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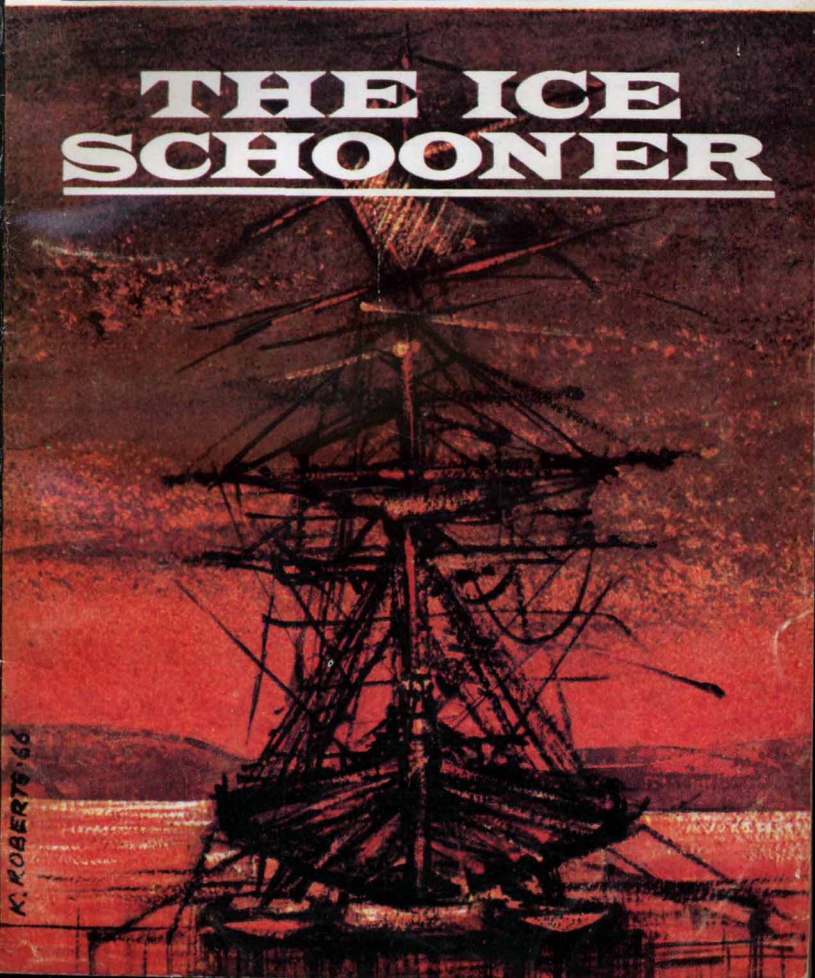
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**MICHAEL
MOORCOCK**

**THE ICE
SCHOONER**

K. ROBERTS '66



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Guest Editorial by Judith Merrill

Once upon a time there were two science fiction fans who met at a place called the Hydra Club. That was in New York City and almost twenty years ago. Both of them had big plans for a glorious future; but he was still a struggling young comic strip artist, and she a struggling young writer of western and sports pulp stories. His name was Harry Harrison, and hers—mine—was Judy Merrill.

Later, they both met another fan, an Englishman on his first visit to the States: a struggling young editor named Ted Carnell, who had put out four issues of a magazine called NEW WORLDS, who also had some grandiose ideas about the future. But none of our visions in 1949 included any such wild possibilities as that a magazine Carnell had not yet started—SCIENCE FANTASY—would be edited—as SF IMPULSE—by Harrison; or that Harrison, in Trieste judging a fantasy film festival, would ask me, in London doing an anthology, to fill in for him as editorialist.

It is a particular pleasure to me to fulfil this request. In its successive phases, SCIENCE FANTASY/IMPULSE has been a continuing favourite of mine. It was in Carnell's SCIENCE FANTASY that I found such memorable stories as Ballard's "Prima Belladonna" and "The Sound Sweep", Aldiss' "Let's be Frank", Tubb's "Fresh Guy", Rome's "Parky", for my annual anthologies; it was in the same pages that I first read John Kippax, Helen Urban, John Rackham, Michael Moorcock and James Colvin.

Somehow, SCIENCE FANTASY was the place where the *different* stories appeared. (I have always had a sneaking feeling it was because Carnell used his "best science fiction" in NEW WORLDS that the odd delights and exciting newcomers always seemed to pop up in SCIENCE FANTASY; I know he was always surprised at my making selections from the same magazine again and again). It would be impossible to list them all, even if I could remember them all—but Brunner's "When Gabriel" comes to mind, and Kippax's "Me, Myself, and I," Presslie's "Dial O for Operator," Peake's "Same Time, Same Place." . . .

When I heard Carnell was leaving the magazines, that

Moorcock was to edit NEW WORLDS and that a rank outsider named Kyril Bonfiglioli would handle SCIENCE FANTASY, I thought someone had made a terrible mistake. I had read Moorcock's articles on fantasy; he was obviously the man for this magazine.

By the time I made my first trip to England last year to attend the London convention, I knew how unnecessary my concern had been. In one dozen issues Bonfiglioli had give the magazine a distinctive character, as different from the Moorcock NEW WORLDS as both were from the Carnell magazines—and in the meantime had introduced more interesting new writers than both magazines combined had produced in the five years previous. Jael Cracken, Thom Keyes, Keith Roberts, Colin Hume, Johnny Byrne, Alistair Bevan, Charles Platt, Philip Wordley, Roger Jones, Pippin Graham, Robert Cheetham, are only some of the names from those twelve issues. Since then, there have been among others Chris Priest, Chris Boyce, and Robert Clough.

It was not just a matter of novelty; it was quality as well. One might fairly say that Moorcock's NEW WORLDS is generating more exciting new thinking than science fiction has known since the early years of the Campbell ASTOUNDING—and as fairly, that Bonfiglioli's SCIENCE FANTASY/IMPULSE sustained a level of literate imaginative writing unequalled since the peak of Boucher's tenure at FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION.

When I met both editors at the London convention, I began to understand it all. Two more appropriately congenial, distinctive, brilliant, individual and *different* madmen I have never met together. You all know something about Moorcock; you have read his stories and articles and reviews, seen pictures of him, perhaps even met him. But 'Bon' is the man no one knows. He was never part of science fiction fan activities; the only story I know of that he wrote was published anonymously; the magazine has never carried his photograph; even his editorials were ordinarily so impersonal as to be self-effacing. All this (but *not* the magazine he produced) seems oddly out of character for the man I met; and it seems time for the readers he pleased to know something about him.

(continued on page 118)

MICHAEL
MOORCOCK'S
THE
ICE
SCHOONER

One of Kyril Bonfiglioli's last acts as editor of **SF IMPULSE** was to commission a full length novel from Michael Moorcock, editor of our sister magazine. Mike surely needs no introduction from us; suffice to say that we believe this powerful tale of a world in the grip of the fourth Ice Age will prove his finest work to date. We present part one of



CHAPTER ONE

Konrad Arflane

WHEN KONRAD ARFLANE found himself without an ice ship to command, he left the city-crevasse of Brershill and set off on skis across the great ice plateau; he went with the intention of deciding whether he should live or die.

In order to allow himself no compromise, he took a small supply of food and equipment, reckoning that if he had not made up his mind within eight days he would die anyway of starvation and exposure.

As he saw it, his reason for doing this was a good one. Although only thirty-five and one of the best known skippers of the plateau, he had little chance of obtaining a new captaincy in Brershill and refused to consider serving as a first or second officer under another master even if it were possible to get such a berth. Only fifteen years before Brershill had had a fleet of over fifty ships. Now she had twenty-three. While he was not a morbid man, Arflane had decided that there was only one alternative to taking a command with some foreign city, and that was to die.

So he set off, heading south across the plateau. There would be few ships in that direction and little to disturb him.

Arflane was a tall, heavy man with a full, red beard that now sparkled with rime. He was dressed in the black fur of the seal and the white fur of the bear. To protect his head from the cut of the cold wind he wore a thick bear-skin hood; to protect his eyes from the reflected glare of the sun on the ice, he wore a visor of thin cloth stretched on a seal-bone frame. At his hip he had a short cutlass in a sealskin scabbard, and in either hand he held eight foot harpoons which served him both as weapons and as ski-poles. His skis were long strips cut from the bone of the great land whale. On these he was able to make good speed and soon found himself well beyond the normal shipping routes.

As his distant ancestors had been men of the sea, Konrad Arflane was a man of the ice. He had the same solitary habits, the same air of self-sufficiency, the same distant expression in his grey eyes. The only great difference between Arflane and his ancestors was that they had been forced at times to desert the sea, whereas he was never away from the ice ; for in these days it encircled the world.

As Arflane knew, at all points of the compass lay ice of one sort or another ; cliffs of ice, plains of ice, valleys of ice and even, though he had only heard of them, whole cities of ice. Ice that constantly changed its colour as the sky changed colour ; ice of pale blue, purple and ultramarine, ice of crimson, of yellow and emerald green. In summer crevasses, glaciers and grottoes were made even more beautiful by the deep, rich, glittering shades they reflected, and in winter the bleak ice mountains and plateaux possessed overpowering grandeur as they rose white, grey and black beneath the grim, snow-filled skies. At all seasons there was no scenery that was not ice in all its varieties and colourings and Arflane was deeply aware that the landscape would never change. There would be ice for all eternity.

The great ice plateau, which was the territory best known to Arflane, occupied and entirely covered the part of the world once known as the Matto Grosso. The original mountains and valleys had long since been engulfed by the ice and the present plateau was several hundred miles in diameter, gradually sloping at its farthest points and joining with the rougher ice that surrounded it. Arflane knew the plateau better than most men, for he had first sailed the ice with his father before his second birthday and had been master of a staysail schooner before he was twenty-one. His father had been called Konrad Arflane, as had all in the male line for hundreds of years, and they had all been masters of ships. Only a few generations back, members of the Arflane family had actually owned several vessels.

The ice ships—trading vessels and hunting craft for the most part—were sailing ships mounted on runners like giant skis which bore them across the ice at great speed. Centuries old, the ships were the principal source of communication, sustenance and trade for the inhabitants of the

eight cities of the plateau. These settlements, situated in crevasses below the level of the ice, all owned sailing craft and their power depended on the size and quality of their fleets.

Arflane's home city, Brershill, had once been the most powerful of them all, but her fleet was diminishing rapidly these days and there were now more masters than ships; for Friesgalt, always Brershill's greatest rival, had now risen to become the pre-eminent city of the plateau, dictating the terms of trade, monopolising the hunting grounds and buying, as had recently happened to Arflane's barquentine, ships from the men of other cities who were unable to compete.

When he was six days out of Brershill and still undecided as to his fate, Konrad Arflane saw a dark object moving slowly towards him over the frozen white plain. He stopped his skis and stared ahead, trying to distinguish the nature of the object. There was nothing by which he could judge its size. It could be anything from a wounded land whale, dragging itself on its huge, muscular flippers, to a wild dog that had lost its way far from the warm ponds where it preyed on the seals.

Arflane's normal expression was remote and insouciant, but at this moment there was a hint of curiosity in his eyes as he stood watching the object's slow progress. He debated what to do.

Moody skies, immense, grey, and heavy with snow, rolled above his head, blotting out the sun. Lifting his visor, Arflane peered at the moving thing, wondering if he should approach it or ignore it. He had not come out on to the ice to hunt, but if the thing were a whale and he could finish it and cut his mark on it he would become comparatively rich and his future would be that much easier to decide.

Frowning, he dug his harpoons into the ice and pushed himself forward on his skis. His muscles moved beneath his fur jacket and the pack on his back was jostled as he went skimming swiftly towards the thing. His movements were economical, almost nervous. He leaned forward on the skis, riding the ice with ease.

For a moment the red sun broke through the layers of

cold cloud and ice sparkled like diamonds from horizon to horizon. Arflane saw that it was a man who lay on the ice. Then the sun was obscured again.

Arflane felt faintly resentful. A whale, or even a seal, could have been killed and put to good use, but a man was of no use at all. What was even more annoying was that he had deliberately chosen this way so that he would avoid contact with men or ships.

Even as he sped across the silent ice towards the man, Arflane considered ignoring him. The ethics of the ice-lands put him under no obligation to help, he would feel no pang of conscience if he left the man to die. For some reason, though he was taciturn by nature, Arflane still found himself continuing to approach. It was difficult to arouse his curiosity, but, once aroused, it had to be satisfied. The presence of men was very rare in this region.

When he was close enough to be able to make out details of the figure on the ice, he brought himself to a gradual halt and watched.

There was certainly little life left in the man. The exposed face, feet and hands were purple with cold and covered in frostbite swellings. Blood had frozen on the head and arms. One leg was completely useless, either broken or numb. Inadequate tatters of rich furs were tied around the body with strips of gut and leather; the head was bare and the grey hair shone with frost. This was an old man, but the body, though wasted, was big, and the shoulders were wide. The man continued to crawl with extraordinary animal tenacity. The red, half-blind eyes stared ahead; the great, gaunt skull, with its blue lips frozen in a grin, rolled as the figure moved on elbows and belly over the frozen plain. Arflane was unnoticed.

Konrad Arflane stared moodily at the figure for a moment, his strong, tanned face frowning heavily. Then he turned to go back. He had an obscure feeling of admiration for the dying old man. He thought that it would be wrong to intrude on such a private ordeal. He poised his harpoons, ready to push himself across the ice in the direction from which he had come, but, hearing a sound behind him, he glanced back and saw that the old man had collapsed and now lay completely still on the white ice. It would not be long before he died.

On impulse, Arflane pushed himself round again and slid forward on the skis until he was able to crouch beside the body. Laying down one harpoon and steadying himself with the other, he grasped one of the old man's shoulders in his thickly-gloved hand. The grip was gentle, virtually a caress. "You are a determined old man," he murmured.

The great head moved so that Arflane could now see the frozen face beneath the ice-matted mane of hair. The eyes opened slowly; they were full of an introverted madness. The blue, swollen lips parted and a guttural sound came from the throat. Arflane looked broodingly into the insane eyes for a moment; then he unslung his bulky pack and opened it, taking out a flask of spirit. He clumsily removed the cap from the flask and put the neck to the puffy, twisted mouth, pouring a little of the spirit between the lips. The old man swallowed, coughed, and gasped, then, quite levelly, he said: "I feel as if I burn, yet that's impossible. Before you go, sir, tell me if it is far to Friesgalt . . ."

The eyes closed and the head dropped. Arflane looked at the old man indecisively. He could tell both from the remains of the clothing and from the accent, that the dying man was a Friesgaltian aristocrat. How had such a one come to be alone on the ice without retainers? Once again, Arflane considered leaving him to die. He had nothing to gain from trying to save the man, who was as good as dead. He had only contempt and hatred for the grand lords of Friesgalt, whose tall ice-schooners these days dominated the frozen plains. Compared with the men of the other cities the Friesgaltian nobility was soft-living and godless. It openly mocked the doctrine of the Ice Mother; it heated its houses to excess; it was often thriftless. It refused to make its women do the simplest manual work; it even gave some of them equality with men.

Arflane sighed and then frowned again, looking down at the old aristocrat, judging him. He balanced his own prejudice and his sense of self-preservation against his grudging admiration for the man's tenacity and courage. If he were the survivor of a shipwreck, then he had plainly crawled many miles to get this far. A wreck could be the only explanation for his presence on the ice. Arflane made up his mind. He took a fur-lined sleeping sack from his

pack, unrolled it and spread it out. Walking clumsily on his skis, he went to the man's feet and got them into the neck of the sack and began to wrestle the rest of the body down into it until he could tie the sack's hood tightly around the man's head, leaving only the smallest aperture through which he could breathe. Then he shifted his pack so that it hung forward on his chest by its straps and hauled the sleeping sack on to his back until the muffled face was just above the level of his own broad shoulders. From a pouch at his belt, he took two lengths of leather and strapped the fur-swathed old man in place. Then, with difficulty even for someone of his strength, he heaved on his harpoons and began the long ski-trek to Friesgalt.

The wind was rising at his back. Above him, it had cut the clouds into swirling grey streamers and revealed the sun, which threw the shadows of the clouds on to the ice. The ice seemed to be alive, like a racing tide, black in the shadow and red in the sunlight, sparkling like clear water. The plateau seemed infinite in extent, having no projections, no landmarks, no indication of horizon save for the clouds which seemed to touch the ice far away. The sun was setting and he had only two hours or so in which to travel, for it was unwise to travel at night. He was heading towards the west, towards Friesgalt, chasing the great red globe as it sank. Light snow and tiny pieces of ice whirled over the plateau, moved, as he was moved, by the cold wind. Arflane's powerful arms pumped the tall harpoons up and down as he leaned forward, partly for speed, partly because of the burden on his back, his legs spread slightly apart on the tough whalebone skis.

He sped on, until the dusk faded into the darkness of night and the moon and stars could occasionally be seen through the thickening clouds. Then he slowed himself and stopped. The wind was falling, its sound now like a distant sigh; even that faded as Arflane removed the body from his back and the pack from his chest and pitched his tent, driving in the bone spikes at an angle to the ice.

When the tent was ready he got the old man inside it and started his heating unit; a precious possession but one which he mistrusted almost as much as naked fire, which he had seen only twice in his life. The unit was powered by small solar batteries and Arflane, like everyone else,

did not understand how it worked. Even the explanations in the old books meant nothing to him. The batteries were supposed to be almost everlasting, but good ones were becoming scarcer.

He prepared broth for them both and, with some more spirit from his flask revived the old man, loosening the thongs around the sack's neck.

The moon shone through the worn fabric of the tent and gave Arflane just enough light to work by.

The Friesgaltian coughed and groaned. Arflane felt him shudder.

"Do you want some broth?" Arflane asked him.

"A little, if you can spare it." The exhausted voice, still containing the traces of an earlier strength, had a puzzled note.

Arflane put a beaker of warm broth to the broken lips. The Friesgaltian swallowed and grunted. "Enough for the meantime, I thank you." Arflane replaced the beaker on the heater and squatted in silence for a while. It was the Friesgaltian who spoke first.

"How far are we from Friesgalt?"

"Not far. Perhaps ten hours journey on skis. We could move on while the moon is up, but I'm not following a properly mapped route. I shan't risk travelling until dawn."

"Of course. I had thought it was closer, but . . ." the old man coughed again, weakly, and a thin sigh followed. "One misjudges distances easily. I was lucky. You saved me. I am grateful. You are from Brerhill, I can tell by your accent. Why . . .?"

"I don't know," said Arflane brusquely.

Silence followed and Arflane prepared to lie down on the groundsheet. The old man had his sleeping sack but it would not be too cold if, against his normal instincts, he left the heating unit on. The weak voice spoke again. "It is unusual for a man to travel the unmapped ice alone, even in summer."

"True," Arflane replied.

After a pause, the Friesgaltian said hoarsely, evidently tiring: "I am the Lord Pyotr Rorsefne. Most men would have left me to die on the ice—even the men of my own city."

Arflane grunted impatiently.

"You are a generous man," added the principal Ship Lord of Friesgalt before he slept at last.

"Possibly just a fool," said Arflane, shaking his head. He lay back on the groundsheet, his hands behind his head. He pursed his lips for a moment, frowning lightly. Then he smiled a little ironically. The smile faded as he, too, fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Ulsenn's Wife

SCARCELY MORE THAN eight hours after dawn Konrad Arflane sighted Friesgalt. Like all the Eight Cities it lay beneath the surface of the ice, carved into the faces of a wide natural crevasse that was almost a mile deep. Its main chambers and passages were hollowed from the rock that began several hundred feet below, though many of its storehouses and upper chambers had been cut from the ice itself. Little of Friesgalt was visible above the surface; the only feature to be seen clearly was the wall of ice blocks that surrounded the crevasse and protected the entrance to the city both from the elements and from human enemies.

It was, however, the field of high ships' masts that really indicated the city's location. At first sight it seemed that a forest sprouted from the ice, with every tree symmetrical and every branch straight and horizontal; a dense, still, even menacing forest that defied nature and seemed like an ancient geometrician's dream of ideally ordered landscape.

When he was close enough to make out more detail, Arflane saw that fifty or sixty good-sized ice-ships lay anchored to the ice by means of mooring lines attached to bone spikes that had been hammered into the hard surface. Their weathered fibre-glass hulls were scarred by centuries of use and most of their accessories were not the original parts, but copies made from natural materials.

Belaying pins had been carved from walrus ivory, booms had been fashioned of whale bone, and the rigging was a mixture of precious nylon, gut and strips of sealskin. Many of their runners were also fashioned of whale bone, as were the spars that joined them to the hulls.

The sails, like the hulls, were of the original synthetic material. There were great stocks of nylon sailcloth in every city; indeed their very economy was heavily based on the amount of fabric that existed in the storechambers of the various cities. Every ship but one, which was preparing to get under way, had its sails tightly furled.

Twenty ships long and three ships deep, Friesgalt's docks were impressive. There were no new ships here. There was no means, in Arflane's world, of building new ones. All the ships were worn by age, but were nonetheless sturdy and powerful; and every ship had an individual line, partly due to the various embellishments made by generations of crews and skippers, partly because of the cuts of rigging favoured by different captains and owners.

The yards of the masts, the rigging, the decks and the surrounding ice were thick with working, fur-clad sailors, their breath white in the cold air. They were loading and unloading the vessels, making repairs and putting their craft in order. Stacks of baled pelts, barrels and boxes stood near the ships. Cargo booms jutted over the sides of the vessels, being used to winch the goods up to deck level and then swung over the hatches where they dropped the bales and barrels into the waiting hands of the men whose job it was to stow the cargo. Other cargoes were being piled on sledges that were either pulled by dogs or dragged by hand towards the city.

Beneath the lowering sky, from which a little light snow fluttered, dogs barked, men shouted, and the indefinable smell of shipping mingled with the more easily distinguished smells of oil and skins and whale flesh.

Some distance off along the line a whaler was crewing up. The whaling men generally kept themselves apart from other sailors, disdaining their company, and the crews of the trading vessels were relieved that they did so; for both the North Ice and the South Ice whalers were more than boisterous in their methods of entertaining themselves. They were nearly all large men, swaggering along with their ten

foot harpoons on their shoulders, careless of where they swung them. They wore full, thick beards; their hair was also thick and much longer than usual. It was often, like their beards, plaited and held in place by whale grease, fashioned into strange barbaric styles. Their furs were rich, of a kind only normally worn by aristocrats, for whale men could afford anything they pleased to purchase if they were successful; but the furs were stained and worn casually. Arflane had been a whaling skipper through much of his career, and felt a comradeship for these coarse-voiced North Ice whaling men as they swung aboard their ship.

Aside from the few whalers, which were mainly three-masted barques or barquentines, there were all kinds of boats and ships on the oil-slippery ice. There were the little yachts and ketches used for work around the dock, and brigs, brigantines, two-mast two-topsail schooners, cutters and sloops. Most of the trading ships were three-mast square-rigged ships, but there was a fair scattering of two-mast brigs and two-mast schooners. Their colours for the most part were dull weather-beaten browns, blacks, greens.

The hunting ships of the whaling men were invariably black-hulled, stained by the blood of generations of slaughtered land-whales.

Arflane could now make out the names of the nearer craft. He recognized most of them without needing to read the characters carved into their sides. A heavy three-master, the *Land Whale*, was nearest him; it was from the city of Djobhabn, southernmost of the Eight, and had a strong resemblance to the one-time sea-mammal which, many centuries earlier, had left the oceans as the ice had gradually covered them, returning once again to the land it had left in favour of the sea. The *Land Whale* was heavy and powerful, with a broad prow that tapered gradually towards the stern. Her runners were short and she squatted on them, close to the ice.

A two-masted brig, the *Heurfrast*, named for the Ice Mother's mythical son, lay nearby, unloading a cargo of sealskin and bear pelts, evidently just back from a successful hunting expedition. Another two-master—a brigantine—was taking on tubs of whale oil, preparatory, Arflane guessed, to making a trading voyage among the other cities; this was the *Good Wind*, christened in the hope that the

name would bring luck to the ship. Arflane knew her for an unreliable vessel, ironically subject to getting herself becalmed at crucial times; she had had many owners. Other two-masted brigs and schooners and two- or three-masted schooners, as well as barques were there, and Arflane knew every ship by its name; he could see the barquentine *Katarina Ulsenn* and its sister ships, the *Nastasya Ulsenn* and the *Ingrid Ulsenn*, all owned by the powerful Ulsenn family of Friesgalt and named after Ulsenn matrons. There was the Brerhillian square-rigger, the *Leaper*, and another three-master from Brerhill, the slender hunting barque *Bear Scenter*. Two trading brigs, small and bulky, were from Chaddersgalt, the city closest to Brerhill, and others were from Djobhabn, Abersgalt, Fyorsgep and Keltshill, the rest of the Eight Cities.

The whale hunting craft lay away from the main gathering of ships. They were battered looking vessels, with a spirit of pride and defiance about them. Traditionally, whaling ships were called by paradoxical names, and Arflane recognised whalers called *Sweet Girl*, *Truelove*, *Smiling Lady*, *Gentle Touch*, *Soft Heart*, *Kindness* and similar names, while others were called *Good Fortune*, *Hopeful*, *Lucky Lance* and the like.

Also to one side, but at the other end of the line to the whaling ships, stood the ice-clippers, their masts towering well above those of all the surrounding craft, their whole appearance one of cruel arrogance. These were the fast-running, slim-prowed and stately queens of the plateau that, at their best, could travel at more than twice the speed of any other ship. Their hulls, supported on slender runners, dwarfed everything nearby, and from their decks one could look down on the poop of any other ship.

Tallest and most graceful of all these four-masted clippers was the principal ship of the Friesgaltian fleet, the *Ice Spirit*, with her sails trimly furled and every inch of her gleaming with polished bone, fibre-glass, soft gold, silver, copper and even iron. An elegant craft, with very clean lines, she would have surprised her ancient designer if he could have seen her now; for she bore embellishments.

Her bow, bowsprit and forecastle were decorated with the huge elongated skulls of the adapted sperm whale. The

beak-like mouths bristled with savage teeth, grinning out disdainfully on the other shipping, witnesses to the skill, bravery and power of the ship's owners, the Rorsefne family. Though she was known as a schooner, the *Ice Spirit* was really a square-rigged barque in the old terminology of the sea. Originally all the big clippers had been fore-and-aft schooner rigged, but this rig had been proven impracticable soon after ice navigation had become fully understood and square rig had been substituted; but the old name of schooner had stuck. The Rorsefne flag flew from above her royals; all four flags were large. Painted in black, white, gold and red by some half-barbaric artist, the Rorsefne standard showed the symbolic white hands of the Ice Mother, flanked by a bear and a whale, symbols of courage and vitality, while cupped in the hands was an ice ship. A grandiose flag, thought Arflane, hefting his near-dead burden on his back and skimming closer to the great concourse of craft.

As Arflane approached the ships, the schooner he had noticed preparing to leave let go its moorings and its huge sails bulged as the wind filled them. Only the mainsail and two fore-stay sails had been unfurled, enough to take the ship out slowly until it was clear of the others.

It turned into the wind and slid gracefully towards him on its great runners. He stopped and saluted cheerfully as the ship sailed by. It was *The Snow Girl* out of Brershill. The runners squealed on the smooth ice as the helmsman swung his wheel and steered a course between the few irregularities worn by the constant passage of ships. One or two of the sailors recognised him and waved back from where they hung in the rigging, but most were busy with the sails. Through the clear, freezing air, Arflane heard the voice of the skipper shouting his orders into a megaphone. Then the ship had passed him, letting down more sail and gathering speed.

Arflane felt a pang as he turned and watched the ship skim over the ice towards the east. It was a good craft; one he would be pleased to command. The wind caught more sail and *The Snow Girl* leapt suddenly, like an animal. Startled by the sudden burst of speed, the black and white snow-kites that had been circling above her squawked wildly and flapped upwards before diving back to the main

gathering of ships to drift expectantly above them or perch in the top trees in the hope of snatching tit-bits of whale meat or seal blubber from the carcasses being unloaded.

Arflane dug his lances deep into the ice and pushed his overloaded skis forward, sliding now between the lines and hulls of the ships, avoiding the curious sailors who glanced at him as they worked, and making his way towards the high wall of ice-blocks that sheltered the city-crevasse of Friesgalt.

At the main gate, which was barely large enough to let through a sledge, a guard stood squarely in the entrance, an arrow nocked to his ivory bow. The guard was a fair-haired youngster with his fur hood flung back from his head and an anxious expression on his face which made Arflane believe that the lad had only recently been appointed to guard the gate.

"You are not of Friesgalt and you are plainly not a trader from the ships," said the youth. "What do you want?"

"I carry your Lord Rorsefne on my back," said Arflane. "Where shall I take him?"

"The Lord Rorsefne!" The guard stepped forward, lowering his bow and pulling back the headpiece of the sleeping sack so that he could make out the face of Arflane's burden. "Are there no others? Is he dead?"

"Almost."

"They left months ago—on a secret expedition. Where did you find him?"

"A day's journey or so east of here." Arflane loosened the straps and began lowering the old man to the ice. "I'll leave him with you."

The young man looked hesitant and then said: "No—stay until my relief arrives. He is due now. You must tell all you know. They might want to send out a rescue party."

"I can't help them," Arflane said impatiently.

"Please stay—just to tell them exactly how you found him. It will be easier for me."

Arflane shrugged. "There's nothing to tell." He bent and began dragging the body inside the gate. "But I'll wait, if you like, until they give me back my sleeping sack."

Beyond the gate was a second wall of ice-blocks, at chest

height. Peering over it, Arflane saw the steep path that led down to the first level of the city. There were other levels at intervals, going down as far as the eye could see. On the far side of the crevasse Arflane made out some of the doorways and windows of the residential levels. Many of them were embellished with ornate carvings and bas reliefs chiselled from the living rock. More elaborate than any cave-dwellings of millennia ago, these troglodytic chambers had from the outside much of the appearance of the first permanent shelters mankind's ancestors had possessed. The reversion to this mode of existence had been made necessary centuries earlier when it had become impossible to build surface houses as the temperature decreased and the level of the ice rose. The first crevasse-dwellers had shown forethought in anticipating the conditions to come and had built their living quarters as far below ground as possible in order to retain as much heat as they could. These same men had built the ice-ships, knowing that, with the impossibility of sustaining supplies of fuel, these were the most practical form of transportation.

Arflane could now see the young guard's relief on the nearside ramp leading to the second level to the top. He was dressed in white bearskins and armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows. He toiled up the slope in the spiked boots that it was best to wear when ascending or descending the levels, for there was only a single leather rope to stop a man from falling off the comparatively narrow ramp into the gorge.

When the relief came the young guard explained what had happened. The relief, an old man with an expressionless face, nodded and went to take up his position on the gate.

Arflane squatted down and unlaced his skis while the young guard fetched him a pair of spiked boots. When Arflane had got these on they lifted the faintly stirring bundle between them and began carefully to descend the ramp.

The light from the surface grew fainter as they descended, passing a number of men and women busy with trade goods being taken to the surface and supplies of food and hides being brought down. Some of the people realized the identity of the Lord Rorsefne. Arflane and the guard re-

fused to answer their incredulous and anxious questions but stumbled on into the ever-increasing darkness.

It took a long time to get the Lord Rorsefne to a level lying midway on the face of the crevasse. The level was lighted dimly by bulbs powered by the same source that heated the residential sections of the cavern city. This source lay at the very bottom of the crevasse and was regarded, even by the myth-mocking Friesgaltian aristocracy, with superstition. To the ice-dwellers, cold was the natural condition of everything and heat was an evil necessity for their survival, but it did not make it any the less unnatural. In the Ice Mother's land there was no heat and none was needed to sustain the eternal life of all those who joined her when they died and became cold. Heat could destroy the ice, and this was sure proof of its evil. Down at the bottom of the crevasse the heat, it was rumoured, reached an impossible temperature and it was here that those who had offended against the Ice Mother went in spirit after they had died.

The Lord Rorsefne's family inhabited a whole level of the city on both sides of the crevasse. A bridge spanned the gorge and the two men had to cross it to reach the main chambers of the Rorsefne household. The bridge, made of hide, swayed and sagged as they crossed. Waiting for them on the other side was a square-faced middle-aged man in the yellow indoor livery of the Rorsefne.

"What have you got there?" he asked impatiently, thinking probably that Arflane and the guard were traders trying to sell something.

"Your master," Arflane said with a slight smile. He had the satisfaction of seeing the servant's face fall as he recognised the half-hidden features of the man in the sleeping sack.

Hurriedly, the servant helped them through a low door which had the Rorsefne arms carved into the rock above it. They went through two more doors before reaching the entrance hall.

The big hall was well-lit by light tubes imbedded in the wall. It was overheated also, and Arflane began to sweat in mental and physical discomfort. He pushed back his hood and loosened the thongs of his coat. The hall was richly furnished, Arflane had seen nothing like it. Painted

hangings of the softest leather covered the rock walls ; and even here, in the entrance hall, there were chairs made of wood, some with upholstery of real cloth. Arflane had only seen sailcloth and one wooden artifact in his life. Leather, no matter how finely it could be tanned, was never so delicate as the silk and linen he looked at now. It was hundreds of years old, preserved in the cold of the store-chambers no doubt, and must date back to a time before his ancestors had come to live in the ravines of the south, when there was still vegetation on the land and not just in the warm ponds and the ocean of blasphemous legend. Arflane knew that the world, like the stars and the moon, was comprised almost wholly of ice and that one day at the will of the Ice Mother even the warm ponds and the rock-caverns that sustained animal and human life would be turned into the ice which was the natural state of all matter.

The yellow-clad servant had disappeared but now returned with a man almost as tall as Arflane. He was thin-faced, with pursed lips and pale blue eyes. His skin was white, as if it had never been exposed above ground, and he wore a wine-red jacket and tight black trousers of soft leather. His clothing seemed effete to Arflane.

He stopped near the unconscious body of Rorsefne and looked down at it thoughtfully ; then he raised his head and glanced distastefully at Arflane and the guard.

"Very well," he said. "You may go."

The man could not help his voice—perhaps not his tone either—but both irritated Arflane. He turned to leave. He had expected, without desiring it, at least some formal statement of thanks.

"Not you, stranger," said the tall man. "I meant the guard."

The guard left and Arflane watched the servants carry the old man away. He said: "I'd like my sleeping sack back later," then looked into the face of the tall man.

"How is the Lord Rorsefne?" said the other distantly.

"Dying, perhaps. Another would be—but he could live. He'll lose some fingers and toes at very least."

Expressionlessly, the other man nodded. "I am Janek Ulsenn," he said, "the Lord Rorsefne's son-in-law. Naturally we are grateful to you. How did you find the Lord?"

Arflane explained briefly.

Ulsenn frowned. "He told you nothing else?"

"It's a marvel he had the strength to tell me as much." Arflane could have liked the old man, but he knew he could never like Ulsenn.

"Indeed?" Ulsenn thought for a moment. "Well, I will see you have your reward. A thousand good bear skins should satisfy you, eh?"

It was a fortune.

"I helped the old man because I admired his courage," Arflane said brusquely. "I do not want your skins."

Ulsenn seemed momentarily surprised. "What *do* you want? I see you're," he paused, "from another city. You are not a nobleman. What . . . ?" He was plainly puzzled. "It is unheard of that a man—without a code—would bother to do what you did. Even one of us would hesitate to save a stranger." His final sentence held a note of belligerence, as if he resented the idea of a foreigner and a commoner making the gesture Arflane had made; as if selfless action were the prerogative of the rich and powerful.

Arflane shrugged. "I liked the old man's courage." He made to leave, but as he did so a door opened on his right and a black-haired woman wearing a heavy dress of fawn and blue entered the hall. Her pale face was long and firm-jawed, and she walked with natural grace. Her hair flowed over her shoulders, and she had gold-flecked brown eyes. She glanced at Ulsenn with a slight interrogatory frown.

Arflane inclined his head slightly and reached for the door handle.

The woman's voice was soft, perhaps a trifle hesitant. "Are you the man who saved my father's life?"

Unwillingly, Arflane turned back and stood facing her with his legs spread apart as if on the deck of a ship. "I am, madam—if he survives," he said shortly.

"This is my wife," said Ulsenn with equally poor grace.

She smiled pleasantly. "He wanted me to thank you and wants to express his gratitude himself when he feels stronger. He would like you to stay here until then—as his guest."

Arflane had not looked directly at her until now and

when he raised his head to stare for a moment into her golden eyes she appeared to give a faint start, but at once was composed again.

"Thank you," he said, looking with some amusement in Ulsenn's direction, "but your husband might not feel so hospitable."

Ulsenn's wife gave her husband a glance of vexed surprise. Either she was genuinely upset by Ulsenn's treatment of Arflane, or she was acting for Arflane's benefit. If she were acting, Arflane was still at a loss to understand her motives; for all he knew she was merely using this opportunity to embarrass her husband in front of a stranger of lower rank than himself.

Ulsenn sighed. "Nonsense. He must stay if your father desires it. The Lord Rorsefne, after all, is head of the house. I'll have Onvald bring him something."

"Perhaps our guest would prefer to eat with us," she said sharply. There was definitely animosity between the two.

"Ah, yes," muttered Ulsenn bleakly.

Wearying of this, Arflane said with as much politeness as he could muster "With your permission I'll eat at a trader's lodging and rest there, too. I have heard you have a good traveller's hostel on the sixteenth level." The guard had told him that as they had passed the place earlier.

She said quietly, "Please stay with us. After what—"

Arflane bowed and again looked directly at her, trying to judge her sincerity. This woman was not of the same stuff as her husband, he decided. She resembled her father in features to some extent and he thought he saw the qualities in her that he had admired in the old man; but he would not stay now.

She avoided his glance. "Very well. What name shall be asked at the traveller's lodging?"

"Captain Konrad Arflane," he said gruffly, as if reluctantly confiding a secret, "of Breshill. Ice Mother protect you."

Then, with a curt nod to them both, he left the hall, passing through the triple doors and slamming the last heavily and fiercely behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Ice Spirit

AGAINST HIS NORMAL instincts, Konrad Arflane decided to wait in Friesgalt until the old man could talk to him. He was not sure why he waited ; if asked, he would have said it was because he did not want to lose a good sleeping sack and, besides, he had nothing better to do. He would not have admitted that it was Ulrica Ulsenn who kept him in the city.

He spent most of his time wandering around on the surface among the big ships. He deliberately did not call at the Rorsefne household, being too stubborn. He waited for them to contact him.

In spite of his strong dislike of the man, Arflane thought he understood Janek Ulsenn better than other Friesgaltians he had encountered. Ulsenn was not typical of the modern aristocracy of Friesgalt who belittled the rigid and haughty code of their ancestors. In the other poorer cities the old traditions were still respected, though the merchant princes there had never had the power of families like the Rorsefnes and Ulsenns. Arflane could admire Ulsenn at least for refusing to soften his attitudes. In that respect he and Ulsenn had something in common. Arflane hated the signs of gradual change in his environment that he had half-consciously noted. Thinking was looser, the softening of the harsh but sensible laws of survival in the icelands was even illustrated by his own recent action in helping the old man. Only disaster could come of this trend towards decadence and more like Ulsenn were needed in positions of influence where they could stop the gradual rejection of traditional social behaviour, traditional religion and traditional thinking. There was no other way to ensure their ability to stay alive in an environment where animal life was not meant to exist. Let the rot set in, Arflane thought, and the Ice Mother would lose no time in sweeping away the last surviving members of the race.

It was a sign of the times that Arflane had become something of a hero in the city. A century earlier they would have sneered at his weakness. Now they congratulated him and he in turn despised them, understanding that they patronised him as they might have honoured a brave animal, that they had contempt for his values and, indeed, his very poverty. He wandered alone, his face stern, his manner surly, avoiding everyone and knowing without caring that he was reinforcing their opinion that all not of Friesgalt were uncouth and barbarian.

On the third day of his stay he went to look, with grudging admiration, at the *Ice Spirit*.

As he came up to the ship, ducking under her taut mooring lines, someone shouted down at him.

"Captain Arflane!"

He looked up reluctantly. A fair, bearded face peered over the rail. "Would you like to come aboard and look around the ship, sir?"

Arflane shook his head; but a leather ladder was already bouncing down the side, its bottom striking the ice near his feet. He frowned, desiring no unnecessary involvement with the Friesgaltians, but deeply curious to set foot on the deck of a vessel that was almost a myth in the icelands.

He made up his mind quickly, grasped the ladder and began to climb towards the ivory-inlaid rail far above.

Swinging his leg over the rail he was greeted with a smile by the bearded man, dressed in a rich jerkin of white bear cub's fur and tight, grey sealskin trousers, almost the uniform of Friesgaltian ship's officers.

"I thought you might be interested to inspect the ship, captain, as a fellow sailor." The man's smile was frank and his tone did not have the hint of condescension Arflane half expected. "My name's Petchnyoff, second officer of the *Ice Spirit*." He was a comparatively young man for a second officer. His beard and hair were soft and blond, tending to give him a foolish look, but his voice was strong and steady. "Can I show you around?"

"Thanks," said Arflane. "Shouldn't you ask your captain first?" He, when commanding his own ship, was firm about such courtesies.

Petchnyoff smiled. "The *Ice Spirit* has no captain, as such. She's captained by the Lord Rorsefne under normal

conditions, or by someone he has appointed when he's unable to be aboard. In your case, I'm sure he'd want me to show you over the ship."

Arflane disapproved of this system, which he had heard about; in his opinion a ship should have a permanent captain, a man who spent most of his life aboard her. It was the only way to get the full feel of a ship and learn what she could do and what she could not.

The ship had three decks, main, middle and poop, each of diminishing area, with the two upper decks aft of them as they stood there. The decks were of pitted fibreglass, like the hull, and spread with ground-up bone to give the feet better purchase. Most of the ship's superstructure was of the same fibreglass, worn, scratched and battered from countless voyages over countless years. Some doors and hatch-covers had been replaced by facsimiles fashioned of large pieces of ivory glued together and carved elaborately in contrast to the unadorned fibreglass. The ivory was yellowed and old in many places and looked almost as ancient as the originals. Lines—a mixture of nylon, gut and leather—stretched from the rails into the top trees.

Arflane looked up, getting the best impression of the ship's size he had had yet. The masts were so high that they seemed almost to disappear from sight. The ship was well kept, he noted, with every yard and inch of rigging so straight and true that he would not have been surprised to have seen men crawling about in the top-trees measuring the angle of the gaffs. The sails were furled tight, with every fold of identical depth; and Arflane saw that the ivory booms, too, were carved with intricate pictorial designs. This was a show ship and he was filled with resentment that she was so rarely sailed on a working trip.

Petchnyoff stood patiently at his side, looking up also. The light had turned grey and cold, giving an unreal quality to the day.

"It'll snow soon," said the second officer.

Arflane nodded. He liked nothing better than a snow-storm. "She's very tidily kept," he said.

Petchnyoff noted his tone and grinned. "Too tidy, you think. You could be right. We have to keep the crew occupied. We get precious little chance of sailing her, particularly since the Lord Rorsefne's been away." He led Arflane

towards an ivory door let into the side of the middle deck. "I'll show you below first."

The cabin they entered held two bunks and was more luxuriously furnished than any cabin Arflane had seen. There were heavy chests, furs, a table of whalebone and chairs of skins slung on bone frames. A door led off this into a narrow companionway.

"These are the cabins of the captain and any guests he happens to have with him," Petchnyoff explained, pointing out doors as they passed them. "The cabin we came through was mine. I share it with the third officer, Kristov Hensin. He's on duty, but he wants to meet you."

Petchnyoff showed Arflane the vast holds of the ship. They seemed to go on forever. Arflane began to think that he was lost in a maze the size of a city, the ship was so big. The crew's quarters were clean and spacious. They were under-occupied since only a skeleton crew was aboard, primarily to keep the ship looking at her best and ready to sail at the whim of her owner-captain. Most of the ship's ports were of the original thick, unbreakable glass. As he went by one, Arflane noticed that it was darker outside and that snow was falling in great sheets on to the ice, limiting visibility to a few yards.

Arflane could not help being impressed by the capacity of the ship and envied Petchnyoff his command. If Breshill had one vessel like this, he thought, the city would put her to good use and soon regain her status. Perhaps he should be thankful that the Friesgaltians did not make better use of her, otherwise they might have captured an even bigger proportion of the trade.

They climbed up eventually to the poop deck. It was occupied by an old man who appeared not to notice them. He was staring intently at the dimly-seen wheel that was positioned below on the middle deck. It had been lashed fast so that the runners which it steered would not shift and strain the ship's moorings. Though the old man's eyes were focused on the wheel he seemed to be contemplating some inner thought. He turned as they joined him at the rail. His beard was white and he wore his coarse fur hood up, shadowing his eyes. He had his jerkin tightly laced and there were mittens on his hands. Snow had settled on his shoulders; the snow was still heavy, darkening the air and

drifting through the rigging to heap itself on the decks. Arflane heard it pattering on the canvas high above.

"This is our third officer, Kristoff Hinsen," Petchnyoff said, slapping the old man's arm. "Meet the Lord Rorsefne's saviour, Kristoff."

Kristoff regarded Arflane thoughtfully. He had a face like an old snow-kite, with knowing beady black eyes and a hooked nose.

"You're Captain Arflane. You commanded *The North Wind*, eh?"

"I'm surprised you should know that," Arflane replied. "I left her five years ago."

"Aye. Remember a ship you nosed into an icebreak south of here? *The Tanya Ulsenn*?"

Arflane laughed. "I do. We were racing for a whale herd that had been sighted. The others dropped out until there was only us and *The Tanya*. It was a profitable trip once we'd put *The Tanya* into the icebreak. Were you aboard her?"

"I was the captain. I lost my commission through your trick."

Arflane had acted according to the accepted code of the ice sailors, but he studied Kristoff's face for signs of resentment. There seemed to be none.

"They were better times for me," said Arflane.

"And for me," Kristoff said. He chuckled. "So our victories and defeats come to the same thing in the end. You've no ship to captain now—and I'm third officer aboard a fancy hussy who lies in bed all day."

"She should sail," Arflane said, looking around him. "She's worth ten of any other ship."

"The day this old whore sails on a working trip—that's the day the world will end!" Kristoff kicked at the deck in disgust. "I tried your tactic once you know, Captain Arflane, when I was second officer aboard *The Heurfrast*. The captain was hurt—tangled up in a harpoon line of all things—and I was in command. You know that old hunter, *The Heurfrast*?"

Arflane nodded.

"Well, she's hard to handle until you get the feel of her and then she's easy. It was a year or so later and we were racing two brigs from Abersgalt. One overturned in our

path and we had to go round her, which gave the other a good start on us. We managed to get up behind her and then we saw this icebreak ahead. I decided to try nosing her in."

"What happened?" Arflane asked, smiling.

"We *both* went in—I didn't have your sense of timing. For that, they pensioned me off on this petrified cow-whale. I realise now that your trick was even harder than I thought."

"I was lucky," Arflane said.

"But you'd used that tactic before—and since. You were a good captain. We Friesgaltians don't usually admit there are any better sailors than our own."

"Thanks," said Arflane, unable to resist the old man's flattery and beginning to feel more comfortable now that he was in the company of men of his own trade. "You nearly pulled yourself out of my trap, I remember."

"Nearly." Hinsen sighed. "The sailing isn't what it was, Captain Arflane."

Arflane grunted agreement.

Petchnyoff smiled and pulled up his hood against the weather. The snow fell so thickly that it was impossible to make out more than the faint outlines of the nearer ships.

Standing there in relaxed silence, Arflane fancied that they could be the only three men in all the world; for everything was still beneath the falling snow that muffled any sound.

"We'll see less of this weather as time goes on," said Petchnyoff thankfully. "Snow comes only once in ten or fifteen days now. My father remembers it falling so often it seemed to last the whole summer. And the winds were harsher in the winter, too."

Hinsen dusted snow off his jerkin. "You're right, lad. The world has changed since I was young—she's warming up. In a few generations we'll be skipping about on the surface naked." He laughed at his own joke.

Arflane felt uneasy. He did not want to spoil the pleasant mood, but he had to speak. "Not talk the Ice Mother should hear, friends," he said awkwardly. "Besides, what you say is untrue. The climate alters a little one way or another

from year to year, but over a lifetime it grows steadily colder. That must be so. The world is dying."

"So our ancestors thought and symbolised their ideas in the creed of the Ice Mother," Petchnyoff said, smiling. "But what if there were no Ice Mother? Suppose the sun were getting hotter and the world changing back to what it was before the ice came? What if the idea were true that this is only one of several ages when the ice has covered the world? Certain old books say as much, captain."

"I would call that blasphemous nonsense," Arflane said sharply. "You know yourself that those books contain many strange notions which we know to be false. The only book I believe is the Book of the Ice Mother. She came from the centre of the universe, bringing cleansing ice; one day her purpose will be fulfilled and all will be ice, all will be purified. Read what you will into that, say that the Ice Mother does not exist—that her story only represents the truth—but you must admit that even some of the old books said the same, that all heat must disappear."

Hinsen glanced at him sardonically. "There are signs that the old ideas are false," he murmured. "Followers of the Ice Mother say 'All must grow cold'; but you know that we have scholars in Friesgalt who make it their business to measure the weather. We got our power through their knowledge. The scholars say the level of the ice has dropped a few degrees in the last two or three years, and one day the sun will burn yellow-hot again and it will melt the ice away. They say that the sun is hotter already and the beasts move south, anticipating the change. They smell a new sort of life, Arflane. Life like the weed-plants we find in the warm ponds, but growing on land out of stuff that is like little bits of crumbled rock—out of earth. They believe that these must already exist somewhere—that they have always existed, perhaps on islands in the sea . . ."

"There is no *sea*!"

"The scholars think we could not have survived if there were not a sea somewhere, and these plants growing on islands."

"No!" Arflane turned his back on Hinsen.

"You say not? But reason says it is the truth."

"Reason?" Arflane sneered. "Or some twist of mind that passes for reason? There's no true logic in what you say."

You only prattle a warped idea you would *rather* believe. Your kind of thinking will bring disaster to us all!"

Hinsen shook his head. "I see this as a fact, Captain Arflane—the ice is softening as we grow soft. Just as the beasts scent the new life, so do we—that is why our ideas are changing. I *desire* no change. I am only sorry, for I could love no other world than the one I know. I'll die in my own world, but what will our descendants miss? The wind, the snow, and the swift ice—the sight of a herd of whales speeding in flight before your fleet, the harpoon's leap, the fight under a red, round sun hanging frozen in the blue sky; the spout of black whale blood, brave as the men who let it . . . Where will all that be when the icelands become dirty, unfirm earth and brittle green? What will men become? All we love and admire will be belittled and then forgotten in that clogged, hot, unhealthy place. What a tangled, untidy world it will be. But it *will* be!"

Arflane slapped the rail, scattering the snow. "You are insane! How can all this change?"

"You could be right," Hinsen replied softly. "But what I see, sane or not, is what I see, straight and definite—in-avoidable."

"You'd deny every rule of nature?" Arflane asked mockingly. "Even a fool must admit that nothing becomes hot of its own accord after it has become cold. See what is about you, not what you *think* is here! I understand your reasoning. But it is soft reasoning, wishful reasoning. Death, Kristoff Hinsen, *death* is all that is inevitable! Once there was this dirt, this green, this life—I accept that. But it died. Does a man die, become cold and then suddenly grow warm again, springing up saying 'I died, but now I live!?' Can't you see how your logic deceives you? Whether the Ice Mother is real or only a symbol of what is real, she must be honoured. Lose sight of that, as you in Friesgalt have done, and our people will die sooner than they need. You think me a superstitious barbarian, I know, for holding the views I hold—but there is good sense in what I say."

"I envy you for being able to stay so certain," Kristoff Hinsen said calmly.

"And I pity you for your unnecessary sorrow!"

Embarrassed, Petchnyoff took Arflane's arm. "Can I show you the rest of the ship, captain?"

"Thank you," said Arflane brusquely, "but I have seen all I want. She is a good ship. Don't let her rot, also."

His face troubled, Hinsen started to say something; but Arflane turned away. He left the poop and made his way to the lower deck, clambered over the side, climbed down the ladder and marched back towards the underground city, his boots crunching in the snow.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Shipsmasher Hostel

AFTER HIS VISIT to the ice schooner Konrad Arflane became increasingly impatient with his wait in Friesgalt. He had still had no word from the Ulsenns about the old man's condition and he was disturbed by the atmosphere he found in the city. He had come to no decision regarding his own affairs; but he resolved to try to get a berth, even as a petty officer for the time being, on the next Brershill ship that came in.

He took to haunting the fringes of the great dock, avoiding contact with all the ships and in particular the *Ice Spirit*, and looking out for a Brershill craft.

On the fourth morning of his wait a three-masted barque was sighted. She was gliding in under full sail, flying a Brershill flag and travelling faster than was wise for a vessel so close to the dock. Arflane smiled as she came nearer, recognising her as the *Tender Maiden*, a whaler skippered by his old friend Captain Jarhan Brønn. She seemed to be sailing straight for the part of the dock where ships were thickest, and the men working there began to scatter in panic, doubtless fearing that she was out of control. When she was only a short distance from the dock she turned smoothly and rapidly in a narrow arc, reefed sails and slid

towards the far end of the line where other whaling vessels were already moored. Arflane began to run across the ice, his ridged boots giving him good purchase.

Panting, he reached the *Tender Maiden* just as she was throwing down her anchor ropes to the mooring hands who stood by with their spikes and mallets.

Arflane grinned a little as he seized the bone spikes and heavy iron mallet from a surprised mooring hand and began driving a spike into the ice. He reached out for a nearby line and tautened it, lashing it fast to the spike. The ship stirred for a moment, resisting the lines, and then was still.

From above him on the deck he heard someone laughing. Looking up, he saw that the ship's captain, Jarhan Brenn, was standing at the rail.

"Arflane! Are you down to working as a mooring hand? Where's your ship?"

Arflane shrugged and spread his hands ironically, then grabbed hold of the mooring line and began to swing himself up it until he was able to grasp the rail and climb over it to stand beside his old friend.

"No ship," he told Brenn. "She was given up to honour a bad debt of the owner's. Sold to a Friesgalt merchant."

Brenn nodded sympathetically. "Not the last, I'd guess. You should have stayed at the whaling. There's always work for us whalers, whatever happens. And you didn't even marry the woman in the end." He chuckled.

Brenn was referring to a time, six years since, when Arflane had taken a trading command as a favour to a girl he had wished to marry. It was only after he had done this that he had realised that he wanted no part of a girl who could demand such terms. By then it had been too late to get his command of the whaler back.

He smiled ruefully at Brenn and shrugged again. "With my poor luck, Brenn, I doubt I'd have sighted a whale in all these six years."

His friend was a short, stocky man, with a round, ruddy face and a fringe beard. He was dressed in heavy black fur, but his head and hands were bare. His greying hair was cropped close, for a whaler, but his rough, strong hands showed the callouses that only a harpoon could make. Brenn was respected as a skipper in both the South Ice and

North Ice hunting fields. Currently, by the look of his rig, he was hunting the North Ice.

"Poor luck isn't yours alone." Brenn grunted in disgust. "Our holds are just about empty. Two calves and an old cow are all we have aboard. We ran out of provisions and plan to trade our cargo for more supplies, then we'll try the South Ice and hope the hunting's better. Whales are getting hard to find in the north."

Brenn was unusual in that he hunted both south and north. Most whaling men preferred one type of field or the other (for their characteristics were very different) but Brenn did not mind.

"Aren't all the hunting fields poor this season?" Arflane asked. "I heard that even seal and bear are scarcer, and no walrus have been seen for two seasons."

Brenn pursed his lips. "The patch will pass, with the Ice Mother's help." He slapped Arflane's arm and began to move down the deck to supervise the unloading of the cargo from the central hold. The ship stank of whale blood and blubber. "Look at our catch," he said, as Arflane followed him. "There was no need for flenching. We just hauled 'em in and stowed 'em whole." Flenching was the whaling man's term for cutting up the whale. This was normally done on the ice, and then the pieces were winched aboard for stowing. If there had been no need to do this, then the catch must be small indeed.

Balancing himself by gripping ratline, Arflane peered into the hold. It was dark, but he could make out the stiff bodies of two small calves and a cow-whale which did not look much bigger. He shook his head in sympathy. There was hardly enough there to re-provision the ship for the long haul to the South Ice. Brenn must be in a gloomier mood than he seemed.

Brenn shouted orders and his hands began to lower themselves into the hold as derricks were swung across and tackles dropped. The whaling men worked slowly and were plainly depressed. They had every reason to be in poor spirits, since the proceeds of a catch were always divided up at the end of a hunting voyage, and every man's share depended on the number and size of the whales caught. Brenn must have asked his crew to forgo its share in this small catch in the hope that the South Ice would yield a

better one. Whaling men normally came into a dock with plenty of credit and they liked to spend it. Whalers with no credit were surly and quick tempered. Arflane realised that Brenn would be aware of this and must be worrying how he would be able to control his crew during its stay in Friesgalt.

"Where are you berthing?" he asked quietly, watching as the first of the calves was swung up out of the hold. The dead calf had the marks of four or five harpoons in its hide. Its four great flippers, front and back, waved as it turned in the tackle. Like all young land-whales, there was only sparse hair on its body. Land-whales normally grew their full covering of wiry hair at maturity, after three years. As it was, this calf was twelve feet long and must weigh only a few tons.

Brenn sighed. "Well, I've good credit at the Shipsmasher hostel. I always pay in a certain amount of my profit there every time we dock in Friesgalt. My men will be looked after all right, for a few days at least, and by that time we should be ready to sail again. It depends on the sort of bargain I can make with the merchants—and how soon I can make it. I'll be out looking for the best offer tomorrow."

The Shipsmasher, named like all whaling men's hostels after a famous whale, was not the best hostel in Friesgalt. It had claims, in fact, for being the worst. It was a 'top-deck' hostel on the third level from the top, cut from ice and not from rock. Arflane realised that this was a bad time to ask his friend for a berth. Brenn must be cutting all possible corners to provision and re-equip his ship on the gamble that the South Ice would yield a better catch.

The derricks creaked as the calf was swung towards the side.

"We're getting 'em out as soon as possible," Brenn said. "There's a chance that someone will want the catch right away. The faster the better."

Brenn shouted to his first officer, a tall, thin man by the name of Olaf Bergsenn. "Take over Olaf, I'm going to the Shipsmasher. Bring the men there when you're finished. You know who to put on watch."

Bergsenn's lugubrious face did not change expression as he nodded once and moved along the stained deck to supervise the unloading.

A gangplank had been lowered and Arflane and Brenn walked down it in short, jerky steps, watched by a knot of gloomy harpooners who lounged, harpoons across their shoulders, near the mainmast. It was a tradition that only the captain could leave the ship before the cargo had been unloaded.

When they got to the city wall, the guard recognised Arflane and let him and Brenn through. They began to descend the ramp. The ice of the ramp and the wall beside it was ingrained with powdered rock that had itself worn so that it now resembled stone. The rope rail on the other side of the ramp also showed signs of constant wear. On the far wall of the crevasse, for some distance down, Arflane could see people moving up and down the ramps, or working on the ledges. At almost every level the chasm was criss-crossed by rope bridges, and some way up the crevasse, above their heads now, was the single permanent bridge which was only used when especially needed.

As they stumbled down the ramps towards the third level Brenn smiled once or twice at Arflane, but was silent. Arflane wondered if he were intruding and asked his friend if he would like him to leave him at the Shipsmasher, but Brenn shook his head.

"I wouldn't miss a chance of seeing you, Arflane. Let me talk to Flatch, then we'll have a barrel of beer and I'll tell you all my troubles and listen to yours."

There were three whaling hostels on the third level. They walked past the first two—the King Herdarda and the Killer Pers—and came to the Shipsmasher. Like the other two, the Shipsmasher had a huge whale jawbone for a doorway and a small whale skull hanging as a sign outside.

They opened the battered door and walked straight in to the hostel's main room.

It was dark, large and high-roofed, though it gave the impression of being cramped. Its walls were covered with crudely tanned whale hides. Faulty lighting strips flickered at odd places on ceiling and walls and the place smelled strongly of ale, whalemeat and human sweat. Crude pictures of whales, whaling men and whaling ships were hung on the hides, as were harpoons, lances and the three-foot broadbladed cutlasses, similar to the one Arflane wore, that were used mainly for flenching. Some of the harpoons had

been twisted into fantastic shapes telling of the death-struggles of particular whales. None of these whaling tools were crossed, for the whalers regarded it as unlucky to cross harpoons or flenching cutlasses.

Groups of whaling men lounged at the closely-packed tables, sitting on hard benches and drinking a beer that was brewed from one of the many kinds of weed found in the warm ponds. This ale was extremely bitter and few but whaling men would drink it.

Arflane and Brenn walked through the clusters of tables up to the small counter. Behind it, in a cubby hole, sat a shadowy figure who rose as they approached.

Flatch, the owner of the Shipsmasher, had been a whaling man years before. He was taller than Arflane but almost unbelievably obese, with a great belly and enormously fat arm and leg. He had only one eye, one ear, one arm and one leg, as if a huge knife had been used to sheer off everything down one side of him. He had lost these various organs and limbs in an encounter with the whale called Shipsmasher, a huge bull that he had been the first to harpoon. The whale had been killed, but Flatch had been unable to carry on whaling and had bought the hostel out of his share of the proceeds. As a tribute to his kill he had named the hostel after it. As recompense he had used the whale's ivory to replace his arm and leg, and a triangle of its hide was used as a patch for his missing eye.

Flatch's remaining eye peered through the layers of fat surrounding it and he raised his whalebone arm in greeting.

"Captain Arflane. Captain Brenn." His voice was high and unpleasant, but at the same time barely audible, as if it was forced to travel up through all the fat around his throat. His many chins moved slightly as he spoke, but it was impossible to tell if he greeted them with any particular feeling.

"Good morning, Flatch," Brenn said cordially. "You'll remember the beer and provisions I've supplied you with all these past seasons?"

"I do, Captain Brenn."

"I've need of the credit for a few days. My men must be fed, boozed and whored here until I'm ready to sail for the South Ice. I've had bad luck in the north. I ask you only fair return for what I've invested, no more."

Flatch parted his fat lips and his jowls moved up and down. "You'll get it, Captain Brenn. Your help saw me through a bad time for two seasons. Your men will be looked after."

Brenn grinned, as if in relief. He seemed to have been expecting an argument. "I'll want a room for myself," he said. He turned to Arflane. "Where are you staying, Arflane?"

"I have a room in a hostel some levels down," Konrad Arflane told him.

"How many in your crew, captain?" Flatch asked.

Brenn told him, and answered the few other questions Flatch asked him. He began to relax more, glancing around the hostel's main room, looking at some of the pictures on the walls.

As he was finishing with Flatch a man got up from a nearby table and took several steps towards them before stopping and confronting them.

He cradled a long, heavy harpoon in one massive arm and the other hand was on his hip. His face, even in the poor, flickering light, could be seen to be red, mottled and ravaged by wind, sun and frostbite. It was a near-fleshless head and the bones jutted like the ribs of a ship. His nose was long and narrow, like the inverted prow of a clipper, and there was a deep scar under his right eye and another on his left cheek. His hair was black, piled and plaited on his head in a kind of coiled pyramid that broke at the top into two stiff pieces resembling the fins of a whale or seal. This strange hairstyle was held in place by clotted blubber and its smell was strong. His furs were of fine quality, but matted with whale blood and blubber, smelling rancidly; the jacket was open at the neck, revealing a whale-tooth necklace. From both ear lobes were suspended pieces of flat, carved ivory. He wore boots of soft leather, drawn up to the knee and fastened against his fur breeches by means of bone pins. Around his waist was a broad belt, from which hung a scabbarded cutlass and a large pouch. He seemed a savage, even amongst whaling men, but he had a powerful presence, partially due to his narrow eyes, which were cold, glinting blue.

"You're sailing to the South Ice, did I hear you say, skipper?" His voice was deep and harsh. "To the south?"

"Aye." Brenn looked the man up and down. "And I'm fully crewed—or as fully crewed as I can afford."

The huge man nodded and moved his tongue inside his mouth before spitting into a spittoon near the counter. The spittoon had been made from a whale's cranium. "I'm not asking for a berth, skipper. I'm my own man. Captains ask me to sail with them, not the other way about. I'm Urquart."

Arflane had already recognised the man, but Brenn by some fluke could never have seen him. Brenn's expression changed. "Urquart—Long Lance Urquart. I'm honoured to meet you." Urquart was known as the greatest harpooner in the history of the icelands. He was rumoured to have killed more than twenty bull whales single-handed.

Urquart moved his head slightly, as if acknowledging Brenn's compliment. "Aye." He spat again and looked broodingly at the cranium spittoon. "I'm a South Ice man myself. You hunt the North Ice mainly, I hear."

"Mainly," Brenn agreed, "but I know the South Ice well enough." His tone was puzzled, though he was too polite, or too over-awed, to ask Urquart directly why he had addressed him.

Urquart leaned on his harpoon, clutching it with both big, bony hands and sucking in his lips. The harpoon was ten feet long, and its many barbs were six inches or more across, curving down for nearly two feet of its length, with a big metal ring fixed beneath them where tackle was tied.

"There's a great many North Ice men have turned to the South Ice this season as well as last," said Urquart. "They've found few fish, Captain Brenn."

Whaling men — particularly harpooners — invariably called whales 'fish' in a spirit of studied disdain for the huge mammals.

"You mean the hunting's poor there, too." Brenn's face clouded.

"Not as poor as on the North Ice, from what I hear," Urquart said slowly. "But I only tell you because you seem about to take a risk. I've seen many skippers—good ones like yourself—do the same. I speak friendly, Captain Brenn. The luck is bad, both north and south. A decent herd's not been sighted all season. The fish are moving south, beyond

our range. Our ships follow them further and further. Soon it'll not be possible to provision for long enough voyages." Urquart paused, and then he added, "The fish are leaving."

"Why tell me this?" Brenn said, half-angry with Urquart in his disappointment.

"Because you're Konrad Arflane's friend," Urquart said without looking at Arflane, who had never met him in his life before, had only seen him at a distance.

Arflane was astonished. "You don't know me, man . . ."

"I know your actions," Urquart murmured, then drew in a deep breath as if the talking had winded him. He turned slowly on his heel and walked with a long, loping stride towards the door, ducked his head beneath the top of the frame and was gone.

Brenn snorted and shifted his feet. He slapped his leg several times and then frowned at Arflane. "What was he talking about?"

Arflane leaned back against the counter. "I don't know, Brenn. But if Urquart warned you that the fishing is poor on the South Ice, you should heed that."

Brenn laughed briefly and bitterly. "I can't afford to heed it, Arflane. I'll just pray all night to the Ice Mother and hope she gives me better luck. It's all I can do, man!" His voice had risen almost to a shout.

Flatch had reseated himself in his cubby-hole behind the counter, but he rose, looking like some monstrous beast himself, and glanced enquiringly with his single eye as Brenn faced him again and ordered whale steaks with seka weed and a barrel of beer to be brought to them at their table.

Later, after Brenn's men had come in and been cheered by the discovery that Flatch was willing to provide them with everything they needed, Arflane and Brenn sat opposite each other at a side table with the beer barrel against the wall. Every so often they would turn the spiggot and replenish their cups. The cups were unbreakable, fashioned of some ancient plastic substance. The beer did not, as they had hoped, improve their spirits, although Brenn managed to look confident enough whenever any of his men

addressed him through the shadowy gloom of the hostel room.

The beer had in fact succeeded in turning Brenn in on himself and he was uncommunicative, constantly twisting his head round to look at the door, which had now been closed. Arflane knew that Brenn was expecting no one.

At last he leaned over the table and said, "Urquart seemed a gloomy individual, Brenn—perhaps even mad. He sees the bad luck of everything. I've been here for some days, and I've seen the catches unloaded. They're smaller than usual certainly, but not that small. We've both had as poor catches and they've done us no harm in the long term. It happened to me for several seasons running and then I had plenty of luck for another three. The owners were worried, but . . ."

Brenn looked up from his cup. "There you have it, Arflane. I'm my own master now. The *Tender Maiden's* mine. I bought her two seasons back." Again he laughed bitterly. "I thought I was doing a sensible thing seeing that so many of us have had our ships sold over our heads in past years. It looks as if I'll be selling my own craft over my own head at this rate, or hiring out to some Friesgaltian merchant. I'll have no choice. And there's my crew—willing to gamble with me. Do I tell them Urquart's news? They've wives and children, as I have. Shall I tell them?"

"It would do no good," Arflane said quietly.

"And where are the fish going?" Brenn continued. He put his cup down heavily. "What's happening to the herds?"

"Urquart said they're going south. Perhaps the clever man will be the one who learns how to follow them—how to live off what provisions he can find on the ice. There are more warm ponds to the south—possibly a means of tracking the herds could be devised . . ."

"Will that help me this season?"

"I don't know," Arflane admitted. He was thinking now about his conversation aboard the *Ice Spirit* and he began to feel even more depressed.

Flatch's whores came down to the main room of the hostel. Flatch had done nothing by halves. There was a girl for every man, including Arflane and Brenn. Katarina, Flatch's youngest daughter, a girl of eighteen, approached them, holding the hand of another girl who was as dark and

pretty as Flatch's daughter was fair and plain. Katarina introduced the other girl as Maji.

Arflane attempted to sound jovial. "Here," he said to Brenn, "here's someone to cheer you up."

Leaning back, with the drunken, dark haired girl Maji cuddled against his chest, Brenn roared with laughter at his own joke. The girl giggled. On the other side of the table, Arflane smiled and stroked Katarina's hair. She was a warm hearted girl and able instinctively to make men relax. Maji winked up at Brenn. The women had succeeded, where Arflane had failed, in restoring Brenn's natural optimism.

It was very late. The air was stale and hot and the hostel room was noisy with the drunken voices of the whalers. Through the poor, flickering light Arflane could see their fur-clad silhouettes reeling from table to table or sitting slumped on the benches. Brenn's crew was not the only one in the Shipsmasher. There were men from two other ships there; a Friesgaltian North Ice whaler and another North Icer from Abersgalt. If South Ice men had been there there might have been trouble, but these crews seemed to be mingling well with Brenn's men. Out of the press of bulky bodies rose the long lances of the harpooners, swaying like slender masts in a high wind, their barbed tips casting distorted shadows in the shuddering light from the faulty strips. There were thumps as men fell or knocked over barrels. There was the smell of spilled, bitter beer which ran over the tables and swamped the floor. Arflane heard the giggles of the girls and the harsh laughter of the men and, though the temperature was too warm for his own comfort, he felt himself begin to relax now that he was in the company of men that he understood. Off-ship, crews had more or less equal status with the officers, and this contributed to the free and easy atmosphere in the Ship-smasher.

Arflane poured himself another cup of beer as Brenn began a fresh story.

The outer door opened suddenly and cold air blew in, making Arflane shiver, though he was grateful for it. Silence fell as the men turned. The door slammed shut and

a man of medium height, swathed in a heavy sealskin cloak, began to walk between the tables.

He was not a whaling man.

That could be judged from the cut of his cloak, the way he walked, the texture of his skin. His hair was short and dark, cut in a fringe over his eyes and scarcely reaching to the nape of his neck. There was a gold bracelet curving up his right fore-arm and a silver ring on the second finger of his right hand. He moved casually, but somewhat deliberately, and had a slight, ironic smile on his lips. He was handsome and fairly young. He nodded a greeting to the men who still stared at him suspiciously.

One heavily built harpooner opened his mouth and laughed at the young man, and others began to laugh, too. The young man raised his eyebrows and put his head on one side, looking at them coolly.

"I'm seeking Captain Arflane." His voice was melodious and aristocratic, with a Friesgalt accent. "I heard he was here."

"I'm Arflane. What do you want?" Konrad Arflane looked with some hostility at the young man.

"I'm Manfred Rorsefne. May I join you?"

Arflane shrugged and Rorsefne came and sat on the bench next to Katarina Flatch.

"Have a drink," said Arflane, pushing his full cup towards Rorsefne. He realised, as he made the movement, that he was quite drunk. This realisation made him pause and rub his forehead. When he looked up at Manfred Rorsefne, he was glowering.

Rorsefne shook his head. "No thank you, captain. I'm not in a drinking mood. I wanted to speak with you alone if that is possible."

Suddenly petulant, Arflane said, "It is not. I'm enjoying the company of my friends. What is a Rorsefne doing in a top-deck hostel anyway?"

"Looking for you, obviously." Manfred Rorsefne sighed theatrically. "And looking for you at this hour because it is important. However," he began to rise, "I will come to your hostel in the morning. I am sorry for intruding, captain." He glanced at Katarina Flatch a trifle cynically.

As Rorsefne made his way towards the door, one of the men thrust a harpoon shaft in front of his legs and he trip-

ped and stumbled. He tried to recover his balance, but another shaft took him in the back and sent him sprawling. He fell as the whalers laughed raucously.

Arflane watched expressionlessly. Even an aristocrat was not safe in a whaling hostel if he had no connection with whaling. Manfred Rorsefne was simply paying for his folly.

The big harpooner who had first laughed at Rorsefne now stood up and grabbed the young man by the collar of his cloak. The cloak came away and the harpooner staggered back, laughing drunkenly. Another joined him, a stocky, red-headed man, and reached down to grab Rorsefne's jacket. But Rorsefne rolled over to face the man, his smile still ironic, and tried to get to his feet.

Brenn leaned forward to see what was going on. He glanced at Arflane. "D'you want me to stop them?"

Arflane shook his head. "It's his own fault. He's a fool for coming here."

"I've never heard of an intrusion like it," Brenn agreed, settling back.

Rorsefne was now on his feet, reaching past the red-headed whaleman towards the sealskin cloak held by the big harpooner. "I'll thank you for my cloak," he said, his tone light, but shaking slightly.

"That's our payment for your entertainment," grinned the harpooner. "You can go now."

Rorsefne's eyes were hooded as he folded his arms across his chest. Arflane admired him for taking a stand.

"It would seem," said Rorsefne quietly, "that I have given you more entertainment than you have given me." His voice was now firm.

Arflane got up on impulse and squeezed past Flatch's daughter to stand to the left of the harpooner. Arflane was so drunk that he had to lean for a moment against the edge of a table.

"Give him the cloak, lad," he said, his voice slurring. "And let's get on with our drinking. The boy's not worth our trouble."

The big harpooner ignored Arflane and continued to grin at the young aristocrat, dangling the rich cloak in one hand, teasing him. Arflane lurched forward and grabbed the cloak out of the man's hand. The harpooner turned, grunting, and hit Arflane across the face. Brenn stood up

from his corner, shouting at his man, but the harpooner ignored him and bent to pick up the cloak from where it had fallen. Perhaps encouraged by Arflane's action, Manfred Rorsefne also stooped forward towards the cloak. The red-headed whaleman hit him. Rorsefne reeled and then struck back.

Arflane, sobered somewhat by the blow, took hold of the harpooner by the shoulder, swung him round, and punched him in the face. Brenn came scrambling over the table, shouting incoherently and trying to stop the fight before it went too far. He attempted to pull Arflane and the harpooner apart.

The Friesgalt whalemen were now yelling angrily, siding, perhaps for the sake of the fight, with Manfred Rorsefne who was wrestling with the red-headed whaler.

The fight became confused. Screaming girls gathered their skirts about them and made for the back room of the hostel. Harpoons were used like quarter-staves to batter at heads and bodies.

Arflane saw Brenn go down with a blow on the head and tried to reach his friend. Every whaleman in the hostel seemed to be against him. He struck out in all directions but was soon overcome by their numbers. Even as he fell to the floor, still fighting, he felt the cold air come through the door again and wondered who had entered.

Then a great roaring voice, like the noise of the north wind at its height, sounded over the din of the fight. Arflane felt the whaleman's hands leave him and got up, wiping blood from his eyes. His ears were ringing as the voice he had heard roared again.

"Fish, you cave-bound fools! Fish, I tell you! Fish, you dog-hunters! Fish, you beer-swillers! Fish to take the rust off your lances! A herd of a hundred or more, not fifty miles distant at sou'-sou'-west!"

Blinking through the blood, which came from a shallow cut on his forehead, Arflane saw that the speaker was the man he and Brenn had encountered earlier—Long Lance Urquart.

Urquart had one arm curled around his great harpoon and the other around the shoulders of a half-grown boy who looked both excited and embarrassed. The lad wore a single plait, coated with whale grease, and a white bearskin

coat that showed by its richness that he was a whaling hand, probably a cabin boy.

"Tell them, Stefan," Urquart said, more softly now that he could be heard.

The boy spoke in a stutter, pointing back through the still open doorway into the night. "Our ship passed them coming in at dusk. We were loaded up and could not stop, for we had to make Friesgalt by nightfall. But we saw them. Heading from north to south, on a line roughly twenty degrees west. A big herd. My father—our skipper—says there hasn't been a bigger in twenty seasons."

Arflane bent to help Brenn who was staggering to his feet, clutching his head.

"Did you hear that, Brenn?"

"I did." Brenn smiled in spite of his bruised, swollen lips. "The Ice Mother's good to us."

"There's enough out there for every ship in the dock," Urquart continued, "and more besides. They're travelling fast, from what the lad's father says, but good sailing should catch 'em."

Arflane looked around the room, trying to find Manfred Rorsefne. He saw him leaning against a wall, a flenching cutlass, that had obviously been one of the wall's ornaments, clutched in his right hand. He still wore his ironic smile. Arflane looked at him thoughtfully.

Urquart, also, turned his attention from the men and looked surprised when he saw Rorsefne there. The expression passed quickly and his gaunt features became frozen again. He took his arm from the boy's shoulders and shifted his harpoon to cradle it in his other arm. He walked towards Manfred Rorsefne and took the cutlass from him.

"Thanks," said Rorsefne grinning, "it was becoming heavy."

"What were you doing in this place?" Urquart asked brusquely. Arflane was surprised by his familiarity with the youth.

Rorsefne nodded his head in Arflane's direction. "I came to give a message to Captain Arflane, but he was busy with his friends. Some others decided I should give them some entertainment since I was here. Captain Arflane and I seemed agreed that they had had enough . . ."

Urquart's narrow, blue eyes turned to look carefully at Arflane. "You helped him, captain?"

Arflane let his face show his disgust. "He was a fool to come alone to a place like this. If you know him take him home, Urquart."

The men were beginning to leave the hostel, pulling their hoods about their heads, picking up their harpoons as they hurried back to their ships, knowing that their skippers would want to sail with the first light.

Brenn clapped Arflane on the shoulder. "I must go. We've enough provisions for a short haul. It was good to see you, Arflane."

In the company of two of his harpooners, Brenn left the hostel. Save for Urquart, Rorsefne and Arflane, the place was now empty.

Flatch came stumping down between the overturned tables, his gross body swaying from side to side. He was followed by three of his daughters who began to clean up the mess. They appeared to take it for granted. Flatch watched them work and did not approach the three men.

Urquart's strangely arranged hair threw a huge shadow on the far wall, by the door. Arflane had not noticed before how closely it resembled the tail of a land-whale.

"So you helped another Rorsefne," Urquart murmured, "though once again you had no need to."

Arflane rubbed his damaged forehead. "I was drunk. I didn't interfere for his sake."

"It was a good fight, however," Manfred Rorsefne said lightly. "I did not realise I could fight so well."

"They were playing." Arflane's tone was weary and contemptuous.

Gravely, Urquart nodded in agreement. He shifted his grip on his harpoon and looked directly at Rorsefne. "They were playing with you," he repeated.

"Then it was a good game, cousin," Rorsefne said, looking up into Urquart's bleak eyes. "Eh?" The Long Lance's tall, gaunt figure was immobile, the features composed. His eyes looked towards the door. Arflane wondered why Rorsefne called Urquart 'cousin', for it was unlikely that there was a true blood-link between the aristocrat and the savage harpooner.

"I will escort you both back to the deeper levels," said Urquart slowly.

"What's the danger now?" Manfred Rorsefne asked him. "None. We'll go alone, cousin, and then perhaps I'll be able to deliver my message to Captain Arflane after all."

Urquart shrugged, turned and left the hostel without a word.

Manfred grinned at Arflane who merely scowled in return. "A moody man, cousin Long Lance. Now, captain, would you be willing to listen while I tell you what I came to say?"

Arflane spat into the whale cranium nearby. "It can do no harm," he said.

As they walked carefully down the sloping ramps to the lower levels, avoiding the drunken whalers who staggered past them on their way upwards, Manfred Rorsefne said nothing and Arflane was too bored and tired to ask him directly what his message was. The effects of the beer had worn off, and the pains in his bruised body were beginning to make themselves felt. The shadowy figures of the whalers, hurrying back to their ships through the dim light, could be seen both in front of them and behind them. Occasionally a man shouted, but for the most part the whalers moved in comparative silence, though the constant shuffle of their ridged boots on the causeways echoed around the crevasse. Here and there a man clung to the swaying guard ropes, having staggered too close to the edge. It was not unusual for drunken sailors to lose their footing and fall to the mysterious bottom of the gorge.

Only when Arflane stopped at the entrance to his hostel and the last of the whalers had gone by did Rorsefne speak.

"My uncle's better. He seems eager to see you."

"Your uncle?"

"Pyotr Rorsefne. He is better."

"When does he want to see me?"

"Now, if it's convenient."

"I'm too tired. Your fight . . ."

"I apologise, but I had no intention of involving you . . ."

"You should not have gone to the Shipsmasher. You knew that."

"True. The mistake was mine, captain. In fact if cousin

Long Lance had not brought his good news, I could have your death on my conscience now . . .”

“Don’t be stupid,” Arflane said disdainfully. “Why d’you call Urquart your cousin?”

“It embarrasses him. It’s a family secret. I’m not supposed to tell anyone that Urquart is my uncle’s natural son. Are you coming to our quarters? You could sleep there, if you’re so tired, and see my uncle first thing in the morning.”

Arflane shrugged and followed Manfred Rorsefne down the ramp. He was half-asleep and half-drunk and the memory which kept recurring as he walked was not that of Pyotr Rorsefne, but of his daughter.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Rorsefne Household

WAKING IN A BED that was too soft and too hot, Konrad Arflane looked dazedly about the small room. It was lined with rich wall-hangings of painted canvas depicting famous Rorsefne ships on their voyages and hunts. Here a four-masted schooner was attacked by gigantic land whales, there a whale was slain by a captain with poised harpoon; elsewhere ships floundered in ice breaks or approached cities across the panorama of the ice; old wars were fought, old victories glorified; valiant Rorsefne men were at all times in the forefront, usually managing to bear the Rorsefne flag. Action and violence were on all sides.

There was a trace of humour in Arflane’s expression as he stared round at the paintings. He sat up, pushing the furs away from his naked body. His clothes lay on a bench against the wall nearest the door. He swung his legs to the floor and stood up, walking across the carpet of fur to where a wash-stand had been prepared for him. As he washed, dousing himself in cold water, he realised that his memory of how he had arrived here was vague. He must

have been very drunk to have agreed to Manfred Rorsefne's suggestion that he stay the night. He could not understand how he had come to accept the invitation. As he dressed, pulling on the tight undergarments of soft leather and struggling into his jacket and trousers, he wondered if he would see Ulrica Ulsenn that day.

Someone knocked and then Manfred Rorsefne entered, wearing a fur cloak dyed in red and blue squares. He smiled quizzically at Arflane.

"Well captain? Are you feeling any ill-effects?"

"I was drunk, I suppose," Arflane said resentfully, as if blaming the young man. "Do we see old Rorsefne now?"

"Breakfast first, I think." Manfred led him into a wide passage that was also covered in dark, painted wall hangings. They passed through a door at the end and entered a large room in the centre of which was a square table made of beautifully carved whale ivory. On the table were several loaves of a kind of bread made from warm-pond weed, dishes of whale, seal and bear meat, a full tureen containing a stew, and a large jug of *hess*, which had a taste similar to tea.

Already seated at the table was Ulrica Ulsenn, wearing a simple dress of black and red leather. She glanced up as Arflane entered, gave him a shy smile and looked down at her plate.

"Good morning," Arflane said gruffly.

"Good morning." Her voice was almost inaudible. Manfred Rorsefne pulled back the chair next to hers.

"Would you care to sit here, captain?"

Uneasily, Arflane went to sit down. As he pulled his chair in to the table, his knee brushed hers. They both recoiled at once. On the opposite side of the table Manfred Rorsefne was helping himself to seal-meat and bread. He glanced humorously at his cousin and Arflane. Two female servants came into the room. They were dressed in long brown dresses, with the Rorsefne insignia on the sleeves.

One of them remained in the background; the other stepped forward and curtsied. Ulrica Ulsenn smiled at her. "Some more *hess*, please, Mirayn."

The girl took the half-empty jug from the table. "Is everything else in order, my lady?"

"Yes, thank you." Ulrica glanced at Arflane. "Is there anything you lack, captain?"

Arflane shook his head.

As the servants were leaving, Janek Ulsenn pushed in past them. He saw Arflane beside his wife and nodded brusquely, then sat down and began to serve himself from the dishes.

There was an unmistakable atmosphere of tension in the room. Arflane and Ulrica Ulsenn avoided looking at each other. Janek Ulsenn glowered, but did not lift his eyes from his food; Manfred Rorsefne looked amusedly at all of them, adding, it would seem deliberately, to their discomfort.

"I hear a big herd's been sighted," Janek Ulsenn said at last, addressing Manfred and ignoring his wife and Arflane.

"I was one of the first to hear the news," Manfred smiled. "Wasn't I, Captain Arflane?"

Arflane made a noise through his nose and continued to eat. He was embarrassingly aware of Ulrica Ulsenn's presence so close to him.

"Are we sending a ship?" Manfred asked Janek Ulsenn. "We ought to. There's plenty of fish for all, by the sound of it. We ought to go ourselves—we could take the two-mast schooner and enjoy the hunt for as long as it lasted."

Ulrica seemed to welcome the suggestion. "A splendid idea, Manfred. Father's better, so he won't need me. I'll come, too." Her eyes sparkled. "I haven't seen a hunt for three seasons!"

Janek Ulsenn rubbed his nose and frowned. "I've no time to spare for a foolhardy pleasure voyage."

"We could be back within a day." Manfred's tone was eager. "We'll go, Ulrica, if Janek hasn't the spirit for it. Captain Arflane can take command . . ."

Arflane scowled. "Lord Ulsenn chose the right word—foolhardy. A yacht—with a woman on board—whale-hunting! I'd take no such responsibility. I'd advise you to forget the idea. All it would need would be for one bull to turn and your boat would be smashed in seconds."

"Don't be dull, captain," Manfred admonished. "Ulrica will come, anyway. Won't you, Ulrica?"

Ulrica Ulsenn shrugged slightly. "If Janek has no objection."

"I have," Ulsenn muttered.

"You are right to advise her against a trip like that," Arflane said. He was unwilling to join forces with Ulsenn, but in this case he knew it was his duty. There was a good chance that a yacht would be destroyed in the hunt.

Ulsenn straightened up, his eyes resentful. "But if you wish to go, Ulrica," he said firmly, staring hard at Arflane, "you may do so."

Arflane shifted his own gaze so that he looked directly into Ulsenn's eyes. "In which case, I feel that you must have an experienced man in command. I'll skipper the craft."

"You must come too, cousin Janek," Manfred put in banteringly. "You have a duty to our people. They will respect you the more if they see that you are willing to face danger."

"I do not care what they think," Ulsenn said, glaring at Manfred Rorsefne. "I am not afraid of danger. I am busy. Someone has to run your father's affairs while he is ill!"

"One day is all you would lose." Manfred was plainly taunting the man.

Ulsenn paused, evidently torn between decisions. He got up from the table, his breakfast unfinished.

"I'll consider it," he said as he left the room.

Ulrica Ulsenn rose.

"You deliberately upset him, Manfred. You have offended him and embarrassed Captain Arflane. You must apologise."

Manfred made a mock bow to Arflane. "I am sorry, captain."

Arflane looked thoughtfully up into Ulrica Ulsenn's beautiful face. She flushed and left the room in the direction her husband had taken.

As the door closed, Manfred burst into laughter. "Forgive me, captain. Janek is so pompous and Ulrica hates him as much as I do. But Ulrica is so *loyal*!"

"A rare quality," Arflane said dryly.

"Oh, indeed!" Manfred got up from the table. "Now. We'll go to see the only one of them who is worth any loyalty."

Heads of bear, walrus, whale and wolf decorated the skin-covered walls of the large bedroom. At the far end

was the high, wide bed and in it, propped against folded furs, lay Pyotr Rorsefne. His bandaged hands lay on the bed covers; apart from some faint scars on his face, these were the only sign that he had been so close to death. His face was red and healthy, his eyes bright, and his movements alert as he turned his head to look towards Arflane and Manfred Rorsefne. His great mane of grey hair was combed and fell to his shoulders. He now had a heavy moustache and beard; both were nearly snow white. His body, what Arflane could see of it, had filled out and it was hard to believe that such a recovery could have been possible. Arflane credited the miracle to the old man's natural vitality and love of life, rather than to any care he had received. Momentarily, he wondered why Rorsefne was still in bed.

"Hello, Arflane. I recognise you, you see!" His voice was rich and vibrant, with all trace of weakness gone. "I'm well again—or as well as I'll ever be. Forgive this manner of meeting, but those milksops think I won't be able to get my balance. Lost the feet—but the rest I kept."

Arflane nodded, responding against his will to the old man's friendliness.

Manfred brought up a chair from a corner of the room.

"Sit down," Pyotr Rorsefne said. "We'll talk. You can leave us now, Manfred."

Arflane seated himself beside the bed and Manfred, reluctantly it seemed, left the room.

"You and I thwarted the Ice Mother," Rorsefne smiled, looking closely at Arflane. "What do you feel about that, captain?"

"A man has a right to try to preserve his life for as long as possible," Arflane replied. "The Ice Mother surely does not resent having to wait a little longer."

"It used to be thought that no man should interfere in another man's life—or his death. It used to be said that if a man was about to be taken by the Ice Mother then it was no one's right to thwart her. That was the old philosophy."

"I know. Perhaps I'm as soft as some of the others I've condemned while I've been here."

"You've condemned us, have you?"

"I see a turning away from the Ice Mother. I see disaster resulting from that, sir."

"You hold with the old ideas, not the new ones. You do not believe the ice is melting?"

"I do not, sir."

A small table stood beside the bed. On it was a large chart box, writing materials, a jug of *hess* and a cup. Pyotr Rorsefne reached toward the cup. Arflane forestalled him, poured some *hess* from the jug, and handed him the drink. Rorsefne grunted his thanks. His expression was thoughtful and calculating as he looked into Arflane's face.

Konrad Arflane stared back, boldly enough. This man was one he believed he could understand. Unlike the rest of his family, he did not make Arflane feel uncomfortable.

"I own many ships," Rorsefne murmured.

"I know. Many more than actually sail."

"Something else you disapprove of, captain? The big clippers not at work. Yet you're aware, I'm sure, that if I set them to hunting and trading, we should reduce all you other cities to poverty within a decade."

"You're generous." Arflane found it surprising that Rorsefne should boast about his charity; it did not seem to fit with the rest of his character.

"I'm wise." Rorsefne gesticulated with one bandaged hand. "Friesgalt needs the competition as much as your city and its like need the trade. Already we're too fat, soft, complacent. You agree, I think."

Arflane nodded.

"It's the way of things," Rorsefne sighed. "Once a city becomes so powerful, it begins to decline. It lacks stimulus. We are reaching the point, here on the plateau of the eight cities, where we have nothing left to spur us on. What's more, the game is leaving. I see death for all in not too short a time, Arflane."

Arflane shrugged. "It's the Ice Mother's will. It must happen sooner or later. I'm not sure that I follow all your reasoning, but I do know that the softer people become the less chance they have of survival . . ."

"If the natural conditions are softer, then the people can afford to become so," Rorsefne said quietly. "And our scientists tell us that the level of the ice is dropping, that the weather is improving, season by season."

"I once saw a great line of ice-cliffs on the horizon," Arflane interrupted. "I was astonished. There'd never been

cliffs there before—particularly ones that stood on their peaks, with their bases in the clouds. I began to doubt all I knew about the world. I went home and told them what I had seen. They laughed at me. They said that what I had seen was an illusion—something to do with light—and that if I went to look the next day the cliffs would be gone. I went the next day. The cliffs were gone. I knew then that I could not always trust my senses, but that I could trust what I knew to be right within me. I know that the ice is not melting. I know that your scientists have been deceived, as I was, by illusions.”

Rorsefne sighed. “I would like to agree with you, Arflane . . .”

“But you do not. I have had this argument already.”

“No. I meant it. I want to agree with you. It is simply that I need proof, one way or the other.”

“Proof surrounds you. The natural course is towards utter coldness and death. The sun must die and the wind must blow us into the night.”

“I’ve read that there were other ages when ice covered the world and then disappeared.” Rorsefne straightened his back and leaned forward. “What of those?”

“They were only the beginning. Two or three times, the Ice Mother was driven back. But she was stronger, and had patience. You know the answers. They are in the creed.”

“The scientists say that again her power is waning.”

“That cannot be. Her total domination of all matter is inevitable.”

“You quote the creed. Have you no doubts?”

Arflane got up from his seat. “None.”

“I envy you.”

“That, too, has already been said to me. There is nothing to envy. Perhaps it is better to believe in an illusion.”

“I cannot believe in it, Arflane.” Rorsefne leant forward, his bandaged hands reaching for Arflane’s arm. “Wait. I told you I needed proof. I know, I think, where that proof may be found.”

“Where?”

“Where I went with my ship and my crew. Where I returned from. A city—many months travel from here, to the distant north. New York. Have you heard of it?”

Arflane laughed. “A myth. I spoke of illusions . . .”

"I've seen it—from a distance, true, but there was no doubting its existence. My men saw it. We were short of provisions and under attack from barbarians. We were forced to turn before we could get closer. I planned to go back with a fleet. I saw New York, where the Ice Ghosts have their court. The city of the Ice Mother. A city of marvels. I saw its buildings rising tier upon tier into the sky."

"I know the tale. The city was drowned by water and then frozen, preserved complete beneath the ice. An impossible legend. I may believe in the doctrines of the Ice Mother, my lord, but I am not so superstitious . . ."

"It is true. I have seen New York. Its towers thrust upwards from a gleaming field of smooth ice. There is no telling how deep they go. Perhaps the Ice Mother's court is there, perhaps that part is a myth . . . But if the city has been preserved, then its knowledge has been preserved too. One way or the other, Arflane, the proof I spoke of is in New York."

Arflane was perplexed, wondering if the old man's fever were still with him.

Rorsefne seemed to guess his thoughts. He laughed, tapping the chart box. "I'm sane, captain. Everything is in here. With a good ship—better than the one I took—New York can be reached and the truth discovered."

Arflane sat down again. "How was the first ship wrecked?"

Rorsefne sighed. "A series of misfortunes—ice-breaks, shifting cliffs, land whale attacks, the attacks of the barbarians. Finally, ascending to the plateau up the Great North Course, the ship could stand no more and fell apart, killing most of us. The rest set off to walk to Friesgalt, the boats being crushed, hoping we should meet a ship. We did not. Soon, only I remained alive."

"So bad luck was the cause of the wreck."

"Essentially. A better ship would not suffer such luck."

"You know this city's location?"

"More—I have the whole course plotted."

"How did you know where to go?"

"It wasn't difficult. I read the old books, compared the locations they gave."

"And now you want to take a fleet there?"

"No." Rorsefne sank back on the furs. "I would be a hindrance on such a voyage. I went secretly the first time, because I wanted no rumours spreading to disturb the people. At a time of stress, such news could destroy the stability of our entire society. I think it best to keep the city a secret until one ship has been to New York and discovered what knowledge the city actually does hold. I intend to send the *Ice Spirit*."

"She's the best ship in the eight cities."

"They say a ship's as good as her master," Rorsefne murmured. His strength was beginning to fail him, it appeared. "I know of no better master than yourself, Captain Arflane. I trust you—and your reputation is good."

Arflane did not refuse immediately, as he had expected he would. He had half anticipated the old man's suggestion, but he was not sure that Rorsefne was completely sane. Perhaps he too had seen a mirage of some kind, or a line of mountains that had looked like a city from a distance. Yet the idea of New York, the thought of discovering the mythical palace of the Ice Mother and of verifying his own instinctive knowledge of the inevitability of the ice's rule, appealed to him and excited his imagination. He had, after all, nothing to keep him on the plateau; the quest was a noble one, almost a holy one. To go north toward the home of the Ice Mother, to sail, like the mariners of ancient times, on a great voyage of many months, seeking knowledge that might change the world, suited his essentially romantic nature. What was more he would command the finest ship in the world, sailing across unknown seas of ice, discovering new races of men if Rorsefne's talk of barbarians were true. New York, the fabled city, whose tall towers jutted from a plain of smooth ice . . . What if after all it did not exist? He would sail on and on, farther and farther north, while everything else travelled south.

Rorsefne's eyes were half-closed now. His appearance of health had been deceptive; plainly, he had exhausted himself.

Arflane got up for the the second time.

"I have agreed—against my better judgment—to captain a yacht in which your family intend to follow a whale hunt today."

Rorsefne smiled weakly. "Ulrica's idea?"

"Manfred's. He has somehow committed Lord Janek Ulsenn, your daughter and myself to the scheme. Your daughter supported Manfred. As head of the family you should . . ."

"It is not your affair, captain. I know you speak from good will, but Manfred and Ulrica know what is right for them. Rorsefne stock breeds best encountering danger—it needs to seek it out." Rorsefne paused, studying Arflane's face again, frowning a little curiously. "I should not have thought it like you to offer unasked for advice, captain . . ."

"It is not my way, normally." Arflane himself was now perplexed. "I don't know why I mentioned this. I apologise." He was not acting in a normal fashion at all, he realised. What was causing the change?

For a moment he saw the whole Rorsefne family as representing danger for him, but the danger was nebulous. He felt a faint stirring of panic and rubbed his bearded chin rapidly. Looking down into Rorsefne's face, he saw that the man was smiling very slightly. The smile seemed sympathetic.

"Is Janek going, did you say?" Rorsefne asked suddenly, breaking the mood.

"It seems so."

Rorsefne laughed quietly. "I wonder how he was convinced. No matter. With luck he'll be the one killed and she'll find herself a man to marry, though they're scarce enough. You'll skipper the yacht?"

"I said I would, though I don't know why. I am doing many things that I would not do elsewhere. I am in something of a quandary, Lord Rorsefne."

"Don't worry," Rorsefne chuckled. "You're simply not adjusted to our way of doing things."

"Your nephew puzzles me. Somehow he manages to talk me into agreeing with him, when everything I feel disagrees with him. He is a subtle young man."

"He has his own kind of strength," Rorsefne said affectionately. "Do not under-estimate Manfred, captain. He appears weak, both in character and in physique, but he likes to give that appearance."

"You make him seem very mysterious," Arflane said half jokingly.

"He is more complicated than us, I think," Rorsefne

replied. "He represents something new—possibly just a new generation. You dislike him, I can see. You may come to like him as much as you like my daughter."

"Now you are being mysterious, sir. I expressed no liking for anyone in particular."

Rorsefne ignored this remark. "See me after the hunt," he said in his failing voice. "I'll show you the charts. You can tell me then if you accept the commission."

"Very well. Good-bye, sir."

Leaving the room, Arflane realised that he had been drawn irrevocably into the affairs of the Rorsefne household and that, ever since he had saved the old man's life, his fate had been linked with theirs. They had somehow seduced him; made him their man. He knew that he would take the command offered by Pyotr Rorsefne just as he had taken the command of the yacht offered by Manfred Rorsefne. Without appearing to have lost any of his integrity, he was no longer his own master. Pyotr Rorsefne's strength of character, Ulrica Ulsenn's beauty and grace, Manfred Rorsefne's subtlety, even Janek Ulsenn's belligerence, had combined to trap him. Disturbed, Arflane walked back toward the breakfast room.

— MICHAEL MOORCOCK

to be continued

BOOK FARE

by

TOM BOARDMAN, JR.

This month we look at a pair of novels that in many ways exemplify two of science-fiction's main fields of speculation: Science and Sociology. Both are by authors whose professional careers started in the early 40's—and both are still active today. Each writes a distinctive story that, perhaps only he can write in such a way, and as well. Each has had imitators, yet remains an "onlie begetter"—I refer to Messrs. Frederik Pohl and Hal Clement.

Another critic has characterised the Pohl formula as being dependent on having a hero who is a jerk, to whom all manner of disasters occur, and who emerges victorious despite his best efforts. Although this is unfair, and not wholly true, it is an apt description of Chandler, the protagonist of *A Plague of Pythons* (Gollancz 16s.). Without any warning, an undiagnosable malaise sweeps all over the world: people are 'possessed' by a spirit and commit all sorts of dastardly acts. Chandler is charged with rape and murder. Usually it is only necessary to plead possession in order to be acquitted. But Chandler has done his deeds while working in a chemical factory—a place where no-one has ever been possessed. So he is accused of being a hoaxer and this carries the death penalty.

He gets off on a technicality, but is expelled from the community. In his wanderings he meets a fanatic group who call themselves the Orphalese—believing that the spirits can be exorcised by fire. Chandler begins to think they have found the answer, but the group becomes possessed

and kill each other. And as Chandler is possessed he realises that his own mind is aware of the external influence, and it draws him to Hawaii.

On the island he finds a flourishing society, an oligarchy that is made up of a few executives who can control the minds of others, and a vast horde of men and women like Chandler who are being used by the executives. Chandler joins an underground movement of revolt; is discovered; and saved by the beautiful Rosalie who offers to make Chandler an executive. And now he faces a moral dilemma—should he accept? His ideals are crumbling and he knows that the compassion he once felt for the masses is being overcome by a desire to have power.

A Plague of Pythons is good, but not Pohl at his superlative best. The first half is enticing: the joy of reading a novel by Pohl is the imaginative future world that unfolds three-dimensionally as you go along. But the solution is curiously unsatisfactory and rather melodramatic. Perhaps it was meant to be so; once the world has been described, the problem set, we only have human emotions and reactions left to resolve. And from the cosmic viewpoint man's inhumanity to man is pretty weak beer.

In vivid contrast is the scientific realism that Hal Clement has made so much a hallmark of all he writes. Complete, if hypothetical, accuracy of the science, impressive plotting and sustained suspense combine to provide an intellectual appeal that has made such novels as *Mission of Gravity* and *Cycle of Fire* so memorable.

His new novel, *Close to Critical* (Gollancz 16s.), once again postulates a planet with a completely alien environment: this time one with a gravity three times that of Earth, with daytime temperatures rising to 380 degrees centigrade, with an atmosphere of water vapour, and a constantly shifting surface crust. And intelligent life inhabits this planet.

A scientific expedition from Earth is examining these people by means of a remote-controlled capsule that can withstand the planetary pressures. Six youngsters have been contacted and are being taught to communicate. Eventually they will pass on to their people the knowledge they acquire from the expedition. All goes well until two children in the expedition get into the capsule and crash on the

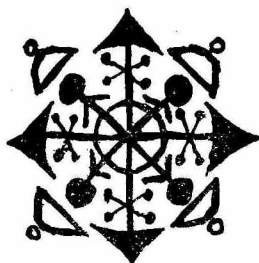
planet. Although they are in radio contact with their parents the capsule does not respond to the remote controls, and it is only a matter of time before it will break open on the planet's surface. So the natives are enlisted in trying to find the castaways and, painstakingly, the area is searched until the children are found and saved: but not in the way the scientists expect.

Hal Clement is such a consummate craftsman that the overall effect of this rather simple story is deepened to a point of intense interest. The characters of the humans are rather stereotyped, but the aliens are convincing and have personalities that are sympathetic. In fact you end up liking the aliens more than their 'superior' visitors.

Neither *A Plague of Pythons* nor *Close to Critical* will become science-fiction classics, but each, in its individual way, is well worth reading and shows (if you care to make the comparison) what tremendous strides the science-fiction genre has made in the quarter of a century that has elapsed since their authors began writing.

—TOM BOARDMAN, JR.

She had everything a girl could want. Or so it seemed . . .



THE SIMPLE FOR LOVE



An 'Anita' story by
KEITH ROBERTS

Anita posed magnificently before the mirror in panties and hair-ribbon. She was uncertain about the hair-ribbon; she put her head first on one side then on the other while the ribbon shuffled about tying itself into obedient bows here and there, constricting the waves of her hair and letting them slacken again. Anita pouted. The ribbon wouldn't

do, it was red. The night was warm ; she must wear no hot colours or she would feel sweaty. She was colour sensitive ; she would have liked a bow of electric blue but that would jazz her mind, start thoughts as bright and irresponsible as lightning, and that would never do. The ribbon swept from her hair and riffled away into a corner of the bedroom. She pulled at her lip with her teeth, sat down, put her chin in her hands and regarded her reflection worriedly.

Anita had ribbons of all types, sizes and colours ; they were a passion with her. The whole collection sprawled over her dressing table ; there were ribbons of red and ribbons of blue, ribbons of yellow, green, lilac, white, ribbons spotted and ribbons plain, gingham checked, sombre, brown and black, vilely fluorescent . . . The mass churned about as her mind probed into them. Yellow and green were useless, she bought the colours but never wore them, they didn't suit her . . . what about white?

A white satiny thing looped forward like a caterpillar, shook itself, flew around her head to burrow ticklingly behind her ears. She made a huge Alice bow with it, then it went the way of the red. White was for chasteness, and Anita wanted no omens. Pink was discarded as well ; it was too pretty, she'd look like a birthday cake. Once on a time there would have been no problem ; she would have bound her hair with dragonflies, made their wings flutter round her head like a tinsel coronet. But that needed a spell, and spells were finished, done, through . . . Anita sighed. Black was mournful, it was the colour of witch-rites and death and in any case it would take the heat worse than red ; and spots were out of the question . . .

Something caught her eye, and her mind flicked it out of the pile and hung it up for inspection. A pale, ice blue. She tried it on and it was right, there was just the correct measure of coolness. And that solved the dress problem too ; she would wear her new one, that sleeveless job in the off-beat coffee colour. Ice blue and brown ; she would be like a frosted leaf blowing on the June wind. The dress flapped out of the wardrobe cupboard, hung round her shoulders and wriggled till she slipped her arms into it. She fastened the buttons, shutting herself away for the moment carefully.

She pulled the ribbon undone, by hand this time, and

started brushing her hair again. It was hard trying to give up all her powers at once but she was managing very well. Soon she would be a normal girl; it was a wonderful thought.

Shoes . . . No shoes at all she thought, wriggling. Just glow-worms on my toes . . . There were only five glow-worms in the whole of Northamptonshire, she nearly sent for them before she remembered. She decided reluctantly on plain sandals and no messing about. She retied the ribbon, gave her hair a final pat and tuck and opened the bedroom door. She crept downstairs and through the house, trying not to disturb her Granny. A sharp thought tapped her on the back as she was opening the kitchen door. She slipped through quietly, ran hare-quick down the garden path and into the copse. She emerged from the trees no longer a witch, and feeling marvellous.

Out on the main road the little red car was waiting, just as *he* had said it would be. Anita scurried toward it and bumped down in the seat smelling of elderberry and crushed grass. *He* smiled at her.

"Hello, Anita . . ."

She tried to say 'Hello, Roger' back but the words got stuck somehow. She made a *guk-guk* noise instead, just like last time. He laughed and drove away and Anita hung onto the dash tingling a little because steel is nearly like iron, feeling the wind bustle her, seeing the gear-lever snick forward and back, hearing the tyres whimper on the bends, wanting to go at a million miles an hour and spin right off the earth. The MG purred, making a noise like a great bee. He drives so *well* thought Anita, oh he isn't like the people in the little houses, he isn't like anybody else at all, I shall fill right up and explode, vanish in a green puff and a shower of sparks like one of Granny's spells when she hasn't read the book right. I don't know what will happen to me, I want to run and scream and swim and jump and laugh all together . . .

Roger shouted over the wind and the insect-noise of the engine. "Where do you want to go?"

"Don't know, don't care . . ."

"I know where there's a dance . . ."

"Oh no please, not a dance . . ." I can't do your dances yet, I know the dance that sends bees to pollen but there

isn't music for it, not music you could hear . . . "I don't know," said Anita.

He glanced at her sharply. "You nearly looked frightened!"

"I *didn't* . . ."

He laughed again. "Anita, you are a funny girl . . ."

"But I'm trying, I'm trying to change . . ."

He drifted round a bend and let fly at the straight beyond it. The MG declared war; Anita watched the speedo needle playing with the number seventy. The other thing, the dial that moved in funny jerks, was the rev-counter. She was learning fast . . . "I don't want you to change," said Roger. "Why do you want to do that? You're perfect as you are . . ."

Anita glowed. "Let's go somewhere quiet," she said. "A long way away."

The car leaped forward; the engine sounded angry because there was so much road.

The pub was cool and still, set back from a main road that ran straight as an arrow into the distance. The cars passed steadily, veeee-whooom, veeee-whooom. The sound was not disturbing; it was a summer-night noise, and right. Anita sat at a table on the lawn, under a great rustling tree, and felt thoughts probing at her. She tried to shut them out but they were insistent, like little asdic pulses. 'Who . . . ping . . . who . . . ping . . . who . . . ping . . .'

"What do you want to drink, Anita?"

"I . . . don't know. Choose something."

"Lemonade?"

"No!"

"Shandy then . . . OK?"

'WHO . . . PING . . . WHO . . . PING . . .'

She had to send her callsign; there were improbable things in the hedgerows, there could easily have been a mobbing. After all, she had crossed a county boundary without a proper clearance. The questions and pipings faded, leaving one insistent voice.

"*There y'are, yer young varmint . . .*"

"Gran please, not *now* . . ."

"Come 'um this *minute* . . ."

"Gran I can't . . . I'm in *love* . . ."

Airy profanity. Anita shut her mind. Far off, a summer

storm rumbled over Foxhanger. There was no rain, but the thunder was audible for miles.

"Please Anita," said Roger, half laughing and half worried. "*What do you want to drink?*"

"A beer," said Anita a little desperately. "A big one . . ." He stared at her and she lifted her nose a trifle, regarding a distant view.

The pint arrived; she buried her nose in the froth and drank lustily. Hardly ladylike, but she was past caring. Roger gave her a cigarette. She had been smoking for two weeks now and had disposed of a whole ten. They did unmentionable things to her queer complex of senses, but that was all to the good. Roger shook his head. He said again "You are a funny girl."

"Why?"

"You just are."

"Tell me."

"What about?"

"About how I'm funny."

He laughed. He was tall and almost gaunt with straight dark hair; he had a soft, velvety sort of voice and his hands were bony and strong and smelled of nicotine and carbolic soap. He cupped one over the other now on the table, looking down and watching the smoke drift away from his cigarette. He said "I don't know how you're funny. That's why you're funny . . . I like it, Anita. But half the time you just don't seem to be *there* . . . Oh I didn't mean that, you know what I mean . . . What do you go dreamy about? Come on, penny for your thoughts. Right now."

"No."

"Twopence then."

Perhaps I should have worn a little choker ribbon instead, they say they're very fetching . . . "No," said Anita. "I want a golden guinea."

"You shall have one. Promise."

Anita laughed. "It wouldn't be worth it. I wasn't thinking at all."

Something prodded at her mind and she acknowledged irritably. "You are cleared for area G-6," said the Northamptonshire Controller frostily. "Huntingdonshire, and Cambridgeshire as far as Ely. And don't do this again or

I shall have to report it downstairs . . . Please state your destination and E.T.A."

Efficiency, always efficiency . . . The Dark One was making a fetish of modern business methods. Anita snapped "I'm going back to Foxhanger. I'm taking a boy."

There was unholy laughter. "Good hunting," from the Controller, and a babble of monstrous suggestions from the lesser fry. Anita's mind sent out a series of red flashes, confusing all wavelengths; when they died away the Huntingdonshire folk let her be.

Roger put out his hand and placed it over hers. He said, "There, I told you. You keep drifting away. You did it then, while I was talking to you."

"I didn't!"

"You did. I bet you don't know a thing I said."

"I do too, it was about giving me a golden guinea."

"Well that just proves it, that was ages ago. I said I wanted to talk to you rather seriously."

Anita gulped. Five miles from Foxhanger was a hayrick; she'd spent the whole of last night lying in bed and tousling its surface into softness. Baled hay was uncomfortable but this would be soft as a mattress. "We'll do circles," she thought, going a little crazy. "Round and round, wheeee . . . and we'll finish up in that, *ker-plunk* . . . And I'll listen to him for hours if he wants, his voice is like bees when the light is going . . ." "Roger," she said, "Can we talk later, please? And can we go now . . .?"

"Of course," he said. He was frowning and grinning at the same time. "Of course."

"Then come on . . . wheeeee . . ."

The stack showed in the twilight, a dark shape with the moon rising behind it. Anita relaxed as well as she could in a bucket seat, feeling dreamy. Roger touched her hair thoughtfully, starting shivers down her back. "Why did you want to stop just here, what's so special about here?"

"Hm . . . nothing . . . Tell me about your house in London again."

"I've told you a dozen times already."

"Again. Please . . ."

He lit a cigarette, offered her the packet belatedly. She shook her head without opening her eyes. It was a mistake, but he didn't spot it. "It's in Hampstead," he said. "It's a

very nice place. It's quite open ; there's a little High Street with trees, it's just like a country town. You hardly know you're in London. And the house is . . . well, it's quite large, and it has a drive, and there are garages. Inside, it's nearly all white . . ."

"Your parents won't like me . . ."

"Of course they will."

Anita's heart fluttered. "They won't. They can't. Roger I'm not supposed to tell a soul but . . . you see I'm a witch. It's all terribly difficult."

He was very firm. "Now don't be silly, please. We've been into all this before, we've got to be serious now. The first thing we've got to do is sort out about this Granny of yours. If I could just come along and meet her . . ."

Anita's eyes opened wide. "*No . . .*"

He shrugged a little helplessly ; then he tried another tack. "Is she your legal guardian?"

"Who?"

"Your Granny of course."

"I don't know," said Anita, totally confused. "I suppose she must be . . ."

He played with her hair, twirling a little coil of it round his finger, "Anita, I'm afraid this is rather personal but . . . how old are you?"

"A million and three."

"Anita *please . . .*"

"But I am, honestly . . ."

He sighed. "I wish you'd try to be serious."

She was watching him steadily. Her eyes seemed to be glowing. "All right," she said. "I'll tell. I'm two minutes old. I was born when the car stopped."

He seemed to be searching for the right thing to say. "Anita I wish you'd try because it's very important. You see I love you rather a lot and——"

She shot upright, galvanised. "*What?*"

He looked miserable. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It just sort of slipped out. Don't be angry."

Anita scrambled out of the car, her long legs suddenly as ungainly as those of a grasshopper. She bolted down the road, shedding a shoe on the way. Roger jumped up. "Anita, come back . . . Don't be scared . . . Oh, Lord . . ."

She piped at him from a hundred yards away. "You never even said it before. I love you too . . ."

"Anita . . ."

"Come and catch me . . . !"

The haycock was a little plateau with an horizon of stars. Anita wriggled luxuriously and the autumn leaf began to come apart. Buttons slid magically undone, she lost her hair ribbon and her other shoe. Her heart was thudding violently and things round her seemed to be spinning in giddy vertical planes. "Roger. . ."

He was trying to stand but the surface of the hay was not sympathetic. "Anita, *what are you doing . . .*"

"It's all right, we're in love . . ."

"Anita," he said, floundering. "You must be mad . . ."

"MMMMM . . ."

He shouted at her. "*Do your dress up!*" He caught her bare shoulders and shook her. "Look at yourself," he said. "*What do you think you're doing?*" He shoved her away from him and Anita rolled across the stack thinking lightning had struck at the very least. He slid down awkwardly to the field and his voice floated back to her, distant and cold. "Tidy yourself this minute," he said. "And then come down. It's very late. I'm going to take you home."

Anita lay on her face, still feeling the fiery teasing of the straw, a thoroughly shattered witch. The sobs came soft at first then louder, shaking her stupid body in the silly undone dress. Her tears ran into the hay, trickling together as though they would reach the bottom of the stack.

Anita faced her Granny across the kitchen table. The old lady stood stock-still, eyes screwed up, as she tried to take in what her grand-daughter had said. At length she said faintly, "'Ave you gorn completely orf yer 'ead? Well, 'ave yer?"

Anita's jaw quivered. "No Gran, I haven't. This is awful. I feel absolutely awful but I . . . mean what I say. I'm going away."

"Weer?" asked Granny Thompson, still dazed. "Weer, gel? Weer yer gooin'?"

Anita took the plunge. "L-London. You see Gran there's this boy. R-Roger Morrison. And I'm in love with him, and I can't do anything about it, and there's no use trying. An'

he . . . he won't do anything until I go away. He wants me to stay in his house in Hampstead . . ."

"Ter see the time om *took*," Granny broke in, muttering and shaking her head dolefully. "Orl the years om brought yer up . . . I never thort I'd see nothink like *this*, straight I din't . . ."

Anita's lip began to tremble. "It's no good Gran," she said. "Not a scrap. If you go on like that I know I shall start to cry, but it won't make any difference. I shall still go, it's j-just one of those things . . . I'm going to Hampstead and I'm going to get a job, and that's that. And I'm going to be married. Properly married, in Church . . ."

Granny Thompson's mood changed abruptly. "Married?" she screeched. "*Married?* An' to 'ooman . . ." Her voice began to take on some of the quality of a circular saw ripping into steel plate. "I never 'eard nothink like it, not in orl me born *days* . . . Gel yer a *witch*, kent yer see that? Yer got power uvver the beasts o' the field an' the win's o' the air, yer kin call the lightnin' down inter the cup o' yer' and . . . Yer got senses piled atop o' the senses o' mortals, yer soul's bought an' paid fer down under this twenty year, an' yer talkin' about *marriage* . . ."

"And I'm giving it all up" screeched Anita, beating her Granny down by sheer volume. "An' I'm going to be *baptized*, an' married in *Church* . . . I'm goin' to be like Roger, a *Catholic* . . ."

Queer lights flared, fumes rolled round the room. Ceiling and walls quivered and a noise like millstones began, shaking the cottage. Anita was deafened and blinded; when she could see again her Granny was leaning over the table quite still, her spellstick pointed unwaveringly between Anita's eyes. On the old lady's shoulder a familiar crouched, back spiky with hatred, yellow eyes swimming. Anita began to tremble as though there were an engine inside her, running raggedly. Her teeth started to chatter; she lowered her head and slowly clenched her hands.

"By 'Im Wot's Down Under," said Granny Thompson slowly, hissing the words between her teeth. "I never thort I'd see the day. The *langwidge* . . . an' under my roof an' orl. I never thort it'd come ter *this* . . ."

Anita's voice was wobbly; it almost refused to come at all. "You'll have to d-do away with me then, Gran," she

said. "I'm sorry, but I can't change. Spell me to a cinder, it doesn't matter now . . ." She stayed with her head down, shaking.

Granny Thompson champed her lips, took a breath, let it out again, paused and seemed momentarily to swell. The familiar crouched slowly; its eye pupils contracted to tiny dots, its ears flattened and it began to purr. For a whole minute that was the only sound in the room; then Granny lifted the animal from her shoulder and set it on the ground. She crossed to her chair, using the stick to walk with, and sat down. After a time the long wooden creak of the rockers sounded. Anita opened her eyes and looked up slowly. A streak of sweat ran down her face and she wiped at it automatically with the back of her hand. Then her eyes brimmed. "Gran," she said. "Oh, Gran . . ."

"I dunt want none o' that neither," said the old lady firmly. "*Waterworks*. Dunt 'elp nothink ner nobody. When are yer gooin', gel?"

"Gran, I . . ."

"There's a sootcase somewheer about," said Granny. "Yer kin 'ave that. Yer'd better goo in yer noo things, yer old 'uns wunt 'urt fer bein' scumbled."

Anita spread her hands on the table helplessly and stared at them.

"Yer'll 'ave ter give the lot up o' course," said Granny Thompson sternly. "'Ent no good 'arf doin' it. I shall atter report it, so's we kin get yer signed orf the books. I dunt expect there'll be no trouble . . ."

A large tear splashed onto Anita's wrist.

"Times ent wot they were," said the old lady. She was sitting half turned from Anita; her profile looked pinched and thin. "I dunt say as 'ow I altergether blames yer," she said. "Times is shiftin'. Too fast fer us old 'uns . . . We'll just atter git on as best we can, same as we allus 'as. I dare say 'e's a nice enough young bloke, I'd 'a' done the same meself mebbe, fifty year or more back. I shall 'atter write a note though, jist in case any o' them up there wants ter know. An' 'oo kin tell, mebbe yer'll be comin' back now an' then jist visitin' like . . ."

Anita broke, and fled from the room.

A bat called her up at four a.m., as he was passing the cottage on his way to his home in the bole of an ancient

tree. An angry thought burst at him through the thatch ; a split second before it reached him it relented, spun a bubble that twitched him half a mile off course and a hundred yards above his normal ceiling. He floated down puzzled, reoriented himself on the tall trees of Deadman's Copse, just growing out of the night.

Anita walked slowly toward the main road. She was wearing a new dress, very white and clean, and a little jacket. It was early evening again, and there had been rain ; the wetness in the grass made the fields look rough and grey. Droplets flew like pearls, splashing her ankles ; her suitcase bumped her knee. Twenty yards off something scurried along a hedge bottom but she ignored it. There was a wall round her mind through which no thoughts could penetrate ; above her a swooping bird braked and spun away, puzzled by the blankness.

She was thinking about her home. About the red tile floors and limewashed walls, the thumpings and night chirpings and scratchings she had always heard in the thatch. The old beams and the deep windowsills with their scatter cushions and well worn paint. The warmth and cosiness of the kitchen hearth, the tall cupboards full of ancient spells and mysteries. They were things she could never take with her ; she'd had to leave them all behind as she'd left her ribbons and her dresses and her boxes full of toys and curios, the little fossils so old she could put them to her ear and hear all the years inside singing like a kettle . . .

Somewhere a ripple ran across the grass. Something chattered, something drummed, something sat up and scrubbed its ears. The grass waved, complicating itself with private patterns. The green stems chafed a message. "Anita's going away . . . *going away . . .*"

She had wanted to fill her case with stupid things, with corn dollies and mouse nests and ammonite shells and ribbons and pressed flowers and spellbooks and old leaves and pieces of ironstone for drawing ginger pictures on the ground ; but Granny Thompson had made her be sensible and there were woollies and undies and a spare dress and her comb and brush and a strong pair of shoes and some money, and a letter in the old lady's improbable hand-

writing that said she was over twenty-one, and a free agent . . .

The noise increased, the rustlings and quiverings, the thumpings like little drums beating strange rhythms through the grass. To others it might have been the wind but to Anita it was a song, a crying, something black and strange.

There was the road, and a bus stop. A big green United Counties omnibus, quivering and noisy and hot. Anita climbed onto it and the anthem stopped, blown away by diesel fumes. The bus ground off, and soon home was nothing but a memory and a dream.

The train compartment smelled of dust and old sticky sweet wrappers. The seats were upholstered in faded reddish cloth and there were spotty narrow pictures of castles and lakes in Scotland and a map with all the stations of the region printed on it and a mirror with the letters 'BR' engraved in its centre. Anita sat waiting for the train to start. She was sure she would feel the jerk, but there was nothing; the carriage glided away so smoothly the platform was slipping past before she realized. Roger smiled at her reassuringly. "Don't look so worried," he said. "Everything's all right."

Anita smiled back, conscious of the station buildings and sidings falling away behind and the fields coming into sight. Roger offered her a cigarette but she shook her head. He said "It's a good fast train, we'll be in Saint Pancras before dark . . . Anita?"

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

Anita nodded, suddenly feeling a glow. It was done, the old way was broken. She was going to Hampstead, to see the open spaces and the tall houses and the High Street that was like a little country town. She was going to meet Roger's parents and start everything new and there was going to be no more magic . . .

Roger was still talking. She tried hard to follow. "I'm sorry we couldn't drive up, the motor broke a half-shaft and had to go into a garage. Got to come down again later in the week and fetch her, awful bore . . . I showed Sis your picture, she thinks you're smashing . . . I've never seen that dress before, is it new . . . Mother would have fetched us

but she doesn't like driving the Jag, and Father's abroad till the end of the month . . ."

"Anita?"

Far away, tiny with distance, a hare was pounding along keeping pace with the train. A thought pinged up to the carriage; the glass of the window was thick, the message barely came through.

"Tell Anita the weasel's run over. He was crossing a road and a car came, it broke his back . . ."

"Anita doesn't want to know . . ."

The train was swaying now as it picked up speed. Anita could imagine what it looked like, long and tall, racing in the late sunlight. She was able to see it from outside, through eyes set very close to the ground.

"Anita!"

She blinked, and smiled again a little desperately. "Trains p-pick up water don't they, from sort of troughs in between the rails? They have a sort of scoop . . . I was looking at a train book last night and there was one doing it . . ."

Roger came and sat with her, putting his arm round her shoulders. "Anita, you're just like a child sometimes . . . Anyway, this is a Diesel. Only steam trains pick up water." He paused; then, "You were dreaming again, weren't you?"

"No, I . . . yes . . . Roger, I'm trying so hard . . ."

"Don't. It doesn't matter, it's all right . . . Anita, what do you dream?"

"I mustn't tell, I've got to forget . . ."

"It doesn't matter now that you know they're only dreams. Tell me about them. Telling helps, it's the best thing to do."

One of those little knolls must be Foxhanger. Far away, blue with distance. Anita used a flash of one of her abnormal senses and the scene through the window altered. Strange eddies were visible, and lines of force. Foxhanger winked like a jewel. She turned away, playing with a button on the boy's coat. "I can fly in the air . . . did you know that, Roger?"

"Go on. I think you have pretty dreams."

Suddenly it was wonderful just to be talking about it. Talking made things seem nearer for a little while longer. "I can fly," said Anita, "and I can change into things. I can

be a hare or a fox or a badger . . . And I know how it feels when dragonflies mate, it's wonderful, you go soaring up in the air till there's nothing round you but blueness and sunlight . . . And I can be a bat and squeak like a bat and fly up and try and hear the echoes bouncing off the moon . . . An' I've been to the moon, everything's stiff and black and white and the stars are huge and the sky's like velvet and there isn't any air . . . And there's drifts of dust you could sink right into, and cracks and rifts everywhere and nothing growing. Nothing there at all except little scampery things in the shadows and you never see them, you just hear them calling . . . An' I know what it's like to . . . be a fish, how the current feels pushing against your nose and how the weed touches your back . . . And how the sun looks on the top of the water, the ripples are all gold and swimming fast's like driving under trees . . . I know about everything, I can go into crayfish burrows to feed them, I can hunt with the foxes . . . An' I know about weasels, they're terrible. If they catch you when you're small . . ." She stopped and bit her lip. "It's all finished with though Roger, I mustn't think about it. Granny said it was best. She was t-terribly kind . . ."

He looked worried now. "They're dreams, Anita. You have fantastic dreams."

"No. They're *real* . . ."

He looked at her searchingly. "You still believe it, don't you?"

"They're real, Roger. I wish they weren't."

He took her hands. "Look," he said. "Look, when we get to London there won't be any need for you to find a job or anything silly like that. You won't even have to get a flat or a place to stay because you'll be at my house. You can stay there as long as you like, it's quiet and nobody will bother you. You'll probably see the priest from time to time, he's a nice old man and he's very interested in you, I've told him all about you. But he won't worry you till you're ready. Now the dreams will go away, you'll see. And if they don't . . . well, there's a friend of Father's. He's a sort of doctor, he'll just come and talk to you and find out all about it and after that there won't be anything else to frighten you. You'll be all right, promise . . ."

Anita's eyes began to open slowly. They grew wider and

wider till they looked like bright, shocked marbles. She said "What did you say?"

Roger patted her hand. "Don't worry. I shouldn't have said anything about that perhaps, not just yet. But it'll be all right. I love you, and everyone else will . . ."

Anita said, "You mean a *psychiatrist!*"

He smiled gently. "Don't think about it any more. Not now. If you need help, we'll help you. We'll all be your friends . . ."

Anita's hands went to her face and everything, the train, the countryside, time itself, seemed to stand quite still. Anita screamed.

If she'd screamed with her voice, it wouldn't have been too bad . . .

The sun had gone and night was pushing grey fingers overhead but the rim of the sky was still bright turquoise. Along the horizon was the dark line of the railway embankment. Anita stared back at it one last time then climbed the stile to the road, lifting her left leg awkwardly. The suitcase in her hand felt as if it was stuffed with lead; it seemed she'd carried it half a century. She used her seventh sense fleetingly, just long enough to locate Foxhanger. She detected a whirling world; there were owls and foxes, little scuttling things in the grass, beetles and birds by the score. Queries piped at her and she closed her mind again. She wasn't ready for them all yet; there would be a welcoming, and she didn't feel she could cope. She limped on down the lane, using her human shape as a penance.

The woods were black silhouettes against the flaring afterglow when she met a farm boy. He came walking slowly toward her, whistling to himself. He stopped when he got close, and scratched his head uncertainly. He said "Evenin' Miss . . ."

Anita felt suddenly dead tired. "Hello," she said, "who are you?" Then before she could stop herself, "I'm lost. And I've got a t-terrible way to go . . ."

He crossed the road to her, anxiously. "You all right, miss?"

"Yes," said Anita. "Yes, of course. Don't fuss, please. . ."

"Cor," he said. "What 'ave yer done to yer leg?"

There had been the hot bite of barbed wire as she leaped

down the embankment . . . "I just pulled a communication cord," said Anita. "The train made a terrible fuss . . ."

The boy was bending down ; she felt his fingers touching "That's nasty," he said. "That wants wrappin', miss. Real nasty that is, wants seein' to . . ." Anita held her foot off the ground and whimpered. "Yes," she said. "I suppose it does . . ."

The boy found a clean hankie from somewhere and tied it round her knee. The Northamptonshire Controller began to roar for information and Anita referred him tiredly to her Granny. "Come on, miss," said the boy. "I'll help yer, give us yer case . . ."

She leaned on him and he put his arm round her. He was strong, and he smelled faintly of hay and earth. "I'm Anita," she said. "I jumped off a train."

"Yer'll git in trouble fer that miss, can't goo on like that. 'Ave the p'lice on yer in no time yer will. 'Ow far are yer gooin'?"

"Home. To Foxhanger."

"Yer wunt walk orl that way. It 'ent 'arf a step."

"I know. It doesn't matter . . ." Anita started to cry. "Farmer's boy," she said, "it's awful. Nothing will ever be right again. It's all changing, all the old things are going. They want to cut through Deadman's Copse to get the ironstone . . ."

"I know."

"An' they want to build all out to Foxhanger . . ."

"I know . . ."

"An' culvert the Fyne-Brook," sobbed Anita, hanging on and limping.

"Yes miss," he said quietly. "It's all right, I know . . ."

The night was deepening. Anita leaned at a greater and greater angle ; her bosom jostled the boy, and he could smell her hair. At the bend by the Hollis Farm her limp became much worse ; and by Major Brewer's stackyard her foot refused to go onto the ground any more. The retreat ended at the stacks, practically for the night.

She had discovered the simple for love.

—KEITH ROBERTS

What is there that's truly worse than fear? You don't know? Then come for a little ride. Get off at

STOP SEVENTEEN

by Robert Wells

At precisely 8.16 a.m. the first sigh of air whispered along the tunnel. Shortly afterwards the pendant lights and signs above the station began to swing. From far off down the black iron throat the sound of a train became audible and at 8.17 all the lights came on and it rolled to a stop at the platform.

Hart walked compulsively past several of its carriages while the robot controls slid the doors open for him. Every one was empty, but he had no cause for surprise. The train had been that way each morning for as far back as he could remember.

When he had discovered the station and the solitary subway auto after the Disaster and the Exodus left him behind in a feral world, he began riding it hopefully. He believed then that he must surely find some other survivor like himself one day who had also taken refuge in the subways of the megalopolis.

His search had proved fruitless. Now he rode the train from habit alone. Sometimes he left it to explore with increasing disbelief another station or its hinterland, but this became more difficult as dog packs infiltrated the ruins of the city and made all expeditions dangerous. So Hart mostly confined himself to the routine of the daily journey, allowing the train to collect him in the morning and deposit him at night at his barricaded refuge.

Presumably it would continue to make its circuit as long as resources of power remained. They showed no sign of diminishing. Hart had lost his memory bank in the Disaster and had no means of measuring how long he had been making his ritual journey nor any way of remembering

from what element subway autos drew their power, but he had given up speculating long ago on the ultimate running down of his train.

He boarded it and it started smoothly and slid into the tunnel. He always slept for the first part of the ride. At the commencement of the journey it often seemed to him that he had performed it in identical circumstances and was merely a recurring term in a limitless equation. This disturbed him until he reasoned that the repetitive pattern of his daily routine could easily create such a hallucination now that he had lost his efficient mechanical memory and had to rely on a defective corporeal one. So he had taught himself to sleep.

He woke, as usual, at Stop Fifteen. His heart had begun to beat untidily. Stop Sixteen. The train came soundlessly to a halt. Piles of rubble blocked the platforms here. The skin of earth and rock above Stop Sixteen had been badly affected by the Disaster and the roof had collapsed at several points.

As the doors closed, sealing him in again, Hart stood up. The train rolled into the tunnel on the next stage of its journey. Hart stood with his face close to the window as the darkness rushed by outside, seeming to press against his smarting eyeballs.

He began to count. This stage lasted 300 seconds. The train seemed to move with increasing velocity. *Two sixty nine and two seventy and . . .*

The darkness sighed by on the other side of the glass. Now its quality began to change. *Two ninety three and two nine four and two nine five . . .* Light began to flow. Hart counted aloud the last numbers.

The train ran into Stop Seventeen. Light of the intensity of the sunlight he remembered faintly burst against the glass and flooded his dark-drugged pupils. "Stop," he whispered hopelessly to the train. "Stop!"

But the train did not stop. It flashed past the lights and the platform and the entrance and exit signs; heedlessly on past the moving advertisements that went on enticing nobody to drink this whisky or wear that shirt or use the other perfume: a quite undamaged, normal station, functioning as it might have done before the Disaster and the Exodus, but without people and without a train. For by

some irony one of the mechanisms of the underground railway was at fault and Hart's last train had not stopped at Stop Seventeen in all the time he had ridden it.

Until the last few days (or was it weeks or months perhaps?) he had never particularly desired that it should. Out of curiosity he had sometimes found himself wishing he could explore the queer, undamaged place, but on second thoughts considered its untouched survival somehow sinister. Besides, the much more compelling fear of harming his only means of moving from place to place, albeit only on a roundabout, had dissuaded him from even contemplating stopping the train by artificial means. But a new element had lately entered the situation.

Hart's train took four seconds to clear Stop Seventeen. He was watching carefully now. The first time it might have been an illusion, the second a coincidence; yesterday, when there had been nothing again, he might have missed it. Four seconds was not long. As the train yawned into the exit tunnel he closed his eyes so that the unmistakable image would remain impressed on his retina.

Inside his closed eyes he looked and recognised that the shadow was there again and he was not mistaken. There could be no doubt now that someone inhabited or had discovered the station and was concealing himself as the train passed through each day by standing on the exit elevator staircase.

Hart sat down and found that his hands were shaking. When he was calmer he made up his mind and laid plans as well as anyone can whose memory bank has been lost.

Stop Sixteen was inaccessible, a heap of rubble. Stop Eighteen was 726 travelling seconds away from Seventeen and there was no guarantee he could find his way out of it and navigate in the right direction above ground back towards Stop Seventeen even without the serious intervening hazards of the deserted city, the dog-packs or what other predatory beasts might by now have invested it.

If the shy survivor of Stop Seventeen was to yield his secret somehow the train had to be made to stop there. The possible consequences must be faced.

Hart spent hours of intense mental effort recalling and laboriously writing down everything he could remember about subway autos.

He had just finished re-reading his notes when his train slid open its doors to let him alight at his home station. As its departing murmur faded down the tunnel, Hart made his way to the store-house he had built for himself and began selecting tools.

He hardly slept that night and a pre-dawn dream was tormented by sunlight and shadows that moved across the walls of a narrow, elliptical prison. By 8.10 he was already waiting impatiently on the platform. He stared up at the signs and lights. He cursed them because they would not move. He strained his hearing towards the dark mouth of the tunnel, but it was still too early.

His train came, neither early nor late, fulfilling the function for which it had been designed: to serve time-keeping travellers before the Disaster and their exodus had reduced it to a cypher, forsaken, punctual for no one but another cypher: Hart.

He gave up his usual sleep that morning. By the time he had reached Stop Fifteen he was sweating and talking out loud to himself.

"What if Hart makes a mistake? Supposing Hart can't get the leverage between the doors or does it too soon or too late and the train stops in the tunnel? Christ! I shouldn't be able to get out. I'd be marooned down here in the dark and die! Rotting slowly like a fragment of food in the guts of an invalid!"

Between Stops Fifteen and Sixteen he paced the length of the carriage twenty times, examined the tools and steel crowbar repeatedly and rehearsed his plan again and again.

When the doors closed at Stop Sixteen he knelt down behind them and gripped the crowbar in his trembling hands. His teeth began to chatter. He sweated. He knew that everything might depend upon the counting. As the darkness came down outside the windows he began to count, forcing the rational method aloud through his trembling lips: "One and er two and er three and er four . . ."

He rested his forehead against the glass, counting with his eyes shut. The steel bar was cold in his cold hand. "Two oh three two oh four, two oh five . . ."

In a sudden panic he opened his eyes and clawed up to the window. Suppose he miscounted . . . ?

"Suppose Hart miscounted!" he shouted to the darkness,

but he was still counting mentally: *two one six, two one seven, two one eight.*

Hart calmed himself with an effort. It was time to prepare. He squatted now so that his only contact with the floor was by the soles of the thick rubber boots he had put on. He drew on heavy rubber gloves.

Two eight six, two eight seven, two eight eight . . .

As the quality of the darkness outside began to change, he forced the lip of the crowbar into the space where the doors spliced.

Two nine three and two nine four and two nine five.

With a compulsive push and wrench Hart got the crowbar in. A shock jarred him; a high-voltage spark arced between the forced doors. The train shuddered. The strange sunshine of Stop Seventeen flooded down. Robot controls locked the brakes on hard; Hart's train stopped almost exactly aligned to the platform.

He was vaguely aware that from somewhere there was coming the insistent scream of a warning buzzer. Emergency equipment was coming into operation. With uncanny obedience all the doors opened on both sides of the train and the escape doors, too. Sweat trickled down Hart's nose and temples; saliva escaped from his mouth. He scrambled out onto Stop Seventeen, dragging the tools and a bag of supplies with him through the damaged door.

For several seconds he remained crouched on the platform, wondering whether it was safe to go further. His train seemed to have been relegated absolutely to a past to which he would never return although in fact it remained not two yards behind him, its outraged mechanisms trying to right themselves, bells ringing and alarms flashing.

Hart opened his eyes and stood up boldly. The light seemed more potent now that he was outside the train. More shattering still were the memories which drenched down suddenly on him. He remembered who he was and where he was and he stretched out a hand in amazement at the people passing on all sides of him.

Suddenly there was a noise which made him turn. He cried out with surprise. The train's robot alarm units had sent out surface crawlers. It was something Hart's deprived memory systems had not allowed for. They had

located the damage, assessed and isolated it. Now they returned to the central control unit and Hart had been startled by the gentle swish of the undamaged doors closing.

As he watched, immobilised, the train slid away from the platform, gathered speed and was gone down the exit tunnel. "Stop!" he shouted after it, holding out his hand as though someone could hear him and see his panic.

The lights did not go out. The whisper of the receding train faded. Hart turned back from it. The platform was empty.

"Don't move . . ."

They were the first words Hart had heard spoken by another human being since the Disaster and Exodus. Whoever it was was down the platform somewhere behind him.

"You all right?"

"Yes," said Hart, "I'm all right."

"Why did you stop the train? You were happy riding it. I watched you once or twice. You were all right in there. It won't stop again for you—you know that? I don't want to be saddled with you. I rigged it so's it wouldn't stop here."

Hart had not turned round. "Who are you? I thought I was the only one left alive down here. Why did you rig the train not to stop? If you saw me on it didn't you . . . Didn't you want . . ."

"Turn around, son."

Hart turned. An old man had stepped out of the elevator exit. His beard and moustache were white. He had a scarf tied around his white hair. Hart's faulty memory reminded him just in time that the tube thing the old man carried could cause him acute harm if discharged in his direction.

"I fixed it because I got tired of running a cemetery. And most of all I fixed it so you wouldn't get off here."

Hart opened his mouth to question this enigma, but recognised with terrible clarity the street in which the old man was suddenly standing. He swayed and put his hand up to his eyes and remembered who ought to be waiting for him there and was about to say her name when the old man's voice spoke quite close to him this time.

"What do you see here?" Hart opened his eyes. The old man made a circular motion around the station with the tip of his tube,

"I'm sorry," said Hart. "Just for a moment I saw . . . What was it? What was it? *Was* she?"

"Oh, yes," said the old man with a kind of exasperated despair. "She *was*, all right. Like you. Like me. Now, try to answer me. What do you see here?"

Hart was staring into the old man's face. There was a crazy familiarity about it, but he could not think whether it was someone he had met or someone he had yet to meet. He stared into the eyes bewildered, trying to remember the question he had been asked. In the vertiginous depths of the old man's eyes Hart could see only himself.

He got a grip on his mind and looked about him again. "Subway station," he said. "Like they all were before. Before it happened. Moving advertisements. Lights. Visor-phone booths. Route-tracer maps. Everything."

The old man advanced still closer. His skin was yellow after the long separation from daylight. "Don't you know what this stop was, son?"

Hart shook his head. The old man's eyes looked quickly at Hart's left shoulder, at the broken holster where the memory bank should have been strapped.

"Lost it. Disaster, eh?"

Hart nodded. He wanted to say something, but it spun sideways out of his head and she came towards him under the arcade with the familiar challenging grin and the cropped hair and he said out loud to the old man: "Oh, Christ, Lynn, it is you isn't it." But she went on, right on through him and he didn't know whether he was in her or she was in him or whether they were both in the old man and he fell forward hearing someone saying: "Stop Seventeen, that's all I know. *Stop Seventeen . . .*"

"No wonder," said the old man, "no wonder." He didn't try to help Hart get up. Hart had grazed his shins and hands on some obstruction; but when he looked down all that seemed to be under him was ordinary, smooth platform. He put his hand over his eyes and got up slowly.

Although the old man was still talking, Hart was getting into the hydrofoil with his mother and father, off on his first underwater holiday in the Pacific.

"Well," said the old man, "does CIMD mean anything to you?"

The vision slipped quietly away skimming the waves, and

a ragged end of another memory replaced it. A huge octagonal building, windowless ; inside it gallery after gallery served by lifts, padded floors, cubicles where you sat and where telepathically the stored up memories and dreams were fed back into your subconscious.

"CIMD," he repeated. "CIM Central . . ."

"Yes. Yes."

"In . . . In . . ."

"I love you," she said. "Don't you forget it. You have it just as long as you want it ; have a use for it."

"You're young," he told her. "You'll forget."

"No," she said. "No I won't. Ever." The way she said it was so that he knew she meant it.

"Help me," he asked the old man. "What is it here?" The world with the old man's face and Lynn's white arms and a station illogically smashed and full of rubble spun up to meet him as he fell.

"Tomorrow I'll get down and rig those trips again," said the old man. "You stay here tonight son. You can't do nothing else anyway. I'm not running a morgue of hopes nor a cemetery no more. I'll get down and rig those trips so she stops again tomorrow. You be off. You're the last one. I wanted to save you."

Hart turned over and tried to sit up, but his hands seemed to be tied. He and the old man were in some sort of shelter. It was on a staircase. There was the smell of coffee.

The old man leaned forward to talk to him. "Best way. Sorry. You see—so many others. That place up above. CIMD. No, you wouldn't remember. Especially here you wouldn't remember. With your bank busted they'd get in at you too fast. Out of control, see?"

"Central Index of Memory and Dreams. You remember they used to clear the memory banks for you. Store up the ones you could do without so you could come back any time and take a selective replacement."

"My God," said Hart quietly. "I remember." But he didn't really interrupt the old man.

"Plenty used to turn up in the early days. Nearly all of them wanted the same thing: to get back through to those ghosts that are still living out time like it was before the Disaster. It never took me that way. It took most pretty

bad. Running about calling out names and crying and carrying on. Then jumping under ou . . . under the train or hanging themselves or wasting my good ammunition blowing their fool heads off. . .

"What it is, you see, is that you can't get through to them, the escaped ones. They just go on inhabiting the world we used to live in." The old man laughed. "They're the real ones here. More real than us, I reckon. No, you can't break through to them. We're the ghosts. Their world stopped at the Disaster."

"Yes," said Hart.

"I was all right after a bit. You see, I didn't want to go back. Why exchange this desolation for an old one? They wanted to get me. She used to come a lot. But I wouldn't take it. I would have done it if just by going over the frontier you could change the past. But you can't. It's fixed. Immutable. Queer." He shook his head. "Must've been some quirk in the radiation, I guess. Set all the systems going. Let 'em all run free down here."

He remembered that he had a prisoner and smiled at Hart and poured out coffee.

"It used to be worse before I shut the elevators and sealed off the communication doors. Up there. I mean what's left of the galleries. They're there all right. But I can't see a damn one now. They don't come for me any more. No, this real shambles belongs to me. I don't need no imaginary other."

"Yes," said Hart. He was going up in the elevator. The flat door slid open. Horrified he watched himself and Lynn in love in the room with the movie window where you looked out on a panorama of Naples and the bay with day and night and a Vesuvius that never erupted because it was only a film.

"If I could stop it there," he said. "If I could just stop it there, I'd go . . ."

"Where are you?" said the old man. "Come back out of it. You can't stop it. We know that . . ."

"Get me out," said Hart closing his eyes. "Get me out."

"Some even went up," said the old man. "They didn't come back. You think what it would be like living in a time-stop inside the collective mind of two million rational mad-

men. That's what it must be like up there. I didn't even go up after 'em. I had enough to contend with down here.

"So in the end I just blocked the exits and rigged the trips so the train wouldn't stop any more either."

"I can't take it," said Hart.

"God-damn cemetery of hope," said the old man. "Still you're about the last one, son. I got an even chance I can save you. Get down in the morning and rig those trips again. Get you back riding."

"Yes," said Hart. "For the sake of pity, get me out of here . . ."

His night was passed moving to and fro across a life that seemed to have belonged to some other being called Hart. It was better when the old man was there, talking all the time in his calm way; speculating on which was the reality and which the ghosts.

When he went off at seven down the elevator ramp and into the silence along the station to fix the trips, it got worse.

"Don't go. Don't look." She held her wrist upside down so that he couldn't read her wrist watch and kept her other hand over the dial of his own. "It's stopped. It's stopped for us. There's just one continuous now going on until the end . . ."

"I have to go," he told Hart, although Hart was taking the kisses and he knew he wouldn't be able to go even when it was time or when he understood what time was about.

"Come on," said the old man. "Take it easy, son. We'll see what we can do. Just hold on to me. Keep your eyes closed if it helps."

"Alan," said his mother. "You know what will happen if you day-dream like this all the time. No career. No future. Just round and round on a roundabout doing a routine day after day. I thought you told me you were going to fly space or be a technician on the space-cars? What do you want to do all your life—ride a train backwards and forwards to town every day? What a future!"

"Stopped for us . . . Don't go . . ."

"Lynn," said Hart. "I have to go. We can't stop it . . ."

"Don't look. Don't go. Stay here with me."

"Okay," said Hart, not meaning it. "I'll stay."

"Don't say it like that." She wept. "Don't say it like that as though you meant it . . ."

"Just keep holding on, son. Half minute more and you'll make it. I think I can hear her coming." The old man had both arms around Hart. "You see, they want us. It's their world here. Don't give in . . ."

"No . . ."

The first sigh of air drove along the tunnel. The pendant lights and signs above the station began to swing. Far off down the deep, iron throat came the sound of Hart's train. On time. It was always on time and would be until it or time ran down from sheer exhaustion.

The arms around him were white and strong and wouldn't let him go. "It's stopping," said a voice inside his ear. "It's stopping for us. *Don't look . . .*"

As the lights came on and the wasphead front of the last train raced towards him he wrenched his hands from his eyes. With fierce strength he struck free of the encircling arms. "Okay," he shouted meaning it. "I'll stay. *I'll stay!*"

The train stopped and slid open its doors for the grim old man called Hart waiting alone on a dark, wrecked and empty platform.

— ROBERT WELLS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Heading this month's column is an admonition from Mr. Archie Potts of 41, Kenton Avenue, Kenton Park, Newcastle-on-Tyne 3.

Dear Sir,

A change of editors usually means a change in editorial policy and I should like to urge the continued use of short material. One reviewer referred to such stories as "Space fillers". But personally I have enjoyed many of the shorts which appeared in SF IMPULSE far more than I enjoyed the longer ones. Surely a story should be judged by its merits as a story and not by its length. Some of Fredric Brown's best stories have been under two thousand words. Once writers find that shorts are hard to sell they are likely to be tempted to pad out their material. There's also the development of new writers, most of whom start with short stories then graduate to novelettes. It will be very difficult for them to break into the field with long stories, and hence some promising writers may be discouraged. So please, keep the shorts.

— ARCHIE POTTS

We're fully in agreement with the views expressed here. If we remember correctly, the phrase referred to was "typical Bonfiglioli space fillers". We feel Bon may have got a little oversensitive on the subject; there's certainly nothing wrong with short material used in moderation though it would obviously be bad to fill the book with "squibs" every month. The main objection to very short pieces is they

almost invariably depend on some form of twist ending. We'd like to counsel prospective writers against this; there's only ever been one O. Henry.

Here now a carefully reasoned answer to E. C. Tubb's recent article on trends within sf. Brian M. Stableford, of 16, Thompson Road, Denton, Lancs., is a keen fan and short story writer. We hope we shall be hearing a great deal more of him.

Dear Sir,

I must take exception to several of the points made by E. C. Tubb in his COMMENT of SF IMPULSE 6.

His main objections to sex in science fiction stories seem to be (a) that sf will one day turn exclusively into sex stories in spaceships and (b) sex is unnecessary in sf stories.

I dispute both points. Nobody wants to turn sf into "sexy speculation". On the other hand, I shouldn't imagine anybody wants to have a solid diet of the tale where the heroic spaceman and the professor's daughter vanquish the Scourge of the Spaceways (fade out while embracing over body). Like Mr. Tubb, I want to read sf—not sex stories. On the other hand I don't consider gangsters with rayguns sf any more than exploits in the spaceship's bedroom.

Some sf is about other beings in other planets. But a lot of it is about human beings. Among his other peculiarities man indulges in sex. A ban on sex is tantamount to a ban on humanity. An old-time sf hero is not so much a human being as a robot with raygun whose clicks, whirrs and beeps stand for clichés.

Mr. Tubb seems worried about the moral code. Does he imagine that only immoral people have sex? A conjecture that needs no comment!

He may place the "broad sweep of space-opera action" above the quality of the story. He can keep it. If a story purports to depict human beings, then that is what it should do. Limitations like the ban on sex are neither functional nor necessary. They should be dispensed with.

— BRIAN STABLEFORD

We feel both Mr. Tubb and Mr. Stableford are right to a certain extent. Obviously nobody wants to see sf turned into an excuse for provocative writing and near-pornography (most of which is so damned bad it isn't interesting

anyway). *On the other hand the day of the simple space opera is over. (We feel there Mr. Stableford has given us a glimpse of the obvious). We think sf will continue to be what it has been in the past; a "broad spectrum" medium appealing to a great number of different people for a great number of different reasons. Surely there's room both for the type of work Mr. Stableford advocates and for straight, well-told, action narrative?*

And now one that's almost bound to start a war. Mr. Michael Butterworth of 10, Charter Road, Altrincham, Cheshire, writes:

Dear Sir,

QUOTE: . . . "but it has not been pointed out often enough that he has failed." (Harrison on Burroughs, SF IMPULSE 4). Has Burroughs failed?

Granted—WSB *has* failed—in part but not consistently. In those pieces of Burroughs' text that have come off successfully there is every indication that he is a powerful writer to deal with. Perhaps the moderns will take more notice of him than the present society will ever. Remember we also bargain with WSB as a great myth-maker; in this respect he has most definitely *not* failed.

WSB has another step to take—to perfect now what he has written. This will take time, a lot more of it than he has ever taken before. Do you really find him hard to understand? Remember he's experimenting with our nervous systems, and therefore apt to try to use a language completely alien to us.

Burroughs himself admits that he has failed. I think not; he's merely a beginner at strange dice—as was many another strange genius.

— MICHAEL BUTTERWORTH

Surely "experiment" is one of the most abused words in the language. We asked Langdon Jones—who has nothing to do with this but happened to be sitting around—for a spot definition. He came up with "process to determine the validity of a theory", which we thought was pretty good. On these grounds "experimental prose" is work done to satisfy the author on some point or other and shouldn't be foisted on the reading public at all. From where we sit all we can see is good, bad and average writing. By all

means let's try and decide where to place individual authors; but let's not cloud the issue too much with imprecise catchphrases.

Finally a word from Mr. Colin Pilkington of 16, Bridge Street, Ormskirk, Lancs. Colin is a rather shy, retiring historian at present working with the BBC. So retiring in fact we nearly had to bully him to let us have his views on Keith Roberts' recently published novel PAVANE.

Dear Sir,

In case I am misunderstood I must first of all state my outright admiration for the entire cycle of stories. One feels that they were written with affection for the people, for the West Country and for the technological cul-de-sacs represented by the traction engines and semaphore communication system. The fusion of ancient and modern, anachronistic and current elements in the stories led to the creation of a world that one felt was intensely real without necessarily having any contact with *our* reality. Yet, despite this readiness to believe in the world so created, the explanation contained in the prologue to *THE LADY ANNE* led to an undermining of one's suspension of unbelief inasmuch as future reading was marred by the nagging thought—*such a series of events could not have followed Elizabeth's assassination if history prior to 1588 had been as we know it.*

The Reformation, like the Crusades, while outwardly religious in character, sprang in fact from basic changes in the social and economic structure of European civilisation. The deep-seated reasons for the success of the Calvinist doctrine have been described at length by Tawney and Weber but they can be very briefly summarised as a moral justification for the triumph of the mercantile classes over the landed aristocracy of the feudal period. In England, where the old aristocracy had been decimated by the Wars of the Roses, the educated middle classes who operated the Tudor bureaucracy emerged as the new aristocracy. Men like the Cecils and Dudleys based their support against the old feudal and Catholic nobility on the twin buttresses of the Tudor usurpation and the Protestant Reformation. The Tudor Council had too much of a vested interest in the Protestant Succession to allow the country

to collapse without Elizabeth. They would have seen that a Protestant monarch succeeded to the throne. 1588 is, after all, only fifteen years short of 1603 when, despite the doubts of many, the succession of James was contrived without trouble.

No, the moment in our history when we could have been diverted onto the path envisaged was in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth. The Yorkist kings were every bit as modernist as the Tudors in their striving towards a strong and centralised nation state but philosophically they were feudal in outlook. They were extremely antagonistic towards France and more inclined towards friendship with Flanders and Spain than the Tudors. It is not inconceivable to visualise a sixteenth century Yorkist monarch allying himself with Spain and the Guise to overthrow the House of Valois. Most important of all is the fact that Richard III, while devoutly Catholic, was nevertheless of a puritanical mind—as witness his persecution of Jane Shore and his shunning of brother Edward's loose-living Court. If he had been granted a long reign it is not impossible that he might have created a brand of Catholicism in England that anticipated the dedication of the Jesuits and might well have had the vitality to withstand the appeal of Geneva to English minds.

— COLIN PILKINGTON

The PAVANE stories have created a considerable amount of reader interest. So much in fact that we felt justified in asking our one housetrained author to comment on the above. This is what we received.

Dear Mr. Pilkington,

I read your letter with great interest. I wouldn't say categorically you are wrong, any more than I'd claim myself to be wholly right. It seems to me there have been many points where our history could have diverged, possibly an infinite number. Many historians reckon England to have been still predominantly Catholic at the time of the Armada; feelings must have run high, with otherwise staunch Royalists torn between demands of faith and loyalty to the "woman Elizabeth". The Pope's weirdly delayed excommunication, backed by the intriguing of such powerful enemies as Mendoza, must have brought the country perilously close to civil war, a war I've imagined

being triggered by the assassination of Elizabeth and my Walsingham Massacres. Can anybody really say what the results of such a pogrom would have been? The whole affair was potentially disastrous.

The origins of PAVANE lie in the Surreal disparity between the primeval Wessex landscape and the excesses of the modern tourist trade. My butterfly cars tangling with the hooves of Henry's cavalry are no more bizarre than a girl in a bikini ogling the great barbicans of Corfe. I think it was images like this rather than an urge to warp history that led me to write the book.

I recently had the pleasure of the Lady Eleanor's company on a drive across the Purbecks. As ever, she was calmly confident of previous incarnations. Corfe Gate was a green place, little harvests of moss glowing on its stones. The air was clear, scrubbed with rain; in the quiet the mutter of old guns was louder than before.

— KEITH ROBERTS

Which leaves us of course with a slight mystery. We asked Roberts to elucidate but he declined further comment.

Well, so much for that. We must say we're delighted with our first batch of letters. We've had several intriguing replies to our "define science fiction" contest; these we're holding over till we have a few more in. So keep 'em coming!



**THE EYES
OF
THE
BLIND KING**

**BRIAN W.
ALDISS**

Yugoslavia is a strange country that one either hates or loves or that seizes one—like Aldiss—in the firm grasp of a love-hate relationship. This story is an earlier episode in the life of Vukasan, whom we first encountered in SCIENCE FANTASY 78. These chronicles of a bloody and distant age offer a challenge to easy classification. Are they fantasy? Perhaps, since the characters are artificial creations. Are they history? Perhaps, because many of the events took place in the time and manner described. Each reader must answer these questions for himself, though there is one question that will not have to be asked. Are they good entertainment? That they indeed are, fiction at its very best, a look through a literary time machine at a vanished and terrible era so very different from our own.

All the night, there was coming and going in the tall and draughty palace on the Middle Street. Dim lights appeared and disappeared at windows as if they had been sucked out across the somnolent Bosphorus. At first light, Vukasan awoke and dressed himself at once in his travelling clothes.

As he buckled on his belt, his old nurse Arake came unto him and said, "Prince, your sister Branka cries and vows she cannot leave Byzantium."

"Bid her get dressed and come to me! Tell her all Serbia leaves Byzantium this day, and she had better be with us."

"Let me buckle that belt for you!" Impulsively, the old woman came forward, but Vukasan drew himself back, for he was seven now and needed no woman's hand upon him. Arake saw the look in his eye and understood it. Sadness was on her mouth, for she had loved him and tended him all the five years of his father Jurosh's exile.

"I'll miss you, Prince Vukasan, that I will! You've been a good boy, and, I must say, I don't think it's right that children like you and Branka should go back home with your father and get mixed up in wars at your age!"

Vukasan stood there very tall and dark, wearing his seven years like armour and saying, "My father the king must needs fight to get back his throne wrongfully usurped from him by my Uncle Nikolas. So it is proper that I should be by his side. This you must understand, dear Arake."

Arake shook her head. "I don't understand it at all, why

you can't all live under the peace of Byzantium, safe in Constantinople."

He knew well that she regarded Serbia as a savage place, although his mighty grandfather Orusan had been crowned Emperor with more glory than this decadent state could manage. For this reason, she had been coward and refused his father's invitation to accompany them back to the Kingdom of Serbia and the palace of Prilep. Angrily, he answered, "Because you Greeks can provide no peace! Your strength has been bankrupt three hundred years and your rulers are decadent and the Ottomans laugh at you from across the water! We Serbs will make our own peace!"

"I see, Prince Vukasan," said she, and withdrew from his chamber in such a manner that the boy regretted his speech, fearing he had been too boastful. But such was the fashion of his people—and the Greek fashion was no better, for as he looked for the last time round his room, he noticed that the carpetings were of Anatolian make, and probably his bed also, and through the window he could see people dressed in the Ottoman way, with baggy trousers, aping their foes from the East.

He strode from the room, and down the passage, and into the crowded hall on the ground floor, where some warmed smoked meats awaited him to break his fast. Some of the nobles who had stood by his father in exile were here, but he avoided them and, meat in hand, hurried away to seek his father on this momentous morning.

The spring day was chill, with an icy wind blowing from the north across the Black Sea. It would be good to escape from here, back to the warmer valleys of Serbia!

Against the palace stood the stable his father had had converted into a church; Vukasan entered it softly. A great circular chandelier hung in the middle of darkness, its twenty-four candles sending a dull brass gleam on to the pictures of saints. Under the chandelier, his head almost knocking its iron hoop, stood the exiled King Stefan Jurosh of the Nemanijas, a tall and unwarlike figure, for all that he was heavily accoutred for a long and warlike journey.

Vukasan's observation was quick. He saw that his father was not praying, nor even meditating; he stood indecisively, unsure whether he should go out and take command of the

preparations for departure. And this uncertainty he covered up by speaking over-loudly to his son.

He stooped to look down at Vukasan, and his great long wounded face was like an icon swinging in the darkness. Following the troubles attendant on his great father Orusan's death, when his brother Nikolas had defeated and captured him on the bloody banks of the Struma, two men had been set on him to put out his eyes with burning irons, since a blind man can never rule. In exile, Jurosh's sight had returned, but the tortured skin about his eyes still remained stamped and folded in the pattern of its first pain.

The love and terror Vukasan felt for his father boiled within him and found no words.

Jurosh said, "When we have recaptured Prilep and restored peace throughout the kingdom, I shall build a church dedicated to God in thanks for my victories, and it shall be my mausoleum, and we will set it safe in the hills, in some small dreaming valley among the tributaries of the Babuna, and artists shall journey from far away to decorate its walls."

Vukasan was not cheered by this speech. "First we must recapture Prilep, father."

At this, his father recollected his warlike aims, and drew himself up to his full height, so that he knocked the chandelier swinging with his head. Then he retrieved his sword belt which he had laid to one side, saying as he strapped them on, "Triumph will be ours. You will see, Vukasan! The people will witness I have my sight back and will know it for a miracle of God! Then they will all flock to my side, and Nikolas will have to go!"

"We'll have to kill him, father! You said we shall have to kill him ere we get peace!"

"It is so, son; though he was once my dear brother, nevertheless I must slay him. But everyone will turn against him, especially when they see I come with support from Byzantium, and his heart will not be in the fight."

He took his boy's hand in his old rough one, perhaps trying to disguise a weakness in his tone, and led him from the church.

The support of which the king spoke was that guaranteed by the Palaeologan Emperor Andronicus, who had been

a friend, though not always a reliable one, of Jurosh throughout his exile. By supporting Jurosh and maintaining an alliance with him when he got back his throne, Andronicus thought to ensure peace with the Serbs while he dealt with all the other tribes and nations threatening his crumbling empire.

By mid-morning, the small Serbian garrison was ready to leave on its great journey homeward, but the Byzantine forces had not appeared. Although messengers posted back and forth between palace and palace and palace and garrison, not as much as a hoof of Greek cavalry arrived.

Now there came to the king's side Marko Sokolovic, his best and bravest general, who had fought against the infidel Bosnians. Marko was always cool and always polite, not at all a Serb by nature; he acknowledged both Jurosh and Vukasan and said, "My lord, the hour of noon is here and still we wait on Palaeologus! Let us set forth on our way—they will be better mounted and can overtake us, or else we can wait in Sophia for them. One thing we may not do is wait here!"

Jurosh smote his fist on the table and said angrily, "These Roman eunuchs! Not a man of them can be trusted! We must wait. Once we are gone, Marko, the mangy bears will sleep on in their lairs."

"Are we to sleep too?"

"Let us set out for Sophia as Marko says, father!—Show our purpose!"

"Quiet, boy! No, Marko, I dare not risk leaving without the reinforcements. You take our party out of the city to wait beyond the gates, while I go in person to speak with Andronicus."

There was some argument, in which some of the other nobles joined, but eventually the king had his way and rode off alone through the dirty streets of the golden city. Under Marko's direction, and with much shouting, the party prepared to leave. The confusion was made worse by the idlers among the local population, who filled the streets to watch the excitement and poke their rascally fingers, if possible, into the baggage.

Vukasan ran through the emptying palace in a great excitement, throwing open doors everywhere to see that nobody remained behind. In one room, he came upon old

Arake with arms round his sister Branka, and both of them crying to each other. For a moment his heart was softened, but he called boldly to his sister that they were about to go without her.

She was small and dark, eighteen months younger than her brother ; when they fled to sanctuary in Constantinople, she had been but a babe-in-arms. Looking up at her brother with a tear-blotched face, she said, "Shall we stop at Vranje on the way to Prilep, Vukasan?"

"Certainly we shall—you know that father has a solemn trust there!"

"That's where dear Arake used to live!"

"I know it, sister, and she might go back there with us if she so willed."

"Never!" Arake exclaimed. "It has been a battleground five times over. No, you poor chicks must manage for yourselves without your poor old Arake."

"The choice is yours." Although Vukasan spoke coolly, in the manner of Marko, he felt tears within him, and wished that at least the old woman might go with them as far as Vranje, which was on the borders of the Kingdom of Serbia.

Although he could not remember Vranje directly, he had so often listened to the terrifying story of what had happened there that a clear picture of it existed in his mind.

The old woman had turned to Branka and said, "You understand what your big brother means by saying your father the king has a sacred trust in Vranje, don't you?"

The girl shook her head dumbly.

"Well, your father the king has sworn many and many a time that he will repay Petr and Milos when he gets there, so you must see he does so, because Petr is a distant kinsman of mine, and a fine man. So you remember that, won't you, and when you see Petr you'll give him old Arake's love, won't you?"

Branka nodded.

"Promise?"

"I promise. Is Petr as old as you, Arake?"

"He's a strong young fellow still, though gone a bit to stoutness, and he'll be proud to see you, my little princess." At these words, the old nurse burst into tears again, and

Vukasan dragged his sister away and ran with her down the echoing wooden stairs.

Despite her protests, he handed her over to Marko's wife, Ivana, to ride in one of the wagons. As he lifted her up, he whispered in her ear, "Don't weep, little Branka! Soon you'll be playing in the palace at Prilep!" But the words did not console his sister.

With innumerable delays, the company formed up, and at last some of them began to move down the windy streets. Vukasan rode in the front near Marko, his thoughts far from the onlookers who lined their way. He paid little heed to the fact that they were leaving this melancholy and ruinous city.

He brooded on the thought of his father, and of what his father had to do at Vranje. For Vranje was more than the place where he would reward the two men who had been of such great service to him; Vranje was just within the frontiers of the Serbian Kingdom, so that there Jurosh would once again take up kingship within his own nation, and must begin by a kingly act. Although nobody had ever explained the matter to Vukasan, he knew his father was both weak and noble. Therefore he feared for his father, and hoped that his kingly act would be sufficiently bold for it to carry all round the kingdom and rally men to his cause, turning them against the wicked Nikolas.

In his eager boy's mind, he saw himself in his father's place, striding before Petr and Milos, two old men who had been brought from the ramparts of the castle to stand before him.

"Many years ago," said Vukasan to them in his mind, "You two men did not blind me when my dastardly brother ordered you, before I was cast into exile with my children. What you did to me hurt a little, but of course it had to because my brother was looking on. I forgive you for that, and I now reward you for not blinding me by making you, Milos, a present of this bag of gold, and you, Petr, because you are a kinsman of the old Greek woman who cared for my children, I make you a member of my household for life, with a new suit of clothes every St. Sava's day to go with it."

And in his mind there were plaudits from the crowds, and a great rush of people going before them as they

marched, and armed men hurrying to their cause and deserting Nikolas, and at last, still in the person of his father, Vukasan met his hated brother on the plain before Prilep, and they drew their swords and fell on each other so fiercely that their supporters could but stand back and watch pale-faced as the fight went on throughout the day. And at last, as the bats came wheeling out of their holes in the great mountain above Prilep, the better man won, and Nikolas fell down face forward in his own blood—a villain, but dying nobly like a true Nemanija, as his brother entered into his rightful kingdom, his son by his side.

The boy was recalled from his reverie by the chaos outside the Charisian Gate. Here the Serbs had to assemble in open ground, but a cold and unpleasant rainstorm overtook them, so that many of the men turned back and sought shelter under the walls.

Finally, with much shouting, all were assembled in some sort of organisation, as befitted a military expedition. But the king had not arrived, so that they had to wait on him.

To cover his embarrassment, Vukasan addressed the nobles. "My lords, you have been faithful to my father and you will be rewarded. Look you that you behave yourselves in the fitting Serbian way when we are home!" They smiled, knowing that he could not recall the land he called home, so that he said sharply to Marko, "Marko, remind us all of the high code of behaviour we should follow."

But Marko shook his shaggy head and said calmly, "They have it already by heart, Prince; and we must not add boredom to their present troubles."

"It should bore no man to be reminded of the correct way to treat those beneath him—and all the other matters in which you have instructed me."

"I had the duty entrusted in me to instruct you alone, my prince; these arrogant fellows will laugh at me if I attempt to instruct them."

Feeling the blood move to his cheeks, Vukasan reined his pony closer to Marko's great brown mount and said, "About the two men at Vranje, Marko—you know, Petr and Milos—since they will be the first men my father will see when he re-enters his kingdom, I expect he will treat them in a grand manner according to their deserts, don't

you? They could have blinded him properly, you know, and then he could never have reigned more, could he?"

"Or you after him. He will take care of them, prince, for he spoke to me of them by name this very day."

They fell silent. An hour passed, and the women of the *cortège* climbed down and did some idle business with the pedlars who had followed them through the gates of the city. At last, Vukasan could bear the wait no longer. With a sign to Marko, he wheeled his pony and galloped through the throng, back through the Gate of Charisius, and along the Middle Street. He was determined to go to the palace of the Palaeologus if necessary, but when he arrived at the old Serbian palace, he turned into the yard and dismounted.

Already, members of the citizenry were busy carrying away for loot the articles that Jurosh's court had perforce to leave behind: cupboards and golden mirrors and carpets and a Roman statue that had stood in the throne room. Ignoring them, Vukasan went to the stable that had been converted into a church.

His father was there again, as he half-expected. This time, no lights burned, for the Orthodox priest was with the main party, the round chandelier in his possession. Jurosh knelt in near-darkness, his ruined face upturned to the iconostasis, as marked and cracked as it. Vukasan went straight over and knelt by him.

"That devil Andronicus! He has loaned the soldiers who were to protect us to the Genoese! I cannot face Marko and the others after this disgrace!"

Then said Vukasan softly, "Father, you are a great warrior of the Nemanijas, and soon you will be king of your green native country again. What care you for the word or actions of a pack of lying Greeks or Genoese? Come, let us leave these accursed walls, for the good awaits us elsewhere."

Peering down from his scarred eyes, Jurosh seemed for the first time to take in the character of his son.

"To think, my son, that I almost left you behind as too puny a thing to enter exile with me! Already you speak with more courage than I have."

"You have vast troves of courage like treasure, father, that I perceive in your face."

"This poor ruined countenance! My son, I perceive by your words that you have looked deeply into me and seen me for the weak and melancholy man I really am."

And at this remark, which was the first intimate one the exiled king had ever addressed to his son, a great fear like a sudden flaw in crystal glass ran through Vukasan. He did not wish to think of his father as either weak or melancholy, and he jumped up shouting. "The king! The king! The king who was blinded but by the grace of God has back his sight, comes to rule again in his green kingdom! Hurrah for King Jurosh!" And he broke into angry tears.

But the tears were those of his kind, easily drawn forth, easily quelled, and when he saw that his father rose and moved towards the door, he followed in better spirits. When his father mounted his great black horse Herkles, he also mounted, and they rode forth together, the old man in front.

"Let us leave this ruinous city, once the legend of all Christendom, and create cities of our own!" cried Jurosh, his spirits returning as he spurred his way through the Charisian Gate.

Upon their rejoining the Serbian party, Jurosh related soberly how he had gone to Andronicus and found that hard-pressed Emperor being blackmailed by the Genoese from the colony of Pera across the Golden Horn. They, it seemed, had been alarmed by rumours of a new Bulgarian uprising, and were threatening to block the passage of goods to Byzantium unless Andronicus provided protection for their caravan to Adrianople and Sofia. Andronicus had been forced to yield, and had pledged them the men he had promised to Jurosh, swearing they should rejoin Jurosh's force after Sofia. Jurosh had found the Emperor reclining miserably on a gilt couch in his wife's quarters, crying that the world was a travesty of the real world, that honesty had long ago fled the earth, and that the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire would be proclaimed any day.

"Then it shall fall to us, and we shall preserve its glories, rather than to the Turks, who will devour it!" cried Marko. "Long live King Jurosh of Serbia, who shall return this way again before five years are past to add these lands to his, to make himself Emperor of the Serbs, Greeks, and

Bulgars, to drive the armies of the Ottoman back bleeding into the sandy mountains of distant Anatolia!"

He spoke well, and drew a ragged cheer from the company, so that Jurosh put on a bold face and spurred his horse to the head of the procession. Indeed, in his heavy garb, and with his long moustaches, and his face bearing the permanent marks of this world's suffering, he looked a man who could lead. So they set off into Thrace, a party of some sixty people, one half of whom were women or old men.

Vukasan had another instance of his father's changeableness of heart before night. Because they had set out so late, darkness began to fall when they were scarcely on the road to Adrianople. At first, Jurosh would have that they should keep on all the night, and his followers had to unite to deflect his purpose. They camped in a sheltering copse and, after the meal, sentries were posted. Vukašan, to his disgust, was sent to sleep in the wagon with his sister.

There was some uneasy discussion about the rumour that had frightened the Genoese, to wit, the activities of the Bulgars; but in the event, the fears came to nothing and they moved on again shortly after sunrise. Equally to be feared were the Turkish forces, some of which had recently captured Phillipopolis, but they resolved to skirt that city, to avoid trouble.

After that day's travel, it took three more before they came to Adrianople. The Black Death having recently visited that city as a partner to the sudden spring heat, they found it easy to buy extra horses, and with these were able to make better time on the road through Eastern Roumelia, so that although the way lay upward, they reached the walls of Sofia within another week. While the tents were being pitched for the night, Jurosh sent in a messenger with gifts to the Bulgarian Czar, Jovan Alexandr, a good man who was distant kin of his.

The message that returned was welcoming. Taking only their personal guard with them, Jurosh and Marko entered the city, with Vukasan, extremely excited, accompanying them.

The old walls of Sofia were badly battered from the

last Turkish attack and, within, much ruin was to be seen. But there were fine new buildings too, including a temple decorated on the outside with frescoes, after the Wallachian fashion.

All this did Vukasan gape at. He had to suppress his yawns as over a long and heavy meal Czar Jovan Alexandr expounded upon the difficulties confronting his empire—as he still called his small dismembered state. Although his country was being attacked by the Ottoman forces from the south, he was raising a band of Turkish mercenaries to march against Constantinople, of which he still hoped to proclaim himself Emperor. It must have been a rumour of this intention that had reached the Genoese in Pera. The Czar was also suffering from the depredations of a cousin of his who controlled Dobrudza to the north, by Bessarabia.

Over his ambitions, his strategy, his tactics, the Czar lingered long, and his guests had perforce to listen, though much of what he told them was familiar to them through the gossip of the Byzantine court. When Jovan Alexandr began to talk about Serbia, their patience was rewarded, for he had to report new developments of which they did not know.

Jovan Alexandr had always supported Jurosh's claim to the Serbian throne, although his position of weakness had forced him to tolerate Nikolas. But now Nikolas was under attack. Not only were the sporadic Turkish raids persisting in the south, despite all that Nikolas could do against them; he was being attacked from the north by a combined army of Magyars and Croats.

"It is the perfect time for you to reclaim your throne," the Czar said.

He talked much more, and Jurosh and Marko found a turn to speak; but fascinating although the talk was, the great candles burned too bright, consuming the eyes, devouring eyesight, and Vukasan fell asleep.

The next day was full of much moving about and talking and arguing. Almost every hour brought its excitements. At one time, a Serb working at the Bulgar court came privily to Marko and told him that the Czar's plan was to set both

Nikolas and Jurosh against the Hungarian Empire, since Magyar forces were harassing also the northern frontiers of Bulgaria, along the line of the Danube. At another time, an offer arrived from the Czar to lend Jurosh a strong body of Tartar mercenaries ; but since these men appeared to be survivors of the Tartar force that Orusan, only seven years earlier, had bloodily destroyed, Jurosh and Marko deemed it wiser to refuse. They had the hire instead of some of the Turkish mercenaries that had been gathered for the march against Constantinople ; for the Czar did not care which batch of his chicks hatched first. The leader of the Turkish force, Mohammed Saveji, seemed a reliable man, and his troop well-disciplined and armed. Later came an armourer from the Czar and sold Jurosh many weapons, among them Serbian swords struck at Prizren and captured in some forgotten battle. Thus an army gathered about the exiled king.

During this while, nobody watched Jurosh more anxiously than his son Vukasan. He observed with approval that the king seemed to become increasingly a warlike figure, gathering more authority and stiffer raiment to himself. He approved also that the king, with his terrible face and gaunt body, appeared much more a soldier than the round-figured and loquacious Czar. But the king and the Czar got along famously and sat idly amid serving women plotting future campaigns that they would conduct together. And there was the worrying fact that the king delayed leaving the capital a whole day because he wished to talk with the architects of the Czar's latest church, consulting them about costs and materials, and whether they would consent to visit Prilep in the autumn.

The extra day brought them one advantage. The Genoese merchants arrived from Constantinople, escorted by twenty-five Saxon mercenaries in chain mail, well-mounted and well-armed. Andronicus had paid this guard with a secret reserve of plate—possibly, said the Saxon leader, part of the dowry of his Jewish wife—and they were well-content to join Jurosh's party as arranged ; although directly they had done so, they became alarmingly drunk to a man with the extra proceeds they had frightened out of the Italians, and nearly set all Sofia alight that night.

At last the little army was on its way again, moving with the Czar's blessing. They now had some eighty miles to go.

to Vranje and Serbian soil, through dangerous mountain country which, since the successive collapses of the Byzantine, Bulgarian and Serbian states, was effectively ruled by nobody. Gaudy hajduks held their brigand strongholds here, some of them boasting armies bigger than Jurosh's; but as the Serbian column proceeded on its way, it heard how one after the other these hajduks were being overwhelmed and falling into Turkish vassalage.

When they were deep in the mountains, an incident occurred that may here be swiftly told, although later it was to have its bearing upon the Nemanjid fortunes. One of Marko's patrols, moving ahead of the main body, established contact with a scout belonging to a noted brigand named Telec Krumovic. Although mainly Bulgarian by birth, Krumovic in his youth had been a faithful liege to the great Emperor Orusan; when Orusan died so unwontedly, Krumovic, like many another Serbian baron, refused to knuckle down or surrender his gains to a successor; and he had lived his doubtful life of bravery and brutality in the wilderness ever since. Now he was surrounded by a strong force of Ottoman soldiery, to whom he had given every provocation, and was about to be slaughtered by them in his mountain retreat.

Now when Jurosh heard this, he swore an oath, for as a young man he had loved Krumovic much as one loves a captive bear. Accordingly, he said to Marko that he would ride with the Saxons to relieve Krumovic. But Marko took the king on one side and said that here was a chance to make a test he early desired to make, before they came to a real battle, to try the loyalty of their Turkish arm; accordingly, he offered to ride off with Mohammed Saveji and his force and see what show they made of engaging their fellow Turks.

This plan was approved. Mohammed Saveji was called forward, and conferred with the king and Marko under the acacia trees. Soon the detachment rode forth, while the king disposed of the rest of his force over the area, guarding vantage points, and keeping his son ever by his side.

So they waited, while the afternoon turned golden and the fitful wind died—until into the little valley above which the king stood with part of his force came a body of Turkish

foot-soldiers, clutching their scimitars and running for safety, for Marko's intervention had taken them entirely by surprise. The king charged down upon them, the Saxons with him, bawling like men possessed.

Hopelessly, the Turks made what stand they could. Vukasan galloped towards them with his sword drawn. He saw them go down almost at once, unable to withstand a charge, dying with their faces full of anger and empty of fear. Soon they were all strewn upon the field, their turbans, helmets, shields, and weapons lying about them. And no sooner was the foray finished than Marko was returning, to report with satisfaction on the ferocity of Mohammed Saveji and his men; and with him came Krumovic, a mighty and fearful old man whose curling black hair seemed to grow even through his armour. And he kissed Jurosh on both his cheeks and knelt before him, and hugged his bony knees.

He and the king and the commanders of the various forces conferred together, all heartened by this small success. Then they buried the slain foes where they lay and moved on to Krumovic's camp. And there they roistered through the evening and much of the night, so violently that Vukasan and his sister Branka were frightened. Only Mohammed Saveji did not drink, and sat apart. But when they all rode off in the morning, Krumovic's considerable force was with them, sworn to depose the traitorous Nikolas.

Krumovic took his place beside Jurosh and Marko, laughing heartily as they went along. "Ah, my fine king, you are chosen by God, blessed by God, the good God who has never failed me in my hour of need, old villain though I am! You were blinded—don't I know it—eyes burnt out only five years ago, frying like cinders. Everyone knows it in the mountains! Now by the way you spitted those Turks yesterday it's clear you can see as well as the next man! As well as an eagle over Novo Brdo! Well, why should God have worked for you that way if He didn't mean you to be king of Serbia? It wouldn't be sensible! He's on your side!"

"That's how I shall explain things to my people," Jurosh said.

"Good—and I'll help you! They'll all be behind you.

They'll soon turn that brother of yours out, you wait and see. Why, you're twice the man he'll ever be! I recall in Emperor Orusan's day . . ."

And off he went into a series of stories designed to show how great he had always reckoned Jurosh to be. Vukasan could not but note how his father drank in these tales and even added small details of self-aggrandisement to them; nor did he fail to note how Marko grew tired of the prattle, and dropped behind to talk with Mohammed Saveji, with whom he was clearly establishing a friendship.

"Ah, if only I were a man!" thought Vukasan, with anguish looking at all the years ahead of him before he reached puberty. "Then would I ride with my father and tell him to be sure of himself without the need of flattery! Already I understand many grown-up things such as sword-fighting and falconry, but I cannot understand grown-up actions. When boys shout out about how brave they are, they are generally cowards trying to blow fire into their own hearts; I wonder if it is the same with men? How shall I ever learn such things, of which nobody talks—or not in my hearing!"

He began to try and reason with himself as to whether his father had been chosen by God; but he was as mystified about the behaviour of God as about that of men. Nor was he sure whether, even if God had chosen his father to rule, this would inevitably mean he *would* rule. He looked up hopefully at his father's great maligned countenance with its unhealing bruises, but it told him nothing.

These troubled thoughts were soon banished. They rode over the brow of the next hill and there in the valley before them lay the Juzna Morava, with Vranje standing on its banks, the little castle visible even from this distance. Beyond it lay fair Serbia, the country of honour and valour and legend; and its hills were broader and nobler and its trees greener than the ones they had passed, and a grave enchantment seemed to pour from its landscape.

As Vukasan stared down on this sight, his father, who had ignored him all day in preference for Krumovic's conversation, leant over and laid his gloved hand on the boy's. The tears rose in Vukasan's throat, emerged as great sobs, and would not be denied.

Two hours later, the column became an invading army. It crossed the patched wooden bridge over the Morava and entered on to Serbian soil.

Word of Jurosh's approach had flown ahead of him. A goodly crowd of peasants stood in Vranje's long crooked street to greet him, while the Bishop of Vranje came forth in his full regalia and bowed before him. Knowing full well the power of the priesthood, Jurosh climbed stiffly from his horse and accepted the Bishop's blessing. The Bishop kissed him twice on the face and on the breast and said, "All true Serbs of the faith know that being a Nemanjid king thou, Stefan Jurosh, art born in sainthood, a descendant of Saint Simeon. More especially, God has been moved to restore thy sight that was taken from thee, as a sign that thou art by Him appointed to have disposition over our earthly being: whereupon in the name of the Serbian Orthodox Church, I thy Bishop of Vranje do offer up my prayers and my support on thy behalf."

Then said Jurosh, his tattered old face aglow, "I thank thee, my Lord Bishop. It is even as thou sayest! The Lord hath given back to me mine eyes that were stolen from me by sinners. Therefore let all here gathered know that I now see the wrongs of my kingdom, and shall make all haste to right them, beginning first with the defeat of my usurping brother Nikolas, and then joining with the Bulgar Czar to smite our common enemy, the Ottoman. If you will join me now, loyal subjects, life shall be better for you, even as it was in the days of my blessed father, the Emperor Orusan."

Some of the people there gathered gave a cheer, and many clustered about the king, staring up at him and exclaiming, "It's true! He sees, by the living God! He sees, though Petr and Milos put out his eyes not six years back!"

The king grew impatient of them, and of standing in the dusty street. Throwing a significant look at Marko, he said, "The time is come to reward those two brave torturers!" and he heaved himself back into the saddle.

Overhearing his father's words, Vukasan's heart grew grand with pride, for although he had not dared remind his father of this matter, he had kept it constantly in mind, searching the crowd to see if by any chance he could see

two men he might identify as Petr and Milos—for he had a vivid picture of what they looked like, although he had never seen them.

Calling for someone to bring the two men to him, Jurosh rode into the castle with his generals following, Vukasan among them. An ostler, looking frightened and bowing low, held their horses as Jurosh, Marko, Krumovic and Vukasan strode past him into the keep.

Four guards sat there about a smoky fire, for it was cold and damp and dark in the room. They tried uneasily to leave when they saw who entered, but Krumovic grabbed the leader of them, booted the others out, and made the man deliver what he knew of the national situation.

The man told them little they did not know. Although there were various Turkish raids on Macedonian soil, they were desultory, since the Ottomans' main force was engaged in the East in bloody battles with Mongol invaders. As for Nikolas, he and his forces were at the Bosnian border across the country, fighting off a strong Hungarian-Croat army which the Catholic king of Bosnia, Dragutin, had invited across his territory. The time was obviously favourable to attack Nikolas, and had been well chosen.

As Krumovic kicked their informant out, two men were ushered into the gloomy chamber. Marko slammed and bolted the door after them.

Vukasan found himself trembling. This was a moment and a scene of which he had long dreamed. He wished to walk up to them and take their hands, as he had seen his father do with those who had done him favours, but he was frozen where he stood by surprise at finding how different the men looked from his imagined picture of them. The Serb, Milos, was a sickly little hunchback, scarcely bigger than Vukasan, though his grey hairs showed him to be long past childhood. He rubbed his hands together over and over, and was plainly scared out of what wits he had. The Bulgar, Petr, distant kinsman of the old nurse Arake, was scarcely a more noble figure. He was large and fat and untidy; his skin was dark and oily and spotted; he too trembled very much, although he stood square and faced the king impudently.

"You are back, my lord king," he observed.

Marko said, "You recall how five years ago King

Jurosh's base-minded brother Nikolas paid you both to put out his eyes before he went into exile, so that he might be no danger to the ill-gained succession? What did I unto you then?"

The hunchback could think of nothing to say, but Petr said, "Why, Lord Marko, we—Milos and me—we were ever the king's loyal men, though forced to act by Nikolas, and—"

"What did I unto you then?"

"Why, my lord, you gave us each a bag of gold, did you not, to save the king's sight, which we would happily have done without reward."

"We didn't want the reward," Milos said. "Didn't want it at all!"

"I bribed you both," Marko said, his voice suddenly quiet.

Vukasan stared at all their faces, scarcely distinguishable in the gloom of the chamber, so narrow were the windows. He felt sickness rise in his throat, knowing this was not what he had expected, guessing that some terrible thing was about to jump out upon them all from the concealing curtains of time, some terrible thing that already existed in the mind of his father.

"Father, let us give these kind men a further reward and then leave them! Let us not tease—"

Before he could finish, Krumovic had seized him by one puny wrist and swung him away into a corner, shouting to him to stay out of matters he could not understand. Jurosh did not move; it was as if, with his mind set on some special purpose, he did not notice at all the irrelevance of his son's interruption.

To the trembling men he said, "In these five years, how many of your vile cronies have you told that I was not truly blinded?"

"None my lord, none! We kept our peace, even as we promised!"

"Pah, you have blabbed it out drunk a hundred times, even as you swilled away the byzants we paid you!"

Petr said firmly, "My lord king, prithee let us go free from here. We are not worth your attention." And Milos said, "We told not a soul you had not been truly blinded by our irons."

"Ha! Then if I was not truly blinded, how is it that God has seen fit in His mercy to restore my sight?"

The way that Jurosh delivered this question showed clearly that the words formed a sort of blazing core to his thinking. He appeared very large and terrifying, his helmet almost scraping the beams of the low room—and as he spoke, he drew his cruel Prizren sword from its sheath. Marko and Krumovic did likewise.

As if seeing for the first time the trap into which they had entered, the prisoners shrank back, and Milos clutched pathetically at Petr's arm. The latter made a quavering attempt to answer the king's paradox: "God will restore your kingdom, my lord king, but we spared your vision!"

"So that's the tale you tell to all through the dark winter nights, that you saved your king! Did you or did you not press your smouldering irons into the tender flesh of my face while I was bound helpless before you?"

As if realising that he could not escape his fate, Milos sank shuddering and groaning to the ground. It was like a signal. Jurosh and Marko threw themselves forward together. Their swords bit through the dull air.

"No, no! For Arake's sake!" cried Vukasan. He ran forward. This time, it was the flat of Krumovic's sword that halted him.

Irresistibly, the king's sword swooped at Petr's broad belly. As it entered, Jurosh twisted it savagely with a strong turn of his wrist, immediately withdrew it and struck again. Petr threw back his head, crying with hardly a sound, and died on his feet. He crashed to the floor, breaking a wooden bench as he fell, and rolled over in his own blood, his mouth frighteningly open, as if gagging over one last bite he needed to take. It seemed to Vukasan that he had to gaze at that ghastly face for ever.

The little hunchback dodged Marko's sword, was leaping up from the floor as he struck, whirled round and threw back the bolt on the door. Krumovic cried in a loud voice that he would escape, but Marko impaled him through the kidneys before he was as much as half way through the door. Milos slid backwards, took a step into the room to retain his balance, his face working in malevolence and pain. As Marko stabbed him in the chest, he grabbed hold

of the murderous weapon with both hands, and then dropped dead to the floor.

The rest of that day Vukasan spent as a child, weeping into his sister's lap. Branka nursed him and cried with him. He had run from the terrible place of the murder shouting hysterically, and his father had been unable to stop him. Only when he was much calmer did he recall the words his father had shouted at him as he charged in horror from him: "My subjects would have thought me a feeble king if I did not slay the men who blinded me!"

So Vukasan wept and wept, and wondered which would prove the harder to subdue: truth or Serbia.

— BRIAN W. ALDISS

EDITORIAL—continued from page 5)

If you follow that sort of thing, you may have read about him last year when he discovered a Tintoretto valued at £40,000. It was not exactly in the day's work, but let's say in the decade's; for Bon, who—in addition to a book shop and curio shop—manages a flourishing art gallery in Oxford, where he also lives. His home is an oversized Victorian villa, marked by the Rolls in the front drive and the cases of stuffed birds in the hall (and all through the house—part of a vanload he picked up last year); in the drawing room, paintings and sketches and *objets d'art*, on their way to and from the gallery, sometimes completely obscure the grand piano (as well as the birds). A Balliol man, erudite, elegant, Bonfiglioli is an expert on mediaeval literature and art (lecturing occasionally on mediaeval art in Oxford).

How did he come to edit an sf magazine? I don't know, except that his knowledge of sf is as comprehensive as his knowledge in his other specialities, and that he is a restless man with more energies, more ideas and more imagination than seem reasonable in one person. It was never likely that he would stay with the magazine very long; one can only be glad he stayed long enough to establish its present unique flavour—and that he left it in hands as reliable as Harry Harrison's.

Thomas M. Disch is a young and brilliant American writer of whom we shall all be hearing a great deal more. Here he has taken as his theme that odd quirk of human nature that dictates our fascination for the things we each find most appalling. And produced a masterpiece of tension and subtle horror . . .



THE ROACHES

by

**THOMAS
M. DISCH**

Miss Marcia Kenwell had a perfect horror of cockroaches. It was an altogether different horror than the one which she felt, for instance, toward the colour puce. Marcia Kenwell loathed the little things. She couldn't see one without wanting to scream. Her revulsion was so extreme that she could not bear to crush them under the soles of her shoes. No, that would be too awful. She would run, instead, for the spray-can of Black Flag and inundate the little beast with poison until it ceased to move or got out of reach into one of the cracks where they all seemed to live. It was horrible, unspeakably horrible, to think of them nestling in the walls, under the linoleum, only waiting for the lights to be turned off, and then. . . . No, it was best not to think about it.

Every week she looked through the *Times* hoping to find another apartment, but either the rents were prohibitive (this was Manhattan, and Marcia's wage was a mere \$62.50 a week, gross) or the building was obviously infested. She could always tell: there would be husks of dead roaches scattered about in the dust beneath the sink, stuck to the greasy backside of the stove, lining the out-of-reach cupboard shelves like the rice on the church steps after a wedding. She left such rooms in a passion of disgust, unable even to think till she reached her own apartment, where the air would be thick with the wholesome odours of Black Flag, Roach-It, and the toxic pastes that were spread on slices of potato and hidden in a hundred cracks which only she and the roaches knew about.

At least, she thought, I keep my apartment clean. And truly, the linoleum under the sink, the backside and underside of the stove, and the white contact paper lining her cupboards were immaculate. She could not understand how other people could let these matters get so entirely out-of-hand. *They must be Puerto Ricans,* she decided—and shivered again with horror, remembering that litter of empty husks, the filth and the disease.

Such extreme antipathy toward insects—toward one particular insect—may seem excessive, but Marcia Kenwell was not really exceptional in this. There are many women, bachelor-women like Marcia chiefly, who share this feeling,

though one may hope, for sweet charity's sake, that they escape Marcia's peculiar fate.

Marcia's phobia was, as in most such cases, hereditary in origin. That is to say, she inherited it from her mother, who had a morbid fear of anything that crawled or skittered or lived in tiny holes. Mice, frogs, snakes, worms, bugs—all could send Mrs. Kenwell into hysterics, and it would indeed have been a wonder if little Marcia had not taken after her. It was rather strange, though, that her fear had become so particular, and stranger still that it should particularly be cockroaches that captured her fancy, for Marcia had never seen a single cockroach, didn't know what they were. (The Kenwells were a Minnesota family, and Minnesota families simply don't have cockroaches.) In fact, the subject did not arise until Marcia was nineteen and setting out (armed with nothing but a high school diploma and pluck, for she was not, you see, a very attractive girl) to conquer New York.

On the day of her departure, her favourite and only surviving aunt came with her to the Greyhound Terminal (her parents being deceased) and gave her this parting advice: "Watch out for the roaches, Marcia darling. New York City is full of cockroaches." At that time (at almost any time really) Marcia hardly paid attention to her aunt, who had opposed the trip from the start and given a hundred or more reasons why Marcia had better not go, not till she was older at least.

Her aunt had been proven right on all counts: Marcia, after five years and fifteen employment agency fees, could find nothing in New York but dull jobs at mediocre wages; she had no more friends than when she lived on West 16th; and, except for its view (the Chock-Full-O'-Nuts warehouse and a patch of sky), her present apartment on lower Thompson Street was not a great improvement on its predecessor.

The city was full of promises, but they had all been pledged to other people. The city Marcia knew was sinful, indifferent, dirty, and dangerous. Every day she read accounts of women attacked in subway stations, raped in the streets, knifed in their own beds. A hundred people looked on curiously all the while and offered no assistance. And on top of everything else there were the roaches!

There were roaches everywhere, but Marcia didn't see them until she'd been in New York a month. They came to her—or she to them—at Silversmith's on Nassau Street, a stationery shop where she had been working for three days. It was the first job she'd been able to find. Alone or helped by a pimply stockboy (in all fairness it must be noted that Marcia was not without an acne problem of her own), she wandered in rows of rasp-edged metal shelves in the musty basement, making an inventory of the sheaves and piles and boxes of bond paper, leatherette-bound diaries, pins and clips, and carbon paper. The basement was dirty and so dim that she needed a flashlight for the lowest shelves. In the obscurest corner, a faucet leaked perpetually into a grey sink: she had been resting near this sink, sipping a cup of tepid coffee (saturated, in the New York manner, with sugar and drowned in milk), thinking, probably, of how she could afford several things she simply couldn't afford, when she noticed the dark spots moving on the side of the sink. At first she thought they might be no more than motes floating in the jelly of her eyes, or the giddy dots that one sees after over-exertion on a hot day. But they persisted too long to be illusory, and Marcia drew nearer, feeling compelled to bear witness. *How do I know they are insects?* she thought.

How are we to explain the fact that what repels us most can be at times—at the same time—inordinately attractive? Why is the cobra poised to strike so beautiful? The fascination of the abomination is something that. . . . Something which we would rather not account for. The subject borders on the obscene, and there is no need to deal with it here, except to note the breathless wonder with which Marcia observed these first roaches of hers. Her chair was drawn so close to the sink that she could see the mottling of their oval, unsegmented bodies, the quick scuttering of their thin legs, and the quicker flutter of their antennae. They moved randomly, proceeding nowhere, centred nowhere. They seemed greatly disturbed over nothing. *Perhaps, Marcia thought, my presence has a morbid effect on them?*

Only then did she become aware, aware fully, that these were the cockroaches of which she had been warned. Repulsion took hold; her flesh curdled on her bones. She

screamed and fell back in her chair, almost upsetting a shelf of odd-lots. Simultaneously the roaches disappeared over the edge of the sink and into the drain.

Mr. Silversmith, coming downstairs to inquire the source of Marcia's alarm, found her supine and unconscious. He sprinkled her face with tapwater, and she awoke with a shudder of nausea. She refused to explain why she had screamed and insisted that she must leave Mr. Silversmith's employ immediately. He, supposing that the pimply stock-boy (who was his son) had made a pass at Marcia, paid her for the three days she had worked and let her go without regrets. From that moment on, cockroaches were to be a regular feature of Marcia's existence.

On Thompson Street Marcia was able to reach a sort of stalemate with the cockroaches. She settled into a comfortable routine of pastes and powders, scrubbing and waxing, prevention (she never had even a cup of coffee without washing and drying cup and coffee-pot immediately afterward) and ruthless extermination. The only roaches who trespassed upon her two cosy rooms came up from the apartment below, and they did not stay long, you may be sure. Marcia would have complained to the landlady, except that it was the landlady's apartment and her roaches. She had been inside, for a glass of wine on Christmas eve, and she had to admit that it wasn't exceptionally dirty. It was, in fact, more than commonly clean—but *that* was not enough in New York. *If everyone, Marcia thought, took as much care as I, there would soon be no cockroaches in New York City.*

Then (it was March and Marcia was halfway through her sixth year in the city) the Shchupalovs moved in next door. There were three of them—two men and a woman—and they were old, though exactly how old it was hard to say: they had been aged by more than time. Perhaps they weren't more than forty. The woman, for instance, though she still had brown hair, had a face wrinkly as a prune and was missing several teeth. She would stop Marcia in the hallway or on the street, grabbing hold of her coatsleeve, and talk to her—always a simple lament about the weather, which was too hot or too cold or too wet or too dry. Marcia never knew half of what the old woman

was saying, she mumbled so. Then she'd totter off to the grocery with her bagful of empties.

The Shchupalovs, you see, drank. Marcia, who had a rather exaggerated idea of the cost of alcohol (the cheapest thing she could imagine was vodka), wondered where they got the money for all the drinking they did. She knew they didn't work, for on days when Marcia was home with the flu she could hear the three Shchupalovs through the thin wall between their kitchen and hers screaming at each other to exercise their adrenal glands. *They're on welfare*, Marcia decided. Or perhaps the man with only one eye was a veteran on pension.

She didn't so much mind the noise of their arguments (she was seldom home in the afternoon), but she couldn't stand their singing. Early in the evening they'd start in, singing along with the radio stations. Everything they listened to sounded like Guy Lombardo. Later, about eight o'clock they sang *a cappella*. Strange, soulless noises rose and fell like Civil Defence sirens; there were bellowings, bayings, and cries. Marcia had heard something like it once on a Folkways record of Czechoslovakian wedding chants. She was quite beside herself whenever the awful noise started up and had to leave the house till they were done. A complaint would do no good: the Shchupalovs had a right to sing at that hour.

Besides, one of the men was said to be related by marriage to the landlady. That's how they got the apartment, which had been used as a storage space until they'd moved in. Marcia couldn't understand how the three of them could fit into such a little space—just a room-and-a-half with a narrow window opening onto the air shaft. (Marcia had discovered that she could see their entire living space through a hole that had been broken through the wall when the plumbers had installed a sink for the Shchupalovs.)

But if their singing distressed her, *what* was she to do about the roaches? The Shchupalov woman, who was the sister of one man and married to the other—or else the men were brothers and she was the wife of one of them (sometimes, it seemed to Marcia, from the words that came through the walls, that she was married to neither of them—or to both), was a bad housekeeper, and the

Shchupalov apartment was soon swarming with roaches. Since Marcia's sink and the Shchupalovs' were fed by the same pipes and emptied into a common drain, a steady overflow of roaches was disgorged into Marcia's immaculate kitchen. She could spray and lay out more poisoned potatoes; she could scrub and dust and stuff Kleenex tissues into holes where the pipes passed through the wall: it was all to no avail. The Shchupalov roaches could always lay another million eggs in the garbage bags rotting beneath the Shchupalov sink. In a few days they would be swarming through the pipes and cracks and into Marcia's cupboards. She would lay in bed and watch them (this was possible because Marcia kept a nightlight burning in each room) advancing across the floor and up the walls, trailing the Shchupalovs' filth and disease everywhere they went.

One such evening the roaches were especially bad, and Marcia was trying to muster the resolution to get out of her warm bed and attack them with Roach-It. She had left the windows open from the conviction that cockroaches do not like the cold, but she found that she liked it much less. When she swallowed, it hurt, and she knew she was coming down with a cold. And all because of *them!*

"Oh go away!" she begged. *"Go away! Go away! Get out of my apartment."*

She addressed the roaches with the same desperate intensity with which she sometimes (though not often in recent years) addressed prayers to the Almighty. Once she had prayed all night long to get rid of her acne, but in the morning it was worse than ever. People in intolerable circumstances will pray to anything. Truly, there are no atheists in foxholes: the men there pray to the bombs that they may land somewhere else.

The only strange thing in Marcia's case is that her prayers were answered. The cockroaches fled from her apartment as quickly as their little legs could carry them—and in straight lines, too. Had they heard her? Had they understood?

Marcia could still see one cockroach coming down from the cupboard. *"Stop!"* she commanded. And it stopped.

At Marcia's spoken command, the cockroach would march up and down, to the left and to the right. Suspect-

ing that her phobia had matured into madness, Marcia left her warm bed, turned on the light, and cautiously approached the roach, which remained motionless, as she had bade it. "*Wiggle your antennae,*" she commanded. The cockroach wiggled its antennae.

She wondered if they would *all* obey her and found, within the next few days, that they all would. They would do anything she told them to. They would eat poison out of her hand. Well, not exactly out of her hand, but it amounted to the same thing. They were devoted to her. Slavishly.

It is the end, she thought, *of my roach problem.* But of course it was only the beginning.

Marcia did not question too closely the *reason* the roaches obeyed her. She had never much troubled herself with abstract problems. After expending so much time and attention on them, it seemed only natural that she should exercise a certain power over them. However she was wise enough never to speak of this power to anyone else—even to Miss Bismuth at the insurance office. Miss Bismuth read the horoscope magazines and claimed to be able to communicate with her mother, aged 68, telepathically. Her mother lived in Ohio. But what would Marcia have said: that *she* could communicate telepathically with cockroaches? Impossible.

Nor did Marcia use her power for any other purpose than keeping the cockroaches out of her own apartment. Whenever she saw one, she simply commanded it to go to the Shchapalov apartment and stay there. It was surprising then that there were always more roaches coming back through the pipes. Marcia assumed that they were younger generations. Cockroaches are known to breed fast. But it was easy enough to send them back to the Shchapalovs.

"*Into their beds,*" she added as an afterthought. "*Go into their beds.*" Disgusting as it was, the idea gave her a queer thrill of pleasure.

The next morning, the Shchapalov woman, smelling a little worse than usual (Whatever was it, Marcia wondered, that they drank?), was waiting at the open door of her apartment. She wanted to speak to Marcia before she left for work. Her housedress was mired from an attempt at

scrubbing the floor, and while she sat there talking, she tried to wring out the scrubwater.

"No idea!" she exclaimed. "You ain't got no idea how bad! 'S terrible!"

"What?" Marcia asked, knowing perfectly well what.

"The boogs! Oh, the boogs are just everywhere. Don't you have em, sweetheart? I don't know what to do. I try to keep a decent house, God knows—" She lifted her rheumy eyes to heaven, testifying. "—but I don't know what to do." She leaned forward, confidently. "You won't believe this, sweetheart, but last night. . . ." A cockroach began to climb out of the limp strands of hair straggling down into the woman's eyes. ". . . they got into bed with us! Would you believe it? There must have been a hundred of em. I said to Osip, I said—What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Marcia, speechless with horror, pointed at the roach, which had almost reached the bridge of the woman's nose. "Yech!" the woman agreed, smashing it and wiping her dirtied thumb on her dirtied dress. "Goddam boogs! I hate em, I swear to God. But what's a person gonna do? Now, what I wanted to ask, sweetheart, is do you have a problem with the boogs? Being as how you're right next door, I thought—" She smiled a confidential smile, as though to say this is just between us ladies. Marcia almost expected a roach to skitter out between her gapped teeth.

"No," she said. "No, I use Black Flag." She backed away from the doorway toward the safety of the stairwell. "Black Flag," she said again, louder. "Black Flag," she shouted from the foot of the stairs. Her knees trembled so, that she had to hold onto the metal banister for support.

At the insurance office that day, Marcia couldn't keep her mind on her work five minutes at a time. (Her work in the Actuarial Dividends department consisted of adding up long rows of two-digit numbers on a Burroughs adding machine and checking the similar additions of her co-workers for errors.) She kept thinking of the cockroaches in the tangled hair of the Shchupalov woman, of her bed teeming with roaches, and of other, less concrete horrors on the periphery of consciousness. The numbers swam and swarmed before her eyes, and twice she had to go to the Ladies' Room, but each time it was a false alarm. Never-

theless, lunchtime found her with no appetite. Instead of going down to the employee cafeteria she went out into the fresh April air and strolled along 23rd Street. Despite the spring, it all seemed to bespeak a sordidness, a festering corruption. The stones of the Flatiron Building oozed damp blackness; the gutters were heaped with soft decay; the smell of burning grease hung in the air outside the cheap restaurants like cigarette smoke in a close room.

The afternoon was worse. Her fingers would not touch the correct numbers on the machine unless she looked at them. One silly phrase kept running through her head: "Something must be done. Something must be done." She had quite forgotten that she had sent the roaches into the Shchupalovs' bed in the first place.

That night, instead of going home immediately, she went to a double feature on 42nd Street. She couldn't afford the better movies. Susan Hayward's little boy almost drowned in quicksand. That was the only thing she remembered afterwards.

She did something then that she had never done before. She had a drink in a bar. She had two drinks. Nobody bothered her; nobody even looked in her direction. She took a taxi to Thompson Street (the subways weren't safe at that hour) and arrived at her door by eleven o'clock. She didn't have anything left for a tip. The taxi driver said he understood.

There was a light on under the Shchupalovs' door, and they were singing. It was eleven o'clock! "Something must be done," Marcia whispered to herself earnestly. "Something must be *done*."

Without turning on her own light, without even taking off her new spring jacket from Ohrbach's, Marcia got down on her knees and crawled under the sink. She tore out the Kleenexes she had stuffed into the cracks around the pipes.

There they were, the three of them, the Shchupalovs, drinking, the woman plumped on the lap of the one-eyed man, and the other man, in a dirty undershirt, stamping his foot on the floor to accompany the loud discords of their song. Horrible. They were drinking of course, she might have known it, and now the woman pressed her roachy mouth against the mouth of the one-eyed man—

kiss, kiss. Horrible, horrible. Marcia's hands knotted into her mouse-coloured hair, and she thought: *The filth, the disease!* Why, they hadn't learned a thing from last night!

Sometime later (Marcia had lost track of time) the overhead light in the Shchupalovs' apartment was turned off. Marcia waited till they made no more noise. "Now," Marcia said, "all of you."

"All of you in this building, all of you that can hear me, gather round the bed, but wait a little while yet. Patience. All of you. . . ." The words of her command fell apart into little fragments, which she told like the beads of a rosary—little brown ovoid wooden beads. ". . . gather round . . . wait a little while yet . . . all of you . . . patience . . . gather round. . . ." Her hand stroked the cold water pipes rhythmically, and it seemed that she could hear them—gathering, scuttering up through the walls, coming out of the cupboards, the garbage bags—a host, an army, and she was their absolute queen.

"Now!" she said. "Mount them! Cover them! Devour them!"

There was no doubt that she could hear them now. She heard them quite palpably. Their sound was like grass in the wind, like the first stirrings of gravel dumped from a truck. Then there was the Shchupalov woman's scream, and curses from the men, such terrible curses that Marcia could hardly bear to listen.

A light went on, and Marcia could see them, the roaches, everywhere. Every surface, the walls, the floors, the shabby sticks of furniture, was mottly thick with *Blattellae Germanicae*. There was more than a single thickness.

The Shchupalov woman, standing up in her bed, screamed monotonously. Her pink rayon nightgown was speckled with brown-black dots. Her knobby fingers tried to brush bugs out of her hair, off her face. The man in the undershirt who a few minutes before had been stomping his feet to the music stomped now more urgently, one hand still holding onto the lightcord. Soon the floor was slimy with crushed roaches, and he slipped. The light went out. The woman's scream took on a rather choked quality, as though. . . .

But Marcia wouldn't think of that. "Enough," she whispered. "No more. Stop."

She crawled away from the sink, across the room on to her bed, which tried, with a few tawdry cushions, to dissemble itself as a couch for the daytime. Her breathing came hard, and there was a curious constriction in her throat. She was sweating incontinently.

From the Shchupalovs' room came scuffling sounds, a door banged, running feet, and then a louder, muffled noise, perhaps a body falling downstairs. The landlady's voice: "What the hell do you think you're—" Other voices overriding hers. Incoherences, and footsteps returning up the stairs. Once more, the landlady: "There ain't no *boogs* here, for heaven's sake. The boogs is in your heads. You've got the d.t.'s, that's what. And it wouldn't be any wonder, if there were boogs. The place is filthy. Look at that crap on the floor. Filth! I've stood just about enough from you. Tomorrow you move out, hear? This *used* to be a decent building."

The Shchupalovs did not protest their eviction. Indeed, they did not wait for the morrow to leave. They quitted their apartment with only a suitcase, a laundry bag, and an electric toaster. Marcia watched them go down the steps through her half-opened door. *It's done*, she thought. *It's all over.*

With a sigh of almost sensual pleasure, she turned on the lamp beside the bed, then the other lamps. The room gleamed immaculately. Deciding to celebrate her victory, she went to the cupboard, where she kept a bottle of *crème de menthe*.

The cupboard was full of roaches.

She had not told them where to go, where *not* to go, when they left the Shchupalov apartment. It was her own fault.

The great silent mass of roaches regarded Marcia calmly, and it seemed to the distracted girl that she could read *their* thoughts, their thought rather, for they had but a single thought. She could read it as clearly as she could read the illuminated billboard for Chock-Full-O'-Nuts outside her window. It was delicate as music issuing from a thousand tiny pipes. It was an ancient music box opened after centuries of silence: "We love you we love you we love you."

Something strange happened inside Marcia then, something unprecedented: she responded.

"I love you too," she replied. "Oh, I love you. Come to me, all of you. Come to me. I love you. Come to me. I love you. Come to me."

From every corner of Manhattan, from the crumbling walls of Harlem, from restaurants on 56th Street, from warehouses along the river, from sewers and from orange peels mouldering in garbage cans, the loving roaches came forth and began to crawl toward their mistress.

— THOMAS M. DISCH.

SF FILM FESTIVAL

by Francesco Biamonti

The Fourth Annual International Festival of Science Fiction Films was recently held in Trieste, Italy. (And if you think that title is impressive in English . . . in Italian it is *Il Quarto Festival Internazionale del Film di Fantascienza*.) The festival was mentioned in last month's editorial and created enough interest so that we had to ask Our Man in Trieste to file a report. Signore Biamonti is a respected international insurance specialist by day and a secret sf enthusiast by night. He possesses an immense sf library in English, Italian, French and German—all of which he reads in their original language. The perfect man to view the international film. His report is a personal one and we agree enthusiastically about the Czech film "Who Wants to Kill Jessie?" It is pure sf and undoubtedly one of the funniest films ever made.

"That is not what I am accustomed to . . ." was the annoyed comment of an elderly gentleman about the sniggers and at the loud noises which immediately followed the official announcements made by the speaker at the opening of the 4th International Festival of the SF film at the castle of San Giusto of Trieste, in the courtyard that forms a large open air cinema.

The noises came from the cheap seats usually crowded with the less refined breeds of the public. We tried to reach that same gentleman during the intermission between the film and the documentary in order to record his impression of the film but were prevented by the sight of a group of personalities rushing towards a dark hole in the thick walls of the castle which conceals a bar (fully licensed). The group, apparently guided by Arthur C. Clarke (though the others seemed to know the way quite as well) included Harry Harrison, Isaac Kleinerman (CBS), Sam Abarbanel (the film producer), Mike H. Imison (BBC) and others. We were not wrong in that all these influential guests had enjoyed the film, yet at the same time they had not failed to also enjoy the comments of the public who plays the role here of the chorus in ancient Greek dramas.

This year's Festival, much as the previous ones, consisted mainly of the meeting of three categories of people; V.I.P.s, the Press and the general public. Contacts between the first and the second category are occasional and take the form of press conferences, which means that they are only formal. Forty Italian correspondents were present and over twenty foreign ones. The language barrier made closer contacts almost impossible because from the language angle the Italians are very British and do not generally speak or understand foreign languages. Between the first and the third category (or the second and the third) there was no contact whatsoever. Strange enough because sf fans undoubtedly exist both in Trieste and in Italy, but they do not seem to really constitute a "fandom" or any Latin equivalent of it. They positively lack "esprit de corps", the affection for true sf being really confined to a small group of intellectuals who are able to spot and appreciate a real good piece of sf literature (in spite of the dust covers of the books which are done in the most monotonous and monster-filled manner. This does not mean that monsters must be banned, they belong to the early ages of sf and have full citizenship in this realm—but one would rather have a Spanish meal without garlic than garlic without any meal at all. Even monsters must change and become more intelligent in conception and more justified in shape. We add that a slight touch of art could make them more charming and, consequently, more acceptable.

Two events took place during the Festival, a conference or "round table" on the theme "Possibilities of extra-terrestrial life" and the exhibition of paintings by the French artist Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). Please do not try to find any connection between these events and the Festival, for the former unobtrusively occurred during the Festival and appealed to the general public in quite a different way from the films.

At the conference scientists, experts and writers debated upon the theme, and were seldom interrupted by questions from the audience who hesitated to step in notwithstanding the generous "question time" at their disposal.

We could then listen to the wise arguments of Mrs. Margherita Hack (Italian), a lady astronomer who is in charge of the local observatory, and of Mr. Henri Sulzer,

a French engineer, who discussed the problems of interstellar communications. Harry Harrison came up to everybody's expectations by putting forward fantastic hypotheses (he was the only one to imagine a definite form of alien life and illustrated his speech with some very effective drawings). Arthur C. Clarke tried to bridge the gap between science and fantasy and stressed the fact that the development of science has demonstrated that what was thought to be impossible sixty years ago has now become a living reality, especially in the field of astronautics; and that some of the hypotheses of only twenty years ago have been proven to be completely false now. He openly admitted that some of the questions from the audience had given him ideas for at least six new science-fiction novels. Harrison, Clarke and Sulzer were also interviewed by the Italian Television on the trends of modern sf literature.

As to the Festival proper, the films we would observe in the first place that they were separated into three sections: full length feature films, short features, and documentaries and educational productions. The third section included some TV series such as "Batman" by Lambert Hillyer, "Space" by Erwin Allen (released by CBS in the U.S.A.) and a retrospective featuring productions such as "Croisière Sidérale" by André Swoboda (France-1941), "La cité foudroyée" by Luitz Morat (France-1923) and "The Mysterious Island" by E. A. Penzline and B. M. Chelintzev (U.S.S.R.-1941). The well-known French astronomer Mr. J. Leclerc presented a series of short documentaries recording his own studies and research works on the sun. The U.S.A. introduced "Project Apollo", "Solar Activity" by Donald Menzel, "Rangers VII photographs the Moon" and "Beyond the Sky" (both produced by the USIS).

We apologize for having started with the third section but must explain that the Trieste Festival is a non-competitive one as far as feature films are concerned, for which only a referendum is held among the accredited press correspondents, while a jury sits for the short features and documentaries. The jury was composed by Mario Nordio (Italian) who acted as president, Harry Harrison (U.S.A.), Michael H. Imison (U.K.), Michel Mourlet (France) and Tino Ranieri (Italy). They awarded the "Golden Seal" of the Town of Trieste to "The Moon" by Piotr Kluscjantsev

(U.S.S.R.) and the "Silver Seal" to "Les Escargots" by René Laloux (France). A conscientious and well-balanced compromise between science and imagination the first, and an effective cartoon conceived with humour and originality the second. This second section consisted of six productions (two French, one Italian, one Yugoslav, one Russian and one American). Besides the two winners, a kind word must be said for the Yugoslav production "Posjet iz Svemira" ("A Visit from Space"), a delightful cartoon by Zlatko Grgic, which confirmed the high standard reached by the Yugoslavs in this field. Camillo Bazzoni, the Italian winner of the 3rd Festival, fell short of our expectations for his work "L'urlo" ("The Scream") appeared too frail and at the same time too redundant in spite of the excellent use of the camera.

What about the full length feature films? There were just eight of them because the Japanese "Invasion of the Astro-monster" was not shown due to the French customs—through which monsters apparently cannot pass. (A new item to add to the list of customs duties?) The Festival was opened by "City Under the Sea" (U.S.A.) directed by Jacques Tourneur with Vincent Price in the main role. A not too convincing yarn inspired by a fragment of a poem by E. A. Poe. The second evening "El Sonido Prehistorico" ("The Prehistoric Sound") by J. A. Nieves Conde (Spain) gave the creeps to the audience through a gradual heightening of suspense, and a picture which made us regret that the monster had to become visible at the end for it was much more effective when invisible. "Invasion" (G.B.) by Alan Bridges with Edward Judd and attractive Yoko Tani (still pretty in spite of her space-suit) is a well constructed story of the pursuit of a criminal from his original planet as far as on Earth. Some impressive effects (the crashing of a car against a heat barrier) and the overall seriousness displayed by all British sf films. The Soviet production "The Hyperboloid of Dr. Garin" by M. Berdicevski tells us the story of a rather clumsy "007" who gets busy in a "belle époque" environment in order to prevent a lunatic scientist (Garin) from destroying the world with a kind of home-made Laser. It is the first work of M. Berdicevski—a former cameraman—as a director, and looks very much like it.

The Italian space-opera "I Criminali della Galassia" ("Galactic Criminals") by Anthony Dawson (Antonio Margheriti in everyday life) was a nice surprise for many. Though the story is not so original we could not but appreciate some breath-taking pursuits and the excellent use of miniature models. The scenery also deserves a special mention; it is remarkable for conception, colour and variety.

The Festival went on with "L'or et le plomb" ("Gold and Lead") by Alain Cuniot (France), another example of that "cinéma vérité" with much "vérité" and very little "cinéma" in it, and no sf at all. Apart from the fact that this film shows all the limitations of the "cinéma vérité," it did not go beyond a dignified series of TV interviews on some problems of the day as seen by very conventional types of humanity. Rather dull in fact.

The British production "Island of Terror," directed by Terence Fisher and starring Peter Cushing and Edward Judd in the main roles, contained all the ingredients of the British sf-terror films. A clever use of colour and suspense, a laudable disregard of the "all's well that ends well" endings which impair so many sf productions.

Finally the Czech (Kdo chce zabít Jessii?) ("Who Wants to Kill Jessie?") a very enjoyable story treated with a touch of "mittel Europa" humour which spared no one in the world, scientists, socialist rules, police force, Superman comics and their readers. Characters of the current comics such as Superman, Gunman and Jessie are brought to life in the real world and the result of their meddling with our world is uproarious.

The referendum among the accredited correspondents gave the laurel to "Jessie". "Island of Terror" rated two votes and "L'or et le plomb" one.

Though we felt the lack of an outstanding production this year (remember "Alphaville", "The Damned), etc., of the past festivals) we can safely say that the general level of the films, both feature and documentaries, was undoubtedly higher than in the past. And in addition—how can one neglect the possibility of rubbing shoulders with many of the most outstanding science-fictioners of the world?

— FRANCESCO BIAMONTI

Trieste, Italy, 1966.

Hek Belov strikes again! We're sure his fans will welcome this brand new tale of the twenty-first century's most individual cyberneticist.

PASQUALI'S PEERLESS PUPPETS

by Edward Mackin

Money isn't everything, friends ; but it does dictate the larger part of one's waking existence. Generally speaking, without money you can't eat, you can't drink, and you can't indulge in any of the more essential and civilised vices. If, like old Belov, you have the additional handicap of being, above all else, a gentleman you will find that you are further impeded in that you would rather starve than put the bite on someone for a few hockey.

It's true.

Besides, there was no-one around to put the bite on, and no wonder. It was February, and the underpavement heating, which had been reduced under each new economy drive, had reached the point where it was purely a technical quibble as to whether the heat was on or off. I had chosen a seat near the plasteel statue of Sir Gordon Gearwater-Gorbit, the genius who pioneered the Schleesh project. This is a semi-nutritious substance processed from garbage, which a beneficent government distributes through its soup-kitchens and other hand-out agencies under the name of Staple 52. It is greatly appreciated by those unfortunates who can't afford real food, and haven't the courage to cut their throats.

I sat there shivering and, to take my mind off the cold

and the hopelessness of my situation, burned the city down. I paid particular attention to a prosperous-looking character who had just stepped out of a glossy cream-and-gold hover-jet. It burst into flames around his ears; but he phoenixed out of it somehow, and I glared at this representative of the rich as he strode past, fat and sleek and cat-creamily sickening, without so much as a glance in my direction.

I turned my imagination off then and searched through my pockets for the third time in ten minutes looking for a cigarette stump or a fragment of tobacco. All I succeeded in flushing out were a couple of old betting tickets, a hover-bus stub, and some bits of pocket fluff. I put everything back in my pockets and sighed.

As though this was the distress signal someone was waiting for a hand came round from behind me holding a gold cigarette dispenser. Almost unthinkingly I took one and found that it was one of the expensive self-igniting type. I pulled at it gratefully and then swivelled round in surprise.

It was Meerschraft; as fat, as oily, and probably as crafty as ever. "My dear Belov," he smiled, "I can't say how pleased I am to see you. I take it that you are rather, er—down on your luck?"

When I didn't answer he came round and sat down beside me. "I may be able to help you," he said, slapping me on the knee. "I happen to be engaged on a little job . . ."

"All right, Meerschraft," I said, flatly. "Cut the prologue. What fell down, and who was underneath at the time?"

His smile died, and his eyes opened in apparent astonishment. He flung his arms around in a way he has and elevated his shoulders. "I don't understand you, Belov. I come here to offer you a lucrative piece of work and what do I get? The serpent's tooth."

I drew on the cigarette, and regarded him closely. "What happened?" I insisted.

"Happened? Nothing happened," he said, testily. "I've been engaged to master-mind a little project that is proving rather stubborn that's all."

"It blew up in your face, you mean, and now you want somebody to pick up the bits. Anyone else, yes; but not

you, Meerschraft. I know you only too well. You can do your own Humpty-Dumptying. All the king's horses and all the king's men wouldn't drag me into it."

"Money!" he said, with a gesture like someone casting a fly. My hand trembled as I took another drag at the cigarette. "Lots of money!" he added, without looking at me.

I was hooked. "I may live to regret this," I told him; "but you just got yourself a deal. Lay it out for me."

"Well," he began, "it seemed a straightforward enough job at first; but now, quite frankly, it's got me baffled."

I wasn't surprised. A lighting circuit for a four-roomed doll's house would have thrown him.

"You don't say," I said.

"Do you remember Pasquali? You know, Pasquali's Peerless Puppets? Well, the job is simply to get the whole thing working again."

I remembered the puppets all right. I first saw them on an old tri-di video when I was just a kid. They were magnificent. They weren't jerky like other puppets had been. They moved with the certainty of veteran actors. They *were* actors. They were so good that people began to whisper it about that they weren't puppets at all, but flesh-and-blood actors and actresses.

He even put them on the stage at the old Imperial Theatre. They were as good there as they had been on video, except that they looked far more human. No mechanical aids were used to move them around, and they were life-size. Their speech was normal, nothing artificial about it. In fact, everything about them was normal.

It soon became evident that they weren't puppets in the accepted sense. To prove that they weren't human either Pasquali used to freeze the performers at the end of the play, and then clap his hands together just once. Immediately, they would sink to the stage; just heaps of clothes with crumpled faces. Pasquali, tall, with greying hair, and a slightly sardonic smile, would bow to the stunned audience, and then make his exit as the curtain dropped. It was frightening when you remembered the apparent humanity of that company of actors, and saw what they had become. The applause was always sporadic and never whole-hearted; but that never seemed to trouble the

puppet-master. Then one day, after entering this same theatre, he simply disappeared.

"It's been tried before," I told Meerschraft. "I could name at least a dozen people who have tried to re-animate those puppets. Pasquali took the secret with him. A few hundred years ago they'd have said he was in league with the devil."

"Wasn't he?" asked Meerschraft. He sounded disillusioned. "I've tried every damned thing to get a movement out of them. After all, what one man can do . . ."

"Who's the sucker?" I inquired.

"I wish you wouldn't use such a term," he objected, peevishly. "After all, if a man wants a job doing and he's prepared to pay handsomely for it it's very hard to disillusion him."

He went over to a nearby call-post and thumbed the button for a heli-cab. "I'll explain about that on the way over," he promised. A heli-cab floated down and we got in. "The Imperial Theatre," Meerschraft instructed the jockey. We shot off the Level and started to climb. "Have you heard of Cranford Weagle?"

"Mr. Entertainment?" I said. "Who hasn't?"

"He's always on the look-out for a fresh gimmick, and this is old enough to be regarded as new. There's a whole generation that knows nothing of Pasquali."

"If you mean the Cavs they wouldn't have had time to take him in anyway. They're far too busy demolishing civilization and each other." I looked him straight in the eye. "We seem to be talking all round the main point. What's my cut, Meerschraft? What do I get out of it?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Most of the available cash has been sunk one way or another in the actual project."

I snapped my teeth at him. "You're not saying anything, Meerschraft. That's just con-stuff. How much have you had out of Weagle?"

He licked his lips and looked away from me when he answered. "Fifteen thousand pounds."

"Fifteen thousand! Where is it? Don't tell me you've spent it all. Not fifteen thousand!"

He nodded. "Some of the so-called experts I had in proved very expensive. There were some outstanding debts I had to settle, too."

I don't know how I kept my hands off him. "You gross, globular, vacuum-headed clown! All the clever-clever boys get their cut, and you only call me in when the money's gone. Fifteen thousand, eh? Well, that's a sizeable chunk of gelt to make away with, and nothing to show for it." I grinned at him, mirthlessly. "You are going to find out that even Staple 52 is preferable to being guinea-pigged with that grey goo they serve in prison."

"You mean you won't help me?"

I looked at him in astonishment. "Help you? You're joking, of course. Or what miserable *mentis* you possess must be completely *non compos*."

He sighed. "I should hate you to have to go to gaol with me," he said, examining his finger nails. "You might be interested to know that I bought up a couple of your debts this morning. A little matter of a fur coat from the Westley Fur Supplies, and a dining-room suite with a portrait of Whistler's Mother from Grant's Furnishings."

One has to live.

To tell the truth, friends, I'd eaten them. All except Whistler's Mother. She appears to be not so much on a declining market as on a collapsed one. I left her behind at my old lodgings in payment of three weeks rent. That is to say, I left a note for my landlady explaining this. No doubt she was overjoyed.

He allowed me a few seconds to digest the information he had given me, then he said "They had been thinking of prosecuting; but they hadn't been able to locate you."

"Well now," I said quietly, "and what do you propose to do with these old debts of mine?"

He smiled, cherubically. "Oh, if you just let me have a couple of centuries now, the other sixty-five pounds will do next week. Otherwise, old friend, I'm afraid you leave me no alternative but to prosecute. What makes it worse is the way you kept changing your address without informing anyone. The police might easily get the impression that you deliberately tried to defraud the original suppliers." He shook his head slowly from side to side. "It just won't do, you know."

He had me, the swine!

"You Judas!" I snarled. "You traitorous, black-gutted, circuit-wrecking pack-rat! You double-dealing dog! And

to think," I added, a trifle histrionically, perhaps, "that I once regarded you as my friend. Tcha!"

"You're in then, I take it?" he said, conversationally.

"Yes," I grated. "Right up to the neck, and may heaven forgive me for having anything to do with such a despicable snake in the grass."

The Imperial Theatre was on Top Level, East 43rd. Meerschraft paid the heli-cab off and we went in through the massive crystalcrete entrance, with its plasgold fittings and exploded-glass doors. The doors opened as we approached them, closed silently after us. We went backstage to the computer room.

A tall man in his thirties with a mane of reddish hair came forward to meet us, right hand extended. He had a big, false face that snapped into a smile as soon as he came within shaking distance. It couldn't have been done better with a proximity fuse.

I was still feeling needled. "I thought you said you couldn't fix them," I said loudly. "This one's all right."

The smile snapped off, and the red-haired man glared at me.

"This is Mr. Weagle," Meerschraft introduced us quickly. "Mr. Weagle, this is Hek Belov, the cyberneticist I was telling you about."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Weasel," I said, shoving out my hand.

He seemed to swallow something, and then attempted a half-hearted smile. "Weagle," he corrected. "Cranford Weagle." We gripped, desultorily.

"Why the sudden urge to resurrect Pasquali's Puppets?" I asked.

"Well," he said, oilily, "after all this is a part of our culture, is it not? It would be a shame to lose it completely. Besides, with the enormous salaries actors are demanding nowadays these puppets would represent a considerable saving in our gross expenditure."

In other words, what they represented to him was a reservoir of cheap labour. "Good for you," I said; "but if Pasquali didn't leave any operating instructions it might possibly be because he never regarded his puppets as part of our national inheritance. If he had no doubt he would have written a book about the whole thing."

"The point is," Meerschraft broke in, "that he didn't and it is up to us to sort things out as best we can."

I glared at him. I was roped in now all right.

"The point is," observed Weagle tartly, "that you have had fifteen thousand from the company, and I have a Board meeting tomorrow. Someone will want to know what progress has been made. You know how these things crop up. I shall have to inform them that no progress has been made with the project, and that it looks as though fifteen thousand pounds of our money has been squandered aimlessly." He pursed his lips and regarded us both. "They are not going to like it, I assure you. They may advise a certain course of action, and I shall be forced to comply. It could be, in fact, that they might recommend that I have a word with the authorities."

He meant the police, of course. Lately they have been taking a very jaundiced view of anything approaching false pretences, particularly where large sums of money are involved.

As if divining my thoughts, Weagle said maliciously, "I don't have to draw a picture for you about the legal aspects; but I think you should know that I just happen to have a tape-recording of our initial conversation, Mr. Meerschraft, when you stated quite definitely that you had a fair idea as to how the puppets could be animated." His cold smile embraced us both.

I looked at Meerschraft. He'd gone quite pale, and his fat lips twitched slightly. "You nutcase!" I said, feelingly.

"Of course," Weagle continued, "I understand about your having to engage certain so-called experts, and they must have come rather expensive; but there is also the matter of special equipment which you regarded as necessary, and which took care of six thousand five hundred of the total. I don't see any equipment lying around; but perhaps it's still on order. I'd be obliged if you'd let me have the correspondence concerning this at our next meeting."

"Of course, of course," Meerschraft mumbled unhappily. "A few items have already been incorporated in the original setup to provide another line of control, and I'm waiting delivery of the more important items." He looked towards me, desperately.

"Quasi-differential vilvers have to be specially tailored," I said. "You can't just order off the peg."

Weagle gave me a bleak look. "All I want," he said slowly and emphatically, "is some movement out of those damned puppets." He moved off. "And I want it by tomorrow morning," he added, over his shoulder. "Otherwise I am quite sure the Board will recommend that I approach the Director of Prosecutions." He went out and left the door swinging.

"Thanks for the quasi-differential whatsernames," Meerschraft said, gratefully.

"I should invent one," I said, snapping my teeth at him, "just for the pleasure of stuffing it down your throat."

"Now then." He rubbed his hands together, suddenly and unaccountably cheerful. "How should we tackle the job, eh?"

I looked at him in disgust. "You fat toad! Why should I let you feed on my brains? Why should I?"

He pulled his wallet out and handed me two neatly folded account slips. They were, respectively, for a suite of furniture with a portrait of Whistler's Mother, and a lady's fur coat.

"Why a fur coat?" he asked. "And why a lady's? That rather intrigues me."

"A lady's fur coat is a far more vendible commodity than a gentleman's. The one is almost a necessity. The other is an eccentricity."

I gave him a pen and watched while he wrote *Paid With Thanks* across them both, and signed this with a flourish. Then I put them away in my wallet. I was practically solvent again. There was just a little matter of thirty-nine pounds, or thereabouts, outstanding to Emilio's restaurant, and a similar amount for a suit of clothes from Gerno Doon, the Master Tailor. It had been a very fine suit and whoever was wearing it now no doubt appreciated it. The truth was that I had been unable to keep up the payments; and on top of that I had needed some ready money for one or two luxuries like food and a place to sleep. Such epicurean weaknesses will be the ruin of me.

There were three enormous rooms backstage. Two of them were used for scenery and scenic effects. The other was where Pasquali had operated from. Over by the far

wall was a computer, which I recognised as a standard Mk. I Gradsten. I unhooked some of the casing and took sights.

"It's been modified," I said.

Meerschraft nodded. "That's the way I found it. The trouble is that the modifications are completely offbeat, for want of a better term. Fantastic might be a better word to describe them. Do you think you can sort it out?"

I looked at him incredulously. You could drop one of these things off Top Level, or take a hovertank through it, and old Belov will still sort it out. It's a gift of course, on a par with poetic inspiration. Either you have it, or you haven't. I have it.

"I'm a cyberneticist," I informed him, coldly.

To be truthful, it wasn't just modified; it was a complete rebuild, with all the K-amplifiers replaced with units that weren't in the books. These appeared to be models of crystal lattices, and there was a whole row of these mysterious units with their icy glitter. I put my pocket Simmons across some of the circuit points and was surprised to find that there was a considerable current flowing although it was supposed to be switched off.

The switching arrangements were extraordinarily delicate, working through relays and obviously meant to be operated from some remote source. The setting of some circuits were, I was fairly certain, coded. I wasn't prepared to admit it; but the whole thing, *modus operandi* and all, bugged me completely. I had an uneasy suspicion that what I was looking at was only the tip of the iceberg. There was, I felt, a whole lot more hidden away beneath these surface arrangements. Quite unbidden, the word that sprang to mind was paranormal.

Meerschraft elevated his shoulders, and looked both puzzled and annoyed when I more or less laid it out for him. "What on earth are we going to do? Weagle will have my guts for garters if we don't come up with something soon."

"I've done all the thinking I can on an empty stomach," I told him. "Let's adjourn for lunch. Come on."

He followed me, protesting, and protested even more when I demanded something on account. He finally handed me a ten pound note, which he swore was all he had left.

We took the fast East ped-strip, and dropped down two Levels to Emilio's restaurant.

Emilio, two-hundred-and-seventy-three pounds of thunderous disapproval, came from behind the counter when he saw us. I didn't like the look of the carving knife he was brandishing, and put a table between us. "Belov!" he bel-lowed, and the plates rattled. "I want for you to leave my restaurant at once. At once!" He stalked me around the table, and the two men who were eating there left in a hurry.

"Would you throw me out of Eden?" I flannelled. "There's no-one can cook like you, old friend."

This was true. There is no chef this side of heaven who can touch him. He is a culinary wizard, a gastronomic gas, a very great man, and I, Belov, say so.

My blandishments had no effect. Even his immaculately white chef's hat tilted towards me and assumed an expression of malevolence. Meerschraft looked on in astonishment, and seemed on the point of fleeing.

"What have I done?" I asked, keeping out of range of the knife.

"You 'ave give this address to certain peoples." He threw his arms about. "This I might forgive ; but the grand piano not. I 'ave the police 'ere looking for it." He beat his chest with one great, hairy fist, while he kept the knife pointing at me, and three more customers got up and left. "The piano I do not see. Yet still they think I 'ave it because you give this address."

"I can explain, old friend," I said, quickly. "The piano was for a very deserving case, a young man of my acquaintance who is a veritable genius ; but unable to afford such an instrument. One owes something to posterity, and this boy, I'm telling you, Emilio, is a second Segovia."

"Segovia play the guitar. Even I know that, Belov." He made a sudden dash and I had to leap a chair and change tables to avoid being spitted. It was unfortunate about that piano, because it had never really existed. It was just an arrangement I had with a certain salesman who had trimmed his sails rather too close to the wind. Naturally it had never occurred to me that he might be dishonest ; not at the time, anyway. The truth is, friends, that I am easily

put upon. Besides, I needed the money, and he needed the piano. He needed several pianos. I never met such a man for stacking things on the credit side that should have been on the debit side—or was it the other way round? I don't believe he knew either.

Meerschraft's nerve finally broke and he belted for the door; I leapt over a table and two chairs and still managed to get out before him. You know, I do believe I could have been a world-class athlete. I have always been extraordinarily fit, the result of living a good, clean life; I defy anyone to live any other kind of life on my miserable income.

After a not too satisfying meal at an inferior restaurant with superior prices we returned to the theatre. The puppets were clipped into three huge wardrobes. There were selector buttons on the side which slid them out as required. I found that the mechanism involved could also be operated remotely, possibly from the transmitter in the computer; but I wasn't betting on this. Besides the puppets there were another half-dozen wardrobes, similarly operated and containing various costumes and bits of phoney armour, guns, swords, and other theatrical odds and ends.

I examined the puppets a bit gingerly. They looked like whole skins. They even had the feel of skin about them. Some kind of latex, I supposed. They had pores, too; but the only substantial thing about them was the hair, and the nails. They gave me the shudders with their drooping faces and lifeless eyes.

"Look at this one," Meerschraft invited, and buttoned the side of a long case, the sides of which immediately collapsed. "Here be dragons!" he grinned, indicating the thing in the case.

It was a dragon, or at least it had a dragon-like appearance. "It must be about fifteen feet long," I hazarded. Unlike the human puppets this was no mere skin. It was substantial, and it was heavy. Too heavy to lift. "It just looks as though it's sleeping," I said, not feeling too happy about it. "Case the damned thing up again, and the next time you press that button I want a four-minute warning."

He lifted one side up, pressed the switch and the dragon was enclosed again. I breathed easier.

"There are some tapes over here," Meerschraft said. He

went over to the other side of the room, where there was a metal box resting on a table. "Here they are," he smiled, handing them to me. "See what you can make of them. They don't seem to have anything coherent on them. Just impulses."

What did he expect? Beethoven's Fifth?

"That's as it should be," I explained, gently; "but unfortunately the thing can't be programmed or operated like a normal computer. What else have you got?"

"A boxful of metal rods about three inches long. I can't imagine what they're for. I don't suppose they have any connection with our problem." He fetched a small wooden box from a cupboard, and I took it from him. "Press the spring catch," he said, doing it for me.

The lid sprang open revealing three rows of the little grey rods, thirteen to a row, and all neatly socketed in. They were numbered consecutively; but there was no other information on the box. I put it down and went back to the computer.

One of the balance meters was slightly out of alignment. I twisted it and it moved. It shouldn't have moved; but it did, and I felt, rather than heard, the slight click as a switch operated.

A small panel I hadn't noticed in the near end of the casing sprang open and a shelf came forward. The equipment on it was rather strange. I recognised the ruby end of a laser pencil; but the rest puzzled me. Then I got it. I took one of the grey rods and fitted it into the holding grips under the pencil. Then I pressed one of the switch keys.

I had expected the rod to revolve. It didn't seem to move at all, yet I was certain it was moving under the sharp red eye of the laser pencil. I carry a jeweller's glass for examining the mini-markings on today's micro equipment, and I used this now to determine whether there was, in fact, any movement. If my assumption was right there would be some movement; but it would be very slight.

I straightened up and put the glass away. "It's revolving," I said, "at less than a snail's pace; but that's all that's necessary."

Meerschraft wasn't impressed. "For heaven's sake, Belov," he said, frowning. "what kind of a recording can you get at that speed? How do you get a play, or even half

a play, on a metal rod three inches long? Have you thought about that?"

I thought of strangling him, but dismissed the thought as unworthy of a genius and a gentleman born. "Your I.Q. would make a baboon look brilliant," I told him. "Don't ever crack your skull or there'll be the devil of an implosion . . ."

I switched off and took another look at those mysterious crystal units. One seemed to me to be slightly discoloured. A closer inspection revealed that it was simply plugged in. I pulled it out and took it over to the bench. It looked to me as though it had been subjected to a pretty heavy current surge. When I examined the immediate circuit I discovered that a capacitance had gone o.c., and I replaced it. The crystal unit broke down into three distinct pieces. I cleaned it up, and put it back the other way round; I suspected there had been a reversal of polarity, going by the slight grain that is, and comparing it with the others. Intuition entered into it too. That's the way I work.

I switched on again, and the crystal units glowed faintly. It was at this moment that I noticed Meerschraft's face. He looked as though he were about to have a stroke. He was gazing over my shoulder, and I turned around quickly. There was a group of figures tripping towards us engaged in a kind of dance. There were two young men and a girl, followed by an older man who looked suspiciously like a satyr. He piped a merry, wicked tune, and they were all completely naked. I switched off quickly and the figures collapsed on the floor, little heaps of fabric and hair.

"Did you see them?" Meerschraft almost shrieked. "They were nude, and they had . . . I mean, well, puppets! There was no need for it, now was there? Well, not the men, anyway. Why did he do it?"

"Maybe it was his way. To the true artist perfection is essential. Even the hidden things must be given the same consideration as those that are seen. The medieval stone mason was more concerned with the hidden side of a piece of stonework than the side that was merely seen by man. Anyway, there is the hang of the clothes to be considered."

"What's that got to do with it? They weren't wearing any damned clothes! Belov, you're just confusing the issue."

I was, too. It wasn't important, and I had other things to think about.

"I think it's disgusting!" Meerschraft fumed.

"I've just cracked part of your problem," I reminded him. "What's so disgusting about that?"

Part of the problem was right, although I had used the phrase inadvertently. There was far more to it than this.

Meerschraft brightened. "That's right," he said. "I'll get Weagle on the vidy."

I allowed him to switch on and button the number, then I reached out and killed the screen.

He looked surprised. "Now why on earth did you do that, Belov?"

"It was just that I thought even you would have been interested to learn how the thing works." I removed the rod and thrust it in front of his eyes. "But of course you know all about it, don't you Meerschraft? All right then, tell me how it operates."

"Look," he said, "I didn't mean to upset you. You can tell Weagle if you like."

"Forget Weagle for the time being," I said, weighing the little rod in my hand. It looked and felt like chrome steel. "If this is what I think it is then it is the ultimate and most perfect of recording techniques. It was suggested many years ago; but the technical difficulties were thought to be insuperable. Now it looks as though someone has solved all the problems. This, my friend, unless I am very much mistaken, is recording by molecular displacement.

"That's only the half of it though. There's a whole row of master circuits in there accepting signals from heaven knows where, and feeding out on different frequencies. The puppets are only part of the setup. Something else is being informed too. I've had my Simmons across bits of that hook-up, as you know, and there's something coming in from outside. It still comes in when you switch off. I am beginning to wonder exactly what we are up against."

"Quite so, quite so," nodded Meerschraft wisely, and probably without having taken in a word of what I had said. "Hadn't we better get Weagle now?" He reached for the switch.

I sighed wearily, and caught him by the arm. "Leave him to me," I said. "He might want to know more than

you can tell him. What we have to do at this stage is to leave him both enlightened and confused. Truth is a commodity that has to be paid for, and he hasn't given me a damned penny as yet."

His titian-haired secretary answered. Her baby blue eyes gazed at me, incuriously. "Weagle Productions," she said. "Mr. Weagle's office. What can I do for you?"

I gave her an appreciative smile. "Plenty, sweetheart." I said; "but business before pleasure. I have to talk with your boss, so put me on to him and then think of some place you'd like to go tonight. Somewhere secluded, huh?"

"Somewhere like my flat, maybe?" she breathed, moving so close to the scanner that I could only see her perfectly shaped lips.

"You hooked the thought right out of my mind," I said, leaning closer myself.

She drew back. "I never fish in sewers," she told me, "and unfortunately my husband is anti-social. He cross-buttocked the last man I brought home, and threw him down the stairs. Maybe you've heard of The Barbarian?"

I'd heard of him all right. He was a wrestler who weighed in at two-forty-seven, and he hadn't lost a fight in thirty-nine contests. "He's your husband?" I said, weakly.

She shook her pretty head and smiled. "No, he's the one that got thrown down the stairs."

I never have any luck.

Weagle glowered at me from the screen. "I hope you've some progress to report," he rasped. "Where's Meer-schraft?"

"Busy working out what you owe us," I told him. "When you come over bring your cheque book with you. There's a loose end to the Gordian knot, and a little encouragement would not come amiss at this stage. A judicious pull might very well solve all your problems; but we can't promise anything without definite guarantees of adequate financial support. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," he said. "You mean it's rolling. I'll be right over." He switched off.

Weagle arrived with the Newsflash boys. He seemed determined to extract the maximum amount of publicity out of the project. "We'll have an audience here in a few minutes," he said, "and then we can get their reactions to

all this. I've been promised a nation-wide hook-up. So let's get organized, eh?"

"Just like that?" I said.

"Just like what?" he frowned.

"Just like you wave your magic wand and there everything is—just as you wanted it. Tell me, Mr. Weagle, where did you get all that confidence?"

He made a deprecatory gesture with his hands and shoulders. "I suppose it's a gift," he smiled, "coupled with the fact that I am essentially an optimist and, this is the important point, I pick my men. I knew Meerschraft could do it as soon as I set eyes on him. Then, three days later, I knew he was a bum. I'm as quick as lightning like that." The great man was in a playful mood. "Immediately Meerschraft mentioned you I knew you were the man for the job, and I was right. You did say it was rolling, didn't you?"

I patted him on the shoulder. "You have an extraordinarily illogical mind, my friend," I told him, "and that is very refreshing in this age of uniformity. It's a joy to work for you. Now, if you'll just get out your cheque-book . . ."

"Mr. Belov," he broke in, brushing off the invisible dirt my hand had left on the shoulder of his dark grey suit, "nothing would afford me greater pleasure than to write you a cheque for the balance agreed with Mr. Meerschraft. Unfortunately my committee won't allow me to spend another penny until they have seen the puppets in action, and even then they have stipulated, I'm afraid, that audience reaction must be a key factor in determining whether or no we can invest any further in Pasquali's Puppets."

"You forgot something," I snarled. "We didn't show you how the set-up works."

He seemed taken aback. "Yes," he said, "I must admit you have a point there. What do you say to ten pounds?" I told him and he winced. "Twenty," he said, "and that's my final offer."

An economy shot; but I needed the transfusion.

Meerschraft was hovering in the background. "Aren't you forgetting someone?" he said, when he saw me take the cheque.

Weagle slid the book out of sight. "You're still working

it off." he snapped ; "but you've a choice. You can do it for me, or for the authorities."

"He means in gaol," I translated.

"I know what he means," Meerschraft sulked ; "but what am I supposed to live on?"

I eyed him up. He could have lived on his fat for a month.

"There's always Staple 52," Weagle said, almost brightly. Meerschraft shuddered.

The audience, who had somehow been rounded up for the occasion, seemed to be composed mostly of Cavs and their half-dressed doxies.

No expense had been spared on the interior of The Imperial to make it heavily lush and slightly old-fashioned. It was all gilt and crimson with a huge sweep of balcony, and carpets that caressed your ankles. When it had been first built just twenty-six years before it had, for a time, paid off. The deepies had been a novelty then ; but now it had become a video trick. So people stayed at home to watch rather than risk the Levels at night, with the prowling Cavs and their doxies, kick-sick and ready for anything that might provide an instant's amusement.

"Don't tell me they actually paid," I said incredulously.

Weagle looked at me from under his heavy brows. "This time is for publicity and to obtain audience reaction. Next time they'll pay gladly when they learn what new ideas we have in store for them. What I have in mind is a mixed company of real actors and puppets. It's completely original and should revitalize the theatre." He showed his teeth and grinned like a wolf. "If you can't beat them join them, eh, eh? Imagine the impact of a human actor in a love scene with a puppet. It would be almost like a new kind of vice ; off-norm anyway. I can see us packing them in yet."

There was something unhealthy about the whole concept that rubbed me up the wrong way. "You could be right," I gritted, snapping my teeth at him ; "but you should be handcuffed to a ghost for thinking of it."

He glared, and walked away. Meerschraft shook his head, gloomily. "We'll never get the rest of the cash out of him if you talk like that," he said. "You should learn to be more diplomatic."

"Like you? Heaven forbid. I'd rather take a course in self-immolation."

The production we tried on them proved to be a costume drama, fake Arthurian with St. George and the dragon thrown in for good measure. The amazing thing about these puppets wasn't that they were so real, but that they even dressed themselves, or were helped to dress by other puppets, who acted the part of professional dressers, changing costumes and armour, and pushing the dragon on stage when he was needed. There was only one obvious difference between the puppets and a company of human actors. Off-stage there was no chattering. Everything was done efficiently, but in complete silence. Watching them preparing or waiting for their cues was an eerie experience. Two or three times they tried to walk through me as though I didn't exist, and if anything was placed in their way they fell over it, got up, and did the same thing again. Evidently they were programmed to go through certain movements on or off stage, and to move along what was to them a continuous path in a certain way and at a certain time. But moving the wardrobe-dispensers containing the costumes didn't seem to bug them, oddly enough. They must have been keyed in to these, just as everything was keyed in to the cue lines. If anything went wrong the whole production changed slightly, dialogue and all, to accommodate the emergency.

So they dressed, or were silently dressed, walked or rode on, said their pieces and went back-stage, where they changed costume or merely waited, silent apart from their breathing. Yes, they breathed, and at first I thought this was to avoid the dead-action of the puppet; but after watching them for a while I wasn't so sure.

The swords they used on each other and on the dragon were stage weapons which were artfully designed to collapse at point of contact. Unfortunately, one of them failed to do this at a vital moment, and the dragon was pretty substantially pricked. Immediately it charged off the stage roaring its disapproval and belching smoke and flames as it went.

Pandemonium broke loose with everyone trying to get out of the exits at once. The creature turned its scaly, reptilian head and spat curly yellow flames in all directions.

"This is really something," I said to Meerschraft, who stood there with bulging eyes, gazing down at the shambles. "Anything that can panic the Cavs has my full support. The police should indent for a couple of dragons instead of those dogs they use. They'd clear the Levels like nobody's business."

Weagle came belting into the computer room screaming, "Shut down! Shut down!"

Meerschraft leapt for the main switch and knocked it off. The puppets collapsed on the stage in shrunken little heaps of clothes and gleaming armour; but that didn't stop the dragon.

We looked down at the scene through the one-way glass of the observation window and I marvelled again at the way he had routed the Cavs and their girl-friends. The sprinkler system wasn't coping too well, and the place was beginning to fill with smoke; although I could still see as far as the exit doors, with the crowds outside looking in, obviously ready to scatter the moment the dragon made a move in their direction.

This creature was wandering aimlessly about now, sniffing at the smouldering seats. Weagle reached over my head and pulled the switch that closed the doors. "Thousands of pounds worth of damage!" he moaned. "What are the insurance people going to say when I tell them a dragon did it?"

"Lay off the lysergic blip-blaps," I suggested.

"I'll deal with you later!" he grated.

A vending machine rolled towards the dragon.

"Iced Chokka," it intoned, mellifluously. "Koola-Fruta. Lemonade . . ." The dragon extended a huge limb and stopped it. "Slot your money please," directed the machine, pleasantly. "Other customers are waiting."

The dragon opened its jaws and bit the top off it. Soft drink cartons cascaded out. Some of the liquid splashed over the creature's muzzle. It roared again and flames shot out the length of the aisle. Steam rose from the now silent robot. I decided that this was no place for old Belov.

I slapped my hat on. "Glad to have been of service," I said. "I'll video you later about the fee."

Meerschraft, who was still looking across the auditorium,

suddenly gasped, "My God! Look at the thing! Just look at it!"

The dragon appeared to have gone completely mad. It flipped around the place like a Big-Top acrobat, roaring all the time. Then it appeared to attempt a take-off in several different directions at once, finally compromising with a shuddering spiral that took it halfway to the ornate ceiling. It was like some scaly phoenix rising from the ashes, all green and gold and glorious.

It crashed back across the seats, and its skin seemed to burst near the hindquarters. There was a glinting glimpse of something metallic before it bucked its way across the theatre, cavorting and plunging like a lassoed steer. It really was a magnificent performance. "Bravo!" I shouted, clapping like mad. "Bravo! Encore!"

"You're crazy!" Weagle told me, as though he meant it. "What the hell are you clapping for?"

I ignored him. I know talent when I see it. The dragon was chasing its tail now all around the stage. Then it looked towards us, showing its spiky teeth, and exited left. We could hear it approaching down the passageway, and presently there was a heavy thump on the door.

We looked at each other. Weagle cursed softly, and Meerschraft almost whimpered. There were snuffling sounds, and a puff of smoke came from under the door. I wasn't scared, of course. I must say, friends, that there aren't many people with my kind of courage. Fear is something that never touches me. Actually, it was a case of keep your head while all about you, as the poet says, are losing theirs and blaming it on you.

I ignored them, naturally, and taking a steel chair smashed it through the one-way glass. The crystals into which it disintegrated had hardly hit the stage before the other two had both leapt through and were legging it for the exit. Have you ever known such cowardly swine?

I was just about to vault through myself when there was a tap on my shoulder; when I turned I found myself gazing into the cynical grey eyes of Pasquali.

"You seem to be having trouble," he remarked.

"You could call it that," I agreed as the door burst open.

Pasquali drew a gun of some kind from an inside pocket and a series of bright blue beads tore the dragon's head

off. "I always said that toy was too realistic," he said, and turned towards me, still holding the gun. I noticed that the dark barrel tapered almost to a point.

I stole a quick glance through the smashed window. A couple of firemen were busy at the other end of the theatre with their quench-packs. Another two were working the aisles, smothering the smouldering carpet and the burning seats, with plas-foam, which could be torn away without damage to anything once the fire was out. I could hear the sound of a riot-can siren outside, too. It shouldn't be long before the police took a hand.

"A toy?" I echoed, wondering how long it would be before the firemen or the police reached us, and if it would help anyway in view of what this gun of Pasquali's could do.

He nodded. "A toy for a seventy eight foot infant. Adults like myself were over two hundred feet in height, using this world's measurements, that is. These things are relative, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, not knowing what the devil he was on about. At the same time I wasn't prepared to dispute it; not with a man two hundred feet high, or who thought he was.

"You may wonder where I sprang from after all these years," he said, smiling like a shark.

I glanced out of the window again. The firemen were back-tracking, doing a good job and spinning a fine web of plas-foam over everything. It was even money that the other two hadn't informed them that someone had been left behind in the theatre. Maybe they were still running.

"It had crossed my mind," I admitted.

"Well," he said, "without going into unnecessary details I had to make a journey which took me across the dimensions; but that burn-out left me stranded." I noticed that the puppet-dispenser had been moved to one side and that there was a cubicle behind it large enough to hold three men comfortably. "You did a good job on that control-receptor, we could use a mind like yours. You've heard of the Feynham graphs, of course?" He prodded me with the gun.

"Naturally. Every schoolboy knows about the Feynham graphs." I wondered who the blazes Feynham was.

"They are really time maps, and a very valuable tool in the science of quantum mechanics. Extrapolating from these you will realise that time, besides being an indeterminate pattern, is a discontinuous line, a dotted line if you like, and that between the dots lie other dots, other universes. Some of these differ little from each other ; but there are others so alien that they would pass your comprehension. Your universe and mine differ only in the angle of the pattern of events, and in the fact that we have played so many tricks with time that our own worlds crumble around us.

"We had to escape to a similar universe, and our time-maps revealed that your universe was the only one we could enter from our own angle of incidence. So yours it had to be, and that is when we came across an unexpected snag. We discovered that this universe was merely a Lilliputian part of the pattern, a tiny repetition of the main theme. We were too big, and your universe was too small. So we had to discard our bodies and what we have now is a kind of inter-dimensional mind-bank, which we draw on as required. The puppet-show was a mere cover-up for the grand plan, and the ultimate take-over. This may take centuries because we have infiltrated into other worlds in this universe as well, and we need to have a complete understanding of the sociological set-up of all these societies." He smiled, bleakly. "There is no hurry as far as we are concerned. The pleasures of the body are almost forgotten, and the mind takes pleasure in the contemplation of gradual manoeuvres and the setting of tiny events that lead eventually to the desired end."

"A kind of cosmic chess," I said, and couldn't for the life of me think of anything else to say.

He motioned with the gun. "I'd like you to enter the chamber behind the puppet-dispenser. It is a sort of teleport, using the dimensional-slip method, and it leaves the body in non-space until required—or forever."

"It wasn't just size that barred your entry to this world, I'll wager," I said, playing for time. I could hear the tread of heavy footsteps outside. "I'll bet you've got ten legs and a face like an alligator." I raised my heels a little and balanced on the balls of my feet, ready to take evasive action.

His whole body shook, and his eyes glinted menacingly. "Move!" he grated.

One of the firemen came in quite unsuspectingly. "Hello, what's this?" he said.

Pasquali half-turned, gun in hand; I rabbit-punched him desperately but only succeeded in knocking him off balance. The fireman left as fast as he could go. I saw the gun come up from where Pasquali sat, anger distorting his lean features. I threw myself clear just as he fired. The blue beads tore into the pseudo-computer, and ripped its para-electronic guts out.

I looked in astonishment at the puppet skin that had been Pasquali, and thought I saw a shadow flitting towards the chamber beside the puppet-dispenser. I jumped when this rolled back into place, and looked for the gun. It wasn't there. All that was left was a smoking heap of paranormality in the shape of a computer, the puppet skins, and the headless remains of a huge toy dragon.

"The hell with that for a tale," Weagle said later, as he surveyed the damage. "Pasquali my foot! You don't think I believe that rubbish, do you? Which one of my competitors paid you to ruin me?"

I snapped my teeth at him. "All of them," I said. "They fought each other for the honour. One of them wanted to add a bonus if we brought back your head for a doorstep."

"Which one?" he demanded. "Was it Robson?"

"It wasn't anyone," Meerschraft squealed. "He's making it up."

"It was Robson," I said.

Robson was the most eminent actor-producer in the business.

"Why do you do it, Belov?" wailed Meerschraft. "Why do you?"

"I'll sue you for all you've got," Weagle promised.

"Don't bother," I said, and emptying my pockets of the small change I grabbed his hand and stuck the coins in it. "That's the lot, and you've got it."

I walked out and left them to it. A few days later I heard that the police were looking for me. Weagle had taken a writ out, which alleged everything from malpractice to

downright sabotage ; but it might be a while before they catch up with me. They're so busy these days.

They are investigating the mysterious disappearance of over half-a-hundred people, some of them of high rank, including a cabinet minister. In every case, they say, there are certain odd similarities. Like puppet skins, perhaps? They're not saying yet ; but any day now I expect the hunt to switch entirely to the finding of old Belov.

They could experience some difficulty here, although I am as a matter of fact staying at *The Ambassador*, which is one of the swankiest hotels in the city. Even a glass of water could cost you as much as a double Scotch anywhere else. You may wonder then how I come to be living in such an expensive manner. The truth is, friends, that the management are largely unaware of my presence.

My room, if you can call it that, is actually a rather commodious cupboard on the mezzanine floor, right next to a food lift. I have found that, with a little judicious prising, I can remove a plastic panel, and this gives me access to the lift on its journeyings to and from the kitchens. I live well ; but from the sounds echoing up the lift shaft I have reason to suspect that the chef is beginning to lose his sanity. Today he put thick red pepper on the caviar. It made it almost inedible.

— EDWARD MACKIN

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