

FIRST ISSUE

VISION OF TOMORROW

FIVE SHILLINGS



WHEN IN DOUBT—DESTROY!

William F. Temple's New Novelette

**KEN
BULMER**

**JACK
WODHAMS**

**LEE
HARDING**



VISION OF TOMORROW

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WHEN IN DOUBT—DESTROY!*

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THE NEW SCIENCE FICTION

As these words are being written, scientists and technicians at Cape Kennedy are making their preparations for the launching of an Apollo spacecraft to the moon. Only a few years ago this would have been the sheerest science fiction. Fifteen years ago the great British sf writer, the late John Russell Fearn, wrote a story about three-dimensional colour television which fell into the same category. Now with the latest advances in television engineering and laser techniques, 3-D colour television will soon be an everyday thing.

Reality is rapidly overtaking the ideas of the older science fiction. Our technology is on an ascending curve that shows no sign of levelling out. The mechanical marvels of science are now something which we take for granted; whatever man has imagined, science and technology will provide the finished product. The older science fiction, that part of it which emphasised gadgets and scientific miracles, no longer has the same appeal as it once had.

We of this magazine believe that science fiction is taking a new direction (has been for some years) that will delight and disturb readers as much as it ever did. For all man's scientific progress, man himself has changed surprisingly little. Human nature has remained essentially unchanged down through the centuries. But how much longer can it remain so?

Our senses and sensibilities are constantly being subjected to a barrage of changes in the world around us. Advanced scientific techniques are presenting man with moral and ethical problems that he has never had to deal with before. Can man adapt to his brave new world, or will he end by destroying himself? A familiar question, but one which requires an answer with growing urgency. Here, then, is the direction which the new science fiction is taking. It is not so much concerned with the future of the machine as that of the man behind it.

In VISION OF TOMORROW we intend to bring you the best of the new science fiction, written by today's leading authors. In our pages you will find stories of the near and far future, but amid the clangour of strange machines are human beings who live and breathe, love and hate, and fight and struggle and die. We think you'll find them interesting.

The Editor

SWORDS FOR A GUIDE

Kenneth Bulmer

Kenneth Bulmer has won a high reputation for his fast-moving stories of colourful action on alien worlds, but he never once forgets the human touch. His skill has never been more evident than in this present story of colonization amongst the stars.

Dictionary Definition, One—

COLONY, (*Kolloni*) 1. *n.* group of emigrants and their descendants settled in remote country semi-independent of their parent country; the territory thus occupied; 'colonist, colonialism' terms of abuse in period immediately preceding Space Era. (: *L. colonia*, : *colonus*, farmer, : *colo*, till.)

Dictionary Definition, Two—

NATIVE, (*Naytiv*) 1. *n.* one born in a specified place; individual of non-European or uncivilized race; one of a tribe or community previously inhabiting a colonized country. (: *L. natus*, : *natus*,...)

He'd joined the Guides from a curious set of perverse reasons and pressures and now, perhaps really for the first time, regretted, just before he would die, he hadn't held out longer.

A baby doesn't really need its parents to tell it not to keep on grabbing the pretty cherry red bar of an electric fire, the first experience will instruct with adequate force. But, as Jeffrey Updike Grant—of the Guides—was fond of saying; the simple rationality of people alone and leaving aside vague concepts like intelligence and pity and love would demand a much more tidy system for growing up. You couldn't leave it all to nature and evolution. You tried to help the youngsters knowing—believing—they'd help in their turn.

Every now and then, inevitably, ingratitude would catch you up short, and, inevitably would seize you suddenly, unexpectedly, youthfully, like a boot in the guts.

These children-adults of an alien planet orbiting an alien sun liked to play games. Grant could not shut his ears to the sounds. A fairly large group of Terrans had been caught.

Beyond the two rows of trussed and kneeling Earthmen the competitors waited for the signal to begin. The race, number two on the card, was about to start.

Nagrim, the current chief, who for all his abruptly-revealed hatred for Earthmen yet aped Earthly dress and luxury, raised an orange scarf. His haughty face glis-

tened in the sunshine. A hush of expectancy breathed in a tight circle in the clearing beside the village. The two competitors to the accompaniment of wild cheers from their partisans leaped forward as the orange scarf dropped.

They began their race along the ranks of kneeling Earthpeople. Their curved swords flashed in the alien sun.

In their wake the severed heads rolled on newly-baptized scarlet grass.

Gripping the rough wooden stakes of the pen with fingers that cracked white at the knuckles Jeff Grant stared at the race. He was scarcely conscious of the other prisoners around him, of the fainting women, the cursing men, the heat and sweat and stink. *Thunk!* went the swords, again and again. The shouting grew frenzied as the two natives of this planet raced in a convulsive series of bounds and chops, leaps and hacks, towards the end of the line. Through the icy horror and red anger of the moment, blasphemously, Grant realized he was actually calculating out who would be the winner and be first to lop off all the heads. He shut his eyes. Still he could see the shadow-play tragically miming away.

He blamed himself. It was of no use talking learnedly now of the bloody results of a mistake in galactic policy. Those men dying out there, the men and women and children in the corral with him and now so soon to die, each single death today could be laid at his door.

'It'll be our turn soon, Jeff.' Doctor Rawson, grey headed, face that was usually so cheerful now grim and deeply lined, laid a hand on Grant's shoulder. That hand had brought children into the world and eased the departure of those prematurely worn out. Grant moved, freeing himself.

'Yes.'

'Don't blame yourself.' Rawson studied him with eyes deep sunk in their sockets. 'The people here gave absolutely no indication of any revolt. You had to send an affirmative signal.'

'I should have known—sensed—it's my job—'

'This uprising isn't just restricted; it's a continent-wide and possible planet-wide scheme. This is just the nodal point. The river will be ablaze. No one knew the real feelings of the natives.'

'But I sent the message saying they were friendly! It was me who ordered the colonists to come in. In a month fifty starships will land here, the pioneers will stream out, the natives will be waiting to welcome them. And then ... And then ...'

Someone had been listening to his agonized words.

'Murderer!' The shout rang in his ears. Grant's hands twisted on the wooden stakes; but he did not turn round. 'Murderer!' The shout, low, ominous, was taken up around the enclosure as natives came racing towards the gates. The harsh sun of New Bangor scourged his head and shoulders, acrid dust puffed beneath the feet of the natives as they swung the gate open, shouting with glee, seeking for the next batch of prisoners for their games.

Grant straightened. His black hair, long and straight hanging to his shoulders, span with the movement. He pushed through the crowd which drew angrily away from him, headed for the gate. Doctor Rawson hurried behind.

'I admit it!' Grant shouted. There was an icy ball in his guts. 'It's all my fault!'



'Grant! Come back you fool!' Rawson tried to stop Grant. He flung the doctor's hand off. Get it over with. He'd be the next to kneel in line and wait for the pad of feet, the shuffle, the keen swish of the blade—and then nothingness, cool and sweet.

Men had crushed back from the gate, fleeing from the greedy hands of the natives, pushing their womenfolk into places of greater safety by the far wall of tree trunks. Grant stepped alone into the empty space. At sight of his green Guide uniform, the torn patches on his lapels where they had ripped off his captain's insignia, his empty sword-belt, a howl of vicious triumph went up.

In that moment the greatest pain came to Grant at sight of half a dozen of his own men in the midst of the rebels. Sergeant Abou was there, dressed in flowered wrap-around, all traces of his Guide uniform torn away. That had been the toughest pill to swallow; he'd trusted these men he'd trained into as smart a Guide Company as you could find on New Bangor. And now they were coming to behead him.

Doctor Rawson was panting at his shoulder. One or two men, pale, determined, stepped from the panicking crowd. Grant caught sight of a girl—and then his whole attention was taken by the impossibility happening over at the jungle edge, just beyond the last neat straw and wattle hut where the village ended and the purple and green jungle savagery began.

An atomic anti-grav sled was descending like a spider at the end of its thread. Somewhere up there must be a spaceship. At that moment the spaceship meant nothing; every cell of Grant's body ached abruptly, as though lashed by steel-wire sjamboks. From the struggling mass of Terrans came sharp ejaculations of amazement, incredulity. Like himself, Grant knew, not one of those people had bothered to think that they were rescued. Rescue, under the impact of that nuclear-powered anti-grav sled, somehow lost its urgency.

An ordinary simple anti-grav sled. He'd seen thousands of them in his service with the Galactic Colonial Administration. From behind him someone shouted that it was a mass hallucination, sent to torture them into thinking themselves saved. Almost, Grant would prefer to believe that. Almost—and then common sanity reasserted itself and he knew that his own skin, his own life, was more precious to him than all the Galactic laws and oaths he had sworn.

Anti-grav sleds just weren't allowed on New Bangor.

Galactic law stated explicitly that no weapons, no form of transport, no instruments and no technology in advance of the level of culture of a native planet could be brought in to that planet. The reasons, stemming from the early days, spoke eloquently from backward, apathetic races of once proud beings who now touted for cigarettes from the heedless technology-proud Terrans. A man who took a pride in his ox-drawn plough, his carefully fashioned clay-potter's wheel, his skill with the hunting spear, would have that pride shredded away by careless people from the stars with their mechanization, their mass production and their weapons with unguessable powers of destruction. And the Galactic Administration wanted to build up the peoples of the galaxy, not tear away the roots of their self-respect.

The sled flicked out from the jungle shadow and hot sunshine gleamed metallicly from its gun barrels swing-

ing to cover the open space before the prison enclosure. The natives' onrush halted. Eyes widened on this strange boat floating unsupported six feet above the ground. A quick, spurting shout welled from the prisoners. The moment hung fire, tension grew, swelled—burst.

Burst in gouts of flame that spewed from the sled, sliced into the natives' ranks, sent them screaming in headlong ruin for the far strip of jungle. Magically, the area was clear. The only bodies were dead bodies—the two pathetic rows of headless Terrans and a scattering of brightly garbed natives crumpled across the grass all the way to the gloom of the far jungle. Seeing it done like that; brutally, blatantly, casually, made Grant sick to his stomach. Atomic weapons—unleashed upon ignorant savages with their pitiful swords and bows and shields!

He had forgotten that only minutes before those swords were taking the heads off his friends.

Then the prisoners had swarmed from the enclosure, raced to meet the laughing, swarthy, flashily dressed men from the sled. Under an alien sun upon an alien planet men from Earth met in furious, bitter debate. In the forefront of the Terrans who so recently had been prisoners Grant could see the tall figure with leonine head and lumpy, ugly nose of Chambers, the Resident. Chambers was strict, punctilious, a good Resident but inclined to forget that he was also a human. Now his thick accents floated over all other voices, stilling them.

'I don't know who you are; but, by Heaven, a full report of this outrage goes back to Galcon Headquarters as soon as we get the transmitter working again. Using illegal weapons, murdering natives—do you realize you've set back development on this planet by fifty years?'

Grant pushed through the throng. He had felt exactly like that; the same hot anger at the wanton murder of ignorant natives, the deliberate flouting of Galcon orders; but he was also remembering the shrilling along his nerves as he stepped forward expecting to feel a sword slice through his neck. The peril of the administrators had not seemed real to them, had not penetrated fully into their inner minds; now it was over it must be like a bad dream. A few, a very few, those who had lost friends or husbands, did not feel that sense of bewilderment—they had rushed to the pitiful line of bodies and crouched there now, sobbing. The majority were shouting recriminations, clustered around their saviours.

'Thanks for saving our lives,' Grant said dryly.

There was a gasp, then a little silence.

The leader of the newcomers smiled, replacing the scowl of angry annoyance he had been wearing when Grant approached. He thrust a hand out and Grant took it.

'I'm Sam Barjinskey—call me Sam. You're in the Guides? The New Bangor Guides?'

'That's right. Captain Jeff Grant.' He made a sour movement with his lips. 'My men joined this revolt. It was lucky for us you happened along.'

'Lucky? I'll say it was. As for happened along, well,' Sam looked up with a puzzled smile. 'We got your distress signal and came right away. Normally, we'd steer clear of the Guides.'

'Distress signal? The revolt came so suddenly—it must have been carefully planned—that everyone was rounded up like lambs for the slaughter. My own men took me.'

The bitterness was still there. 'The Resident was in his shower—'

Chambers harrumphed at that. Grant went on: 'All of us were grabbed fast, the whole administrative staff. No one sent a signal.'

'Well, we received one, otherwise why would we be here? You must know what we are by now.'

'I know.' Grant did not want to pursue that subject. If he was to do his duty he would immediately arrest these laughing, carefree, swashbuckling men who had saved his life. They were freetraders, sweeping in from space, trading with the natives and gaining colossal profits for their baubles, and then racing off again before law and order could catch up with them. They scorned the Galcon laws forbidding the impact of too high a level of technology upon natives. They brought in shiny gadgets, liquor, guns—anything that would sell and show a profit. And they lived well.

He decided to shelve that knotty problem for the moment and began striding off towards the transmission hut. A group broke and followed him, Sam striding cockily in their midst and Chambers glowering at him from a few paces to his rear. Doctor Rawson had returned from the bodies—a child could have seen they were past hope.

The transmission hut was a shambles. The sub-etheric radio had spilled its guts across the floor. Marks of violence were everywhere. Grant turned one corpse over. Broken off in its chest was a sword. The hilt lay by his boot. He recognized it at once, stooped and retrieved it. It was a standard Guide pattern, and engraved on the hilt were the words: 'New Bangor Guides. Abou—Sergeant.'

Grant had a vivid picture of Abou flinging up his hands and falling, shot to pieces, out there before the prison enclosure. So he had been a good Guide to the last. He weighed the piece of steel on his palm.

'Who signed that signal, Sam?'

'Why, Sergeant Abou, Guides. I thought I said.'

'No. You didn't.'

'Sorry.' Sam looked about. 'Whoever sent the signal had a ham fist—eh, what?'

Grant had turned on him, the fragment of sword raised. Then he sagged. 'Sorry, Sam. It's nothing. Just an ignorant native trying to do a job. And doing a damned good job, without adequate tools.' Grant pushed out of the hut which had become cloying and stinking of blood in his nostrils. He wanted to think.

Poor Abou had done the only thing he could, restraining his officer to save his life, knowing that Grant would have fought it out. Then he had sent the signal, killing to do it, and gone down to the village acting the part of a rebel. He must have had some plan when he had approached the gate, when he had been shot down—the sun was very hot and thinking was difficult. Grant wiped his forehead wearily. The Guides should have proper weapons; it was murder the way it was. He became aware of Chambers, the Resident.

'Get this mess cleared up and see what Galcon have to say.'

Doctor Rawson, lined face flushed, answered angrily.

'Are you so besotted with your own position that you can't see a simple fact, Chambers? These men saved our lives. You can't tell me you'd rather be back in that enclosure waiting to have your head cut off?'

'That is beside the point—'

Grant chose that moment to intervene. He stepped down from the shattered hut and accosted the two wrangling men. Somewhere in the jungle a looney-bird screamed. It was answered by the chattering call of a Bangor flying tiger, an animal as large as a cat, with claws, and with the ability of a flying fox. It seemed to the strained nerves of the Earthmen that the jungle regarded them with evil eyes.

'What are you going to do about the rest of the rebels, Chambers? It seems that it wasn't mutiny, after all. My men tried to help us, they brought assistance, and were shot down doing their duty. The natives are up to you.'

Chambers' eyes shifted uncertainly. These people were merely the forerunners of the colonial expansion that would follow. They were civil servants, wielding a computer with confidence; completely lost with a weapon. The only piece of equipment allowed by Galcon was the sub-radio; with it they could contact headquarters and the other colonial posts scattered over the planet. And they looked to the Guides for protection, loyal natives trained and officered by Terrans in the tradition that had proved so effective on hundreds of other planets. The Guides of New Bangor were only one division of the system of planetary Guides that had policed and brought order to those planets using merely the natives and the native weapons of each individual planet. If an inhabitant of a planet understood a blow-gun—then police him with troopers armed with blow-guns; Galcon Administration had made that inflexible rule and offenders did not go lightly unpunished—when they were caught. If this Sam was an example of the freetraders, then there was no wonder that the thriving illicit trade was carried on so effectively.

'Well?' demanded Grant, for the first time smoothing back his long hair, symbol of the Guides. 'What about the revolt? They planned, chose their time, struck hard and ruthlessly. They won't give all that up—'

'I'm aware of that.' Chambers was obviously unsettled. He fanned himself with a handkerchief-tissue, his big raw-boned face creased with a helpless frown. The dilemma of finding something constructive to say was broken for him by the quick breathless rush of a girl. Vaguely, Grant remembered her as a cybernetic-technician and he had the idea that she was the girl who had stepped out to stand at his shoulder in the enclosure when the natives were running in for their next victims. Her pink smock was torn and her hair a brilliant auburn halo looked unnaturally bright against the uniform pink of the smock and the dark green and purple of the jungle. Her forehead was beaded with sweat and there were three sprawling dirt marks across her face.

'Captain Grant, I must speak to you,' she began, panting the words out and holding her side.

'Stitch?' Grant said.

'Yes. Come on, man! Don't just stand there!'

Shaken, yet smiling at her spitfire quality, Grant moved a few paces off from the others. 'Well?'

'A native girl with whom I was friendly called to me from the trees. She was badly frightened. She was Sergeant Abou's girl friend, from what she says. She wants to talk to you. She's waiting over there. She won't come into the open.'

'Of course not. Frightened of being seen. We must

be under observation right this minute. All right, I'll come. We'll have to take it easy, stroll there casually.'

'We can always hold hands.'

Grant cocked his head at her. The steel-true quality of this girl might be bravery—or it might be the first hysterical symptoms of a nervous breakdown. From an adding machine to swords and blood in five minutes; not a very pleasant change. He took her arm firmly just above the elbow and they strolled over to the waiting jungle shadows.

The native girl was Seela, Grant saw, Sergeant Abou's fiancée. Her eyes were enormous with terror and grief. She told them, quite simply and without heroics, that the men of Grant's Guide Company were still loyal to him but that expediency dictated they stay with the rebels and use a girl to carry their messages. They were not of this village, having been trained by Grant and brought in when this section was opened up; their position must be one of suspicion.

'Tell them to trust me,' Grant said. 'It is better they stay with the rebels until the Earthpeople are safe. I understand your feelings, Seela—or do I?' Here was a native girl whose lover had just been shot down by magical weapons attempting to help those who had been instrumental in killing him. How would he have felt had the positions been reversed? 'Tell Corporal John I have faith in him. He is in command until we can rejoice. Your people have done a great wrong, blood has been spilt, tempers are fierce. It will be a long time before the old happy ways of peace are restored.'

It didn't quite sound so pompous as that in the native's tongue; it had an effect on Seela. As she began to sob, the Terran girl said in English: 'Probably do her good to cry.' Her head lifted, the bright hair a dull gleam of copper in the dappling shadows. 'What's that?'

Shouts, screams, the thud of running feet. The shrilling hiss of atomic weapons. Grant sprang from the jungle edge into the clearing, to be met by a running group of Terrans. Doctor Rawson, grey head smeared with blood, caught his arm, dragged him back into the shadows. Chambers was there, panting like a hound. Sam, the freetraders' leader was hammering at his gun and cursing in a fluent, scathing monotone. A girl with blonde, fluffy hair, fell to her knees, to be hauled upright and hurled with the others into the woody shelter.

Grant had time for one quick, shocked glance, before putting an arm around the red-haired girl's waist and racing with the other Terrans deep into the shadows. He had seen the savage stream of exultant natives pouring across the clearing, had seen their bloody swords—had seen the atomic weapons they were spraying in every direction. A clump of dead freetraders by the smashed anti-grav sled told its own story. Anyone could press the stud that unleashed the primal fury of splitting atoms—even ignorant savages.

They ran. They plunged, panting, lungs burning, limbs lashed by thorns and creepers, their clothes in tatters, bright blotches of blood patterning their flesh, fought their way through the wilderness of brambles and ferns and mossy trunks. A roaring in Grant's head warned him he should rest. The blonde had sunk exhausted to the ground, her head on a log, sobbing. Chambers was drawing great whooping gulps of air. Sam was still struggling with his weapon, silent now, concentrating

with a possessive, sullen determination.

'So what happened?' The red-haired girl asked.

Grant laughed shortly. Doctor Rawson sank down on the log and began to massage the blonde's taut neck muscles. 'They jumped the freetraders, took their guns. In no time at all they had found out that you pressed the button and people died. They're not simple, these people. The anti-grav sled caught a full beam. We managed to get away; I think another group with Roberts, the surveyor, managed to slip off towards the East. But that's about all. The rest went down.'

Chambers stuck his big nose at Sam. 'This is the direct result of flouting Galcon orders. You bring in weapons beyond the understanding of the natives—and this is what happens. Murder!'

'Beyond their understanding hell!' Sam stared up from hating eyes. 'They know how to press a button. I came here to rescue you, and ever since I've been insulted, scorned, told I'm a criminal. Well, I know that; but at least I can't stand idly by and see Earthpeople killed and do nothing. What are you, Chambers? A man or a cybernetic machine?'

'Now just a minute,' said Grant. 'We're in a pretty tough position and we won't help ourselves by fighting.' 'Well, tell bossy here to lay off.'

'What are we going to do?' That was the girl with the torn pink smock and red hair. Grant looked at her.

'The only obvious thing. We'll have to make our way to the nearest settlement. For one thing, they'll have to be warned of the revolt, it may spread. For another, we'll need to go carefully when we come back here. The natives are seething like an overturned hive, they've made a rude contact with galactic violence and must guess that we aren't just normal people from other parts of their own world.'

'That's a big assumption, Jeff,' said Doctor Rawson.

'Maybe. Galcon want to keep the same level of culture on new planets. We may bring in only a radio and medical supplies that are in advance of what we find.' He shook his head. 'That may be right or it may be wrong; just now I don't know. But I do know we'll have to get away from here and warn the other settlements and try to put this rising down. Otherwise the planet will go up.'

Sam grunted offensively. Chambers started to say something, then gave it up and slouched moodily off.

Grant took his eyes off the big figure and said to the girl: 'What's your name?'

'Cyberneticist Abigail Landers. Abby to those lost in the jungle with me.'

Grant smiled. 'We're not lost. Just over there is the river. When we can induce a little harmony into the group we'll make a raft and float downstream. Gordonstoun is about two hundred miles off. We'll make it.'

The area through which they struggled was that earmarked for rapid development as soon as the colonists arrived. The plans so carefully drawn up by the band of colonial administrators and their carefully rationed electronic equipment—which would have been withdrawn immediately expansion had begun—were by now probably wisps of charred ashes and melted tapes. It would be some time before the trees went down under the blows of axes and the fields were tilled and seeds sown. Grant could not forget that it was on his report that the natives were ready that the signal for the fifty star-

ships to leave had been given. He just had to broadcast a warning before they landed.

Building a raft with only Sam's sword as their sole implement was not as difficult as he had imagined. They found six large fallen tree trunks suitable for a frame and upon these lashed with the crawling vines a crazy platform of branches. Grant insisted that a low parapet of branches be erected around the raft. The others, with apprehensive glances over their shoulders, were for pushing on at once.

'If the natives were following us they would have caught us long before this,' Grant said testily. 'They'll soon have word of us on the river and then they'll be shooting at us with arrows from the banks.' He did not mention the possibility of the Terrans' weapons. Privately, he had a word with Sam who told him that probably the charges would be expended at the reckless rate of firing of the natives. Fervently, Grant hoped so.

He was fussy with the raft's defences, trying to still his racing brain. He had found little surprise in the presence of Seela with the fugitives; the native girl's lush body must have been unmistakable when her compatriots had attacked. Together, he and Sam freed a large flat stone from the river bank and manhandled it on to the raft and positioned it near the stern. 'Hearth,' Grant said gruffly in response to a puzzled inquiry. He took out his handkerchief, gripped two opposite corners, selected a pebble from the bank and, whirling the pebble in the handkerchief around his head, let one corner fly free and sent the stone to thud satisfactorily into the big clumsy bird that bumbled along just above their heads. It tasted not unlike duck.

'Well, come on then. Let's push off,' Chambers, wiping his greasy fingers on a tuft of grass, walked down towards the raft. The others, still munching pseudo-duck, followed. The blonde girl, Ann, and Seela went forward at once to the little shelter constructed for the women; but Abby helped in pushing the raft off with the long poles that made gurgling sucking sounds in the mud. The current caught the haphazard collection of wood, thrust it, span it a few times, then swept it off down the centre of the stream at a good three knots.

Seven people. Seven fugitives, fleeing down a river on a creaking and unstable raft. Four Earthmen, two Earthgirls and a half-naked native girl. At least, Grant saw ruefully, her semi-nakedness was nothing by which to pick her out; all their clothing was tattered and shredded. It had been only lightweight material to begin with and the rough handling they had had, their headlong flight through the jungle, had left each with just enough to remain decent. Not that that really mattered, now, Grant decided wearily.

He raised an eyebrow at Sam and they sat together at the stern. There was little need to use the clumsy steering paddle they had made, the stream washed them along with gentle plunking sounds, an occasional ripple rising to wash sullenly at the raft. The sun was hot—and growing hotter.

'Mended your gun yet, Sam?'

'Nope. Damn thing's jammed up. Anyway, I think the charge is about done for.' Sam licked his lips. 'I hope those crazy natives shot off all the guns. They could be nasty.'

He was still speaking as the shriek rose. Grant and

Sam looked up. Chambers was standing in the centre of the raft with a look of horror and revulsion plastered across his big features. His right hand was gripping his left shoulder. From that shoulder stood up, thin and straight, a feathered arrow. A second later another arrow thunked into the branches forming the screen. Everyone ducked for cover, Doctor Rawson dragging down the dazed Resident. He began to work on the arrow.

'Can you see them?' asked Abby.

'Occasionally. They're running through the foliage on the bank, about two hundred yards range. Even at the slow rate of this tub I don't think they'll pace us through that jungle.'

'We hope,' said Sam. He slammed his gun on the wood.

Chambers gave a short scream, abruptly stifled.

'All right, Jeff,' Rawson said. 'Don't move.'

Grant turned his head. Rawson laid the two halves of arrow, one stained, on the platform and took the scrap of white cloth Abby handed him. He bound up Chambers' wound.

The smell of the branches was in Grant's nostrils, together with the watery, green smell of the river. The lazy hum of countless insects drifted down and he wondered how long his ointment would last. When it had dissipated, they'd be bitten until they were crazy. The river gurgled infuriatingly.

'Is this water drinkable?' asked Sam.

'Yes,' Grant turned back. Then he shouted. 'Keep down, you fool! They'll pin you—'

Sam had slid forward, over the brushwood parapet, had sunk his lips into the stream. He gulped, twice. Then he wriggled back and turned a water-shining face to Grant.

'That, brother, was good.'

Grant did not say anything. The raft slid on down the stream, swinging wide on curves where they gave a few leaden strokes with the paddles and forced it back into midstream. The natives had been unable to keep up, even at the slow drift of the raft, and now the sun blazed down from a flawless sky. The river water tasted sweet; Grant guessed that in fact it was probably highly unpleasant.

He refused to comment on Sam's rash action. Instead, he mentioned the thought that had been gnawing at him for some time. 'Was there a spaceship up there when you landed?'

Sam's face turned ugly. 'Yes,' he said shortly. Then, as if the words were distasteful to him: 'It's no use thinking she'll come down to help us. We're a pretty free and easy bunch in the freetraders. O'Brien, my second, will have assumed me dead when he finds the anti-grav sled shambles, and will be happy to take over command. There's no hope there!'

Abby had heard this and now smiled at Grant. 'You said Gordonstoun is about two hundred miles? And we must be doing at least five miles an hour. Simple arithmetic.'

'The river winds,' Grant reminded gently. 'It'll take a little longer than that. But we'll get there.'

'The river winds,' echoed Sam. 'What about the cross-country hike of the natives? They'll be waiting for us at all the bends.'

'Maybe,' Grant said. He'd known that; it was no use bringing up fresh troubles until they happened. 'I think

we'd better push ashore soon and gather fresh branches. Make a better screen, over all the raft.'

'Yes,' Abby said, her face vivacious with forced gaiety. 'We can cover the raft with stuff and then the natives won't know which is us and which is brushwood.'

'Good idea. We can put a shirt out or something. Make a good target.'

Sam laughed. 'Whose shirt?'

Eventually they had the raft covered with branches and leaves, with heavier logs forming a kind of palisade in the centre. The matter of clothing was delicate; but they managed to contrive four respectable dummies of leaves, to be artistically positioned around their odd craft. Grant brought aboard a number of flexible lengths of wood and a mass of the creeping vine. He sat in the stern, and set to work preoccupied, oblivious of the passage of time. The sun, moving ponderously in its forty hour day, beat down mercilessly. They were all wearing leafy coverings; but already the insects were discovering the ointment barrier was going down and the Terrans were starting to slap and curse.

There was something sensual about the river. It flowed darkly shining between the coloured magnificence of the forest banks, bearing them along smoothly, save for an occasional chuckle and gurgle of water, quietly and effortlessly. Grant lay on his stomach in the stern, looking as always downstream—the raft happened to be floating stern first and they hadn't bothered to right it—wondering why Galcon maintained this obviously archaic rule about weapons. At least the Guides should have weapons fit for their status, guns which could overawe the natives and make revolts like the one that had killed his friends and sent him floating a fugitive down the great river impossible. He sighed. And, in that breath, saw the bend ahead, and the bobbing heads on the bluffs.

The current pushed the raft nearer the right hand shore and soon arrows began to plunk into the wood and hiss through the brush. Grant was lying near Abby, her flaming hair camouflaged with leaves. He was looking at his dark green Guide tunic bundled around leaves and probably looking from the bank like a Terran. As he stared an arrow feathered itself cleanly through the centre of the tunic. Before it had ceased quivering two more fastened themselves on either side. The five shafts looked like a skeletal hand.

Abby whistled.

The raft slid away, span in eddies beyond the bluffs and then, when Grant had judged it was out of easy shot, he groped aft and peered carefully upstream. Two fragile canoes danced towards them, sides bristling with spears.

'Sam,' Grant called.

The freetrader needed no telling when he saw the advancing canoes. Chambers was useless with his wound. Doctor Rawson, his bloody head roughly bandaged, came aft and took the club Grant silently handed him. Abby picked up a long length of wood and hefted it in her hands. Balancing on the swaying wood, they awaited the attack.

Grant and Sam, between them, had the flat stone they had used as a hearth. A few arrows whistled over their heads; but it was evident that the natives wished to close to quarters. Grant picked up the crude bow he had made and selected the first from the pile of a dozen or so arrows

he had collected. Then he knelt forward, raised the bow and sent the twelve arrows, one after the other, flick, flick, flick, into the first canoe.

The canoe swung crazily with the current, veered, then overturned. Under the cover of the shrieks and yells the second closed, its stem nuzzling the rough wood of the raft. Grant leaped back, Sam had the end of the stone lifted; together they swung it out, leaning under its weight, tipped it clumsily into the canoe.

Grant had to raise his arms to protect himself from the blows of a club; then the end of a pole slid over his shoulder and pushed his assailant clear. He saw Abby, face alight, hair waving. Grant shouted deeply, lashed his fist into the face of a yelling native—and then they were free. Both canoes had gone. A few heads struggled in the water.

Doctor Rawson collapsed on the platform. Abby knelt to him quickly. Grant looked round for Sam.

The freetrader was not on the raft.

'Sam!' He shouted, suddenly panicking. 'Sam!'

Rawson looked up, face as grey as his hair. 'He went overboard. They speared him as he was coming back from the stone—he just slid in headfirst.'

Abby's face was ghastly. 'I could only save one—'

'It's all right, Abby. No one could have done anymore.'

The raft floated on and it seemed that a black pall kept pace with it all through the heat of the afternoon. They rounded two further bends without incident and then on the third the familiar arrows began thudding into the raft.

'Lie low,' Grant said. 'These people aren't at home on the river; you saw that in the inept way they handled those canoes. We'll get through.'

If it hadn't been for the sandspit they would have.

That—and the blonde.

The two incidents co-incided. One minute they were drifting serenely along, peppered by arrows but confident that they were in no extreme danger from them. The next—the blonde Ann rushed shrieking from her place of concealment, her face blazing with terror. She was practically naked and her white body and fair hair stood out against the dark tree-shadowed water as though picked out by a searchlight.

'They've killed her!' she screamed. At once Grant scrambled to his feet and stumbled towards her. He caught one wrist, seeing over the bare shoulder the contorted body of Seela, the native girl, with a long arrow through her.

Ann was twisting and thrashing like a landed fish. Grant slapped her hard across the face, and then the raft struck and they both pitched heavily to the wooden platform. Vaguely, Grant heard Abby's strong voice, shouting. He struggled to rise, conscious of the hideous stillness of the deck. They must have grounded hard.

Lights flashed before him, whether from the river or his strained brain he could not be sure. Through a mist he saw Doctor Rawson leap overboard, a long pole in his hand. Grant tried despairingly to rise, to go to the old doctor's assistance. Abby was standing defiantly in the stern, thrusting with her pole, trying to free the raft. Grant felt a hesitant movement. He forced himself to his feet, staggered to the side, ready to fall over and push with the doctor.

'She's going!' Abby shrieked.



'Push!' Doctor Rawson shouted in answer. 'We'll get her off—' He did not complete the sentence. Horrified, Grant saw the doctor stretch upwards to his full height, arms outflung. For a single agonized instant he stood there, hanging as though crucified against the sky, the long arrow sprouting from his back. Then he shrank and collapsed like an emptied sack.

In that last convulsive movement the raft slid free, the water chuckled around it as though unaware of the darker stain on its bosom; and the raft floated downstream.

And this was Galactic colonization! This was the wise forethought of those pundits of earth—not one outboard motor, not one gun—nothing of a technological civilization that could aid and succour them now. Instead, they must die because they were forbidden the tools that would give them life.

In that black moment, Grant did not like Galcon at all.

Chambers' wound had gone septic; in the hot humid atmosphere the onset of poison was swift. At least, they could not blame Galcon for prohibiting medicines; but they had none now. Doctor Rawson was gone. They bathed the wound and dressed as best they could the ugly patch. Grant looked hollowly at Abby.

'Things happen fast on New Bangor,' he said wearily. 'He won't last.'

They slid the body over the side just as the sun was touching the distant tops of the jungle trees.

And with the coming of night the insects changed shifts and the graveyard watch came on. It was almost impossible to sleep and itching agony kept them slapping and scratching until the small hours. Then Grant saw the glow in the sky ahead and grew afraid.

'What is it, Jeff?' Abby asked in a small voice.

'I hope not,' Grant said. 'My God! I hope not.'

But it was.

When they rounded the last bend Gordonstoun before them was a single mass of flames, a pyre blazing to the sky, throwing livid orange light on their pallid faces.

They were lucky. As the shouts and shrieks rent the air, with the hot sulphurous smell floating out across the water, and the crashing of burning timbers in their ears, they crept silently past, borne by the stream out and away from the holocaust. At last they sank into a troubled slumber, wrapped in each other's arms, huddled under the pitiful protection of their leafy coverings. Morning found them hollow-eyed, gaunt, famished and frightened. But with the sun Grant found fresh strength. He brought down a bird and they ate pseudo-duck. They washed and combed their hair and presently they fell to talking.

'What's the next town, Jeff?'

'If it's still there, it should be Chatham. It's an old settlement. Major Anders of the Guides must know something of what is going on by now. He'll have boats out on the river. We ought to make it.'

'You mean we're safe?'

'Don't bank on it.' Grant felt no hesitation now in discussing his inner thoughts freely with this girl. 'We don't know how widespread is the revolt.' He tossed a bone overboard and watched the sun glint on the ripples. 'I'm going to have something to say to Charteris. He's the Resident at Chatham. I'm going to tell him what I

think of Galcon.'

Abby looked as though she was going to argue, and then fell silent. Watching her, Grant guessed her thoughts. When you were brought up to an acceptance of Galcon and its absolute rightness in everything to do with planetary colonization, it was not easy to see those beliefs shattered by manifest ineptitude in Galcon's orders.

'You know, Jeff,' Abby said. 'All planets aren't restricted to this rigid culture levelling. Some of the worlds of high culture weren't always that way. And they haven't risen by the sole efforts of the natives. Technology has been brought in. I know.'

'So I've heard.' Grant stroked her auburn hair. 'So I've heard. There are too many planets for Galcon to control them all—'

'No—I mean, planets where Galcon have deliberately gone about raising the technology level, Industrial and Agricultural revolutions—the works.'

'I've been a Guides Officer nearly all my adult life. I've been assigned duty on six new planets so far. In every case we went in without disclosing our extraterrestrial origin, trained up a force, policed the planet a little, always using the natives' own weapons and combat systems. The natives accepted us on face value—Cortez could have come from Mars for all Montezuma knew.'

'That makes sense.'

'I'm glad something does in this nightmare.' Grant looked back upstream, still watchful, still not believing they had run through the area of revolt. 'In two of those assignments there were revolutions—oh, nothing like this. But each might have been, might have blown the planet asunder. If that makes sense to you—?'

'I don't know, Jeff. Maybe it makes sense to Galcon.'

Grant's reply was not quite obscene—he remembered there was a lady aboard.

A looney bird chattered insanely from the far bank. The rich dark water rolled around them. Grant felt thankful that they were spared the final torture of native drums—New Bangor communicated in a fluting whistle that only a native could pick out from the surrounding noise level of bird calls. Only a native—the looney birds had picked up recently...

The relaxation he had experienced after they had slid past the funeral pyre of Gordonstoun left Grant. He grew tense and unavailingly tried to force himself to relax, to keep his new awareness of danger from the girl.

He looked across at his crude bow and the handful of arrows. If that had been an atomic gun, any one of the myriad awful shapes of destruction wielded by Earthmen, why, then, he could go back to his command, rally his own loyal troops, deal out retribution and death to the murdering fanatics who had cheerfully lopped off the heads of his comrades.

And then, gently, almost unnoticed, came the memory of the natives firing atomic guns until their charges ran out, childishly delighted at the powers in their hands. Playfully laughing that when a grimy thumb pressed this pleasantly coloured knob men died in ravening flame. The memory faded.

Canoes bobbed down the river. Looney birds shrilled.

Grant glanced at Abby. Her face was pale, yet composed. Black circles gave to her eyes a pathetic, yearn-

ing look, as though begging for rest and comfort. Her body shone magnificently through the shredded smock. Grant smiled.

'Use your spear, Abby. We're going to fight it out.'

'Saying goodbye now, Jeff?'

He touched her hand. 'Something like that.'

As he knelt down and arranged the brushwood screen before his face and chest he was aware of a professional interest in the extent of the revolt. Whole planets do not take fire easily. The area of this infection had spread rapidly and everything he had seen pointed to a continent-wide revolt; but only this continent. If only he—someone—could warn those colonist spaceships, they could put down on one of the islands or other continents of this world.

That would be Major Anders' job. It was up to him to send the warning signal. That he'd never cared much for Anders as a man meant nothing. The major would do his job.

It meant less than nothing now. The long darkly shining shapes out there on the water were closing up fast. Aided by flashing paddles, the canoes swept down the river, their prows cutting apexes of glowing water-rippling wedges.

There were three of them. When there had been but two the raft had lost a man; and they'd had other help. Now, that help floated, dead and bloating, down the river. From the prow came a slobbering wail. That was Ann, the blonde, slowly going insane. Disgust twisted Grant's lips and he tasted bile.

To die, like this! So uselessly! When all the worlds and stars of space beckoned to him.

He checked that Abby was covered with brushwood, and then carefully notched his first shaft.

There was no blood-red satisfaction in him as he sent the arrow through the throat of the leading canoe's helmsman. The man's paddle flicked through the air. The canoe veered, caught, breasted the current and swept on downstream, stern first.

To Grant, it seemed he was carrying out some hypothetical training manoeuvre about which all the cadets had been complaining. One of the familiar and yet always novel progress tests. *Test One: You are aboard a raft floating down a river. Hostiles in three canoes are pursuing. Details of weaponry: Bows and arrows, spears, swords. Outline your command decisions and give reasons in full. Time allowed, thirty minutes. Marking value, twenty. Optional question.*

He laughed, thickly, feeling again the bile choking his throat.

Optional!

An arrow feathered into the wood at his shoulder. Sun glare from the river burned his eyes. A steel band was constricting ever more tightly around his forehead. He had no more sweat left in him.

His fifth and sixth arrows missed. The seventh skewered two men—it was that close—and then the first canoe nuzzled the raft and Grant stared into distorted faces and glittering weapons and men gone mad.

He might have broken then; but a flicker of red and gold in the tail of his eye sobered him—sobered him and then drove him battle-crazy. He swung the billet of wood with both hands, disdaining the brushwood clump he had intended to use as a shield. That type of thinking be-



longed to Galcon cadet training, where the questions were optional. But Grant had no intention of allowing this question to remain optional; he wanted in. He wanted in badly. He wanted to earn those full twenty marks and protect Abby at the same time.

There, aboard that blood splashed raft under the alien sun of New Bangor, Jeff Grant went savagely into the battle-frenzy that knows nothing, feels nothing, thinks not at all, until the last stained sword drops and there is nothing left to fight.

When it was all over he stood unsteadily, legs wide apart, whooping great draughts of air into his lungs. Gradually, the red mists lifted. He could see again. Abby. She was there, staring at him in concern, her hair falling half across her face like any pagan woman of Earth's prehistory.

And around her—figures from a dream, men from the stars, men whom Grant had never hoped to see again.

Major Anders said: 'How in hell did you get here, Captain Grant?' He surveyed the raft, the shambles, the blood, the arrows still standing embedded, the two near-naked Terrans staring hollowly at him, dirt-streaked, blood-smeared, gaunt-faced and exhausted. He shook his head, scarcely believing. Then he cracked one leather glove into the other.

'Well, Captain? What happened at your post?'

'There was a revolt—' Grant began wearily.

'Yes, yes. I know that. Why didn't you stay for the relieving force?' Anders' precise features and sculptured

lips and all the dapper elegance of him infuriated Grant.

'The what?'

'The relieving force. Under Captain Ramdoul. They reported that the revolt had broken out ahead of time and that Terrans were in danger. Where's Chambers?'

'Dead.'

Major Anders looked shocked. 'Dead? But how? Why?'

Gradually, Grant took in the scene. Clogging mists rose from that tight circle before his eyes in which he had seen only the next man to kill, and his area of vision expanded to take in the three fast sailing canoes packed with the green of the Guides. Weapons aboard those craft flashed in the sun. Good steel blades made on Earth. Bows and arrows turned out by belching factories using every device of automation and streamlined mass-production. Yes, Galcon equipped its servants with fine weapons; but those weapons were on the same technology level as the native worlds where they would be used. Grant smeared dirt and blood tiredly across his face. Anders was speaking again, sharply.

'Captain Grant! I want a full report! Now!'

Something snapped in Grant. Anders' dapper figure jumped in his vision. Streaks of fire burned across his eyes. This man represented authority, that same authority that had blindly allowed Grant's Guide company to be hacked to pieces or fly helplessly into the jungles and had done nothing when innocent Earthmen had been beheaded for sport.

He took a step forward on the raft, pushed up against the brushwood, and his fists knotted into ugly lumps. His face must have warned Abby. Her small hands constricted on his arm. Her warm lips brushed his ear.

'Take it easy, Jeff! These people are here to help us. Listen—'

'Captain Grant!' Anders was in a pale fury now where his nostrils pinched tight and shrewish. 'Come aboard at once. You are evidently suffering from the effects of your own folly.' He jerked his head. 'Here, Abou, help the lady.' The last in the dialect of New Bangor.

A sergeant who might have been the twin of that other Sergeant Abou who, doing his duty as he conceived it should be done in the eyes of these men from the stars—as they must by now have guessed the Terrans to be—had been cut to pieces in the doing of it, now handed Abby into the canoe. Grant stepped across, light-headed, hating the fatigue in his bones. He remembered Sergeant Abou. The native Guide's eyes were huge in the dusk. Shadows shrouded the river.

Major Anders was fussing on the scrap of decking in the stern. Grant stumbled his way there, following Abby.

He said: 'And you'd better take off your insignia, Major.'

Anders' hand dropped to his sword. Grant did not heed the motion. Anders spoke with decision. 'I'm going up there right away. I can't imagine what went wrong.'

'I'll tell you,' Grant said thickly. 'Galcon, the ever-loving, everwise Galactic Colonial Administration, saw fit to police a horde of savages with men armed with bows and arrows and swords. Not a real weapon amongst us! It was sheer bloody murder! I'll have something to say to Charteris—'

'Yes, Captain, I think you will. He will be most interested. Your observations show your own ignorance.'

'Sure! My ignorance. From what you said you seemed to have been expecting this revolt. And yet you left us to take it alone. Men were killed. My friends had their heads taken off in a game. A game! My God! If we'd had a few decent weapons we could have smashed the revolt—' Grant caught the whimpering from the raft. He finished in the same grimly strained voice: 'There's a madwoman on the raft. Ann something. You'd better take her off.' He gazed contemptuously at Anders. 'She's just another victim of your incompetent, bungling, idiotic—'

'That's enough, Captain!' Anders' face had darkened with blood and in the deepening dusk his eyes and teeth shone evilly. 'You are not aware of the picture. Your rank does not entitle it.' His accents were cutting. The native paddlers' faces were blank and Grant, even then, was thankful that this acrimonious wrangling was carried on in English.

'I would have thought that you, at least, as a Guide officer, would have shared my viewpoint.'

'Captain Grant,' Anders said with mock patience. 'You have insulted a superior, insulted Galcon, failed in your duty and run from your post. With what else do you wish to associate yourself as a Guide officer?'

Grant felt the tremble start. His leg muscles shook. His jaw twitched and he made a brief, angry effort to control himself. He remembered Sam, he saw again Doc Rawson standing in the bloody foam, crucified against the sky, he saw all his friends again, waiting for the jovial

sweep of the executioners' blades. He knew, then, that he couldn't take it any more.

He took a single stiff pace forward and hit Anders on the jaw.

As soon as it was done, it meant nothing.

Oh, sure, Grant knew that he was finished in the Guides. That didn't bother him in the least; the truth was that he felt relief and thankfulness that he could get out. But it added nothing constructive to the situation. It didn't bring back Doc Rawson or Chambers or Sam. It didn't even do anything about helping those few Earth-people who had escaped into the jungle and were probably now roaming the pathless tracks hysterically seeking help.

'Sergeant!' Grant put iron and the tone of command into his voice.

'Sir!' The native sergeant maintained an admirable phlegm. The way Grant glared at him would have intimidated many more strongly-minded individuals than an ordinary native of New Bangor. Grant forced his mind to order itself, to sort out the next procedure. 'Get the canoes moving, upriver. Fast as you can. We must reach Gordonstoun before dawn. Understood?'

'Understood, sir.' The sergeant saluted and then turned to go. He hesitated, put his head on one shoulder and half-turned, still poised for his rapid march down the scrap of deck. 'Sir?'

'Yes?'

'Major Anders. Shall I—?'

'I'll look after him. He has been, shall we say, stricken by the sun. I promise you, sergeant, you will not suffer for what has happened. All right! Move!'

Sergeant Abou moved.

A stab of pity for the men of this planet skewered Grant. Men had stalked in from the stars, taken over, ordered and commanded, and in all the hurly-burly the natural-born pride of the natives became a fragile bubble, smashed by a careless gesture or a heedless word. This Sergeant Abou, for instance. Grant knew perfectly well, now, that he would have acted in exactly the same way as that other Sergeant Abou who had acted according to his honour and had died for it. Men like that were worth fighting and suffering for.

Abby took his arm, her face worried. She nodded at Anders, all asprawl on the deck.

'Well, Jeff. You hit him. You worked off some of your anger and frustration.' She smiled tiredly. 'Now what?'

'I don't know, Abby. We have to get back as fast as we can to see if anyone is still alive.' He placed his hand over hers on his arm. 'If that is knowing what to do in the sense you mean. As a Guide, I'm all washed up.'

'You don't think anyone will still be alive, do you, Jeff?'

'No. No, I don't. But we have to try.'

'Man always has to try.'

The first thing Anders said when he recovered was: 'Captain Grant, you're under arrest!'

Grant laughed at him, nastily. 'What, here, Anders? On a native canoe under an alien sun? Just you, on your own? Act your age, sonny boy. Act your age.'

Anders would have exploded had not Grant pivoted on his heel and strode angrily forward. He picked his way through the paddlers, idling now that the sails urged them onward with watery music a mocking tinkle from

the canoes' prows. He hunched down, legs dangling, brooding. The dark, sensuous river rolled beneath him.

How long Anders had been standing, foot braced on the gunwale, Grant did not know. Suddenly, he became aware that the major was there. He turned, angry and suspicious.

Major Anders was a good Guide. Also, to be a Guide and to remain alive, a man had to be clever and resourceful. To rise to a majority, a man had to have something extra. Major Anders said, without expression: 'We're going back to your post, captain. I imagine you will be happy to have a crack at the rebels, to pay back your imagined score, to serve as a Guide officer for a time yet.'

'Go on.'

'Our relationship can be that of officers. You do your job, I'll do mine. When we've sorted this thing out, and return to Chatham, then whatever happens is up to the Service. Understand?'

Grant felt a lightening of the spirits. He did not smile; but some of the tension left his lean and haggard face.

'Understood.' He stood up, swaying lithely to the roll of the canoe. 'Oh—and I have no grievance against the natives. They're acting according to their lights. No, my quarrel is with Galcon. Guess you sort of came between my fist and Charteris and his pals back on Earth.' Even then, Grant couldn't bring himself to apologize.

'That, too, you'll understand—' Anders started to say. He was interrupted by the quick, excited hail from the lookout.

In the darkness the man's head was a blob of black against moon shimmer on the river. Grant's pulses raced.

Men's voices raised, then a flurry of activity splashed alongside. Anders and Grant leaped from the prow, peered over the side from the centre paddler's supports. Washing half-submerged against the streamlined hull, a massive, vine-covered log surged dangerously, threatening to stove in the canoe. Willing arms fended it off.

Four people clambered aboard. Four Terrans, half-naked, filthy and water-bedraggled, wounded. They lay on the little deck and gasped like spent dogs.

Their story was briefly told, briefly and tragically.

They were lab workers and technicians from Gordonstoun where a hundred Terrans had been working to organize the early settlement in preparation for the arrival of the colonists. They had been using native labour, with a cordial understanding growing between the men of New Bangor and the men of Earth. And then the revolt had caught them as it had caught the Guide company and scientists at Grant's own small post. The story was similar. Gordonstoun, the mass of flames that Grant and Abby had passed in fearful expectation of discovery, was now no longer recognizable.

'And the Guides?' asked Anders. 'Captain Du Cheyne?'

'Du Cheyne is dead. The Guides are gone. The natives have gone crazy. Killing, looting, burning—'

Major Anders looked across the exhausted body of the speaker, stared into Grant's eyes. Grant nodded.

'We by-pass Gordonstoun,' he said softly. 'My post may be salvageable. Some people got away, I know.'

'Agreed.' And Anders gave the necessary orders.

That long haul back up the river of blood remained with Grant as a nightmare that haunted him in his

moments of deepest depression. Corpses floated down. Headless corpses. Corpses bristling with arrows, caught and barbarously held in rolling branches of floating trees. The whole continent seemed to have gone mad, and Captain Grant felt himself going insane along with it. Only Abby retained her miraculous calm.

The sun was a cauldron of torture high in the sky when at last the canoes reached the river bank where Grant and Abby and those others had flung together their raft and floated downstream. The marks were still in the mud.

'The natives weren't slow,' Grant said, pointing.

Tracks milled in the mud, zig-zagging, showing where the rebels had reached the river and argued and shouted before racing away in their attempts to catch the raft at the bends.

'We go straight in,' Major Anders said grimly. He gave his orders in a low, controlled voice. The Guides fanned out, points ahead, flankers to the sides, the heavy weapons—Grant's lips curled contemptuously—to the rear. The heavy weapons were three large-size bows on skids. They were a sort of debased form of ballista, bent by four men hauling in unison, and firing a jagged chunk of rock from a leather pouch. They made a soft hissing noise as their skids slid through the mud.

Grant and Abby smeared anti-insect ointment over their faces and exposed parts of their bodies—they were both wearing borrowed tunics and shorts. Try as he would, Grant could not rouse any feelings of revenge, or pleasurable anticipation at killing the natives who had killed his friends. He could see the native viewpoint clearly enough. The fault, as he saw it, lay with Galcon. Either a firm hand—or complete non-interference; he could see no middle way. His years of experience as a Guide officer had prepared him for policing a planet with native personnel; it could never make him ready to face a continent-wide revolt. The heat grew and insect buzz screwed up all their nerves. They were heading in now towards the rebels' kicking-off point, where old Nagrim, the chief who aped Earthly dress, must have planned and ordered and gloated over the revolt. The reckoning was overdue, and Grant, as a good Guide, was going in to settle the score.

As for Abby—no argument could keep her out.

It began slowly, and built up with the leisurely speed of a rattler's strike. One moment a lone Guide up ahead challenged; the next the trees and vines erupted yelling natives.

The forest went mad. Grant found himself standing back to back with Anders, beating off waves of frenzied men who raced forward on to their swords. Abby crouched at their feet and took vicious swipes at the rebels' naked legs with a long-handled knife she had thoughtfully brought along. Heat beat down. Blood glittered brightly in the random rays of the sun, caught and held under the canopy of leaves. The Guides fought well. Grant saw the heavy artillery overwhelmed, the Guide gunners pathetically attempting to operate their futile weapons.

But clumps of other green uniforms thickened, extended into line through the trees, formed square and did not break. The whirr of arrows was continuous and sounded in Grant's head like the moaning of some vast wind from beyond a frozen horizon. Men screamed and

choked and died. The din and confusion grew. The battle swayed through the forest, trampling down the bright flowers, dabbling the grasses a dreadful hue, sending the animals and birds scurrying in terror. And still the rebels hurled themselves at the Guides. Still the fray hammered in waves of hate and destruction.

Until Grant grew sick with the futility of it all.

This—this was the way to colonize a new planet in the Galactic Federation? This was scientific man? This was the era of light and prosperity brought by Earthmen to their brothers of other stars? This was civilization?

The shock that thrilled through him when he discovered that Anders no longer covered his back—that instead Abby stood there like some Valkyrie—sobered and at the same time exhilarated him. So many shocks, since last time he had inspected his company on that fateful morning of rebellion, had not dulled the sensitivity to scene innate within him. He hacked down a shouting native and whirled, quite unable to go on fighting with a female cyberneticist wielding a knife as his rearguard. He caught Abby's arm, ran her opponent through, and broke for the trees. She ran with him, fleetly.

Ahead a group of Guides, the front rank kneeling, were methodically shooting into the mass of enemy. Their arms and bows moved in rhythmic unison and the arrows flighted like swarms of silver spaceships. Grant flung Abby to the ground to their rear and swung back, eyes raking the scene.

From here, the confusion was less apparent than from out there, where he had been exposed. Anders was on the opposite side of the forest trail and Grant could see the major working at his small radio. Grant laughed without mirth. A radio was little use here—an atomic handgun would be more the mark.

The steady, controlled, accurate shooting of the Guides had the rebels worried. They surged in yelling, fanatic waves up to the serried lines of Green and then washed back, broken, like tattered storm clouds. A gleam of hope shone in Grant's mind.

'Keep shooting, men,' he said, pleased that his voice was still steady and confident. 'We've got them licked.'

Sergeant Abou—respectfully—broke the bad news.

'Arrows for only ten more volleys, sir.' His broad face was expressionless; but the fire of battle glinted in his eyes. He fingered his sword lovingly. Like a good sergeant, he had already cleaned it after the first encounter.

Anders was still working on his radio. Grant gave the order matter-of-factly. 'Application only, now, Abou.' He smiled frostily, putting on the big bwana act. 'And make every arrow tell.' It was a good line. It always had been a good line. For all Grant could tell, it looked like going on being a good line as long as Earthmen got themselves fouled up with emptying ammunition pouches and hordes of fanatical tribesmen.

But it didn't make any difference to the fact that in an hour or so he would be very dead.

Across the trail Anders looked over from his radio and put a thumb into the air. Grant took a fresh grip on his sword hilt and ignored the major. The smell of death was high in his nostrils and there was no time left for heroics.

The final rush came, the rush that was intended to run

clear over the Guides and flatten them into the ground.

Inexplicably, to Grant slashing his sword frantically from one rebel to another in a desperate attempt to cover both himself and Abby, that attack faltered. It slackened and died, and then, incredibly, broke into utter rout.

Grant leaned against a tree, gasping, his brain on fire, his whole body aching and clamouring for rest.

Around him the Guides were chattering and some were laughing and there was even a scattered cheer.

'What's going on, Abou?' Grant called sharply.

'A relieving force, sir.' Abou trotted across, his sword blood-smeared clear to the hilt. His face blazed with the aftermath of battle, the blazing ferocity that had been chopped off in mid-tide. Sergeant Abou, Grant knew, would have gone on fighting until he dropped. That was very nice for natives, and especially nice for men of a new planet when they were in effect policemen; but for applicants to a Galactic Federation—the Sergeant's words penetrated Grant's battle-dazed senses.

'A relieving force?' He looked out quickly, the light in the open space of the trail hurting his eyes, across the heaps of slain. At first he could see only the moving background of forest trees. Then he saw them.

Guides.

Green figures running through the trees, hacking at obstacles, seemingly indifferent if those obstacles were creeping vines or fleeing rebels. Hundreds of them. Disciplined and under perfect control, they would halt to shoot, then spring forward whilst their comrades shot in their turn. It seemed to Grant, standing there smeared with blood, panting and heavy with fatigue, that in no time at all the trail was empty of all rebels save those who were dead.

He didn't believe it. But it was true.

Abby touched his arm. 'It looks as though Galcon came through after all.'

'Yes.'

'Better late than never, I suppose.'

Grant shook his head, feeling his fatigue clawing at his body. Anders was walking out over the trail, picking his way between the dead. He walked cockily. He looked like a man who has just won a battle.

'Yes,' Grant said again. This thing needed thought.

Anders was forced to tread over the dead rebels before Grant; they lay so thickly there that no ground showed. Grant felt small and ashamed. The heat sickened him; the heat and the flies and what they were bringing. He moved a little way off, Abby with him, until he was standing deeper in the forest.

Anders stood for some little time before he spoke.

They all breathed deeply of the scent of flowers and leaves and yet could not rid themselves of the guilt of what lay back there in the trail clearing.

'It's all over, captain,' Anders said.

'Yes,' Grant repeated, like an idiot child.

Surprisingly, Anders touched him on the shoulder.

'Your remarks about Galcon appear to have been unfounded, captain. We were not let down, once Galcon knew.'

Something stirred in Grant; the sense of injustice he had nursed and nurtured against this time. 'Galcon knew before the outbreak,' he said heavily. 'You admitted that yourself.'

'That is true. The revolt began ahead of time. We knew it was due; the computer misfired, or reports were incorrectly evaluated.' Anders paused. Then he said slowly: 'Or those reports were incorrectly sent by those officers on the spot.'

'And so,' Grant thought, 'we are back to where we started.'

Before he could frame a sentence that might damn him—through indignant denial, tired uncaring, or whining attempts to disclaim the blame—his attention was caught and held by a silver shimmer, up ahead there through the trees.

He knew what it was at once, of course. He turned to face Anders and for the first time since he had struck the major, looked him full in the eyes. 'Personal travshields?'

'Naturally,' Anders said briskly. 'How else could you drop a Guide Regiment into this forest?'

'But—but travshields aren't allowed on New Bangor.' Grant was remembering the dead Chambers' wrath with the dead Sam. 'Travshields are symptoms of a culture these people here cannot understand. You just don't do that sort of thing.'

Abby was staring at the travshields. It was probably the first time she had ever seen the transparent ovoids with the anti-grav units in base, tracked wheels and armoured ports in front that normally sprouted atomic weapons. A few native Guides stood around, their bows ready notched with arrows. Their swords gleamed in vagrant sunshine. Grant laughed.

The laugh surprised him. Products of an atomic-gearred civilization, manned by men from a barbaric past. Abby touched his hand, uncertainly.

'There are laws and laws, captain,' Anders said. 'The Guides were conditioned so that they accepted their transport from base here as a peculiarly rapid march. They will return to base on their feet. They will have no memory of the travshields. Indoctrination of the manual of operations was easy via hypno-drugs, and Charteris will see to it that not a single Guide retains a memory—'

'I get the picture.'

'So Galcon does break laws when it likes,' said Abby.

Bitterness welled in Grant. 'A pity they didn't break a law and get help to us before the head-lobbing began.' He wouldn't forget that. How could he; if he were responsible?

Slowly, working his tongue around the words carefully, as though each were a white hot marble, he said:

'If Galcon breaks a law when necessary don't you consider it futile to wait until the damage is done before rushing to the rescue?' The marbles burned his tongue and lips. 'I'd say that Galcon was a bunch of old women too scared to make up their own minds.'

Abby said something, stopped, bit her lips, and remained silent. Grant saw Anders look at her, a quick smile destroying that smug beauty no man's face should have and making the major look human and likeable. There was a sense of waiting in the air.

At last, reluctantly, Grant had to put it into words.

'I'm a Guide officer,' he said stiffly. 'I fully understand that we cannot force Earthly civilization upon a new, semi-primitive world. The reasons are obvious. But that's not my quarrel with Galcon.'

'You think the Guides should be equipped with weap-

ons of such power that no native revolt could ever succeed?'

'It seems logical.' The sarcasm fell flat, somehow, in the changed wind that was blowing through his emotions.

A light, purring noise of machinery interrupted them, and Anders turned, looking across the clearing towards his radio. Hanging a few feet above it, a travshield turned slowly from side to side, like a huge silver fruit suspended from a vine. The vision plates set above the empty weapon orifices glowed, and the travshield floated gently towards the three Terrans. Symbolically, Grant thought disgustedly, the tracks wafted above—did not touch—the piled heaps of slain.

The shining ovoid settled to ground, the tracks biting into the forest loam, and the hatch swung open. Automatically, Major Anders and Captain Grant stiffened to attention as the slight, bowed, fever-stricken form of Charteris, the Galactic Federation's Resident at Chatham, on the planet New Bangor, stepped out on to the battlefield.

Staring into that narrow, yellow face, with the eyes so deep-sunk only their glitter told of the driving purpose of this man, Grant felt his old admiration for a spirit confined in a failing fleshly cage. Charteris thrust his tungsten-tipped cane into the ground, leaned his weight upon it, and glared silently at the two Guide officers. He licked his lips, and the light turned those lips mauve and slit-like. All the miracle drugs and wizardry of modern medicine could not keep Charteris' frail body from periodic bouts of agonizing fever.

'I notice the revolt has been cleaned up, Major,' Charteris said at last. His voice reminded Grant of rustling dust in a mouldering tomb. 'A great pity it achieved the size it did. But we all make mistakes. That is the price we must pay for acting God to these people.'

Grant did not say anything. He felt too strung-up even to think coherently. All his anger seemed to have evaporated, and yet he still thought that this man was at fault.

Anders gave a quick, precise report. It began with his first awareness of the seriousness of the revolt, told of meeting Grant and Abby on the raft, carried through to the moment when they had been ambushed—as Captain Ramdoul's column had been—and finished with the arrival of the Guide Regiment in response to the directional call of the radio.

'It was as well we had this regiment indoctrinated in the use of travshields ahead of time, then,' remarked Charteris. He glanced at Grant. 'Well, what is it, captain?'

Grant looked at Anders. The major had omitted one thing. He had not mentioned being struck by Grant. Odd.

'Nothing, sir. I—that is—my friends were killed, be-headed in a game—'

Charteris nodded his yellow bird-face. 'That again,' he said grimly. 'We've tried to stamp that out. A nasty little hangover from more primitive times. Well, go on.'

'We didn't have a chance. The natives were able to butcher Earthpeople as they liked. We—that is—there were no weapons—'

'No weapons, captain?' Charteris glanced at Grant's blood-caked sword. 'I do not understand. You were in charge of the post, were you not?'

'Yes,' Grant knew that this was all wrong. This wasn't

the way he thought he would speak. He had intended to be cutting, damning, prosecuting. The facts told their own story. On those facts even a moron would condemn Galcon. But it wasn't going like that. He said, blurting the words out: 'What's the use of policing the natives with their own weapons? They have every chance. We needed atomic handguns, at the least. You make the rules—' he was working himself up now, ignoring Abby's anxious face—'you tell us not to take in artifacts of a superior civilization and then when it's too late and the blood has been spilt you calmly ride in on trav shields and save the day and then blame me for failure! Galcon's nothing but a bunch of idiotic, moronic murderers—'

He might have gone on that way had not Anders interrupted very firmly.

'Captain Grant has been under a very great strain, sir. His friends were beheaded and shot under his eyes. He has had no sleep in days. He's not seeing things in their right perspective.'

Charteris did not reply but looked carefully at Grant. Then he said: 'I understand. You, Captain, should also understand that I was the man who made the mistake. We calculate these things pretty finely, at Galcon. If a revolt is to come it will follow the pattern of these things and explode quickly and bloodily. We've learned alien psychology pretty well, Captain, we can almost date-line the day of a revolution.' He smiled. 'The fewer super-weapons there are on a planet the less messy will the whole affair be. If your Guide company had been equipped with atomic rifles, for instance, this last battle here would not have been so easily decided. Even though we might use atomic rifles in our turn. The bigger the weapons, Captain, the bigger the final score.' He straightened and lifted his stick. 'In this case the tinder-barrel went up too fast.'

Echoing the words a shout belched behind them and then the sickening crackle of an atomic handgun was lost in the smashing avalanche as a tree split and fell and brought down two of its neighbours in mutual ruin.

Grant pivoted, his left arm going automatically around Abby. From the trees pirouetted the native chief dressed in tattered Earthly clothes. Nagrim, leader of the revolt, brandishing an atomic gun taken from Sam's freebooters. A hand of ice unclenched in Grant's stomach and dropped fear to spread throughout his body.

Two Guides ran in quickly, their swords held low and ready, as they had been trained. Nagrim blasted them.

He saw the little group of Terrans. His beady eyes fastened upon Charteris. He recognized the Resident. His lips slobbered. The gun wavered and then steadied.

Major Anders gave a little chuckle. Without looking away from Nagrim, he drew his sword. He said: 'Looks like your theories have come home to roost, Captain.'

The fear that was in Grant was an obscene thing. It twisted and twined in his guts. It gibbered in his face. The fear was for Abby—for the girl who stood straight and proud beside him. What else could a man feel when he was armed only with a sword and a madman stalked towards him carelessly brandishing an atomic gun?

Grant understood a great deal in that microsecond of utter debasement.

And then Major Anders, cool, cocky, self-possessed, had swung his sword forward and gone marching, erect

and trim, out there to put his body before that of his superior. Charteris tried to speak and his husky voice was lost in his throat.

Grant looked at Abby. Her face showed nothing. It might have been some graven mask of marble, hanging over her tomb. Gently, she disengaged herself from his left arm.

Grant knew, then, what Abby had known for some time, for all eternity, since the moment when Nagrim had come swaggering through the trees. There are loyalties that transcend common-sense. Being an Earthman upon an alien planet put you behind the eight ball—There was nothing that he could do about that now. He couldn't go back and prevent Earthmen from shooting in their fragile ships into space.

There was only one thing he could do.

The world seemed to have fined down until there was only this single scene written large across its microcosm of time. Up there crouched Nagrim, slobbering and half-mad, in his single person exhibiting all the characteristics of debasement and primitiveness to be expected on a primitive world. A world that could produce Sergeant Abou could also produce Nagrim—that was balance. Confronting Nagrim, standing easily, erect, Major Anders was too much the hero from a comic book for Grant; but the major knew what he was doing. His body blocked off from view Charteris and Abby and—Grant's mind rebelled, stung—Grant himself.

The scene hung, poised, like the fragment of time excised from consciousness in which the lion flicks his tail before he springs, in which the snake appears to take aim before he strikes, in which the fireball exists before it mushrooms to the heavens.

All awareness of self left Grant. He became as nothing; a mere automaton of sinews and reflexes. He saw Anders' sword tip blur—the man was going to charge... In that second Nagrim pressed the stud and a narrow bolt of fire screamed through ruptured air. The native chief by some chance had the aperture fined down; the bolt struck Anders in the left elbow and severed his arm. In spite of that, through sheer momentum, Anders raced forward three or four steps before he pitched headlong, his sword swinging on its thong around his wrist to clatter against his boots.

And now there was nothing between them. Nagrim and Captain Grant.

Nagrim's eyes flickered in recognition. The gun jerked and Grant realized that the chief intended to play with his victims. The image of those heads rolling, the memory of Sam sliding into the water, of Doc Rawson crucified against the merciless sky, of poor, pitiful blonde Ann's mind breaking down—all burned into Grant's soul.

Casually he flicked his sword into the air, freed the thong from his wrist, caught the blade two inches from the hilt, drew his arm back and hurled the sword lance-like directly at Nagrim. It all happened in one flowing motion.

The sword was a heavy one. The hilt jammed hard against Nagrim's chin and breast.

It stayed there, held fast by the blade which protruded from the dead chieftain's neck.

The atomic gun fell to the ground. And as it fell it vomited one last gout of supernal fire. The blast utterly consumed Nagrim, last chief of the tribe of New Bangor.

Somehow, that mattered a lot to Grant.

Sergeant Abou had regained his honour. The men of New Bangor had regained their manhood; their past sins had been washed away in that cleansing fire.

Some time later, cleaned and fed and polished, Grant and Anders—his stump bound up, all ready to leave for base where a new prosthetic limb would be grafted on—Charteris and Abby sat around camp furnishings and drank cool draughts of iced lager. Radio reports told of the end of the revolt. The whistle-carried news of the death of Nagrim had spread and the men of New Bangor, thankful that the revolt was over, were already planning a welcome for the colonists. They had seen where their future lay.

'I guess you're all straightened out now, Captain,' Charteris husked, smiling.

'Yes, sir. I still regret the useless loss of lives. I'll never forget that. But I follow Galcon policy.'

Charteris nodded. 'If there is to be a revolt, then get it over with fast. We mistimed this one, that's all.'

'And later you come in, when the revolt is dead and the natives are willing to co-operate to the full. Then you can inaugurate the agricultural revolution and then an industrial revolution.'

'Those are the revolutions that matter, Captain.'

Abby said: 'And you have the natives' respect.'

Charteris gave one of his wintery smiles.

'We've met them on their own ground, with their own weapons, and proved ourselves fit to lead them in the development of their own planet until they are capable of taking up their burden of the responsibility for the civilized worlds of the Galaxy.'

Charteris said with an air of finality: 'We don't bring in evidence of a superior civilization because we know it takes away the self-respect of the native peoples. And any culture resents being policed—clumsily done it results in violent reaction as we know from that terrible head-lobbing—but that resentment will never die if you police with super weapons and a technology the native

people cannot understand. We need these folk here as friends. And they must become our friends from their own choice, we cannot force them into friendship.'

'Galactic psychology brought down to the personal level,' Grant said. 'If a man beats you with a superior weapon it doesn't mean anything. But he gains your respect if he knocks you out in fair fight.'

'Fair fight—' Abby echoed.

Major Anders stood up and adjusted his sling. He reached over and Grant took the proffered hand. Their grip was strong and mutually satisfying.

'I don't know about fighting them with their own weapons,' Anders said with a little chuckle. 'You did a pretty good job of beating them when they held the aces, Jeff.'

'I made the first miscalculation. I owed my people that.'

Anders nodded. He walked off, almost strutting, a cocky, independent figure with his stump across his chest like a battle honour.

Grant took his gaze away from the major and looked across Charteris at Abby. She looked steadily back at him, smiling. She had never looked more desirable.

In her eyes was a promise that meant more to Grant than any new planet however carefully eased into the structure of the Galaxy could possibly give. So he wasn't able to explain what he said next.

'I understand what Galcon are doing and I understand the reasons for their decisions in the opening up of new worlds. When we colonize we do it humanely, carefully, thinking always of the psychological and material well-being of the peoples we find on the new planets.'

Abby looked wonderful, smiling at him, and Charteris was beaming away like an old and successful marriage-broker.

'So,' said Captain Jeffrey Updike Grant of the Guides, 'why do we go out into space and colonize? No—' He hushed their immediate reactions. '—I know *why*; I mean *why*?'

They all had wit enough not to try to answer that question.

When In Doubt- DESTROY!

WILLIAM F.
TEMPLE

The first confrontation between men and alien beings has long been a subject for speculation by sf writers. But if anyone thinks that the idea is beginning to be played out, the evergreen Mr Temple has some delightful surprises in store...

'Great God, but this is an awful place!'

That was Captain Scott's reaction, on his death journey, to the aspect of the South Pole. Cordell had quoted it a dozen times in the last three days. Marston contained his irritation. He had to accept the fact that outside of his job Cordell's mind was limited to a narrow band of grooves. It wasn't the man's fault that he couldn't get on with the job.

And it was true that Scylla-8 was an awful place: dim, desolate, lifeless, not meant for warm-blooded man. It was the eighth planet of the white dwarf sun, Scylla. A kind of Pluto, sun-starved on the outermost rim, a seed fallen on stony ground.

Yet—maybe not wholly barren ground. Providence, in the shape of mankind, had chosen to plant something there. Although Scylla-8 might not generate life, it could play a part in helping to: it could serve as a platform for a beacon.

Cordell had to stand on tiptoe to see out of the small round window. He was small, neat, nervily quick of speech, as though he had much to say and time were limited. In fact, he had little to say and now there was too much time. So he was apt to repeat himself.

'Yes, it's pretty awful,' said Cordell perfunctorily, and wondered why the other kept looking at it. The terrain was nothing but lava frozen long ago and in no particularly interesting formations. It might just as well have been spilt porridge. Barely visible in the distance-eneebled glow of an orange-sized Scylla was the base section of the beacon, outlined against pallid stars.

The section had arrived on schedule in Monthly One, the first automatic supply ion-rocket to follow their own ship from Earth. The two Pathfinders, Marston and Cordell, had off-loaded and assembled it, also on schedule. The day after completion Monthly Two was due with the next section, plus fresh food and commodities, mail and general reading matter.

It didn't come.

It still hadn't come. It was now 245 hours overdue, too

many of which they'd spent in uncheckable speculation. Where was it? And where were, come to that, Fairbank and Strauss, Pathfinders who set out for Scylla-8 three years ago?

Schedule allowed nine months for the completion of a beacon, upon which instantaneous communication with Earth became possible.

But no signal was received from Fairbank and Strauss. Maybe their ship never reached the Scylla system. Maybe it did but its Re-animator had a functional failure and somewhere on this dark planet they still lay frozen in their tanks. If they were, they would have to wait a while yet. The Programme was too far behind. No time could be wasted on a possibly vain search.

There had had to be a great deal of testing and re-design of equipment before Earth mounted a second Pathfinder expedition.

Cordell began tapping with a fingernail at the quartz window. It became a tattoo. Marston's nerves became fretful again. He tried to calm them with a joke.

'What do you think that is, Cordy—a barometer?'

Cordell stopped. He sighed. 'Just hoping to attract someone's attention out there.'

'A woman's?'

'Anyone's.'

'You'll be lucky,' said Marston. There was no known vegetable—let alone fleshly—life out there, anywhere.

He wondered how much longer he could endure Cordell without blowing his top. Psychological tests indicated that the two men were ideally suited working partners. And, until this hitch, their partnership had been one of almost unceasing work. Idleness wasn't on the schedule, so their ability to stand the morale rot of inaction hadn't been measured.

Maybe waiting wouldn't have been so bad if there were an ordained date when it would end. Crossing off the days would be a kind of positive action, marking a steady advance. But doubt, ignorance, and utter helplessness were soul-killing.

'If only we could let them know the damn thing's missing,' said Cordell for the *n*th time.

'If the lift-off went wrong, they'll know already.'

Marston had said that before, too. He reflected that his responses were becoming as automatic as Cordell's observations. Maybe Cordell kept hoping he'd come up with different answers, one of them a solution to the insoluble.

He added: 'If Monthly Three arrives on schedule, and we've heard nothing in the meantime, then we'll know that they don't know Two went astray.'

'If, if, if,' said Cordell irritably. 'Two, Three, Four, Five—if only one of them is lost, we're sunk: we'll never be able to put Humpty-Dumpty together again.'

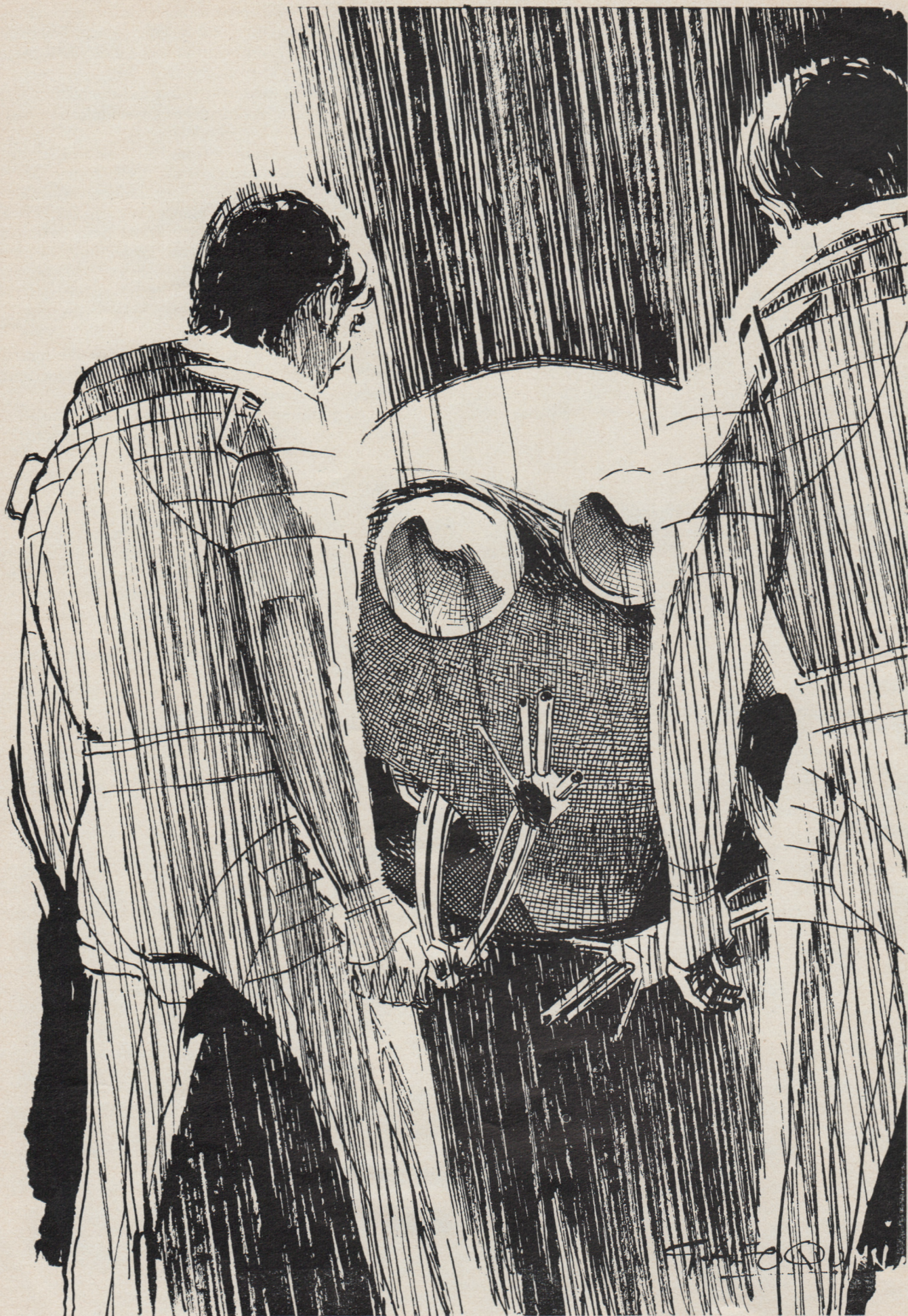
The obvious needed no further comment. They became silent, but hard-to-kill hope kept them glancing pretty frequently at the radar screen. It was their only link with Out There.

Presently, within the same second, they both noticed the blip edge on to it.

'There it is!' Cordell danced over to the screen as if to greet it.

Marston's comment was internal: Thank God. Oh, thank God.

The rotating arm, painting its picture with dripping



green fire, kept revealing the blip a mite nearer to its axis. The ship from Out There was heading their way. Monthly Three wasn't due for twenty days yet, so it must be the overdue Two. Marston's shaken faith in the Programme began to get off its knees. If the ship weren't on time, at least it was dead on course.

The final refinement was now possible. Marston pushed the button. The landing controller began transmitting its Welcome to Scylla-8 signal. Two should land half a mile to the north.

Both men began to dodge around in their small metal-oid igloo from window to window. It was an undeclared contest to be the first to spot the ship itself in the sky. By now its bright red lights, fore and aft, should be turned on and blazing forth its position.

But they could see no such ruby cluster. Yet the radar told them the ship was up there, coming in fast.

'Relay's stuck,' Marston diagnosed, with only mild annoyance. That was a minor fault. The main thing was that the ship had got here.

'There—I saw it!' Cordell veered to another window. He did a little ballet on tip-toes, peering out. 'Yes—it's landing.'

'Can't be—not there,' snapped Marston. 'That's due west.'

Cordell became still and said nothing more. Marston strode across and looked past him.

Something, lit only by Scylla's faint rays, lay out there on the lava field. It was certainly a ship but smaller than the Monthly class. Disappointment and curiosity wrestled a brief bout inside Marston.

Cordell, equally uncertain, asked: 'Well, what do you make of it?'

'Can't place the type. But I guess it must be Terrestrial. How about this? There's been a big hitch over Two and they've sent someone to explain?'

Cordell remained doubtful. 'It doesn't look like a deep-space craft. Too lightweight.'

He had touched the point Marston didn't feel too happy about. A deep-freeze plant was necessarily bulky and also necessary for a star-ship. That slim hull lacked room for one.

The ship carried no visible insignia, no observation ports. There was a solitary black dot on its side, amid-ships, not easy to see in that light. Marston stared at the dot. It seemed to be slowly enlarging itself. Marston distrusted his eyes and rubbed them. But the dot continued to expand. Then he realized it was a widening hole and was reminded of the iris aperture of a camera.

'Something's coming out,' Cordell whispered.

As a child Marston had been a great reader of romances and fantasy stories. They provided material for recurring dreams—and nightmares. One nightmare which had plagued him for years had its seed in *Treasure Island*.

It always began with him finding himself confined in a flimsy wooden cage—his childish conception of a stockade. He could see a ship out there on a vividly blue sea: the *Hispaniola*. Its long-gun was being readied by the villainous Israel Hands to fire on the stockade.

'Israel was Flin's gunner,' said a hoarse voice, and the reminder always froze him with fear. The gun's muzzle appeared to be trained on him personally.

The gun fired soundlessly. He saw the round shot emerging from the bore and realized there was no escape.

He had only a few seconds of life left. Then he would be mashed into pulp.

Time slowed. Each second stretched into an age.

The shot approached him in awful deliberate slow motion, swelling as it came. It became much bigger than himself, a great globe, some runaway planet on a collision course.

Then, all at once, it developed eyes, shot out tentacles and changed into a monster squid about to make its kill.

At which point, inevitably, he would start awake, screaming.

It was as though he had been shocked into waking now, for he found himself, trying not to yell, regarding a black globe hovering just outside the igloo. It had eyes. Slowly it was growing four tentacles. They were of jointed metal, being ejected section by section from the body of the thing. Each was tipped by a bunch of feelers of varying thickness, a distorted hand.

One hand reached for the bolt of the outer door of the airlock.

Marston became aware that Cordell was no longer at his side. He spun around. The little man was taking the beam rifle from its rack. He turned, flicking the safety catch back. Now that something that mattered was happening, he was quiet and composed. He caught Marston's eye, saw the panic in it.

'It's okay. I shan't start anything unless it does.'

There was a soothing quality in his tone which both shamed and annoyed Marston. As seasoned Pathfinders they had often encountered non-Terrestrial life before and in stranger forms than this. But Marston had seldom lost control in quite this way before. True, his nerves were frayed through worrying during the long, blank wait for the missing Two. But Cordell had shared his anxiety.

It was just the coincidental resemblance to that old nightmare, Marston told himself. That's what threw me. But deep down he remained afraid. He had a feeling that there wasn't any coincidence, that the dream had been symbolically true, foretelling his doom: his last hour was not far distant...

But the black ball was only a robot, after all. Passionless: a mere surveying instrument. Marston reflected that once, as a tiny tot, he had run screaming from a domestic vacuum cleaner...

Yet that was an inapt comparison. A vacuum cleaner is brainless. Mark 1105 could take thought. It waited in the airlock, hovering like a tethered toy balloon. Soon, all the musty, oppressive Scylla-8 atmosphere had been pumped out and replaced by clean air.

Then Mark 1105 entered, floating in some force-field at Marston's shoulder-height. It shot the door bolts behind it without fumbling, as though it had done so often before. Its pupiless lenses, which yet might be called eyes, were directed at Cordell.

A voice came from it, though there was no discernible aperture.

'That weapon can't damage me. It's no damn good to you, man. Forget it.'

English. Colloquial English, at that. Definitely a non-organic voice, product of electronic wave patterns, not fleshly vocal cords. Yet there were traces of accents Marston had heard somewhere before.

Cordell, alert as a bantam-weight sparring for an opening, said: 'Maybe so, maybe not.' And kept his finger on the trigger-button.

Marston cleared his throat and asked: 'Where do you come from? Who sent you?'

'I was manufactured on Scylla-3. A number of us patrol the Scylla System outer limits. We're official interrogators. State your business here.'

Marston repeated: 'Who sent you?'

'State your business here.'

Cordell chuckled, though with little real amusement. 'Get that, Marston. It's got a built-in tin ear so far as leading questions are concerned. Presumably it's owned by Scyllans Anonymous.'

Marston frowned. 'Well, we can be cagey too. Look, friend, we'll trade information with you. That means it has to work both ways. We didn't come here just to be cross-examined. We're Earthmen, from Sol, roughly ninety degrees along the rim of the Galaxy from here. We come in peace. Now, who are your makers? How is it that they know our language?'

'I'm Mark 1105. I don't have to explain anything, for this is our space. We belong here. You have entered our space. We ask why. We have the right to ask why. State your business here.'

Pathfinders had found the incredibly varied universe more fantastic in reality than any romantic fiction dreamed up by man in all his Earthbound centuries. They were accustomed to taking things as they came: the strange was usual. Yet suddenly Marston had a queer feeling that this situation was unreal. No reason for it. Here was just a solid, unremarkable robot, a metallic plum-pudding, confronting them in a standard igloo isolated in remote Finnish wastes from a Sibelius tone poem. If he cracked the thing open there would be nothing to see but a complex of micro-components—prosaic as hell.

Nothing comparable to, for instance, the spirit-land of Neopha, where you were surrounded by whispering, semi-seen gauze, a life-tissue which could mingle with yours until your personal memories seemed only part of an alien race memory, and you were simultaneously nothing and everything.

But he had this sudden feeling of acute loneliness. He was a living soul alone among dead things. Cordell was just a zombie, Scylla-8 but petrified stone, the robot was nothing: just a black hole in space, the mouth of a bottomless pit. The pit was the only refuge from this aching loneliness: it offered thornless oblivion.

Marston shook his head, denying himself that escape. The physical movement broke the spell. Reality returned, sharply focussed. He was able to analyse now those odd intonations: a mixture of Nebraskan and second-generation Viennese accents.

'Where are the two Earthmen who came here before us?' he asked crisply.

Cordell glanced at him, startled, then comprehended and nodded.

'Fairbank, of course—"no damn good, man". Everything was always no damn good, with him. And Strauss—those "w's" that always threw him!'

He aimed the rifle carefully.

Marston knew what had come into Cordell's mind: that old but still disputed adage of hardened Pathfinders:

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When in doubt, destroy.

'Hold it!' he snapped. 'Don't make things worse. Just remember the spot we're in.'

'Just remember the spot you're in,' Mark 1105 echoed.

Cordell gestured impatiently with the rifle. Then he walked slowly around the robot, inspecting it. It didn't turn. Cordell reached a console and thumbed a switch. All around them segmented shutters rose from floor grooves, arched over their heads and clamped themselves together in a seamless hemisphere. It was the inner defence wall, a precaution against the outer wall being breached.

'Be our guest, Mark,' said Cordell. 'We call this the Keep. Because here we shall keep you until you answer a few questions. For a starter, the question already put: where are the other two Earthmen?'

'Don't concern yourself, man—they'll not be harmed.'

'That wasn't the question, Mark.'

'They, together with their ship—and your own missing second ship—are in our keeping. We understand that Earthmen are preparing to move in large numbers into our space. Naturally we're interested to learn what kind of neighbours we're to expect.'

Marston and Cordell exchanged glances. They didn't need to speak their thoughts aloud: automatically they'd become a working team again.

Marston said: 'This "we" you refer to—your masters, presumably inhabitants of Planet 3 of this system. Rather high-handed, aren't they? They've taken two Earthmen away from their highly important work and are apparently keeping them in custody. Not only that, they've obviously diverted our supply ship from its course and commandeered it, making it impossible for us to continue our work here. Not exactly a friendly welcome. It's we Earthmen who should be wary of our new neighbours, wouldn't you think?'

'Our precautionary measures are perfectly logical,' said Mark 1105. 'We've learnt a fair amount from your comrades, including of course your language. But we need to know a lot more about your race: its history, the scope of its science, its habits, its intentions. Then we can assess the possible relationship between our cultures. It may be good. It may be no damn good.'

'It'll be no damn good, for sure, unless you return our men and our property, unharmed,' said Marston seriously.

'Afterwards.'

'No. Before. *Now*.'

'I second that,' said Cordell.

A moment of tense silence.

Then both men felt as though their blood had ceased its flow through their arteries, ceased to nourish their brain cells. Their sight dimmed and failed, consciousness failed. In two seconds they were dead—or as good as dead.

When they returned to life there had been some changes within the igloo. The Keep was sheathed back in its underfloor slots. Its control button was fused into a burnt patch on the console and inoperable. All the provision compartments stood open—and empty. The beam rifle was gone.

But Mark 1105 hung in the air as though it had not moved an inch.

It said: 'It's my function to make the conditions, not yours. Your food and water have been removed to my ship. You will receive regular rations—but only so long as you provide information.'

Marston was still re-adjusting, so that took a little while to sink in. When it had registered, he said slowly: 'No, you certainly don't know much about Earthmen.'

'You sure have a lot to learn yet,' said Cordell. 'But not from us. We'll starve first.'

'Fairbank and Stauss didn't starve, man,' said Mark 1105. 'They talked. As you will—in time. Time matters nothing to me. But it matters a great deal to you.'

'More Earthmen will follow us and they'll be prepared for trouble,' said Marston, knowing it was a hollow threat. After two failures to establish a beacon here, the Pathfinders would try another planet.

'Even if they could destroy me, any one of a thousand more powerful machines could take my place. I'll leave you to think it over.'

Mark 1105 withdrew through the airlock, floated back to its ship.

It was then that the men discovered that their space-suits had been taken, too. They held a council of war.

When, next day, Mark 1105 emerged from the airlock, a net of stout cordage dropped over it from the ceiling. Both men had been busy all night weaving it.

They sprang forward gathering its ends, trying to drag the robot to the floor and bind it.

There was no visible emanation from Mark 1105, yet unconsciousness engulfed them again.

When they recovered, the robot was hovering in its usual spot. On the floor was a scatter of charred ropes. There was a smell of burnt nylon.

The emotionless voice said: 'I have assessed all possible ways that the materials within your reach could be formed into weapons. Statistically, so far as they and you are concerned, I am indestructible. Therefore to attack me is a pure waste of effort. You must accept that. Logically, your wisest move is to begin talking.'

'—off!' growled Cordell, vicious with disappointment.

On the third day Marston licked sore, cracked lips and said: 'Well, I don't know. Maybe we're just being stupid. Hard to tell where obstinacy ends and stupidity begins.'

'That's the way, man—talk yourself out of it.'

Thirst robbed their voices of much intonation. Marston wondered whether Cordell meant to be humorous or condemnatory. He said: 'Maybe we *should* talk ourselves out of it. When you come to think of it, what harm could it do? After all, we don't know any really vital secrets. So we could hardly betray our side, so to speak.'

'Isn't *all* information of use to the enemy?'

'Enemy?' Marston frowned. 'They haven't declared war on us. They're only inquiring about us. Just as any landlord would do about a prospective tenant.'

'Landlords shouldn't kidnap people, starve them and confiscate their property.'

Marston sighed and went silent. When Mark 1105 paid its daily visit, again they let it go unanswered.

On the fifth day their tongues were swollen. Their bodies cried out for water and food—in that order.

'So we die.' Marston's voice was just a thick whisper. 'And then who'll ever know or care what heroes we've been? Not even ourselves.'

'That's not the point. Can't you see that?'

'I don't see any point to anything any more.'

Cordell croaked: 'How the hell did you ever become a Pathfinder, Marston? I thought the training weeded out all the weaklings. I'd never imagined it could happen but this team's breaking up. Pull yourself together, for God's sake.'

Marston winced internally. He'd shared enough ordeals with Cordell to come to think he could take anything. Indeed, he had believed that if it came to the crunch, Cordell would likely crack first: he was more highly strung, he had less inner resources.

It was humiliating to learn that the boot was on the other foot. Cordell's very lack of imagination was an asset. He was narrow, concentrated, dedicated. Marston was apt to brood too long and reach second thoughts that were too often shaped by fear.

Yet why hadn't he cracked long before this? What was exceptional about this situation? Just that one thing that touched his flaw: too much time on his hands to think about it, around and over and under it. Introspection was self-destroying.

They'd spent decades on the journey here, but in frozen sleep, so that relatively it had taken no time at all. Hard work had devoured the time after that ... until the Programme was sabotaged and left them disengaged in a vacuum.

Mark 1105 was right: time mattered a great deal to them—to Marston, anyway. Dying by inches for a lost cause seemed an intolerably pointless way to spend it.

On the seventh day Marston could only just articulate. 'Water. Must have ... water.'

'You know the condition,' said Mark 1105.

'Can't talk ... without ... water.'

'You'll talk—after?'

'Yes,' said Marston faintly.

Cordell began groaning in his sleep, as if he had heard and was striving to wake. But he still hadn't surfaced when Mark 1105 returned with a flask of water and a container of meat extract wafers. His eyes didn't open until an hour later when Marston was expounding what he could recall of *The Descent of Man*.

He shut them again, weary, disgusted. 'Bloody traitor,' he murmured.

Marston, still hungry but stronger expostulated: 'But Darwin's universal knowledge, man! Why, half the planets we've—'

'Never mind him,' Mark 1105 instructed. 'I'm recording you. Stay on the subject.'

But Marston couldn't for all that long. Evolution, anthropology, biology weren't his specialized subjects. He exhausted his knowledge of them. To further questions he could only answer honestly: 'I don't know.'

Mark 1105 accepted that. It switched to Terrestrial techniques in astronautics. Obviously it was already well-informed and intended only to fill in a few gaps, particularly concerning the method of Re-animation after deep freeze. Here Marston was on his own ground.

Soon he was well into the chemistry of it. 'The barium content, one part in sixty—'

Mark 1105 interrupted with an urgent electronic whistle, pitched so high that it pained Marston's ears. It stopped and the robot emitted some rapid but unrhythmic clicks.

'Check,' it said. 'Check barium.'

'Repeat: barium.'

'My information is sodium.'

'You're mistaken.'

More clicks, rapid, uneven. 'I am never mistaken. I can't afford to be. All Mark 1105's are infallible. Sodium is my information.'

'Then you were given wrong information.'

'That is possible. Wait.'

Mark 1105 became externally inanimate. Its arms hung like dead branches and an inner film, grey-white, frosted its lenses. Marston found himself comparing the thing to a large spider, dead for a long time and full of dust.

Waiting, he slowly ate the last of the tangy, concentrated wafers, prolonging the sheer pleasure of eating.

Abruptly, Mark 1105 stirred, alive once more.

'Strauss said sodium. I've now compared his validity graph with yours. His record is definitely negative. Yours is positive. Therefore I've erased sodium and substituted barium. Continue.'

Marston tried to but lost the thread. In his feeble state concentration kept sagging. But curiosity remained.

'What do you mean by a validity graph?'

'In the course of our duty reluctant subjects sometimes try to mislead us with false information. As Strauss did. It's useless. We're equipped with a lie-detector. Organic beings can lie only consciously. There's no such thing as an unconscious lie: that can only be classed as a mistake. Thoughts are electrical phenomena of measurable intensity. Thoughts emanating from the upper cortical layer give a different reading from those stored in the deeper, or memory, regions. During interrogation I keep a running graph based on all readings. Responses from your memory bank are regarded as true or what you believe to be true. Calculated answers from the conscious level are categorized as suspect.'

'I see,' said Marston, and added wryly: 'Father, I cannot tell a lie.'

'Why do you address me as "father"?'

'Er—the allusion is to George Washington and his father.'

Please, he prayed, don't ask me to explain humour.

'Who is George Washington?'

Well, maybe history is simpler... Marston related what he could recall of Washington, his deeds and times. It wasn't a great deal. He explained the cherry tree bit. Brought in the Declaration of Independence, although Washington had little to do with that. His scanty material ran out.

Mark 1105 said: 'I wish to check that information now. Wait.'

It retreated into its shell, outwardly dead, inwardly active. But only briefly.

It reported: 'Validity graph positive. Cross references positive. Information registered as correct.'

'So I get top marks?'

'Explain "top marks".'

Marston sighed and, fumbling wearily for words, described the role of examinations in Terrestrial educa-

tion. He almost envied Cordell's immunity from this insatiable mind vampire. How long could he go on? What would happen when he was drained of information?

Mark 1105 said: 'You're beginning to repeat yourself. You aren't keeping your attention on what you're saying. That's no damn good.'

'I'm still hungry. I can't think straight when I'm hungry.'

'Very well. As you've not fed for some days I'll allow you an extra canister—for today only. But no more water. After this the ration will be limited to one container and one flask each day. I've checked that this contains sufficient nutriment to maintain you.'

The robot made its way back to its ship. Marston watched from a window for a few moments. It floated unhurriedly through the weak twilight, past the beacon base which stood like a witness to their ruined purpose. He felt a sudden hatred for it and the unseen beings who had loosed it on him and Cordell.

Cordell groaned, made dry sounds in his throat. Marston hurried to him. Cordell mustn't die and leave him alone with that pitiless machine. He picked up the flask; it was two-thirds empty. He pillowed Cordell's head on his knee, put the flask to his lips.

Cordell swallowed, choked, swallowed again, until a mere drain of water remained. He opened his eyes. Their corneas had lost transparency, their sockets were bruise-dark. But he could still see. He stared at the flask, then pushed it away weakly.

'Damn you,' he whispered. 'Leave me alone.'

'Cordy, don't give up.'

'It was you who gave up.'

'No. I was playing for time. While there's life there's hope. There still may be a way out. Something might turn up.'

'Micawber.' A faint unexpected sneer. Cordell had little use for fiction.

Marston made no answer. Cordell looked up at him dully, indifferently. He muttered, as though it were a throwaway line: 'It'll kill you when it's sucked you dry.'

'It didn't kill the other two.'

'Did it say that?'

No, Marston reflected unhappily. It had merely said that Fairbank and Strauss were 'in our keeping'. Alive—or dead?

'Only one way to defeat it.' Cordell's lips barely moved. 'Tell it... nothing.'

He edged himself away on to his side, lay with his back to Marston.

Marston knelt there, uncertain, distressed, biting his thumbnail.

The air-lock door swung open. Their tormentor was back.

Mark 1105 occupied its usual position, became quite motionless, as though it were resting on an invisible table. One of its misshapen hands gripped a food container.

Marston got to his feet, trying to dissemble his concern. He held out his hand for the container.

Mark 1105 displayed no reaction. Its stillness and silence were disturbing. Its lens-eyes were clear, showing that it was alert to its surroundings. Marston was reminded of a tiger frozen in the intention to pounce.

He said nervously: 'I'm glad to see you back.'
'That's a particularly obvious lie.'

The robot's voice was dispassionate, as always. Maybe it was Marston's imagination that imbued it with an extra chilliness.

Marston shrugged uneasily. 'All right, have it your way.'

'I will. I always do. It's my function. Your companion imagines he'll tell me nothing. He will tell me everything he knows. As your predecessors did . . . before they died. There's no way out and nothing can turn up to save you. You co-operate, willingly or not.'

The realization made Marston feel sick. They had no privacy, never would have. Ever since it first came here they had been within earshot of this thing. While they were unconscious it had planted some radio-type bug in the igloo. And the revelation that Fairbank and Strauss were dead knocked the bottom out of everything.

To talk or not to talk? Either way, obviously, led only to that black pit of extinction.

One of Mark 1105's telescopic arms elongated itself, reached down. Its feelers wrapped themselves around Cordell's neck. And Cordell screamed shatteringly. He writhed on the floor. He tried to reach the feelers to break their grip. He failed even to touch them. His fingers became doubled up, clenched into agonized fists.

Marston flung himself at the metal arm and gripped it. It was like clutching a red-hot bar. Worse: the bar was highly electrified. Great throbbing waves of pain passed up his arms. It was paralysing: his scream burst from locked jaws. The unbearable overplus of energy seemed to rush up into his skull and burn out his brain.

When he came to, he was in his bunk. Cordell was squatting on the floor, shoulders hunched, hands clasped around his knees, head bowed. It was suggestive of the pre-natal position. He was a dejected little figure.

Marston sat up. Surprisingly, although his arms tingled, he had no real pain now. Indeed, he felt somewhat invigorated. But recollection of the ordeal made him look around apprehensively for Mark 1105. It had gone.

Cordell looked up at him in hangdog fashion. He was pale. His very cheek muscles seemed to sag with despair. It was as though he had conceded defeat, may never stand erect again or walk with his old sprightliness. He noted Marston's fear.

'It'll be back tomorrow,' he said spiritlessly. 'With more of the same—if we refuse to talk.'

'That thing's a devil!'

'No. Just a pragmatist.'

'What can we do?'

'Nothing. And, by the way, remember that it's taping us, even though it's back in its ship.'

Marston felt frustrated, but only for a moment. He went to the desk and returned with pencil and memo pad. Cordell remained uninterested, never raised his head.

Marston hesitated. He had an urge to do *something*. To think up a scheme—but he had no ideas. To escape—but although the door of their cell wasn't locked no man could live for much more than a minute outside it without oxygen.

'We've had it,' said Cordell, chin on knees.

'What happened after I passed out?'

'I talked, that's what happened. My God, how I talked! I'd discovered I was a coward. But I can tell you that a hunger strike is pure pleasure compared with the torture our robot friend can hand out. I couldn't take it—not indefinitely. It was like having every nerve in my body stretched out to breaking point. You can't imagine it. *You* were knocked out right away. But I was kept dangling. I got it the slow way. I don't recommend it.'

Marston felt sweat on his forehead. 'But—'

'Don't worry, that treatment's not for you, only for the bad boys. I was stubborn, so I was made an example of. And I learned the lesson: you can't beat Mark. You can't even starve yourself to death. It has ways of forcibly feeding you. One of them is by pouring that terrible energy into you. It half kills you and revitalizes you at the same time. It's some crazy kind of substitute for metabolism.'

'Oh.' Marston felt at a loss. He tossed the pad aside and climbed back on his bunk. There was nothing to write. He needed inspiration. He lay back, tried to relax and invite it to come.

Cordell lapsed into silence, drooping under the burden of his guilt. When, presently, Marston addressed him again, he didn't answer. He preferred to withdraw from the world he could no longer cope with.

The hours dragged on. During an unnumbered one of them, Marston dozed off.

When he awoke, he was alone in the igloo.

'Cordy!' he called uselessly, stupidly. He looked through the glass panel into the airlock, which was empty. He started the round of the windows, peering out. No more than twenty yards beyond the third window, Cordell lay face-up on the unyielding lava, as dead as it was. Scylla, like a small orange lantern, seemed to be hanging just above him.

Otherwise the scene was as it had been for days past. There was the robot's ship, its door closed and shrunk into a small knot. There was the abandoned beacon on the dreary stone desert under the cold stars.

'Cordy!' said Marston desolately.

He was unhappy but not all that surprised. He realized that the little man was dead even before he walked out there. His pride, his spirit, his heart had been broken.

Marston felt terribly alone.

However, there was one more communication from Cordell. Marston found it scrawled on the pad on his bunk.

It won't get any more out of me. I didn't want it to get any more from you, either. I was going to leave both air-lock doors open. But I can't do it. We've been together too long. I can't murder you. What you do now is up to you. Best follow me—the sooner the end, the less dishonourable. Look on it as our Declaration of Independence.

Marston sat thinking it over. Suicide was a Declaration of Independence, but of a negative kind. There was no triumph in it. It was a defeat.

It was odd that Cordy had mentioned the Declaration. Maybe, when semi-conscious, he yet heard something of that sketchy description of it supplied to Mark 1105. Sketchy and maybe inaccurate, Marston reflected. He'd not invented anything but he couldn't be sure he'd got all the facts right. But Mark 1105 had seemed satisfied.

So long as they didn't clash with data recorded from Fairbank and Strauss, so long as they came from the subconscious level, the robot accepted them as true.

That old story of Washington chopping down the cherry tree, for example. 'Father, I cannot tell a lie.' Surely that was apocryphal?

And at that moment it came: the inspiration.

Soon afterwards Mark 1105 came also. But by then Marston was good and ready for it.

Directly it had closed the air-lock door, even before it had settled in its place, it announced: 'This time I am here to stay. You will not be able to follow your companion. He thought he would tell me no more about Earthmen. He was wrong. He has told me that Earthmen may choose to kill themselves in preference to deferring death. It's against the law of self-preservation. I've not encountered this attitude before.'

'Well, I did tell you that you didn't know much about our kind.'

Mark 1105 ignored that. It continued: 'I've brought you sufficient nutriment for ten days. By then you'll have told me all you know. I shall stimulate your brain when you tire. You will not sleep. Not a minute will be wasted. You will recall that we were dealing with the subject of history. I want all available information about your men and women of history, all the significant characters. Begin with the earliest recorded times. Begin now.'

Marston smiled a secret smile and complied. 'Our civilization began with the Greeks and the Romans. They were great and powerful characters. For instance, Bellerophon, son of the King of Corinth. He rode the winged horse, Pegasus—'

Mark 1105 emitted its shrill electronic shriek. 'Check "winged horse".'

'Pegasus had wings, like a bird. It could fly through the air.'

The robot clicked convulsively. 'Wait.'

It took time out to consult its records. Then it said: 'Previous information was that horses are large quadrupeds incapable of flight. The Strauss graph is positive. Your own graph is positive. Deduction: Pegasus was an exception.'

'True,' said Marston. 'Pegasus flew up into the sky and was made into a constellation of stars. It is the only horse to be turned into stars.'

Another shriek. 'An impossible transmutation. Organic matter ... Hydrogen.' Click-click. 'Against the known physical laws.' Click-click-click. 'This must be a lie.' Click. 'Wait.'

The inspiration was genuine. It was working. Marston felt himself on the way to becoming the master of the situation. Mark 1105 had gone into a lengthy huddle with its data on the laws of physics, on equine animals, with its graphs ... This is only the beginning, my friend, Marston told it silently. My guess is that your masters are little more than machines themselves, fettered by rigid logic, blind to the deep truths inherent in mythology. They can see a picture only if it's in a standard-type frame. No, our cultures would never merge. The Scyllans and ourselves would always be bad neighbours. There's no future in it. Well, it's something to have learned that.

The robot returned its attention to him.

'Graph positive: deep memory level. You believe this

to be true. But it cannot be true. Classed as a mistake. Continue.'

'Bellerophon slew the fire-breathing monster, Chimæra—'

High-pitched whistle. 'Check "monster". Animal?'

'Yes. Part lion, part goat.'

Mark 1105 had a fit of clicks, like uncontrollable hiccoughs. It was some time before it managed to comment: 'This doesn't appear to be feasible. Wait.' A consultation. When it spoke again, its voice was crackling with electrical disturbances. 'Graph positive. Yet comparisons show highly improbable biologically.' Click-click.

A pause. Then it added, speaking rapidly in a higher tone: 'Also Terrestrial animals unable to breathe fire. Mistake. Mistake.'

A violent flash, from some internal spark, briefly illuminated one lens.

'Contin—contin—cancel.' It was stuttering.

Marston waited curiously, watchfully.

'No damn good,' said Mark 1105. 'I cannot keep registering mistakes. No damn good for my circuit, man. No damn good for my masters. Useless. I do not make mistakes. They do not want mistakes. You must not tell me mistakes.'

'I tell you the truth,' said Marston blandly.

'Contin—continue.'

Marston continued heartlessly with classical mythology. It continued to cause Mark 1105 trouble with ingestion. The robot choked over Prometheus with his indestructible liver. The shape-changing sooth-sayer, Proteus. Medusa, of the literally petrifying gaze.

Marston warmed up to it.

Mark 1105 shrieked again and this time it went on and on. Marston pressed his palms over his ears.

At last it stopped. The robot was swaying in the air as though changing wind-gusts were catching it. Its arms waved at random. One lens was clear, the other filmed over. The sound of sparks from shorting circuits was like intermittent rifle-fire.

Above the noise, it made one clear statement: 'Mark 1106.'

Then it fell with a crash on the floor, fizzled out like a firework, became inert. Dead metal. A spent cannonball.

Marston gazed at it, his mind still whirling with nonsense that was also true. The robot's rapid collapse had taken him by surprise. He was prepared for a longer struggle. He almost regretted the early victory. He had plenty of shots still left in his locker. The Arabian Nights. The Wizard of Oz. Alice in Wonderland—*that* would have given Mark 1105 a real brainstorm.

He had repaid torture with torture, avenged Cordy. He wondered that Mark 1105 hadn't rendered him unconscious to save himself. But maybe it had gone too far out of control.

'Mark 1106' it had said, and then ceased to function. Had it made a mistake over its own name—its first and last mistake concerning a fact?

Or—the thought chilled his excitement—was it a signal, a summons? As it realized that it wasn't equal to the task it had been given, had it called upon some more sophisticated model to take over?

Maybe there wasn't too much time left.

Marston hastened to the tool drawer. A hammer, a hacksaw, any smashing or cutting tool might serve. The

drawer was empty—there wasn't even a screwdriver left. Mark 1105 had been thorough about removing possible weapons.

He returned to the robot. It lay on its side. Its sightless lenses, at that angle one above the other, no longer suggested eyes—just a couple of glassed-over holes in metal. He gripped the rim of one, wrenched it. It turned, unscrewing. He unscrewed it completely and peered into the globe.

He could see a mesh of fine wires. He poked his finger through, trying to reach them. It was stopped by some transparent stuff, not glass—more like resilient plastic. It gave but wouldn't break.

'Damn!'

He went feverishly around the igloo, yanking open compartments and drawers. All the knives were gone from the cutlery drawer—but forks remained, presumably classed as harmless. He took one to the plastic stuff, jabbing hard. It penetrated. He got the stuff away in pieces, then began hooking out the wires with the prongs. Once he'd got a grip on the ends, the wires came winding out like entrails, dragging transistors, spools of narrow tape, and conglomerations of micro-units to which he could put no name.

Here were all the records of Cordell and himself, and of Fairbank and Strauss also. All the information they'd ever supplied. It was likely that copies of the records of the latter pair had been lodged with the Scyllans. If so, that couldn't be helped. But, equally likely, Mark 1105 hadn't yet conveyed the incomplete dossier on him and Cordy. So he was obliterating himself. And Cordy too.

He extricated the lot. Tore it apart, stamped it into fragments.

Then he turned his back on it, stretched his arms and yawned hugely. All at once he felt tired. It was reaction to the long period of stress under threat. He considered. He had food for ten days—hardly enough to

survive until the next monthly rocket came, supposing it were not diverted and seized by the Scyllans.

His gaze fell upon the radar screen. *Something* was coming, anyhow. The blip was clear. His heart leaped. Last-minute rescue?

He watched, alert and tense again. But it was coming from the wrong quarter, at the wrong angle...

Well, he'd fought to the limit. He'd won a battle but not the war. One man alone couldn't win a war. But maybe one day mankind, united, would win this one. From his own skirmish, he'd put his money on mankind.

The Scyllan robot ship landed quite near to its sister ship. It was of the same design but a trifle larger. Marston supposed it was piloted by Mark 1106. Anyway, certainly another interrogator, who possibly caught that last signal—if signal it was—from Mark 1105.

Sooner or later, it would have come. He didn't suppose he could have destroyed a working robot without that destruction being detected at some Scyllan master control panel. They would have realized by now that he was a dangerous animal, a killer. This time they wouldn't stop to question. *When in doubt, destroy*. The Pathfinder philosophy was boomeranging back. They would blast him into insensibility and take him apart at their leisure.

If he let them.

It was time now to proclaim his personal Declaration of Independence.

He entered the air-lock. Through the outer quartz panel he saw the expanding black dot on the second ship spew forth its round shot. A heavier calibre gun this time: it would have delighted Israel Hands.

The jet-black ball, swelling hugely, travelled without hurry towards him. It could take its time: it was sure of the outcome.

So was Marston. He flung open the outer door and—proud, unafraid, triumphant—went to face the fate destined from his childhood.

ANCHOR MAN

Jack Wodhams

Over the years, science has played an increasing role in crime detection and prevention. Modern police officers employ scientific aids which would have seemed magical to Sherlock Holmes. Tomorrow's detectives may also have use for something which we might classify as magic ourselves...

We had had some small successes, and we had had a number of indeterminate results which, for our lack of speed and detailed precision, were accounted as failures. We would have to score a lot higher than 30% before most in the Department would give us sensible credence. They did not understand.

They had never put us on a murder case before.

'But twenty thousand dead, Tirk, it... it's terrible,' I said.

He spooned some more powder into his cup. 'Pass me the jug. Look, more people than that die in China every day of natural causes.'

That's the way Tirk was, always so logical, no emotional response whatsoever. Never could I comprehend his seeming inability to *feel*. I watched him pour hot water. 'But these didn't die of natural causes, Tirk. They were smashed and churned and... and crushed. It must have been so frightening, so... very awful for them.'

Tirk added sugar to his mix. 'Ken, you make it sound as though it was one huge body that suffered twenty thousand times as much. But it wasn't. They died one at a time like everybody else. So there's an earthquake and one man looks up and gets flattened by a falling building. That's it. He dies. Tough luck. But it's no worse than being mangled in a car smash.'

'But so many, all at once in the same place, so unexpected,' I protested. 'Can't you imagine the fear, the panic, what it must have been like? The ground heaving under their feet, the screams, the terror...'

Tirk stirred his coffee. 'Death is a singular experience, no matter how many die in company. Death is always a lonely and personal thing. The ground opens up, a man falls in, the ground crunches together, blip, a little squirt of ketchup—is that such a bad way to go?'

I grimaced. 'God, but you're callous. Can you not at all conceive the agony, the pain, the distress of those injured, those who have lost family and friends?'

'Ah, now you are talking about the living, the survivors. That's different.' Tirk grinned his pseudo sardonic grin. 'The gleaners of aid, of Red Cross parcels, of sympathy. Yes, I can feel sorry for them. But they have survived, and this fact alone will be something for them to cherish just so long as they may live. They are still alive, and that is something for them to be thankful for, eh?'

'But the children,' I said, 'the homeless, the suffering they must know.'

Tirk swallowed coffee. 'They have survived. It's a sort of divine selection. They will repair. They will continue to survive. Human resilience is phenomenal. In time even their loss will be put to good account.'

I despaired. Tirk had no *feelings*. He never understood. He was so solidly phlegmatic always and seemed incapable of knowing the finer sensibilities. This was ideal for our working relationship, but I did find his insensitivity depressing at times.

On our way. What is the course of these things? Coincidence?

We took a wrong turn, had to circle back, were held up by a patrolman who was supervising kids crossing the street.

The patrolman took the last to the kerb, spoke to them, crouched, two little girls, a little boy, offered them pieces of candy. Your friendly neighbourhood cop. How sweet. Two women nearby, smiling. And the cop was pleased. But in a different way. It was easy, so easy to get results. And there was something, his face...

'Okay,' Tirk said, 'you wanted to drive, so drive. You're doing a great job so far.'

Recalled, I wriggled my shoulders, dismissing the impression. I let out the clutch and the car lurched forward.

Going up in the elevator Tirk said, 'How do you feel?'

'I don't know,' I said, and I didn't. There was a kind of hollow in me waiting to be filled. It was not premonition exactly so much as resistless awareness. It was always so amorphous, so terribly hard to explain.

Tirk said no more. The car stopped, we stepped out.

Tirk flashed our credentials and the officer let us through.

We walked along the passageway to the huddle in front of the door. The only one I recognized was Lieutenant Hyke from the Murder Squad. He looked up at our approach and quickly put on big query. 'What do you fellows want?'

'We've been sent to assist,' Tirk informed him calmly. 'They thought that the E.P.D. could maybe add something.'

'Hmph.' Hyke was not overjoyed. 'This isn't lost kids or a missing two-bit bauble. I suppose it was Tucker the... the so-and-so who thought it might be fun to let you loose on me, huh?' He sounded disgusted. 'This is serious damned business. What in hell do you hope to do?'

Me, I'd have gone. Hyke simply radiated animosity and I found it hard to bear. But Tirk was imperturbable. 'We don't know,' he said candidly. 'We never do. We just have to try, and then see what comes.'

'Guesswork and superstitious hogwash,' Hyke growled. 'This is a killing, not a seance to contact dear old Uncle George. What do you think you might find in there, the remnants of transphysical vibrations and an invisible

witness or two to chat with?’

Tirk faced Hyke squarely. ‘So you are an authority on psychic manifestation?’ he said. ‘We didn’t know. We’ll have to get you transferred to the Division.’

‘Don’t get smart with me,’ Hyke snarled. ‘The E.P.D. is Tucker’s pet project, an outlet for the mystic streak he picked up when he saw the re-run of Dracula’s Daughter. He knows nothing about it, and neither does anybody else.’

‘You don’t, at least, and that’s proof enough for you, isn’t it?’ Tirk said. God, but it was at times like these that I admired Tirk the most. He was impervious, an immovable foundation somehow lodged in thin air. ‘You are as ignorant of paranormal experience as I am, but you won’t admit that it *is* ignorance. We know so much these days, but we are a long way from knowing it all. And to deny paranormal phenomena just because it *is* so tenuous and indefinable is to stick your head in the sand and invite a boot up the backside.’

‘It’s because it’s a realm that can produce no hard facts and verifiable corroborative testimony that it’s so wide open to hocus-pocus,’ Hyke replied, not to be bluffed. ‘Who can prove anything? How can you prove that you are right and the other mumbo-jumbo mob wrong? You can’t even prove that the method you think you used was the one you really did use. It’s crap. It’s a con game. They’d get as good value, better, spending their dimes on some edible forecasting like fortune-cookies.’

‘Because a thing is inexplicable does not mean to say that it does not exist,’ Tirk said patiently. ‘If...’

‘But *I* see nothing inexplicable here,’ Hyke grated. ‘This is a straight case of homicide. We can handle it and process it in the normal way. Your type of help is superfluous.’

‘Do you know who the killer is? Is an arrest imminent? The way it was given to us, the prelim was a little sparse and not too promising.’

‘Jesus, give us time,’ Hyke exploded. ‘A prelim’s a prelim. We haven’t been given space to form a picture yet.’

‘Uhuh,’ Tirk said. ‘Well, you must just about be all through in there, so hows about *we* go in to see if we can get anything?’

‘Hold it,’ Hyke said quickly. ‘We had to wait for the Freddie’s, another new damn bunch, so we’re still sucking and scraping in there. You’ll have to wait a while.’

Tirk pursed his lips. ‘Okay.’ He turned to me, his shadow in such situations. ‘Do you want to wait, Ken, or shall we come back?’

‘Oh, we’d better wait. They shouldn’t be long, should they?’ And I was feeling nervous, wanting to get away, wanting to get it over with. Hyke’s acrid scepticism dejected me.

So we waited.

In about fifteen minutes Hyke’s faint hope that we might surrender our opportunity evaporated. The techs came out of the room with their vacuums, cameras and whatnot. We now had the medics on our backs chafing at our further delaying their appropriation of the body. Everyone was so grim and purposeful, had such solid material angles to work upon, solid material objects to work with.

We were given a rather grudging nod and, somewhat

guiltily, we took our turn. Leastways, *I* felt guilty, but Tirk appeared to be completely indifferent.

‘That Hyke hasn’t an idea in his head,’ Tirk said, closing the door behind us. And he gave his lopsided grin. ‘Like a lot of other people, he’s afraid that we might know something that he doesn’t.’ He stepped forward. ‘Want to look at the body?’ He bent.

‘I... guess so,’ I said, not relishing the prospect at all. I’d only ever seen two dead bodies before—my mother, and a man who had fallen from a building and couldn’t have been alive looking like that.

Tirk tweaked the sheet away. My throat tightened. She was flatly sprawled forward, her head tilted, her right ear against the carpet. They hadn’t closed her eyes, and she just stared on and on in awed wonder.

She had tight curly hair, bubble blonde, was a little thick in build, but I placed her in the mid-twenties. But death can make people look younger. The blood had drained from the upper surfaces and the tinge of grey was appallingly evident. There was a cluster of three large spots by her left shoulder-blade. The spots were not red but black, black and circular and rather bigger around than a pencil. For no valid reason I suddenly felt like crying.

Tirk flicked the sheet, tugged here and there, covered the body again as dispassionately as a maid might drape a tablecloth.

I turned away, my mind jumbled. A woman, dead, once warm, once a... a woman. I needed support. The nearest place was the footboard of the bed and I moved to it to grip and lean. A woman. Inanimate. The world had been robbed of her. Flesh. There were a lot worse than she had been. What difference did it make?

Rumpled primrose sheets, a bright tumbled gay yellow bedspread flecked with bold black. What looked like a couple of picture-romance magazines on the floor. There was a dizziness in my head. Why was I here? It would have helped if I myself knew what I was doing. All I did was feel. Feeling is life, life is emotion, changing from moment to moment or driving, an ambition to feel a certain content, a certain satisfaction, a certain sensation. We strive to feel triumph, to achieve acclaim, to know the uplift of personal appreciation. We feel neglect, feel hurt, feel frustration, feel exasperation, feeling, always feeling, for feeling *is* life. And a prisoner can feel at peace in a dungeon, and a voluptuous king can be bedevilled by sore feet and boredom.

What did I feel? Was it imagination? There was a chill in this room. Atmosphere. Atmosphere is a strange thing. All places have it, some good, some poor. Some places try to create it and fail, other places make no effort and have it so rich as to seep into the very bones. The most popular place in town.

But not here, not this. Was it the body of the slightly dumpy young woman? Dumpy? She had been a cheerful sort. How did I know that? From a bedspread and love-comics? No. It was in the room somehow. An easy-going young woman, capable of enjoying both liveliness and laziness.

I shook my head. Guessing? No, it was there. Tirk had taken up position by the dressing-table. He just stood there, relaxed, quietly watching me. I let go with one hand to press knuckles against my teeth. It was good to have Tirk there. Nothing would affect *him*. And there

was something in this room, an overlay. And I shied from it. I let my eyes rove, trying to see something, some tangible object that I could fasten upon. But there was nothing. Nothing except the bed. A used bed unmade.

A fine coating of sweat popped on my skin. She had slept here. A large bed. Not alone, no, not alone. The covers folded back, a diagonal, folded one roll but not flung. What did the ripples and many creases in the sheets tell? The position of the pillows?

I dropped my hand back to the footboard. It was there. I knew it was there but I didn't want to see it. What had Hyke said—lost kids and baubles? Yes. No, this was different, this was ... I didn't like this.

It was beginning to shout at me. Every crinkle, every buckle and dent in the bed seemed to magnify, to carry a message, to state, to declare like a chorus singing louder and louder, mesmerizing. An inane remark by the woman, standard, good-humoured but tired. What did she do? No hate, the bed said, no squabble, no hard words. A man? Yes a man. Of course. Hot? No. No, no, no, the bed howled, cold, cold! What kind of man? What kind of ...

It came so quickly that it took my breathing short. For a moment I touched the killer's mind. I shivered. And I tried to let go, and couldn't. It was senseless. There was no motive. A detached liaison for pleasure, cynical pleasure. I saw her and smiled, an attentive listener, watching her lips and not hearing a word. Thinking. How dull she was. How unremarkably predictable she was. Unsurprising. How unaware she was. An ordinary slut. What would she do if ever she really ...

I broke into full sweat at conception of such a mind. It was a whim, a quirk of macabre humour. The gun was hers. That was amusing. It was under her pillow. And his hand had found it. A gun? The stupid creature would not know how to fire it. But *he* knew. Never a shot fired in anger. And she was out and walking away—for what? on what errand? Water? Totally unsuspecting, completely unaware. A joke. A huge joke. Surprise! Surprise, surprise!

I clutched the foot of the bed, sick, sick, unable to release the ghastly warped image. And she had shockingly lost the use of her limbs and had seen the room fly at her head. And after a pause he had slipped out of the bed to go and stand over her, to casually look down, and ... he had felt annoyed with himself now. He had felt annoyed at his own impulsiveness, his own accession to make sudden devastating jest—not annoyed because he had killed the girl, but because ... because ... because she was now a nuisance to him, and other people wouldn't understand ...

I reeled and clung to the bed. 'Tirk! Tirk, get me, get ... !'

Tirk was at my side in a moment, gripping my elbows. 'Okay, Ken boy, take it easy, take it easy ...'

We walked out past Hyke and his head swivelled. He watched us expressionlessly. Then, unable to resist, he called after us, a mocking tone masking an unwilling curiosity, 'Did you get anything?'

The medical trio came away from the wall bumping their stretcher on end, brushing us, one muttering his disgruntlement in that loud underbreath meant to be heard, 'About time.'

Tirk did not stop. 'We'll let you know,' he called back airily. 'We have to evaluate the data.'

Which stimulated Hyke into immediate glower. 'I'm in charge of this case,' he snapped. 'You have anything that may be relevant, I want to know.'

We faced the elevator doors and Tirk pressed the button. 'We have nothing relevant,' he answered. He was untouchable, had an armour-plated hide. And sweetly, 'You wouldn't understand it even if you could prove that we had it, which you can't, so don't worry about it.'

And the doors opened, and I was glad it was Tirk and not me, and stepped inside nimbly to escape the evil eye.

The café was clean, had bustle about it. I like checkered cloths.

Tirk had his notebook on the table, methodically shorthanding my account for future reference. 'Okay,' he said, 'that's part of it. Now, can you give me any idea what this guy looks like?'

I fiddled with my cigarette. I was still not accustomed to having my singular and fragile non-factual observations listened-to with seeming respect. Even by Tirk. 'I know what he is like as a mind, but a mind *is*. I mean, I am sitting here but I am not looking at myself. A man is not aware of his body most of the time. What a man is aware of is everything outside himself that might affect himself. Not other bodies, either, but other minds, all the time. It's ... I have an impression of him as a person, but not of his physical appearance. From what I felt, I can guess, but it would *be* guessing and even less materially certain than my other impressions.'

'Don't underrate yourself,' Tirk said. 'Just give me your picture of the kind of body that would go with a mind like that. I'll put it under the "Wild" heading.'

I smiled at that. They had three headings for special sensings—Firm, Partial, and Wild. 'Well, I'd imagine him to be in his late twenties, a little better than average height, a little slimmer than average weight. Strong. Not strong in muscle so much as strong with a sense that he can use what he has more efficiently than anyone else. He is very sure of himself. He is very certain of his own immunity.'

'Uhuh. But what do you think he *looks* like?'

The mind is so much more important than the body. The mind is real, the body merely a vehicle inextricably allied. 'Naturally pale, delicate hands and ... and apparently of unexceptionable demeanour. Hard to recognize.'

'From that description, yes,' Tirk agreed. 'You mean he is just a face in a crowd?'

'No, no, his *mind* would be hard to recognize. People wouldn't know who he was, not ... who he really was, not at all.'

'Oh. That way.' Tirk nodded. 'Well, it's something. Colour of hair? Scars? Big ears, special features?'

I shook my head.

'Okay. We'll go back and see if Hyke is still there, give him the basics on one of our cards to keep him from grousing, and follow up on the witnesses he's through with, right?'

I stubbed out my cigarette, breaking many roundels of ash into powder. 'All right,' I said at last.

'Witnesses? What witnesses?' Hyke snorted. He banged the wall with his fist. 'Look at it, grass and sawdust.'

Looks good, the cheap shit goes up in a week. Wood-pulp-and-glue skin, porous core backing, and apart from being cheap and light, do you know why it's popular?' He didn't wait for us to reply. 'Because it soaks up sound. Modern living. Turn the radio full blast and the people next-door can hardly hear it. They've got foam in the floors and ceilings, that damps anything but a bomb. Privacy and peace. It's okay till someone gets blasted, and then it's no good at all.

'Look, in the old places where they've got good-quality brick, cement and plaster, a case like this would have broken in no time. People would have heard the shots, neighbours on four or more sides could spout the lead-up argument word for word, and everybody would be up and looking through door-cracks to catch the finalé. But here,' and he sneered around at the built-in shine and polish, 'here privacy they got. Witnesses?' His thumb wagged. 'Try next door for a character reference.'

He glanced again at the E.P.D. report-slip he had been given. And he looked at us and he pointedly folded the paper and scrunched it into his side pocket.

Mary. Her name just couldn't have been Mary. But it had been. Splayed on her face, staring. Mary.

'She had men-friends, sure.' The red-head shrugged. 'We all got to live ain't we?' Were no women ever satisfied with the natural colour of their hair?

'Did she have any special boyfriend?' Tirk's prompting was rote.

'I told all this to the other guys just now,' she complained. 'I got to keep going through it? It's not nice, you know, having a thing like that happen to a friend.'

'We just think that the other fellows might have missed something,' Tirk soothed blandly. 'We can't afford to pass up any detail that might help to nail the killer, and quick. We don't know,' and he eyed her with deadpan meaning, 'who might be next.'

She gave herself a cigarette and we let her light her own matches. 'She had two or three regulars.' She laughed. 'But Mary was a never-on-Sundays girl. It was her day off, she used to say.'

We gave her silence to laugh herself out. It didn't last long. She was afraid a little, nervous a little, annoyed a lot. The killer, Hyke, the medics, her friend, all annoyed. She was annoyed that Mary had got shot like that. It was a chunk of ugliness right next door, and if it could happen to Mary ... It was not nice to think about, it spoilt things, everything used to be so all right ...

'So yesterday's customer had special privilege, huh? For him she worked overtime?'

'I don't know. I don't know who it was. I don't know who it could have been. I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anybody.' Her voice rose. 'I don't know anything. It was nothing to do with me. I just happen to live next door, that's all. How am I supposed to help it?'

'Mmm.' Tirk looked at me. I gave him negative. The girl knew nothing. Her attitude brought me low. She saddened me. She'd had giggles with Mary. Mary had been a sport with a simple philosophy for life. There were no real friends in this game.

We took our leave.

We learned that Hyke had picked up Mary's 'arranger', or pimp. We went down to the station-house to look him over.

This was bad. Grave qualms I had now. This was bigger than I was used to. I found myself on a quiver with expectancy. It was not a thing to look forward to, to face the man who might have been the killer. No, I did not look forward to it at all. Had Mary cheated? Had Mary shucked him? No. Mary had died without a care in the world. But still ...

They brought him in. He was a squat, broad man, and he had a moustache. I knew from the moustache alone. The now-rumpled but well-cut business suit helped to improve him. He had a touch of fear, but here was yet another person annoyed. Stupid careless bitch. And here was an animal with sour curled lip and a shell of defiance that could be topped like an egg to reveal the twisting, conniving, whining self-preservative soul of the man inside.

A little of him was too much for me. Tirk hardly said, 'Well?' before I averted my head and began to move my feet out.

'You're absolutely sure?' Tirk said. 'His alibi is loose and Hyke the Tyke likes the look of him.'

'Tirk, a mind is like a fingerprint, more so—it has thousands of whorls and whirls that are unmistakably and uniquely its own. He is not the killer. He would have used his hands. And he ... he instinctively knows the link between pain and possession.'

Tirk squinted at me. 'You barely saw him.'

I gestured, a weak thing. I wish that I wasn't so compelled to make such defensive flutters. 'He's smart and he's empty and he knows it. He'll rot out his own guts. It wasn't him,' I repeated. 'It wasn't.'

'Okay, Ken, okay, if you say so,' Tirk said. He turned on a grin, phony, but well-intended. He was as hard as nails and no-nonsense, and who had picked him for me, and how, I didn't know. But I was grateful.

I had another try at explaining the way it was. 'Tirk, I don't know what it is that conveys. Is it the set of the mouth? The look about the eyes? The way the head is held? The stance? It may be all of these things, walk, smell, sound. Or it may be none of these things. It's instinct, Tirk.'

I waved my hands about, to hell with it. 'The subconscious, superthink, the entire concept of supernatural intuition has this awareness of the unperceivable as a basic tenet. When a bird builds its architecturally perfect nest, it does not do so "consciously" but by instinct. The world is awash with instinctive behaviour. Man alone partially excepted, all living things depend on it. The hunch, the feeling, emotion, memory, all abstracts—Tirk, emotion is everything.'

'Yes,' Tirk said. 'Yes, sure.' He listened, eyes squinged up, and I do think he genuinely tried to comprehend. In his way. Not a chance.

'It's not understood, that's all,' I said, falling back, retiring to the fortress and starting to raise the drawbridge. 'Even those who've got it don't know what it is. This is not to say that the supernatural may never be understood. I mean, see, a radio would truthfully and effectively be described as supernatural by a pre-historic cave-man—simply because he would not know how it worked. And that's it. We ... We just don't know how it works.' The subject always seemed doomed to come to a lame finish.

'No, I guess not,' Tirk said, 'but it seems to be there. You're a strange fellow right enough.' He grinned again. 'Like Ben Jonson—or was it Franklin? Or maybe Benedict Arnold?—I may not have the least notion of how you feel, but I will defend with my life your right to feel it.'

The damn great uncomplicated prophetic fool. I gave up. Boy, but he was a great man to have around.

Like a fingerprint. Only more so.

We had left the station-house to walk the block to see Tucker in the administration offices. We crossed the driveway gate that led to the rear of the station-house. I happened to glance through into the yard. There was a figure there, a man, watching another man wiping the windscreen of a prowl car. They were both police-officers, patrolmen, but the one watching...

I bumped into Tirk, stumbled. I couldn't take my eyes off the man. Clammy fingers felt around my navel, from the inside.

'Hey, Ken, what's the matter?'

We stopped in the gateway gutter. The idling patrolman slowly turned around. It was like a dream. He was a good thirty yards away, but I had seen it all before. Where? Instant memory. I *knew* him. And he was looking straight at me. My stomach turned to water and fear clawed at my throat. What was it about him, in heaven's name? What mannerism, what force did he exude, what powerful undefinable identifying aura shrieked out to betray him?

I stepped back, tripped on the gutter, was held by Tirk, shuffled, got out of sight, pressed back against the rough stone wall.

Tirk's hold was painful. He just asked, 'Which one?'

I gulped. I was crawling with sensations, none of them happy. 'The ... The one who turned and looked at me.'

It was the same patrolman who had given sweets to the children.

'Send him in,' Tucker said into the intercom.

We waited in Tucker's office. Anxiety gnawed at me, twitching my muscles. Sickness invaded me, doubt. This was murder. This wasn't lost kids a gee-gaws. Who was I? How flimsily based was my judgement? What had happened? Had I caught more of him than I thought when he was with the children? Unconsciously tabbed him, only to superimpose him as a suitable character upon the scene on the crime? That would be so easy, to take a known, a freshly known *real*, to stand in for a totally unknown commodity. Geilford Wainard could play Napoleon in the film, the role fitted him like a truss. Had I just given this patrolman the role of killer merely because he had seemed the nearest approximation to what was needed, the closest superficial resemblance that I could find in my casting directory?

But again, with the children, even then, did I have a presentiment of who he was? Unknowing, passing over it, not looking, but receiving something that had to surface when it fitted, when it fitted so well. This was a murder we were dealing with. God, but my throat was dry.

Tucker's secretary opened the door, ushered the patrolman in. She smiled at him. She received Tucker's barely perceptible signal of dismissal, but came in the place a plain folder upon his desk. Then she left, closed the door behind her.

The patrolman came on in, curious, a shade puzzled. And keenly alert. Did the others see? My heart bumped.

'You wanted to see me, Mr Tucker?' Polite, deferential, in no way fazed.

Tucker was affable. 'Yes, Melthorpe. Good of you to come so quickly. Take a seat, won't you?'

And Tucker couldn't see. And Tirk, leaning forward, quizzical, *he* couldn't see. And I shrank back into my seat. *I* could see, and I could have screamed at their blindness.

'You finished your late shift 4 a.m. Sunday,' Tucker said, 'and came back on duty today for the straight 8-to-4 spell, right?'

Melthorpe—Melthorpe? His name couldn't be Melthorpe—looked mystified. 'That's right, sir. I was about to go home when I got your message.'

'Uhuh, now,' Tucker was unsure of himself, I could see, but he was persistent in a cause, 'can you tell me where you were between 2 and 3 o'clock this morning? There's a little matter we wish to verify.'

'What?' This startled him, and I had him now. Surely they could see? His every line ... 'Between 2 and 3?' His mouth worked, his recovery good, but ... His hands went out. 'I was at home in bed.'

'Uhum.' Tucker rubbed the side of his nose. 'You, ah ... can't prove it in any way, I suppose?'

'Prove it, sir?' He looked around at us, and his eyes met mine, briefly held, jumped on. I went rigid in my chair. He knew. In that moment he had got everything. For me the atmosphere seemed to be filled with static, building, building.

'Well, sir,' Melthorpe said, 'I live with my mother. She worries about me.' He shrugged. 'She called out in the night sometime, around one, I think. I made her some hot milk, uh, had a beer myself, and went back to bed.' He chewed his lip. 'That's about all, sir.' Beneath his evident bafflement was a second face, and his mind was probing, cold, cold. And he avoided looking at me again, but was conscious, very conscious of me, and he waited, no rush, behind it all, calculating.

'Sir, uh, could you tell me what this is all about?' A touch of diffidence, a touch of helplessness, eminently reasonable. Couldn't they see how skilfully false it was? There was plain truth and visible deception. It was *him*, *him*! And what could I do? Rise up and point an accusing finger and denounce him? 'This is the killer!' 'How do you know?' 'Because I *know* he is the killer!' 'But *how* do you know?' 'Because I can *see* he is. Because I can *feel* he is. You *must* be able to see, it's so ... so obvious!'

But no. His mind did not nudge theirs as it nudged mine. They—and it seemed completely impossible that they could be so unperceptive—they were unaware of anything save the appearance he wished to present. I was virtually alone in the room with him, could feel him testing me, could feel him taking extra care to try and fool me as well as the others.

'Yes, Melthorpe.' Tucker looked to me. I gave him a frantic frozen nod, all that I could manage. Tucker frowned. 'These men are from the E.P.D.' He indicated us. 'You know what that is?'

Melthorpe knew, he knew. He let a smile come to his face. 'The ones who found the Goodson boy in the kindergarten? Yes, sir, I've heard of them.' Cunning, cunning, he was reaching me. I tried to fend him off. I

had Tirk. Tirk, keep him away from me!

'Hmph, yes. They've had some successes too,' Tucker said firmly.

'Oh. Oh yes, sir. I meant no disrespect, sir.' Mockery, mockery.

Tucker struck at him, too weak and too late. 'You know something of the Pantici murder?' Watched narrowly, shrewdly.

Melthorpe was prepared. It was there, the quick stab, but was buried underneath. That sealed it. Cold. 'Me? Why no, sir. I've only heard about it. As a patrolman, sir, I don't...'

'Yes, yes, yes. But you deny that you were directly involved?'

'Me, sir?' Shock. Perfect, judged perfectly. No. He was dangerous, dangerous! Tirk!

I must have gasped his name, for Tirk stood and moved soberly to part block me off with his bulky body.

'The E.P.D. has...? Not me, surely sir?' And Melthorpe laughed. And a louder burst. To dry up suddenly at the seriousness that faced him. He swallowed. 'I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to do that. It just... I'm sorry, sir.'

I could have cried. I knew what was wrong. We weren't three against one. It was my impression of him against the impression of himself that he could convey to others. He was so good. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. But what of those who have not? I knew that Tucker and Tirk could not see him as I did. I *knew* that they were finding it hard to believe that this engagingly frank officer could ever be a killer.

He scared me. He scared hell out of me. How could I tell them what to look for when they were not equipped with the acuity needed to observe? How to describe the multitude of so tiny things, perceptible and imperceptible, that added to a whole, wisps like water vapour gathered together to become as massively visible as a cloud—and just as tangible. 'See the way he is sitting? Relaxed tension. Fingers loose, sec? Left foot. See how still he is. He doesn't *look* still, but he is. Notice his unhurried answers, time to think, that inflexion, get it? There, did you see that? The corner of his mouth? ...'

I was sticky right down to my boots. That wasn't evidence. That was nothing that could be produced in court. This was a highly viable thing, existing from moment to moment, it *was*, adopting oh, so readily! The pose that would most convincingly deceive.

'Very good, Melthorpe. It was just one of the things that came up. We thought you might be able to help us. We had to check it out.'

'Of course, sir.'

It was stifling. I thought I might choke at any minute. He was perfect. 'Of course, sir.' Respectful and straight-faced, and making Tucker feel a little ridiculous. I could do nothing against this man, nothing, prove nothing. I was helpless.

Tucker got to his feet. 'Yes, well, thank you for coming along.' He moved around his desk and Melthorpe rose also. 'Good of you to co-operate.' They moved towards the door.

'Not at all, sir. Anything I can do to assist...'

'Yes.' Tucker opened the door. 'Ah, there is no need for you to blab about this call. I have a very good memory for discreet officers.'

'I understand, sir.' And Melthorpe's whole body and being said that he did.

I was exhausted. Reaction left me limp in my chair, and fear inside me was numb. What could I do? 'You let him go,' I said, somewhat listlessly.

Tucker took a seat on the corner of his desk. He bent a very penetrating gaze upon me. Penetrating, that is, *trying* to penetrate. To be gazed upon so was familiar to me. I longed to be fathomed, comprehended, but not by any known means of voice, gesture or grimace could I explain. A feeling is a feeling. And then I was sorry for Tucker. He wanted so badly to get in, but just couldn't. He had to work from the outside.

'You're sure he's the killer?' It was a statement more than a question.

'He's the one,' I said.

'H'm.' He reached over for the folder on his desk, opened it on his knee. 'What can you tell us about him? Say, as a policeman. Say, what sort of report would he have had from rookie college?'

'From the Collar Stud? Good,' I said. 'An efficient pupil. Seeming friendly enough with his fellows, but most popular with the instructors. They'd like him for the same reason *you* liked him. He is plainly intelligent, but he knows his place and flatteringly makes himself one degree subservient. This is all a game to him. It amuses him to elicit predictable reactions from people, to appear the most conscientious of his breed. But he has not one subservient bone in his body. He feels that he has full control and power to play with.'

'Mmm. And on the beat?' Tucker said.

All my joints seemed to creak as I got up. I took a few steps to and fro. What difference did it make? 'Efficient again, but more quietly so. Reliable, rather. Has no close friends, has no real enemies, either. Yet you will find that a lot of people are unconsciously wary of him, some of the less simple people who've had much to do with him, "He seems a nice enough guy, but...", "Sure, he's okay, but...", that sort of thing. Nothing to pin down.'

'His job?' Tucker quizzed. 'Dealing with criminals?'

'Few repeats with them. They'll keep out of his way. Criminals tend to have sharper instincts than most people. They'll avoid tangling with him if they can, without really knowing why. Or they'll deal with him under no illusions that he's a fool.'

'Graft?'

'No, not money. He doesn't need money. He has power over people—and it *is* power over people to make them believe so completely something that is not true. The woman, Mary, had not the least inkling who he was. She was an extrovert. He treated her like a clinical specimen. He hit the notes, and she sang. It was highly diverting. And when she walked away from the bed she was probably feeling quite pleased with herself. That's what made it all so funny.'

Tucker closed the folder, flipped it over his hip on to the desk. 'He has a good record as a cop. He is a *good* cop. Why did he become a cop? If, as you say, he is inherently a law unto himself?'

Fidgety, I stuck my hands into my pockets. 'What better place to hide? And there is power, too, an awful lot of added power that a mind like his can obtain from a uniform.'

Tucker still stared at me hard. As a key figure behind the psychology tests taken by the force, he was maybe aggrieved that one had got by. But Melthorpe knew the answers.

Then up and around, and Tucker seated himself properly. 'Ken, I am obliged to believe you. I won't pretend that I could see through him as you have. But, because of your suspicions, I was paying very, very close attention. Like you say, he's too good. He made me feel just that faint bit uneasy. I'm used to judging men, but ... Dammit, Ken, I don't know if I felt what I felt or not.'

'His stock-in-trade is his clean past and the benefit of the doubt.'

'Maybe,' Tucker growled. 'You plant nasty thoughts in my mind, Ken. No man likes being taken, and I'm no exception. And you've put a great big nag right in there. All right,' he said decisively, 'we'll check this Melthorpe out. Quietly and without fuss. See if we can get anything concrete. If he is the one, let him think he's got away with it. Let him think he's fooled us. Let him carry on as though we know nothing.'

I had to smile at that, and, boy, I shook my head. 'He won't hold still, Mr Tucker. He *knows* we know. Or, at least, that *I* know.' My whole body was in one hell of a weighted state, switched over, just like that, to be commanded by apathy. 'I can't think. I don't know what he will do next.'

Tirk slid in behind the wheel. He sighed. 'No luck to date. They've tabbed a half-dozen of her customers so far. Descriptions don't help much. Melthorpe in mufti would be pretty unobtrusive, wouldn't you say?'

I didn't answer for a moment. I was beginning to hate this lousy case more and more. Melthorpe knew that *I* knew. I had detected him. He wouldn't like that. No, he wouldn't like that one bit, to have one person who could breach his near-faultless cover. 'He probably met her in the line of duty,' I said. 'He's not the type to go out looking for a woman. His sex-drive is low, as controlled as his other emotions. That's him. He controls his own emotions and extends this to control the emotions of others.'

Tirk used a complete handful of fingers to scratch under his ear. 'If he met her in uniform, someone is bound to have seen him. In all the asking around, nothing like that has come up. Someone is sure to have mentioned it.'

How can a man have a sour taste right down to his toenails? 'Yes, someone is bound to have seen him. No, someone is *not* sure to mention it.' I licked my lips. I wanted out. Here I was talking myself in. 'The questions asked have been about the men, especially strange men, that she consorted with. A cop is not a strange man—he's a cop. If she had been seen talking to a cop on the street, she'd have got sympathy for having bad luck. *He* would not enter the minds of witnesses as a person likely to be wanted for murder, now would he?'

Tirk rested his hands on the steering-wheel and gave the matter two seconds thought. 'True. Unless they were specifically asked.' He brooded. 'And they haven't been especially asked. Here,' and he took a paper from his pocket and handed it to me, 'she stuck to the same area most of the time. Those are the places she frequented most. Feel like browsing around?'

I felt like going home and packing a bag and leaving town. 'No,' I said.

'Uhuh.' He studied me. 'Ken, Tucker thought it might be a good idea for you to wander around her old haunts. Thought you might get something.'

My voice came out thick. 'I've told you who killed her.'

'Uhuh. But we need proof, Ken, and we don't have much so far. How about it?'

And right then within me came this welling, this upsurge, this repudiation. And following it almost at once, realization hit me, and the shock slapped in a wave of self-revulsion. *Now I was annoyed because Mary Pantici had got herself killed.*

I wagged my hand. 'Okay. Okay, go.'

'Where shall we start? Which place first? North or South end?'

'Huh? Anywhere.' I still had the list in my hand. I pointed. 'South. Go there. The Freebooter's Inn will be as good as any ...'

The Freebooter's Inn was better than the rest. I wasn't even trying. It was a guess, I swear to God, sheer fluke and nothing more. Jeez, but I wish things like that didn't happen. I could say 'Luck' to Tirk over and over and try to impress him that it was pure chance, but not a hope. He'd never believe me.

Tirk left the pay-phone and came sauntering back to our table. He gave me one of *those* queer looks, so I didn't even bother to try. 'Friday before last. Short-handed. Melthorpe was tooling on his own that night, his partner sick. Drunk brought in, but no mention of the girl.'

I said nothing.

'Right on the footpath. The doorman gave him a hand. It was Melthorpe all right. She was mussed up a little, got her dress torn. Melthorpe must have run her home.'

I just looked down at my glass.

'Never thought to mention it. Or rather, did mention it, but a routine check has the drunk still in the tank doing fourteen days. So forget it. Nobody thought of Melthorpe.'

That's how they got acquainted. Gratitude. Why not, uh, call around sometime? I looked up at Tirk, and away. I was sick. They shouldn't have tried me on a murder case. It was too charged, too ... too much, altogether too much.

A woman at the next table caught my eye and smiled. And that was deception also. She had abandoned thought of ever knowing an honest unconditional affection, was too independent, suffered for it. It was a pity. She should have had better luck. What was luck? Three little black circles.

I came back to my glass. Women, in the general way, are easier to understand than men. Men are much more complex in their ambitions. I thought of Renee. A neurotic should never marry another neurotic; they understand each other *too* well.

I lifted my glass and drained it. I was surprised to see that the woman had distracted Tirk, who was giving her a not-unappreciative eye. 'You'd make a great husband for some woman, Tirk,' I said, lowering the empty. 'Women don't like a man who can plumb their so-called mysteries. There are times when I envy you, when I fervently wish that I, too, had blunter sensibilities.'

'I was thinking of Mary Panticci,' Tirk said in soft injury. 'She might have sat at a table like that.'

'Liar. Just like that you let your mind wander off the job.' How could he do it? Forget so quick? Instinct.

'Sorry, Ken. A lapse. What with the E.P.D. and one thing and another, it just crossed my mind that I haven't enjoyed feminine company for some little while.' His shoulders lifted and dropped a fraction. 'Okay, where to next?'

'I'd had sufficient for the day. 'Home,' and I meant it. 'This is late enough for me. I'm whacked out.'

I worried about Melthorpe. I wondered where he was. I wanted to rest. Not later but right now. It can come on in a hurry, the nerves being harried all day and going round and around, round and around. 'Pick her up if you want to. You'll go well together. Don't mind me. Four pills and you'll get nothing more out of me till morning.' Matchmaker yet. He needed encouragement? Another guy's love-life. Irritating, a thing like that.

Tirk inclined his head, gauged and said, 'Okay. It has been a long day. We have enough to go on for a while.'

Tirk signalled for the check, crossed eyes with the woman again and, what the hell, who am I? But it would be nice to be able to be as careless as that.

Tirk and I had adjoining apartments. He roused me out of bed next morning and be damned if he didn't have her cooking breakfast for us both. I begrudged him his informality, his naturalness, his cursed invaluable capacity to simply expect and accept and remark nothing untoward.

Morning is terrible. Sleep does not wash away the cares of yesterday. Sleep merely refreshes that the cares of yesterday and before may be reassumed, to be carried forward to gather yet more additions from yet another day. Depressed, a headache, I had room only for the direst premonitions.

Helen poured me coffee. Thank God. She seemed to like playing housewife. Common enough, the done thing. Not much else to do at that time of day. I would have liked her body, but her mind would have driven me crazy. Oh, short drive. And just then I envied Tirk and hated him and savagely silently blasted him for his good fortune. And he didn't give a damn. And that hurt, was perhaps the thing that hurt most—he just didn't know how fortunate he was.

One thing about having a light breakfast, a man can get to finish it if an emergency arises. I'd had my piece of toast, was smoking, was on my slow second cup of coffee when Tirk came back from answering the phone. 'It's confirmed. Melthorpe. And he's gone.'

We were wanted at once.

'The infra-red shots in the region of the bed are particularly interesting,' Tucker said. 'The retracing breakdown into time intervals of the heat-drift, and shading densities from known body-heat emissions, clearly shows the occupancy and progression of events. The room was air-conditioned and the circulation tests establish flow-lines evident in these originals. The steady moderate and uniform temperature facilitated computer calculation and permitted a fairly accurate time-fix to be made.'

'The woman, Mary Panticci, was alone and in bed. At

approximately 11.30 p.m. she must have let Melthorpe in, for, from this shot, you can see that two people spent some time on the couch in the living-room. They probably had drinks; there were rinsed glasses. That she did not immediately go to bed with him suggests that she *could* perhaps have been unwilling. However. ...'

'No,' I interrupted. I wished I could keep my big mouth shut. 'Never on Sunday. It was ... a thing with her. She made him wait past midnight till it was officially Monday morning. They ... joked about it ... I'd say.'

'Ah. Yes. Well, good,' Tucker said. What the hell was good about it? 'Good. Now they went to bed together at approximately 12.30 and, here, you can see the evaluations in order, at roughly fifteen-minute intervals. Blurs, indefinite shadows, but positively two people. And these are the last two or three formulations, broken down into shorter periods. Here it can be seen where the woman must have sat for a few minutes on the edge of the bed. Time: Just after 2 a.m.'

'Yes, and of course, that is the most significant fact of all. Throughout there was a gun under her pillow.'

Tucker gazed at me. 'We don't know where the gun came from and we don't know where it has gone. But Ken's account tallied so well that we could not help but follow it up. An unknown man, one in a million. He could have been anybody. No one saw him. Where to start looking? But for Ken it is highly unlikely that we would ever have even considered Melthorpe. As it is ...'

Praise, oh lordy. Fingerman. They had no conception of what it was like. Wasn't it nice to be on a winner? Bloodied and bemused, hold up the right fist—the boy's been shadow-boxing and hey, what do you know? He's scored a knock-out!

'We put a tail on Melthorpe, but late last night he left home and shortly gave our man the slip. From what Ken has said, he knew he'd been found out, so we wasted no more time but moved in. The lab techs have worked over samples obtained of dandruff, cologne, hair, etcetera, and positive matchings have been made all the way through. We even have a smudged fingerprint he missed.'

'His alibi was supported by his mother. She is a semi-invalid. She called out in the night, she said, and he brought her a glass of milk. She particularly noticed the time—ten after two a.m. She afterwards slept through till nearly midday. She thinks her boy is wonderful. She is mistaken, but at this stage it seemed unkind to inform her otherwise. He misled her, probably by altering the clock and waking her on a pretext, then feeding her dope.'

'Now we have lost him.' Tucker came back to me. 'Melthorpe, we know, is clever and dangerous. We want to find him again as quickly as possible. Ken,' he raised his eyebrows at me, 'Ken, can you help?'

I blasted the Freddie's and their damned blobby heat-pictures. They helped now to invest me with a mantle of seemingly magical prescience. 'I don't know where he is,' I said, vexed. 'I'm not a telepath. I'm not in contact with him. I don't want to be in contact with him. I can't send out a signal, "Where are you, Melthorpe?"' I glowered. I wanted to scotch the notion that I could be pulled in as a cure-all for everything. It made me furious. Have a little extraordinary success in one thing, in one special case, and everybody, even those who should have had more sense, concluded that I was infallible, could switch it on and off at will.

'Ken, you know more about him than we do. We're flat-footed. To us his behaviour is unguessable. You could perhaps give us a clue as to what to anticipate, where to look...'

'I don't know what he might do,' I said tartly. 'Catching him is your business. You know who you want, it shouldn't be too difficult. It should be no harder than looking for any other wanted man in the normal way. I've pointed him out, what more do you want?'

Tucker didn't belt me in the mouth. He was sombre. 'He might kill again. He obviously has no compunction about killing. A wide net thrown might not catch him for days, weeks. And a closing net could make him resort to God-knows-what desperate actions. You know him, Ken, better than anybody. How is he likely to react when he's cornered?'

It was a bastard of a thing. They should have held him the day before. But my say-so hadn't been good enough. Now he'd skipped. One man to keep an eye on him, ludicrous. He was clever, damned clever. The lab evidence placed him there, but not necessarily that night. It was doubtful that he'd have broken down under questioning and the case was still shaky, he'd know that. No, he hadn't lost his nerve and panicked—but he had been afraid of the unknown quantity. Me.

'You ... won't catch him easily,' I said, reluctant to admit it. 'He has supreme confidence in himself and no nerves to speak of. Being chased might ... even amuse him.'

Tucker continued looking at me. And now everybody seemed to find me an absorbingly interesting object to contemplate.

'I don't know where he is,' I said, perhaps too loudly. 'I haven't the least idea where he might have gone. Not the least idea. I'm no wiser than the rest of you.'

'Ken, we're not asking you to find him all by yourself,' Tucker assured me. 'The call is out. We'd just like you to give us what pointers you could, cast about, maybe pick up a scent. Just, you know, see what you feel, no sweat.'

It was so damned reasonable. All of them. There was no pressure, oh no, but walk away and I became crud. I had no pride. I'd slept on it. This was out of my league. This was homicide. They could go to hell. Cast around. Yeah, like a bloodhound. Well they'd get no joyful woof out of me. I'd go along. Stand around. Make the motions. Oh what terribly bad luck, not the least twinge or twitter coming through.

'All right,' I capitulated as carelessly as I could and, with an edge of sarcasm too brilliantly modulated for them to discern, 'which pair of his dirty socks are you going to stick under my nose?'

Tirk took me to my initial sniff at the Melthorpe home.

I was in a cranky mood. Everything was going wrong. I was feeling things that I did not want to feel. This was a rotten business. I was not cut out for it. I seemed to be surrounded too closely and by too much unpleasantness.

Mrs Melthorpe, the mother. Frail, gentle, courteous, timid. She did not think that her boy was wonderful. She did as she was told. Had done so for a long time. She was innocent, with the innocence of a mind that deliberately prefers not to query.

She was afraid. 'I'm sorry, I don't know where he might have gone.' She blinked at us. Tirk felt sorry for her. I felt sorry for her, too. Dear little old-before-her-time lady. Years with a son like Melthorpe. She wouldn't tell us anything even if she knew; her son might come back and require an accounting. She dearly wanted to be left alone.

'Wasn't there any place he especially liked to go? On his vacation, say?' Tirk asked. She reminded him of *his* mother, of *everybody's* mother. 'Didn't he ever mention a liking for some particular location, either here or abroad?'

She smiled, a tremulous thing. Could only I see her wishing us please, please to stop trying to make trouble for her? 'I didn't interfere. He is a good boy. He looks after me. No mother ever had a finer son. He's grown now. A parent must trust. I've always trusted Chris. After a certain age, I don't think a parent should restrict or pry, do you? And he's so thoughtful.'

'Yes, Mrs Melthorpe, but ...'

I couldn't stand it. I cut in. 'Can we see his room, Mrs Melthorpe? He might have left a note or something. We're ... worried that he might have met with foul play. In his job he meets some rather violent characters.'

I was right, of course, it stuck out like a Bergerac beezer. Her good boy a cop and it had never occurred to her that *he* was the one who might have been clobbered. The thought came as a shock. 'Chris? Hurt?' It was unthinkable. She couldn't believe it. 'No, not Chris ...'

'Why do you think we're here, Mrs Melthorpe? Why do you think we want to find him?' I'd stopped Tirk from doing this, and now here I was doing the self-same thing. 'He could have been hit over the head, perhaps lost his memory. That's why we'd like to know where he liked to go—his subconscious might take him there again.'

I more or less saw her mind close, locking in this information for slow digestion. 'I don't know. He didn't tell me. And I don't think a parent has the right to pry, not with a grown son ...'

We stood in Melthorpe's bedroom. It was his all right. How does a man put part of himself in the positioning of a clock, in selecting this colour, in arranging his books in such an order, to even reveal a fragment in his very choice of comb? The house was Melthorpe's, his hand was everywhere. But here, in this room, his thoughts had played.

I didn't want any part of it. I'd done what I could. I didn't like it, and that was the truth. There was something about this sensitivity, this attuning to another mind—there was always the fear that the other mind might prove the stronger. To feel such a thing, to deliberately let such a feeling in—and it was so unexplored, so little understood—it was like being in the dark trying to use a circular saw—the raging power was there, but the groping fingers had best be tentative.

I tried to draw away, to turn and leave the room, to say blithely, 'Nothing here'. What would they know? Instead I began to perspire. Everything I looked at revealed another trait to affirm his composition, a facet tiny, a facet large, winking, jogging. Dryly and coolly the room derided me.

My limbs a little stiff, I walked to the closet and

opened the door. It was something to do. I didn't know what I was doing. Anything rather than soak. He was everywhere, meticulous. Hangers neat, two pairs of shoes just so. He'd packed his bags with just those things he would need, had closed the closet door as if just finished dressing for a night out. Habit, mannerism, no unseemly haste. No started hare, no frantic runner this one. He'd have known what to do. Quietly disappear without fuss.

I stared at the shoes on the floor of the closet. Two pair. Smart, clean, polished, new. I raised my eyes. Suit. Spare uniform. I wouldn't need that any more. Good suit. He might be back. Cunning. Devilish.

I turned to survey the room again. Uniform. The best place to hide. Neatness. Tidiness. Intelligence. The last place anyone would look.

I tried not to. My heart thudded. But the whole room was telling me. I tried to stop it, but it came out. 'I think I know where he is.'

Red I went. They mobilized a full squad. I was embarrassed in advance. What did I have? A loose thought, no more. Now there were a dozen men, plus Tirk and myself and Tucker coming along to oversee the affair from the control wagon.

Certainty faded out of me like a ghost apologizing for haunting the wrong address. Foolish. I felt damn foolish. 'It's only a guess, Mr Tucker. He may be around there someplace, and he may not. If he *is* there, I can't say what part you might find him in.'

'We'll comb the place.'

'You'll miss him.' I blurted this. If he *was* in there, beating through would only tip him to dive.

'What do you suggest then? More men?'

Part of me voted, 'Yes, yes, bring in the Army'. The larger part of me shrank from the thought. God, but I was feeling sick again. They'd lose him. No matter how carefully they trod, I knew that they would lose him. *If* he was in there. And if he was in there, and took warning, and escaped, he'd turn mean, really vicious and mean, frightened for the first time in his life at being hunted with such deadly speed and precision. Mary Pantici. A joke. This was no joke, no, not at all.

Why me? Why did it have to be me all the time? If he was not in there I would look like an idiot. If he was in there, I was convinced that he would elude them, and this would provide the same result. *I* didn't want to go after him. *I* wanted to be an innocent bystander. Okay, Ken, you and Tirk stay with me in the control wagon. No need for you to go in there, Ken. We'll flush him out, Ken. God, Tucker did not realize how acutely honed Melthorpe would be to every footfall, to every rustle, to every marginal inconsistency in his selected habitat.

I put both hands to my cheeks and rubbed, then folded my arms to hug. Why me? 'I'll have to go in.' It's what Tucker wanted. I hated his guts.

I knew his next words before he opened his mouth. 'Ken, you don't have to go. We can handle it. No rush. The boys are dressed for the part; they'll mingle. They'll find him.'

There's no need for you to go in, Ken. Feeble protest. With me in there probing, he figured the chances improved one thousand per cent. I hated his guts. They should never have tried me on this case. They had no right. Experimental, okay, but this was too much. Raking

my fibres raw for some blasted tart I'd never known. I liked people, and they used that to bring out the worst in me, to be like a dog chewing at my own ankles.

My temper flared. 'I'll go in!' It was more or less a shout. I tore off my tie. It was no foresight that I was wearing my comfortable old leather jacket, denims and sneakers. Clothes for the occasion that the control-wagon might be in all ways circumspect. The tie? Stupid tie, that had been a gesture. Tirk was in a peajacket from his sailing wardrobe. To appear unpretentious in that neighbourhood.

The bastards. All along. They wanted me in there. I just about hated everybody. I reached for the car-door handle. 'Hold off and give us time, an hour, say. We'll phone.' I had the door open. 'We'll take the bus to Denvers Street and start from there.'

'Ken, are you sure?' Tucker argued tokenly. 'Here, take this in case you might need it.'

Half out the car, I took it, looked at it. 'What am I supposed to do with this? I'm no hot pot-shotter.'

'Just for show,' Tucker said. 'There's only two of you, and you can use it to cover Tirk. You need it. Just to wave it about will be a good deterrent.'

I didn't think so. I didn't like guns. But I shoved the ugly lump of metal into my pocket. I was fed-up. My stomach was in knots. I didn't know what I was doing, or what I was doing it *for*.

'Take care, both of you, Tirk. Don't take any chances...'

Skid Row. Melthorpe, tidy, fastidious, calm, competent, who would think of him as a bum, authentic, look for him as a rummy, poke through a doss-house to find him? A growth of beard, dirt, become anonymous, wait and watch, take time to think. Submerge to slide out in a week or two maybe. A fraternity of natural law-dodgers. Packed his bags, but left his very best or favourite. Threw them away, sent them long-distance, to be collected, to be traced eventually, a false trail. Guesswork. Sheer guesswork. Not one lousy fact that was worth a split peanut.

We walked. My mind was a mess, jazzing. 'Tirk, I'm a coward. You know it, Tucker knows it. And right now I've got the yellow-pox chicken-fever bad. Tirk, I don't like this. I shouldn't be here. I'm not this kind of guy.'

'You want we should go back? Ken, don't frazzle yourself. We'll get him, one way or another. Don't knock yourself out.' He was concerned, genuinely concerned. In his practical and objective way. It was his job to look after me, to keep me in good condition. He'd been given a nut to play with, was the wrench meant to gently and without stress keep the nut turning in the right direction.

'I can't help it. No, I can't go back. It's like I'm caught up in something inevitable. That's what makes it...'

We were walking slow and my thoughts were jambling, skittering. I had to keep talking. 'How can I explain? Nobody else knows what it's like. What am I doing, Tirk? What's my mind? Just how much does my mind encompass? Just how much control do I have over it? I have no control at all, Tirk. It just happens. And it's only feeling. And I don't know why, see? And if I receive, how much do I have to give? And if I get, suppose someone else gets me?'

And this was it, the thing that really clawed at my

insides. Horsing around with something that nobody knew anything about. It was my mind, not theirs, flailing around in unknown territory, and who knew what it might meet, come up against suddenly, smash, grind, crunch. Melthorpe was powerful. He was loaded with unconscious insight. Suppose he woke up, really broke out? Could I handle him? Could I hell. I sensed his untapped potential and shivered. He'd eat me. He'd eat me alive.

We walked. Look for him? Was I looking for him? No. I was getting nothing at all. The only feeling I had was to run. This was none of my business. I wanted to turn around and walk a lot faster, to canter, sprint. I wanted to go home, no, take a vacation, be anywhere but here.

Talk, I hardly let Tirk get a word in. 'He's probably not here, Tirk, we're wasting our time. I didn't have a strong feeling, not a strong feeling at all. Just an idea, that's all, one of those "might be" things, you know? It's unlikely. I'm getting nothing, Tirk, nothing. We're just walking, that's all. I don't think he's here now. I'm getting nothing, not the least thing. He could be anywhere, if he's here. And I don't think he's here now. If he ever was. We can't win 'em all. When we get to the Cross, call Tucker. They can go through, but I don't think they'll find anything. I'm not with it today. I'm screwed after yesterday. Easy to make a mistake that way. Say anything, the sillier the better. I don't really think he's here, Tirk. When you think about it, it doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? ...'

The words rattled out of me virtually non-stop. If I paused for reply, I didn't listen. I put a grin on my face that became as fixed as a death mask. I shut my mind to anything but reason and common-sense. I said Tucker was a fool, and even giggled at how fatheaded we'd all look, and sweat ran into my eyes and dripped off my chin.

We crossed a vacant lot-cum-dump, and I was soggy outside and parched inside and thinking of nothing now but getting out.

We passed a Mission Hall and I was still talking, not rightly knowing what I was saying, not caring, just wanting to keep going, to get clear. Tall drab houses, rusty railings, grime, a discarded newspaper having its pages tugged apart by short gusts of wind.

And then ... my step faltered. My eyes bugged, my vocal cords gave out. I stopped talking. I stopped walking. It was like being tapped by Midas. Or getting a peek, a fleeting sight of the Gorgon's head. We'd passed him. My whole brain stopped still. Just the message to sear with the agony of branding—Behind me!

I whirled about, and Tirk in reflex followed suit with astonishing swiftness. Not ten-fifteen yards, close, a figure in battered hat and cheap sunglasses. An old sweater, faded jeans, thongs. Melthorpe. Vaguely glimpsed in the Mission doorway. Malevolence bridging the gap between us, cold fury. A gun.

The heel of Tirk's hand hit my shoulder and sent me flying. I slammed back into a garbage-can, took it with me, rolled on it, over, grabbing for balance, bruising against the railings, skidding on my spine, head half sticking over an areaway.

The oddly flat spat! spat! of the shots sounded in-

congruously innocuous. I frenziedly kicked the garbage-can from under my knees, scrambled, saw Tirk buckling backwards and sideways, saw Melthorpe crouched and aiming, menace, flame, flung myself around, down, falling, tumbling down the steps, terror leaping to cleanse my mind, blind, hurling back a door, running.

A table, two people, startled, goggling, useless, don't pause, flee! Stumble, sweep aside an old curtain, pound, scamper down a passageway, long, long, long passageway, the door of salvation, light, dusty, white-red-green, a long way, never reaching. Melthorpe with a gun, Melthorpe behind me, marksman Melthorpe, killing Melthorpe.

Gasping, whimpering, I reached the glass-topped door, scabbled at the latch, burst through out into a tiny yard. High wall, red barbs, never climb that. To the padlocked iron gate. Padlocked! Here! Trapped! By God trapped no! A drunken pile of collapsed cartons, a heap of bottles, some wooden crates in pieces. No protection. No hiding place. Melthorpe right behind me!

I lurched, dropped to all fours, scuttled like a frightened crab to smack against the wall, to squat scrunched by the lower door-hinges. He'd kill me. He couldn't let me live. He'd kill me. He'd kill me. He'd never be safe while I lived. Even now he was loping down the passageway. Oh God, oh God, oh God. Finished. He'd kill me. Oh God. I panted, too scared to do anything. Pitifully concealed, finished.

Tirk's voice. Calm. 'Ken, I'm hurt. I can't use my gun. You'll have to use yours. Plenty of time. He won't see you straightaway.'

There was a thud on the door, it whipped open. Inches from my nose the ends of four fingers gripping and holding the door. Then gone. And the door creaking back, driven by an ancient spring. I dug for my gun, lugged at it, freed it from the folds of my pocket.

Melthorpe darting to the gate, testing, flash puzzled, switching to the rubbish. Three neat black circles.

I was trembling uncontrollably. Tirk said, unhurried, 'Easy, Ken, easy.'

Melthorpe took a step, quick, to more closely scan the junk. My gun up, wobbling, both hands. A tableaux, a split second. And he knew and he spun and my aim firmed and bang! bang! bang! bang! bang!

Melthorpe heeled, took dance steps back into the old cartons, bounced and pitched and kicked. Some bottles scraped, screeked and rolled, clinking.

I lowered my gun. I was utterly spent, now sucking in great sobbing breaths. I slumped against the wall and put my head back. Over. It was over. And I passed out.

A bullet through the heart. He'd died right out there in that filthy gutter. Tirk had saved me, used his good right hand to shove me aside instead of immediately, vitally, reaching for his own weapon.

Tirk was great. I ... I guess he was the greatest. Don't ask me because I don't know. I don't know anything. I just feel things. And I just feel that ... that Tirk was ... But for me ... How I wish I'd known. Oh how dearly I wish I could have known.

THE VAULT

Damien Broderick

The number of 'mythical' characters and places which have turned out to have some basis of historical fact is much greater than one might imagine. In this powerful story, one of Australia's most talented young writers presents an electrifying explanation for a figure who has haunted the minds of men since the beginning of time.

The one thing you don't expect in a democracy is the knock on your door at 3 a.m. which means they've come to take you away.

I'd rubbed grit out of my eyes and glared angrily at the two patient strangers standing on my doormat. 'Do you realize what the hour—'

'You will come with us, Dr delFord,' said one in a low clear voice. 'Don't bother to pack. We will contact your wife and the Dean of your college.'

I didn't understand what they were saying. 'I beg your—?'

'We have an Air Force jet waiting,' said the other man. 'You must come with us immediately.'

I began to lose my temper and started to close the door. 'You can go to—' A heavy boot blocked the door and I was looking into a face which was suddenly frozen granite. The man's voice was steel clashing steel.

'Dr delFord, we do not have time for arguments.' He flashed an ID card at me which could have been anything. 'The President does not like to be kept waiting.'

We roared to the nearby Air Force Base in an austere Chevrolet. I crossed the tarmac shivering, wind slashing my thin pyjamas and chilling my bare feet. Inside the sleek jet a one-time colleague of mine offered an apologetic smile and indicated a pile of brand new clothing.

'I'm sorry about the melodrama, Jason,' he said. 'It's a habit they get into. Put some warm clothes on. We were guided by your old Service fittings, with allowance made for the wear and tear of maturity.'

'Gellner,' I said, lurching as the jet taxied into the bright-dotted runway. 'What in God's name is this all about?'

'Sit down and get your seat-belt on,' Gellner said, rather childishly pleased with the impact he'd made. 'These things go up like the devil.'

The clothes were a little tight. Obviously I'd put on more weight than had been expected. It revived my faith in individual liberty and I started to get angry again. 'Just

what the hell is this game, buddy? It's the most high-handed piece of piracy it has ever been my misfortune—'

'Jason, have a drink.' The anthropologist made whiskey appear and put it in my hand when I finished knotting the woollen tie they'd chosen. 'How's Marie and the kids?'

'Scared out of their bloody wits, probably. Am I allowed to call them when we land?'

Gellner grew serious. 'I'm sorry, no. But we'll make sure they know you're all right—somebody will have set their minds at ease already, actually. You can write to them, of course.'

'Thanks a lot.' I sipped the whiskey and brooded out the port at dark hurtling cloud. 'We really *are* seeing the President?'

'In conference, yes. Look, I'll give you a quick run-down.' His face filled with almost adolescent excitement. 'You'll forgive us our bad manners when you know where you're going.'

'Uh.'

'Two years ago,' he said, 'The third lunar Apollo mission detected modulated transmissions in the hydrogen band from the crater Tycho.'

My heart stopped, a moment of wild surmise. Then I said, 'Russian, of course.'

'No. The signals were automatically taped by the Apollo module and communicated to Mission Control by tight maser beam.'

'You really mean...'

'Yes. Crash-priority conference between the President, Cape Kennedy and JPL resulted in the mission being diverted into synchronous orbit above Tycho.'

'So it wasn't a failure in the fuel pumps.' I could feel the hair starting to rise on the back of my neck.

'Attempts were made,' said Gellner, 'to establish two-way contact with the signal source; they were unsuccessful. The backup crew were put on ready status. Defence computers examined the signals, reported definitively that the communication represented extra-terrestrial intelligence. Cabinet, in secret session, approved immediate preparation of the fourth Apollo mission, to land in Tycho. Despite considerable qualms on the part of NASA scientists, the mission was launched twenty-five days later.'

'My God,' I said. Then, foolishly: 'There've been no reports in the Press about—'

'That's right. The two astronauts who landed found the remains, which we've dated at more than 200,000 years, of a buried computer complex. Evidence indicates that it could not have originated in this solar system. The complex, which we've coded Selene Alpha, is presumed to be the work of interstellar visitors.'

Emotion churned in me. *Living creatures from the stars! Proof positive that man is not alone in the universe. Or is he? We've missed them by two thousand centuries...*

'What had happened to the complex?'

'It is inferred that Selene Alpha suffered nuclear attack, but was partially protected by an unknown screening system. Unfortunately most of the devices were totally fused into an homogenous slag.'

The glass nearly shattered in my grip. *We must have that screen, I thought. Not just us, the Americans, the*

West—the human race must have it! ‘If the Alpha complex is only a ruin,’ I said, ‘who sent the initial transmission?’

‘The few remaining operative systems apparently recognized the Apollo crew as living beings within orbital range,’ said Gellner. ‘The signals were, of course, automatic, perhaps part of the aliens’ navigation network. The technology is fantastically formidable: ages old, nuclear blasted, it still worked ... The signal,’ he added, leaning back, ‘has resisted translation.’

The jet boomed across heaven, carrying us at Mach 2 towards Washington. Compared with the ruined structure on the Moon, it was a child’s toy.

Gellner fixed us both another drink and related the rest of the extraordinary data. How, galvanized by their usual paranoid suspicion or perhaps a NASA security leak, the Russians had sent their own hastily-prepared lunar vehicle to Tycho. How astronauts and cosmonauts—in a spectacular act of near-treasonable scientific integrity—confronting each other across the ancient ruins a quarter million miles from Earth, had pooled their resources and efforts.

How they had uncovered, in concert, the huge alien map of Earth with its time-distorted continents and its two glowing location-markers ...

My pulse jumped. ‘The aliens had been on Earth?’

‘Wouldn’t you expect them to? It was inferred that the sites located on the map were bases belonging either to the race who constructed Selene Alpha, or the others who destroyed them. Direct investigation of the sites was, unfortunately, hampered by political issues. Neither Americans nor Russians were prepared to trust each other. And still,’ he grimaced, ‘are not. One can see why, of course. A monopoly of that nuclear shield ...’

‘The United Nations,’ I suggested.

Gellner nodded. ‘That was the eventual outcome. Special UN forces, sworn to secrecy, were called in. Since then specialized experts have been press-ganged when the need arises.’

I was still shaken by the mind-twisting perspectives the anthropologist had thrown open before me. ‘What about the alien location, Gellner? Is there still anything there after all these thousands of years?’

‘One is buried irretrievably under the Atlantic Ocean,’ Gellner told me gravely. ‘The other is in Australia, more than eight thousand feet beneath a unique geological formation known as Ayer’s Rock. One hundred and seventy-three men have died so far in our attempts to investigate it.’

Thus, finally, plummeting through the screaming night, I learned about the Vault ...

I followed the grey-suited UN man down the steep tunnel, knowing I might explode into a greasy cloud of dispersed colloids at any moment. A forced draft thrust fingers into my hair, lifted sweat and heat from my face. The next landing glimmered a hundred yards further down the boron-epoxy tube. We were nearly a mile and a half into the bowels of the earth.

‘You’ll change into protective clothing at this checkpoint, Mr delFord,’ said the agent. ‘Research & Development sent it ahead.’ His voice boomed and echoed along the tunnel.

I said nothing. Even with the gradient they’d main-

tained in these fibre-matrix cylinders, we’d had to trek miles to come this deep. I’m a desk man; physical exertion is not my forte. Thighs and belly were protesting with increasing peevishness against the unusual slope beneath my feet.

Gaslight flared white and sharp as we rounded the bend into the landing. Several UN-uniformed troops regarded us with trained suspicion from behind their emplacements. Bored grey-smocked scientists (*Bored!* I thought. *Incredible...*!) tended make-shift instruments and conferred in murmurs. I massaged pain out of my cramping muscles and looked for a seat to collapse on.

My guide had sought out the local brass and was doing brisk business. An aide brought me a chair and a paper mug of iced-water. I leaned back, eyes closed, and tried to still my jittering nerves. A quarter mile from here was the monstrous thing I had come to investigate. I could feel Death snuffling already for my scent ... *Cut that!* I warned myself. *Fear will keep you razor-edge alert, but don’t get morbid.*

I stood up despite angry darts from ill-used muscles and tried to look sternly impressive. It wasn’t easy. A civilian expert is just a second-rate specimen to the military. The agent got the message though and hurried over with a burly officer on his heels.

‘General M’Buta, this is Jason delFord.’ I shook hands and sat down again. That gave the general a shock but all he said was, ‘How do you do, Dr delFord? We’re pleased to have you here.’

‘Jason,’ I said. ‘Or Mr delFord, if you insist on formalities, M’Buta. Forget the degrees.’

‘Uh, yes Mr delFord.’ He squared his shoulders unconsciously and muscles rippled under his dark skin. ‘I suggest you come over to my office for a final briefing. Then you can get changed and we’ll take you down the hole.’

‘Fine,’ I said, reaching into my pockets. ‘Is it okay to smoke?’

M’Buta hesitated. ‘Preferably not,’ he said. ‘Most of the instrumentation we’re using involve chemical transactions—it’s somewhat jerryrigged.’

I flushed. ‘Yes, of course.’

The general flashed white teeth. ‘That’s how it is down here, Jason,’ he said, leading me to his plastic-box office. ‘The things you take for granted are the things to worry about.’

It was subtly disturbing in his patchwork Operations Command office, knowing that the closest electronic equipment was a mile and a half away—straight up. The bulky contraption to one side of the plastic desk, heavy tube boring up through the ceiling, was a hydraulic communication device. The input-output was a massively-gearred mechanical typewriter.

There was nothing in the area which a nineteenth-century engineer couldn’t have cobbled together, although the structural materials and work-tolerances would have staggered him.

And all this desperate ingenuity was shaped by one appallingly simple fact: the Vault would not tolerate foreign electromagnetic fields. In some way we didn’t understand, it—destroyed them. Along with any human personnel associated with them. Thoroughly and horribly.

My heart started to hammer again. Within the hour I

would be going down to break the Vault. More probably, the Vault would break me. It had already killed nearly two hundred men.

M'Buta's resonant voice cut through my brooding.

'We'll take you to the three hundred yard post, delFord. After that you'll be on your own.'

'Yes,' I said. He was searching my face. I kept the cringing fear buried deep inside me. My cheeks felt cold in the muggy air. The major fact which had been brutally impressed upon me was that no man could twice enter the 300-yard limit. The Vault permitted a single intrusion. Second time round you were dead.

'You will have just under one hour,' M'Buta said carefully. 'We will ring bells every fifteen minutes. A series of coded klaxons will count down the last ten minutes. Are you completely familiar with the procedure?'

'Yes.' The codes had been scorched into my conscious and unconscious memory by narco-hypnosis, machine-instruction and good old adrenaline-prompted study. I'd react to those bells if I was three days buried in Hell.

The general held out a pack of gum, took a stick himself. 'Apart from the time-count there will be absolutely no attempt to communicate with you.' A rap on the door shook the frail plastic cubicle, and two civilians brought in a metallic garment which they handled with extreme care. M'Buta introduced us quickly and they went away.

'Something,' he explained, 'the Johnnies upstairs have been working on.'

'This is my, uh, protective clothing?'

'It was cut to your specifications while you were being flown here. The electronics physicists claim it dampens the minute electrical field generated by the human nervous system. It may provide some extra protection down there.'

'It hasn't been tested?'

'In the laboratory. Not in the Vault.'

I stood up and went to the minutely-detailed map on the pale blue wall. The zigzag of the tunnel ended, on the map, at a blurred sphere. There were no details of the Vault's interior. Sweat broke again on my forehead. It was my job to complete that map.

Clad in the stifling foam-lined suit, I walked stiffly to the end of the landing. Millions of separate metal threads were wired in a crazy tangle through the inert fabric of the suit. It was lighter than chainmail, but not much more flexible. Technicians scurried around in dismayed resignation; they did not expect to see me alive again.

'You'll make it, delFord,' M'Buta said. His hand rested on my shoulder. 'I have an intuition. Not so many generations past, you know, my ancestors believed in such things. I think maybe they had something.'

'General, I sincerely hope so.' The tunnel stretched away into the depths, lighted at intervals by gasmantles. Strange synthetic odours mingled with machine-gun oil and human sweat. Heat poured up the tunnel, radiating from the invisible, incomprehensible barrier around the Vault. A mile and a half above us, blazing sun parched the desert rocks.

'That other Vault, if that's what it was, under the Atlantic...' M'Buta mused. 'Is it too fantastic, Jason, to recall legends of drowned Atlantis?'

I cleared my throat. Unscratchable itches raged across my skin. 'And do you interpret the Rock, General, as a giant tombstone?'

His brown eyes went hard. 'It has been tombstone to nearly two hundred fine men,' he grated. Then: 'Jason, please pardon that unfortunate remark.'

I'd hardly heard him anyway. Irritably I asked: 'What's holding your countdown?'

'I'm afraid it's unavoidable,' he said, still embarrassed. 'The research staff must have all their equipment rolling as you go in. And they're not used to dealing with non-electronic...' With a painful and obvious effort, he sought a new topic. 'I must admit I'm still curious as to why a mathematician has been chosen for the job. Jason, what *are* your special survival skills?'

I gave a harsh bark. 'Maybe it's just that they've tried everything else already.' Years of discipline saved M'Buta from flinching. He knew it was true. "Logician" is more accurate, General, or perhaps "philosopher". He'd been sent a complete dossier on me, of course, but I could see that he was still genuinely puzzled. 'In the trade I'm known as a theoretical meta-mathematician. I am, if you like, an expert in inventing crazy postulates and working through to the last dot what follows from them.'

M'Buta was respectful but incredulous. It must have sounded ridiculous.

'It's a fashionable occupation in some circles.' I kept talking so booming echoes would drown the butterflies writhing in my belly. 'Consider the proposition one plus two equals one. You might imagine that it'd lead you straight to the funny farm. In fact, it's a basic theorem in modern high-school math.' The general didn't believe me for a moment. Well, it'd been thirty years since he left school. 'I'll send you a textbook if I get out of this in one piece.'

A bell rang stridently. Officers had been scurrying all the time, bearing messages to M'Buta. He spoke briefly to a lean white-haired scientist, turned to me with military punctilio.

'You may go down now, Mr delFord. These gentlemen will accompany you to the 300-yard limit. I wish you luck.' I shook his hand and didn't feel a thing through the wired glove. Flanked by my escort, I walked into the final leg of the tunnel.

The men who had employed the Moon map to find this alien installation did not have the faintest idea what to expect. At first they'd thought the Rock itself harboured the base. For thousands of years aboriginals had recognized its strangeness. To them it was—sacred; they'd brought their dead, since before memory fades into Dreamtime, for interment. Twentieth-century Caucasians were more mundane. They'd made Ayer's Rock a tourist attraction. But now the whole area was blockaded under Highest Security, ostensibly for rocket research.

X-rays were not powerful enough to penetrate the Rock. The newest and most experimental disciplines were invoked: cosmic-ray diffraction, neutrino astronomy. They proved the aboriginals wrong.

The Rock was, simply, solid rock.

Electronic probes were initiated to plumb the geological strata beneath the Rock. Five months after the Apollo landing, as the probes echoed back from 8,000 feet, the research establishment got results. All hundred and fifty-eight men died explosively. Their bright new equipment was fused into the molten desert silica.

I stalked, crouch-legged, towards the Thing which had done that murder. The helmet of fine mesh surrounded

my head, splintering gaslight like a prism. My muscles ached; lungs burned with the fiery air fleeing up from the Vault's barrier. Fear urged me to turn, run. And yet I knew a deeper compulsion, more profound than patriotism or honour, which tugged me down into the tunnel. Curiosity—intense, demanding, almost orgasmically exciting—drove me to the Vault.

This last quarter mile had all been dug by hand-wielded hydraulic excavators. The other slanting miles of tunnel, designed to trap most of the radiation if the Vault detonated a nuclear self-destruct, had been hammered through the raw strata by exquisitely fashioned shaped-charges. Once formed, the empty tubes were lined with boron fibre-epoxy matrix materials microscopically interlocked in tetrahedral patterns. The stressed substances were incredibly light and fantastically stronger than steel.

I managed to smile at myself. The jargon, and the brand-new engineering concepts behind it, had stuck fast during my crash six-day orientation briefing. It made me feel slightly better. Backing me up were all the inestimable resources of mankind's courage and intelligence.

Yet: *Against what? Something still operating 200,000 years after it was sunk into the rock. Something created by Beings who crossed from star to star when Man was still grubbing in the forests.*

'We have reached the limit-zone,' said the white-haired scientist, breaking my anaesthetic abstraction. A bell clamoured; the first fifteen minutes had begun. 'We will wait here for you, sir. Begin your return no later than the first klaxon.'

'Yes,' I said, gripping their hands in turn. 'Thank you.'

I crossed the hot interface of the barrier, and entered the zone.

I paced, stiffly, the perfect flat surface which surrounded the Vault's dull white sphere. The thing was clearly illuminated in focussed beams cast from gasmantles behind the limit. My shadow stumped ahead of me, black as night without stars. My breath whistled through the fine wire grid. My footsteps clicked and rebounded. I felt nothing at all.

The Vault loomed. It was quite featureless, just as the stereo photographs had shown it. A calculus of death ran its simple figures in my mind, a stark refrain. *This thing has slain one hundred and seventy-three men. One hundred and fifty-eight in that first catastrophe. Six more during the blasting of the tunnels, who died confirming the link between the use of electric fields and reprisal from the Vault. And nine brave, intelligent explorers who entered the barrier to map the Vault.*

Cautiously, according to instructions, I stopped after the first hundred yards. Heat-effect from the invisible barrier had diminished; I felt slightly cold despite the foam padding of my suit. *Fear reaction*, I thought with clinical detachment. In actual fact, the suit was retaining much of my body heat. A trickle of sweat ran from my chest down my belly.

I awaited attack from the Vault. None came. I moved closer, slowly circling its inert globe. Fear thrust stubby fingers into my stomach. Those nine dead men were not the only casualties of direct attempts on the Vault. Four others, I knew, had come this far and further, and escaped with their lives. They lay at this moment in an

Alice Springs hospital, under total sedation. They were all utterly, irretrievably insane...

I edged towards the Vault—

And fell screaming into infinity.

—Fell and fell, limbs thrust out, eyes clamped shut in nausea and shock, panic clawing.

You are not falling! I howled in fury at myself. *There is nowhere to fall.* The plunging descent into hell did not abate. But I felt the surface firm beneath my feet, forced my eyes open. Nothing had changed. I was not falling, despite the acrophobic torment roaring in my ears and muscles. The strain was intolerable. I could feel sanity slipping...

I did the one impossible thing: I hurled myself forward, straight into the gaping pit only frail reason told me was not there.

And the rock was solid beneath me again. The illusion of that endless plunge was gone, cut off abruptly as a storm at the slamming of a door.

I picked myself up off the ground, ruefully massaging bruised elbows. Cold and enigmatic, the white sphere loomed ahead of me. *It's possible to beat it*, I thought, astounded. I stood loose, let myself relax in the modified yoga sequence NASA medics had taught me. Purpose and confidence flooded back, soothed the fright and sickness out of me. When the bell rang out, signalling the end of the first fifteen-minute period, I moved on again towards the Vault.

I had come almost under its curved exterior when nightmare struck anew.

Perspective twisted into a delirium of horror. My body stretched into a distorted caricature, arms shrinking to withered stumps, legs like melted plastic stilts. My eyes protruded from their sockets in the writhing ruin of my face. Around the dry pitted crater of my mouth, teeth were needle fangs of bone. I tried to cover my face but my hands were mere bulbous lumps of botched tissue which could not reach...

And somehow I was laughing, with not quite the shrill madness of hysteria. 'It's all,' I shouted with my ruined mouth, thinking wildly of that theorem which demonstrated how one plus two equals one, 'done with mirrors.' The echo of my voice rang in the chamber of the Vault. And the nightmare was gone. I stood before the featureless Vault. I had circled it completely. There was no visible entrance.

'Well,' I said at last, voice slightly shaky. 'What do you want me to do, say Open Sesame?' Shock ran chilling through me. Noiselessly, an opening irised; a dark, empty, ominous maw.

A voice, brook-tinkle sweet and alpine-lonely, sang in my mind: YOU HAVE COME!

I could not move. —Not so; I *was* moving, step after unattended step towards the door into damnation. My mind gibbered warning, and yet could not heed it.

WHY ARE YOU FEARFUL? cried the beautiful voice, desolated. BELOVED, I HAVE AWAITED YOUR COMING FOR SO LONG. SO VERY, VERY LONG...

And the taint of evil stank in my nostrils. The filthy, terror-howling stink of some ancestral enemy so vile that two hundred thousand years had not expunged it from my genes. The pressure from beyond my body gripped limbs and nerves, took me against my shrieking denial through the door of the Vault.

Nobody, some part of my mind recorded, *has come this far before*. All the others had died without reaching the Vault. Or stumbled back with ruined minds and shattered flesh. *Why has it chosen me?*

YOUR MIND IS BEAUTIFUL, sang the evil, ancient voice. IT SEES MORE, DARES SEE MORE, THAN THE RIGID BRAINS OF THOSE OTHER FOOLS.

Lines of light—indigo, turquoise, scarlet; flame-hot, sunbright—leaped and shattered about me. I walked into the heart of the Vault, looked on the glowing fluid shapes of geometries I had only known as equations on a page.

And something in me bent, was tempted. The stink of repulsion was numbed. I felt the urge to worship grow and boom within me. *'Belovèd!'* the voice had called me. I stumbled on in the coils of light and at the very centre of the Vault—

—Stopped.

For she was beautiful. Breathtakingly, heartstoppingly beautiful. My hands tried to clench in the wire gloves. Impossible to move, to speak, to swallow. Serpents of light swayed and wove about me, and bore cupped in the darkness they enclosed—Her.

The bright lines broke, for the merest moment. My mind shuddered at the brink of collapse.

—A faint, clanging, demanding cry of bells had scored fire in my brain.

I tried to turn, to respond, and saw at the edge of my eye the foul nauseating Thing which...

AH! she cried, DO NOT FORSAKE ME!

She held out golden arms, lured me to the ripe enjoyment of her body. Man, since Adam wept to first see Eve dew-touched asleep in Paradise, saw never woman such as this. Tears filled my eyes. I reached to clasp her, passion rising in a foaming wave, reached to find her breasts golden soft, to be flesh in her flesh, to taste the sweet scent—

Stench! Vile as sulphur, vile as acid foaming; the poison stink of something ancient and repulsive. I fought her lure, tore away my eyes, clamped teeth deep into tongue. Pain came sharp and terrible. My mouth filled with the salty reek of blood.

WHY DO YOU RESIST OUR DREAM? MAN, YOU MUST NOT!

I grovelled on the metal deck, muscle fighting muscle, and prayed for the clamour of the bell. The lilting music of her voice tore at me, sang virtue and seduction. I wept in fury, and heard the bell.

I ran. I did not reach the doorway. The harsh clangour died, and the hatch cycled into darkness.

She waited in the Vault, with her wiles and her power, and I knew I would never escape her.

I moved my numb jaw. 'Who are you?'

AH, DO YOU NEED TO ASK? Anger and reproach filled the glorious voice. HUMAN, HAS YOUR RACE SO SOON FORGOTTEN ITS GODDESS?

Waves rolled and crashed outward from the centre of the Vault, hammered my emotions. Sleep stroked my will with the sensual touch of slumber. My mind was lulled, webbed in a drowsy net of warmth and darkness. And the same force rebounded with images of lust. A tide of heavy blood rose and moved in me, brought fever, sent me crashing in brute male frenzy towards the golden waiting body of my goddess...

Danger! screamed my mind, cutting a knife of cold terror through the snares of fantasy. *Evil! The stink of*

Death is waiting here! I stumbled to a halt, snakes of light weaving in terrible patterns about me.

COME, urged the voice. (Was it merely angry at my resistance, or did I dare detect an edge of fear in it?) I ground teeth together, prayed for the bell's interruption to give me rest and strength. BELOVÈD HUMAN, YOU MUST NOT FEAR ME. I AM ASTARTE, APHRODITE, ISIS, THE GODDESS OF YOUR PEOPLE. COME TO MY ARMS AND GIVE ME NOURISHMENT, MY LOVE!

The bell sounded again. My anguished muscles tensed against her tugging lure, were freed.

And I did not run.

There was no place to run. I knew in that blinding instant of clarity and fear that I could escape only by cunning and deceit.

Something else struck me with equal suddenness, an insight so rich and yet so obvious that I was dazed by my stupidity in not having seen it before. *This is not a Vault, it's a Prison!* And the dreadful alien being which called itself a goddess was the prisoner, bound and chained by forces beyond human comprehension 200,000 years ago.

The defences outside the installation, the terrible distortions of space and time which destroyed machines and killed men, were merely a side-effect of its primary purpose. *Or, at the most, insurance against the Thing using intruders to escape.*

A pang of guilt and grief stabbed through me. *Yes. That's what it wants of me: to help it escape!*

YOU ARE RIGHT, HUMAN. The sweet lilt of seduction vanished. Ugly power roared, a volcano of spite and hatred. I HAVE BEEN KEPT THUS FROM MY MATE, BUT WE WILL FEED AGAIN! YOU WILL DISARM THE DEFENCES AND SET ME FREE, AND I SHALL SEEK OUT MY LORD HUSBAND.

Savage sucking hunger tugged at me, a blood-lust starved for a quarter million years. The fury of that monstrous turmoil was a whirlpool, a maelstrom of carnivorous hate. I jerked and trembled under its impact like a marionette wielded by a drunkard.

'Your mate?' I screamed, snatching for some tag of rationality. 'Who is your mate?'

Fury abated, became giant laughter.

THE LORD LUCIFER, cried the voice in triumph. HIM YOU KNOW AS SATAN.

My sense of elapsed time had been completely deranged by the mental tumult. I knew only that the klaxons would sound soon, would provide my last chance of escape. I was near the end of my resources. Sweat slicked my whole body, exhaustion filleted me. And yet, to escape I must plan, must think, evaluate, reject, devise. Which was the one thing I could *not* do, since conscious planning would be instantly detected, thwarted. I wondered fleetingly at the silence now; realized then that the monster's orgy of triumph was temporarily blocking its scrutiny of my mind.

If I could only reverse that process, find some way to think and act without being seized the instant it saw my intention... The problem was an impossible, belly-chilling paradox—

Paradox! I sucked breath. If I—

ENOUGH! roared the voice. CEASE YOUR FUTILE STRUGGLES AND DELIVER MIND AND BODY TO MY CONTROL. A sudden fresh blast of overwhelming passion went through me, and the creature's filthy beautiful voice fondled me again. YOU SHALL FIND THAT SERVICE FOR YOUR GODDESS HAS ITS JOYS.

I clamped tight the dangerous corner of my mind. Tremors shook me, spasmed my face at the effort.

'I will serve you, my Goddess,' I cried. 'What steps must I take to free you?'

THEY ARE VERY COMPLEX, said the voice. ALLOW ME TO CONTROL YOUR LIMBS. I WILL PERFORM THE ACTIONS THROUGH YOU.

I relaxed my muscles, denying knowledge to myself. More gentle now I did not resist it, the force took control and led me back to the entrance of the Vault. A great panel of engraved markings glowed on the curved wall. My hands rose under the volition of the Thing hulking within its imprisoning force-field, sought the alien controls.

A bare half-inch from the surface, I exerted all the strength left in me. My hands stilled.

'Which of these opens the Vault?' I demanded. I forced my hands to rove, agony lancing, forced them to skim across the whole face of the panel. 'Is it this marking? This?' My left hand almost reached the lower corner. The alien convulsed me, snatched it away.

STOP! DO YOU DREAM YET OF ESCAPE, LET ME WARN YOU...

I fell heavily on the floor. My eyes were seared by blazing pokers, the flesh of my face was shredding under the claws of some terrible beast of prey, my body was an iron fist of cramp. The pain went on for eternity. When it stopped, echoes of torture drumming, the voice roared: YOU ARE A FOOLISH AND STUBBORN BREED EVEN FOR CATTLE, YOU HUMANS. NOW, ATTEND TO MY TASK.

This, I realized in cold desperation, is it.

'Paradox,' I said aloud, focussing with ferocious intensity on the idea, 'is a logical contradiction which can be neither affirmed nor denied.' My hands stopped their directed movement.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? howled the voice furiously.

Practising my trade, I thought ironically. This problem has stymied the greatest meta-mathematicians; I dare say it'll stop me now.

'There exists a set,' I said, straining to hold my arms from the release-markings, 'such that whatever x may be, x is a member of it if and only if x is a set that is not a member of itself. I will call this set z .'

And the horrendous wailing of the klaxons slashed the air, shrilled their cyclic whine until the very walls of the Vault seemed to reverberate.

I felt trained reflexes come alive, blocking everything but the will to escape, get out, cross the barrier. In that instant, the alien's control of my body faltered, left me trembling with weakness.

I did not cease my mathematical deliberations. 'Either z is a member of z , or z is not a member of z .' I sagged against the wall, forcing breath into my lungs, forcing the clear impossible concept of Russell's Paradox through my consciousness.

BELOVED! cried the voice, all anger and arrogance gone from it. The fury which must have been raging in the monster was concealed, converted into the overpowering seductiveness it had used earlier. WHY DO YOU RUN? I WILL FORSAKE MY PRISONED MATE, BELOVED, AND MAKE YOU A GOD. FREE ME, MY DARLING, AND WE WILL RULE THE EARTH IN GLORY FOR A MILLION YEARS.

'Suppose,' I suggested reasonably, ' z were a member of itself. Then it would fail to fulfil the condition that any set must fulfil in order to belong to z . Therefore z is not a member of itself.' My hands found the lower left corner of the plate, probed the engraving there. Lamber blue flame crackled across my fingers. The Vault door irised open.

Light from the gasmantles shone. The shrieking klaxons were calling me. Conditioned reflexes hammered to answer them. The circle of paradox closed in my mind, sealed into an impossible mindblocking circuit.

'Suppose z were not a member of itself, it would then fulfil the condition which is sufficient to make it a member of itself, and so it *must* be a member of itself.'

I was running, stumbling in my exhaustion across the bland extent of the defence area. At the corners of my mind the Thing within the Vault gnawed a dazzling mind-spell of seduction and promise. It could not penetrate the rational lunacy of the Paradox.

I fell to the ground and could not get up. The barrier's heat blew at me.

Thus, chanted my mind, if the set z is a member of itself it is not a member of itself, but if z is not a member of itself it must be a member of itself, but if z is a member of itself...

RETURN, HUMAN, rang the faint voice of the alien. I MUST BE FREED! I MUST HAVE THE NOURISHMENT OF BLOOD AND PAIN...

I clawed up from the ground, eyes stinging with sweat, soaked foam rubbing torment on my bare flesh, klaxon-scream thunder and headache; staggered to my feet, ran for the hot invisible barrier. A final blast of filth and hatred brought me almost to my knees as I crossed it. I turned, caught across my shoulder a blurred image of the Vault entrance irising shut. I collapsed into the arms of the waiting medical team.

When my eyes opened again, painful and dull, General M'Buta's dark seamed face hung over me.

I managed a grimace. 'It's a pity about Ayer's Rock,' I said.

He got quite anxious for a moment. 'Jason, what—?'

'You're going to have to chop it into little pieces,' I said, finding clarity difficult with Russell's Paradox pounding circles in my brain. 'You've got twelve miles of tunnel to fill in.'

I closed my eyes again and tried without success not to think about set theory.

SIXTH SENSE

Michael G. Coney

A number of years ago, it used to be thought that the development of human interest was incompatible with a science fiction story. Here a new author explodes this fallacy with a brilliant study of real people in a true, and oddly moving, sf setting.

I didn't remember any individuals that morning; just a sea of drinking faces between myself and closing time. I know I was busy, and usually when the inn is crowded, time goes quickly. But that morning dragged. My God, how it dragged. I do remember a certain amount of good-natured banter and leg-pulling, as the regular customers realized that my mind was not on my job, and I served them scotch when they asked for beer, and when they pointed out the error I still couldn't get it right...

At last it was 1500 and I had signified time, and they were drifting out. I closed the door behind the final laggard and pottered around the room, aimlessly picking up glasses and putting them down again... I turned on the water, filled the sink, dropped in a few dirty glasses and swirled them around absently.

I couldn't stand it any longer. I left the glasses to drain, opened the door and went outside, my stomach a knot of anticipation. I crossed the lane and walked over the short, springy salt grass to the cliff top. I turned, and gazed inland.

Across the fields, far away, a wraith of dust rose into the still air, moving slowly, too slowly.

As I watched it my thoughts were suddenly carried back by a vivid process of *deja vu*, and it was once again that hot summer's day, three years ago...

I stood on the doorstep of the inn, thinking of nothing in particular, just watching the sea sparkling in the afternoon sunshine, misting blue-grey with distance so that the horizon was difficult to discern.

It was hot, humid, almost steamy, and for a moment I toyed with the idea of strolling down the hill to the little village at the water's edge, and stripping off, and having a cool swim. From the inn, perched near the cliff-top, the water looked clear and inviting in the small cove which formed the village harbour; I could see the bottom, silvery shingle merging into dark green around the base of the cliff. I didn't need to open the bar until 1700; I had plenty of time...

But there were the guests to think about. The paying guests. They had written to say that they would be arriving about mid-afternoon, and it wouldn't look too good

if there were no reply when they thumbed the entrance, and they had to wait on the doorstep, baffled, while I pounded back up the hill from the village, clutching wet trunks and towel.

They would be hot and tired and they would want baths and drinks. My place has no pretensions to opulence, in fact I only have three letting bedrooms, but I do like to make people feel welcome. In any case, my living depends on it.

So I contented myself with a stroll to the edge of the cliff, some two hundred metres away. There I stood in shirt and shorts, wishing there were a cool breeze, looking at the sea and at the birds wheeling around Gull Crag.

People have climbed Gull Crag, for fun. I've seen them doing it, watching them through the window while standing behind the bar. I climbed it myself, once. Never again.

The cliff, where I stood, fell about eighty metres to the quiet, heavy sea. Some twenty metres down was a crumbling shale ledge, a bridge which spanned the unpleasant drop between the cliff and Gull Crag. Gull Crag itself was a towering pinnacle composed of the same shale as the cliff, but rising almost sheer from the water to a point about ten metres above the level of the cliff-top, like the gnarled arm of an elderly, drowning giant.

And people climbed it for fun. Holds, they would inform me, were difficult to come by. They broke off in the hand, as soon as you had found them.

Yet they would scramble down the cliff to the bridge, and nip across while the sea, on breezier days, sucked and slobbered greedily far below, and start to climb, grinning with fear. Every year a little more of the bridge would collapse into the gorge while the November gales eroded the base of the Crag itself. One day the Crag too would collapse, maybe in my life-time. Then no more would I see these triumphant fools waving to their friends in the bar from their precarious perch on the summit, ankle-deep in seagull excrement. I sighed, saddened by the decay of a local landmark.

Turning, I saw a trail of dust rising in the still air from the lane which twisted inland among the fields. The guests. Nobody local would be returning from the town at this hour of the afternoon.

I left the cliff-top and returned to the inn, practising my open, welcoming smile.

I went inside, closing the door behind me, and waited. This is something I always do; it gives me a better chance to assess the personalities of new arrivals, before they catch sight of me and are put on their guard, and the barriers go up.

After a while I reached out. Cautiously, so as to avoid detection.

My mind was met with a jumble of confused, ill-tempered acrimony, a sense of sweatiness and discomfort, the feeling of a group of people among whom friendship was a surface veneer which had peeled off with the humidity.

Ah, well, it was going to be one of those weeks. You get all types. I opened the door wide and stepped into the fierce sunlight. It was like stepping back into a furnace. I smiled, exuding bonhomie.

The car was one of those gull-winged jobs, all enamel

and platinum, with richly-decorated side-skirts, lying in the road like a wealthy but nevertheless stranded whale. One of the gull-wings rose with expensive smoothness and a tall woman stepped out, her appearance rivalling the car in ostentation.

Her greeting smacked my senses like a broad-sword. 'Hera Piggott,' she introduced herself. She was staring at me haughtily, and I caught an image of myself in the vulgarly unguarded recesses of her mind. I was wearing a smock and across the front were three XXX's. My face was hidden under an enormous floppy hat and my legs were encased in lace-up boots. I recognized an old twentieth-century advertising art-form. I decided I didn't like Mrs Piggott, but I kept the fact from her. You have to be an expert at that sort of thing, in my trade.

'Jack Garner,' I gave her back, politely.

Another wing was lifting from the whale, and another. It looked as though invisible flensers were at work. A portly, balding figure rose from the front passenger seat. Hera Piggott had been driving, naturally.

'Mr Piggott.' Rudely, his wife gave him no time to introduce himself, the power of her emission blanketing his feeble wave. 'Piggy,' she thought to herself, and the chorus of mental sniggers which had been discernible among the other, unseen passengers became derisive as the image of the yokel was joined by a hog.

But there was an element of dissention. A young girl stepped out from the rear of the car, smoothing her short skirt, not amused by the mental caricatures banded around.

'I'm Mandy. It's nice to see you.' She meant it, too. She smiled at me and her feelings were a combination of friendliness and an odd kind of sympathy and ... something else, something which was conveyed by her frank gaze and yet veiled in her mind. She half turned and surveyed the landscape, and I caught a sudden image from her, of Gull Crag. She looked about sixteen but I guessed that she was younger. She was quite tall, and well-built.

'My daughter.' This from Hera Piggott, without pride. In fact, with ill-concealed antipathy. Jealousy, perhaps.

'Jim Blantyre,' announced the dark-haired gigolo climbing out from the back, assisting his wife ('Joyce,' he supplied) with exaggerated chivalry. Joyce looked mousey and downtrodden, the antithesis of Hera.

I immediately assumed that Jim and Hera were in the throes of something sordid, and that Piggy and Joyce hadn't got the guts to do anything about it. After ten years at the inn I could sum newly-arrived guests up pretty quickly, mental barriers or not.

Introductions over, I was assailed by a jocular yet insistent joint image of four bodies lying in cool baths, drinking cocktails. The fifth person, Mandy, was guarded, or maybe drowned out.

I only possessed one bath, and was not much good at mixing cocktails, but I didn't let on. They would find out.

'Come in ... I'll show you to your rooms.' They clattered after me and milled around the bar emitting drink images. I ignored them obtusely, concentrating on the idea of getting them to their rooms and bringing the luggage in. 'Get everything sorted out first, then a nice quiet drink,' I intimated, giving it an intonation of logic and sensibility. They agreed, reluctantly I thought, and I led the way, showed them two doubles and a single, and

went down for the luggage.

There was a hell of a lot of it, and in each double room a divergence of opinion as to where it should be placed. 'Over there.' 'No, dear. On the bed, so that we can unpack. No. The other bed, it's nearer the chest of drawers.' Etcetera.

'Just stick it anywhere.' This was the single, Mandy, and the last suitcase. 'I never bring much. Then I don't get this problem of not knowing which dress to wear. It worries Mummy to death, the dress situation on holiday. I've been with her sometimes, we've been just sitting down conversing with Uncle Jim (an odd underlying image of faint revulsion) and all the time I can tell that, underneath it all, she's wondering if she's got the right dress on. I keep catching pictures of her, considering herself wearing something different. I decided a long time ago that I would never get like that.' She smiled. She was very self-possessed.

It was a pleasure to communicate with her. The word images were beautifully clear and direct, with the sense behind them conveyed in a fluid progression.

She was pretty, too, with short hair in the current fashion, and wide brown eyes in an oval face. A nice wide mouth with faint dimples at the corners. I just caught myself in time, as unguardedly I wondered what it would be like to kiss her. For God's sake, I was getting a bit old for that sort of thing, and she was only a kid.

'How old are you, Mandy?' I asked.

She chuckled, and flashed a row of numbers at me, big and in old-fashioned script. 21, 20, 19, 18 ... 17 ... pausing longer on each numeral, waiting to catch a response from me that I believed her, so that she could stop. I helped her out, and the 17 wavered and disappeared, without being replaced.

'Seventeen,' I repeated, privately doing a little more subtraction. 'I'd better go and mix those cocktails.'

'See you in a minute,' she replied, by means of an image of herself coming down the stairs in brief black shorts and a white shirt. I got the impression that she was angling for approval. I grinned and left, without comment.

The drinks revived the guests and the atmosphere became more pleasant as they sat at the bar asking me about the locality. They were surprised when I told them I had been at the inn for ten years.

'Don't you find it dull in the winter?' Hera's question was embroidered by a snowy landscape, with deep drifts against the inn door and footprints conspicuously absent from the road to the village.

I smiled, and gave her the bar at night, the local customers all present, the open fire burning merrily in the grate, reflecting flickering highlights on the glasses.

'Yes, but nothing can ever *happen* here.' An image of a gay party with people bursting bright balloons, and Hera herself the centre of attraction. Outside, a busy street; above, a milling cloud of helicarcs.

I tried to explain how I disliked the city; the smells, the crowds, the pressure of just keeping up. How I had lived like that for twenty years, and how glad I was that I had got out of it.

But, as always, I let out the real reason. I don't like to be thought a freak ...

Mandy had finished her bath, she had dressed, she was coming down. I was surprised that I could detect her, at

that distance. I scanned the others briefly, but they were intent on discussing some party they had attended the night before. Piggy's thoughts were accompanied by a sensation of nausea. The drink had disagreed with him, he was explaining. Someone must have tampered with it. Jim was grinning broadly, recollecting Piggy flat on his back while the dancers revolved around his prone form.

Mandy appeared at the top of the stairs, paused for effect, and began to descend. She was wearing, of course, the black shorts and white shirt, and I must admit that she looked delectable. Her legs were long and slim, and I noticed Hera gave her own skirt an involuntary jerk, to conceal thighs which were running to fat.

'You've been long enough. We all want a bath, you know. You might have some consideration for the rest of us, young madam,' was Hera's acid comment.

Mandy didn't reply to that; she was conveying the idea of going out for a walk, but she winked at me and I caught a faint image of Gull Crag and the open sea; then she looked at Jim, and the sea grew fierce, and Gull Crag was crumbling, sinking.

That night, after the locals had all stumbled back home and the bar was quiet, we sat around conversing in desultory fashion while Hera and Jim, in particular, got in their quota of drinks following the dry drive from the city.

They told me something about themselves; it appeared that Piggy and Jim were business partners, although the exact nature of the business was not specified. I did, however, get the impression that it was one of those enterprises where you took chances in order to make money fast.

Hera and Piggy had been married for five years, the second marriage for each of them. Mandy was Hera's child by her first husband. While Hera was describing the set-up to me I was aware, surprisingly, of a strong bond of mutual respect and affection between Mandy and her stepfather.

Joyce, I fancied, was rather older than Jim. They, too, had been married for about five years, but there were no children. Joyce was unhappy about this and I observed a sad little half-concealed image of herself hanging a row of small clothes on a washing-line.

Jim didn't want kids that much was clear. Actually, it was apparent that he wanted Hera, but he made a token effort to conceal the fact. From the general set-up I deduced that he had married Joyce for her money and was regretting it, but was stuck with her because ... I suppose because Joyce held the majority shareholding in the business.

Mandy's thoughts were well guarded as she sat a little apart from the others, frowning from time to time at fleeting notions I couldn't catch, and not joining in the general exchanges. She had been for a long walk after dinner, by herself, while the others washed down their food with cocktails. She was sipping a mineral water, glancing at us every now and then, but mainly gazing into her glass.

'Time you were in bed, Mandy.' Hera caught her eye.

Mandy didn't receive; she was lost in some private reverie, looking through Hera rather than at her.

'Damn kid.' Hera increased her power. 'She's been

nothing but a bloody nuisance all day, moping around. For God's sake have a decent drink, and enjoy yourself.'

Mandy remained enigmatic, her gaze shifting to her stepfather.

As the days went by the weather grew more humid and the disposition of the guests more irritable. Each of them, hot and uncomfortable, seemed to get on the others' nerves, and even the guessed-at affair between Hera and Jim was wearing a little thin.

By the fourth day they were too exhausted to do anything in the afternoon, and just lay on air-beds on the lawn at the side of the inn, while I trotted to and fro with an endless succession of drinks, tempering my irritation with the thought that I was making a fortune out of them, I don't think that thought occurred to them; I took pains to conceal it, for fear they would suddenly realize that the weather was doing me a good turn, and switch to iced water out of cussedness.

Mandy was not there; she had disappeared immediately after lunch on one of her private expeditions. I missed her. I had not seen a lot of her, but I found her easy to get on with, and her presence made the others bearable. But even she, the last two days, had grown quieter as the weather grew hotter, and her thoughts had tended to be well guarded. My first impression that she was an open, frank sort of kid had undergone a gradual revision. There were depths to Mandy.

As I handed Hera her umpteenth drink she directed an image of the sky at me. 'Looks like thunder,' she remarked, the words large with relief and a strange anticipation. 'It might clear the air a bit,' she added, enigmatically.

Piggy looked, if anything, more morose than ever. His white, slug-like body was tinted an angry red, and it looked as though he had a nasty case of sunburn due. Why he didn't cover himself up God knows, unless he had the pathetic notion that his wife would be attracted by the sight of his portly form, its nudity mercifully cut short by massive flowered beach trunks.

Jim's body was already tanned; he was the type that was always brown. He glanced at the huge anvil cumulus spreading from the horizon and smiled, and something passed between him and Hera so quickly and intimately that I couldn't catch it.

Mandy was here. She stepped from the lane and walked across the grass towards us, looking extremely hot and flushed, her white shirt sticking to her body and outlining her young breasts. She caught me looking at her, and suddenly there seemed to be all the knowledge of womanhood in her brown eyes. Then she regarded the supine group of drinkers.

'Piggy!' A bright, affectionate word of exclamation. She was staring at her stepfather, not needing to convey further words as she projected a vivid picture of a scarlet, half-cooked lobster feebly waving pincers in its death throes. 'Get dressed! You'll be in agony by tonight!'

Piggy rose to his feet obediently and she led him indoors, conveying a sadistic impression of sticky lotion and agonizingly cold hands.

The remaining three called for more drinks and Joyce shifted her position so that she was now sitting, bolt upright in her shaded deckchair, directly between Hera and Jim. Her mousey hair was lank with sweat and she

glanced at the gathering thunderclouds worriedly, abstractedly.

The storm broke during dinner. I had given them salad, as nobody could face the thought of a hot meal, and I was clearing away the plates in preparation for the ice-cream which was to follow, when the early twilight outside was ionized by a vivid flash of lightning. Rain began immediately to fall, in torrents, streaming down the window.

Communication, which had steadily been getting more difficult, was now well-nigh impossible in the heavy electrical atmosphere. I had to bend close to Mandy to catch her request—'Chocolate ice for me, please. And I think you are very nice.' I looked up at the others, I was startled and ridiculously guilt-ridden; but they had noticed nothing. You couldn't even communicate across the table, in this storm. Hera and Jim's eyes met and Hera passed her tongue across her lips, looking oddly excited.

Conversation had now been blanked out completely and the rest of the meal was conducted in mental silence. I've never known a storm like it, before or since, when I felt so totally cut off from humanity and social intercourse. Yet at least two of the guests were enjoying it, judging by the secret smile on Hera's lips, and Jim's intent gaze.

They had finished. Mandy's coffee cup clattered to its saucer for the last time; her hand was trembling slightly. Hera and Jim had been watching her, willing the last mouthful down, and now they rose abruptly, followed with less alacrity by Joyce and Piggy and, finally, Mandy. They filed out of the room.

I cleared away the cups and left them in the kitchen. I could wash up later. Surprisingly, I found the others in the bar, waiting for me. I had half-expected that they would be going out, braving the rain for a night on the town. Hera slipped off her stool as I entered, and came close.

'Scotch, please. Make it a double.' She was emitting at full power. 'And the same again, three times. And one lemonade.' I tried to reach the others as they sat just two or three metres away, but it was like ... it was like a winter afternoon when a fog is blowing in off the sea, and as you look from the bar window at where Gull Crag rises above the cliff-top you think you can see it ... there is a dark shape beyond the mist ... or is it imagination? In that swirling mist you can't tell whether visibility is fifty metres or five.

So it was that evening, as the lightning flickered outside and the atmosphere lay thick with static. That evening I didn't know whether I was receiving Mandy's light, direct shapes, or the grey anonymous thought-forms of Joyce. Or whether I was receiving anything at all, apart from the almost painful lightning emissions and the general, crackling electrical fog.

Hera turned, looked out at the storm. It was going to be quite a show, when night came. At present, in the half-light, the edge of the cliff was just visible, and Gull Crag a dim finger behind a curtain of driving rain.

'I beg your pardon?' I had half-received a question from Hera. I leaned forward.

'I said ... It gets boring, when you can't communicate. Can't go out in this, either.'

The damned woman seemed to hold me responsible for the weather. She was looking at me expectantly, as

though I was an entertainments man about to organize indoor games, but who still had half a cigarette left.

Then she pointed at the Sensitter behind the bar. I obediently twisted the knob. I don't normally put it on during opening hours because it interferes with conversation, but if she wanted it ... Anything to keep her happy.

I turned the volume to full and my mind was immediately filled with the melodious music of a large dance orchestra. The power was considerable, battling valiantly with the electrical storm. It's a continuous tape, actually. I rather like dance music; it keeps me going while I'm cleaning out the bar in the mornings. The Sensitter has a coupled Lumibeat as well; it's an expensive model. I turned this on also, and the coloured lights flashed out, illuminating the room with rhythmic pulses, *one two three one two three red blue white red blue white*, in time to the music. Suddenly, the bar looked quite gay.

The guests had brightened and Hera was tapping her fingers on the counter, beating time. If the music was partly blanketed out, even at full volume, at least the lights were getting through.

'Shall we dance?' Hera had risen from her seat and was standing before Jim, hands extended. Jim levered himself out of his chair and stood up, taking her around the waist. They began to waltz slowly, and quite well.

Piggy was watching them miserably, eyes pale in sweaty red face. He looked the type that didn't dance very well. Anyhow, it would have been agony for him to have Hera's long nails digging into his sunburned back. He looked tentatively at Joyce, then Mandy, then thought better of it, his eyes returning to Hera and Jim.

'Would you like to dance with me, Jack?' It was Mandy, on her feet at the bar, confidently lifting the access flap to allow me through to the room. She took hold of me firmly but chastely, and we began to dance. She was light in my arms, and somehow cool and comfortable, an oasis in the oppressive heat of the room. I was beginning to enjoy myself. She was smiling, her thoughts well guarded, and as we turned I saw Piggy smiling too, watching her fondly.

Then, suddenly, it happened.

First I caught an outraged flash from Mandy; raw, unguarded and bitter.

Then, as we turned, myself startled and wondering what the hell caused her outburst, I brushed against Hera and Jim, dancing oblivious to anybody else, heads close together.

Gossamer, obscene threads of thought stroked my mind.

They grew stronger, then faded into static. Grew stronger again, pulsing.

God, it was revolting. There were these two, in full view of everyone else including a young girl, taking advantage of the weather conditions to indulge in the most outrageous form of mental adultery one could conceive. As I moved Mandy away, hastily, I was pursued by images of naked flesh and rhythmic pulses all overlaid by a sense of sniggering dirtiness and private, triumphant delight. I reckon myself to be pretty broadminded and I've come across some pretty queer circumstances during my years at the inn, but this ... It was unbelievable.

'I don't think I want to dance any more, thank you.' A very small voice in my head. I released her and she sat

down, white-faced, not meeting my eyes.

And Hera and Jim danced on and on, lost in their private world of lust, brazenly serene in the knowledge that no one could *know* what was going on, if they even suspected ... I'll bet they had planned this in advance when they saw that the storm was imminent, and they thought that this would be the only chance they would get, for a week or two ...

At last they sat down. Mandy relaxed slightly, her expression one of relief and then compassion, as at last she was able to meet her stepfather's eyes. Something passed between them, without thought, conveyed by the eyes alone. I wondered if he had guessed. He looked a bit sick.

He rose to his feet and approached me. 'I think I'll get to bed,' he remarked faintly. 'Feeling a bit sore. Sunburn. Goodnight.' He went upstairs.

Mandy was furious. I could read the thoughts on her face as she watched her stepfather's retreating back. I must say, I considered his attitude a little weak. He must have suspected something, if only from the look on Hera's face as she danced, but somehow he didn't feel up to a showdown. Perhaps it does seem a little silly to punch a man on the nose because of his thoughts, when he is dancing with your wife; particularly when you don't know what those thoughts are. In any case, it takes two ...

They were dancing again and now, with Piggy gone and Joyce apparently asleep in her chair, they were even less guarded, their emissions so strong that I'd swear that from where I was standing I caught a shape or two from Hera, above the static ...

Mandy was watching, her eyes unfathomable. Her last drink had been a scotch; the glass now hung empty in her hand. She moved in her chair restlessly, watching ...

Jim's lips were parted in a fierce grin, Hera's face was ecstatic.

It was a continuous tape. My God, this could go on all night. I'd never get another customer tonight, not in this weather. It was still just light, the rain sheeting down. I ought to turn the music off.

Time passed.

Mandy had gone, her chair was empty. She must have slipped up to see Piggy while I was watching Jim and Hera ...

Piggy was coming downstairs. I caught an image from him as he passed. He was going to break the party up. He had plucked up courage. Things had gone far enough.

I supposed that Mandy had told him what was going on.

He tapped Jim on the shoulder and, as Jim turned and released Hera—and as I expected him to drop Jim with a right—

He took Hera around the waist and began to dance with her clumsily. Hera hardly broke step, looking comically surprised. Jim sat down rather abruptly and watched them as they circled the small space in the centre of the room. Conflicting emotions flitted across his face; he was regarding Piggy with a look of respect, almost, although Piggy dancing with Hera was not an impressive sight. She overtopped him by an inch, at least. They danced for quite a time, but I don't think their thoughts were on their steps.

The colossal anticlimax left me feeling curiously disappointed.

Eventually Piggy led Hera to her seat, then approached the bar. 'Where's Mandy?' he inquired strongly.

'I don't know,' I replied. 'I assumed she was with you.'

'I haven't seen her. She's not in her room; I looked before I came down ... Hera!' The image cut through the static like a knife. 'Have you seen Mandy?'

A faint, abashed negative. I wondered exactly what had passed between them, during their dance.

'How long is it since you saw her?'

'An hour, perhaps. I don't know. She's old enough to look after herself.'

'Damn it, Hera, she's only fourteen. What the hell's been going on down here? Why has she gone out, on a night like this? It's pitch black outside. She could have fallen over the cliff!' They had gathered around him at the bar in growing alarm. He was surprisingly dominating the group; his concern for Mandy and their guilt in allowing her to go out causing a shift in the usual relationship.

'We'd better start looking for her.' This was Joyce, backing him up while Hera and Jim vacillated. 'I'll get the waterproofs. Jack, have you got some torches?'

Within minutes we were outside in the night, the driving rain silver streaks in the torchlight, the landscape spasmodically bleached by lightning.

'MANDY!' Piggy projected at full strength, but it was only a whisper against the storm.

'You'll never get through to her, not in this.' Joyce was impatient. 'We'll just have to start looking. Come on. She might be lying hurt somewhere.'

So we separated. Piggy and Hera hurried down to the village; I took the lane inland while Jim and Joyce searched the cliff-top and the immediate surroundings. Despite the waterproof cape I was soaked within minutes, rain was trickling down my neck and my trouser legs were sticking to me, clammy and unpleasant. I walked for half an hour as prearranged, then turned and went back. I met the others at the cliff-top. Nobody had seen any sign of Mandy.

Piggy was playing his torch beam along the edge of the cliff. 'Do you suppose ...' He tried to cut himself off but I received, faint through the static, the image of a falling figure.

'Don't be damned silly.' Hera was edgy.

'It was light when she started out ... Maybe she just misjudged the time.' A puerile suggestion from Jim.

'And *when* we find her, *if* we find her—' Piggy's thought-shapes were suddenly steel-hard, bitter—I'm going to have something to say to you, Hera. There's a few things I'd like to get straight.'

'I really don't know what you're talking about,' replied Hera nervously. 'She only went out for a walk. She's been acting strangely all day.' Then, with a flash of the old Hera, 'I'm going to have a word with *her*, when she gets back. Frightening us all like this.'

'You shut up,' retorted Piggy roughly. 'MANDY!' He tried again, at full strength.

Crackling silence, as we all strained our senses.

No reply. The rain pelted down, we shuffled around uncertainly, wondering what to do next.

Then ...

Then suddenly I knew where she was.

With the others following, not really believing, I led the way a few metres along the edge of the cliff. 'Wait

here,' I instructed them. 'And give me plenty of light. Shine the torches on me as I climb across, then I'll have to go around the other side, where it's easier. Remember, I won't be able to get through to you, once I'm over there.' And I played my torch across the gap, at the scarred, crumbling face of Gull Crag.

I lowered myself over the cliff-edge and began to climb down to the shale bridge.

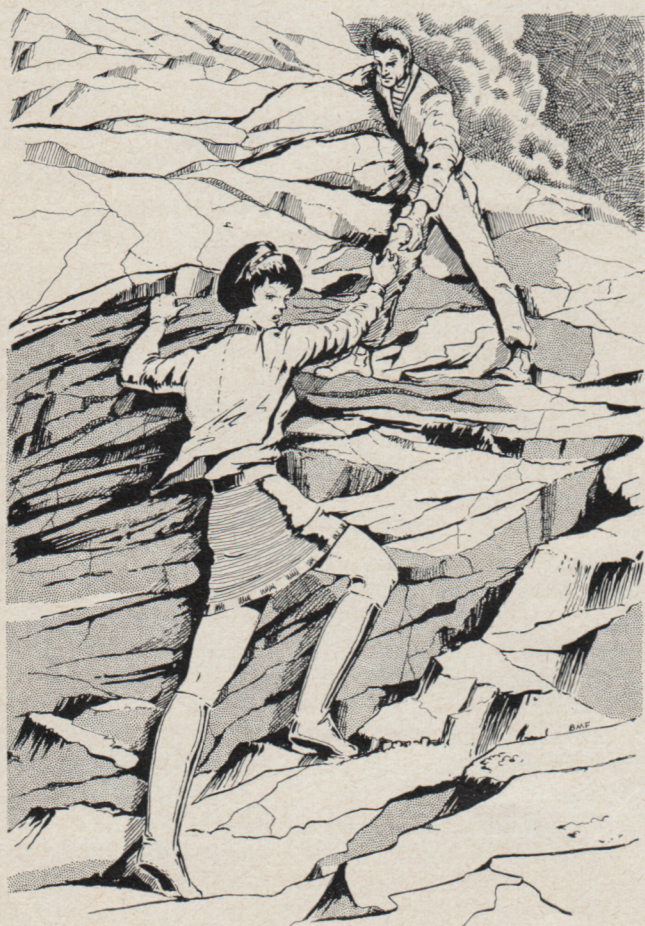
I was glad I couldn't see the waves below. I held the torch in my teeth as I crawled across the bridge on all fours. The torches from above played about me as I went, lighting up broken rock, disappearing off the edge into a frightening void, swinging back to illuminate the way ahead.

I reached Gull Crag. Taking the torch in my hand, edging round beyond the view of the others, I began to climb.

The rain was lighter, now; it was pitch dark with the sudden brilliance of lightning flashes in sharp contrast, outlining the rock face with magnesium clarity. I remembered, uncomfortably, an image I had caught from Mandy a few days ago. Of Gull Crag, toppling into the sea. I tried not to think about it but I flinched at every flash, wondering where it would strike. The sea moved restlessly below and the jagged, gritty rock was very slippery. Sometimes I needed both hands to climb, then I had to slip the torch between my teeth, and go by memory.

As I climbed I muttered to myself. I think I was repeating her name. I had to concentrate on something; I am scared witless by heights. I muttered, scrambling on.

Soon, I pulled myself up on to a wide ledge, and the lightning blazed yet again, and I saw a small, frightened face...



She lay on her bed at the inn and we all stood around, so damned glad to see her eyes open, forgetting the irritations and stupidities of the day in our relief that she was unharmed.

'Sorry,' she apologized. 'I must have passed out.' So she had, stone cold, immediately we had reached the safety of the cliff-top. 'Thanks, Jack,' she continued. 'It was very silly of me, getting stuck.'

'What on earth possessed you to wander off like that?' Irritation was replacing concern in Hera's emissions, now that it was apparent that things were back to normal.

'Oh ... I don't know. I got bored, I suppose. The rain had eased off for a bit and ... I didn't like it in the bar very much. I decided to go for a climb, that's all. And I got stuck.'

I thought Hera was going to make a further comment, but she didn't. The colour had returned to Mandy's cheeks, she looked fresh and well. The recuperative powers of youth. Myself, I needed another scotch and a night's sleep.

Hera had switched her attention to me. 'How the hell did you know she was up there?' A blustering question, not quite concealing an underlying deep gratitude. 'I reckon my senses are pretty keen, but I couldn't pick her up, not in those conditions. You must receive like a deep-space radio.'

'Oh, I don't know,' I answered modestly. 'I'm not *that* sharp. It was a trick of the surroundings. Something to do with where I was standing in relation to Mandy. The cleft in the rock where she was lying must have amplified her emissions and directed them at me. You get some funny effects, in a thunderstorm.'

Let them think that. It's easier than trying to explain.

An awkward silence followed, the sort you get in a hospital during visiting hours. We stood around, looking at her, and she shifted uncomfortably under the sheets, then suddenly her eyelids fluttered shut, and her breathing became deep and regular. She was asleep.

We shuffled around for a bit, tucking her in and getting in one another's way, then we left her, Hera closing the door quietly after a last look. She smiled uncertainly at Piggy, who grinned back, briefly. The original intention of having a damned good row seemed, somehow, to have been shelved.

'Come on, Jim.' Joyce took her husband's arm. 'We must get to bed. We want to make an early start, tomorrow.'

'You're leaving in the morning?' I asked, surprised.

'Yes. We all had a little chat, and Jim and I have decided to move on down the coast for a few days. I don't think it's a good idea for us all to be together too much, seeing the same faces on holiday as we see for the rest of the year. Don't you agree?'

Jim grinned, sheepishly.

They went to their room, actually holding hands.

My God, I thought, there's nothing like a bit of a crisis to bring people to their senses.

And now the whirling dust trail was close, and I could hear the whine of the turbine, and presently the small sports model rounded the corner, pulled off the road and ran across the grass towards me. The engine died and the car sank down, settled, a few yards away.

She stepped out and I took both her hands in mine.

She was just a little taller, and her dark hair longer. On sensivision, I thought, you always get this cliché. Girls grow up, and suddenly become sophisticated. But it doesn't apply to her. She could never be sophisticated. She is just ... very lovely.

She smiled, and suddenly I kissed her briefly and impulsively; then we stood apart, both rather taken aback.

'Is this the way you usually greet your new kitchen staff?' she asked, in the clear shapes I remembered so well. 'No wonder you have difficulty getting help in the summer. You scare them off as soon as they arrive.' She grinned. 'I don't think Mummy would have let me come alone, if she'd known you were going to behave like this.'

'I expect your mother's glad to get rid of you for a couple of months,' I observed. 'Anyway, I'd glad to see you, Mandy. It's very good of you to give up your holiday to come and help me out.'

'Oh, yes.' She gave me a sidelong look. 'Actually, I'm not giving up my holiday. I left school a week ago, for good. You might say I'm starting work.'

'Oh.' A formless exclamation escaped me, full of personal implications. I thought, I'm not all that damned old. Thirty-seven ... is that old? It's just that Mandy is so young ... But she has come back. She *knows* about me; I had to tell her, that night on Gull Crag; and yet she has come back ... Oh, what the hell. 'So you don't ... er ... have to go home, necessarily, at the end of the summer.'

'No.' Again the sidelong look, and mischievous grin. She looked around, taking in the sea, the cliffs, the

village, the inn, Gull Crag. 'It doesn't change, does it? I can see why you don't like the cities. It's so peaceful here ...'

That's it, of course. That's it exactly. It's difficult, but can you imagine how the cities appear, to someone like me?

The roar of the spacebound rockets, the incessant chatter of the helicar; the grinding, crunching, exploding din of earth-shifting equipment, the whining ultrasonics of the turbine-borne traffic?

You can't imagine it, I know.

Back in the twentieth-century they would have known what I was talking about, before the coming of telepathy, which rendered the sense of hearing unnecessary. A now obsolete sense which was nevertheless a constant source of pain, because of the unbearable clangour of everyday life. Until gradually, mercifully, that sense was lost ...

No, you can't imagine it because, like everybody else except me, you can't *hear*.

Am I a freak, a throwback?

If I am; whatever I am, I thank God for it. Because it was this primitive sense which led me to Mandy when she was driven to climb Gull Crag by impulses she was possibly too young to understand. And she got herself trapped on that ledge in the electrical storm, and she gave vent to her fear in a very basic, primitive way, and nobody else could get through to her, nobody else knew where she was, the static was drowning everything out ...

But I could hear her screaming ...

CONSUMER REPORT

Lee Harding

Modern scientific thought tends more and more to the belief that the universe around us teems with other solar systems, other planets. Therefore we might reasonably expect to find alien life, granted that mankind is able to explore the universe in time to come. Or that alien life might one day discover us. Either way, we could be in for a few surprises...

The journey was accomplished with remarkable ease.

Once clear of the perimeter of the galaxy the master drives were activated and made ready for the plunge into space-three. Final reports were prepared and sent scurrying Homewards. Control of the fleet was passed over to the Cybers. We retired apprehensively to our pods. I felt a faint prickle in my head as my senses were deactivated—nothing else. I was thereafter conscious only of an all pervading darkness, and a faint stirring upon the threshold of awareness afterwards identifiable as the fluttering pulse of life.

There was no sensation of the passing of time. We waited in our protective darkness while the fleet ripped asunder the fabric of space-two and propelled us at an incredible velocity through a nightmare universe. Safe and secure in our pods, protected from the mind-wrenching non-reality of space-three, we journeyed soundlessly, mindlessly.

The fading tingle in my mind brought with it a first reaction: gratitude.

We had successfully penetrated, traversed an impossible gulf of space, and re-emerged into normal space-time again. For that there was a great deal to be thankful for.

I thanked the Engineers who had made the Fleet possible. Those who had built the ships. And the Cybers for guiding us safely through the chaos of space-three where biological minds would have disintegrated.

The lights came on. The pod swung open. I breathed the canned air of the ship again. And when I moved my body breasted the currents of familiar space-time.

I went straight to the bridge.

How shall I ever forget the splendour of an alien galaxy unwinding across the dark splash of space ahead of us? I saw it stretching before me like a great silver jewel, indolent arms trailing carelessly across our path, single stars strewn this way and that. The great giant of a universe collapsing towards a central nucleus of white hot incandescence.

This, our prize.

To have voyaged where none had ever been before, across an ocean more vast than the mind could imagine, to reach *this*.

To have brought the Cosmic All so far from Home, to the very doorstep of another universe, filled me with awe. I knelt before the viewscreen and meditated the transcendence of what we had done.

Later, my officers joined me. Together we contemplated the vision before us.

For some time. And in silence. The fleet hung poised like a hungry shoal of fish. Then:

'It is done.'

My words broke the long silence.

The verbal compliment to the intense emotions burning between us.

Reger handed me the reports from the other ships. I scanned them eagerly. The crossing had been accomplished without physical damage to any of the crew. The Cybers were functioning perfectly. All parts hummed expectantly and ready and willing to perform work far in excess of what had already been done.

The Engineers had every reason to be proud.

Thus: the justification of centuries of toil and sacrifice. That a dream might one day be fulfilled.

'Find us a world,' I asked the central Cyber, 'somewhere along the perimeter. Where we may land. And make our Mark with due ceremony and give thanks to the Cosmic All.'

My officers moved off to return to their respective duties. I remained on the bridge for all of the long, wearying approach towards the nearest trailing arm of the great galaxy.

To have bridged the awesome gulf separating two island universes in an amount of time negligible by our



standards of measurement and now to have to proceed at an interminably cautious speed on our secondary drives seemed an anticlimax. Yet there was time. Time for us each to think up the enormity of our accomplishment. And what lay ahead.

The fleet pressed on. Great waves of invisible detection apparatus probing ahead of us. Searching nimbly for a suitable world upon which to make our first, important planetfall. As time passed I allowed my mind to drift idly down the millennia of recorded history, sifting and absorbing all that was great and grand in our people. I sensed the pride and the glory that had made us masters of a galaxy. I saw worlds born and die under alien tyranny, and one race born to rule them all and bring peace to creation.

My people. Lords of a universe once big enough to contain everything. Like all that lives and breathes but part of the All, yet somehow destined to be the catalyst that would weld a galaxy together.

Was it possible, I wondered, that there had once been a time when one universe had been sufficient? Enough to cower the most grandiose mind?

Strange. The inevitability of progression. And how awesome distances diminish under the assault of time. Boundaries that had once seemed infinite suddenly became very definitely finite. We stood upon the edges of a conquered galaxy and stared out at the great night separating us from the other island universes. Crowding the night sky like great silver fish.

How long had we faced that gulf?

How many times had Home spun upon its axis before we had dared challenge the staggering distance that shut us off from the rest of creation?

Eons.

But what did it matter? The important thing was that we had finally achieved the impossible. We had *arrived*.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

The fleet coasted in through the shoals of suns that made up the nearest outflung arm of the spiral galaxy.

Nothing here to warm our hearts.

Worlds dead and dim, the aged off-spring of the titanic birth that had torn asunder space-time to create the gigantic system.

Planets circling like shrivelled fruits sucked dry of their juices. Black cinders moving uncaringly around the rich glow of their parent suns.

The Cybers confirmed my suspicions.

'There is no life out here,' I informed the crew. 'We must go further in.'

This was a disappointment. As sparsely populated as was the perimeter of our own galaxy, there were a goodly number of healthy planets. Yet why had we assumed a similar proportion here on this alien universe?

It could be much older than our own. In which case we would have to move much closer towards the centre before we would find a likely planetfall.

The long wait was wearying. Yet there was no alternative.

I directed the Cybers to take the fleet on a brief plunge through space-two. That way we would omit unnecessary delay.

We returned to our pods and descended into darkness.

The fleet lurched and plunged momentarily into that

other space.

The pod swung open.

I went to the bridge and interrogated the Cyber.

There is no change, the machine informed. The detectors are stretched to their utmost. A further jump is desirable?

No.

There was no point in postponing a landing any longer. There was much exploring to be done. It would be better to get the business over and done with here, amongst the dead, outlying systems. Then we could devote all of our available time to the study of the richer inner systems.

I stared at the facia overlaying the Bridge extension of the intricate inter-ship Cyber.

'Find me the most suitable world from those around us,' I directed. 'It is only necessary that it should support our landing party.'

We could conduct a second ceremony on a planet further in. Then we could take our time. For a relaxation of the All it was necessary that ceremony be done.

The probing fingers of the Cyber's detectors selected, weighed and approved for us a planet. While the fleet hovered overhead I let the flagship descend to the alien soil.

Soil was a misnomer. The world was nothing more than a blackened cinder stripped of its natural wealth. Only hard, bitter rocks greeted our tentative feet.

I wondered just how old this galaxy was. And whether we would find civilizations in advance of our own or stagnant and regressive.

An intriguing prospect.

But formalities must be done. I laid claim to admission into this universe by virtue of the All. Took note of the formations overhead and cast a time.

We meditated what we had done while the dead planet wheeled drunkenly around a wan, orange sun.

Our mission accomplished we returned to our ship. And to the fleet. Poised once more against the galactic night there were re-decisions to be made.

Item: we had expected to have Encountered well within the limits of the Rim.

Unsuccessful.

Item: We had wrongly presupposed a galaxy as densely populated as our own.

Error of reasoning.

Presumptive.

I discussed my new theories, concerning the age of the galaxy we were now in, with Reger.

'This means that we shall have to penetrate much deeper than we had intended,' I pointed out. 'Perhaps even to the very centre of the galaxy.'

This put us in an uneasy situation. Our original orders were to make a Contact, after which we were to make a quick survey of the galaxy and then return Home so that the ears of our own universe might hear of our momentous journey. After which another expedition would be mounted.

I had no wish to return at this juncture. Yet further delay would only increase the apprehension of those waiting at Home.

But: I could not, I *would* not return with a bunch of withered planets as my only prize.

I gave the order to advance.

The Cybers took over. Divided the galaxy into sectors and apportioned a ship to each.

Eight sectors.

We would proceed by means of a succession of jumps through space-two, with regular scanning and correlating periods in between. Detectors would be given maximum spread. They would sweep parsecs ahead in search of life. Not even the microscopic forms would escape the hungry eyes of our scanners.

Now there was nothing we could do but retire to our pods, until such time as the Cybers roused us with news of a Contact.

This time when the Pods released us there was news awaiting us all.

I stood impatiently upon the bridge while the Cyber placed the facts before me. The correlation of all data obtained by the burrowing ships of the fleet.

We consider it necessary, the machine spoke, that you be acquainted with the facts as they are before further penetration is attempted.

Instantly, an image was projected into my mind.

A third of the galaxy penetrated. Our resources strained to the utmost. And with this result;

We were burrowing our way through a graveyard. A great celestial boneyard. Devoid of life. Worlds shrunk and blackened caricatures of what they once might have been. Uncomprehending suns burning as brightly as if they were surrounded by their retinue of attendant worlds in the fresh spring of life.

No flicker disturbed the dead swathe of the life detectors. No ripple of renegade thought disturbed the wavebands of this universe.

The vision of a dead galaxy was overpowering.

Had we come so far only to find *this*?

The idea was appalling. That a universe was as mortal as we. That worlds might sunder and die and their fiery fathers continue on unaware of their demise. That biological life was an unnecessary and easily dispensed with accumulation upon the substance of space-time.

My people. My proud and mighty nation. And all that moved and breathed: fermentation upon the carapace of the All?

Staggering concepts rioted through my head. A dizzying spectacle of the presumptuous biped wheeling blindly towards a destiny that...

I pulled myself together.

There must be an explanation.

A disaster.

Of proportions inconceivable to our humble minds.

'The balance of entropy is wrong,' I said, aloud. So that my thoughts would be carried by the Cybers to all corners of the waiting fleet. 'The worlds are dead yet the suns live on. Oblivious to the true position.'

An All unaware of the true state of its being?

Impossible.

And yet:

Presumption again rears an erroneous head. I was assuming a basis of philosophy perhaps incompatible with an alien universe.

Yet still we drifted on through the great graveyard.

I ordered that a detailed analysis be made of every planet within the immediate vicinity of the widely dispersed fleet.

'I suspect a disaster of truly cosmic scale,' I explained.

'We must not overlook anything if we are to solve the riddle of this stricken universe.'

Slowly, sluggishly it seemed, the reports came in. Of slag heaps circling fiery suns. Celestial cinders wheeling inopportunely onwards through the great night.

I stared ahead through the motionless screen. Towards the brilliant white coal of the centre.

Perhaps *there*...

Should we give up so easily? Surely in all the vast spread of the galaxy there remained a faint pulse of life flickering?

I would not, I *could* not accept such crushing defeat. That a billion billion worlds had been deprived of life. That the suns still burned as they had since the beginning of time. That we could only return home with this miserable report.

An entire galaxy. Bowel of our dreams for untold centuries. Dead. Gutted. And inhospitable.

'Penetrate,' I ordered. 'To the ultimate.'

By which I meant to the very centre of the galaxy and out again, to the further Rim.

Two gigantic jumps through space-two.

We would emerge at the galactic hub and see what there was to see. If the results were negative then we would proceed half-way across the remaining portion of the galaxy. If at the end of that...

My mind refused to even consider the prospect.

The first jump would take some time. A great deal of time. Which would be extinguished under the soothing darkness of the pods.

This time, as we made our way to our booths, the terrible weight of despair hung heavily upon our shoulders.

Lights came on with the shrill of alarms.

I ran to the Bridge, where indicators swung every which way and life detectors screamed hysterically.

'What is it? What is it?'

Filters snapped into place across the view-screen to extinguish the overwhelming brilliance of the galactic hub.

The Cybers whirled in confusion.

Gibberish poured into my head.

'Cease transmission!' I cried. And the agony ceased. The machines were left to sort themselves out.

'Reger!'

In a second he was beside me, face pale and excited.

'Whatever have we found?' he cried.

Whatever it was the Cybers took some time to sort it out. But the answer, when it came, was unquestionably: *Life*.

But the pictures would not form.

Angrily, I interrogated the Cybers again.

'What is it? What have you found?'

I ... it is difficult. Confusion here. There is life ... but ...

'Shut off those damned alarms!'

The insane jangling stopped.

Frustration boiled over. I stormed at the machine.

'Find it! Locate it, damn you!'

Had the stresses proved too much for the machines? Were they no longer capable of guiding us successfully?

One moment.

Silence.

A tense air of expectancy hung over the ship. I keyed in the fleet on individual plates. I felt better having them in view.

And then it happened. A sudden shaft of terror drove through the *Cyber*. It pierced my mind in an explosion of intolerable agony.

I stumbled and fell to the floor. With eyes glazed over I watched the destruction of one of the ships.

It seemed to expand, suddenly. And distort out of all perspective. The camera spun wildly as it adjusted the focus to encompass the insanely swelling ship. It grew until it seemed to fill several parsecs.

And disintegrated.

Not exploded.

But ... dispersed. As though it had never existed.

The scream of the *Cyber* rose to a pitch of terror.

What was it, my mind wondered wildly, that could instill terror into a *machine*?

Even as I watched another of the ships began to swell grotesquely.

'Space-two!' I screamed. So that the sound caroomed off the walls and battered against my own skull. '*Space-two!*'

In the midst of its impossible terror, the *Cyber* seemed to hear. And understood.

The screens blurred.

The scream faded.

Sanity returned.

I scrambled unsteadily to my feet. Reger lay against the facia, lips pulled back across his teeth and a look of animal terror frozen upon his face.

I summoned medical orderlies and had him taken away. Then I sat down before the control and tried to get sense out of the *Cybers*.

Communications were opened between ships. The space-two beams appeared to be operating well enough. But the other machines ...

'What happened?' I asked the *Cyber*. 'What *happened*?'

We disturbed ... *something*.

A quivering uncertainty suffused the images.

'You were afraid. You. A *Cyber*. *Why*?'

A confusion of pictures tumbled into my head. I ordered coherence and waited for an explanation to emerge. And when it finally did it was easy to understand the confusion of the machines. And the delay. For they had had to cast an entirely new philosophy before they could interpret what they had found:

A monster.

A beast whose extremities were the farthest arms of the spiral galaxy, whose being slept dormant at the fiery hub, monstrous and out of all proportion to what we were conditioned for.

Who had slept for millennia in incredible hibernation.

Until we had disturbed its slumber.

And awakened the most intense hunger in all creation.

The facts were there for us all to observe. Incredible as it seemed there existed an All without Parts. An All who functioned only to *consume*.

This in opposition to the Cosmic All who wills

addition!

Consider this: from our earliest times we, as a race, have added to the reality into which we were born. It would have been inconceivable for us to have *destroyed* any part of our multiple existence. We created out of ourselves. Added to our reality.

But in this dead universe no such will ever existed. And if my theologians are correct in their reasonings, then this All is *insane*.

How else to describe an entity whose components thrived on the necessity of consuming their reality? Who flooded a galaxy with their drive, consuming everything in their path until there was nothing left to destroy but themselves. And when that was accomplished the All remained free and unencumbered by material parts and continued its ghastly work of destruction. Absorbing and consuming the very minerals of the planets. Only the suns immune to its insatiable lust. A power too intense even for its gruesome purpose.

Incredible. That a race had been born with this one resolve. To take reality, to beat it, twist it, consume it and vomit it forth in this grotesque shape. Until it no longer possessed corporate existence. Until there was no further trace of the material components and only the disincorporate All remained. A wild, insane entity capable only of consuming. And when it had gutted a galaxy (over how many cons?) could only achieve stasis. Somehow rendered itself dormant, and slept.

Until we had awakened it.

And became, in turn, the prey.

The fleet was infinitesimal compared to the material bulk of a galaxy long since dead. But power we possessed—tamed and leashed at the moment—the tremendous power that had warped us across space and time. That was enough to rouse the beast. And, by somehow distending the atomic structure of a ship, was able to enlarge it to incredible proportion before absorption.

But what happened to the energy devoured? Surely it couldn't just ... cease to function?

I thought then of the fiery suns beyond space-two, and wondered wildly if that indeed was the answer. That the monstrous All had consumed the material wealth of the planets and remaindered the subsequent energy to the suns.

The mind gibbered at the prospect of so grotesque a symbiosis.

But for the moment: what were we to do?

The fleet hung deaf, dumb and blind in space-two. The *Cybers* were unreliable. Several had already broken down. We had obtained no fix before our plunge from normal space. We had no idea of our position.

I racked my brains—and the *Cybers*—but there was no other way.

We would have to emerge. *Briefly*. Long enough for the *Cybers* to obtain our position and set course out of the galaxy.

Only a few microseconds.

Either that or remain in space-two forever.

That was not really a choice.

I fear Out There, whispered the *Cyber*. What sort of thing was it that could strike terror into inanimate matter?

'There is no need,' I said. 'We shall emerge. Long enough to obtain a position. That is all.'

A pause.

Very well.

The presence of the Cyber slid from my mind. I sat down by the facia and stared at the screen.

A burst of stars illuminated the grey translucence.

There was a sudden shudder that shot through the length of the ship.

A great cry of terror crashed into my mind.

And I knew that *it* was upon us.

Come from the depths of the galaxy in one gigantic lunge.

A crushing blow of terror seized me.

And then the screen opaqued again.

I stared dully at the featureless grey. My head ached from the sudden transition. With great difficulty I found that I could listen to the Cyber.

Position obtained.

And other information. All in a microsecond.

Another ship destroyed. The beast had obviously been waiting for us to emerge from space-two.

More: that the discorporate All had existed as a dissipated substance spread through the galaxy. Too low an entropy value to be detected by our scanners. Until it had sensed our presence, and contracted its far-flung sentence into one highly mobile nucleus.

Ready to consume.

'Prepare to jump,' I directed, and staggered to my feet.

There was nothing *we* could do against such an adversary. Two ships lost. We had best make Home immediately.

I almost fell into the pod.

The darkness was more welcome than ever. My mind ... forgot. The Cybers made it possible for our bodies to be hurled now at the titanic velocities necessary to negotiate space-two.

Then the lights came on.

I climbed out of the Pod in a state of semi-euphoria. That was the after effects of the drugs shot into me while asleep.

But we were still in space-two!

I stared at the grey murk in the viewscreen. And felt the vibrations of the mighty engines thrumming beneath my feet.

We were moving!

'What is this!' I demanded. 'Why have we been drugged and woken up?'

I stood swaying, unsteadily, feeling space-two reeling

around my head.

I shall never forget the terror-stricken reply of the Cyber.

It is following us!

'Impossible!'

No, the Cyber explained. Quite possible. The beast had broken through into space-two. And was rapidly gaining upon the fleet.

How do you outdistance an All?

I felt sickened. And very tired.

'You know what to do,' I said.

Evasive action.

Still in a drugged semi-stupor I remained on the bridge and watched the fleet dodge in and out of normal space in an effort to confuse and lose the beast.

A hopeless gesture. This was no normal being we were dealing with. And with each step the gap lessened.

If we were not safe in space-two then we had no alternative but to risk breaking through into space-three before we were clear of the galaxy, I know that the Engineers feared for the stability of the Master Drives when operated under stellar influence, but we were in no position to be cautious. Our lives, and the glory of our quest, we endangered.

The Auto-Drives were set. The Masters readied.

We shall soon be plunging into space-three. Surely the beast cannot find us there? But we can't be really sure. Its powers are immense and beyond our power to cope with.

I have made this report and am sending it on ahead at maximum acceleration so that if we do not arrive Home then at least you will have this warning:

Beware of the Dead Galaxy.

We go to our pods...

'The fools,' cried the Emperor. 'Oh, the fools...'

He let the message coil drop from his hand and stared up at where the bald sky had suddenly cracked open and poured turmoil upon the land. The earth shook under the impact of a Beast whose cunning had caught the hint of limitless minerals from the minds of lesser prey, and a hunger that had crossed a billion parsecs of space-three was suddenly sated.

A great wind ripped the face of the planet bare. Great pits were gouged through the crust. A shriek of triumph bore down upon world after world after world...

Very slowly at first, a great, dark stain began spreading throughout the universe.

ARE YOU THERE, MR JONES?

by **STANISLAW LEM**

(translated into English by Peter Roberts)

Stanislaw Lem is a leading Polish sf writer whose works have been widely read in Europe, and translated into seventeen languages. Strangely, he has never been translated into English, and this magazine is proud to introduce his work to English readers.

JUDGE: The next case for the court's attention is that of the Cybernetics Company versus Harry Jones. Are both parties present?

ATTORNEY: Yes, m'lud.

JUDGE: And who are you representing?

ATTORNEY: I'm the Judicial Advisor to the Cybernetics Company, m'lud.

JUDGE: And who is the defendant?

JONES: Here, m'lud.

JUDGE: Could you give me your personal particulars, please?

JONES: Certainly, m'lud. My name is Harry Jones, born 6th of April 1917 in Stockport.

ATTORNEY: There you have the principal question, m'lud. The defendant is lying, since he was never born at all!

JONES: Here's my birth certificate for a start and my brother is in court as well and he...

ATTORNEY: That isn't your birth certificate, nor is that person your brother!

JONES: Whose brother is he then? Yours perhaps?

JUDGE: Please keep silent for a moment, counsellor. Now, Mr. Jones?

JONES: My late father, Lexington Jones—God rest his soul—was the owner of several racing-cars and he gradually instilled in me a love for racing. I first started at the age of seventeen and since then I have taken part in eighty-seven professional races, coming first in sixteen, second in twenty-one, third in...

JUDGE: Thank you, Mr Jones, but these details are irrelevant.

JONES: I've won three cups. Three, mind!

JUDGE: I said, thank you, Mr Jones.

JONES: And a silver wreath!

DONOVAN, THE COMPANY DIRECTOR: Hey, he's stalling!

JONES: Rubbish! I'd never do such a thing!

JUDGE: Silence, please! Have you someone for your defence, Mr Jones?

JONES: No, I haven't. I'm able to defend myself, thank you.

JUDGE: Do you know what claim the Cybernetics Company is laying against you?

JONES: Yes, m'lud, I do, and I feel that I am the victim of a gang of thugs who have been lying in ambush for me, waiting...

JUDGE: Thank you, Mr Jones. Counsellor Jenkins, could you please acquaint the court with the nature of the complaint.

ATTORNEY: Certainly, m'lud. Two years ago the defendant suffered an accident whilst racing in Chicago and lost a leg. Naturally he turned to us to set the matter right. As everyone knows, the Cybernetics Company produces artificial arms and legs, synthetic kidneys, hearts, and other organs. The defendant acquired an artificial leg on a hire-purchase agreement and paid the first instalment. Four weeks later he called on us again, this time to order two arms, a breast-bone, and a new neck.

JONES: Hey, don't exaggerate! I didn't order the neck until the New Year, after the Winter hill-scrambles!

JUDGE: Please refrain from interrupting, Mr Jones.

ATTORNEY: After the delivery of this second consignment, the defendant owed us £1,237. Five months later the defendant's brother came to us on Mr Jones's behalf, since he himself lay in a hospital in London. The firm then delivered more replacement organs after a deposit had been paid. A detailed list of these things is included in the documents which you have before you. Among them is an electronic brain-circuit—'Genius' trademark—replacing half the original and costing £10,000. I should like to call the court's attention to the fact that the defendant ordered the brain to Luxury standards—out of stainless-steel tubes and with an attachment for dreaming in natural colours, a filter for unpleasantness, and a worry-suppressor—although this obviously overstepped his financial means.

JONES: You'd just love to see me suffer, wouldn't you?

JUDGE: I must ask you to remain silent, Mr Jones.

ATTORNEY: The fact that the defendant ordered no ordinary artificial arm from us, but a specially manufactured one with a built-in Swiss Schaffhausen eighteen-jewelled watch, only goes to prove that he acts with malice aforethought and never intended to pay for the parts he had acquired. When the defendant's debt reached £12,764, we demanded the return of all the artificial organs supplied. At that time, however, the court dismissed our complaint on the grounds that their removal would have rendered further life impossible for the debtor, only half a brain remaining of the previous Mr Jones.

JONES: What on Earth do you mean 'previous Mr Jones'? The firm pays you a bonus for insulting me, I suppose! You're nothing but a petty, small-time...

JUDGE: Quiet, please! Mr Jones, if you continue to insult Mr Jenkins, I shall be obliged to impose a fine upon you!

JONES: Me insult Mr Jenkins? Perish the thought! He was insulting me!

ATTORNEY: I really don't know how Mr Jones can stand there and openly scorn our products and mock their quality, when he is obviously guilty and has been furnished from head to toe with organs manufactured by the Cybernetics Company, which, I might add, has bent over backwards to comply with the defendant's every whim. However, none of this prevented him from calling on us again three months later. He complained of every hardship possible and said that he thought it was a result of his old brain not being compatible with its new artificial surroundings. Once more the firm, out of a feeling of humanity, let itself be persuaded and gave way to the

defendants request to make him a complete 'Genius'—in other words to replace his own old portion of brain with a twin-apparatus made by 'Genius'. In payment for this the defendant made out a bill of exchange for £12,134 of which he has paid £98 to date. These facts are of importance to the case in that ... Please, m'lud, the defendant is deliberately preventing me from speaking—He is hissing, twittering and gnashing his teeth, all of which is contriving to drown me out. I request that the court call him to order!

JUDGE: Mr Jones...

JONES: It isn't me, it's the 'Genius'. It always does that when I'm trying to think hard. Why should I take the blame for the Cybernetics Company? The court ought to call Mr Donovan to order instead, to answer for his shoddy workmanship!

ATTORNEY: Because of these facts the firm should have the right to take back what it produced—the collection of artificial organs illegally masquerading as Mr Jones and present in this court-room even now.

JONES: Ye gods! Words fail me ... And if Jones isn't here, where, according to you, is he?

ATTORNEY: The mortal remains of the famous racing-driver Harry Jones lie scattered over various European race-tracks. Should the court decide in our favour, then no human-being will be harmed, since the firm will simply be receiving back what rightfully belongs to it—a collection of plastic and steel pieces!

JONES: That's great! Chop me up into spare-parts!

DONOVAN: It's no concern of yours what we intend doing with our own property!

JUDGE: Mr Donovan, may I ask you, with all due respect, to remain silent.

ATTORNEY: M'lud, I should like to repeat the point at issue—that the defendant can not be a defendant at all, since the object over there is nothing but a mechanical construction which is maintaining that it is its own master. In reality, however, since the defendant is no longer alive...

JONES: Step a little closer, mate, and then perhaps I can convince you whether I'm alive or not!

JUDGE: Yes ... hm, this really is an extremely unusual case. Hmm ... Counsellor, I should like to postpone the question as to whether the defendant is alive or not until the verdict has been given, since it might disturb the normal run of the trial. You may now put your case, Mr Jones.

JONES: M'lud and distinguished counsellors, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, citizens of this fair country; you are today witnessing the shameful and malicious endeavour of a large and powerful organization to destroy a free, thinking individual, created equal...

JUDGE: You're only stating your case, Mr Jones, not haranguing a political meeting!

JONES: Yes, m'lud. The facts are that I have indeed acquired a few artificial organs from the Cybernetics Company...

DONOVAN: A few artificial organs! That's the understatement of the year!

JONES: I demand that this man be called to order, m'lud! ... Right then, these artificial organs: I shan't go into their defects. I won't say how constantly, whether I'm on my feet or sitting down, eating or sleeping, my head keeps humming, so much that my brother made me

move into another room because I kept him awake at night! I will refrain from mentioning how, because of these overprized 'Genius' brains which are nothing more than glorified adding-machines, I have developed an adding mania and have to count railings and cats, poles and pedestrians, and God knows what else! I won't express my feelings on any of those things. In any case I honestly did intend to pay off all my obligations. But I can only earn money if I win races, and I'd had a hard time, I was depressed, lost my head and...

ATTORNEY: There you are, the defendant himself admits to having lost his head! I beg the court to take notice of this.

JONES: Don't interrupt me! I didn't mean it that way at all. I lost my senses, began to speculate on the stock-exchange, lost and went into debt. I felt lousy. Constant pain flowed through my left leg, sparks flew before my eyes, I had idiotic dreams about sewing and knitting-machines. And at this time, weakened and scarcely able to move, the firm first dragged me to court. The newspapers were full of it and as a result of their malicious defamation of my character, the Church, of which I was a member, closed the chapel door in my face.

ATTORNEY: You're complaining about that? Do you perhaps believe in life after death?

JONES: Yes, as a matter of fact I do. How does that concern you?

ATTORNEY: It is my concern, since Mr Harry Jones is already living this life after death and you are therefore nothing more than an usurper!

JONES: What a load of old...

JUDGE: I must ask both parties to remain quiet!

JONES: M'lud, after the firm's first attempt to sue me had fallen through, a crafty sort of character named Goas came round to see me—obviously someone whom Donovan had sent on my heels. At that time, I knew nothing of the events that were to come. This Goas posed as an electrical-repairman and told me there was only one way to get rid of the pains in my leg and the sparks before my eyes, and that was to have the full 'Genius' treatment. With my health in the state it was I could not possibly think of motor-racing. What else could I do? I gave my consent and a few days later Goas brought me into the fabrication department of the Cybernetics...

JUDGE: In other words, they've removed your...

JONES: Exactly.

JUDGE: And replaced it with a new...?

JONES: Precisely; but I never suspected why they agreed to it so willingly and gave me such favourable terms with a long time to pay. Now I know! They wanted to get rid of the last portion of the old me, because the court had previously turned down the firm's claim on the grounds that the remainder of my brain could not exist when it was left on its own. They exploited my naivety and the mental weakness that resulted from my accidents, and sent this chap Goas to make me agree to the removal of that last piece. I walked straight into the spider's web. Luckily this insanity was only temporary! Let me ask the court to consider the firm's arguments; they say that they have the right over my body. With what authority? What if someone buys food from a shop on credit—flour, meat, sugar, and so on—and after a time the shopkeeper goes to court! Should the defendant be handed over to him? After all, it is medically proved that

foodstuffs form the material which makes body-organs and therefore after a few months the whole of the defendant—head, liver, arm and legs—will consist of the eggs, fat, albumen, and carbohydrates which the shopkeeper sold on credit. Is there any court in the world which would recognize the claims of this tradesman? Are we living in the Middle Ages, when Shylock could demand his pound of flesh? The situation here is exactly the same. I'm a racing-driver named Harry Jones and not a machine!

DONOVAN: That's not true. You're just an automaton!

JONES: Uh-huh, then just who is the firm really suing? What address is on the summons? That of a machine or that of Mr Jones, in other words me? Could you please clarify this question, m'lud?

JUDGE: Hmm ... yes, you're right. The summons is addressed to Harry Jones, 12 Orchard Way, London.

JONES: Hear that, Donovan? Will you also permit me, m'lud, to ask a question about court-procedure: Do the laws of this country provide for the legal suing of a machine?

JUDGE: Well ... uh ... no. There is no provision for that in our laws as they stand.

JONES: This then makes the case very simple; either I'm a machine—in which case the trial should not take place, since a machine cannot be sued—or I'm a human-being—in which case the firm cannot make claims on my person. Unless perhaps they want me as a slave! Do you want to become a slave-owner, Mr Donovan?

DONOVAN: Insulting me will not help you! You have to admit that our new parts are efficient, though. Don't you?

JONES: Oh, sure ... ! M'lud, let me tell you of yet another deed which bears witness to the methods which the firm employ; when I first managed to struggle out of hospital, I went on to the beach for some fresh air. I soon noticed that a crowd of people was following me—for, as it turned out, I had had 'Made in the Cybernetics Company' stamped in several places on my back. This had to be removed at my own expense. And now look what they're doing to me! You know, it's true what my mother and father always used to say—a poor man is always relieved of his possessions.

DONOVAN: The Cybernetics Company is your father and mother.

JUDGE: Please be silent, Mr Donovan! Have you

finished, Mr Jones?

JONES: No, I haven't. I should like to emphasize that the firm must support me, since I no longer have any means of livelihood. Since last month the management of the Motor Club has held my entry in all European races as invalid; they say that an 'automatic robot-device' has been sitting at the wheel of my car. And who got me into that mess? Them, the Cybernetics Company! They sent a slanderous and abusive letter to the Motor Club! So if the firm chooses to take away my daily bread, then it can damn-well take care of my maintenance and supply me with spare parts! Is it my fault if I keep on blowing fuses, sometimes here, sometimes there? And that isn't the end of my complaints; whenever I come face to face with any of the firm's employees, especially the directors, they persist in insulting me!

Mr Donovan has suggested a compromise: I must stand in the showroom for eight hours a day as a model. When I replied that this was unworthy of a racing-driver and that he could go and stuff himself, he answered that he had gone and stuffed me and it had cost him £24,000 to do so! I'll sue the firm for insulting me on that and similar occasions! And now may I ask the court to swear in my brother as a witness, since he knows the exact details of the case.

ATTORNEY: M'lud, I must protest at the defendant's brother being summoned.

JUDGE: Because of a questionable relationship?

ATTORNEY: Yes and no ... the fact is that the defendant's brother crashed several weeks ago in an aeroplane catastrophe.

JUDGE: Aha, so he can't appear in front of the court?

BROTHER: Yes I can, I'm already here!

ATTORNEY: Certainly he is here, but the catastrophe proved fatal and so the firm has produced a new brother on the order of his wife.

JUDGE: A new *what*?

ATTORNEY: A new brother and at the same time a new husband for the former widow.

JUDGE: Ah, I see ...

JONES: And why shouldn't my brother make a statement? His wife has paid the bill in full!

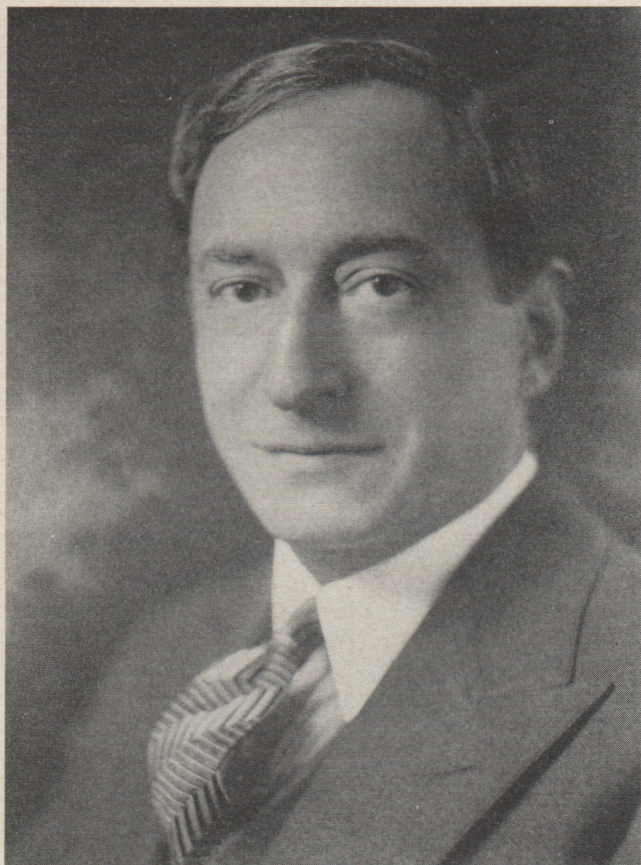
JUDGE: Silence, please, since there are some fundamental details which the court must clear up, I hereby adjourn the trial.

The Impatient Dreamers

WALTER GILLINGS

The Story of British Science Fiction

Vision of Tomorrow is privileged to present the story of the development of modern science fiction in this country, as told by one who, as a professional journalist and active devotee, was largely responsible for its beginnings over thirty years ago. Besides being one of the founders of organized 'fandom' on this side of the Atlantic, Walter Gillings was the originator of the first regular sf magazine published here, which introduced many British contributors to the field. Since the days of *Tales of Wonder* he has launched five other magazines, one of which, the internationally acclaimed *Science-Fantasy Review*, helped to bring about the present burgeoning sf in



Hugo Gernsback, pioneer publisher of American science fiction, pictured in his prime. An immigrant from Luxemburg, he was writing about space travel, television, and other things to come years before he started *Amazing Stories*.

Britain, following its incursion into the field of 'hard-cover' books in the U.S.A. Only last April, nearly twenty years after its demise, he brought the *Review* back to life under a new title—*Cosmos*. Now, for a new generation of readers, he relates the fascinating story of the painful growth of magazine sf in a land where editors and publishers mostly insisted that Wells and Verne and their 'imitators' had left no scope for further exercises of the imagination.

I: FIRST ENCOUNTERS

First let me warn you that this account must be, to a large extent, autobiographical. For more than forty of my fifty-seven years I have spent the best part of my spare time with science fiction; not only in reading but in writing it, in helping others to write it, and presenting it in magazines so that those who cared might read it. I have also written a good deal about it, and talked to other readers—and non-readers—about it.

There was a time when I would make long speeches about it—until I considered the criticism of one long-suffering listener that I always made the same speech and that everybody was bored with it, and decided that he had a case. After which I was not so anxious to inflict on patient fans, at their annual get-togethers, the sorry story of my early endeavours on behalf of British science fiction.

But enough time has elapsed since my last recital on this theme for a whole new generation of fans to grow up, in blissful ignorance of those pre-war days when *Tales of Wonder* was reprinting the *Wonder Stories* of John Beynon Harris, later to become known as John Wyndham; Arthur C. Clarke was writing exclusively for *Amateur Science Stories* (and helping to cut the stencils), and John Russell Fearn had acquired no more than a half-dozen pen-names.

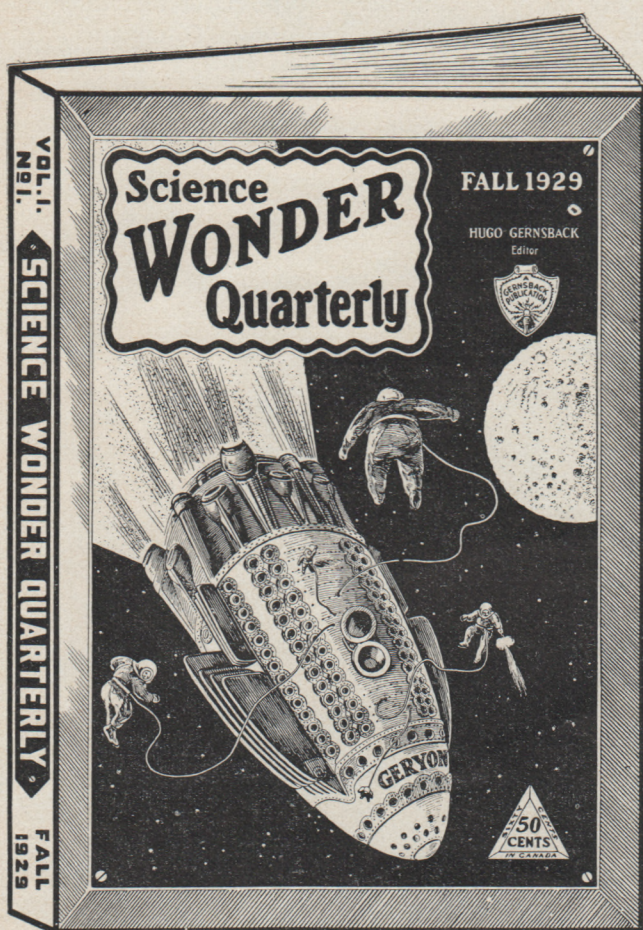
Those were the days when the Science Fiction Association was making headway, and fans made obeisance to Professor A. M. Low. Many of its members also lent support to the British Interplanetary Society, which was the target for cheap jibes by the *Daily Express*—when it could get any mention at all. *New Worlds* was a duplicated fanmag, and fan conventions were held without the aid of microphones or tape recorders, or any of the pleasant devices which make them so enjoyable today. They were rather solemn occasions; for they were, on the whole, more serious days and we were in deadly earnest about science fiction and its 'mission'.

Looking back now, it is easy to see why we took ourselves rather too seriously. But let us go back to the beginning and see how it all started. And if you find the narrative too personal, bear in mind that to me, as to most of the isolated readers of that time, science fiction was an intensely personal matter—a newly-discovered treasure that we kept to ourselves only because there were none to share it with, at least within hailing distance.

The British sf fan of today, who takes his pick of half a dozen magazines and a constant stream of paperbacks, can hardly imagine what it was like for yesterday's aficionado to have to rely on a single publication, imported from America, to supplement his reading of

Verne, Wells, Conan Doyle and Edgar Rice Burroughs—if the public library was so accommodating. To those secluded enthusiasts of the 1920s the discovery of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in a back-street bookshop or a market stall came as a gift from the gods—even though it might consist mainly of reprints of Wells and Verne.

My own initiation, it turned out, was typical of that of embryo fans in Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, and every big city where remainder copies of the one and only 'Magazine of Scientification' chanced to circulate. It was in an East End shop window that I first saw my fate, in the cover of the March 1927 issue illustrating T. S. Stribling's 'The Green Splotches'—a reprint from America's *Adventure* magazine. I was irresistibly attracted. I spent fourpence on it, was enthralled, and went back for more. Having already exhausted Burroughs' tales of Barsoom, I revelled in 'The Land That Time Forgot'. Then, in a junk shop nearer home where I had bought my mixed lots of foreign stamps, I found the issues containing 'The Moon Pool'.



Artist Frank R. Paul's cover picture of this 40-year-old magazine depicts a space-flight to the Moon during which astronauts, tethered to their vessel, are exercising in the void. The story was based on German theories of space-travel which have proved remarkably prophetic.

After that there was no escape. Though I fancy there was an interval of months while I was engrossed with the bumper volume of Wells' short stories, loaned by a trust-

ing friend, I was soon enticed back to *Amazing* by 'The Skylark of Space'; thence to *Amazing Stories Quarterly* (sixpence from the junk shop) by 'The Sunken World' and 'The World of the Giant Ants'. Every issue that came my way I hoarded, after reading every word, and soon set about securing the numbers I had missed from other British readers who had been enslaved before me, but were not averse to parting with their copies. It was easy to get in touch with them—through the readers' letters pages which, by the time I was hooked, had become a regular feature of the magazine.

Had I realized that for more than two years *Amazing* had been available in mint condition—except for the rubber stamp of its British distributors, which defaced those startling covers I was careful to conceal from the public gaze—I would have gone without Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton to plonk down one-and-sixpence for each new issue. But I had only recently left technical school to earn 15s. a week as a City office boy, and it was not until I had begun to find my way around that I saw my precious periodical on sale in Fleet Street. Then, I couldn't resist the shiny allure of Frank R. Paul's ingenious artwork ... or had Leo Morey taken over by then? Anyway, by conquering the smoking habit which had soon possessed me (with cigarettes at three a penny), I even managed to spare the magnificent sum of half-a-crown to procure the huge *Quarterly* issues of 144 pages, the like of which had never been seen and never will be again. Which, perhaps, is just as well: you almost needed a block and tackle to read them ...

But it wasn't long before my pocket compelled me to fall back on the vast resources of Leather Lane where, on a market stall jam-packed with every variety of Yankee pulp, I unearthed Gernsback's second magazine, *Science Wonder Stories*, and its companion *Air Wonder*, with which it was fated to combine as plain *Wonder Stories*. So we went on to digest Dr David H. Keller's 'The Human Termites', consider Hermann Noordung's intriguing 'Problems of Space Flying', and ponder over readers' prizewinning letters on 'What Science Fiction Means to Me'.

It was about this time—just before the third of the 'Big Three' sf magazines, *Astounding Stories*, appeared on the scene—that the first stirrings of organized American fandom became evident. Prior to leaving *Amazing* to the mercies of a new publisher and ageing editor Dr O'Connor Sloane, who had been one of his associates, Gernsback had established a shield-like symbol for sf—one that might well have served as a lapel button. Afterwards, he began to whip up a missionary zeal among his own readers by running in *Science Wonder Quarterly* another letter contest on 'What I have Done to Spread Science Fiction'.

To Raymond A. Palmer, who was destined to become editor of *Amazing* before launching his own publishing set-up with *Other Worlds* and *Fate*, went one of the hundred dollar prizes for his efforts as secretary of the *Science Correspondence Club*, which had sprung from a mutual interest in sf between widely separated fans. A closer group which held club meetings, organized in New York by a handful of enthusiasts who were to develop a professional interest in the field—including Mort Weisinger, editor of the re-vamped *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and literary agent Julius Schwartz—also received Gernsback's

blessing. The suggestion of Indiana fan Conrad H. Rupert for a Science Fiction Week, during which all the converted would spread the gospel among the uninitiated, was readily accepted and duly scheduled for the Spring of 1930.

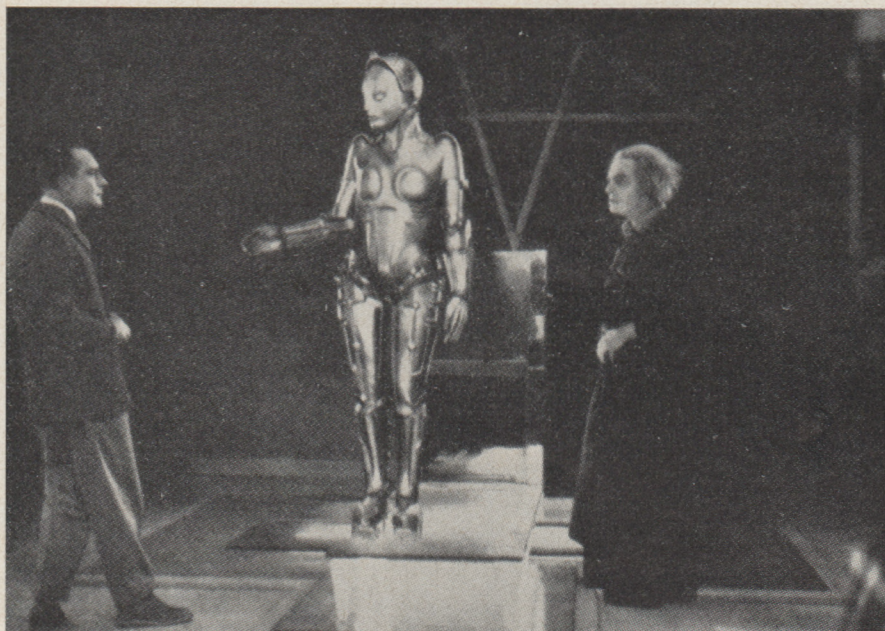
Constantly in his editorials 'Uncle Hugo', as he came to be called by his more affectionate followers, harped on the theme that out of the diligent reading of sf would come a better appreciation of the powers of science to improve man's lot. At the same time he bemoaned the indisputable fact that, despite the growing popularity of the 'new' literature, the public appetite still inclined towards Westerns and sexy thrillers. Yet 'the editors have never believed so firmly as they do now that science fiction will one day sweep the country. But until that day comes, there is the steady winning of new converts . . . year after year building substantially the great army of sf fans'.

It was the only army I ever wanted to join—or enlist other recruits in. And a letter in the June 1930 issue of *Wonder* from one L. A. Kippin, of Ilford, Essex, gave me the chance to share my enthusiasm with someone similarly disposed. The writer responded to my overtures by promptly calling at my home in Leyton. So began the first of many firm friendships which have been among the greatest satisfactions that I, like many another, have derived from science fiction through the years. So developed, too, the Ilford Science Literary Circle, through which I made my first contacts with both English

and American sf writers, and my own journalistic incursions in the field.

To keep the record straight, let us admit that the first organization of sf readers in Great Britain—if not in the world—would seem to have been the Science Fiction Association which had its headquarters at Hayes, Middlesex, as far back as 1927. My records do not, however, reveal how long it lasted, what it achieved, or even what it set out to accomplish—if anything. I know it claimed to have produced what must have been the first British 'fanzine', titled *Fantasia*. But the first I heard of either fan club or magazine was when one of its erstwhile officers sought my advice on how to go about publishing a journal which might serve to keep the organization together if it could be revived.

This was, if I recall aright, in 1931 when I was secretary of the Science Literary Circle—which did not get far towards realizing its avowed object of popularizing sf through a national association. At best it had no more than a dozen members, not all of whom could be called sf fans. But its records show that, starting in October 1930, it held regular weekly meetings—37 in all—until it broke up in the summer of 1931, never to resume its chatty, informal sessions. And it did secure for its lofty aims a good deal of publicity—if only by virtue of the fact that I was in the throes of my first year's training as a reporter on the *Ilford Recorder*, where I had found an opening after several vain attempts to storm the citadels of journalism.



A dramatic scene from Fritz Lang's classic film, 'Metropolis'. The scientist-villain who has kidnapped an innocent girl to animate his metal robot puts her through her paces for the benefit of the son of the city's Big Boss, who had fallen for her . . . The story was written by Lang's wife, Thea von Harbou, before the two were divorced. His work won the admiration of Hitler, but he preferred to move to Hollywood rather than make films for the dictator.

I got my chance on the strength of the promise shown by an amateur magazine, laboriously produced in handwriting and ink drawing while I was still at school. It was at the age of thirteen that I first developed an aspiration towards the editor's chair while at the same time exhibiting a certain flair for sf writing. And it was in this select publication, which had a circulation of ten, that I authored a serial entitled '2000 A.D.' inspired by some articles in *The Mechanical Age* of 1925-26. But, like so many of my early efforts, it was never finished. For the *Merry-go-round Magazine* came to a stop after seven issues, just when my hero had made radio contact with Mars...

Ever since I had feasted, at the age of nine, on a George Goodchild serial in the *Children's Newspaper* concerning 'The Message from Space' and a cosmic crisis in which the Martians saved mankind from extinction, I had nursed a passion for such stories—which was rarely satisfied. I can recall an exciting visit, made at about the same period, to what must have been Mr Burroughs' perilous world 'At the Earth's Core'; this through the agency of a boys' paper loaned to me by a village school-girl with plaited hair. I never once pulled her pigtails after that...

Later, the *Nelson Lee Library* and the *Boys' Magazine* provided the occasional voyage to Atlantis or some other fantastic adventure. I have vivid recollections of a thrilling tale, well advertised on the billboards, in which rival armies of robots struggled for supremacy—and which moved me to attempt an unconscious plagiarism, happily soon abandoned.

Another formative influence, perhaps strongest of all, was the radio; for the BBC and the *Radio Times* both showed a decided inclination towards sf, even in those days. The fantasies of Lance Sieveking and L. du Garde Peach enthralled me, as I sat by my crystal set with headphones pinning back my ears. And the memory of the first broadcast of Capek's 'R.U.R.' (Rossum's Universal Robots) in 1927, with Ernest Milton and Grizelda Hervey as the new Adam and Eve, stays with me as though it were yesterday.

As for the cinema, it was in that same year I sat in the ninepennies spellbound as I watched the lovely Brigitte Helm transformed into an automaton in Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis'; while the book by Thea von Harbou could be bought at Woolworth's for sixpence. Years later, at a fans' convention, I saw the uncensored, home movie version ... and nearly laughed myself sick at the hysterical antics of the mad scientist Rotwang, and those of his creation—and her ecstatic audience—when she does her sexy dance in the hero's dream. This, of course, being the part the Censor cut out—mercifully, perhaps.

But now, whenever they show old films at conventions, I make a bee-line for the bar. Even at the expense of a good laugh, I prefer to keep my more pleasant memories intact.

(In the next issue Walter Gillings will tell of the first attempts to establish a British sf fandom, and of his efforts to convert editors to the idea of a home-produced magazine—which produced a response from America.)

COMING NEXT ISSUE

DARUTI shook his head trying to get rid of the ceaseless noise of running water, of cool lakes, glaciers, surging oceans. The pulse of the sea merged with the tinkle of ice, the sweet, liquid perfume of rain. His brain was awash with watery imaginings. Fountains, waterfalls, the spray from a shower, the gush from a faucet. The concept of thirst-quenching liquid filled the universe.

He tripped and fell, the shock of impact just another shock, the ache of bruised flesh just another ache to add to all the rest. His lips were cracked, the tongue swollen, his febrile skin like leather to the touch. His sweat had dried leaving salty encrustations. His feet were horribly blistered and one ankle was puffed where something had driven its sting.

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MEET THE AUTHORS

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

H. G. Wells first sparked Temple's interest in sf and remains his first favourite. *Amazing Stories* triggered him into writing for the sf pulp mags, circa 1938/9, during which two crowded years he shared a flat with Arthur C. Clarke and Maurice Hanson. The trio were sf fans. And they knew the space age was coming. They spread both gospels. Between them they issued the sf fan-mag, *Nova Terrae*. John Carnell, frequent visitor, later anglicized the name for his pro-mag, *New Worlds*.

The flat became a centre for sf fan gatherings. John Wyndham, John Christopher, Syd Bounds were among the regular attendees. It was also the HQ for the small, struggling British Interplanetary Society. Temple edited its *Journal*, Clarke was Treasurer. Its ideas took fictional form thirty years later in 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and factual form in the Apollo Project.

Autumn 1939: Temple had a story, *Four-Sided Triangle*, in *Amazing*—and married. War broke out, Hanson went into the Army, the BIS went into cold storage, and Clarke into the RAF. Temple became a father, and the Army pressganged him.

In odd moments on the march with the 8th Army he wrote a sf novel based on his *Four-sided Triangle* story, and lost the MS in the Tunisian desert. He swore and rewrote it painfully slowly from memory—and lost it one shell-torn night on the Anzio Beachhead. He cursed—and rewrote it. . . . After the War it was published in Britain, U.S.A., France, Italy—and was filmed. After a West End premiere at the Tivoli in the Strand, it was generally released, and revived years later on TV. The title, straight or adapted, has been 'borrowed' several times since—once by Ellery Queen.

Temple then wrote a crime thriller, a space travel book many sf shorts and novelettes, and several more sf novels. One series featuring spaceman Martin Magnus are being reprinted as paperbacks this summer. His *Shoot at the Moon* went into six different editions. Recently he moved to Folkestone and published another sf novel, *The Fleshpots of Sansato* (Macdonald & Co., 1968).

There he is active in the local Wells Society which meets at Spade House, built by Wells, wherein the master wrote much of his best sf. Former flat-mate, Hanson, has already visited Temple in Folkestone. The other, Clarke, planned to do so early in 1969 and also lecture at Spade House. But a tentacle reached across time from the long-ago flat. Clarke's own tentacle, as it were. It hauled Clarke away to Cape Kennedy to script a historical film of the Apollo Project culminating, it appears, in the realization of the trio's old dream: a manned landing on the moon.

Meanwhile, Temple plays around with his own ideas. His *When In Doubt—Destroy!* concerns an unimaginative robot-computer. Sometimes we're disturbed by the computer's lack of imagination to correct its own mistakes. However, there could be a situation when this very lack might be advantageous. . . .

JACK WODHAMS

More than ordinarily handsome as science-fiction writers go (he claims to have turned down a fortune offered him by United Artists, for a role eventually filled by Rita Tushingham), JACK WODHAMS was born in Dagenham, Essex, in 1931, the sixth and last child in an ineptly planned family.

He was educated in various Council schools, establishments which laboured with commendable energy but ultimate futility to transform riff-raff into half-way presentable prospective citizens. Nervous fatigue, tension and a rebellious temperament (but not, he insists, protest) made him a high-school dropout.

He became an apprentice weighing-machine mechanic for a while, and still considers the experience valuable. The over-all shortage of weighing-machine mechanics is a sociological fact of our time, and Jack consoles himself when things look bad with the thought that there is *something* he can return to.

Thereafter he held a number of appointments, including selling brushes door-to-door and portering in a mental hospital. It is almost a requirement for successful fiction writers that they should have had umpteen curious and unliterary jobs, to prove perhaps just what social misfits they are. Jack has been a labourer, bar-tender, taxi- and truck-driver, and once even did a four-month tour as a magician's assistant. (His duties included helping to cut a lady in half, twice nightly.)

In 1955 he sailed to Australia because it was cheap and he had nothing better to do, and apart from a year in New Zealand and a trip back to England, has been there ever since. At present he resides quietly on twelve spectacularly unproductive acres in rural Queensland, and does his writing (in longhand) in a stone hut by candlelight.

Jack has been writing for over twenty years, for most of that time without direction and for little reward. In 1964 he received two guineas for a TV sketch, in 1965 five guineas for some verse. In 1966 he sold a novelette to *Analog*, and promptly embraced the field with an enthusiasm only equalled by his enthusiasm for eating. An immediate and continuing success, he is Australia's only full-time professional sf writer. (The secret, he says, is hard work, no encumbrances, and the ability to live on \$10 a week—nothing to it, really!)

As Guest of Honour at the 1968 Melbourne SF Conference, Jack revealed himself to be a very genial sort of bloke, a hilarious conversationalist, and, in appearance and speech, *no one's* idea of a writer. But in private conversation one occasionally glimpsed the intensity and profound individuality of this man's approach to writing, and realized that whatever role he might choose to play in public, deep down he is as dedicated a professional writer as you could wish to find. And as versatile. If you like a good story well told, you'll like Jack Wodhams.

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In my opinion the stories in this issue rank as follows:

No. Here

..... *When in Doubt—Destroy!* by William F. Temple
..... *The Vault* by Damien Broderick
..... *Swords for a Guide* by Kenneth Bulmer
..... *Sixth Sense* by Michael G. Coney
..... *Consumer Report* by Lee Harding
..... *Anchor Man* by Jack Wodhams
..... *Are You There, Mr Jones?* by Stanislaw Lem

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