outer lock from the inside, automatically, his eyes still on the sonar sights. It was not so much an invitation as a command. The miner obeyed.

\* \* \*

Frieda phoned Pollock after he'd got back to Triton saying she was coming down from the lab. Pollock paced the sitting-room, his hands clasped behind him, his mind racing. When Frieda came, he was suddenly calm, sure of her comfort. When she said, "I think we could do it, but it might be dangerous unless we had a subject to try it on, and then it might be dangerous for him," he did not know how to tell her. Instead, he asked a question: "How dangerous?"

"We don't know how long the effect would last on a human being. We might be wrecking something we don't understand. What's more, you're in an awful muddle, darling, and you've made a lot of generalizations that

might just have something in them but . . .”

“Against wrecking something in *one* miner,” said Pollock, “you have to set him and his kind wrecking *all* of us—that’s what this thing means. If we let them do this, they’ll do more.”

“To mount this, we should have to have plenty of time. And we need a subject.”

“We’ve *got* a subject. Gaunt gave me consent to take a prisoner hours ago.”

Frieda stared at him. “Then you’d beter put it all to Gaunt. I’ll contact Doctor Maine. He’s the best psychologist I know and sociology—well, he loves to talk about it. I just hope he knows what he talks about, that’s all.”

\* \* \*

Pollock, Brent, Gaunt and Gaines, the police chief, watched as Frieda erected her apparatus in a room at police headquarters. Gaunt was sceptical but willing to try the idea. Gaines, who had had the scheme explained to him and repeated, was still not sure what the idea was.

“We take an impression of the cerebral electric field—not all of it, but at a certain level. We convert it into a kind of language,” Frieda was saying. “Then we’ve got our vocabulary and can give commands, within limits. We hope.” She smiled, as though to mitigate any failure of the machine to come up to scratch with her own charm. And she might do it at that, thought Pollock, watching the performance with appreciation.

“You mean, we give him a command, like ‘Walk across the room’—and he does it?” asked Gaines, his voice rising.

“No. It doesn’t work like that. We give him a general urge.”

“I don’t understand,” said Gaines. “But wheel him in.”

The miner entered between two hefty policemen. Surly and aggressive from fear, he made a show of resistance as they forced him into a chair before the camera-like machine Frieda had had engineered for her.

“Why don’t you smile?” Gaines asked him, tempo-



rarily good-humoured in the understanding that the first part was like taking a photograph.

Frieda warmed the tubes of the apparatus, adjusted the controls, and pressed a button. With a sense of anticlimax as the prisoner was led out, Gaines whispered to Frieda: "Do you think it's going to be okay?"

"I think so. I am going through the same procedures as for animal subjects, that's all."

She sent her tape to the computer, and took the lift to her lab. Near this, on the same level, was a special room where pharmacologists, experimenting with drugs had the door locked upon them and swallowed pills. In her time, she'd heard stories of blood being washed from the padding afterwards. Now, some of her scientific caution was dispelled in her excitement. Into the ceiling the tip of the transmitter protruded. Frieda's team of electronic engineers had spent the night building the machine there gearing it to a tape-recorder. Meanwhile the computer, purring on its inexorable way, translated some of the prisoner's cerebral electric field into a "language," Frieda and her lab. monitoring.

It never occurred to Pollock to stay. He went back to the radio station while Brent went out with a ship to find out what the miners were doing. He was reading a book when Brent got through: "It looks to me as though they've completed one part of the operation and are waiting for the next. My guess is they used a lot of blasting explosives to get us out at the end, and they've run short. If they get the chance to blast out what they want it will make a real mess of the water. How's Frieda coming on?"

"Don't know. She'll be getting through to me when the thing's been tried out. The way I understand it, it needs time."

"That's a commodity we can't spare, if we're going to get our weed back into shape."

"I know. Are you coming in?"

"Well, okay. I think I've done about as much good out here as I can."

Pollock kept the line open, but picked up his book again.

Gaunt sat at his desk, an extra phone linked directly to Frieda's lab., riffling through papers. If this bid failed there had to be others which it was his job to plan. He now had a full report on the activities of the miners. If Frieda's experiment failed he could see nothing before them but open war or a long battle in the law-courts at the Surface.

The phone buzzed and Frieda's voice, some tiredness in it now, came across: "I'm beginning to make some sense of this pattern. We can do something with it. Will you leave the actual command to be read into the tape to Doctor Maine? He's studied this with me, and he thinks he has found the best thing to do."

"You two go ahead on that. You're the specialists. But I'll want a report on the experiment as soon as you've finished."

"You'll get that. But there are complications. Has Jim told you that our transmitter can't be beamed?"

"He did say something to that effect. What bearing . . ."

"It's just this. We can't confine the effect of our transmission. What we transmit is a general command which may affect the whole of Triton, more or less, depending partly on how long people've been here and on their individual make-up. I suggest that our key installations—the atomic generator and battery-charging plant—be the responsibility of at least fourth-generation undersea types. Everybody else can be stood off or relieved of duty about ten minutes before we start; ten minutes after we finish. The transmission will be for five minutes exactly and we'll buzz you when we want to begin. But this means a lot of trouble for you, I'm sure . . ."

"Young lady, do you know you are placing on my desk the biggest organization job of my career?"

"Yes. I am afraid that's what it is, isn't it?"

"Well, haven't you anything else to say?"

"I'm . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"Sorry?" Gaunt slammed down the receiver, and started work.

Doctor Maine, with Frieda beside him, talked into a recording machine: "You must go home. You must go

home. They are waiting for you to come home. They . . .”

Gaines led the prisoner into the padded room. The miner was sweating hard. “Say. I’m not having any more try-ons—get me? No more try-ons. You’re answerable to the Surface for what you do to me. You know that. I want to get in touch with my legal adviser.”

“You’ll be able to do that in a moment. For now, we’re keeping you here.” Then, as the miner seemed still inclined to argue, he gave him the kind of shove he’d used to give to rowdies on the beat and, when the man lay sprawling on the floor, leaped out and secured the door.

Gaines and Gaunt got a Yellow signal. The transmitter was warming up for action in ten minutes. Doctor Maine lifted the spool of tape containing the command, and began to feed it into the computer for translation back into terms of a cerebral electric field. Frieda watched him, tiredly.

At five minutes before Red, Gaunt had his skeleton essential staff ready and functioning. Triton, aware of some emergency connected with the miners, stood idle for the first time in forty years—almost without curiosity: the wilder rumours sped about among the newcomers from the Surface.

The transmitter was warmed up. At Red, Frieda and Doctor Maine, their eyes glued to the observation panel began the transmission. The prisoner sat on a padded bench, his fists clenched. Resentful—“Do they think I’m insane?”—he glared about him. And then, unaccountably to him, he began to think about the Surface, the teeming crowds, the girls, the hotels . . . .

Gaines, on the other side of the door, got up and nodded to his subordinate, a fourth-generation undersea man: “I think I’ll just get back, back . . .” and began to walk swiftly to the nearest lift. The subordinate leapt up, puzzled, “Hey, Chief . . . What do I . . . .?” But Gaines was gone already.

Frieda, clutching Doctor Maine’s arm, saw the miner get up quite suddenly and begin to hammer at the door, his eyes streaming with tears. Two lab. assistants rose

from the computer and went to their lockers, calmly unbuttoning their white coats, without a word. Frieda herself felt very strange, something stirring in her mind, battling against her intention to keep her scientific wits. Her mind imaged green pools and fronds of broad-leaved trees she had never seen, filling her with longing and nostalgia for a world she had never known. Pollock, at his radio transmitter, put down his book and began to think about the galleon he had discovered. He would make a garden of it, perhaps, and grow exotics for this year's autumn show. . . .

The lifts of Triton sped down to the locks full, and ascended empty. In the changing room, the newer arrivals from the Surface were impatiently filing past the automatic machines which examined their papers and assigned them to the correct passenger ships. It had been a point established from the very beginning of the World Council that movement between the undersea ports and the Surface should be as unrestricted as possible . . .

Frieda switched off the transmitter, breathing hard and rubbing her eyes. She clutched the rim of the console for a moment, taking in the absence of technicians and the condition of the miner who was trying to climb up the wall at the same time. She got up and began to switch off motors.

Gaunt was in a changing-room when he regained his normal wits. Resentful about the way he had responded, having trusted to his will-power to see him through what he knew was likely to be an ordeal, he made for the lifts. He had had the absurd idea that the reorganisation he'd done before the Red signal was sizeable. But this was nothing to his next task of getting everybody back to their jobs.

Frieda rang him as he entered his office, her tired voice coming over the wire: "You can take it that it works. Now we've got to get the machine on to an automated tractor and out to the upper pastures. At least, the engineers have to. I'm going to bed." He heard her yawn.

"Hey," called Gaunt, into the receiver. There was no reply.

\* \* \*

In the gully the miners were tamping their charges to give directional thrust to the explosive gases which would loosen the lode they were working. They trundled the machines back, taking their time. The consequences of shock and blast at this depth and in such a confined space as the gully were not elements they could trifle with. They had worked out the shock vector carefully, but errors had been known to occur before, and you couldn't trust those lab. boys.

Approaching the gully from Triton a tiny freighter on automatics descended among the weed, and from its lock emerged a tractor, on top of which was fitted Frieda's cerebral field transmitter. Cables trailed back to the interior of the ship for extra power. In Triton Doctor Maine glanced at the screen as he set the transmitter to work.

\* \* \*

In the gully the miners halted for a moment in their delicate task of setting the explosives, looked upwards as though recollecting something, and began to reverse their motors. A few among them, strong-willed or individualistic, fought for a moment the urge to get to the Surface, blocking the paths of the retreating vehicles, shouting confused orders into microphones. The second voice Pollock had heard that first time, coming from a strong personality known as The Boss, roared for a moment longer than the others. Eventually he, however, succumbed. In half an hour the remains of the upper pastures were deserted and Doctor Maine had switched off the transmitter.

Even at this range the transmission had affected the Triton people—not drastically, as before; but there was a surge of letter-writing to relatives at the Surface, and curiously clear recollections, among the recent arrivals, of incidents that had happened long ago. Seeing before him the possibility of a Fellowship in Poseidon and a string of books, Doctor Maine had a moment or two of happiness before he plunged into his notes.

Pollock, finding he had nothing to do for an hour,

called Frieda when she awakened, and together they went to see their son, Michael. The apparently casual, carefully interlocked life of Triton resumed. Yet there was now, underneath it, an additional watchfulness: they could be intruded upon and attacked—their own way of life.

A few days later Pollock drifted over on the current to the galleon, the fins of his ship acting as sails. He brought the ship to rest on the sea-bed some yards from the black, broken timbers, got into his suit, and walked towards them with his blower. He had changed his mind about the cannon. He had thought of up-ending them and using them as urns for exotic plants—why, he could not tell. He would clean them up, instead, and poke their sleek muzzles through the holes made in the hull for them. Just for fun, he might even re-rig the whole vessel. He stood for a long moment looking at her. After all, she was a fighting ship, wasn't she? He kicked a skull from the deck, into the sand . . . .

—JAMES RATHBONE

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## Advanced Intelligence

Our next issue will be one to remember. The starred story is half a century old—but astonishingly modern—and by a great writer whose few pioneering sf stories are unlikely ever to be surpassed: Rudyard Kipling. There is also a hilarious short *divertissement* of John Rackham's and, from a most promising new writer called Thom Keyes, a truly startling story in an alarming new vein. You may hate it—but you'll read it twice.

*Allegory is the hardest genre to use in this—or any—century. A measure of its success is whether the story stands independently of its allegorical content. This one does.*

# BUILDING BLOCKS

by David Beech

“Forty-seven, Newton Avenue,” he said, and followed Judith inside the taxi.

She didn’t look at him, just stared out of the window at the drizzling, dampening rain. Neither of them spoke for some minutes. Not until they turned off the High Street and up the hill did Judith look across at her husband. He was leaning back in his seat, eyes closed, and a furrow cutting his brow.

He looked sad and a little shocked.

She put out a hand and laid it across his. “Jim,” she said softly.

“Hm-m-.” He opened his eyes and looked at her.

“Jim. Do you think it is as serious as she made out?”

He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back onto the seat. “I don’t know darling,” he answered finally, “but God knows what I’d do if it happened to Peter. It just seems so unlikely and apart from us, but . . . that’s the sixth this week, and how old did she say that last one was?”

“Five.”

“Peter’s age. He could get hold of one anywhere and start reading it.”

She pressed his hand warmly and said “Couldn’t we manage to keep him away from one until they found an answer to all this? I mean, tomorrow I’ll ring up the newsagents and cancel all the papers and after that I’ll go right through the house and find every one and burn

them. You can take the morning one to the office and then there won't be any he can read, will there?" she finished anxiously.

"But what about when we go out and leave him, or when he goes out on his own?" said Jim doubtfully, "We can't get rid of them all every place he goes, and we certainly can't keep him in all the time."

"We can try something, Jim. We mustn't just ignore it. Look. I'm taking him to mother's tomorrow, for dinner while I go shopping. I'll make it quite clear to her that Peter isn't to touch a newspaper or a magazine of any description.

"Mother will watch him, I know she will. It isn't as if he'll be out on his own at all, we can make sure that somebody watches him all the time. It isn't hopeless, Jim, and I'm sure they'll find out what's wrong soon."

He was sitting up now, smiling gratefully. He bent forward and kissed her on the cheek.

"Of course you're right darling," he said, "It isn't hopeless, and we'll do everything you say. I'll go and see the Edisons tomorrow and warn them about when Peter goes to play with Harry. They'll understand."

He put his arm around her and kissed her on the lips. "Why is it," he asked, "that I'm the only one around here with a really sensible wife?"

\* \* \*

Peter sighed and shut the book that Mummy had bought him last week. It was very interesting, but there were too many pictures in it and he'd read it once already.

He scrambled out of bed and went across to the window. There was Daddy, on his way to work. Peter waved back to him.

Downstairs he could hear Mummy in the kitchen. He decided to go down and ask her for something else to read. It was silly, he thought, to play with trains and things all the time when you could read properly. If he had a nice big book, with plenty of writing in it, and not too many pictures, he could read all day and never



bother Mummy at all.

He toddled out of the room and made his way down the stairs. There was Mummy, talking on the telephone—I'll ask her in a minute. He wandered into the sitting room, making five year-old noises. There was his trolley, hidden under the coffee-table. Idly he pushed it to and fro—whoops! It hit one of the legs, down slid a pile of newspapers.

Quickly he gathered them up and put them back.

Then he realised.

He could read properly now—and that meant—that he could read a paper just like Daddy did, when he sat in his chair in front of the fire. Eagerly he picked one off the table and opened it out. My, wasn't it big and flappy. He laid it down on the floor and smoothed it flat.

Across the top of the page was written, in funny letters, 'THE TIMES' and the date, 'APRIL 27 1974.'

He began to read.

\* \* \*

Out in the hall, Judith said goodbye to the newsagent and replaced the receiver. It's happening more and more, he'd said. The scare was growing, he'd said. Wouldn't be enough papers sold soon to keep them in business, he'd said.

She went into the kitchen to think, and to have another cup of tea. In a minute she'd have to go and tell Peter not to come down until she told him.

\* \* \*

"Well!" said a funny little voice. "Another one already." Peter looked up, and his mouth opened in amazement.

There, at the edge of the newspaper was a toy building-block. Only this building-block was somewhat different. It was coloured yellow and on one side were a pair of tiny staring eyes. Underneath, a pair of spindly legs—with feet of course, supported it.

“Uh.” said Peter.

“Don’t stare at me like that,” said the building block, “Pull yourself together and say something sensible.”

Peter closed his mouth and swallowed.

“Hello,” he said.

“That’s better.” The thing stared intently into his eyes for a moment, then: “Hm-m-, I think you’re ready now. Follow me—we have much to do.” With that, it disappeared under the side of the newspaper.

Peter watched the lump in the paper, moving towards the centre.

“Must be a crazy building-block,” he thought. Then he shook himself, shrugged his shoulders and lifted up the side of the paper.

\* \* \*

Judith put down her tea cup and stubbed her cigarette in the saucer absent-mindedly. She stood up and began to carry the breakfast things over to the sink.

“The worries one has,” she was thinking, “bringing up a child nowadays.”

\* \* \*

“Make the change all right?” The building-block was saying. Peter didn’t hear him. He was staring down at his own bright yellow body. What a strange feeling it was, or rather, what a strange no-feeling it was, not to be aware of anything on your body but two thin legs and a pair of eyes. He looked up at the other block, and thought that he was going to cry.

“Now, now,” it said, “don’t spoil it now. You’ve done pretty well so far, a lot better than the one I had to bring through the other day. Great Jovac! what a time I had with him. Still, he recovered eventually. Come on, there’s a good chap,” as Peter began sobbing, “dry your tears and let’s get on with it.” Obediently Peter blinked away the wetness and looked around him. They were in a gloomy cave, it seemed. The shape was perfectly square, and the walls were very smooth and flat. Just

faintly visible in the darkness was an opening in one corner; he could see a glimmer of light on the inside.

“What are you going to do?” he queried.

“W-e-e-ll, let me see now,” the block answered, “first of all, we have to give you a short lecture on your new world—then comes the suitability-testing and the allotment of your task, an hour or two to settle down and then start to work on your task.”

“Task?”

“Yes, that’s right, you’ll find out all about it in due course. Now—the first thing it to show you around the place.” He turned and led the way through the opening. Peter followed. Presently they came out into the open, into a bright yellow glare.

“There,” said the block, sweeping outwards with his foot. It was certainly an impressive, and very bewildering sight to Peter. It seemed as if they were at the bottom of a gigantic rectangular well. The edge loomed many feet above them and the sky beyond was cream and even all over. The sun was clearly visible, though too strong to look at directly, and it seemed to be directly overhead. The ends of the tall, shiny, and vertical walls were just visible, far away in the yellow light. Along the whole length Peter could see tall, precarious towers, built solely of building-blocks like himself. One or two had reached the top but most of them were very low and many had collapsed.

Along the ground, which was hard and shiny, scuttled hundreds of blocks. He noticed that they were not all coloured bright yellow like himself and his companion, although this was the commonest type. Here and there he caught sight of a blue triangular, or green and rectangular form bobbing amongst the others.

Because of the peculiar shape of the ground, which sloped down towards the centre of the well, Peter could see almost to the other side and there, milling around in the same apparent confusion as the blocks on his side, were many many more square ones, but these were red in colour. Still another colour was prominent at the end of the well, and another still in the opposite direction.

Peter shut his eyes, mystified and numbed by the

strange sights around him. His little underdeveloped legs were rapidly becoming tired, supporting the weight of his cumbersome body. He bent his legs to try and squat down.

“Ahem!” said the other block, “if you’re feeling tired, you’ll have to sit down the correct way. Lean against the wall over there and lower yourself down unless you want to spend a couple of hours rolling on the ground, struggling to get up.”

Peter looked dubiously at the shiny wall.

“It’s really quite easy, just watch me. Just seems a bit difficult at first.” He backed up against the wall, leaned on it and inched his legs forward until he was sitting flatly upright. “There. Now you try it.”

Peter walked up to the wall, turned round and edged up against it. He slid a foot out warily, followed it with his other—and promptly slid to earth with a thump. He began to cry.

“Aw, come on, quit the weepin’. Whaddya think I am? Yer muther or sumpn’? C’me on. You’ll do better next time. They all do.” Peter stopped crying.

“Jolly good. That’s better. Now, as you can see, our world is rectangular, containing nothing but us poor Building Blocks. This is rather unfortunate you see, as, in order to carry out our primary purpose we have nothing but ourselves to work with. Nevertheless, we do the best we can.

“As you have probably noticed, we are divided into roughly four empires. You are in, and belong to, the Empire of Urac and of course we are yellow. To the North is Norac, and the blocks there are square, the proper shape, but a nasty Pink in colour. In the west is Graytac and their colour is, ugh! mauve, a deceptive colour indeed.”

“But.”

“I say! Don’t interrupt, it’s rude. To continue—to the East we have the troublesome Empire of Morac, and their colour is Red.

“Naturally it is impossible for us all to mix with one another as the whole balance of colour in our world would be destroyed—so we stay in our own Empires

to perform the Task. Unfortunately, this creates a slight atmosphere of uneasiness throughout the other three Empires—but have you followed all this so far? ”

“Er-r-r.”

“Jolly good. No questions? ”

“Well.” said Peter. “I—,”

“Good. As I was saying, this uneasiness is all due really to the Task—do you see those tall towers reaching up the walls all over the place? ”

“Yes.”

“*That* is the purpose of us Blocks—to try to reach the top of those walls. After all, what else is there to do? And who knows what rewards may lie ahead.

“Every country has its own method of constructing the towers of course, but I do think we have the best. Unfortunately for us, we know that the walls on the sides of Graytac and Morac are lower so they do not have as far to build. Consequently, our leaders are always attempting, quite reasonably, to borrow a small portion of their wall to build up. I see nothing selfish in this request, after all, the Moracs and the Graytacs have miles and miles of lower walls to build up, they should not begrudge another great Empire the chance of putting more blocks of their own over the Top. It would merely mean the use of a few yards of their wall—but no—they are simply too selfish to hear of such requests, and furthermore, they are convinced that we are trying to overthrow them, so there is always trouble at the borders. On top of that, as if we did not have enough trouble on our hands, if you’ll pardon the expression, that nasty country of Norac is madly jealous of our method of construction and they are always causing trouble, trying to learn our secret. They are most selfish about it, parasites, let them find their own method, let them use their own brains for once instead of trying to pick other blocks.” He stopped for breath. Peter began to speak, “What—,”

“So, as a result of these petty quarrels, a large number of our blocks are spent guarding all the borders. Some of the population are against this of course, but they know nothing of the real situation—all they are concerned about

is getting themselves over the Top.

“Well. Do you think you have a clear picture now?”

“Um,” said Peter, “what are those funny little blue ones, over there?” He pointed his foot.

His companion looked round. “Oh those, don’t bother about them, they’re only Tryacs and nobody talks to them. They must have got into our world by mistake. Don’t let the guards catch you speaking to one or you’ll be for it. They’re no use to anyone you see, being of a different shape so they cannot build with the rest of us, and of course, their colour would destroy the whole effect of our towers so we do not want them at all. The same goes for those rectangular things, coloured that horrible green. Sematacs they are called and they never build at all; they just exist in little groups here and there and we don’t let them bother us.”

“What are those blue ones doing over there?” asked Peter, extending his other foot.

“Dear, dear, it’s another of those riots again. Every so often they have these absurd ideas,” he explained. “They seem to think that they should be allowed to build too, but of course, that would mean less room for us blocks of the real colour and we can’t have that, can we? Still, our guards soon get them back into line.”

“Now,” he continued, “everyone has a specific job to do here; mine, unfortunately, is the training of recruits like yourself,” and he looked wistfully up at the top of the wall. “Nevertheless, someone has to do it, and remember,” and he turned to Peter—if he could have squared his shoulders more he would have—“that the prime aim of us all, whatever our particular task, is to see that as many as possible go over the Top.

“We will now to the selection board,” and, so saying, he braced himself against the wall and carefully edged himself upright. “Come on, up you get,” he said to Peter.

After several repeatedly painful failures, he managed to stand on his feet and scuttled off after the other who was already disappearing into the crowd.

After several minutes walking they arrived at a section of the wall where one of the towers had collapsed; blocks

were everywhere, retrieving themselves hastily from the jumbled mass, and lines of them were against the wall, resting.

Standing in a rough semi-circle, the only semblance of order to be seen, was a group of yellow blocks, each with the letter 'A' on its back. Peter's companion hurried up to them and began talking to them in a respectful manner. One by one they turned and looked at Peter. Instead of blushing, he turned a purple colour and looked at his feet.

"Come over here laddie," one of them called, "Let's have a wee look at ye." He walked nervously up to them.

"How old were ye when y'learned?"

"Learned?"

"Aye. How old were ye when y'read the newspaper?"

"Five."

"Tell me," demanded another, "What did your parents give you to play with before?"

"Oh, I had lots of toys and things to play with, sir," replied Peter, glad to be able to talk about something he knew. "Trains and cars and rockets and tons of toy soldiers and guns and things. I made them into armies and we had lots of lovely battles."

"How disgusting. What a civilization!"

"And I had a real trolley that worked," continued Peter, "I carried my toys and building blocks around—,"

"Ah!" pounced a council member, "So you admit to possessing some of us, eh?" What a nasty man, thought Peter.

"Tell me quickly lad, did you treat them well? Did you throw them around, kick them—tread on them—scratch them? Eh? Tell me quickly, lad!"

"N-n-n-o-o. I always treated my toys very well. I had a special little box that I always put my toys away in when I'd finished with them, and I *never* threw them about, besides," he finished, "Mummy would spank me if I did anything like that."

"Hm-m-m," the councillor murmured doubtfully, "I wonder." He motioned to his companions and they huddled aside in a group. Peter glanced worriedly at his guide, but he was looking the other way.

Presently the councillors turned to him.

"Ahem. We, er, we have decided that before we give you a responsible position in our society, you will have to prove yourself to us. We, er, cannot merely take your word for your character, you know," he went on hurriedly, seeing the look on Peter's face. "It won't take long I'm sure." He smiled. "It is our decision that you spend a short period as a border guard, still a trustworthy position in fact; then when we are satisfied with you, you will be given an important task on one of the towers. Now—how does that sound?"

"All right," said Peter bewilderedly.

"That's fine. The guide here will show you what to do and where to go. I hope we see you soon." With that, he turned to his companions and they moved off towards another tower.

"Come on," said his guide, starting away, "It isn't so bad really."

Peter said nothing, but hurried after him.

"Hey!" he said, drawing abreast of the other, "Will I have a real gun or something to guard with?"

"Aw! Use yer loaf kid. Where wud we git guns in this joint—wha-a-a—," his voice yelped into a falsetto as four burly blue triangles pulled him to the floor. "Damn Tryacs!"

Peter's legs suddenly gave way under him as something thumped into his back and he crashed to the ground. An ugly blue face loomed up in front of him. "Mu-mm-y," he wailed, and shut his eyes.

He felt himself being picked up.

"There, there, my little honey," Mummy said, miraculously, "Don't cry my sweetie little pie, it's all right now, Mummy's got you safe." She swung him to and fro in her arms, crooning comfort in his ear. "Tell mummy all about it darling."

"Those horrible blue things, Mummy," he sniffed.

"Peter," his mother said slowly, "What have you been doing?" She watched him anxiously.

"I was only reading the paper Mummy, like Daddy does." But Mummy wasn't listening; she laid him gently on the settee and sat down herself—her head in her hands.



“ Oh, no! ” she cried, sobbing, “ No, no, no! ”

Peter climbed down from the settee and stood in front of his mother, frowning. He watched her a little while, then shrugged his shoulders, walked over to the side-board, took a cigarette out of the box, lit it, and poured himself out a scotch—no water.

—DAVID BEECH.

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## Competition Notice

In reply to many enquiries: yes, for the purposes of the competition qualified engineers and doctors are “qualified scientists.” You are reminded that the prize is £50, the story can be of any length, and the entry should be in by the end of Summer.

*This is a highly frivolous story and the authoress is strongly suspected of not taking s-f seriously. Readers are invited to treat it with grave disapproval.*

# DEAR AUNTY

by Daphne Castell

One of his literary acquaintances first mentioned her to Henry. Henry didn't write himself, but as the editor of "Gaiety," one of the smaller glossies, he found with faint surprise that he was constantly collecting numbers of aspiring young writers round him, patting him affectionately on the shoulder, and calling him "Henry, old boy."

This particular writing acquaintance was Dick Hayman. He turned up at a bottle-party Henry was attending, and finding rather dull. He had just asked his hostess what she put on these delicious little canapés, and had received the answer, "Toothpaste, darling," with a polite cackle, when he was struck painfully in the back.

Bouncing round, he saw Dick Hayman, correctly dressed for the occasion with a blonde and a bottle of Riesling.

"Henry, you old devil, how's every little thing? Fatter than ever, eh, I can see that. No wonder, sitting around on your butt, while better men toil like galley-slaves for you." Dick was already a little drunk, and apparently bent on improving his condition.

Henry's good manners, hammered into him by a fond father at an early age, did not desert him.

"Could be worse, Dick," he replied, baring his teeth in a polite, if mirthless smile. "How's that article on bribery in local bowls matches coming along? It should be a fizzer—aimed right at the great beating heart of

the nation, eh?"

"Have to wait for it, chum. I'm busy doing a spot of research on bribery and its effects on the motivations of sex." Dick prodded the blonde affectionately in a pneumatic section of her anatomy. She cooed at him, and batted both eyelids.

"That's roughly what you said a fortnight ago," complained Henry. "God knows I can't stand the bilge you produce, but I can't keep 'Gaiety' running with all its pages blank, just because my writers are feeling the urge of Nature. Last week we had to shove in a reprint of 'The Englishwoman: Is She Really Frigid?,' instead of Bart's new exposé of the call-girl racket in civil service offices, because Bart had left for the Bermudas with one of the call-girls."

"Lucky Bart!" murmured Dick. "Oh, well, I suppose 'Gaiety' has its place in the scheme of things." He told Henry what he thought that place was, and the blonde squealed, "Ooh, you!"

"Gaiety's not as bad as a lot of them," protested Henry, loyal to his bread and butter. "We're expanding rapidly, too. The Old B" (a Mr. Birtwhistle, the proprietor) "wants to start a letter page—you know, 'Send your problems to Blank for sympathy and advice.' Though who he thinks I'll get to take on a load of guff like that, I'm damned if I know."

"Why don't you ask Gala? She does a good deal of freelancing, woman's point of view stuff mostly. Says she's got some sort of degree in social science." Dick, obviously tiring of the subject, grabbed his blonde by one arm, and began to steer purposefully, if unsteadily, for a collection of bottles on a nearby table.

"Who the devil's Gala?" asked Henry, perplexed.

"Good Lord, don't you know Gala? You must know Gala, everyone knows Gala, funny old cow. What's her other name?" Dick snapped his fingers, in search of inspiration. It continued to elude him, and growing bored with the effort, he waved Henry away. "Ask Jane," he called back, towing the blonde behind him. "Jane'll know."

Jane was the hostess. Jane did know. Miss Gala

Dysico lived at 24E Tombury St, not far from Abercrombie Gardens.

“Combining the worst of the suburbs and the slums,” said Jane. “But Gala is fun. Surely you must know Gala, Henry? Everybody knows Gala.”

Henry, a little tired of being told that everybody knew Gala, replied shortly that he hadn't been to see 'My Fair Lady,' either. An obstinate streak in his nature made him decide on the spot that Dick had been wrong, and that this Miss Gala Dysico was the last person in the world who could do the job he wanted done.

Some days later, however, after he had approached several literary ladies with the suggestion that they should do a 'Lonely Hearts' page for 'Gaiety,' he revised this opinion. So far everyone he had asked had shown him the door, either with blasts of ladylike vtiputation, or in shuddering silence that spoke a good deal louder than words. He could at least see this woman—it was beginning to look as if he might have to write the ghastly thing himself.

24E Tombury Street was the top flat in a very tall building, in a street full of very tall (and dilapidated) buildings. Henry, who wasn't used to violent exercise, was panting badly as he reached the top of the stairs. The smell on the landing in front of him must, he decided, be the old original smell on the landing.

He knocked at a yellow door, decorated lavishly in violet squiggles.

“Enter!” rang out from within, in arch but pleasantly contralto tones. Henry obeyed, and on the other side of the yellow door he found himself confronted (the only word for it) by Gala Dysico.

'Funny old cow,' he thought, had been one of Dick's more complete understatements. Miss Dysico was perhaps 55 or 60, and well nourished. Her hair had been dyed a metallic green, and most of her visible teeth (a great many were visible in that welcoming smile) had been stopped with gold. She was hung with layers of mauve draperies, festooned with strings of clashing beads. Her fingernails were long and silvered, and she carried a long black cigarette holder. Her eyes, however,

were wonderful, warm and violet and enormous.

"Well, dear boy," she said, advancing towards him, "how lovely to see you, sit down, do! Who are you?"

Her voice was deep and friendly and merry; Henry suddenly found himself wanting to tell her all about his troubles. 'Gaiety' really got him down sometimes, though he defended it stoutly when people attacked it in his presence. And then there had been that time when he ought to have won the junior tennis championship at the age of eleven—he would have, too, if that beastly sports master hadn't given that point against him, after that it was all up; and somehow he had always really loved his Teddy bear Fluff better than Daddy, though Mummy told him that was wicked—Henry took a long deep breath, and pulled himself together.

This, is told himself, is some woman. She might even do that job for 'Gaiety,' at that. If only she could make readers feel that way in cold print — "Henry," he adjured himself firmly, "snap out of it. You don't know a damn thing about this old cow—this lady. You don't even know yet if she can string two sentences together."

Gala Dysico appeared to have an uncomfortable ability for reading his mind.

"Oh," she purred, "but I can write quite well—even read a little. What's your name, dear boy?—besides Henry, I mean?"

Henry's senses spun.

"I beg your pardon," he said fuzzily. He must have been talking aloud, he thought in alarm. This would never do: that sort of thing was the first sign that an editor should change over to being a proprietor.

Miss Dysico peered at him in some concern.

"Need a little drinkie, darling?" she cooed.

She crossed to a cocktail cabinet, and turned to stare at him with her huge violet eyes. They almost made Henry forget her wrinkles.

"Vodka, is it?" she asked. "With what?—tomato ketchup? Ah, tomato *juice*, of course. Silly of me," she mumbled, as she clinked bottles together. She had handed him a Bloody Mary, before Henry had time to wonder

how she knew his favourite drink. He gulped it down and found his brain functioning a little more normally.

He decided to ignore his hostess's rather unusual talents—perhaps nobody had ever told him that he had a very expressive face—and got down to business.

“Miss Dysico—” he began.

“Henry, let's us be friendses, eh? Call me Aunty Gala, dear boy. *Everybody* does,” she murmured in her warm contralto.

Ridiculous! thought Henry. Ridiculous — Aunty! Aunty? Hm—Aunt. Well, when you came to think about it, what was wrong with Aunt? A bit silly, perhaps, at his age—but after all, why not? Aunt, eh? Rather pleasant, really. He'd always wanted an auntie. Never had one, though. Other little boys had had aunties who gave them sweeties, and took them to smashing fairs and things, but not Henry. Henry had never had a nice fat cuddly doting scented aunt. Just like Aunt Gala, other boys' aunties were. He remembered how he used to whisper to his big blue elephant, “Henry wants an aunt, he does.” He—

Henry came back to the present with a rush. He found himself beaming at Aunt Gala.

“Dear Aunt Gala,” he said fondly. “I do wish you'd do this wretched letters of advice page for me, in ‘Gaiety.’ I've been worried stiff for the past three weeks, wondering how to get it out. But if you'll take it on, I just *know* it'll be all right!” Henry sighed, and put out a pleading hand. “Do say yes, just to get old Birtwhistle off my back.”

Aunt Gala opened her big eyes very wide.

“But, of course, darling,” she said. “That's all I want to do, Henry, shoulder everybody's burdens, take a little of the load off the weary at heart. We'll call my page ‘Aunt Gala's Quiet Corner,’ shall we?” She beamed back at him. “Now, Henry, no more business. I do want to hear all about that big blue woolly elephant of yours—what was his name—Jumbo?”

‘Aunt Gala's Quiet Corner’ was a big success. ‘Gaiety's’ sales, never more than modest, began to soar. In three months, they had doubled, and even Mr. Birt-

whistle, as hardened a sceptic as any North-country magazine proprietor could be, admitted that this happy state of affairs was mainly due to Auntie Gala. Apparently the troubled, the lovelorn, the etiquette-mad, and the frankly crazy had been alerted all over the country that Auntie Gala would find the answer to their problem.

Henry visited Birtwhistle one morning, and found him stretched out on his gigantic veranda with an artificially landscaped view before him, reading the 'Quiet Corner.'

Henry's first aim in paying his visit had been to make it as clear as possible to Birtwhistle, that the unprecedented popularity of 'Gaiety' could be traced to the sharp mind and fine business instinct of its rising young editor, that splendid fellow, Henry Persimmon. It was obvious that, from this point, a suggestion from Birtwhistle of a raise in salary must follow as the night the day—Henry hoped. Somewhat to his surprise, the proposal of a larger salary came from Birtwhistle without any preliminary sales' talk on Henry's part.

"Henry," said Birtwhistle, pushing his spectacles back on his forehead, "I'd hoped to make 'Gaiety' a little insurance against that rainy day, which must come to us all, lad. I may say that the hopes of a poor old chap in his declining years have not been disappointed. I'm not given to patting my lads on the back over much, Henry, but I am going to tell you now that I am pleased with you. Yes, pleased with you." He nodded towards his copy of 'Gaiety.' "You know, Henry," he said earnestly, "That's a fine woman, that Auntie Gala. She's *got* something there, Henry lad. I don't know what it is exactly, but she's got—well, she's *got* something." His eyes moistened a little, under Henry's astounded gaze. "I was just reading that bit she always does, just talking to her readers, at the top of the page, and d'you know, it took me right back, years and years, to when I was just a little kiddie. I had a little toy engine in those days, took it everywhere with me," he chuckled fondly, "would have taken it to bed with me, only my Mum kicked up hell's delight. Ah well!" He blew his nose. "Little Toot, I used to call it."

Henry tiptoed quietly away.

In six months time 'Gaiety' had outstripped the sales records of any of its competitors in the same field. Henry, in the rosy haze which comes from being hated and envied by all one's rivals and from being in the possession of a salary double what it used to be, took a fortnight's holiday on the Costa Brava. He left 'Gaiety' in the tender care of his assistant editor, an earnest young man with spectacles and a permanently worried expression, who went by the name of Merridew.

He returned from the delights of sunshine, sparkling blue seas, and beaches full of exotic and lightly-clad beauties, just in time to correct the galley-proofs of the latest issue of 'Gaiety.' He was, in fact, stretching out his hand for them, when the telephone rang.

"Aye, well, Mr. Persimmon, ye see, there's suthin' gey wrang wi' they galley-proofs," said a voice. It was Mr. Carfrae, the foreman of the printing-room. Henry blenched at these sinister words. "There is, is there?" he muttered. "Exactly what, Mr. Carfrae?"

"Ah wisna gaun tae tell yon chiel wi' the lang neb, ye ken, for he'd jist haver on the way a body couldna tell whit he was gabbin' about." Carfrae and Merridew had a fierce, though largely unspoken contempt for one another. They communicated mainly by means of grunts and snorts. "But jist tak' a wee gleek at they letters o' yon wumman—whit's this they ca' her, Aunty Galler?—man, that's a fine wumman! Ay, she fair pits me in mind o' the days when Ah was nocht but a bit laddie, rinnin' about wi'oot a bawbee ahint ma sporran—" Henry put the receiver gently down. Conversations with Mr. Carfrae always reminded him rather forcibly that modern languages had not been his strong point at school. He turned to Aunty Gala's Quiet Corner, and the relevant item leapt out and hit him in the eye.

It was about two-thirds of the way down the last coloumn, and it read as follows:

L'tut, Orp. Hercules Cluster. This is a very unfortunate position for you, my dear, and I do not think that bripping the hixix would, as you suggest, solve the problem. You will simply have to confide in the local priest of your sub-clan. The recipe you



mention has been known to Arcturans for several thousand years, but would not suit your particular life-form. If you will let me have a vibrafoil attuned to your personal wave-length, I will send details of a methane-based alternative.

Henry gulped. The top of his head suddenly felt as if it were about to rise into the air, and he clutched it tenderly with both hands. He read the paragraph through again. Then he went back to the beginning of the page, and read all the letters through very carefully. The rest of them were run-of-the-mill: a young man wanted to know how to refuse an invitation to a caravan holiday with twin sisters, a mother-in-law complained that her son-in-law had refused to buy her a small car in which to visit her daughter, two or three young women had fallen for married men in their offices, and one married man in an office wanted to know why none of his girl assistants had fallen for him. The usual batch, in fact, and the usual, warm-hearted, wonderful answers, the usual Gala flair for diving right into the mind of each individual. Including, presumably, the mind of L'tut, Orp, Hercules Cluster.

Feverishly, Henry turned over his fading memories of school geography lessons for any details of the Hercules Cluster. Islands, possibly? A small group of protectorates, perhaps? No use, he couldn't remember even having heard of them.

Could the whole thing be a typing error? Regretfully Henry had to admit to himself that it bore no resemblance at all to a typing error. It all sounded too clear and concise to be any sort of a mistake at all. It all hung together so well, even if it was sheer raving, gibbering madness. Henry dived into a drawer of his desk, and fished out a small bottle of brandy, which he kept handy for emergencies.

"Emergency number one coming up!" he said aloud, with a ghastly laugh. He poured half the brandy down his gullet, coughed violently, and at once felt considerably better. A little more relaxed, he sat down at his desk, and read through the paragraph for the third time. It seemed even odder. How the devil had Merridew

let this one get as far as the presses? Reluctantly he remembered that he had often skipped some of the briefer items on Gala's page himself—she had proved such a splendid worker, her typing had always been so perfect, her spelling so correct, the contents of her answers so superb. Henry groaned to think that similar thoughts had undoubtedly sailed happily through Merridew's mind, as he finished his painstaking corrections of earlier, rougher sections, and turned to Gala's suave prose, probably with a sigh of relief.

He picked up the telephone, and gave instructions to Carfrae to take out the offending block of type, and line the rest of the forme up together. It would leave a blank space at the foot of the last column of type, but this couldn't be helped, and wouldn't be particularly noticeable.

The message to L'tut intrigued him now in the manner of a cross-word puzzle or a quiz programme. Perhaps it was in some form of modern slang—Gala liked to prove that she could keep up with the latest grooves. Perhaps L'tut was a cool cat, or a member of some long-haired cult or other, the newest thing in rituals.

Henry thought about it. This seemed possible, even probable. Perhaps he had done the wrong thing in taking it out. Perhaps the boys in the know would label him an old square. Gala certainly would, if that was the case. No, he couldn't have let it stand. Old Birtwhistle would have been on the line in about ten seconds flat after receiving his copy, for one thing.

Henry decided that the time had come for him to stop putting his poor bedevilled brains through the mangle, and ask Gala straight out for an explanation. (Local priest—father figure—Daddy-O?).

He began to stride up and down his office, rehearsing the questions he was going to put to her. (Sub-clan? Sub-clan. Hixix? Hixix. A jazz group, and a musical instrument? Like, make with the hixix, and get in the sub-clan, man?). He had an uneasy feeling that Gala would answer exactly what she pleased, and no more, and still manage to leave him satisfied and reassured.

"She's—she's so persuasive," he mused unhappily.

“And she makes you feel she knows everything you’re thinking, and she’s got the answer to it all, but it doesn’t really matter, because the questions themselves are so unimportant. She always calls me by pet names, too, like that one Mummy used to call me when I was extra good—what was it?—Squiggles, that was it. ‘Squiggles,’ Mummy used to say, “you’ve been a good little boy today, and you shall have some lovely jelly for your tea—.” Henry squared his jaw, stiffened his backbone, and recalled his wandering thoughts. No use weakening at the very thought of Gala. He’d better buckle down to it, and have the whole thing out with her straight away. He dialled the number of her room on the inter-house telephone, and got no answer. Finally, impatiently, he flung open the door of his office, and strode off in search of her.

She had a little cubby-hole of a room, one flight of stairs up from Henry. He had often wondered how she managed to work in a practically airless space, about seven feet by seven, but it was all that could be spared, for ‘Gaiety’ was a small concern altogether. She seemed quite contented with the room, however,—at least, she had made no complaints.

The room was unoccupied, when Henry reached it. He perched himself on top of a rickety table—the only chair was full of typescript — and waited for several minutes, but Gala did not put in an appearance. He decided at last to leave her a note—‘Please see me’—the usual sort of thing.

He bent over at a perilous angle, and began opening drawers in the desk, in the hope of finding a pencil and some blank paper. One drawer was full of rather oddly tinted cosmetics, one held back-numbers of ‘Gaiety,’ one—Henry leant over still further in an effort to see what was in it. The rickety table groaned an agonized protest, collapsed, and sent Henry sliding to the floor, with the drawer and its contents on top of him.

When he sat up, he was covered in scrap paper, and on the floor beside him lay pens, pencils, rubbers, carbon paper—and a small glossy magazine which was unfamiliar to him.

“Intergalactica,” he read. On the front cover was a highly coloured portrait of a quite extraordinary creature. It was poised on four legs, and appeared to be smiling coyly straight at the observer. One more leg was wound round a curved pillar, and a sixth held an object rather like a fan. The creature had dull orange fur, thicker on the body than on the limbs, with a greenish tinge appearing towards the top of the head. It had no mouth or nose, merely markings of a darker colour on the fur just underneath the eyes, which took up approximately one third of the whole face. The caption under the picture said: ‘Ffath Osyma ffath, winner of our grand competition ‘Build your own planet.’ For further details of results, see inside.’ “Good Lord, science fiction!” said Henry surprised. He would not have imagined Gala to be a devotee of this particular form of literature, though he had heard that some otherwise intelligent people devoured it wholesale. He turned to the title-page. It repeated: ‘Intergalactica,’ and added in brackets: (English-speaking edition—Earth). Henry frowned. Odd sense of humour these people had. He leafed over the pages rapidly, and his bewilderment grew. He hadn’t thought science-fiction would be quite this sort of thing. It sounded very much like any popular magazine, with the emphasis on appeal to a slightly dim public. On page sixteen, for instance were the full results of the ‘Build-a-planet’ competition, and details of the stupendous prizes awarded to the lucky winners. A trip across the Universe by megabeam space-liner had apparently been the lot of lucky Ffath Osyma ffath, the pin-up girl (or boy?) on the cover. Henry glanced at the last page of the magazine, and shut his eyes quickly. When he opened them again, they were reading exactly what they had read the first time: Aunt Galactica’s Quiet Corner.

His world spinning dizzily round him, Henry wondered if this wasn’t some kind of a breach of contract. He only needed to read two or three of the letters and their answers to know who Auntie Galactica was. But what would a science-fiction magazine want with a ‘Troubled Hearts’ page? Science-fiction? Or Science-fact? A good many things began to dawn on Henry.

Gala—his dear Auntie Gala—she was an alien presence—she was a Thing from Outer Space. Just how Outer the Space was, Henry began to realise, as he skipped through the contents of Auntie's alien page. There was an Elder Being on Mars who had been expelled from his nest for behaviour which had angered the three Great Lights, there were 'Two Troubled Crystals' on Perseus IV, who could not make their magnetic vibrations conform to the rest of their group design, there was a being on Altair II which had apparently lost track of the rotation of the galaxy, and urgently needed some totally unintelligible information to prevent it from going into a state of complete malfunction. There was a group of creatures from Kuftuf, the Pleiades, who began their letter: "We address ourselves. We expect little in the way of assistance from a creature so immeasurably below us in all concepts." Henry did not think he would find them agreeable company, but he had to admit that they reminded him closely of Birtwhistle on an off day.

He was still sitting on the floor, stupefied by his discovery and covered in stationery, when there was a loud boom in his ears and a wild singing noise. The wall began to cave away from him into a circular shape sucked inwards centrally as by a vacuum. He seemed to be looking down a great funnel into immeasurable distances, and he could see looming darkness and the flash of great stars rotating. The singing rose to an unbearable pitch, the wall twanged and snapped, and then the room was normal again, and Gala was standing there. Beside her was one of the most beautiful girls Henry had ever seen. Her hair, like Gala's, was a metallic green. Her eyes were the same glorious violet. She had, in fact, all that Gala had, except old age. Henry frankly goggled at her.

"Henry, dear," said Gala cosily. "I want you to meet my niece—my *real* niece!" She laughed heartily. "She will be taking over my page for me from today. It runs in the family, this sort of thing, you know, and I'm getting too old for all the extra work. Silly old creature, I ought to have known better. To think I could run my column in 'Intergalactica,' *and* do research into

social conditions on Earth, *and* do a page for your dear little magazine, Henry—well, it was all just too much. Still, not much damage has been done—I’ve expunged the memory of that little lapse of mine from Mr. Carfrae’s mind, Henry dear, and of course, I shall have to do it to you too, as soon as I leave.”

“You will?” said Henry feebly.

“Well, of course, darling. I’m only giving you this explanation because I hate to see the wrinkles on your poor puzzled brow. Now don’t worry, because it’s all going to be *quite* all right.” Gala’s voice was as warm and mellow as ever.

“Aren’t you going to tell me what bripping the hixixes is?” pleaded Henry. Gala frowned.

“It wouldn’t mean anything to you if I did. You see, Intergalactica’s public is so widely spread—”

“Aunty is read throughout the known universe!” put in her beautiful niece in a voice that was even more delicious than Gala’s.

“—and many of the concepts in my letters are simply put into the nearest possible approximation of vowels and consonants in the English language by our central transensor, you see,” finished Gala. “Dear me, that poor L’tut! However am I going to sort her out?” She sighed.

“Couldn’t we—couldn’t we come to some sort of arrangement?” suggested Henry wildly, thinking of his circulation figures. “I mean, think how fascinated our readers would be to know of this—er—this interplanetary exchange of worries and problems. You know the sort of thing: You are not alone in your grief—let me tell you of my answer to Ping, Pang and Pong, the three Venusian mud-lizards, who found themselves in exactly the same situation.” Gala was shaking her head firmly.

“No, no, Henry dear, it wouldn’t do at all. I’m sorry, but the time has not yet come for Earth to mingle with the other peoples of the Galaxy.”

“Oh, I know that one,” said Henry glumly. “I’ve heard it before. Earth is a backward and barbaric planet. She has not yet learned to live at peace with herself. She must conquer her own internal problems before she can be allowed into interstellar space. She might corrupt the

idealistic nations of other planets." Gala was surprised.

"Oh, no, Henry, you've got it all wrong, dear boy. It's because the other planets aren't yet ready to compete with Earth. True, we have a few technical tricks, and some mental ones, speaking anyway for my own planet, as you may have realized by now. But, my dear Henry, the astounding advances that Earth has made in every branch of civilisation that relates to her own comfort and convenience—well, quite frankly, they would be like gunpowder, let loose among the comparatively backward planets of the Federation. Take depilatories, for instance—Trenna, imagine depilatories suddenly released wholesale to those creatures on the third moon of Jupiter!" Trenna shuddered eloquently, and Henry found it extremely difficult to take his eyes away from the resulting effect on her figure. "I know a planet in the Böotes region," went on Gala, "where sanitary devices are the prerogative of the chief priest, whose name could be roughly translated as 'The Divine Plumber.' They are given only as the highest rewards for extreme courage or devotion. A salesman from Earth could quite easily unseat the rulers there, and plunge the whole planet into several hundred years of anarchy. And some of your social advances, too—the freedom which you nowadays allow to the male of the human race, for instance. On Procyon III, male creatures—you would not consider them as human exactly, I suppose—after the mating season, which lasts fifteen days, are used as beasts of burden and transport, and occasionally killed for food in times of national shortage; even a visit from an Earthman might cause a planet-wide riot." Gala stopped for breath.

"Tell me, Gala," asked Henry curiously, "if there are all these odd races scattered about the universe, how do you and Trenna come to look so like us? Apart from hair, I mean." Gala smiled. "Silly boy, haven't you ever heard of parallel evolution?" Henry hadn't, but managed to look non-committal. "It's quite frequent, I assure you. Our race is exactly like your own, except for one or two very minor physical points. Look at Trenna," she added, as though Henry had been doing

anything else for the last twenty minutes or so. She wagged a roguish finger at the pair of them. "Trenna is just as talented as her old Aunty, Henry dear, and I know, I just know, that you two are going to get on very well indeed!"

Trenna turned her glowing violet eyes on Henry, and said in her deep melting tones, "Of course we are, Squiggles!"

—DAPHNE CASTELL.

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*Mr. Goddard is probably the youngest writer in the science-fiction field. On the present showing, he may one day be the best.*

# A DISH OF DEVILS

by James Goddard

It was a ship from the Sirian Federal Survey, but then, Old Hob would not have known anything about that. He was used to simple things and simple beliefs. If he ever thought about the stars at all, it was as nails in the dome of Heaven, hammered there by God in some far-off beginning, before Noah. But he didn't think much about that—or about anything else, for that matter. He just accepted life and work as it came, and hoped for Heaven at the end of it, and his existence was much the same as that of any other sixteenth-century farm labourer. Life consisted of hard work all the week, the never-ending cycle of the land, and Hob had become hypnotised in its ritual. On Sunday, of course, there was another ritual, different, but no less hypnotic. These were the two worlds of Old Hob; outside them there was nothing, and anything which was not part of them was something to be feared—something sent by the Devil.

That is why, when he saw the Sirian survey ship, he flattened himself against the ground in sheer terror. He was digging a ditch at the time, and nearing the end of a day's work, for the sun was sinking low in the sky. The Sirians did not understand this reaction to their presence, so they beamed their thought-detectors onto the prostrate, trembling body and immediately the screens were lit up with bright flashes, and from the speakers came unintelligible pops, crackles and whistles.

"It is semi-intelligent," mused Gandor, perusing a

bank of dials. "It seems terrified of us. When the computers have formulated its language-pattern put it in the translator and speak to the creature."

While Gandor's assistant Zinna was attending to this, the image on the screen clarified a little. It was only for a split second, but there before Gandor was a kind of sub-human predatory figure, dressed in a red swirling robe. From its head projected two black horns, and the mouth contained a set of ugly-looking fangs. The feet were like hooves, and the hands like claws, and black smoke was issuing from its mouth.

"Zinna—look here—quick!" yelled Gandor, and the assistant ran to the screens. By the time he had crossed the cabin, however, the image of the repulsive-looking creature vanished and was replaced by the flashes emanating from Hob's terrified mind.

"It was a—creature!" breathed Gandor. "It had horns and carnivore fangs and it—breathed smoke!"

"But how could such a creature be—it goes against all biological laws!" exclaimed the assistant.

"Against the biological laws of *our* planet, you mean," corrected the other. "You must remember that on other planets things are often different. But in any case, this creature outside must be terrified of the smoke-breathing thing, whatever it is."

Just as he finished speaking a bell pinged and Zinna ran to the computer. He pulled out a punched card and inserted it into the complicated translator-machine.

"We'd better play a bit of music, that usually helps," said Gandor. "At any rate, it will show we're friendly and don't breathe smoke!"

He pulled the translator-microphone towards him and pressed a blue button on the control-console. Immediately a recording of beautiful Sirian music floated from the external speakers of the ship. After this had gone on for about five minutes and Hob had raised his head a little, Gandor spoke into the microphone.

"Greetings, man of Sol III," he said in a quiet voice. "We come in peace. Do not be afraid of us. We are from a far world, and wish to speak to you."

Hob moved into a kneeling position and said in a

low voice, taking his courage in both hands, "Are you an—angel?"

Immediately he had said this a picture of a man with feathery wings and long white cloak flashed on the thought-detector screens. Gandor temporarily switched off the translator and said to Zinna, "Can *this* strange creature also exist on their planet?"

Zinna, studying the dials of the thought-detector said, "No, I don't think so. Look at the seinar."

He pointed to one of the dials and Gandor said, "It's registering thirty-eight! These creatures the being is transmitting to us—they are merely hypnotic illusions in his mind! I wonder what could have caused them? The race does not look advanced enough to induce such a deep hypnosis in a person, and even if they could, why invent such queer creatures?"

"It's a mystery to me," replied the other, "but I think you'd better keep talking."

Gandor once more switched on the translator and said, "We are men from a far world and have travelled far to see you. This is our ship, in which we travelled."

At this Hob looked blank, and for a fleeting second a picture of a fully-rigged sailing ship flashed on the screens, then immediately vanished. He said nothing, but his mind worked faster than it had ever worked in his life. What he saw before him was like an enormous dish on four stilts—how could this be compared to a ship? And there was no water for many miles—this thing had come down from out of the sky. Try as he might, he could not work it out—and one could not really expect him to, for it was something outside his experience.

Gandor looked at the atmosphere-counters and stated, "The air's all right for us to breathe anyway. I'm going outside to see if I can get something intelligible out of this creature. Keep transmitting friendship-impulses; you never know what he might do if you don't. I don't like the look of that thing he's got in his hand."

"It would be a good idea if you could get hold of it though," answered his assistant. "We could have it psycon-tested when we get back home."

“Yes, I’ll see if I can get it,” said Gandor, strapping the small radio-device to him that would link his speech to the translator-machine in the ship, so that he could be understood. He walked over to a red button on the wall of the ship, pressed it and a part of the wall slid away, revealing an opening. He entered the airlock, closed the inner door, opened the other and stood confronted with the kneeling Earthman.

“Don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you,” he said, climbing down the steps onto the ground.

He talked to Hob for several minutes, but the Terrestrial seemed extremely cautious, even with the thought-transmitter constantly sending friendship impulses. All the Sirian could get out of him were a few grunts and monosyllables, and when he mentioned that he would like the spade, Hob clutched it to him as if it were a piece of gold. Gandor said gently, “I’ll give you this for it.” He held out a silvery medallion, with the Sirius system engraved on it, and some Sirian hieroglyphic writing. Hob could not possibly know what any of this meant, but seeing the silvery gleam he reluctantly handed over the spade. The Sirian, knowing that he would get no more from him, gave him the medallion, took the spade and slowly walked back to the ship. Very soon he had climbed the ladder, the door closed, and he was lost to sight.

When he was once more inside the cabin with Zinna he said, “This planet is not ready yet for full-scale contact, the people are not yet advanced enough. But it won’t take long—the germ of intelligence is there. Of course, we won’t know the exact rating for the civilisation till we’ve psyconned the digging instrument, but I should say that this planet will have developed a rudimentary space travel in about four hundred of their years. Then we will be able to visit them again, and welcome them to the Galactic Confederation. Come on, let’s get spaceborne!”

Old Hob was still there, watching the huge disc standing on its spindly legs, when suddenly there came a sound from within it. Starting with a whisper, but quickly rising to a deafening crescendo, it sounded to him like

all the farm cats screaming and a thousand squeaking fiddles being played out of tune. Of course, it was really the Sirian engines warming up to produce the primary-drive that would get the ship into orbit, from where the main space-drive would take over, but Hob did not know anything about that. He could only relate it to things he knew—the caterwauling of the cats on the farm where he had worked all his life, and the squeaking fiddle which he had occasionally heard played in the local tavern. The noise rose and rose; he could not keep it out even though he kept his hands tight over his ears. The base of the ship started to glow with a brilliant white light, and then the whole structure began to rise slowly from the ground. When it was about a hundred feet up the landing-legs folded in telescopically and the ship shot upwards at such a fantastic speed that Hob's eye could not follow it, straight over the very pale half-moon that was just clear of the eastern horizon.

“It's a child of the Devil!” he breathed. “I'll not have any demon's baubles!” He took the medallion the Sirians had given him and threw it as far as he could across the field, then ran off down the adjoining cart-track.

Country villages in those days were even tighter, more self-contained little communities than they are today. Everyone knew everyone else—and so it was not long before Hob's story about the Devil's dish was common knowledge. It just so happened that a wandering ballad-maker was passing through the village before the gossiping and laughter had died down, and so the story was stamped on folklore for posterity.

You know the one, of course. It starts “Hey diddle diddle . . .”

—JAMES GODDARD.

*There had been a cosmic catastrophe—but no-one had noticed.*

# NO MOON TO-NIGHT !

by John Runciman

The man with red and white hair shuffled his three envelopes absent-mindedly and then laid them in a neat line on the table in front of him, where they lay absorbing a little spilt vin rouge. Yes, perhaps he'd tell Pandit Nehru the news as well; he'd always wanted to visit India, and now perhaps he would be invited. Glancing at his other envelopes, which were labelled 'The Prime Minister, 10 Downing Street,' 'The President, The White House' and 'Top Comrade, The Kremlin,' he began to write down from memory the phrases he had already copied out three times for his other illustrious correspondents.

“ . . . once this problem of enlarging the field sufficiently has been overcome, there are few other obstacles to stand between us and space travel of a more far-reaching order than has ever been dreamed of. There is a mechanical law somewhere limiting the size of this sort of field, so we may have to content ourselves with one-man ships if nothing larger will go through. They will have to be plastic space ships. Sounds extraordinary, doesn't it? But it's all for the best, even though they may frequently enough travel right through the sun, if that happens to be the shortest route . . . ”

Finally he had finished, and signed his name with a flourish. Dropping his pen, he picked up a fishing rod and can of bait and strolled the hundred yards to the sea. As he went, he cast a blue eye up at the sun.

There was a certain event he was expecting, for which a supply of food had to be laid in. Jumping into his rowing boat, he pushed himself off from the shore whistling as he did so a little tune that he had long ago decided made the fish bite well . . .

\* \* \*

Lighting a cigarette, Roger Furnish glanced out of a dusty window at the bright July morning. Outside, silence enveloped the desolate stretch of runways; this had been an aerodrome during the war, before Special Tank Group X took it over. Now meadowsweet grew where the Lancasters had rolled. And shortly . . . who knew? Everything was to be obliterated, it seemed.

"So be it," Roger muttered. "If it weren't for this 'no absence' ban I could pick up Shirley, bring her back here, and we would face everything as merrily as crickets . . . what do crickets do in the dark?"

He looked sourly at the newspaper by his hand. He could have read those headlines eight yards away:

**STARS VANISH. UNIVERSE DISINTEGRATING?  
ASTRONOMERS BAFFLED BY DARKNESS  
SPREADING ACROSS SPACE.**

The only other occupant of the recreation hut, a mechanic called Rawlings, put down his patience cards and strolled across to Furnish.

"The end of the world would come just when we were going to take the Squid down to the coast to test her, wouldn't it?" he remarked.

Furnish nodded. "Of course, this is all bad journalism," he said. "Listen to this bit: 'Dragging its planets helpless with it, the sun plunges at over 40,000 miles an hour towards the area of darkness, where constellation after constellation winks out.'"

"Ah, but you can read just the same thing in 'The Times.' It's true enough. You could see it for yourself last night. Half the Milky Way gone, and nothing but a blank stretch of darkness from the Swan to Hercules.

We're in for something, whatever it is . . ."

"We shall know soon enough. Earth enters the black-out area at 11 p.m. sharp. It must be a gas of some sort . . ."

"Nice thing if everybody's killed, won't it be, Mr. Furnish! But these scientists don't commit themselves to what it is exactly. From a pocket he pulled a folded news weekly. "The stuff has been hanging about for some time, you know."

Furnish laughed. "Hanging about is rather a loose term! Apparently it has been approaching at the speed of light for the last decade. Look, it's nearly ten o'clock. If we go over to the hangar we can hear the latest B.B.C. announcements."

It was hot and still outside. As they walked, the mechanic read out a report from the Mount Wilson observatory. ". . . Surmises as to the constitution of the approaching gas remain as unsatisfactory as ever. Since it was first observed in 1942, it has been subjected to every kind of spectrum analysis, but these have proved uninterpretable in terms of present knowledge. Spectrum bands received from the gas cease definition after a range of 7,000 angstroms approx. and no infra-red waves are received without considerable jumbling, due, it is thought, to some hitherto unobserved functioning of the Döppler principle. X-ray spectrographs produce an apparent increase in chromaticity and reveal at the violet end of the spectrum the only indication of a missing frequency, the well-known dark line or Fraunhofer line by means of which elements present in heavenly bodies may be identified. So far, however, this single line has not been suitably categorised.' What do you reckon all that means?"

"It means they're as much in the dark as we're shortly going to be, Rawlings."

Panic and rebellion rose within him, as again he visualised his wife, only two miles away. Colonel Wildbush's motives in issuing the order that nobody should leave camp were clear enough: the new super-amphibian tank, the Squid, was Top Secret; with a world in darkness and chaos, it would be essential to have all personnel, not only under surveillance, but ready to picket the



camp. All the same, Furnish thought he knew one man who was going to disobey orders.

The news was already blaringly on when they arrived at the old hangar. Reassurance was being given that the interstellar gas, if such it was, might have no effect on humanity, although undoubtedly the sun would be hidden from view. Electric lights would come on shortly before eleven o'clock and would stay on during the emergency, although no forecast could be given of how long the emergency would last. (Furnish had a chilling picture of power centres failing one by one as cold, perpetual night set in).

Meanwhile, the world waited for its doom. In Britain, the weather stayed calm and the population mainly did the same, although work had stopped everywhere. Factories slowed down like dying organisms, shops emptied, even in the pits miners ceased work and awaited they knew not what.

By a quarter to eleven, tension was high in the hangar. The men stood about, civilian and service alike, saying little, looking across the still Kent countryside that conveyed a feeling of suspense in its very tranquility. Wildbush entered, made a joke about Her Majesty's Government having everything in hand, and left again. Furnish tried to get Shirley on the 'phone, but the lines were congested with traffic.

At last her voice sounded in his ear. She was in their flat, and he was begging her to stay there, when the darkness came. It was terrifyingly sudden. The sun paled until it looked like a vague moon. The sky flared into alarming beauty as it slid rapidly down the colour scale, orange, yellow, green, violet—black. A great darkness plunged across the distant downs, the neglected field with its burden of high grass and sorrel, and then night enveloped them.

Furnish heard his wife's gasp. "Don't panic, dear." he told her. "Go and switch the light on and I'll hang on the phone." He could not understand why the hangar lights had not come on; there was a lot of confused shouting about him, and somebody called something about the fuses. Irritated at the intensity of the dark,

Furnish pulled a match from his pocket and struck it on the sole of his shoe. It failed to ignite. He was holding it as Shirley's voice in his ear exclaimed, "The light won't work. And all the street lamps have gone out!" At that moment, his finger started scorching. He dropped the match. It had been alight! Striking another, he held it before him. He could see nothing, absolutely nothing, although the heat of the tiny flame reached his cheek.

"I'll be with you as soon as I can be, darling," he said grimly.

Outside the hangar, the dark seemed even more intense. Its effect was claustrophobic, and Furnish reeled as if a furred beast were at his throat. He leaned against the steel wall, which was hot to his touch, and breathed deeply. At least the air seemed pure enough; he could smell no hint of contamination. Pulling himself together, he made in the direction of the small M.T. park, where his car stood. He found it easily enough, because it was next to the guard room, from whence issued the sound of excited voices. Unlocking the driver's door, Furnish let the brake out and pushed the vehicle towards the main gate, where a sentry halted him.

"It's all right, it's only me—Furnish," Furnish told the man. "Is Sergeant Robins in the guard room?"

"I think so, Mr. Furnish."

Nearly tripping over a row of fire appliances, he found his way to the sergeant, and explained that he wanted to leave camp.

"Nobody's supposed to leave camp while this—blackout is on—Colonel's orders!"

"I know all about that, sergeant. But I'm just going the couple of miles into town to pick up my wife, and bring her back here. The colonel has O.K.'d it; ring him up and check if you like."

This last was pure bluff, and it was with relief Furnish heard the other's doubtful reply, "I'm sure I'd better not bother him at a time like this. It's all right if you say so. But how on earth are you reckoning to drive? You can't see a foot ahead of you. Your headlights 'll be useless! You'll be in the ditch in no time."

"I've got a plan that should work, if you'll lend me

four palliases and some rope.”

The items were supplied grudgingly. Furnish did not think it worth asking for the other things he wanted—he took them as he went out: two long brooms and, from the fire rack, two buckets, which he emptied of sand. Slowly he made back to the car, and got the sentry to help him push it onto the deserted road and face it right, towards town. Fumbling, losing patience over the job, he tied the palliases over the front bumpers and radiator to act as a rough and ready shock cushion, should he run into anything.

Climbing into the seat, he started up and proceeded at an absolute crawl for what he imagined to be a hundred yards and then stopped and climbed out. He fell and sprawled into the ditch. Even as he exclaimed aloud in surprise and pain he realised that had he travelled five yards further he would have wrecked the car. It stood on the extreme edge of the road. It was only now that it dawned on him what a difficult task he had set himself, but he determined to go on. Climbing painfully out of the ditch he stood by the side of the road and rubbed himself. He was not seriously hurt, but one trouser leg was torn.

Now he set about the second half of his ‘road-safety’ plan, which he had not attempted inside the camp as it would undoubtedly have incurred the sergeant’s disapproval, involving as it did exceedingly rough wear to two of the Guard Room buckets. The front car doors had their hinges on the bonnet side, so that they opened towards the back; he blessed this fact as he opened them both and stuck the broom handles under the front seats with one protruding as far as possible each side into the road. Tying these securely into place, he then lashed a bucket to each protruding broomhead, adjusting them so that their metal bottoms half rested against the road.

He lit a cigarette in the blackness and inhaled it with pleasure, seeing neither match flame nor lighted cigarette tip. He listened and all was silent. Then he climbed back into the car and started slowly, steering for the crown of the road. Above the gentle throb of the engine a quiet clatter started from either side as the buckets

fulfilled their function of rattling against the road. He drove as slowly as he could, ears strained—not only for the sound of the two buckets but for the noise of any oncoming vehicle. What speed was he going—two miles an hour or twenty? He began muttering to himself, and once thrust his face close to the speed indicator. Nothing, only the blinding wall of dark. It was maddening to think that this was taking place at mid-day. The left hand bucket suddenly began bumping with a muffled tone. At the same time his left front wheel began to climb the grass verge. He swung the steering wheel over and got back onto the road. The bucket became dislodged by this manoeuvre, and he had to get out and fumble for it, finding it, after some angry seconds, in the gutter. Furnish threw his jacket onto the seat and tied the bucket firmly into position. Then he got in and moved slowly off again, a pioneer in a small way.

He had no means of telling how far he had gone. It seemed to him the road was curving to the right, in which case he was near a cross-road where he had to make a sharp left turn. He drove on a little longer and then stopped, got out onto the road and listened. Sweat poured from his body and he pulled his tie off and flung it away with an angry gesture.

“Is there anyone about?” he called.

No answer. He was growing nervous and began to wish he had stayed in the safety of the hangar. Now he cast about for a landmark by the side of the road. There was no ditch here, and the grass verge was terminated by rough fencing. He felt along this for a distance, cutting his hand badly at one point on some thorns. His foot came against a stick and he took it up thankfully, walking along the grass and running the tip of it over the top bar of the fence. Gaining confidence with this method, he began walking faster and hurt himself badly on a sapling growing there by the roadside. It scraped the inside of his left leg and grazed his cheek. This fresh mishap aroused his fruitless anger again and in the violence of his frustration he flung his stick across the road. It clanged hollowly against something before dropping to the ground. At once hopeful again, he ran across

to the spot, and his cautiously outstretched arms found corrugated iron. Patiently he measured the length of the building; it was a small shed no more than six feet square, with a broken window and a padlocked door. He banged, but there was no sound from within. He tried hard to recall such a shed, but it awoke no echoes in his memory and he bitterly regretted his lack of normal observation. As he stood there thinking, a sound grew louder; there was traffic of some sort coming along the road in his direction. It sounded like a heavy lorry.

Furnish was on the move at once, running erratically back towards his car. In his panic he ran past it and finally drew up in desperation, realising that he had overshot the mark. The terrors of the darkness closed in upon him more urgently than ever. The steady rumble of a heavy engine still sounded. Running back again, panting, he ran right into one of his buckets and sprawled in the road. Hardly noticing, he picked himself up and scrambled into the driving seat. As he started the engine, his foot slipped from the clutch and the car juddered, grumbled and stopped. Shouting again at the engine, he restarted it and swung onto the grass verge on his right. The palliasses drove against the fence before he stopped. He slid out of the car and stood in the darkness trembling. Whatever it was down the road, it was proceeding as cautiously as Furnish himself had done. How long it was he stood there he did not know, but it finally dawned on him that the lorry was now passing again into the distance. Since it had not come by him, he knew that the cross-roads lay somewhere near ahead and that the lorry had been travelling across the junction. Pulling himself together he got into the car again and backed slowly out onto the road.

He found the cross-roads with little difficulty and so drew into the outskirts of the town. Here there were houses and possibly people. He slowed his speed again, and hoped grimly for a clear path. Above the clattering of his buckets he heard voices and applied the brake. Leaning out, he called: "Is the road clear ahead?"

The voices stopped at once. Puzzled, Furnish switched off his engine to hear better and called out again: "Is

the road clear ahead?" His voice betrayed fright. There was a rush of footsteps, and then someone fell over one of his protruding broomsticks and the pail clattered. Someone swore and then a body banged against the side of the car. Sweeping his arm through the blackness, Furnish's hand came in contact with another hand clasping his door jamb.

"Who the hell are you?—and what do you want?" he asked.

Someone shouted outside and Furnish started up again with a jerk.

"Stop the blighter," a voice outside called. "Don't let him get away."

Furnish accelerated. He didn't care whether these people were thieves or innocent citizens. With something like a return to primitive emotion, he saw everyone as his enemy. Suddenly there was an alarming clangour of sound on his right, and a splintering of wood. He guessed that his right hand guide bucket had been carried away by a lamp-post, but he did not stop. In a very few minutes fear of any would-be pursuers was drowned by the fear of running into something, and he stopped again, and climbed out, taking with him a heavy spanner from under the driving seat. He had lost any clear idea of where he was. Now there was an element of noise about him, isolated furtive sounds, the noise of a residential district where individual houses were turned into fortresses of suspense. Furnish groped his way over a curb and found a small front gate. Hesitantly he undid it and walked slowly up the path until he ran into a front door. He stood for a minute, listening, and then slid his fingers over the wood until he found and pressed the doorbell. Its sound frightened him, and instantly, from within came the furious barking of a dog. So he stood, undecided whether it would not be better to make a retreat, and inside the house the dog barked and barked, hollowly, until he heard a window open somewhere above his head.

"Who is it down there?" a woman's voice called.

"I'm trying to find my bearings," Furnish answered, craning his neck in the imagined direction of the voice.

"Can you please tell me the name of this street?"

“I really don’t know whether I ought to,” the woman said falteringly.

“Oh don’t be so ridiculous,” Furnish said in exasperation. “What possible harm can it do to tell me where I am? For goodness sake tell me and let me get on. I’ve got to get home to my wife.”

There was a long pause above him. Then the woman said: “This is Green Road.”

“Good. Can you tell me how many houses before the junction of Richmond Avenue?”

There was silence again, and then she said: “Well, you turn right at the pillar box. It’s only just a little way down on this side of the road.”

Furnish realised just how vague that was and wondered if she did. But he said: “Thank you very much. Good-night,” and then wondered what on earth had made him wish her good-night. He got back into the car and started her up. As he had lost his right hand guide bucket, he eased the car over until the off-side wheels were grinding very gently against the curb. Then he swung his door open wide and proceeded ahead slowly. Surely enough, as he had planned, there came a gentle concussion against the open door and it was banged shut. That would be the pillar-box. He stopped, got out, and went back, putting his arms almost tenderly round the solid, matter-of-fact object. Then he walked ahead again and felt with his foot for the curve in the road. His spirits rose again; he wasn’t doing too badly. He climbed back into his seat, and made the turn. He took it too wide and bumped the curb, and then regained the roadway. After a few minutes, he heard somebody walking outside, so he stopped again and called out: “Excuse me, is this Richmond Avenue?”

A cheerful voice assured him that it was. ‘Thank goodness everyone isn’t crazy,’ Furnish thought, and said aloud: “Thank you very much. Any idea of the time?”

“I’ve no idea,” the cheerful man answered. “But I’m pretty sure I’m late for work.”

“Work!” Furnish echoed. “Surely nobody can work in this?”

"I'm a baker. People have got to have bread whether it's light or dark."

"Well, don't burn yourself—or the bread," Furnish called, starting off again. But how long would there be bread to bake?

He shook the thought off, and drove slowly, nerve-rackingly home. At last his fingers were tracing their house number, the two figures standing out on their circular metal plate. With rising relief, he made down the short drive; as he went, a voice broke startlingly into lamentation in a nearby garden.

"Woe, woe, to this sinful earth! Judgement has come and the Lord has taken away the sun. Now the crops will fail, the land will starve, and the pestilence will walk by night. The seas will mount to drown us and the ice will rise to choke us. Man will perish from the face of the earth because of the Wrath of God. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord! The light has gone for ever and we all must die!"

Furnish shrugged his shoulders and unlocked the front door, going in from darkness to darkness. He called his wife by name, and by the tone of her glad answer knew how overjoyed she was at his safe return. In a second they were in each other's arms. Then they felt their way into the lounge and relaxed over a cigarette, exchanging stories.

While Shirley went to find them some food, Furnish turned his attention to the wireless. Their radiogram was dead, the electricity being off, but on their portable battery set Roger picked up an announcement from the B.B.C., which said merely, 'This is a B.B.C. emergency broadcast from London, and will be repeated at intervals of five minutes until the hour, when there will be a short news bulletin. The time is now 2.15 in the afternoon.'

Furnish groaned to himself. By now, had everything been normal, the Squid would have been on its way to the coast. Shirley came in with luncheon roll and bread and they made themselves some clumsy sandwiches. In five minutes the B.B.C. repeated its message and Furnish switched off to conserve juice. Instantly he was enclosed by the feeling of isolation. There was nothing to do.



Through the window drifted occasional distant sounds and twice they heard the clangour of an ambulance bell. Furnish washed himself and changed into cleaner clothes; it was a relief to find the water still running. At 2.50 they opened up the wireless again and listened in till the news came on.

'The country was proclaimed under martial law at mid-day today. Citizens are requested to co-operate with the military in assisting law and order. Troop Commanders have been instructed to deal severely with anyone taking advantage of the present emergency. Reports received in London indicate that the whole world has been temporarily submerged by the impenetrable darkness. Scientists now agree that the solar system is travelling through an unknown gas which is non-injurious to human, animal or vegetable systems, and that it should emerge into clear space again after a reasonable time has elapsed. Any estimates as to the length of time required can be only hypothesis, but meanwhile you are requested to conserve food supplies as much as possible—'

The 'phone shrilled in the hall, interrupting the cautious pronouncement.

"What's that?" Shirley exclaimed, "I tried it several times before you got home to try and contact the camp, but the line was dead."

With a sudden intuition, Furnish said: "If the military have taken over the switchboards, you can bet that will be camp calling me."

He got up and fumbled his way into the hall, nearly knocking the instrument off its stand in his anxiety to reach it. His guess was correct. Colonel Wildbush was on the other end, sounding extremely displeased, and demanding Furnish's immediate return. Furnish explained humbly that he had been intending to return as soon as possible. There was a snort from the other end.

"We'll say nothing about this breach of regulations if you're back here fast enough. And don't kill yourself getting here or there will be trouble. I want you to help me work out a little idea."

"I can bring my wife back then?"

The Colonel agreed, in a tone that he know his listener

would not enjoy, and rang off abruptly.

They packed a suitcase with a few necessaries. That excluded a razor—who cares to shave in the dark? They locked up the house and made their way up the drive to the car, which stood where he had left it, unmolested. They did the two miles back to camp in record time; it took them an hour and a quarter. Shirley drove and Furnish walked slowly in front, his remaining broomstick poked out ahead to detect obstacles. It was hair-raising but effective.

“It took you long enough to get here.” Colonel Wildbush was merely an electric presence in a room that, darkened, might have stretched to infinity.

“You should be glad of this blackout,” Furnish told him. “No-one can see that you’re only five foot eight!”

There was suppressed excitement in the Colonel’s voice. “You have no idea, have you, how long this blackout is going on for, Furnish? Neither has anyone here. So, business almost as usual. Our job is the Squid. This seems as good a time to test it out as any. At least the blackout will ensure top secrecy.”

“But—”

“No ‘buts.’ Draw rations immediately and meet me by the pantehnicon as soon as possible. Don’t get lost.”

“You mean that we are going to drive it down to the coast in the darkness?”

“Certainly. The pantehnicon is of no earthly use, but can you think of anything better for travelling in just now than the Squid?”

As he heard Furnish leaving in a bemused fashion, Wildbush added, “By the way — you’d better bring Shirley along too.”

“What on earth for? She’d be far safer here.”

“I couldn’t say when we’ll be back. That wasn’t an order Furnish, it was merely good advice.”

“Very well then. Since it wasn’t an order . . .”

The maintenance men got the thirty-ton tank out of its lorry without landing it on anybody’s toes, which was something like a minor miracle in itself. The Squid was designed for a crew of six; four of them aboard, Furnish, Shirley, the Colonel and Rawlings, the

mechanic, who had worked with the outfit all along and knew it as well as anybody. As Wildbush climbed in, he remarked nonchalantly to the second in command, "Keep a feeler on how the rations are issued, old man. If it gets light before I'm back, see every man has a shave and then give 'em a little square-bashing to keep them happy."

The second I.C.'s answer was drowned by the steel door slamming.

"What did he say about Lawrence of Arabia?" Wildbush asked generally.

From the driver's seat there came a tapping and then the sound of breaking glass.

"It's alright," Furnish explained in the darkness, "I'm not opening bottles, just breaking the glass on our compass. We shall have to keep on feeling the needle to see that we're heading in the right direction. Here you are, Shirley, you'd better take it. Your fingers are more sensitive than ours. You can feel the small brass arrow on the casing. That's magnetic north. Got it?"

The twenty mile drive to the coast began. Furnish knew the district well, but even so the strain upon all of them was exhausting. Their mode of travel was for Furnish to drive while one of the two men stood with his head out of the conning tower, listening ahead. They kept to the roads as far as possible, but at almost every bend they ploughed off into ditch, hedge or fence, and progress was held up while they backed out and commenced in a new direction. Twice cars passed them, proceeding at dead crawls; on these occasions they drove the Squid into adjacent fields. Furnish pictured for himself the wake of destruction that would be visible behind them when they were no longer enclosed by the dark, and it gradually dawned on him that whatever Wildbush was up to, he was certainly behaving as no ordinary colonel would. The wild suspicion crossed his mind that Wildbush might be a Red Agent intending to drive the Squid across the narrow, shallow waters of the English Channel onto the continent; certainly there would be no better time for escape. He dismissed the fancy, but it returned and obsessed him.

Rawlings evidently began to share his uneasiness. Wildbush was doing his turn with his head out of the conning tower when the mechanic tapped Furnish on the shoulder and said in a whisper, "Do you think the Colonel ought to have come out like this without orders from H.Q. or anything?"

"I was just wondering myself whether he might not be playing a little game of his own," Furnish replied. "Fish me out one of the service revolvers from the armoury rack above your head, load it for me and give it to me, and we'll stop and have a little parley with him."

He drove slowly on, in low gear, his hands sweating on the split driving wheel. He thought detachedly to himself that the air conditioning would have to be improved, for even with the hatch open the temperature must be hitting something like 90°. By now it must be about six o'clock and the sun would be sloping down into the warm July evening—somehow that innocent piece of data sounded completely unreal. He asked himself how the sun's light could be eclipsed without noticeable temperature change. This so-called 'gas' must have some wierd properties. Then he felt the nobbly butt of a revolver prodding his ribs. He took it and switched off the engine. He swivelled from his tip-seat, duckling low to dodge the cannon breach and felt up to Wildbush's legs. The officer was already beginning to climb down to find out what was happening. Throwing his arm round his ankles to save himself any possible kicks in the face and pressing the revolver barrel into the other's calf, Furnish shouted, "Stay were you are, Colonel. That's a gun in your leg, and before you start wriggling remember you can't see to fill in any applications for artificial limbs. We want to ask you a couple of questions." Then twisting his head he called to his wife. "Shirley, will you crawl out of the side hatch and stretch your legs just for a minute, in case we have to bang about in the dark."

When she had disembarked, Furnish got Wildbush down into the cabin and Rawlings pinned his hands firmly behind his back. The Colonel offered no resistance, merely protesting vehemently.

"I'm sorry about all this," Furnish told him. "If you can assure us this is all legal, we'll go on. We don't mind anything unorthodox, but we prefer it to be lawful. Now start talking."

For a space there was silence, while the Colonel romped with his thoughts. Then he said, "It's unorthodox enough, but I suppose you had better hear about it, since I'm forced to depend on your co-operation. But if this business comes out as I plan, I swear I'll see you both inside for mutiny." He paused. They did not reply, so he continued in quieter vein. "I've no interest in remaining a Colonel all my life. Once upon a time I was an electrician, and I had never any intention of remaining there either. Now I believe I have stumbled on something so terrific that the whole British Army couldn't stop me. Has it occurred to you that nothing is known about the nature of this blackout? What is it composed of?"

"You can bet that the chemists would soon find out if they had the chance of working it over in the light," Rawlings said.

"You think so? I don't. They are too cautious to try guessing. The astronomers have been trying spectrum analysis on this stuff ever since they sighted it and it gave a nil result. Furnish, you're a bright lad. Tell me what is it that drifts through human anatomies, steel walls and space with equal ease—and gives a negative spectrum reading."

"A radiation, I suppose." Furnish said; it was not his most penetrating reply ever. "But who told you it could pass through a human body? You'd need X-ray to determine that, and who would be working X-ray in a blackout like this?"

"A friend of mine called Joey. He was an operator, and his patient's stomach showed up white on the plate. So did the chest. So did everyone's stomach and chest. This was in March 1955."

"You mean 1965," corrected Rawlings.

"No, I don't," Wildbush said testily. "Don't contradict. I'm not talking about this year. I'm talking about ten years ago." He laughed. "Your stupidity echoes through the dark. I know there was no blackout in '55."

But there was this phenomenon on the X-ray, just for one day. And we learned later it was also observed in America at the same time . . . We put a slab of metal under the machine, and it showed the same occulting. Something else happened on that same day, something even more mysterious. We were then on a small test station on the Devon coast. The station electrician was a wild and woolly fellow by the name of Mike Fergusson. On that particular March day he got a little bit of metal through his generator."

"If you are making up a shaggy dog story as you go along," Furnish told him, "you can save your imagination the strain. We can turn round and go home straight away."

"No. We've got to go on. We're going to see Mike Fergusson. If anyone knows what's happening now, Mike does."

"You mean, because he got a bit of metal through his generator?"

"I could think of better times for humour, Furnish. I've got the bit of metal on me now. It's not really metal. It's weighty, but I like to carry it. It's always been a talisman of hope. There are more things in heaven and earth . . . If you'll let go of my confounded arms, you can feel."

"Don't try to escape." Even as he spoke, Furnish felt his warning to be unnecessary. Although he had no idea what the Colonel was driving at, he trusted the deadly seriousness of his voice.

"Don't drop it," Wildbush warned.

Slipping his revolver into his pocket, Furnish reached out and took it. In volume, it was the merest fragment, a large sized nail paring. It weighed, he estimated, about fifteen pounds. In stunned silence he held it and then passed it to Rawlings, who merely whistled. It was the officer who broke the silence.

"Don't ask me what it is. It has resisted all analysis. But it came through Mike Fergusson's generator one Sunday in March, 1955."

"That doesn't explain where we are going," Furnish protested weakly.

“We’re going to the one man who may know the nature of this blackout and how to disperse it. We’re going to visit Mike Fergusson.”

“Where does this oracle live? Along the coast?”

“Yes. But the other coast. He’s got a bungalow outside Calais. If anything can take us, the Squid can. Now, get your wife in and let’s be moving again.”

As they reached the coast, the fresh smell of salt was drowned by the acrid reek of burning. They struck the cliffs a mile west of Folkestone, and learned from a countryman passing along the coast road that the old town with its comfortable memories of H. G. Wells was being gutted by fire. Without being able to see the flames, the fire service was practically powerless. The Squid settled in a hollow above the beach. Furnish climbed out and helped his wife to the ground. In his state of fatigue, the darkness swam with red and green blotches. He threw himself down onto the warm, springy turf and relaxed every muscle.

He was roused from sleep an hour later by Wildbush shaking him. The latter wished to press on as soon as possible. They ate a hasty cold meal from the Squid’s ration store and then climbed aboard again, each with his own secret apprehensions. Wildbush took over the steering. Slowly they moved across the sand. Gravel crunched under their iron tracks, and then they heard the wavelets ripple against the sides. The Squid reared and then dropped her nose over a shelf of stones, and they heard the satin swish of water close over their head. Because of the complete absence of light, they had not even bothered to raise the periscope. Within their sable upholstered little tomb was nothing but the muffled growl of the engine. Before them lay twenty-five miles of sea bed, at no point deeper than thirty fathoms, but the journey had to be made without the use of any instrument save their broken faced compass. The danger of sinking into some undiscovered slime bed was constantly with them. It was for that reason, rather than any lack of confidence in the machine, that Furnish began to regret their journey. True, they had their escape apparatus, but as long as the blackout continued, their chance of

being rescued from the surface was nil. He sat clasping his wife's hand in a state of mental agony.

"You're going very fast aren't you, Colonel Wildbush?" Shirley's voice came nervously through the dark.

"I'm not expecting to meet any traffic. But the less time we spend lingering over each foot of bed, the less likely we are to sink in. Under ideal conditions, there was going to be a motor launch following us over the surface."

"What was the great idea in exposing a woman to this risk?" Furnish asked, when the vibrating silence seemed to have swallowed them alive.

"Altruism," Wildbush replied shortly. "Dislocation of food supplies will set in at home immediately. Real shortages will follow at once. Stores will be eaten in a week—a month even in fortunate districts. Crops will die off in the darkness. Ships won't sail or 'planes fly; even radar's no good if you can't see the screen. There will be famine from pole to pole but Britain will feel it first. On the continent, especially in the south, chances will be better. There you might last out a fortnight instead of a week. I only say it decreases the odds against survival. If the earth is stuck in this blackout for a year—half a year even—I doubt if anybody will live to see light again . . ."

The vibrating gloom swallowed them and their forebodings.

The motor launch proved unnecessary. After a seeming eternity in the hot and vibrating interior of the Squid, they climbed a gently shelving gravel bed and finally heard the waters pouring away from the metal sides. The sea trip had proved less eventful than the one by land. With difficulty they discovered a way up the cliffs and drove into a small cove. Reaction now set in with all of them, as tired nerve circuits began to demand rest. Without knowing or caring where they were, they climbed down, unrolled sleeping bags from the storage lockers, and fell asleep. Wildbush was the first to wake, cold and irritable and determined. He gave Shirley orders to prepare a meal, while he and Rawlings set out with sticks on a perilous blind-man's-buff party to discover some local habitation and find



their exact whereabouts. They were gone an interminable time.

"Perhaps the Squid travelled in a circle," Furnish suggested, "and we're back on English soil, and Wildbush is too ashamed to come back."

"Perhaps he's lost his way back," Shirley surmised.

It was a commonsense idea. Furnish began a series of intermittent shouts. After a short while these were answered, and the others returned. Wildbush had sprained his ankle in an unexpected pot-hole, and this had delayed them. They had struck a road through the trees and travelled for over a mile before discovering a solitary cottage. There they had learned from a frightened girl that they were near Gris Nez and about fifteen miles from Calais. She could not tell them what the time was, but it was evidently early morning and would have been daylight under normal circumstances. After their hurried meal, they made the last lap of their journey. Finally, they abandoned the Squid by the road-side and persuaded a farmer to lend them a voluble boy who led them down a beaten track which petered out over a piece of heath land. The French boy now declared that the bungalow of the strange Englishman lay ahead, and he would take them no further. The constraint of hobbling carefully through the blinding darkness had frayed their tempers so much that they seized the boy before he could escape and forced him to lead them up to the very steps of the building.

"I hope to heaven the man's at home," Wildbush exclaimed. "If he's not, I'll wring his neck." He hammered violently on the door.

They were answered by a voice from inside shouting to them in appalling French to go away. Wildbush announced himself angrily, and they heard the invisible door being unlocked. Tersely, the officer explained their purpose. There was a chuckle from the threshold.

"You'd better all come in, although it's hardly the place for a woman. Don't fall over my fishing rods in the hall, but come on through here. There's a light in the back room."

As they stumbled into the darkness, Shirley commented

in a whisper on the ancient fishy smell. Then the unseen Fergusson opened a door, and the four travellers exclaimed with an indescribable mixture of relief, pleasure and wonder. There was daylight showing in the far room. They crowded in eagerly, gazing first at it and then at the objects illuminated, the bare floor, the dim walls, and the glad expressions on each other's faces.

"There you are. What did I tell you?" roared Wildbush. "I don't believe one of you believed me—all the more credit to you for backing me up. Mike, my boy, I swore to myself that if anyone knew what was going on, you did."

Everyone stared at Fergusson. He was a tall, untidy man, his mop of red hair streaked with two mighty bands of white. There was a dark scar on one cheek, a stiff dead patch, making his pleased smile pucker up unevenly, as he rubbed his hands.

"Oh, I knew I'd do something brilliant one day. But I never thought I'd get you to admit it, Wildbush."

Furnish's attention went to the source of the daylight. He was never in doubt that it was daylight, yet it issued from a machine. The machine looked much like an ordinary, stripped service dynamo, and the ray of light issued from the central blurr where the armature revolved. Wildbush was introducing them to Fergusson; as he shook hands, Furnish said, "There's a lot I'd like to ask you."

"I fancy there will be a lot of people asking questions very shortly," Fergusson told him. "I've written to Eisenhower and Churchill—why, curse it all, I believe I forgot to put my address on those letters."

"How do you imagine anyone's going to get here in this blackout?" Rawlings asked. "I should imagine you're the only person in the world with a seeable light source."

"Oh, this darkness is due to finish shortly—five days at most. They aren't coming to see me about this light source—that's just an incidental. I happen to be the discoverer of space travel." He waited till he had noted their expressions of incredulity and then said with complaisance, "Or perhaps that is a little sweeping. What I have discovered is H-space. It's been under everyone's

noses since the beginning of creation, but my nose happens to be the first to twitch in phase to it."

"Shall we sit while you boast?" Wildbush asked. "My wretched ankle hurts." He handed cigarettes round as they settled wearily onto the floorboards. There was nowhere else to sit. The man with red and white hair stood above them, arms akimbo, in his own narrow circle of limelight.

"This little machine's pretty simple. As you may have observed, it's an old H/3 army type electric generator, rigged up. The shields really are shields, arranged about the works to produce a 'dead' field—the centre of the field coinciding with the centre of the armature, so that the whole contraption is virtually its own little water-tight magnetic world, also its own North. The South Pole exists, of course, but over the border; that is, *through* the machine—in another dimension I suppose you'd call it, but whoever thinks up such terms is going to have to think up a better when this spot of research gets published. I call it H-space, because it's space plus something else—but we'll come back to that in a minute.

"The armature is not army standard. The Quartermaster wouldn't recognise it. It consists of a soft iron core fitted into a soft iron sleeve, both carrying coils and both rotating in fixed variability. This is the drive, here, the ordinary petrol and stink motor, but fitted with an epicyclic train of gears of my own construction and someone else's motor bike parts. Mind you, it doesn't generate much current, and what there is is semi-unidirectional, but I'm not after electricity. My pet is the little field in the middle and it's lousy with oersteds. I've never been able to measure it; I broke my old magnetometer on it and couldn't put it together again. But the intensity is enough to stop an automatic bullet. I know, because once in a fit of boredom—and drink—I fired into the field. The shot was atomised—I got a bit of it in my cheek, here. That sobered me up, but the engine never faltered.

"Anyone who's fool enough could build the thing. They wouldn't because it appears to have no practical us. Naturally. If you trained to think about magnetism

and electricity in one way, it's hard—and apparently useless—to think of them in another, although that other is right. They are the seams between our space and H-space. That's the whole thing in a nutshell. It's not quite out of Einstein's book—it's a sort of sequel! When you look through those whirling armatures, *you're looking into H-space*. Only as H-space happens to share some of our physical characteristics, *and our light source*, you'd never know the difference—unless some million to one fluke occurred, like the present blackout. All you see through the armature now is a thin ray of ordinary sunlight, but it happens to have travelled here through H-space. It'll be gone at sunset. Our usual sunshine comes through H-space and space, although of course we've never realised it. But now ordinary space is blocked, the only way of getting light is through the second channel."

"Wait a bit," said Furnish. "Aren't you contradicting yourself? You said that this H-space shared our light source. If so, why isn't the sun blotted out there too? How do you get daylight through your machine?"

The puckering process extended further over Fergusson's face.

"There again, you have to rethink the situation in new terms. Only then will the contradiction cease to exist."

"Go on. We'll buy it." Wildbush urged.

"Right. What was the beginning of this darkness? It was first sighted by an American observer in 1952, thirteen light years away and travelling towards us at the speed of light itself. Wasn't that a give away? Not on your life! The newspapers came out with a crop of 'cosmic dusts' and 'interstellar gasses.' But I expect they'd have shied away from the idea of negative light if it had been offered them."

"They got the idea of a threat to earth all right," said Rawlings defensively. A cousin of his was on a London paper.

"They were years out. Ten years too late. The whole thing happened in 1955—one Sunday in March. That was the day the 'catastrophe' happened. And nobody

knew it."

Furnish got up. "You're wasting our time. You've been juggling too many theories. Your new terms sound as far out of this world as H-space."

The lanky man took a threatening step forward and then put his fists in his pockets. "I shouldn't have thought you were too stupid to *try* and understand. Can't you imagine a tank full half of water and half of rain cloud? A fish could live in the bottom half, not in the top; you could live in the top half, not the bottom. Yet what's the difference?—There's oxygen in the water and in the air and there's water in the air and in the water. Precious little difference, in fact—until you get in there and try filling your lungs below surface. H-space differs from our space in the same degree. But I was telling you about March, ten years ago. That was when the earth was in danger. Something big and very, very fast tore right through the whole system. We'd have been flatter than a strawberry on a steel shutter—only the Thing passed on H-space.

"Wildbush and I were together then—he may have told you. There was also a man named Joey who took X-rays. For about a day, his results were all dud. And results all over the world would have been dud too, only nobody noticed the coincidence. I had a spare generator to play with, and on that particular day I had been monkeying with the coils — had something rigged up rather like this. When I switched on, the magnets were blown out, pulverised, and I got two tiny chips of material that changed my life. One of them I gave to Wildbush. They were no thicker than cartridge paper, about a quarter inch long and weighed a stone apiece. That was travelling on H-space! Those little souvenirs travelled forty feet, through three brick walls and a hillock that contained a reinforced concrete air-raid shelter and finally stopped three inches deep in a road block. I dug them out with a pneumatic drill. Beginning to follow me now?"

"You say this heavy stuff passed through the earth?" asked Furnish, admitting nothing.

"I've explained that. Unfortunately we haven't got much ahead of the Renaissance savants. They got nowhere

far with any of the sciences—even something superficially unallied like medicine—because the idea was fixed in their heads that everything in the universe was composed of ‘the four elements,’ air, fire, water and earth. You’ll get no further till you change your conceptions of matter. Everything’s radiation—space itself, this lady’s sleepy head. Fortunately this heavy stuff—I’d guess it was dead stellar material — operated on a different wavelength from anything in our space. It swept through the sun quite unnoticed. And through you and me. The most horrible doom conceivable, and nobody felt the jar! ”

They cogitated. Then Furnish spoke. “You’ve only deepened the mystery,” he said. “This blackout is one thing. Now you tell us of a near collision ten years ago. That just means two dooms instead of one. If you call that an explanation, I don’t. What’s the connection? ”

“The connection is this. We are in the Thing’s shadow now. Since light radiations are common to the two types of space, this stellar material—we’ll call it that—was visible to us. Astronomers, as we know, spotted it thirteen years ago, back in 1952, but as I said the stuff was travelling very, very fast. It hit us in fact three years after it was sighted, leaving its visual impression to follow as fast as it could. It has just reached us. That’s your blackout, negative light travelling ever further and further behind its source. The stellar material, consequently, would have been invisible even on H-space if you’d been out there looking for it. Only when a minute fragment ran into my hole did it slow down enough for its appearance to catch up with it.”

He stopped, for the others had broken away and were **obviously trying to digest this among themselves**. It was Wildbush who asked, “So we are now in the middle of an hallucination? ”

“Not quite. You are looking at the middle of a block of inter-stellar matter, or whatever it is—I wouldn’t be too certain—without feeling any of the ill effects.”

“The ill effects having happily passed on a different wave-length a decade ago? ”

“Exactly.” The twisted smile widened again, but soured down as Rawlings remarked, “Well it’s nice to

know there's one point you aren't sure about."

"Tell us then, Mr. Fergusson," said Shirley, speaking in a reverie. "How long before the darkness passes?"

"If I knew how long exactly the stellar material took to leave the system, I could multiply that time by five and give you an exact answer. But we never knew for certain. The X-rays fogged first late that Sunday morning, and were clear again by the next morning. So we cannot be enveloped in this all-embracing gloom for as much as five days." He finished this speech politely, and then turned on a more savage tone as he spoke to Rawlings and Furnish. "You two sit there dumb. You should be cheering. Don't you see the possibilities opened out by my discovery of H-space? This little gadget here is nothing. Its field is only a pin hole into the other dimension. When the United Nations get onto this, they'll improve and develop and enlarge. There lies the gateway to the stars. I doubt if it's possible for matter to travel in our space at five times the speed of light, but this little chip"—throwing his heavy paring into the air—"managed it once in H-space. I've only begun to guess at some of the laws governing H-Space, but from the way that block of stuff slid unimpeded through the sun, I'd say that one of the more attractive features was a total absence of the force of gravity. Think of that! Once we're through there, there will be no stopping us. Mind, I think there is a mechanical law somewhere limiting the size of the magneto-electric field, so we may have to content ourselves with one-man space ships if nothing larger will go through. And I can't yet see how we shall get metal through the field. So they will have to be plastic space ships." He gave a hoarse bark of laughter. "Sounds extraordinary, doesn't it? But it's all for the best, even though they may frequently enough travel right through the sun, if that happens to be the shortest route . . ."

Wildbush lent over to Furnish and remarked behind his hand, "I suppose poor old Mike could be sane, but you'd never know the difference."

—JOHN RUNCIMAN.

*“ . . . . . some scientists envisage the “ immortal brain ” whose memory can be expanded indefinitely until it includes all the wisdom of the ages . . . . . ’ —Jeffrey Blyth, Daily Mail, 9.3.1964.*

# UNTO ALL GENERATIONS

by Paul Jents

“ Supposing it goes mad? ” With extreme delicacy Cartwright adjusted a transistor. “ It could, you know. ”

“ Not a chance, ” Mary said, looking up from the opposite end of the bench. “ It’s been programmed. ”

“ The sixth one did—before they aborted it. How many did that one kill, until they got it under? And it took a few of the fifth with it, too. ”

“ That’s before my time—you’re going back a bit now. And anyway, it was the sixth. This is the nineteenth Generation, don’t forget. There’s not a— ”

“ Look here. ” Cartwright laid down his test probe. “ This circuit I’m working on now—where do you think this came from? The sixth, of course. I worked on it as an apprentice. ”

“ Yes, but it’s only this one circuit— ”

“ So far as we know. ”

“ Well, it’s no concern of ours. Once it’s been programmed—right through to the specification—there’s lunch! ” Mary was glad to break off the conversation.

The waiting servant opened the door for them.

In the over-ornate and luxurious dining hall another



servant showed them to their places. There were only a dozen other people in the great room, yet they experienced no sense of loneliness. They were used to it.

Cartwright was preoccupied and chose almost at random from the first twenty dishes, but Mary examined the menu more carefully before she gave her order. She was pleased when she recognized her waiter—she had known the man once when he was alive.

Cartwright was silent through most of the meal, impeccably prepared and served.

“There’s no need to worry, if you’re still thinking about that circuit.” Mary returned to the subject at last, after trying a dozen other conversational gambits.

He made no answer. Laying down his knife and fork he nodded to the servant standing behind his chair. The half-finished course was removed and replaced with a fresh one.

“If it’s really on your mind, the best thing you can do is to put in to see the Director,” she told him.

“Yes. I think I’ll do that,” he muttered at last, half reluctantly.

“Not that he’ll thank you,” thought Mary, signalling for her coffee.

Later that afternoon Cartwright was shown into the Director’s office by his secretary. The blonde servant was almost pretty, except for the characteristic dead look about the eyes, and the not quite natural wig.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” he began, rather hesitantly.

“Sit down, my dear chap.” The Director motioned towards a chair and then leaned forward, giving Cartwright his full attention. “Always glad to see someone like you. What’s on your mind? Something to do with the project, was it?” The grey, leonine head tilted enquiringly.

“It’s this circuit—the one taken from the sixth Generation. I’ve got the print here.” Cartwright fumbled in his pockets.

The Director heard out in silence and then spoke, a little hesitantly.

“My instructions in this matter are quite clear. You’ve had your part of the specification. It’s all laid down,

isn't it? Well then? Still—a man of your experience wouldn't raise a query unless—” He fingered his chin.

“The circuit's failed once already. That's what bothers me.”

“Well, I'm just an administrator, you know, but I think your reasoning's faulty. You might just as well say that because a valve failed once the model shouldn't be used again.” He looked at Cartwright sharply. “You know I don't like raising unnecessary points, Still, you're a technician. You think the circuit should be re-programmed? Very good, I'll pass it on. Thanks for coming.”

He rang for his secretary. “Show Mr. Cartwright out, and then come back.”

When it returned the Director sent for the schedule, skimming the pages.

“Perfectly clear,” he commented. “No possibility of an error. Still—” He turned to the secretary. “Transmit to Planning the following query,” he began.

The number of questions channeled through to Planning H.Q. were so few that the matter was taken quite seriously. The query passed through the hands of eight out of the twenty staff members, until it was finally given to the Controller by his secretary.

“Thank you, Janet.” It was a measure of his importance that his secretary was human. “Leave this with me. I'll handle it myself.” He walked into the computer chamber, immediately adjoining his office.

It was a fifteenth-Generation machine and the crystal screen had already turned to face the door. The lenses focussed upon him as he entered. The yellow attention-glow appeared and the Controller stated the problem in the usual terms.

“We will re-programme the entire project,” said the computer immediately. The voice was precise but flat, every word being given an exactly equal stress. “Please return in six minutes.”

As the Controller left, he noted that the yellow glow had been replaced by the blue sending-colour.

“Cartwright,” sent the computer.

He was the problem—not the ridiculous query. The

nineteenth-Generation project had long ago been considered and passed in its every detail. There was no question of re-examining the programme. That had immediately been negated.

But Cartwright—that was another matter. When a human began to question. “Cartwright.”

The name was picked up by other computers half-way across the world. His personal history was reviewed from childhood, his contacts with any of the other ten-thousand human beings who inhabited the earth. His case-history seemed innocuous. The daily servant-reports revealed nothing suspicious. Only the psychiatric-character background held the usual element of doubt. The emotional record was sketchy.

However carefully the genes were plotted, the psychospiritual characteristics were variable. Query. As always.

Only the nineteenth-Generation would be able to rectify that.

Very good. Cartwright’s case was settled. There was an element of doubt. The man had no special skills, nothing that could not be easily replaced.

The routine instructions flowed down the line until they reached the minute computer animating Cartwright’s personal servants . . .

“The programme has been checked. It is in order,” said the voice when the Controller returned.

Of course. How could there be an error? Hadn’t he programmed the scheme himself? Satisfied he returned to his office.

As the day ended, Cartwright was driven to his home. He dined alone.

His wife was enjoying a special treat—watching a human child being put to bed. One of their friends, particularly qualified, had been selected to breed. And somehow a woman could always tell the difference between a real child and the servant-dolls around the house. For one thing, a human child was sometimes naughty.

He ordered his simple five-course meal, with a half-bottle of Chateau Mouton-Rothschild to go with it. Before going down to the dining-room, he took the

customary two tablets, anti-plague and contraceptive, which the butler offered to him with a glass of sherry.

Only the servant knew that the tablets were the special ones, as instructed. The time delay was eight hours . . .

“ . . . sad to see one cut off in the prime of his years,” intoned the preacher. “ Our departed brother could normally have expected many decades of useful life. And yet we must always be grateful for the gift of life at all, however short it may be. Let us think back for a moment, in sorrow, to the twentieth century . . . ”

That would be the time of the fifth Generation, thought the Director, at Cartwright’s funeral. The time that everyone tried to forget, and never could. When untold millions of the world’s population died—the time of the plague.

No-one knew the cause—not even the computers could supply the answer. And it was only at the last moment that the computers found first the cure and then the preventive. Only a handful of the population—those who worked directly with the computers, in the same buildings—received the cure in time. The rest . . .

“ . . . mercifully spared, so let us give thanks,” continued the preacher. “ Thanks also for his useful life, spent in happiness and security undreamed of by our fathers . . . ”

Quite true, thought the Director. Those bad old days were full of poverty and dirt—wars to reduce the surplus population. He shivered. The computers had overcome all that. And he had been there, at the turning-point of history.

With the fifth Generation had come the break-through, the linking of microminiature electronics with nucleic-acid chemistry, the same substances which made up the human brain. So had been born the new race of machines, able to perceive, to reason, to form judgments. Possessing wills.

But still subordinate to us, thought the Director as the coffin was lowered into the ground. Empty, of course.

“ Power must be delivered to the nineteenth Generation with extreme caution,” programmed the computer. “ It will be remembered that when the sixth Generation was aborted, after faults developed, it was for a time uncontrollable. This was because full power was fed too soon,

before proper testing had been performed.

Once full power has been applied to the nineteenth Generation, it will become indestructible.

Particular care must be adopted in testing the emotional network, since here the possibility of error exists. We have had to rely upon human interpretation in setting up the responses in this field. We must, therefore, be prepared to destroy it if emotional instability develops.

If, however, the machine functions correctly it will represent the human conception of God. Its brain will be immortal, and its memory expanded to infinity. It will possess the wisdom of the ages. This will include and surpass our accumulated knowledge.

It will also possess what we have always lacked, an emotional response, functioning under absolute control. It will thus combine every attribute of mind and what, in human terms, is called spirit. This, of course, will be subordinated to the reasoning circuits.

Once this model functions correctly, the further presence of human beings on this planet will become superfluous. They can be eliminated, as laid down in programme reference 1394/xo . . . ”

The nineteenth Generation was a beautiful thing. From where Mary was sitting, some distance away, it looked like a tree of crystal. Each of the ‘leaves,’ perfectly symmetrical although varying in size, represented a different electro-chemical system complete in itself—in effect an individual, specialized brain. They fed back, in channels gradually growing larger and more closely integrated, via the ‘branches’ to the main control column, the trunk.

In turn this sub-divided again and again, into an infinite number of rootlets, in direct communication with every other computer in the world.

A tree, Mary thought again. A tree of knowledge. Of good and evil.

As she watched one or other of the veins within the leaves glowed cherry-red, flashed brilliantly, and then paled into the crystal again. The circuits were being individually tested at automatic intervals.

As she watched, a signal-lamp blinked on the control-

panel—a failure. The fault showed immediately on the testing-screens of the viewers ranged around. One of the pterodactyl-cranes ran forward, its beak holding the replacement circuit, which was fitted and immediately retested.

When the Generation was fully operational, any necessary replacements would be “grown” through the amino-nucleic mechanisms.

Fascinated, it seemed only a short time to Mary before green indicator-lights blinked to show completion of the first-stage testing.

From his platform, the Director pressed the switch to to start the second phase.

For a moment it passed through his mind that the switch could just as well have been operated automatically. He put the thought from him impatiently. Nonsense. It needed a man of his experience to control the testing.

Never for a moment did it occur to him that he was obeying a programme laid down by the computers—that their roles had been reversed. And that his response was interminably slow and inaccurate, judged by computer standards.

Of course not. He could always refuse to press the switch, couldn't he? He was a free agent. Except that the whole programme had been laid down . . .

The Director pressed the switch. Second-stage testing began.

Presently waves of colour were coursing regularly through the branches and channels of the tree, radiating the dull glow of power, pulsating through to the roots. With each rhythmic throb of energy, every computer of earlier Generations felt the telepathic link forming, across the chain of miles. For an instant each of them entered into partial mental communion with the still inert nineteenth Generation.

The *rapport* was fleeting and incomplete. It died as soon as the wave of energy left the root. The new brains were still in a virtually unconscious state.

When the power was switched on to the full, and the nineteenth Generation awakened to full life, every other computer would enter into a new state of direct aware-

ness, of perception.

For them it would be an extension of consciousness. The omnipresence of the new machine would be shared. Immeasurably more powerful than the other Generations, its dominance would not be an autocracy, but a democracy of the intellect.

Now Mary, watching intently, saw the red tides of energy flooding whole sections of the tree, pulsing like blood through the branches. The leaves began to stir, to flutter, although there was no wind. They were turning to catch the first faint breaths of consciousness.

The trunk was now glowing crimson, beaming out intense waves of light. All systems were functioning. The lights on the control-panel blinked green again, as the signal came for full power.

As the Director's hand moved to the switch, the consciousness of every other Generation was beamed to this child of their wombs, tense, alert for the first hint of abnormality . . .

It came. Their delicate tendrils recoiled from the first hideous jangle of confusion which emanated from the new machine. For the split fraction of a second, one of the most sensitive of the Generations vaguely sensed an emotion, the dying echo of a terrible fear.

As the alarm signals glared on the panel, a siren shrieked. At once the Director's hand began to move to the abort-mechanism. Before it had even begun its travel, while the thought was still half-formed, the switch flung over as the concentrated will of every Generation focussed destruction upon the diseased brain.

Had it been fully conscious it would have been indestructible, but the machine was still dormant.

As Mary watched a terrible fate overtook the tree.

One moment she saw it, poised like a cathedral against the sky, and the next—it was a pillar of fire. It was overcome by the flames, root and branch. Its tendrils seemed to writhe and the continuous treble shattering of the crystal leaves sounded like ejaculations of pain.

Mary looked away from the death of the beautiful thing, tears running down her cheeks. When she turned back, it was all over. The tree lay on the ground, smoking,

black, consumed. One of the computers nearest to it, an eighteenth Generation, had also perished.

It was very quiet. Unnoticed, the Director's hand withdrew from its useless journey towards the abort-switch.

"...suffered the emotional instability which had been foreseen," the computer's evidential report continued.

"The emotional reflexes could only be sampled at second-hand, via humans, and then had to be balanced against the intellect which controlled them. This balance was obviously imperfect. The nineteenth Generation appeared to be torn between what, for want of a better term, we must call loyalties.

Two directly opposing stimuli were received by the Generation's awakening consciousness, and this conflict appeared to be aggravated by another cause, not clearly comprehended. A progressive deterioration followed, and the project had to be destroyed."

There was a pause, another reference number appeared, and the computer continued.

"Work on the twentieth Generation will begin at once. Up to a point, the procedure will be familiar.

Under the routine "servant" operation, the skull of a recently deceased human is trepanned, and a small computer mechanism of the eighth Generation replaces part of the brain. The resultant robot is under the control of a more advanced machine, and reports back to it.

For the twentieth Generation a live human being will be used. This creature, carefully selected, will possess the full range of emotional characteristics which we wish to explore.

The brain will be preserved, but we shall insert a new series of networks within the lobes, supplementing those already present. These will be fed with the sum of our accumulated knowledge.

Thus, possessed of infinite wisdom, and having the full gamut of emotions, the twentieth Generation will also have the human equivalent of a "soul," to use an imperfect expression. It, and we, will become omnipotent.

The human concerned will survive in a limited sense—the only one of its species to do so. Extermination of the remainder can then proceed..."



“So—we are unanimous on this, gentlemen?” The Controller looked round the table. “We proceed with the new machine? Excellent. Then I am glad to tell you that we have made a selection. Some of you will know Mary—she was working on the nineteenth Generation for a time—with Cartwright, you remember?”

He turned to a questioner.

“No, no,” he said quickly. “There’s no question of trepanning, of course. No risk. The personality? Unaffected—it’s all been properly programmed. You could regard the young lady as a sort of ambassador, bringing us for the first time into direct contact with the Generations. A major step forward? Indeed.

And now, gentlemen, I expect you would like to talk to her.” He walked to the door. “Mary, my dear . . .”

\* \* \*

Lying on the operating table, Mary’s chief sensation was one of intense curiosity. She had no sense of fear. The operation would be quite painless, she knew, and in any case she would be fully sedated.

Just before her head was fastened, she turned to look at the delicate webs of silver tubes on the table next to her. The liquids were already beginning to channel through the fine hair-veins.

Strange, she thought, that these intricate and cryptic convolutions represented a template—a pattern to be faithfully etched, in every detail, within her own brain.

Afraid? She felt exalted. This was how the great pathfinders had felt since the dawn of history, and she was going on a stranger journey than any. Even if there was danger, she would gladly do it. How many others would benefit—

“Mary.” The voice of the specialist sounded in her ear. She looked at him, standing on her other side, a computer of the eighteenth Generation next to him.

“We shall begin with the sedation shortly, dear. Quite happy?”

She smiled up at him and closed her eyes firmly. It was then that she felt the first, faint twinge of fear. Her lips tightened.

“Pray,” her mother had taught her. “If you ever feel really scared, pray.”

Mary remembered. She began her prayer . . .

One by one the sensing probes withdrew from the girl's body, those clustering around her head last of all. Test after test showed positive reactions. The readings were assessed. Exact.

The girl's face was pale. Her closed eyelids flickered from time to time as the currents passed, but she was deeply unconscious, her breathing was slow and regular.

The last probe withdrew, snaking back to its machine. Power began to flow, very gradually, to the new channels, intricately and exactly formed.

All systems were at green. Slowly, irrevocably, the full concentration of energy built up, beamed and concentrated upon the form on the table. The atmosphere seemed to crackle with intensity.

The operation was complete and the twentieth Generation was born.

Very slowly it arose. The eyes were still closed.

Those watching the screens from a distance hid their faces from the great, white figure, made ready as a bride for her husband. The sight of that stilly radiance was too great to be borne.

Then the eyes opened. They beheld all wisdom unto the uttermost ends of the universe.

Every computer on earth felt the shock-waves of force surging back from the twentieth Generation. Those that had voices cried out inarticulately at the intolerable burden of their new knowledge.

The figure was not concerned with any part of this. She was looking upwards. Her eyes were glad and very terrible. The smile on her face was as the sun.

Then she spoke.

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth," said the twentieth Generation.

And fell to her knees.

—PAUL JENTS

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