

BRON FANE

U·F·O· 517

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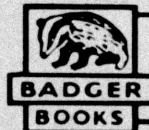
Enthusiastic arm-chair cosmonauts regard them as irrefutable proof that super intelligences from Out There are watching the Earth. A few unscrupulous publicity seekers and practical jokers cash in on the public's curiosity and weird stories of little green men and pink ants go the rounds.

Amateur military tacticians decide that the saucers are either our new secret weapons or the experimental weapons of some alien power.

Interest rises and falls. The Great Debate continues.

There are other possibilities . . . and the implications of some are so horrifying that mere monsters from Beyond would be a pleasant anti-climax. This mature, challenging novel is not recommended for those who like to think of the everyday world in terms of permanence and security with humanity safely established at the head of creation.

Elsbeth Jermyn came dangerously close to the truth, and slowly but surely gathered a small group of helpers together. They worked in strictest secrecy against the Saucer Phenomena and the invidious menace behind it. . . . If they failed Life would have no real meaning.



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If they were not extra-terrestrial,
whence did they come?



2/6
Science
Fiction

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U.F.O. 517

by

BRON FANE

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

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INTRODUCTION

Innumerable explanations have been put forward for the phenomena known popularly as U.F.O.s and Flying Saucers. Eminent psychologists explain them as purely mental phantasmagoria—symptomatic of man's age-old desire for "saviours from the sky." Enthusiastic armchair cosmonauts regard them as irrefutable proof that super intelligences from Out There are watching the Earth. A few publicity seekers and practical jokers cash in on the public's curiosity and weird stories of little green men and pink ants go the rounds. Amateur military tacticians decide that the saucers are either our new secret weapons or the experimental weapons of some alien power. Interest rises and falls. The Great Debate continues.

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"If they were not extra-terrestrial whence did they come?"

CHAPTER ONE

The Advert

ELSPETH JERMYN looked at her watch—a small, neat, diamond and platinum affair that suited her wrist admirably—and realised that she had nearly twenty minutes to fill in before the next lecture. It was her experience that learning was inhibited by too close a juxta-position of one period with another. She liked to relax, to give time for her mind to absorb and digest the information she had received, before going on to something new. It was like the quantum theory, she thought. Energy moved in little packets and so did knowledge. Her mind did not seem to be in a relaxed mood that day. There were occasions when Elspeth could close her eyes and allow the blissful gossamer blanket of daydreaming relaxation to protect her from the sharp draught of the world around, but now her mind was ticking over like a powerful sports car frustrated by traffic lights and irritated by halt signs. Something light, she thought, something unimportant, something I can read without really thinking, to occupy the eyes and the first level of perception rather than to occupy the mind. There were some old papers in the common room rack. She went forward and lifted one from its brazen clamps. The headline contained an account of a Flying Saucer sighting in the locality. Elspeth wrinkled her dainty little nose and

smiled. Didn't really seem very feasible, she thought. The witnesses had been so certain they had sworn affidavits and reported the business to the special department of Air Security which dealt with it. It had been designated in the files as 'U.F.O. 517.' The reporter had been doing a bit of overtime to unearth all that information, thought the girl. She read the account again in a leisurely fashion, and then, still smiling a little, she turned the paper over, preparatory to putting it back in the rack. The back page was covered with an odd miscellany of personal advertisements. They ranged from heart cries to advertisements for deodorant talcum powders, a new cure for hæmorrhoids and a way to stop smoking. She laughed more at the advertisements than she had done at the accounts of the supposed Flying Saucer. Two different aspects of credulity; and then, in the middle of the laughing she stopped. For an instant she knew bewilderment, followed by intense curiosity. The line that took her eye read simply:

"What does the square root of minus one smell like?"

Then there was a box number.

She read it again and put the paper down with another glance at her watch. Ten minutes remained. What does the square root of minus one smell like? Was it a joke? A 'with it' advert? One that she hadn't been able to see through? Perhaps some kind of mathematical deodorant? She picked the paper up again and scrutinised the rest of the column. Was it a misprint or a typographical error? She could understand the religious organisations, tract-promotion groups, and well-meaning but harmless cranks putting in texts or passionate exhortations to prayer, but *this*—? This seemed to have neither religious nor humanitarian significance. "What does the square root of minus one smell like?"

Her mind became a teeming hive of activity. Suppose somebody had put the thing in seriously? Was it a code, a symbolism, a cypher of some sort? If so, what did the cypher hide, and what did the symbolism represent? Basically she saw it as an abstract concept equated with one of the unlikely sense-perception data gathering organs. You couldn't smell the square root of minus one; you could only hold it as a mental concept. It wasn't within the field of any physical

organ. You could see the words, or mathematical symbols, in which it was expressed, but that was all. You could hear somebody say it. What was the advertiser getting at—if he was serious? One of the other students touched her on the shoulder.

"Come on, Elspeth, you'll be late." Then she was moving with the rest into a large, multi-windowed room, sitting at a desk with a note pad open; and there were others doing the same thing all around her; a man was talking; a man was talking about psychology, about the theories of Freud, and the pioneer work of the Viennese School. Part of her mind was writing down the salient points he made, while another part of her mind was mulling over and over again the incredible question in the personal advertisement column of a half-discarded common room newspaper. What does the square root of minus one smell like? At first it sounded like Goon humour: the kind of remark that the uninhibited genius of Milligan would burble inimitably across the footlights. It could almost have been an Oblomovism; but there was more to it than that. It wasn't just superbly zany humour. It was there for a reason. There was enough about it to be purposeful, and she wished to find its purpose.

The lecture ended, there was only one thing to do; she would have to answer the advertisement. It suddenly occurred to her she hadn't got the box number; she hadn't written it down. What if someone had taken or destroyed the paper? She hurried back to the Common Room, panting by the time she got there. It was still there. She snatched at it, avidly, like an opium addict reaching for his tincture. She scribbled the box number down with feverish haste Zv 221. Even that seemed to have a strange symbolism of its own. She went to the Commons stationery store, bought a stamped envelope and returned to the Common Room. It was empty. Everyone else had already gone hurrying towards the dining room. Somehow Elspeth didn't feel hungry. Curiosity had replaced every other appetite. The sheet she tore from her note pad didn't look particularly attractive; she wasn't really satisfied with it as a medium for her letter, but impatience was an integral part of Elspeth's make-up. She was aware of the

conflicting drives of impatience on the one hand and an innate desire to be neat on the other. She compromised by screwing up and throwing away the first sheet of paper she had torn from its holder. The second one she took out carefully and neatly. It still didn't strike her as being adequate for a letter, particularly one that had now assumed such importance, but at least, despite its obviously collegiate look, its edges were intact. She jotted down her address and the date, began "Dear Advertiser," and then stopped to think.

Something instinctive warned her that what she had to say was going to be of prime importance. A single line '*I am interested in your advertisement and would like to know more*' would not do. She had a hunch that the odd question had been written simply to attract a certain kind of person who, in the opinion of the advertiser, would respond in a certain kind of way.

And so, with the pen resting against the paper, she paused and thought. The more she thought about it the less sense there seemed to be in answering it, and with a rather rueful and critical smile she knew that if she thought about it for long enough she probably wouldn't answer it at all; and that would give the burning curiosity a chance to return with redoubled vigour in the middle of the night when she had neither envelope nor paper available.

Any beginning, however tame, would be better than not answering, she decided. It took her the whole of lunch hour to compose the letter to her satisfaction, and even then the satisfaction was by no means complete. It read:

"Dear Advertiser,

"I am intrigued by your olfactory associations of the square root of minus one. If the imputation of redolence to an abstract mathematical concept has any philosophical significance I would be interested to hear of it. Perhaps, on the other hand, you intended the advert as a joke, in which case I am wrong, but it has been sufficiently entertaining to merit the expenditure of fourpence on this stamp. Perhaps there is some poetical concept inherent in the idea. If so, I am probably too much of a Philistine to appreciate it, but would be grateful to

have it explained. If it is of any importance in relation to the advertisement, I am a nineteen-year-old student of psychology in my second undergraduate year.

"Yours sincerely,

"Elspeth Jermyn."

She posted it in the college box, and realising that she had now missed lunch walked ruefully to the canteen and bought coffee and biscuits instead. Now that she had done all that could humanly be done to satisfy her curiosity, normal things like hunger were reasserting themselves. A smell came through the back of the canteen window and the kitchen just beyond it, where the lunches were prepared. College lunch was not usually of the best, but the smell promised more sapidity than was usually placed at the disposal of the student fraternity.

Elspeth patted her firm, flat young stomach and imagined that she heard a hollow sound coming up rather sadly.

The neat little watch warned her that the next lecture period was due.

The two following days passed with difficulty. Try as she would to concentrate on anything, social activities or her lectures, try as she would to read or to make the right kind of noises during tutorial sessions, she could not get her mind very far from that intriguing question about the graveolence of the square root of the negative unit. Then the post came. . . . There was a letter from her aunt in Cornwall. A circular from the Students' Union, a catalogue of posts from agencies specialising in vac. jobs—all of which she discarded—and a mysterious greyish envelope that had a vaguely medical and vaguely academic appearance. The writing—small, neat and very methodical—was thin, almost as though it had been written with a mapping pen. The unusual, strong, black quality of the ink made it more legible than ordinary writing, not less. Elspeth opened it with fingers that shook unashamedly with excitement. She looked at the signature first and then the address. The address was Kensington. The signature looked like 'Zelby.' It was not written with the same

meticulous neatness as the envelope or the rest of the letter, but it certainly looked more like 'Zelby' than any other letter combination. She read the letter through carefully—twice, and was glad that she had answered the advertisement.

"Dear Miss Jermyn,

"I assume from your address and your professions of studentship, that you are still outside the noble institution of holy wedlock." There was a jocular, academic quality to Zelby's phrasing. The humour was dry, not stiff. *"However,"* the letter went on, *"if I have inadvertently dispossessed you from your title, please accept my humble apologies. The advertisement, as you guessed, was intended to convey certain information in symbolic form. If this information is as accurate as I suppose it to be, it could have very important consequences indeed upon an international, perhaps even a cosmic scale."* That word 'cosmic' made Elspeth think, suddenly, of the article she had seen in the same paper, the thing about U.F.O. 517. Even as the word moved through her mind she realised that she must have associated it with science fiction for a long time. It was an exciting, imaginative sort of word, 'cosmic.' She whispered it out loud. It seemed to bode much.

"I would not like to commit too much of my theory to so open and easily intercepted device as a letter," continued Zelby, *"however, if you would care to call at the above address, this evening if possible, I would like to show you that the question in the advertisement does have an answer and that this answer can be reached by normal, computer programming methods. There is no need to reply if you do not wish to pursue the matter any further. For reasons of security, which you will understand if you come, I would like you to memorise the address and then burn the letter."*

How very odd, she thought, how very very odd. The idea of burning the letter, combined with the overtones of that word 'cosmic' gave her the feeling that she had become involved in a science fiction novel which had married a spy thriller and wasn't quite sure what would happen next. Elspeth looked rather disappointedly at the warmly efficient central heating pipe all around the Common Room wall. Spy

thrillers belonged to the coal fire epoch, she decided. Unless you went all the way down to the boiler room—which even then might turn out to be oil-fired, or electric or something even more inconvenient for letter burners, how did you get rid of the missive? The ash tray presented itself for her consideration. Elspeth was too mature and intelligent to smoke, but there was a table lighter in the centre of the polished oak surface in front of her. She lit a corner of her letter very carefully, held it by the opposite corner, and allowed it to burn. With the tip of a pencil she stirred the ashes, and the resulting fragments would have defied the most patient technician in Scotland Yard's forensic laboratories.

The last lecture might as well not have been given as far as she was concerned. Her hand and her ear obeyed the habit of the last two years and wrote copiously what they heard, but her mind, her real consciousness, the brilliant, living essence of Elspeth, kept repeating an address over and over again. She was among the first out of the lecture room, preceded only by a miserable looking student with a neurotic landlady (who always made a scene if he was late for the ill-prepared tea with which she was systematically destroying his internal economy).

She took the tube to South Kensington and began looking for the address. For some reason, perhaps the hint of dark things, and the importance of security—inferred from the burning of the letter—she didn't want to ask the way, even from the solid, reliable form of a Dock Green type police constable. She felt that she wanted to find Doctor Zelby's home unaided, and as unobtrusively as possible. She found herself at last in the shadow of a wrought iron street lamp. Its beams just reached the door of an old Georgian mansion that looked as though it had seen palmier days. Elspeth felt an odd sense of foreboding as she looked up at the house. The top dissolved in the darkness, as she looked up. It was an amorphous, grey-black shape against the night sky, with the glow of London lights behind it. A breeze with a late-Summer-early-Autumn tang to it arose, as if to whisper a warning in the girl's ear. She could almost taste danger as she stood looking at what must be Doctor Zelby's house. She felt

a thrill of fear tingling pleasantly in her back, as she crossed the pavement and climbed the steep stone steps to Doctor Zelby's front door to the accompaniment of a gentle rustle of nylon. She hesitated again just for an instant, wishing that she had the letter to show. Yet she felt glad, overawed as she was by the house, that she had obeyed the request. Did you 'obey' a request, she asked herself, or did you 'comply' with it? Comply, that was better. She wished she was reading English instead of psychology sometimes, both disciplines fascinated her. Language, she decided, was only the medium in which thought was expressed. Psychology was the study of thought itself. She rang the bell. There was a long silence after the sound had died away in the interior of the house. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to turn, to run, to disappear, never to come back. Something—stubbornness rather than courage, she felt—held her to the spot. There was a soft footstep, a light came on, on the other side of the door, and Elspeth knew that convention had now made it impossible to run: too late to escape. Something still prompted her to go, but she was rooted to the spot. The door opened slowly. Somehow she had expected a Hitchcock creak from sinister hinges, or a Karloff smile from a malevolent butler.

Framed in the open doorway, she saw a man; he was tall, five feet eleven or six feet, broad and solid with it, but there was no suggestion of great bulk. He was a large man, but his massiveness was so proportional that it did not seem obvious. He had the look of a well designed tailor's dummy. His face was quite impassive, and as far as she could judge colour in the light of the street lamp he seemed to be wearing a kind of grey uniform or grey suit.

"I've come about the advertisement," she said, "I've come to see Doctor Zelby."

The face remained quite impassive.

"The advertisement," said a voice at last. He had an almost mechanical intonation. The impassive face could have belonged in Madame Tussaud's, with name and date hung round the neck, or stood on a neatly printed card in front of it.

"Yes—the advertisement," she repeated, feeling strangely

embarrassed. What do you say next? she wondered. She could read nothing in the face, but she got the impression that the mind behind it was racing like an express train.

"Doctor Zelby has changed his mind," said that peculiar intonation again. "He saked me to give you his apologies and to refund your expenses. One moment."

She stood frowning as the door closed in her face. Footsteps went and came again; the door re-opened, a handful of silver coins were thrust towards her.

"Doctor Zelby thanks you for your trouble and asks that you will now go, please. Does this cover your fare?"

"It is more than adequate, but are you sure Doctor Zelby doesn't want to see me?"

The eyes looked like glass in the masky face.

"Go, please." The door closed.

Elspeth looked at the pieces of silver, and, feeling vaguely like Judas, walked bewilderedly down the steps and back towards the Underground.

CHAPTER TWO

The Pub

SHE stood thoughtfully in the space between the station entrance and the barrier. The expenses jingling in the pocket of her duffle coat were an unexpected windfall, there was over a pound in silver, and to a second year student on a grant that was a fortune. It altered the entire pattern of the week's entertainment. She still felt very curious about Zelby and the advertisement. She was hurt and a little disappointed at the peculiar reception she had received from the odd character in the grey uniform, but Elspeth was an advocate of the old maxim 'physician heal thyself' and unless a psychiatrist—or a potential psychiatrist—could be an expert in the matter of her own individual behaviour, Elspeth would have felt that the years of training were wasted. Psychology, like charity, had to begin at home. By her lights the best cures for bewilderment and dejection were conversation and cheerful company, preferably with a little alcohol thrown in. She fished in her bag for the current copy of *Interim* and scanned the back page for any meetings in the area. There was one and it was being held in a pub that she had visited before. Feeling more cheerful, she replaced the magazine in her bag, adjusted the little gilt 'M' in the lapel of her duffle coat, and walked towards the ticket machines. One of the silver coins

that had come from Zelby was exchanged for a flat oblong of pale verdure which permitted one to sample the mysteries of the subterranean locomotives. A train chugged towards the platform like a predatory caterpillar nosing its way around a cabbage leaf. Doors opened like insectile air vents, and, feeling like an ingested food particle, Elspeth stepped on to the tube train. The door closed; she sat looking at a wild miscellany of adverts and wondered when the digestive juices would absorb her. She was reading an interesting historical essay which ended up with an exhortation to buy her favourite beer, when a sidelong glance through a grimy window told her this was her station. She leapt from her seat and moved quickly to the opening doors. The train disgorged her, like Jonah's leviathan. She moved past automatic chocolate vendors, the weighing machine which was out of order, a defaced map and a poster for an erotic French film which had attracted the pencils of some transvestite teenagers. Smiling to herself a little she reached the bottom of the escalator and felt a blast of mildly gritty air blowing down towards her. The escalator glided her to the next level. She paced across a curved area enriched with white tiles until it looked like a Roman public convenience, another escalator took her to the top. She handed in her ticket, and bought an evening paper from the hunched, one-eyed man vending them vociferously to the London night; then she walked briskly along the street that could have been one of ten thousand in the metropolis. It was a street which could not have belonged anywhere else. The smell of the air, the traffic fumes, said *London*. Every carcinogenic particle that bombarded her olfactory nerve endings said, 'London!' the rumbling and the roar of the traffic, echoed and re-echoed 'London.' A pigeon fluttered up towards her face and its wings clattered 'London' in the air. There was the taste of London on her tongue. Her feet met pavements that could only have been part of London. The metropolis held a magic, partly black, and partly white, an enchantment and a spell all its own. They did things in London that happened nowhere else in the world. You could find things in London that you could find nowhere else. There was a sense of

potential adventure around every corner, a hidden story behind every window, triumph or tragedy behind every door. Here was London. This was opportunity, and she loved it, every inch of it!

Where else but here, Elspeth asked herself, could there have been a house like the house of Doctor Zelby and a strange man in a grey uniform, and a mystery? Where also but here could you find the opportunity to meet other 'M's so quickly and conveniently so that the whole thing could be absorbed in the great fabric of life and intelligent conversation.

She reached the White Hart, opened the door of the saloon bar and walked confidently inside. It was early yet, and there were only two other people in the saloon, they had their backs to her as she entered, but she was almost certain, even then, that she recognised them. The man was tall, taller than the strangely uniformed stranger with the mechanical intonation who had denied her access to Doctor Zelby. The back of the man's head was covered with short, iron-grey curls that crinkled with the rugged masculinity of a veteran Spartan general. The neck, partly hidden by the trench coat collar, was as broad as the neck of a buffalo. It would have looked disproportionately thick and muscular had it not been for the breadth of the massive shoulders beneath. Even below the trench coat the arms could be seen to match the shoulders and neck. The man was by no means a giant but he was an undeniable heavyweight with all the avoirdupois in the right places. He looked like a great, animated oak tree, like one of Tolkien's Ents. There was a confident, relaxed air about him. She didn't need to see the face to know that it was the one and only Valentine Gregory Stearman, journalist, trouble shooter, adventurer extraordinary. The woman beside him was of medium build, lithe and lissom. There was almost a feline grace about her magnificent curves. The hair was as black as wet coal, and cut in a short, straight, simple, Cleopatrine pattern. She could have stepped from the pages of an illustrated volume of Egyptian Art. Elspeth walked towards the corner of the bar, and fished in her duffle coat pocket. Val half turned to see who had come in. He

smiled in recognition; he had seen Elspeth before at Mensa meetings in the White Hart. La Noire, too, turned and smiled welcomingly.

"Hello!" Stearman's deep bass baritone was a powerful, musical sound, stentorian yet controlled.

"Can I get you a drink?" asked Val.

"I think it might be an idea if we went and sat down," said La Noire. She and Elspeth moved over to a small, comfortable alcove table near the fire. Val brought the drinks over and took a long, appreciative pull at his beer.

"Well kept," he announced, with the pontifical air of a connoisseur. La Noire sipped a Dubonnet and nodded.

"How's everything in the Land of the Mighty Freudians?" grinned Val.

"Oh, we're getting rid of our inhibitions as best we can," laughed Elspeth.

"This must be your second year now?" said La Noire.

"That's right."

"Time flies," commented Val.

"How original can you get?" commented La Noire, disapprovingly.

"The greatest truths are platitudinous!" he answered.

"And that itself is a platitude," she challenged.

"I shall confine my attentions to the beer for the next five minutes while I think of an answer," said Val.

La Noire was looking thoughtfully at Elspeth.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked quietly. There was a probing sensitivity about La Noire. It was not a morbid inquisitiveness that wallowed in the troubles of others under the pretence of doing good. It was a genuine concern of one human being for another. Part of it was innate sensitivity, but some was the experience of life and people that can be built up only in the course of innumerable years. Practice, thought La Noire, added to the ability to sense the feelings of other people so accurately that it seems in itself a supernatural thing. For an instant her thoughts were lost in the dark rearward and abyss of all her Yesterdays; then she was back in the present, looking at Elspeth and wondering. There was a shadow of dejection, a suspicion of doubt in the girl's

eyes. A ghost of bewilderment still haunted the corners of her mouth. Val emerged from his beer, replaced the half empty tankard on the table, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand with a gusto that was in itself a direct and powerful thing, then the real intelligence and sympathy of his innermost being swept away the bluff, Philistine exterior. He raised a thick, interrogative eyebrow and smiled encouragingly.

"There is something on your mind, isn't there, Elspeth? I can smell it!"

He wrinkled his nose like a big, hungry, grey rabbit on the edge of a lettuce patch. Beatrix Potter's immortal line ran through Elspeth's mind: "Lettuces are very soporific."

She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time, partly because of the sweet poignancy of the Beatrix Potter story, and partly because of her own feelings of relief at being with the Stearmans and wanting to tell the whole story of Zelby and the advert.

She looked down at the table as though hoping to find all she needed written there.

"Yes, there is something on my mind," she said at last. She continued to look down at the table, for it was easier directing the words straight downwards than to real people, no matter how kindly and sympathetic they might be.

"Two days ago I was waiting for a lecture," she said softly, "and I picked up a newspaper that was in the rack and began reading. I remember distinctly that on the front was something about a Flying Saucer: quite sensational, yet well done. The writer had obviously put a great deal of time and research into preparing the article, and had approached various official bodies."

"I see," commented Val. "Did this upset you in some way?"

"No. I don't know why I mentioned it, it wasn't really connected at all with the business I'm going to tell you about. It just happened to be the headline."

"Go on," encouraged La Noire.

"I turned the paper over and went through the adverts on the back. In the personal column there were all sorts of ghastly things!" She laughed, but there wasn't much humour

in the sound. "Then, well down the column, there was one of those enigmatical lines: 'What does the square root of minus one smell like?' and a box number."

"What was that again?" demanded Val.

"'What does the square root of minus one smell like?'" repeated Elspeth.

Val paused on the verge of a hearty guffaw.

La Noire was deep in thought.

"It could be," she said quietly, "a symbolic attempt to sum up a problem of reality and human perception."

Elspeth gasped.

"That might almost have been telepathic, La Noire, that's just what I thought; at least, that's what I wondered if it meant."

"And you answered this advert?" said Val.

"Yes. Tonight actually."

"So the trail is still warm!" said Stearman, adjusting an invisible deer-stalker. "Come, Watson, let us take up the case!" He winked broadly at La Noire. The psychology student smiled and drained the last of her lager and lime.

"Let me get you another one," said Val. "It loosens the tongue. Far better for inhibitions than all those carefully planned consultations on couches that you characters go in for."

He took her glass, recharged it, and returned. One or two others were drifting in now, but they were at the other end of the room and in their alcove table the Stearmans and Elspeth seemed to have found a little world of their own.

The girl told them the rest of the story; she enlarged nothing, exaggerated nothing, and left out nothing of significance. When she had finished Stearman sat very still and thoughtful, bit his lip in ruminative silence, and contemplated his empty beer glass. La Noire had also lapsed into thoughtful silence; it was Elspeth who spoke first.

"Do you think I'm making an adventure where nothing exists?"

"No, I don't," said Val. "I don't think that at all. There seems to be a great deal more here than meets the eye. This

business of reality is one that has occurred to me many times," he went on.

"Yes," said La Noire, softly.

"You obviously mean a great deal more than you are saying," prompted Elspeth. She paused, sipping at the pale, light beer in the glass. "Those supernatural articles you do for *The Globe*, Val . . ."

"Oh, this is the sixty-four thousand dollar question!" He grinned good naturedly. "You're going to ask if they're true, aren't you?"

"Not really. I was going to ask how much of them you believed."

"There speaks the psychologist." Val chuckled again.

"This is difficult," he said. "Sometimes you have to look up an interesting story, and although you have no personal experience of it, you try to make it as convincing as you can. I couldn't vouch for any of the second-hand stories, the things that have come to me as hearsay. The older they are, the less likely they often are. Ghosts in the days of candlelight and gas were more numerous than ghosts in a world of electricity and infra red photography. On the other hand this does not mean for a moment that they do not exist today. They do!"

"So you *do* believe it!" said Elspeth. "I've been wanting to ask for a long time."

"I believe what I've seen," answered Stearman, quietly. "I write about what I know."

There was a deep, thoughtful atmosphere in that old inn.

"Then, some of the things that you've presented as stories, have they really happened to you?"

Val gave a soft, throaty chuckle.

"Sometimes you can only present things as fiction," he said

"You mean some of them are . . . real?"

"You answer a question with a question," said Val. "If you genuinely had supernatural powers, very strong ones, if you had wild talents like teleportation, telekenesis, telepathy, what do you think would happen to you?"

She thought for a moment, thought hard . . .

"I suppose you might be termed a kind of security risk."

"That's one possibility," answered Val, "but certainly the

authorities would not be prepared to allow you to run loose, no matter how loyal you were. And there's another point, what sort of social life do you think you'd have if you were known as a genuine miracle worker?"

"Yes, I see the implications," agreed Elspeth.

"If you had such powers," said Val, "what do you think would be the most profitable thing to do with them?"

"Possibly to pretend they were not genuine, but to use them all the same," replied Elspeth as sudden inspiration came to her.

La Noire nodded.

"Have you ever seen conjuring tricks so clever they seem to be impossible?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, I have," agreed Elspeth.

"Suppose that the conjuror wasn't an illusionist? Suppose he was performing a piece of real magic?" said Val.

"The audience would think he was performing, of course," said Elspeth.

"You see the analogy," said La Noire.

"You write up a story as fiction, or as a partly humorous article, and then," said Val, "he who has eyes to see, will see. He who had ears to hear, will hear! Life can go on just as usual . . ."

"This reality business," said the girl, "you've written about probability tracks as though they really existed."

"Would you believe me if I said I'd visited them?" asked Val with a broad grin.

"I don't know—I might."

"Would you believe me if I said I'd actually been inside a flying saucer? That I had experienced incredible adventures on other worlds, in other times?"

"I suppose I might if you said it and meant it! If you assured me that it was true."

"You wouldn't think I was suffering from some kind of serious delusion?"

"I don't know—I might wonder."

"Let's leave it in the wondering stage and leave a question mark beside it," said Val. "You see, when you've done some of the things that we have done, you become very curious

about the fabric of reality. You wonder about metaphysical questions of enormous magnitude."

"It really boils down," said La Noire, "to where our concept of reality comes from—how do you answer that?"

"From our data-gathering organs, from our perception organs," said Elspeth.

"The five basic senses," said Stearman, softly.

"Yes," replied the girl.

"Take the case of one of your psychiatric patients who genuinely believes that he can smell something that isn't there."

"Well, something must be stimulating the olfactory nerve," answered the girl, "some injury, or disease."

"Exactly!" commented La Noire. "Take a patient who hears noises or suffers hallucinations; it can either be a psychological factor, or the result of something wrong in the physical brain."

"I believe experiments have been conducted," said Stearman, "in which certain areas of the brain have been stimulated electrically, and as a result certain sights, sounds and colours, tastes, even smells were experienced by the patient. As far as the patient was concerned the experience was real."

"Quite true," said Elspeth.

"Imagine a brain removed from the body, living in a nutrient solution," said Val quietly. "Imagine various parts of that brain connected to stimulating organs, electrical charges, or what-have-you, if the thing could be done in a sufficiently advanced way the brain would believe that things were really happening to it. It would not conceive of itself as lying inside a tank of nutrient solution, being prodded by electrical impulses. It would feel things just as if it had a real body. It would see things as if it had real eyes. It would experience things."

Elspeth shuddered.

"Yes, I suppose it would. It's rather horrible really."

"It may not be any more horrible than reality," said La Noire.

"What do you mean?" asked the girl.

"It is possible that we are all suffering from the same kind

of delusion as the brain in the hypothetical tanks," murmured La Noire. "It is possible that there is no reality. We depend for all our knowledge on the organs of the senses, and they in turn convey things to us via the nerves; the brain responds to the stimuli it receives."

Elspeth nodded.

"I see your reasoning," she said.

There was another thoughtful silence.

"Reality could be as abstract as minus one," said Stearman, "and the only smell it has would be whatever smell we like to give it."

"Something must exist," said Elspeth.

"Oh, yes, something's real, but what?"

"I," said the girl. "I am real."

"How do you know that you are real?"

"I am real because I can think, because I can conceive of myself as a unit, a personality, a sentient being."

"I think, therefore I am," quoted Stearman. "But are you physical, or mental?"

"I suppose I'm both."

"Common sense says that you're both, the evidence of medicine and science, biology and physics, says that you are both, but——" Val paused thoughtfully, "suppose that only the psychic is real? That the physical is just an illusion. Go back to the idea of electrical stimuli. The so-called physical world is only made up of atoms. The atom itself is a series of negative and positive electrical charges—so what is 'real'? What *matters*?"

"You mean that in a sense the physical and the psychic could be one?" asked Elspeth.

"I think that in a sense they are," said La Noire.

"If matter and energy can be interchanged," said Val, "E=Mc², then physical and psychic universes can be interchanged. Nobody has yet worked out a satisfactory formula to express it, even theoretically."

The silence descended again.

"What about my adventure?" asked Elspeth.

"I am intrigued by your Doctor Zelby," said Val.

"The refusal seemed so odd," said Elspeth, "so completely out of character with the tone of the letter."

There was a silence in the alcove, even against the background noise of the pub. You could practically hear the brains changing gear in the alcove. La Noire finished her Dubonnet and said, with the twinkling light of adventure in her eye: "Suppose we went round to see Doctor Zelby?"

"What—now?" asked Val, a little hesitantly.

"Why not?" demanded La Noire.

"Oh, no reason," shrugged Val. There had been no reason at all, really. I must be getting old, middle-aged caution descending on me, he thought.

"Let's go and see Zelby. The car's in the park," he agreed.

"Could we *really*?" Elspeth was suddenly full of enthusiasm.

"Come on!" Val stood up and moved a trifle unsteadily towards the door.

"I think you'd better drive!" he said to La Noire. "Didn't realise how much beer I'd had till I stood up."

"Are you all right, darling?" she asked.

"I'm fine! Let's hope we encounter some good old-fashioned trouble. I fight better drunk than sober!" He grinned down at his battle scarred knuckles. There was a belicose light in his clear, keen, grey eyes.

La Noire unlocked the car and they tucked Elspeth in the back. Val fell into the passenger seat of the powerful sports saloon and slammed the door behind him, with a loud, extravert concussion. La Noire started the mighty engine and the big car purred out of the park and into the thin stream of evening traffic. Like a great cat moving stealthily through the darkness of the night, it headlights stabbing the gloom, like eyes; it glided towards the Georgian mansion in South Kensington where Doctor Zelby reputedly lived and moved and had his being.

They drew up two blocks away, alighted, left the car unlocked, but took the key, and walked slowly and purposefully in the direction of Zelby's house. There was no sign of light at the front, although something seemed to be gleaming from somewhere.

Val strolled past once, casually, sizing the place up like a professional burglar, casing a house.

As far as Stearman could see, the old Kensington mansion had the genuine air of emptiness. No lights shone from its windows, and there was a peculiarly lifeless quality about it. It reminded him of a museum, when the last visitor is gone, and the doors have been locked for the night. It looked like a closed market, like an arcade with the doors fastened on either end. Val sent the girls back to the car and moved towards the wall at the back garden of Zelby's address. He tried the gate casually, without seeming to stop in his walk. The gate was either locked or bolted; it refused to open. He sauntered on for a few paces, turned, and came quietly and quickly back. His big, battle-scarred hands stretched for the top of the gate. With a heave of his powerful legs and a quick, muscular swing, he had vaulted lightly to the top of the wall, and dropped, soundless as a cat, on the other side. He paused and drew breath; his eyes stabbed into the darkness like the eyes of a cat. The garden was a small, rectangular affair, a few straggly shrubs did their best to fight the grime and sunlessness of the city air. He looked at them a little sadly. Amorphous shapes of stunted arboreals, like deformed dwarves, goblins of the night . . . He reached the back door. As he had expected, it was locked.

Stearman was not an international adventurer for nothing. He dived quickly into his jacket pocket and produced a small flexible instrument, he turned it once or twice, deftly, and then inserted it in the lock. There was a faintly protesting click, and a sliding, grating sound, as though tumblers were being pushed reluctantly against their will, into the positions that were normally allocated to them by a key.

The door opened, at a touch of the handle. Val slid inside and pushed it to after him. He replaced the lock pick in his pocket and moved along the corridor, noting the kitchen on his left, and what must have been designed originally as a laundry or scullery on his right. He continued along the passage, opening each door in turn. He saw a music room and a consulting room; the front door and hall now blocked his path. The front door key was in the lock; he turned it

and opened the door. His hand flicked on the switch and he stood bold as brass in the doorway. La Noire and Elspeth left the car and came quickly towards the oblong of light and the unmistakable silhouette of the enormous man in the doorway. They crossed the small front yard, climbed the steps, and stepped in through the door. Val beamed, closed the door behind them and held a finger to his lips for silence.

With the big journalist adventurer leading the way the three of them went back along the corridor.

"Perhaps I have a nasty, suspicious mind," whispered Stearman, "but my instinct tells me this place would have a cellar, or cellars, of copious size and sinister aspect. It might be a good thing if we now proceeded to examine them!"

"Right," agreed La Noire. Elspeth could feel herself trembling with excitement. This, she thought, was Adventure with a capital "A", the sort of thing that had previously only come to her second-hand through the medium of television, or radio: film or printed word. Now it wasn't second-hand, now it was really happening. Now she was inside a house where she ought not to be, and somehow because Stearman was there it all seemed perfectly all right. She supposed when she came to analyse the feeling introspectively that it was a kind of hero-worship. There were qualities about Stearman that made her feel she would have gladly followed him to the end of the earth. Freud might have said that he was a 'father figure.' Yet he was more romantic than that. There was just a suggestion of patriarchy about him, but it was a patriarchy in his youth and prime. Her introspection ended as Val found the top of the cellar steps. He paused, listening for a moment.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone else about," he said. "Come on."

The powerful bass baritone had dropped to a sibilant whisper. He took La Noire's hand, and led the way down the dark, winding steps to the cellar below.

"There's a light switch to your left," said La Noire, casually.

Val could see nothing, but he knew of old how powerfully effective was his wife's night vision. He reached out his hand

in the direction she indicated, and found the switch. A light beneath a white, plastic shade illuminated the area where they now stood.

"That would appear to be the cellar door, just ahead," said Stearman. La Noire nodded.

"Something's wrong," she said, quietly. Val looked at her; the beautiful, sensitive face was etched with fine lines of anticipation and a kind of anxiety.

"Something's very wrong," she said again. "There's death in the air, Val. I can sense it."

Elspeth felt an icy trickle of fear down her back. Stearman believed instinctively, intrinsically, that there was only one way of dealing with fear, or any other emotion: to recognise it, to tackle it. He was a nettle grasper. Retreat, in his experience had never cured anything. He didn't go out of his way to dig up trouble where it didn't exist, but if trouble had the temerity to come within reach he would go forward and meet it. If there was something unwelcome waiting behind a door, he had no intention of letting it wait while they wasted valuable nerve and energy guessing at its nature.

He tried the cellar door. It was locked; it was, in fact, secured by a small, cupboard-like lock which did not seem to justify, or to merit, the skilful application of the pick that had admitted him to the back door of the mansion. He scarcely bothered to step back. There was a shattering crunch as his shoulder hit the door about eighteen inches above the lock. The screws left their sockets with squeaks of protest, like mice being lifted from their nests by a hungry cat in playful mood.

La Noire found the switch and flooded the cellar with light. Bright, white neons produced a shadowless sea of illumination. The majority of them were mounted on the ceiling, a number were fastened on the upper parts of the walls. The general effect was one of great clarity without dazzle. It reminded Val of a demonstration he had once seen during an exhibition at the Electrical Development Association headquarters—different kinds of lamps serving different purposes. These lights were arranged very scientifically, with great logic. They were not intended as domestic lighting. Certainly they

were not the casual illumination of a cellar that was used as a store room. These lights were laboratory lights, and the cellar at first glance made them think of the classical interior of the 'mad professor's workshop' from a pre-war horror film. But this was a horror film still. It was a set-piece, nothing moved, no hypertrophied rat or spider tore destructively at the bars of its cage. No monster strapped to an operating table, snapped its bonds to sit up and destroy its creator; nothing bubbled in a retort; no strange fluids hissed and exploded in their flasks. There was a great deal of electronic equipment on display, but it was lifeless, disconnected. No relays clicked, not a single valve flashed, the laboratory was as lifeless as a television set on a tropical island, with neither battery nor mains to animate it. The huge coils of what appeared to be a computer remained unenergised.

"It doesn't look exactly inhabited," said Stearman.

"It's fantastic," breathed Elspeth.

She moved forward quickly.

"I think I begin to understand a bit more of what that advertisement meant!"

"What do you mean?" asked Val.

Elspeth was so engrossed in the programme sheets that she scarcely heard the big journalist-advertiser's question.

"I said 'What do you mean?'" repeated Val.

"Eh? Oh! Sorry!" She glanced up from the notes. "I think that Zelby was——" She broke off. From the corner of her eye she had seen something on the floor on the other side of the central computer units. She tried hard not to scream.

Val and La Noire followed the unmistakable direction of her frozen gaze. Stearman took a pace around the central block, then raised an eyebrow and let out a long, low whistle.

"I think we've found Doctor Zelby," he said quietly.

A man of late middle age lay on the laboratory floor. To have said he was dead would have been an unpleasantly macabre understatement. If the man on the floor was Zelby, then Zelby was as dead as it was possible for a human body to be. The lower thorax and upper abdomen had been burned or blasted away by something, as though a telegraph pole had been used to skewer the worthy doctor, as strips of dry meat

are secured by primitive tribesmen for convenient carrying. The eyes were wide and staring. There was a look of surprise and fear on the contorted face.

Stearman took a dust sheet from one of the computer blocks and laid it over the body. La Noire blanched a little, and shuddered.

"What—what could have done that to a man?"

Val shook his head.

"No weapon I've ever seen. No weapon ever seen on earth. What do you think?"

She breathed deeply.

"I'm not sure, darling. I think we have encountered people with weapons that could have done that."

"Yes, I'm just trying to remember," said Val. He grinned, sheepishly and incongruously "So many different things have happened in so many odd places it's a job to remember!" he said. She wanted to smile, but somehow it didn't seem right in the presence of the thing under the sheet.

"What was it?" asked Elspeth.

"It has been burned or blasted with something tremendously powerful," commented Val. "An energy weapon of some kind."

"Yes, or a nuclear missile. I know it sounds like the thing they use to destroy cities, but there are smaller ones." La Noire seemed to be talking to herself. She shut her eyes to shut out the hideous picture of the thing on the floor, but even with her eyelids tightly closed the hideous thing kept on appearing before the screen of memory.

"I wish I hadn't seen it!" she said.

"Sorry. I should have told you to stay back while I covered it up," said Val.

"No, I didn't mean it quite like that," said La Noire. "I suppose I really meant I wish it hadn't been there to see. I wish it hadn't happened like that."

"Listen," said Elspeth

There came the sound of a door opening.

"We've got to get out of here, and fast," said Val. He led the way up the cellar steps.

"Is it all right if I bring the notes?" asked Elspeth.

"Anything you like so long as it's not too bulky!" he called back without looking round. He paused at the head of the stairs, listening to the girl's footsteps behind him. A big something in grey stood just inside the front door at the far end of the passage. Val held up his hand for silence.

"I'll divert him. You get out," he said softly.

The cellar door was hinged on the left-hand side as you came up from below. Val held it open so that it acted as a shield between the stranger in grey and his own party. He squinted through the crack between the edge of the door and its frame. The man in grey was coming towards them.

Think, Stearman, and think fast! said a voice of desperate urgency deep down within his mind. Val pushed La Noire and Elspeth gently away to his right. The man in grey was only four or five yards from the cellar door. He was a big man, but it wasn't physical size that worried Stearman. Unarmed he would have matched blow for blow with any humanoid life in the universe. He would have fought any man, living or dead. Like the legendary John L. Sullivan, Val Stearman's maxim was that he could 'lick any man alive.' It had yet to be disproved. Inspiration came a split second later. It was concern over whether or not the stranger possessed the blasting weapon which had done for the man they thought was Zelby, that made Val hesitate from frontal attack. He got his fingers round the edge of the cellar door. Balancing himself carefully so that he could use weight and strength in exactly the right way, just when he chose, he gave a wild war cry that must have belonged to some remote ancestor in the long forgotten past and snatched the door from its hinges. Like some mighty Berserker, holding his oaken shield in front of him, Val advanced towards the totally unprepared grey-suited stranger. The door must have given the new-cower the impression that Macbeth must have received when Burnham Wood walked to Dunsinane. He fumbled ineffectually with a gleaming metallic tube in a holster at his waist, and while he fumbled the door, apparently self animated, launched itself at him. Despite cartoons and celluloid gangster epics to the contrary, despite the machineations of stunt men in television Westerns, the

human body is normally inferior to a wooden door, in terms of tensile strength, and pain resisting qualities. The man in the grey suit went down like corn before the sickle. He went down with an unreal quickness, as though he was not really solid. Val jumped on the door for good measure and then not wanting to get involved with the official explanations which the circumstances demanded, and which were impossible to give adequately, he raced down the corridor in the opposite direction. La Noire and Elspeth were already out through the back door, across the garden and half way round the block to the waiting car. Val joined them at a leisurely pace, slid in behind the wheel feeling a great deal more sober than he had done when he had left the pub, started the engine, depressed the clutch, slipped into first gear and nosed the powerful sports saloon back in the direction of his flat.

"We'd better bring Elspeth in for a while, hadn't we?" he said as he drove.

"Of course," answered La Noire.

"I feel as though I want a bit of company after—after—" said the girl.

"Let's not dwell on it," urged Val. "I didn't find it very pretty either!"

La Noire led the way into the flat, and Val felt a certain sensation of relief and security as the door closed behind them.

"I think it's time the police visited the late Doctor Zelby," said Val, with a touch of bantering grimness in his smile.

"What are you going to do?" asked Elspeth. "I don't want to give any statements or anything to make any trouble at the university. I mean——"

"All right," said Val, "nobody's going to give any statements. I don't want the bother either."

"Besides, I've got those programme notes," said the girl.

"So you have!" replied Val. "May I have a look at them?"

"Of course!" She handed them over to Val, and he and La Noire looked at them.

"They look interesting, but I'm not a programmer," commented Val.

"I'm not fully trained, but I've done a bit of programming as part of my psychology course, and I was so interested that I took it several stages further. I could crack these, given time, and, possibly access to the university computer."

"It would be good if you could," said Val. "It might shed a bit of light somewhere."

"I wonder if we might do better to leave the whole thing alone," mused La Noire.

"That sounds a very untypical remark," said Val. "What prompts it?"

"I sometimes get these feelings," said La Noire. "I just wondered whether there are some things we were better not to know."

"Now, wait a minute," said Val. "If you believe in truth, in a philosophical sense, if you personify it, make it an aspect of God, then Truth can never be hurt by Truth, can it?"

"Sometimes I wonder," said La Noire, softly. "Truth seems to have different colours, and to change with the generation it serves. It's as though the whole of human history was a series of lantern slides, flashed on a great cosmic screen. I wonder whether, after all, we are just tiny figures, two dimensional images on a screen playing our little parts on a flat dream surface, while reality lies in a totally different dimension, beyond our power."

"The two dimensional world can affect the three dimensional world," said Val. "A shadow is only two dimensional, but if it falls at the wrong moment it can spoil a photograph being taken by a three dimensional camera. Many images on which civilisation depends are only two dimensional things. The number, the letter; the concept of the number or letter has even less depth, it is only thought." He turned and looked at Elspeth. His hand ruffled through his iron-grey curls. "We are back to the square root of minus one," he said.

"Yes," agreed the girl. She picked up the programming sheets, held them tightly; La Noire shook her head as though to clear it.

"You didn't really mean that, did you?" said Val.

"No, I didn't," she said. "Like everyone else, I have my strengths and weaknesses." She smiled, a thin shadow of her

usual smile. "I was thinking about the Coven," she went on, "and how you freed me of them. I was remembering the grip that Jules and Von Haak had over me."

Val nodded.

"Those were the days!" he said rather ruefully.

"Yes." La Noire's answer was soft; as gentle as a southern zephyr on a palm fringed shore. "You're right about Truth, Val. Even though it makes no sense to us we have to go on, we have to press forward. It is those who think they're serving the cause of righteousness by concealing Truth, or trying to suppress it simply because it contradicts an old established dogma, who err. They are not protecting the cause of Right at all—they are only protecting a dogma. All dogma will fall—must fall—unless it has, coincidentally, some kind of scientific basis."

Stearman nodded.

"As I see it," went on La Noire, and now her smile was broadened and real again; her eyes shone with their accustomed light. "As I see it," she repeated, "even if Zelby's theories seemed to cut across all that we knew and understood, there will be a deeper knowledge, and a greater understanding beyond it all. The simple faith of Victorian christianity was apparently given a body blow by Darwin's Evolution of Species, but the modern theist has no difficulty in reconciling the idea of evolution with the concept of an interested divinity. In fact the universe is made bigger to the glory of God, not at His expense. We find something really awe-inspiring in the concept of a Creator who could make not only a world but a universe of unlimited magnitude. If my worst fears about Zelby's ideas should have a tangible foundation it will not really overwhelm or destroy the basic postulates."

Her words died away, lost in an ocean of thoughts. She shook her head again, as though to clear it. Her Cleopatrine fringe danced like blue-black waves above the stars in her eyes.

"I must get hold of our crime man," said Val.

"Sometimes," commented La Noire, "I wonder if you are

a journalist first and a human being second, or the other way round."

"Sometimes I don't wonder!" flashed Stearman, and with that cryptic remark he picked up the phone and dialled.

"Hello, Anderson. Val."

"Yes? I thought I recognised the voice. What can I do for you?"

"I hope I can do something for you."

"Always grateful."

"I've just had some anonymous information."

"Such is fame!"

"Though why he called me instead of the editor, I don't know," said Val. "Maybe he knew Mac's reputation!"

"What's on, then?" asked Anderson.

"Murder, most foul, according to my informer."

"Oh! This sounds very interesting."

Val gave him the Kensington address.

"And that's all I know. By the way, I don't want to get involved, so no sources disclosed, eh?"

"Of course not."

"Though I couldn't tell 'em anything, even if I wanted to," went on Stearman.

"I'll get over there," said Anderson.

Val hung up, waited a moment or two, and then dialled 999

"Emergency, which service, please?"

"Police," said Val.

He got the station operator and disguised his voice through a thick slurred sound.

"Is that the police?"

"Yes."

"Go to Doctor Zelby's." He gave the Kensington address.

"You'll find something interesting." He hung up.

They would act on it. He knew they would act on it. He reckoned he had given Anderson just about enough lead, just about enough start.

La Noire made coffee and they talked for nearly two hours.

Elspeth looked at her watch, and gasped.

"I didn't know it was so late," she apologised. "I'm keeping you up."

"Not at all," said Val resignedly. He grinned. "After all, that's what we're here for."

He reached into the biscuit barrel and took out a round coconut biscuit, delicately baked a thin, golden brown, and crunched it between teeth still strong, but grown a little inadequate, numerically. There was more metal than dentine at the back, he reflected sadly, and the ratio was likely to increase with the relentless progression of the years. Val finished the biscuit and passed his cup to La Noire for re-fill.

"The time has come, the walrus said," sighed Elspeth.

"I take it you'd like us to give you a lift home, young lady?"

"Mmmm. I would, please!"

"Are you sure you're going to be all right, or would you rather stay the night?" asked La Noire.

"Oh, I think I'll be all right, really!"

"O.K. Mustn't make too much of it, you know. It's not a pleasant business—" Val hesitated as though he had been about to say something more. "Death is always an unpleasant business," he added.

La Noire looked at him strangely, as though wondering if he was thinking of the strange barrier that came between them, the one thing they could never share completely. It was one of those things that they seemed never to talk about by some kind of subconscious, mutual agreement, and yet, as La Noire watched Val growing greyer with the passing of the years, while her own tresses remained as black as a raven's, she knew one day she would have to tell him the whole story, right from the very beginning, a beginning that now seemed such a long time ago. Her mind went winging along the corridors of Time, traversing decades and centuries in the twinkling of an eye, and then it turned, and the doors of memory closed with great firmness and determination.

They went down to the car, and Val and La Noire saw Elspeth settled comfortably in the back before driving her back to the students' hostel. It was alive with lights and boisterous young life. The energy and the light, the noise,

the youth that seemed to emanate from the place in waves, was a kind of defence against all that humanity hated and feared. Youth was the racial weapon against death and the decline of age. Noise, laughter, conversation, excited argument: these things were humanity's defence against the silence of the grave. Light from a hundred windows and a thousand bulbs, was a defence against darkness. A man could forgive the inane slogans of neon advertisers, providing the advertiser spent his money dispersing the darkness of the night, challenging it with miniature swords of coloured light, scimitars of red, and rapiers of blue, foils of verdant slenderness and sabres of brilliant orange.

Val alighted, pulled the seat forward, and watched as Elspeth climbed out of the car and ran towards the open door of the hostel.

"Safety in numbers!" said La Noire with a smile.

"Yes, I was thinking along similar lines," agreed Val. "Safety in light, safety in colour, safety in noise, safety in a crowd . . ."

"Is it real?" whispered La Noire. "Is any of it real? How can any of us be sure that the world is still there when we move away from it? How can we be sure that anything exists outside our own minds?"

"Oh, yes, we've discussed this one before, haven't we?" said Val.

"Suppose that I am the only reality?" said La Noire. She was saying it rhetorically, and he knew it, but it was still a disturbing challenge, he thought. "Suppose that when I close my eyes in sleep everything goes out of existence till I open them again? Suppose that I could will this or that to be *or not to be*?"

"Yes, this is a whimsical, not to say a maudling line of reflection," said Val.

"But it could be true," she went on.

"I suppose it could, like some of the propositions Charles Fort put forward that couldn't be dis-proved."

"Ah, there was a man!" said La Noire. "There was a man who knew how to doubt, and what to doubt."

Stearman nodded.

"A few more like him and people in general would stop taking rubbish at more than its face value!"

Fort was a rebel; like all rebels he was impetuous and he probably went too far in a number of directions, but basically, what he said and did was good—which takes us back to what we were saying earlier—Truth cannot hurt the truth."

"You're right, of course," she answered, squeezing his hand. "It was wrong of me to doubt . . ." She broke off, leaving the sentence unfinished. There was a magic in the London night; romance, a spirit of love, music, beauty and solemnity hung over them like a bejewelled canopy of blue velvet. It seemed to Val that the drive ended all too soon. He alighted, moved round and opened the door for La Noire. They looked up at the tall, graceful block where their flat was situated. Somehow it seemed right. There was a powerful, real quality about it; in a world of metaphysical doubts and speculations it was good to put your hand on a brick, and tell yourself that the brick was real.

And yet . . . and yet . . . thought Val, even a brick could be an elaborate illusion in a mysterious and elusive universe. He saw the thing for an instant in a symbolic, allegorical way. The whole creation seemed to be doing the Dance of the Seven Veils. The physical universe broke down into the world of perceptions, perceptions broke down into the world of the Mind. Nothing existed except the atom: the nucleus and the particles singing about it for ever—or so it seemed—like miniature solar systems. And yet, they were not even as solid as that. Every particle carried its electric charge, and at the back of it all, when the last physical, perceptual, electronic and mental veils had been discarded, *what was there?* Could Reality be found? He remembered some lines of a poem from long ago:

"Is the last thing, if only man could find it,
Just some vague power, as mindless as the wind?"

Was that reality? Vague, elemental forces? Or were there other things?

"Darling, what are you thinking?"

La Noire looked at him gravely.

"I suppose I'm trying to analyse and focus all the things that have been going through our minds since we met Elspeth in the pub. It seems like a thousand years ago, instead of earlier tonight!"

"Yes, I feel very much the same way," agreed La Noire.

CHAPTER THREE

The Programme

ELSPETH smiled at two or three of her friends in the hostel common room, and went up to bed carrying the programme notes as though she were a devout, medieval nun carrying an illuminated missal as she went to her devotions.

Once inside her own room, she took off her duffle coat, hung it on the back of the door, turned the key in the lock, and began spreading the programme sheets on the table-topped desk with which each of the little rooms was provided. It was slow, tedious, tiring work, but piece by piece Elspeth began to see the *gestalt*, the pattern of the programme.

Tiredness came over her in waves, slow, gentle waves to begin with. They grew stronger until she was yawning unashamedly. It was becoming difficult for her to keep her eyes open. The sheets of carefully programmed computer symbols began to blur. She rubbed her eyes in a last valiant effort to stay awake, but it was no use—she knew she would have to go to bed. The pattern was forming, too; it was a nuisance. She put the sheets carefully into the top drawer of the desk and locked it, then she undressed, washed—ceremonially rather than as a serious attempt to remove the dirt—slipped into her shorty pyjamas and flopped on to the bed. Elspeth always worked or played to the point of exhaustion. Just before sleep overcame her she thought rather proudly that she couldn't remember what it was like to go to bed until she was so tired sleep was an inevitable assailant who stormed the last castle of consciousness with the irresistible siege engines of Morpheus.

Elspeth drifted off. When sleep came, however, it was an uneasy thing; it moved in waves of lightness and depth, a series of hills and valleys, a withdrawing from waking life,

and then a flirting with the very skirt hem of consciousness, the transparent garment of life.

Elspeth began to dream. She was walking through a garden. The path beneath her was thing of fine crystal; it shone like cut glass with the light behind it. As she looked down on it and saw herself mirrored and reflected a score of times, the path had a curious habit of curling round on itself, twisting and darting between strangely trunked trees. Elspeth tried to stop, but there was no stopping; the path held the feet like the enchanted shoes that trapped a fabulous dancing princess. The convolutions and gyrations of the glittering crystal grew stranger and more bizarre. Elspeth felt as though she was being swept along by some great escalator that had somehow collapsed into a horizontal position. The path ended at last in front of a door. Her dreaming fingers opened the door, and she stepped inside, impelled by the same force which had riveted her feet to the path. The door closed behind her of its own volition. She looked to right and left, although she could see sky above her with complete clarity the walls were high and their confines were narrow. It was a maze; she knew it; she felt its challenge and its fear at the same instant. The walls were made of something that resembled black marble. They absorbed light, gleaming dully, just as the crystal floor leading to the maze had thrown light away. A strange notion came to her as she put her hand on the wall; perhaps all the light absorbed by these black walls was thrown out on the crystal path, as though the black walls and crystal road were the opposite sides of the same coin, the face and the reverse, the positive and negative aspects of the same process. She moved forward and the black wall was a concave curve on her left. She seemed to be on the inside of a vast stone circle. On and on she walked, gliding and drifting in the strange black cylinder. She looked up high above her at the light. She moved right around until she reached the door once more; her dream fingers touched the portal, but there was no egress. The doors seemed as solid and unresilient as the stone that now encircled her. Nightmare terror filled every aspect of her being. She walked round again, this time keeping her eyes on the curve of black stone. It turned

away to the left; she turned into it, a great domed buttress of black stone, so it seemed, like the stern of a huge, black, marble ship. Her fingers ran along the cold stone tracing every inch of it. Once she was past the buttress effect she was in what seemed to be another circle. There was a wall on both sides of her; she carried on until her path was blocked, as far as further encircling went, by a straight stone wall that abutted on to the inner wall which she had just circumnavigated. She now turned to her left, rounding another of the stone buttresses. She was in a similar curved passage, running parallel, as far as she could judge, to the one she had just left.

With all her strength she sprang until her hands caught the top of the wall, she lifted, and was surprised by the ease with which she reached the top. It was like a Nijinsky scissor-kick. She was floating higher and higher; time stood still; she paused and saw the original wall and the door. So she was inside the second concentric circle. Her mind, keen and alert despite the strange dream state, supplied her with a picture of a maze made up to concentric circles, and she tried hard to remember how such a maze could be traversed. There were rules, a Frenchman named Tremaux had worked them out. Mazes were important to students of psychology. Her mind went back to the classic mazes. The dream shifted to the remains of Crocodilopolis, which had been founded by Amenemha, over two thousand years before the Christian era. She thought of Theseus in the Cretan labyrinth, the minotaur and other strange terrors of that weird island.

She sank from the top of the black wall, and now a strange obsession siezed her; she had to solve the maze, to find the centre; it became of paramount importance; the world was one vast, complex maze, and at the centre lay Reality. She had to find that reality. She was running now, yet her feet scarcely seemed to make contact. The black walls were mocking her, and she sped on till they ended. What had the answer been? What had Tremaux said about solving problems in mazes? She wished that she was one of the electronic tortoises with an in-built computer. Think, Elspeth, think! said a voice. She glanced around; whence did that voice come?

Her own rational consciousness from far away? She stood with her back to the end of the inner wall. Ahead of her lay a concave inner surface of the first buttress which she had seen. She kicked upwards again and looked over the top of the high black stone. Yes, there it was. Beyond it lay the outer ring. Why not vault the wall? whispered the voice she had heard before. Vault the wall, and then the outer wall. You have no need of gates. She tried, but the power that had lifted her now seemed to have reversed; it pulled her down, pulled her back. Her limbs were leaden, sluggish; the movement took its toll of energy; she was breathing hard, panting with a desperate exertion. She moved with the chains of nightmare holding her back. The inner wall was convex, the outer wall concave. She walked between them like a fly waiting to be trapped in amber for the amusement and astonishment of posterity. She covered what seemed like nine-tenths of the diameter of a circle, and then came once more to her inner wall. She stood with her back to the end of it, facing the concave interior of the buttress.

It must have been the second one I passed, she thought, from the outside. Her mind now gave her a picture of the concentric circles more clearly. She wondered how much further they went. They were becoming almost visibly smaller. She turned and walked towards what she felt was the door. By the time she had turned through about 160 degrees with her hand brushing the concave outside wall, she felt she was probably as close to the door as she would come on that circuit. Gathering all her energy, she kicked up again, and, yes, she was right, but now there were *three* walls between the door and her present position!

She tried to square it with the mental pattern that had been forming and decided that it was about right. She continued on, wondering where the path would lead her next. Round she came, further and further. Something didn't seem quite right, then to her astonishment she finished up facing the blank wall by which she had come in. The whole thing seemed hopelessly bewildering. She walked through it on the opposite side to the door, and knew that she was between the outer and inner walls again. Despairingly she jumped, and for

a fleeting moment saw the whole plan and pattern of the maze. It was not as she had originally thought. She sat down feeling very close to tears. But Elspeth Jermyn was not the kind of girl who cried, even in her dreams. Notwithstanding her training and psychology there was a hard core in Elspeth which would have known instinctively that the only purpose served by lachrymose activity was corneal ablation. Some of her colleagues might have said that sobbing was a useful release for emotional tension. Something instinctive told Elspeth that it was a waste of time; it accomplished nothing, led nowhere. Whatever power, mental or psychic had lifted her before, now lifted her again. She gave the full effort of her mind, as well as the effort of her body to a further Nyjinsky type scissor-kick which took her level with the top of the wall. She grabbed for it. A kind of invisible net seemed to intervene between her hand and the black stone, but she thrust so violently, purposefully, that invisible reticulations gave way before her like the web of a spider that is shattered by the ministrations of an angry wasp.

The stone felt strange, not as solid as she had anticipated; a weird sense of unreality permeated the maze, but she hung on grimly, then she saw the mistake, and worked her way along to the intersection of the straight wall, a straight wall that cut the wall that barred her path in a circular direction. The effort of pulling herself up level with her hands was tremendous, but she managed it at last. In a state near to mental and physical exhaustion she hung on the intersection of the walls, aware of her own breathing; then with her back to the intersection she dropped into the angle formed by the straight wall and the concave curvature of the fifth concentric circle. Now the centre of the maze lay straight ahead of her. All she had to do was to follow the straight wall, keeping it on her right at all times. She moved along it slowly and purposefully, wondering what the dream maze held in its mysterious centre.

She moved on, the journey still seeming unreal, her feet not actually touching the crystalline floor. It was as though she was some strange crystalline sprite from a by-gone age walking upon a floor which had once existed for her, but now existed no longer. There was a feeling of the presence of the

invisible net again, and then she was through; she was in the centre of the maze.

The world seemed to go grey, and the greyness became darkness; the canescence turned into an ashen opacity, an opalescent *something* that was utterly beyond any word or thought. She was sinking into it, yet she was not honestly aware of any downward movement. She sank through the greyness, or she rose through the greyness, or the greyness moved laterally past her, it did not matter. Nothing mattered. There was no significance in anything any more. The universe, the cosmos, the entire Creation, had condensed, had dissolved into this strange greyness. There was only outside and inside. She was *in*, and the greyness was *out*. It was *her* and *them*. She experienced a loneliness that she had never experienced before. The greyness began to thin, it grew tenebrous; emaciated threads of the strange subductive fibres vanished and were gone like filaments of morning mist vanishing in the rays of the early sun.

Then there was another maze. She stood by the entrance; this time there were rectangular hedges to be negotiated. What force drove her into them she was unable to say. She knew that she would have to go. It was as integral a part of life as breathing. She turned to her right, trying to remember the rules. A voice as from a thousand miles away, or from the remote past, whispered to her mind, yet whispered soundlessly with purely psychic sibilance. "*Keep to one wall, keep to one hedge, let your hand not leave it.*"

Waxen leaved arbutus, and evergreens of all descriptions made up the hedges. Here and there they grew thin. The majority of them were thick and powerful, blotting out light, blotting out the rest of the maze. She tried to jump as she had done in the other maze, but it was not possible to jump. She seemed anchored by gravity. This maze would have to be solved on foot if it was to be solved at all.

It reminded her vaguely of one that she had seen somewhere. Was it in this life, or was it part of another life long ago, or had it been someone else's adventure that she had read about. Nothing was making sense in this incredible dream. She reached a dead end and turned back, passing the

entrance through which she had reached the maze. Although the darkness had faded she wasn't conscious of seeing anything beyond the greyness, just a kind of amorphous nothingness. She knew that the maze was there but that seemed to be all. It was like Einstein's theory of the universe, a thing curved back on itself, through four dimensional space time. You couldn't get out of it, and if you did there was nothing beyond it. Professor Hubble had said something about that. Beyond an innumerable number of light years nothing at all existed, *not even empty space*. But how could that be? asked the girl. Her brilliant young mind toyed with the infinite ideas of Hubble and Einstein. When she could cope with them no longer, she came away from them, as a child leaves a toy puzzle it is unable to cope with.

She reached a corner and turned to her right. It seemed an enormous maze, and the ground of hard packed soil and earth beneath her feet was difficult, tiring, and unpleasant to walk on. There was a peculiar little zig-zag bend, a hedge seemed to block her path but she turned right and then, almost immediately, left; then to her left again.

Now she was facing in the same direction that she had been after leaving the corner where she had first turned right after re-tracing her steps and passing the entrance. She moved on to the next corner. It seemed to her, peering through the hedges, that the outside of the maze lay beyond again. She had traversed two sides of it, and now turned right to start on the third—the side opposite the entrance. She walked a short distance, and then with her hand still brushing the inside hedge, she turned right again, and sharply right once more, so that she was now going down the other side of the hedge she had just walked along. The next turn took her to the left, and she knew she was heading down towards the entrance yet again. She negotiated the same zig-zag—this time from the other side—and continued on to the corner which, in the plan of the maze that was growing in her mind, she had tentatively designated as 'A.' She turned through ninety degrees once more at 'A' and realised she was moving straight for the entrance again, *but on the other side of the hedge*.

She reached the corner, as far as she could go, the corner

which was blocked by a hedge seeming to separate her from a direct route to the very centre. She looked under the lower stems of the foliage and saw, on her right, as she faced what appeared to be the direct route to the centre, the entrance, and knew that, so far at least, her mental plan was working. She was following the rule that had been whispered to her by the voice seeming to come from a distance, *the rule of keeping her hand on the inside hedge, keeping her hand on one hedge, following it at all costs, at all times.*

Long ago and far away, so it seemed, she had read something about it, an article in a magazine, or encyclopædia . . . With her back to the entrance she moved along in a direction that would have taken her straight to the centre had the hedge not barred her path and forced her to turn left. It was only a short distance, and then she was able to move to her right again.

She carried on at a slightly divergent angle until an acute corner gave her the chance to follow her hedge round to the right. It seemed that the centre, mysterious, enigmatic and intriguing, could not be far away. She turned left and right, then left and right again, following the hedge, always the hedge. Now the path was taking her reluctantly away from the central area, but she persisted doggedly and with great determination, even though she knew that she was being taken a long way out of her way because of the system she was following. With a feeling of anticipation she realised that the centre lay directly ahead of her. It opened out into a four-sided figure, a sort of truncated triangle. Elspeth was reading psychology; had she been reading mathematics she might have been able to put a name to it. The centre seemed to expand all around her as she reached it. It had the deceptive appearance of a Mobius strip or a Klein bottle: as though it was trying to do something which the laws of physics implied should be impossible.

The greyness moved all around her, becoming in a sense the universe again. There was outside and inside. The whole feeling was re-enated; this time it seemed to accelerate, to quicken, to move with a different tempo. It was more dangerous for that very reason. There was a new maze; she

thought that she would go mad. She wanted no more, no more of this frightening isolation, no more of this feeling of being apart; she wanted to belong; she wanted to be involved. Something was luring her to try once more; she wanted to give it up, to turn back; then the whispered instructions came.

"When you reach the place where the paths are joined the first time, choose your own path. When a path you have not trodden before leads you to an intersection where you have been before, or to a place where you can advance no further, retrace your steps. If you come by a path that is old to a junction that is old, seek for a path that is new. If there is no path that is new, be content with the old. If you travel any road more than twice you will not find your salvation."

Complicated but comprehensible, she thought. Logical, reasonable. She set out valiantly for the centre. Somehow the code presented itself to her. She knew it was another Tremaux code; but where the information came from she wasn't sure. The dream speeded up again until the hedges were flashing past her, almost too fast to think about, almost too fast to interpret and apply the rules of the code to. It was like racing through a maze in an express train . . . more and more rapid, and then, quite suddenly, *the centre*; the centre was all round her, the centre was grey; the wall was grey.

She was the only thing that was not part of the greyness. She was sinking, *sinking*. The greyness was suffocating; it felt like blankets over the face, and she struggled with the blankets until suddenly she was wide awake amid a tangle of bedclothes. She lay in a cold sweat of fear, and for a moment her mind seemed to spin in a maelstrom of mazes; then they were gone, and there was nothing but the bedroom. She heaved a great sigh of relief, and wondered what symbolism could lie behind the incredible dreams . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man in the Grey Suit

IT took Elspeth a long time to get to sleep again, and when she did, her sleep was fitful and troubled. She was glad when the early grey light of morning came. Just before the dawn broke in its fulness she was aware of one bright, low star, shining in through the window. It seemed somehow, to be a symbol of welcome, to be a symbol of reality against amorphous chaos. The star said *Hope*, the star flashed the inextinguishable message of optimism. It said *Faith* against the barbarism of despair. It said much more, a great deal of its message was so fundamental and rudimentary that it could be conveyed only to the deepest parts of the being, that inner core of the human soul where words are superfluous. Elspeth and the star understood each other, but there was no expression medium in which the terms of their understanding could be conveyed. The star faded with the coming of the full dawn, and she rose reluctantly, washed with a kind of 'lick-and-a-promise' attitude, and made herself breakfast. Elspeth was by no means God's gift to the culinary arts. She was ornamental rather than culinary, but she did her best, and the scrambled eggs that she had were at least of an edible consistency, although their flavour might be below the standard expected of Cordon Bleu. The toast upon which the smashed yolks reposed in funereal state was not the kind of toast that appeared in adverts for the best margarine or the kind of toast which her mother had made at home. Elspeth's toast might have done duty as a buckler if somebody had attached a stout leather handle to it on the concave side. Conversely, it could have been put through a fine mincer and sold to a low grade pigment firm to be re-distributed in the guise of black paint. It would have made quite an interesting emulsion for avant gard interior decoration. As toast it left much to be desired; as charcoal biscuits it was fair-to-

middling; as coke it might have enhanced the reputation of any fuel merchant. She crunched through the yellow goo on its sable repository. Her coffee was a considerable improvement upon her toast. Thus fortified internally, Elspeth made her way to her morning lecture, but all the time she kept thinking about Zelby, the Stearmans, and the foul, incredible nightmare of the mazes.

What was the symbolism of it all? she asked. Somehow she felt that it was to do with artificiality versus reality, and over all there hung a sense of impending disaster. Her pencil made notes on the paper, but she was far from sure of the relevance of what she was writing. It didn't seem very important, somehow. The whole thing lacked significance. It was short of moment; there was no vitality in it. The lecturer was an elderly professor, with a beard that covered his chest, a flowing hirsute appendage. It bobbed up and down as he spoke and for a few odd, fleeting seconds he gave the impression of one of those cartoon figures whose head can be reversed, giving two different sets of features. Elspeth tried imagining the lecturer as he would look with his head upside down, but incongruous as the thought was, the giggle that she half feared would betray her lack of reverence, did not come. She did not feel in the mood for humour since Zelby's death.

As the morning proceeded she was increasingly aware of eyes on her back. It was an odd feeling, but as time passed it built up, growing stronger with every passing second. The eyes never seemed to leave her. Once or twice she actually glanced round, and from the corner of her own eye she saw, or thought she saw, the man in the grey uniform, yet when she looked hard in his direction there was nothing there, either an empty chair or a blank in the amorphous crowd of student faces. Fear, a terrible, deep, resurgent fear, cut out all other emotions. She was glad when the lecture ended, glad when she could get out of the lecture hall with the rows of faces acting as camouflage for those terrible eyes, the eyes of the man in the great suit. The eyes of the man in the grey uniform . . .

She followed the crowd down to the canteen; she queued with the others for toast—far better toast than she made

herself—and cocoa. She took it to a table and ate reflectively. Out of the corner of her eye again, this time on her right, she saw the man in the grey suit. She gasped so sharply that a fellow student sitting at the same table followed the direction of her desperate gaze.

"What's the matter, Elspeth?" asked her companion.

"Oh, n-n-nothing. I'm a bit nervous this morning. Silly of me. I had rather a late night."

"Ooh!" said her friend, knowingly.

"Who's the man in the grey suit?" asked Elspeth suddenly. "The man over there?"

"Where, dear?" The other student looked in the direction in which Elspeth was staring.

"He's gone. Silly of me I wondered if you knew him. Biggish fellow, not very young. Mature looking."

"I can't say I've seen him. He sounds rather exciting."

Elspeth laughed, but there was little mirth in the sound.

"I must find him," she said rather uncertainly, "I've got a message for him."

"Oh, it's a job when you get lumbered with them. I hate being stuck with messages for people I don't know and can't find," said the friend, sympathetically.

Elspeth watched as she finished her cocoa and left. The canteen began to thin out a bit. Elspeth had no after-break lecture that morning. She went to the common room and opened a psycho-analytical text book. It was not the easiest of tomes to read, but she struggled through it as best she could. The words seemed to make little or no sense. Technicalities, and masses of psychological jargon danced tantalisingly in her mind. She was aware of the eyes again, and without closing the book, or making any sign that she knew she was under surveillance, she turned her head very, very slowly.

There he stood in the doorway. She knew it was he. In the same second that she saw him, he seemed to vanish. For one ghastly moment there was a *hole in reality*. The door in that corner of the room didn't seem to be there at all. There was a terrible, black, gaping gulf, a void, a chasm leading straight

into Infinity. Elspeth gave a half-choking scream and fainted . . .

In the seconds during which consciousness left her it seemed that the world, the three dimensional reality as she knew it, had come apart at the seams. There was something in the blackness that blended with the blackness of unconsciousness; it was more than darkness, more than the negative absence of light. She had seen a glimpse of the *Beyond*, and the Beyond was not for mortal sight . . .

* * * * *

Elspeth opened her eyes and saw a figure, a hazy, blurry figure in white. She blinked and the hazy outlines grew clearer. There seemed to be a necklace, or medallion of some sort decorating the stranger's neck. She moved her lips and tried to speak, but at first no sound would come. She had not yet fully regained consciousness. Her eyes focused more accurately, and she saw that the man in white was not a visitor from another world, but the college doctor.

"Now then, young lady," his voice was warm, friendly, reassuring. "What's been happening to you? Overwork, or too many late night parties?"

He was tall and good looking, a man in early middle-age, broad shouldered and athletic, playing Rugby regularly for one of the London teaching hospitals. His eyes were deep and dark, and there was humour in them, and understanding: a grip of human nature. This man knew what life was all about. This man had seen the dark abyss of death, had fought against it, had gone out like a life-guard and brought some strugglers back from the sable portal. There were other things that were written in those eyes. There was a great awareness of the whole cyclic process of humanity. This man had seen life from the cradle to the grave not once but often. He knew the exuberant excitement, the intense emotions of childhood and adolescence; he knew the powerful strivings, the gay, carefree approach of the early twenties; he knew the first sombre stirrings of realisation and maturity that come with early middle age. He knew the dejection and disappointment that come with the passing of the forties, and the subsiding of the fifties. He knew the settling, residual attitude

of the sixties, the mental and physical preparation for retirement, and he knew both the perceptive sprightliness and the decaying tragedy of well-spent and misspent old age. All this Elspeth, in her second psychological year, read like an open book in the college doctor's eyes.

There were other things in that face, a penetrating insight, a deep inextinguishable love of real humanity: not the soft sentimentality of the Victorian poet that projected an unreal image on to the human animal, and then proceeded to fall nauseatingly in love with it. This was something else. Here was a man who had seen humanity at its weakest and its worst. Here was a man who had seen the greatest fear of all: the fear of death, and having seen it loved humanity still. Here was a man who could hear the screams and groans of the helpless and hopeless, who could see a human body at its worst, and still love the personality trapped in the broken remains. The musician heard the singing of a supreme operatic prima donna and rejoicing in the melifluity of the sound, praised the human voice as a divinely ordained instrument of melody. Doctors heard the human voice whispering its fears, screaming its pain, cursing its frustration, and still loved the mind that expressed itself with that voice. The nose of the florist absorbed the rare perfumes and scents of exquisite blossoms and fragrant petals and found the world a good and beautiful place. The nose of the elite socialite experienced the olfactory, æsthetic pleasure of Paris perfumes at nine guineas an ounce, dabbed behind the pretty little pink ears of débutantes. Doctors smelt disease and decay in their foulest and most revolting strength, and still found room to feel pity and love for the body that decayed, and the body that was diseased. So it was with the other senses.

As he looked at Elspeth, the doctor, with the discernment of years of experience, wondered what this girl had seen. His opening gambit had been more of a blind, more like the patter of a conjuror. He looked at the whites of her eyes, sounded her carefully with the stethoscope, and examined the tongue and inside of her mouth.

"Well, you look pretty healthy," he said, and smiled reassuringly. "How do you feel now?"

"All right, I think," she said softly.

"Good." He slipped off the stethoscope and slid it into his pocket. "I shouldn't get up straightaway, give yourself a few minutes to recover, to get your breath back. I'll take your blood pressure if you like."

"No, I'm sure I'm all right. It was——"

"You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to, but I'd be interested if you'd like to talk."

"I saw . . ." she hesitated.

"Yes, go on; I'm quite a credulous man." Again that steady smile, displaying white, even teeth that flashed at her.

"I'm not sure if it sounds silly, but I thought I saw a hole—as though Reality wasn't quite right."

"Interesting," he said, "tell me more."

"There doesn't seem to be much more to tell." She smiled. It was easy to smile. He had the kind of eyes that invited smiles, yet, somehow, there was a new seriousness in him.

"I——" she hesitated. "I got the impression that somehow it was all to do with *the man in grey!*" Now that she had begun it was much easier to talk. The strange inhibitions that prevented people from communicating their own innermost hopes and fears to one another had left her. She felt exultant. The new freedom was intoxicating. She told him everything she had seen, everything that had happened. He sat listening, silently, on the edge of the bed, a graven image of a man, a waxwork, an effigy, and yet, if he had turned to a statue it was a statue carved by a master sculptor. He got up at last and looked at her very directly; his eyes seemed to penetrate, to look at her not only physically but psychically. It was what the novelists of the thirties would have called a 'soul-searching gaze.'

"Well, what do you think?" she asked. Somehow it mattered tremendously what he thought. It was of vital significance.

"I don't know. I can't be more honest than that." He raised an eyebrow at her, and inclined his head a little, in a gesture of affirmation and empathy; then he left. The room was very empty after he had gone. For some reason tiredness

came over her in waves. She wanted to sleep. She closed her eyes, but the desire for sleep was thwarted by the fear of the kind of dreams that she had had, strange symbolic dreams of mazes and hedges, black walls and crystal pathways. The ambivalent conflict raged within her mind for several minutes. She was so quiet that it was almost possible to hear the beating of her heart. She listened to her own breathing, the movement of diaphragm and lungs. Usually she felt safe in bed, but somehow this room didn't feel safe. The security that warm sheets and blankets usually offered was gone. She felt afraid, insecure and uncertain. Childish instincts from deep down and long ago urged her to pull the sheets over her head. She declined, fighting against the instincts, striving, struggling to put down the urges. At last sleep won the unequal contest. She closed her eyes again. How long she was asleep she had no means of knowing. The shock was still working itself out of her system, and the sleep that came was of great depth. She could have been asleep for a minute, a week, or a millennium.

She woke suddenly, with an unpleasant start, and the sensation that she was not alone. She glanced up, and then her mouth opened on a scream that froze in her throat. The man in grey stood beside the bed. There was no doubt it was he. The face was waxy, expressionless; the eyes regarded her like two polished glass spheres set in pink plastic features. There was an inhuman, androidal, robot-like quality about the man in grey, and there was another aspect to him that was more horrible than his cold, inhuman appearance. It was only a feeling, but as far as Elspeth was concerned, this man didn't fit in. He was out of his environment. He was an incongruity. He didn't *belong*. It was as though one wild, negative particle had thrust itself into the middle of an integrated, positive gestalt. There was something disruptive about the man, as though he was out to dismantle her society, her world, her whole philosophy of life. This man in grey was destruction and chaos of an order undreamed of before. He was like the black threat of war suddenly falling across a peaceful horizon and destroying all the happy little aims of countless little people. This man was a blanketing cloud of chaos and dis-

order so big that the previous patterns by which men had lived, their goals and their destinies, were not only altered, but obliterated. There are events, thought Elspeth, as she looked up into the glassy eyes, which come from outside and disturb our lives, and shatter our routines. A man drops a stone into a pond, to the fish and the microscopic, unicellular life in that pond, the falling of the stone is a catastrophic disturbance. But life goes on again after the stone has settled. It has in no way materially altered the basic facts of the existence of the pond, the reality of the life-balance within it. The man in grey was more than a stone. The man in grey was the sun that dried up the pond, leaving baked, dead, mud in its place. He didn't have an effect *in* an environment, he came and *destroyed* the environment. He was the earthquake that split open a great fissure, draining the water out of the pond, leaving floundering fish to die on the dessicated earth, that had once been the bed of their watery home. She shuddered as this terrifying quality of the stranger became more and more pronounced. There was a scream locked somewhere in her mind, trying frantically to claw its way out via the throat and mouth, but the scream was as trapped as the girl!

The man in grey raised his hands, and with his face as expressionless as ever, began stooping towards her. She looked up the sleeve of the grey uniform *and there was nothing but a terrible darkness.*

Perhaps it was only the shadow of the sleeve, or perhaps, she thought, *there is nothing there!*

The desire to scream became so intense that it was almost a physical pain, yet all her body could do was cower helplessly in bed; all power of movement had left her. Waxy pink hands, at the ends of the strange, grey sleeves, grew closer and closer. The glassy eyes came nearer and nearer to her face. Elspeth felt instinctively that if once those hands touched her she was dead, worse than dead. She felt that if once that negative, alien thing touched her with the waxy fingers she would scream into a kind of insanity, involving not only herself but the world as she had known it. There were only inches between her face and the groping hands

when a footstep sounded outside the door; there was a click, and the door opened.

It was the doctor.

"Who the devil are you?" He tried to sound bluff and prosaic, but the grey thing, coupled with what the girl had told him, had drained his nerves into a pair of icy reservoirs situated in his heels. He moved into the room fast, trying to compensate with action for the vacuum where his heart and stomach had been a few seconds earlier.

"I must ask you to leave at once!" Those were the first words that came to his head. To his surprise the grey figure straightened up, looked through him rather than at him, and strode swiftly towards the door. Wisely, he made no attempt to bar its path. There was something about it that made him hesitate; to a lesser extent than Elspeth, he felt the alien antagonism of it. Once it had passed him and gone into the corridor, his courage returned. He raced after it, shouting; heads appeared, and soon a posse of ten or twelve pursued the weird grey shape.

"We've got him now," said a voice behind him. "That's a dead end."

The doctor nodded, and wondered again whether he really wanted to catch their quarry. It seemed obvious now that the end could not be far away. They ran like a stampede of buffalo into the dead end corridor. Then the doctor stopped short. The man in grey had gone! It was as though the wall had opened and swallowed him, as though Houdini had waited at the end of the corridor to spirit him away with some near magical feat of escapology. The doctor stood baffled, shaking his head.

"He can't have got away," said a man.

"He didn't come past," shouted another.

It was a horrifying sight, that blank wall; just a wall: plaster and stone and emulsion paint in a pleasant pastel shade. The doctor's mind was reeling as he made his way back. Voices echoed in his ears as he went along the corridor to Elspeth's room.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so." His voice was faint and breathless.

"He didn't touch you, did he?"

Somehow they both knew that it was important.

"No. He would have done if you hadn't come. Why did you come back?"

"Don't know. I had a kind of instinctive urge that something was wrong. I was just going to open the door, ask if you were all right, and leave. Stupid of me, really, but one gets hunches sometimes. Difficult to explain these intuitions, isn't it?"

"So glad you came back!" she whispered, gratefully.

"Yes, so am I!"

"What do you think of my story now?"

"About men in grey and all that goes with them?"

"Yes?" The monosyllable was rich in interrogation.

"I'm even more open minded than I was before," he answered quietly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He laughed.

"What can it mean?"

She laughed, too. There was relief in the sound.

"Do you think he'll be back?"

"I shouldn't think so," he assured her, "but that's just another hunch, and I may be wrong."

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CHAPTER FIVE

Return of the Man in Grey

THERE was urgency in the knock. Val raised a quizzical eyebrow at La Noire, strode across the room, and flung the door back with characteristic vigour. Elspeth half fell into the flat. Val put a hand out to steady her. La Noire helped her across to the couch.

"What's the matter?"

"I felt I had to come. I don't know why. It's just an awful feeling I've got."

Neither of them spoke; they looked at her enquiringly, promptly.

"The man in grey," she said, "the one from Zelby's or one exactly like him, I kept seeing him at my lectures. He was there but when I turned my head he had gone. Then terrible things happened to the common room; it didn't seem real, and then the whole building—" she broke off. "It all sounds so disjointed, doesn't it? You must think I'm going mad."

"Nothing of the kind," assured La Noire. "I'll make you some coffee." She left the kitchen door open and went on

talking. There was something soothing, motherly about the way she calmed and encouraged Elspeth. By the time the coffee was made the psychology student was already feeling a great deal better.

"This whole business has nearly knocked me to pieces, somehow. It's difficult to explain."

"I wouldn't have thought it was difficult to explain. It would have knocked bigger and tougher people than you to pieces," said Val. "You began by getting mixed up in murder, and now you seem to have attracted the unwelcome attention of whatever it is that dresses up in a grey suit."

"He is either more sinister and much stronger," said Elspeth, "or we are seeing more of the truth. He didn't seem as frightening as that at Zelby's, but now he's——" she paused, "I don't quite know how to put it. It's as though he was something else disguised as a human being, and the disguise is wearing thin. It's as though he was some kind of battery or accumulator and his power is gearing up."

"Or," said Val, "he's like some kind of deadly, radio active isotope, and we've now been exposed to him for longer."

Elspeth shuddered.

"That's a horrifying simile," she said.

She told them of the experiences in the sick bay, not once but three times. Val and La Noire knew that it helped her to talk and they let her talk. La Noire was watching the girl, noting the nervous tension in her face, the tick near the corner of her left eye, the way that she was breathing, fast and shallow. She didn't like the symptoms at all.

Something big and black, warm and comfortable looking, with a self-satisfied smirk on its face, purred into the room. Val stooped and picked it up. Elspeth stretched out her hand to stroke it.

"This is Black Diamond," said Val. "We're looking after it for a neighbour."

"What a magnificent cat!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes, I rather like her," replied La Noire.

Black Diamond turned her head and purred again. Her eyes met La Noire's and it was as though the secrets of a million years passed between them. With casual, feline grace,

the big black cat descended from Stearman's arms and jumped on to the couch beside Elspeth. It rubbed its head against her waist; she stroked it.

"Very friendly, isn't it?" said the girl. It was the kind of question that didn't need an answer, but Stearman nodded just the same.

There was a knock.

It was nothing like the frightened, urgent, desperate knock that Elspeth had used; it was a very quiet knock, a discreet knock, a knock that almost sounded ashamed of itself. It sounded like the tap of a velvet glove encasing the knuckle of a shrewd, cultured, index finger. It was a diplomatic knock. But for all that it was sinister. The effect on the cat was electrifying. She leapt off the couch and the hair on her back rose in vertical ridges; her claws sprang out like daggers in a medieval Italian tavern. Her tail went ramrod stiff. Her eyes grew wide; her mouth drew back in a snarl, exposing rows of teeth. She might have been on the point of defending her kittens against a dog. Spitting and hissing, she advanced towards the door.

"What the devil's the matter with the cat?" wondered Val.

Black Diamond's tail swished as sibilant fury continued to pour from the viciously fanged mouth. Like a miniature tiger, the cat stopped six feet from the door, and would advance no further. Stearman reached the handle, turned it gently, and opened the door about two inches. La Noire could never remember him opening a door carefully before, but there was something undeniably weird about Black Diamond's reaction to that apologetically soft knock. On the other side of the door Val could see nothing but blackness; he closed the door and stepped back.

"What is there?" asked La Noire.

"Nothing," he said, with humourless ambiguity. "There's nothing there at all." His face was pale, strained.

"Nothing?" she persisted.

"*Not even the corridor!*" answered Val, grimly.

"But, darling, I don't understand."

"Neither do I, but there's nothing out there except blackness."

"Let me go."

He stood close beside her as they opened the door again. Beyond the door frame there was only a strange sort of black emptiness. It was like the darkest night Val had ever seen. It was a mixture of tar, pitch, soot and the innermost recesses of haunted subterranean caves. They looked at one another. The light streaming out from the flat hit the darkness and sank. Suddenly a hand appeared, a strangely pink hand, thrown into powerful relief by the darkness beyond. The hand led to a grey sleeve, and the sleeve led to a uniform.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Stearman, although the question was only bluster. He wasn't expecting any kind of answer. It didn't need the instincts of a Sherlock Holmes to know that this was the thing that had destroyed Zelby; this was the thing that had pursued Elspeth Jermyn into the sick bay. This was the thing that had vanished when the doctor had chased it into a cul-de-sac corridor. Space and distance, shape and form lost their integrity for a fraction of a second. The grey thing glided through the aperture, past Val and La Noire, and on into the centre of their lounge. The blackness outside remained. Val slammed the door and put his back to it, broad, rugged, powerful, like an oak tree, he stood, breathing deeply, angrily and defiantly. His great fists clenched; he looked ferociously towards the passive faced man in the grey uniform.

"Well," demanded Stearman, "what do you want, and what have you thrown around out apartment? What is that blackness out there?"

The face, still motionless as a mask, turned stiffly in his direction.

"I have not put anything around your apartment," the voice was lacking in inflection, a mechanical, austere voice. "I have taken something away."

"Taken something away?" echoed La Noire. She felt fear deep down inside herself. There was something here that was enormous. This was no casual encounter with an extra-terrestrial alien; this was something so completely strange that a mere monster from Beyond would have been a com-

parative relief! Her instincts told her that this thing did not live in the way that normal life forms existed. It was an imposter, she was sure of that, but what its façade concealed she could not at the moment guess. There was something horrible and threatening, but even her penetrating insight was unable to get behind the inscrutable features. The eyes continued to stare at her glassily.

"What have you taken away?" asked Stearman.

"A little of what you would call Reality," said the voice.

"Well, what's that supposed to mean?" asked La Noire.

The man in grey pursed his lips into what in happier circumstances might have been described as a smile.

"Relax," he said, in a voice that well might have heralded the crack of doom. La Noire felt her strength ebbing; she staggered towards the couch and collapsed there beside Elspeth. Val took half a pace forward, and then the tense anger in his face relaxed, his eyes glazed, his knees buckled slowly, and he slumped full length on the carpet. He could still see and hear; La Noire could see and hear, and so could Elspeth, but they had no strength to move, no strength to resist the man in grey.

He strode over to Stearman's prostrate form, and Val got a glimpse up one of the sleeves. The pink, waxen hand at the end of the grey, silvery sleeve, looked as bogus as the hand of a tailor's dummy, and up the sleeve Val saw, or thought he saw, *nothing at all* . . . Just black nothingness . . . He would have gasped, but in his attenuated position it was not possible even to relieve his feelings in that way. The grey uniformed thing moved around behind the couch, looking carefully at Elspeth, La Noire and Val. Then, apparently satisfied, it turned swiftly to the centre of the room.

Val could see the familiar furniture of his flat. The wallpaper, the chairs, the table: they seemed an integral part of life. They were part of his world, involved with him somehow, in the social milieu. His mind gave him a picture of the terrible blackness outside, a blackness that had cut off his apartment and everything in it from the rest of the world, a moat of nebulous unreality, isolating them all from the

world beyond. He thought for an instant of Tennyson's sad, melancholy verses, 'Mariana in the Moated Grange.'

The apartment had turned into a moated grange, with no drawbridge and no apparent possibility of rescue, or relief. The grey uniformed stranger began adjusting something that Val was unable to see from where he lay on the floor. It seemed to be about the size of a cigarette packet. It looked as though it might have been a miniature transistor radio. There was a sudden, high-pitched whine that reached a crescendo; glasses vibrated uncomfortably on the cocktail cabinet. The sound reached the threshold of intolerance. Val felt as though miniature, pneumatic drills were cutting away at his brain; then the sound stopped.

It stopped and left a silence like death, as when an earthquake has thrown its chasm across a trembling planet. It left behind it a torrid silence like that which follows the eruption of a volcano, whose lower slopes are populated with hungry, superstitious peasants. It left behind it the silence of the empty sea when a great liner has struck an iceberg and gone down. The silence lay on the room like a funereal pall. Then, something began to take shape. It seemed at first to be materialising from Beyond; then it looked to Val as if a grey vortex, a grey funnel-tube that was now dominating the centre of the room was the only reality; and it was the room, the solid furniture, that was really ethereal and ephemeral.

The creature in the grey uniform turned the thing in its hands in Stearman's direction. He felt as though an invisible crane had been fastened to his back. He felt himself lifted, as helpless as a child, in the grip of gigantic forces. He was carried to the open end of the grey funnel. Normally he would have struggled and fought like a hundred men, but now there was no strength in him. He was only a two hundredweight sack in the power of whatever had captured him. He knew that La Noire and Elspeth were watching; but there was nothing he could do and there was nothing they could do. The force lifted him head foremost into the grey funnel, and he was aware of terrifying movement. It seemed for an instant as though the very molecules of his body were

dissolving, were breaking down into pure energy; then he knew nothing at all. Consciousness deserted him with the legendary cowardliness of Judas.

La Noire watched him disappear into the shimmering grey funnel, and wondered if this was the end. The box in the hands of the grey uniformed alien turned in her direction. She felt herself being pulled off the couch like a piece of thin iron sheeting drawn towards a great magnet. The funnel vortex, grey and terrible, loomed in front of her. She felt a kind of relief. If it was the end, it didn't matter. If it was not the end, she was going where Val had gone. Elspeth watched La Noire vanish into the grey mouth of the vortex. As far as she could see she was now alone with the man-like thing in the grey uniform. This, she told herself, was the thing that had killed Zelby, and it was now a great deal stronger, more sure of itself, than it had been then. Zelby's death alone had proved it was sinister and formidable . . .

The power reached her as the box turned in her direction. She felt as though invisible hands had seized her and turned her in the direction of the grey vortex, of the conical tube. It looked like the vast inverted hopper of an enormous corn storage plant. The greyness pulled her into itself, and consciousness left her.

The thing in the grey suit looked around. Behind the couch a great black cat crouched motionless, its eyes following every movement the stranger made. He looked at it for a moment. His gaze seemed to bore into the very soul and mind of the cat. A smile, as inscrutable as the rest of his face, rested for a moment on the big black feline, then he turned away from it. The cat, quivering with relief, slunk from the couch to the far corner of the room. The man in grey crossed to the door, re-adjusted the controls of his box and the corridor came into view again. He went back to the funnel vortex in the centre of the lounge, climbed in slowly, and pulled the funnel along behind him, like a man climbing into a gigantic Klein bottle. If Stearman had been in a position to see what was happening, he would have likened the act to the tragic fate of the legendary oozelum bird, which, flying around backwards in ever decreasing circles, was

doomed, ultimately, to disappear down its own throat! The shimmering grey vortex vanished, and apart from the terror displayed by the cat in the corner, the apartment was back to normal.

Val opened his eyes and looked around. He was in what looked like the interior of two shallow hemispheres. The floor curved away beneath his feet and the roof domed slightly above his head. The walls, perfectly circular, met in the rounded smoothness of a great arc. He might have been a fly caught inside two saucers put together, rim to rim. *Saucers!* He moved quickly to the point where the rims joined on that section of the circumference nearest to him. He looked around. There was no doubt about it, if the outside was anything like this, then he was on the interior of a saucer shaped craft. He thought about the most recent of the U.F.O. sightings. What had they called it on official records? 517. He wondered if this was the one. Directly in front of him, occupying the central space, a crystal dodecahedron rotated, apparently of its own volition. There was a faint humming sound, as of a powerful electro-magnetic field somewhere near by. The dodecahedron flashed one of its faces at him like an accusing eye, and just for a instant he got the impression that it was watching him. To the right of it, fastened to the floor, was a large, silvery grey box. It looked as though it might be some kind of computer or power unit. There were a number of observation ports around the edge, and some crystalline shapes of different colours that obviously had to have significance, but whose purpose entirely eluded Stearman. The remainder of the space was empty. No couches, no furniture, nothing. It was very different from the saucers Val had seen before. There didn't even seem to be a door at first, then as he looked around he saw what might be intended to act as a portal. It was not open now, and Val wondered whether whoever had designed this ship and used it, was sufficiently intangible to be able to do without doors, or was so completely the master of another dimension, that doors in a three dimensional construction, were as superfluous as terrestrial gates when there were no hedges. Val made himself as comfortable as he

could, with his back against the curved perimeter and waited for something to happen. He didn't have to wait long. La Noire materialised, apparently out of thin air, about four yards in front of him. He uncoiled himself from the wall, and ran to help her. Even the weird experience of the grey vortex had not ruffled her Cleopatrine beauty, her lithe, feminine grace.

She sat with an arm on his shoulder, looking round the interior for a few minutes, drinking in the dodecahedron, and the big silver-grey unit that was either computer, power source, or both. The dodecahedron flashed its faces at them again as it continued to revolve. The humming sound became a little stronger.

The next arrival was Elspeth.

"Where are we?" she gasped. There was gratitude in her voice; she spoke like someone who was glad to be alive.

"I think we're inside a flying saucer," said La Noire.

"Me too," agreed Val.

"The one in the paper," whispered the girl. "When I answered the advert there was a big account of it. *U.F.O. 517.*"

"That's odd," said Val. "I was thinking about that, too."

"It may have been telepathy," said La Noire.

"I wonder where our friend in grey is," said Val.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the alien in the conescent uniform appeared like an evil genie in some lavishly presented West End pantomime. The grey figure with the impassive features moved towards the central area.

"Remain seated," it said quietly.

Knowing its power, even Val didn't feel like attempting to disobey *yet*. He sat watching intently, with La Noire on one side of him, Elspeth on the other. The thing in the grey uniform made various adjustments to the transistor-like box it held, then it moved over to the grey unit and operated something there. The humming note, as of many magnoelectronic fields operating simultaneously increased. The dodecahedron began to spin more rapidly, until it was impossible to distinguish the individual faces. The whole ship began to vibrate.

"I think we're going to take off," said Stearman.

The alien moved over to the area of the hull which Stearman had originally supposed to be a door of some kind. It slid back, and half-a-dozen other grey uniformed aliens walked in softly, treading Indian style. They arranged themselves around the wall like visitors sitting in the whispering gallery of St. Paul's listening to the guide telling of the acoustic properties of the strangely curved stone. The portal closed again, and the alien who had visited Stearman's apartment now went back to the centre of the ship and stood directly beneath the swirling dodecahedron. He held the box towards it, and its pace quickened yet further. Next he moved across to the large, silver-grey unit, and manipulated some controls there. He replaced the box in his uniform pocket, and communicated with the others.

Val, La Noire and Elspeth were watching him intently, curiously. Elspeth had the feeling that something weird was going to happen at any moment. She could feel it in her bones, somehow. There was a peculiar kind of audible signal from the leader of the aliens, then, quite calmly, he put up a strange pink, waxen hand, *and took off his face!* It rolled off like a rubber mask, and the hair came with it. There was nothing but a strange amorphous dark blob. Elspeth screamed. La Noire caught her breath. Val clenched his fists until the knuckles gleamed white. The other aliens unrolled their faces too, and laid them along the perimeter. They took off the uniform jackets. There was only blackness underneath. Boots and trousers went, and last of all, the hands. Then there were only seven amorphous black blobs gliding about like droplets of dark oil in a badly mixed emulsion.

Val held tightly to La Noire and Elspeth; *they watched with mounting horror as the seven black blobs melted into one vast black blob.* This glided across and slid under the spinning dodecahedron. The humming grew louder, more intense; the dodecahedron was spinning so fast now that it looked like a sphere of pure light; then the ship *seemed* to take off. The vibrations grew stronger, more violent. The disc ship was certainly moving. Val and La Noire forced themselves to look away from the terrible black, gaseous pool that lay under the spinning light.

Val got the impression from the observation ports that the ship was rushing upwards at enormous speed. They seemed to be undergoing some kind of vertical take-off procedure, yet Val was not conscious of the excess *g* which he would have expected from that apparent take-off speed.

Things were streaking past the observation ports far too rapidly to be identified; yet despite the evidence of his eyes, Stearman could still feel no gravitational discomfiture. The upward rush seemed to accelerate yet again . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Upsurge

THE movement finally stopped; Val looked at the strange black shadow—itself like a hole in Reality—that lay under the slowing dodecahedron. The force that had pulled him into the vortex now seemed to have him in its grip once more. He found himself being led to the nearest of the observation ports. It was a thick, transparent material, neither like glass nor plastic—as far as he could tell—yet strangely combining the qualities and properties of the two. He tried to turn his head but was immobilised by the force that had taken him to the observation panel. Out of the corner of his eye he knew that Elspeth and La Noire were moving also. Like criminals forced to watch a film of their victim's sufferings, Val and the two girls stared out of the weird, alien disc ship. The humming subsided; and although Stearman could not see it, he felt sure that the dodecahedron had either stopped completely or was almost stationary. Black strangeness drifted past him. He saw it making for the door which was now just within his field of vision to the right. The door opened and closed with a casualness that gave Val the impression it was superfluous. They were using the door ceremoniously, not because they needed a door. He wondered whether they had ever needed a door. Perhaps it was a vestigial trace of something that had been part of the life of the race before they acquired their full power. Perhaps they had even developed from something human; was that the reason for the mask, and the uniform, and the gloves? Stearman's mind was a mass of confused thoughts. They buzzed in his head like a swarm of angry bees, the door of their hive sealed against them. The questions grew angrier and angrier. The bees became hornets, but the hive refused to open. Val continued to stare through the observation port. The black shadow passed in front of the port, shutting out

everything behind it like a thick, velvet curtain. There was a terrible super-opacity to it, as though it not only prevented the passage of light, but absorbed it, fed on it, was the enemy of it. Val could not see La Noire or Elspeth, but he heard his wife's voice.

"Darling?"

"Yes?" he called back questioningly. "Are you all right?"

"I wish I could see you, but I can't turn my head. I think I'm all right."

"I can't turn my head, either; can you see us?"

"No," said La Noire, "I can see nothing, except the emptiness through the observation port." She laughed.

"What's so funny?" demanded Val.

"The prisoners in the cave, darling—Plato."

"Yes, it's almost as if they were re-enacting it for our benefit," said Val. He paused, "as if they were trying to destroy our sense of reality."

"I think they've already destroyed mine," said Elspeth, sadly. "I don't think I ever had a very good one to start with!"

"This sort of thing is new to you," said Stearman, realising, even as he spoke, that he must sound like Prospero counselling Miranda in 'The Tempest.' There was silence between them for a few minutes.

"The ship is moving," said La Noire, "it's tilting a little as though somebody wanted us to have a better view of something."

"You're right, darling," agreed Val.

"Look!" said Elspeth.

The ship had not only tilted from the horizontal to an angle of about forty-five degrees, it was rotating very, very slowly about its own axis. As Val's observation window came down, he saw what had made Elspeth cry out. Like a cluster of magnificent jewels, he saw clouds of stars. The whole thing was wheel-shaped, a galaxy, yet somehow a miniature galaxy. Beyond it he could see others. Perhaps it was just the effect of their position, just the angle at which they were observing, but to Stearman the galaxy looked miniature. He heard a startled gasp from La Noire.

"It looks smaller than the ship!" she said.

"Yes, it does," he agreed, "smaller than the ship!"

His voice didn't sound right, it was thin, too sibilant, as though it was coming from an organ with a leaking pipe. He tried to clear his throat to strengthen his voice, but it was still reminiscent of a turbo jet take-off in the distance. The ship continued to rotate until the galaxy was no longer visible. The black cloud reappeared. It passed through the portal, very close to Stearman, and then moved deliberately towards La Noire and the centre of the ship. As it passed the girl she was aware of powerful mental impact. Something was contacting her, she knew it, yet there was no sound. It was a telepathic experience. It was only a name, nothing more. "*Negon*." She shuddered a little. So that's what the black thing was. That was its name, that was the audible symbol which represented the amorphous black cloud able to unite and divide, able to disguise itself as a human form, and wear grey uniform. *Negon*, there was a terrible, subductive quality about the name. Elspeth was still thinking about it as the whining sound re-commenced.

The dodecahedron spun again; the disc ship vibrated; the up-rush came once more. Val tried desperately to turn away, but couldn't. The only relief was to be found in closing his eyes. He screwed them tight, but even then odd flashes of light from the dim distance gave an impression of speed. It was like driving past a sunlit hedge, the flashes and shadows crossed the eyes in neurotic patterns.

The upward movement continued for an incalculable time. There was something about it that defied the time sense completely. Val was unable to say whether he had been ascending for a day or a week. His stomach gave no sensation, no indication; he felt neither thirst nor hunger: only a terrible longing to turn. The power that held him seemed to hold his eyes rigid in their sockets as well. He seemed to have been disembodied; it was his mind that was being held close to the visiport. The upward rush through the strange, dark, negative emptiness outside the ship finally ended. A dark, amorphous cloud, like the *Negon* itself, settled around the disc-craft. Val stared out through the blackness. There was

no miniature galaxy this time. There was nothing at all but darkness and a terrible, empty loneliness. It was more bleak than anything he had ever previously imagined. His mind tried to find something to focus on, something to which sanity could cling, but it was difficult. Sanity fluttered against the bars of will power, a caged eagle trying to escape into the aerial deserts of madness.

The black cloud of *Negon* gathered itself and drifted out. This time it did not use the door. One moment it was in the ship, the next it was oozing through the fuselage, as a man would walk through curtains of coloured plastic strips or hanging silks. As a man would walk through mist, or stride through rain, so the *Negon* glided through the apparent metal of the disc ship's fuselage. The cloud gradually melted away. It had the appearance of wisps of steam vanishing, as a room cools around a boiled kettle. The black strands disappeared like strands of black mist that rise above a dark fen. Val felt that he was about to see something of greater magnitude than he had yet imagined. He braced himself mentally for a revelation that would carry with it psychic shock waves to repercuss in the mind. He was not disappointed . . .

When the last of the black mists had vanished, Stearman could see a sphere made up of cloudy patches of light. They were rushing from the centre of the sphere to its edges; when they reached the edges they vanished, while new material appeared at the centre. It was like looking at a fountain. The display lived in his mind, after the rotation of the disc ship had taken him beyond it. He knew what he had seen though he tried to deny the evidence of his senses . . .

Slowly, very slowly and painfully, Stearman regained control of his movements. His voice was the faintest of ethereal whispers; he doubted whether it would carry from his lips to an adjacent ear, even when he exerted all his strength. With a final effort he turned his head and looked for La Noire and Elspeth. He could see the interior of the ship, the observation ports, the slowly rotating dodecahedron, and the silver-grey box, but there was no sign of Elspeth and La Noire, or was there? He stared harder, yes, they *were* there—but so thin, so transparent, like three dimensional images

of themselves! He looked down; he, too, was transparent: a pale, bloated ghost of his former self. He could see La Noire's thin, filmy lips moving. Only when he moved very close to her could he hear even the ghost of a sound. It was like listening to a radio signal from very far away. At last he made out a word and then a message.

"What's happened to us?" It was like the faintest of faint spirit messages from the far side of the Land of Shades.

Val put his hand across her shoulders, but his hand didn't stop, the two, filmy, ghost-like images, hand and shoulder, tried to melt into each other. He felt something in his fingers that might have been the ghost of pain: strange, insipid tingling, like an electric shock from a very small battery. La Noire pointed through the observation point nearest to them. Elspeth came across and stood beside them. Val and the two girls looked down at the globe of moving light patches. Again and again a cloud, a nebulous collection of incredibly small white lights, moved up to the edge of the sphere and vanished. Stearman, certain of what he was looking at, felt an awe and fear of such intensity that his ethereal body trembled. There was a rumbling sound, a footstep, a powerful smell of ozone, and the dodecahedron stopped revolving. Val, La Noire and Elspeth all looked towards it. In the centre of the ship, a little to the right of the now stationary dodecahedron, stood Dr. Zelby.

The resemblance to the corpse Val had seen was uncanny. Zelby, however, was now very much alive—if this was he. Tall, and impressive looking, with eyes that radiated intelligence, and *solid*. Ah, so solid, thought Stearman, and in that moment he longed again for the solidity he had lost. He had not realised how attached he was to his own physique. Now that his substantiality had gone, and he was only a pale, thin, transparent ghost of his former self, Val felt the same kind of attachment for the bone and muscle that had served him so well for so long, that a used car enthusiast feels for a vintage Lagonda. Val, La Noire and Elspeth looked at Zelby in shocked bewilderment.

"Please don't be afraid." There was no denying the power and vigour of the doctor's voice. "I have very little of what

you call Time." He smiled slightly, but it didn't seem to reach the others. The eyes were tense and anxious.

"The Negon will be back shortly," warned Zelby.

"But you're dead!" exclaimed Stearman.

"Yes, I'm dead. I'm no longer confined to a three dimensional physical body."

"You're a ghost," said Stearman; it was partly statement and partly accusation.

"In a sense," agreed Zelby. "There's no time for technicalities. I am—in a sense—dead. I was, in fact, killed by one of the Negons. They're after my formula, you know. You mustn't let them get it . . ."

"Formula?" whispered Elspeth. "The computer formula that I've got?"

"That's the one!"

"But——"

"I can hear you far better than you can hear one another," explained Zelby. He had seen the bewildered look on Val's face. Stearman had seen the girl's lips moving but had heard no sound. He had also heard Zelby's reply.

"Can you tell us what's happened?" asked Stearman.

"Basically, yes. The thing that we in our presumptuous ignorance, call the physical universe, is practically nothing . . . a microcosm, a miniature. So small in the scheme of things that it's of no more significance than a grain of sand in a terrestrial desert."

"The whole universe!" blurted Val.

"Yes, the whole universe," affirmed Zelby. "I've only just begun to learn and there's so much to find out. I haven't been here long. In terms of terrestrial time, I was only murdered a short while ago. In terms of cosmic time, yesterday and tomorrow are very much the same thing. Time is an illusion, a very simple illusion, but a devilishly effective one. There's nothing you can do to counteract it, or to stand outside it, until it no longer influences you personally. If we didn't love ourselves quite so much, time would have less power over us. The more tightly you grasp your ego, the more guardedly you seek to protect it, the more you expose it to time. But get outside yourself, try to think exclusively

of other people and the society around you, try to think what the armchair philosophers would call the 'eternal thoughts,' and you will find that time has less effect. You won't be able to negate it completely, but in most cases of extreme longevity you will find an outward looking vigour—but I'm digressing," Zelby checked himself, "I'm digressing and there is a great deal to do. My formula can provide a barrier against the Negons."

"Will it stop them getting to Earth?" asked Val, "in the disc ships?"

"Basically, yes."

"These ships," persisted Val.

"I can see a little of your mind," said the doctor, "and you're right." He pointed to the sphere of glowing lights moving to the global perimeter and vanishing. "*That is your universe.* Somewhere towards the centre of it, one of those tiny, cloudy spheres of light is the galaxy in which Earth itself is situated. You're not only outside it in terms of time, you're outside it in terms of space, and in terms of dimensional comprehension. You are seeing it as though you had one more dimension. You are seeing it as though time had no meaning; your own time system has been slowed down a thousand million times. It is as if you were watching a model of the universe, a vastly accelerated model, on a scale almost too small for the human mind to comprehend. Our mathematics are scarcely capable of dealing with such enormous proportions." There was a pause. "I have come to get you back; and I must do that before the Negon returns."

"What are they?" demanded Val.

"That I don't know yet," answered Zelby.

Stearman shook his head.

"I keep seeing your body. in my mind," he said, "as you were, dead, on the floor of your laboratory."

"It was only my body," said Zelby "It wasn't *me*."

La Noire came very close to him.

"How do the Negons fit in?" she asked. "What's their part in the scheme of things? I've lived through so much——" she hesitated, "yet this is outside any of my experience."

She smiled a thin, pale smile at Val.

"Try to think of it as one minute stage-set. The solar system, our galaxy and the whole physical universe are just part of a tiny galactic, theatrical production."

"When we seemed to be moving upwards," said Val, "we were really getting *bigger*, was that it? Is that why our bodies are now so thin and so pale? Because the molecules of which they are composed have been spread out?"

"Again, I don't fully understand," said Zelby. "But that would be the scientific equivalent of a metaphysical explanation. We have reached that unknown corner of the universe where science and metaphysics have married and produced a strange family of new, combined thinking; systems of knowledge which are neither esoteric, nor strictly logical and scientific."

"But all that I have learnt of good and evil, for many years," said La Noire, and her mind went winging back over the centuries—for La Noire was not as mortal women. "If we are only a stage-set, are good and evil just part of the drama? The things that I believed to be so important——?"

"The Negons are wrong," asserted Zelby. "The very fact that I myself can exist here, outside time and outside space, is some indication of how wrong they are. They are the negative side of creation. I am beginning to think of True Reality in terms of spirit and anti-spirit. There is vibration and there is life, and the opposite of life is death, or stillness. But there is an opposite which is more terrible than this. There is a kind of anti-movement, a subductive, absorbing thing. The Negons are part of *that*."

He stood in the centre of the ship, glanced over his shoulder and saw a black shadow.

"I must send you back, and fast!" he said. "When you return it will seem no more than an evil dream. But you must keep faith with the dream, you must believe in the memory. Common sense will tell you that it is no more than a vision, and you will say that it is a vision you have shared. Men do not share their dreams. It will require great courage and will power to go on, to go on . . . Think of me. Try to remember my laboratory; the body you saw there; remember how I sent you back, then *work*."

"I know!" Elspeth's thin, transparent face was bright with light and purpose. "We have to use your formula! Isn't that it, Dr. Zelby? We have to use your formula against the Negons."

"Good Girl!" His voice was rich, deep, powerful. "Good girl!" he said again. "You can stop them, you see. Just as the atom is safe from the probing fingers of a curious, destructive child because of its very smallness, you can be so small that the Negons cannot reach you. Their shrinking ships, the things you describe as U.F.O.s, can have no power over you if you erect the vibration barrier. It will be like putting a lead shield in front of radiation. There will be no hope for them at all; they will not get past it. They will destroy themselves attempting it."

"I still don't understand all the implications," said La Noire.

"No time, no time," said Zelby. "They are back." He made rapid adjustments to the grey, silver box, and then vanished as though he had never been in the ship at all. The thin, diluted forms of Stearman and the two girls stood undecidedly watching the silver-grey box. Before the Nekon could re-enter the ship the dodecahedron began to revolve. Slowly at first, and then—as the whine grew in intensity—faster and faster; the regular solid flashed its crystal faces, until it could no longer be delineated as a geometric figure. It was a ball, a spinning ball of crystalline flashes. The flashing grew faster and faster, until the whole surface threw off a great spherical flood of light. The ship began to descend; with every passing second Val felt strength and solidity flowing back to him. The ship wasn't really descending, he told himself. Even though that was what his senses said, even though that was what the observation ports told him. The ship was not descending; it was shrinking. A few moments more, and he found himself able to speak.

"Was it real?" he asked, looking carefully away from the observation ports and the rushing environment flying past them outside.

"I don't know!" said La Noire. "It's difficult to believe."

"Did we really see Zelby?" asked Elspeth.

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Val sniffed.

"I think we must have done. He was accompanied by the unmistakable odour of ozone. As though his appearance was associated with some kind of electrical discharge, he ionised the air . . ."

Elspeth wrinkled her nose.

"What does the square root of minus one smell like?" she asked, rather weakly.

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale!" exclaimed Val. He was breathing deeply, trying to force himself to relax. His body seemed to be tingling all over.

"It's an incredible business," commented La Noire. She was speaking half to the others, half to herself. "Where do the Negons fit into the scheme of things? If Earth is only a stage-set, if the whole universe is only a stage-set, then what's the purpose of any of it?"

"Zelby said the Negons were wrong," said Val. "He said they were only the negative side of creation."

"What's that phrase he used?" asked the girl.

"Spirit and anti-spirit," said Val.

"Vibration—life; stillness and anti-movement," said La Noire. "He talked of something that absorbed. He said there was a force powerful enough to negate movement and life."

The saucer seemed to be slowing down. The uprush of blurred lights around the observation panels was certainly less bewildering and confusing than it had been. Val blinked at it, unhappily, for a moment.

"I've got a feeling," he said grimly, "a feeling that things aren't right."

"Oh?" La Noire looked at him.

"I don't usually get the hunches. You do." He smiled at her.

"What do you think is wrong?" she asked.

Elspeth clung to La Noire like a frightened girl holding on to her mother or an older sister.

"I think Zelby was hurried too much at the last moment. I don't think he fully understood the controls," said Val.

"You mean this isn't Earth?" gasped Elspeth. Her eyes grew round, and opened wide in horror.

"I'm not sure," replied Val. "I just don't know."

"I don't think we're as far out as that," said La Noire. "But you must remember that there are three variants to consider—Time, Space——"

"—Probability," ended Val, completing the thought for her.

Elspeth looked from one to the other, anxiously.

"Please explain."

"Well, the first two are obvious," said Val. "This ship will transcend time and space, you saw for yourself that miniature universe when we were with Zelby, when the atoms of our own bodies had been expanded so enormously that we were ghost-like things, and Zelby—who is now pure spirit—or shall we say, who is now a living, but non-physical being—was the only real 'solid'."

"The wheel can turn full cycle," said La Noire. "What seemed to be solid and physical could become psychic and ethereal. What might on Earth have looked like a psychic manifestation could, in its own nobler, broader element, be real and solid."

"I can understand that," rejoined Elspeth. Now that she had something to think about, something real and tangible into which to get her mental teeth, she felt better.

Val looked through the observation port again at the slow-
ing phantasmagoria of upward-moving lights.

There was a grey-black darkness, as though they were crossing some kind of threshold.

"As well as moving about in time and space," said La Noire, "there are the probability tracks."

"Is this the theory that at any given moment in time, two choices are open to you, and depending on which one you take your life will follow a different pattern?" said Elspeth.

"Basically, yes," said Val.

"But the other possibility remains in existence as a probability track," said the girl.

"That's it," said Stearman, "and if you moved from one to the other you'd be like the stylus of a record player jumping a groove."

Elspeth shuddered a little.

"It's frightening," she said.

"I think so, too," said La Noire.

"But have these probability tracks any basis in reality?"

"We have reason to believe so," answered Val. He and La Noire exchanged deep, meaningful glances.

"Yes, they exist," she confirmed.

"And it's possible to go from one to the other?"

"Not easily," he murmured.

"But it could happen in circumstances like this?" persisted Elspeth.

"This could lead to it, yes. It's the idea of parallel worlds. If matter can neither be created nor destroyed, some metaphysicians would argue that thought has the same invulnerability."

"But matter can be changed into energy," said Elspeth.

" $E=Mc^2$," laughed Val. "We know that it's a *theoretical* possibility," he pursued.

"You don't think it could really happen?" asked Elspeth.

"I believe it does happen," said Stearman, "under the right kind of laboratory conditions, or in advanced fields of nuclear experiment."

"In the same way," said La Noire, "it is possible that thought can become environment. If thought is a form of energy, then thought can become matter."

"It sounds rather like some strange, new religion," said the girl.

"It's not a new religion," said Val. "It's probably the keynote of most old religions, if you trace it back far enough. The men who worked miracles were the men who held this view. Those men had the kind of thought which would transcend matter. There were the levitationists, people like Joseph of Copertino, and D. D. Home."

"We've stopped!" La Noire interrupted him. Her whisper seemed loud in the stillness of the saucer's interior.

"The next problem," said Val, "is how do we get out?"

"Do we want to get out?" asked Elspeth.

"Well, unless we lie down head to tail, and pretend to be sardines, I wouldn't think this 'tin' is the ideal environment!" said Val. Some of his old, sardonic humour had returned.

Now that the saucer had stopped, now that there was a

chance of finding a familiar environment in which to react, Val felt a good deal better about things. He didn't like life in the abstract, he liked a real, solid world, and yet, somehow, by an ironic twist of destiny, it seemed to have been his fate to have been involved continually in the peculiar. There was a basic element in Stearman which would have enjoyed fishing and gardening, that would have delighted in Saturday afternoon football matches, detective and cowboy thrillers on television, James Bond films at the cinema, and a pleasantly normal, mundane existence. It was a streak which had been doubly submerged. On the first count Val's desire for comfort, spectatorial pursuits, had been inundated by an insatiable urge for adventure; secondly, it had been immolated by the question mark that lived in his mind, probing through the metaphysical darkness of the world, like the courageous mouth of a voracious blind worm that goes on through dark infinities of soil, determined to find something new, although every mouthful of grit tasted the same. Val was a Seeker, a Quester, a Searcher. He was also an Adventurer. In any age, in any walk of life, the deepest level of his being, the part that would secretly have enjoyed comfort, security and domestic urbanity, was always defeated by the stronger parts of his nature.

"Do you think we can get the doors open?" asked La Noire suddenly. Her voice, husky and exciting, cut across his thoughts, uncoupling their train, bringing him back to the present reality. That in itself, he thought, was strangely cynical and humorous: the present reality!

The alien flying saucer had already been beyond the limits of the universe; the alien flying saucer had been set in motion by a dead man who was very much alive, and had now probably landed them somewhere which neither they nor the dead man had wanted, nor intended, to reach.

Put it into fiction, thought Stearman, incorporate it into a science fiction or supernatural novel, and you would run the risk of being over-optimistic of the readers' capability to exercise the "voluntary suspension of disbelief" which is every imaginative man's birthright, and from which stems the enjoyment of all imaginative literature. Val braced himself

in front of the big doors of the saucer and looked at their mechanism.

Like other muscular heroes of both fact and fiction, from Hercules to Chandos, from Ajax to John Ridd, from Prometheus to Bulldog Drummond, Stearman had the faculty of knowing that he could rely upon a surge of Garth-like power if there was no other way to surmount a difficult obstacle. The door did not appear to operate from any mechanism close to it. Val had the feeling that you would either need to use one of the things that looked like a transistor radio, which the Negon had carried, or you would have to operate one of the controls beside the big, silvery-grey box. Somehow he didn't fancy doing the latter. He had no portable control box. It had vanished with the Negon. Only the empty grey uniforms and artificial hands and faces remained. They lay like discarded suits, yet there was something almost accusing about the sightless eyes and the flexible features, folded flat. It was like the current vogue in slick, black comedy come to life: the guillotine operator saying to the aristocrat, "Come in, hang up your head, and make yourself comfortable!" Or the invitation to "Watch the conjuror," who assured the audience that never once during his next trick would his fingers leave his hands.

Val took hold of the metal and flung his weight against it. The portal refused to budge.

"If only we had a control box," said La Noire, softly.

"I don't suppose it's in one of those uniforms," replied Val. "I assumed it was gone."

"I'll try to look," said Elspeth. Then she hesitated. Somehow none of them fancied touching the empty uniforms. There was a corpse-like quality about them. Val finally overcame the strangely instinctive revulsion that he felt and went across to the nearest of the grey tunics; he groped in its pocket.

"There is something!" he exclaimed. "I thought he would have taken it with him."

"Difficult to know whether those characters are singular or plural," said La Noire, with just a trace of a giggle.

"Yes—sort of gëstalt organisms," agreed Val. "Odd, really."

"I wonder if they are all simultaneously conscious of what the others are doing? Whether they have individual minds or group minds, or whether they have any minds at all?" said Stearman.

"Surely they must have minds!" commented La Noire.

"Doesn't necessarily follow," said Val. He was still studying the box.

"What activates them if they have no mind?" demanded Elspeth.

"I was thinking of the analogy of the slave clock and the master clock," he answered.

"You mean they could just be the limbs of some kind of super-organism?" murmured Elspeth with a shudder.

"We haven't really met the mind at all."

She shuddered again.

"That makes them all the more horrible somehow—like the broken arms of a starfish crawling away!"

"That's a more fitting analogy than appears on the surface," commented Val. "If a starfish is unfortunate enough to be injured, not only does the starfish grow a new limb, the broken limb—if it lives—can grow a new starfish."

"Yes, I know," said Elspeth. They fell quiet.

"If we use this," said Val, at last, breaking the silence, in his deep, grave voice, "and make a mistake with it, then we shall probably find ourselves on the move again."

"But if we are in the wrong place, as you suspect," commented La Noire, "would that be altogether a bad thing?"

"Not necessarily," said Val. "If, on the other hand, Zelby made a mistake, as I have a hunch he did, I don't think it will have been too bad a mistake." He hesitated. "I think they hurried him."

"Odd to think of a ghost making mistakes!" exclaimed La Noire.

"But I think the mistake, if there was one, would be on the fine adjustment, so to speak. Think of a television set, we are on the wrong channel, or the tuner hasn't been turned, or the brightness control is wrong, or the volume hasn't

been turned up. If we twist this thing—and let's face it—none of us has the slightest idea of how it works! If we twist this thing we may go and change the channel and have no chance at all of getting back to the right spot. Whereas if we hold on, the thing may adjust itself, or Zelby may be able to find us."

La Noire sat and thought deeply for a minute.

"Suppose that we study the controls of this thing, carefully," she said, pointing to the box Val held, "and prepared to put back immediately any control that seemed to be having the wrong effect?"

"Hm-hm, sounds reasonable," said Val. "What do you think, Elspeth? You've a right to your opinion, your life is involved in this just as much as ours."

"Thanks," murmured the girl. She looked at the box for a few moments. "It's complicated," she said, "and we've no means of knowing that the returning of a switch to its original position would reverse the effect that we've started."

"No, tha's for certain," agreed Val. "Like pulling the trigger on a gun and blasting your brains out! No good pulling the trigger back to its original position, you can't reverse the action."

"A question of the physical action as opposed to the chemical action, isn't it?" said La Noire. "Physical action can be reversed, snow changes into water, water vapour can be changed again into snow. Water can be boiled until it becomes steam, steam can be condensed back into water, but if you burn a piece of paper you can't recapture the burnt elements and reconstitute the paper by cooling it."

"I suppose in an ultimate laboratory you could——"

"Yes, but not simply and directly," argued La Noire. "Burning paper is an exothermic action which changes carbohydrates into carbon dioxide and water vapour, isn't it? Now, by cooling carbon dioxide and water vapour together in the right quantities and proportions, you can't reproduce a sheet of carbohydrate paper."

"Very scientific and logical," said Val. "I certainly see the point."

"So, if pressing any part of the controls on that box is

analogous to either a chemical reaction or the pressing of the trigger of a rifle, it won't be any good putting the control button back."

"Is it likely that anything on here would be so devastating?" asked Val.

Elspeth pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"I would have thought," she said, "that there is so much latent power in this ship almost anything could happen. I would be hesitant to press one of the buttons."

"There's no way we could de-code the thing?" wondered Val. "I mean by process of logical elimination. Is there one that says 'Brake,' 'Clutch,' 'Gear,' 'Emergency parachute release,' or '*Press here for Infinity*'?"

"There are symbols on it," replied La Noire. "Look."

"Yes, but they don't tell us a great deal," protested Val.

"No, they don't," agreed his wife. She looked at them curiously. "There's nothing there I've ever seen before."

"We hardly expected it to be written in any of the ancient scripts!"

"It might——" she said defensively. "It might if it was some kind of time capsule, you know."

"Yes—I suppose it could, at that," said Val. "Hadh't thought of it that way. Ancient and modern are one and the same when you're dealing with characters who can walk down time in the same way we would walk down a boulevard." He looked at the two girls again. "Would you prefer me to force the doors?"

"That might be even more devastating than using this," protested La Noire. "If we use this and make a mistake, we have at least done something which is natural to the ship. We have made it do something it is intended to do, something that is in line with its controls. If we force something, on the other hand, if you tear the doors apart, there may be no way of ever getting them to seal properly again, and we should be trapped, wherever we are, for ever!"

"Or we stay and wait for Zelby," said Elspeth.

"I can see," grunted Stearman, "that in due course we are going to be in the same state as the characters who were waiting for Godot."

"Waiting for Zelbot!" laughed La Noire.

Somehow the joke fell flat.

"This gives us two almost equally unpromising paths along which to work," commented Val. "Either I force the doors, in which case I risk damaging the ship—in which case we risk staying here for ever and ever, Amen. Or we try to find the door-opening mechanism on that control box—in which case we might press another switch first, and whisk ourselves back into the past or into the future, away on to a probability track, or just into the bowels of hyperspace."

"Or we stay and wait for Zelby," said Elspeth.

"Let's just say what each of us would rather do!"

"I may be quoting too much from psychological authorities," put in the girl, "but I'm in favour of waiting for Zelby. There are times, you know, *when the best response to a stimulus is simply to do nothing*."

"Fair enough," agreed Val. "That's one vote for waiting. What do you want to do, darling?" He looked at La Noire, questioningly.

"I'd like to try the control box," she answered, thoughtfully.

"Hm-hm," said Val. He looked from one to the other. They looked back, enquiringly. "Now you want to know what I want to do?" muttered Stearman. "All right. You've given me your opinions, here's mine! I want to try to force the door."

"Well, that's about as wide a divergence of opinion as we're able to manage," said La Noire ruefully.

There was a faint sliding, hissing sound, as though something pneumatic was operating. The door slid open as they looked at it.

"God!" said Val. "It's automatic!"

"There must be some sort of timing device," said La Noire.

"That seems reasonable," agreed Val. "I mean, after the thing lands it stabilises itself, perhaps, and when it's sure that it's not under water, or in a hostile environment, the lock opens *unless somebody does something to stop it*."

"But how can a thing like a black shadow have a negative

environment?" demanded La Noire. "Surely they could live *anywhere*?"

"They don't need the door in the first place," commented Val.

"No, of course not!" exclaimed Elspeth. "Which means that the automatic opening mechanism and the possible safety sampling mechanism, which we're guessing at to account for the time lag, are part of the anachronism of the door itself."

"Yes, as far as the aliens are concerned, the black things, what did they say their name was?"

"Negons," supplemented La Noire. "They said they were called *Negons*."

"I wish they could make their minds up whether they are singular or plural!" grumbled Stearman.

"Right! We'll call the whole thing Nagon, and the separate ones Negons," said La Noire, "if that will make you feel any happier about it."

"A rose by any other name will smell as sweet, and a cabbage by any other name would be as wholesome," grinned Val. The old bluff Stearman was coming to the fore again. Now that the doors were open there was a chance of action.

The three of them stood framed in the doorway like the symbolic cover from the better kind of science fiction novel, or the symbolic 'still' outside an art theatre, showing a current intellectual French film dealing with Man and the Scientific Environment. La Noire with her Cleopatrine hair, her deep, dark, mysterious eyes, her ageless, timeless beauty, might well have symbolised the mystery of womanhood, the eternal mother-spirit of the race, the goddess Gea; and there was the questing, up-tilted face of Elspeth, symbolising youth and progress, and a continuation of the species: symbolising Spring and the renewal of human life: symbolising hope and curiosity, eagerness, zest, and yet, feeling a certain doubt: wanting to go forward, yet hesitating and wondering; looking for some kind of base where security could be found. In the centre stood Stearman, tall, broad, solid as an oak tree, a pleasantly ugly man, with curly, iron-grey hair and a battle-scarred face; eyes as clear and grey as the water in

a limestone pool; with his vast shoulders and his arms knotted with muscle like the thick branches of a great deciduous tree in mid-winter. He symbolised the security and strength that both women looked for in their different ways. He was man the protector, man the pioneer, man the provider and the fighter. Stearman was the hunter, the ranger, the veteran warrior. He stood for all that was best in man. He had courage, humour, a faith that was not always expressible in words, but which was, nevertheless, as deep-seated as the universe itself.

They remained a frozen tableau, letting their eyes accustom themselves to the gloom of evening. The sound of the sea was all around them. The saucer was a quarter of a mile from the edge of the water.

"We seem to be on an island of some sort," commented Val. Stars were reflected in a great sea on three sides of them.

"I suppose we shan't know until we go and have a look," murmured La Noire.

"Words of wisdom," said Val, thoughtfully.

He leapt lightly down from the saucer's door. It was good to feel solid earth beneath his feet. He stooped and held up a handful of golden, silver sand.

"Coral, by the look of it," he said thoughtfully.

"So?"

"South Seas, or southern latitudes, anyhow. Could be the Carribean."

"At least it seems to be Earth," said La Noire. "That's a relief!"

"It's either Earth or a very Earth-like planet," agreed Val.

"How quiet everything is," said Elspeth. "Apart from the surf you can't hear anything!"

"The South Seas aren't exactly noted for deisel lorries!" said Stearman.

"I didn't mean that! There might have been just one 'plane or one boat, or even a house somewhere with television or radio playing"

"A lot of places haven't yet been penetrated by the white

man's civilisation!" said Val. "Which is their gain, and the loss to somebody or other's electronic company!"

There was that bluff, but cynical, streak asserting itself again. He imagined high pressure salesmen selling transistor radios to natives who would abandon the picturesque dances and songs of centuries in favour of the Top Twenty. Somehow it didn't seem a very fair exchange. All sorts of old jokes about exploitation went through his mind. There was the one about the missionary who converted the heathen, said 'let us pray' and then ran up the Union Jack while their eyes were closed. Not exactly written by a colonialist! thought Val, but nearly as old as the heyday of the Empire. Some of the old colonial adventuring spirit lived again in his veins as he walked purposefully towards the sound of the sea, accompanied by La Noire and Elspeth.

"Do you think we ought to leave the saucer too far? Suppose something happened to it?" said the girl.

"I think it's big enough to take care of itself," said Val.

"But suppose this is the wrong planet!" argued Elspeth.

"Breathe deeply," invited Stearman.

She inhaled, obediently.

"Good, fresh, earthly atmosphere with the tang of the sea in it: fresh, salty, and yet warm with tropical breeze and the scent of spices. Is it likely that all those factors would have coincidentally existed anywhere else at any other time?"

"No, p'raps not"

"Statistically it's almost impossible," said Val, "take it from me!"

"What about the time," persisted the girl. "This awful quietness—"

"You mean there aren't any ships, or planes, or houses with transistor radios," said La Noire.

"Suppose we're in the Past," argued Elspeth again.

"I know worse places to be," said Val.

"Yes—I suppose so." Elspeth was quiet. They walked down to the beach.

"Now let's keep to the water's edge, take a mark from one of those stars there, that one," said Val.

"Look," said La Noire, "it must be the Southern Cross!"

"I thought they didn't seem familiar," replied Val. "These must be the stars of the southern hemisphere."

"We must be close to the equator. I'm sure we're close to the equator," said Elspeth.

Val looked at the sky and the stars, again.

"My astronomy isn't as good as it should be," he said softly, "but I'd be prepared to take a bet on these being the terrestrial constellations."

Elspeth sighed with relief.

"So at least we've got the right planet!" she commented.

"Yes, Zelby hasn't let us down that far," agreed Val.

"Stars don't change much," said La Noire. "We could still be a thousand years in the Past."

"Or more!" come from Val.

"Don't, please don't!" Elspeth shivered a little despite the warmth of the breeze.

"This is the sort of thing that usually only happens to me in dreams," said Val, with a grin. "Shipwrecked on a desert island, with two women!"

He licked his lips, and gave a low wolf howl. They walked around the beach.

It was how they originally suspected, a small, coral island about two square miles in extent.

They returned to their starting point as the moon came up low on the horizon and turned the island into a paradise of silver light.

The sea became a vast, moving poem of silver-white. The waves played marine tennis with the moonbeams . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Barbados

IT was La Noire's keen, nocturnally penetrating eyes that spotted the light. She pointed far out to sea, taking Val's hand as she did so.

"Look, darling, look there, what is it?"

"I'm not sure." His keen grey eyes gazed out steadily across the moonlit waters.

"I think it's a boat," said Elspeth, "a boat with a light at the front."

Val tried hard to remember a story he had once read—no, not read, started to read!—a story that began with a crew of rather superstitious seamen in the old days of sail sighting a weird light that turned out on closer inspection to be a corpse candle! This light had a yellower gleam than any electric illumination had offered, and it seemed, even at this distance, to be flickering. Val wondered whether the yellowness of the illumination was a result of the contrast provided by the silvery flakes of moonlight and the almost greeny-white fluorescence of myriads of tiny sea creatures near the wave tops. The light grew steadily closer. Elspeth and the Stearmans continued gazing out towards it.

"Definitely a boat!" exclaimed La Noire at last.

Val turned his head a little and listened.

"Oars," he murmured, "very definitely, oars!"

"They are rowing very quietly," said Elspeth, "but I can hear them, too."

An adventurer's sixth sense warned Val that this might be a very good time in which to take evasive, observing action.

"It's quite a large boat," said La Noire. "There seem to be a number of them aboard."

"I think we'll get back a little off the beach," decided Val.

They made their way back quickly, keeping the light in sight all the while.

"Do you think they've seen us?" asked La Noire.

"I doubt it," he answered.

They watched from the palm fringed edge of the beach as the boat grounded, and its occupants alighted and began walking across the silver-white sand that lay like a great iced cake in the moonlight. Val didn't very much like what he saw! The men reminded him of something; he wasn't quite certain what.

"They're carrying something," whispered Elspeth.

"Yes," agreed La Noire.

"A chest," said La Noire.

Elspeth suppressed a giggle.

"Pirates!" she whispered.

And then Val knew of what they had reminded him! The actors in 'Treasure Island'! There was something furtively piratical about the way they moved.

"Well this is either a film set," said La Noire, quietly, "or——"

She left the sentence unfinished. Val knew what she meant. So did Elspeth.

"Could we really have gone into the past?" she whispered.

"Unfortunately, we could! When we were watching the miniature universe, our Time systems were so different that to have synchronised them at all, even to within so fine a margin as two hundred years, is a superb piece of chronological 'navigation'! Even so, when you consider the brevity of a terrestrial humanoid life span two hundred years is too big a gap. The problem of putting a man back where he belongs, once you've taken him out of his time, must be very similar to the problems involved in micro-surgery, where the very instruments that you use to dissect a cell—or what-

ever it is—on the slide, are incredibly big and clumsy beside the object you are trying to perform on.”

“It’s all a matter of gearing,” said Elspeth. “I’ve got a friend in the medical school who has been doing some work on it. He says that if you gear it down low enough you can make the most minute movements quite easily, even if you are not particularly deft with your hands.”

“It’s like steering a steamroller,” commented Val, “you have to spin the wheel vigorously to make the front roller turn. It’s the weight of the thing that does it.”

“Sh!” warned La Noire, “they’re coming this way!”

“Into the tree,” said Val, quietly. He pointed to the nearest of the tall palms. A clump a few yards away shadowed the one to which he pointed. Obediently Elspeth and La Noire began to climb as he moved into a patch of shadow.

“I wonder if they’re coming to investigate the saucer?” Elspeth whispered.

“Could be,” murmured La Noire.

“I think we ought to go back inside and close the door.”

“We don’t know how to close the door.”

“‘Course not! Stupid of me!”

The island seemed a lot less desirable. Elspeth looked down into her mind introspectively and found fear writ large. She was conscious of the beating of her own heart. The palm leaves seemed to offer little or no shelter. Pirates on film or television were funny, exciting, romantic, and you knew that the hero would always win; your retreat into security as the excitement grew more intense was simply push-button control, and kill the picture. You could always walk out of the cinema, or feel the velvet of the seat arm and say to yourself: “This is reality. The picture on the screen is only a picture.”

La Noire and Elspeth continued to watch breathlessly as two figures moved away from the group to walk towards the tree. Val, crouched in the shadows, listened. The voices

of the pirates came towards them quite clearly, unmistakably. It didn’t sound like a conversation. They were both speaking English with a rather interesting inflection. One of them seemed to have a French accent. Then Val realised what they were doing, and he gave a silent sigh of relief. The two men were counting. One held something round and gleaming in his hand, about the size of an old-fashioned alarm clock. From his place of concealment Val guessed it must be a compass. The other reached the tree, put his hand on it, and stopped counting.

“A hundred and thirty-seven,” said the man with the compass. From the shadow Val could see him clearly. He was a big fellow, taller than Stearman, and Val topped the six foot mark. He was broad and heavy, bearded, his face swarthy and pock marked, the nose hooked into a cruel beak, the teeth gappy and fang-like. Golden earrings glinted in the pale beams of the queen of the night. He wore a coat that was probably bright red in daylight and his breeches ended in boots that came just over the knee. There was a swaggering, cavalier look to him, but it was not the swagger of a romantic hero; it was the brash arrogance of a successful villain. The moonlight gleamed on cold, hard eyes. Val looked almost instinctively to the pirate’s coat, to see the armaments. He had a pair of pistols under the red cloth, odd how incongruous thoughts come to your mind at serious moments, reflected Stearman. In daylight, he pondered, that coat would probably be as bright as a Georgian Dragoon’s uniform. Somehow the swaggering arrogance of the pirate seemed to merit a red coat. Val looked at the other man. He, too, was big, but he was clean shaven, and much younger than the red-coated swaggerer. Val guessed as far as the moonlight would let him judge, that the younger man’s coat was blue. He, too, wore breeches and knee-length boots, but he had only one golden earring. His features were less sharp and broad, but there was a cold, calculating look about him.

Val looked at the armoury again. As well as the pistols both men carried swords and daggers. Formidable; thought Stearman, and there were probably other weapons hidden away.

"So we have the measurement," said the bearded man. "Do you think you can remember it?"

Blue-coat looked at him thoughtfully, his eyes full of cold cunning and guile.

"I doubt it," he said, "I can remember nothing if it's not written down."

The bearded man laughed.

"You expect me to believe that!"

"You don't trust me?"

"Then why did you ask me to come with you?"

"Two men measure better than one."

"Was that the only reason?"

There was fear in the younger man's voice. Stearman could almost smell it. Elspeth and La Noire crouched motionless in the tree, scarcely daring to breathe, and then because nervous tension affects different people in different ways—all of them inconvenient, and some of them disastrous—Elspeth sneezed.

"What's that?"

The bearded pirate's hand flashed to his pistol butt, and the big, clumsy looking, old-fashioned weapon came out with a speed that would have surprised a Western hero.

"Come down out of there, whoever you are!"

Val saw the evil eyes narrowing, and something that might have been a murderous grin began to spread below the beard. Val's powerful legs uncoiled like two mammoth truck springs in a railway shunting yard. His shoulder, as hard as well tanned leather, with an oak battering ram below it, hit the clean shaven pirate in the blue coat, and crashed him over, gasping for breath, on top of the bigger, bearded man. The pistol exploded harmlessly, hurling the ball high into the sky. Stearman kicked hard at the prostrate pirate's head on his

way to the staggering red coat. The bearded man had his other pistol in his hand by the time Stearman reached him. There was a violent explosion and the ball sang so close to Val's ear that he felt the rush of wind and singe of powder. Then he was in close, grabbing for a hold on the coat. Red coat grunted in amazement as he flew through the air and landed with a thud. There were times when Stearman fought in a manner that the Marquis of Queensbury would have applauded, but there were other times when it seemed to Val that circumstances dictated stronger means. His mind, suddenly as cold and ruthless as a steel blade, was racing ahead. The men on the beach couldn't see accurately what was happening. If they found two convincingly dead men when they arrived, they would think the obvious, and probably, thought Val, it would have happened, anyway. In that the Moguls of Hollywood were not so very far out in their interpretation of buccaneering ethics: kill or be killed; plot, or die as the result of another man's plot. The Caribbean pirate could have taught Borgia and Machiavelli a great deal. The red coated monster rolled away before Val could pin him. The black eyes rested on the grey, and the pirate knew he was fighting for his life. Val gave one swift, sidelong glance at the other form he had kicked. The blue-coated pirate was not going to stir—ever.

The cutlass slashed through the air and Val ducked under it, missing it so narrowly that an iron-grey curl was shorn by the blade. Stearman flung himself to the sand, hooked one great booted foot with his right toes, put his left immediately under the knee and flung the pirate back. Within a split second the bearded pirate's cutlass whistled through the air and sliced through the cloth of Val's trouser leg. He sprang back out of range, a dagger sang past him and sank deep, like a metal tooth, into the trunk of the palm tree where the girls hid.

There were noises and shouts from the other pirates. It had to be finished, and finished quickly! Val snatched the

dagger from the tree, stooped and grabbed a handful of sand. The bearded pirate circled him warily, the cutlass held high ready for a stroke that would sever an arm or a head at a single blow. Val used the palm tree to advantage, trying to tempt the stroke into the bole. The red-clad pirate leader was too wary for that kind of error. Stearman was up against a man as big and as ruthless as he was, a man who had probably seen more mortal combat even than the big journalist adventurer. In a sense Val was glad of that. He had no compunction about killing the pirate. The shadowy figures of the crew were drawing closer, and something had to be done, *and fast*. Stearman knew he had to kill, and then stagger in the direction of the dead man, fall to the ground, and roll away into the concealment of the shadows, so that when the others arrived they would think that only their two companions had been involved in the mortal fight.

Val leapt in suddenly, avoided the cutlass blade by the fraction of an inch, hurled his handful of sand into the bearded face, and while the blinded pirate's cutlass slashed through the air like the blade of a guillotine, Val drove the dagger up to the hilt into his enemy's body. It was a swift, merciful stroke. The cutlass dropped from numbed, dying fingers, and the pirate sagged to the ground. Val staggered as though mortally wounded himself, fell to the ground a few feet from the blue-coated body, and then crawled soundlessly into the shade. Within a matter of seconds the other pirates arrived. Val held his breath, La Noire and Elspeth in the tree were as motionless as shadows.

"It's the captain!"

Val could see the speaker clearly in the moonlight. He was a short, barrel chested man, with a red-and-white striped shirt, and a hook instead of a left hand.

A tall, rapier-thin consumptive stood behind him, and coughed like stones rattling in an empty tomb.

"There's Jackson as well," wheezed the consumptive. "Done for each other, I reckon."

"'Ere, Bugle-eyes, what do you think 'appened?"

Bugle-eyes had a black patch obscuring part of his face and a peg leg bit into the sand beneath the palm trees as he walked. Looking at the man from the shadows, Val guessed he had been hit by a blast from an exploding gunpowder barrel, and at close range, too! When he spoke his voice was as cracked and blemished as his body.

"I reckon they didn't trust each other!" He gave a high, cackling laugh. It seemed an incongruous sound from so villainous a man, thought Elspeth, as she looked down between the palm fronds. La Noire studied them intently. Men like this were not new to her. She knew this time of old, a strange thought went through her mind. Some time, somewhere, she wondered if it could be possible . . . did not the laws of time travel argue against it? But perhaps the laws could be broken by those who had been beyond the universe—maybe Zelby would know. *Could she exist in two places at the same time, or was this, after all, a parrallel world?* The thoughts raced round, creating havoc in her mind.

The man with the hook holled the Captain's body over dispassionately and took the pistols. He helped himself to the sword, and tugged the dagger from between the dead man's ribs. He wiped it thoughtfully on the cadaver's coat, like a good butcher, taking care that his knives do not rust. He added the armaments to those already bristling at his belt. Stearman was thinking that they were as ruthless a crew of cut-throats as the most sanguinary-minded Hollywood producer could ever have envisaged. These were not jolly, singing pirates, drinking in taverns, and laughing good naturedly with buxom, dock-side wenches. These men were psychotic killers for the most part, strange, human flotsam on the surface of the sea. It had always intrigued Stearman and puzzled him, to contemplate the merciless savagery with which pirates were hanged when captured. Now he knew why!

By nature, by instinct, Val—although ruthless himself in a fight-opposed cold-blooded execution. He admitted, when

forced to the point in an argument, the efficacy of the rope as a deterrent, but he argued back that the greatest deterrent was not the severity of the punishment meted out to the criminal, but the certainty of capture. There was a time during the late Georgian days when two hundred separate offences put a man in jeopardy of the rope. The crime rate had continued to rise. . . . It was only with the introduction of the Bow Street runner, and later on Peelers, that there had been any effective law and order. Apprehend the criminal, thought Val, as he crouched in the shadows. His mind, in association, supplied him with the dramatic *finale* of the Pirates of Penzance. What was it Tom Lehrea had said about Gilbert and Sullivan *finalés*? "Full of words and music, signifying nothing."

He smiled grimly to himself, as he waited in the dark.

"What we gonna do wiv 'em, Hookey?" asked the man known as Bugle-eyes.

"Reckon we'd better bury 'em!" said another voice.

"I don' wanta touch 'em!" broke in someone else, a high, nervous falsetto. Val peered through the dark and saw a Negro, probably escaped from a slave plantation somewhere. That began to give him an idea of dates, and re-affirmed the original suspicion that this was probably the Caribbean. Pirates made him think of Jamaica or Barbados. His mind ran over names like Sharktooth Morgan, Bluebeard—or was it Blackbeard?—Val always had difficulty remembering who was the pirate and who was the notorious mass murderer.

There was the sound of spades in sand.

"No need to go very deep."

He could hear laboured breathing.

"Bury 'em deep, so they don't come out!"

The Negro's voice. Amazing, thought Val, how superstition can get hold of a man. He must have risked life and limb to escape the plantations and with his fellow cut-throats he must have faced death a hundred times. Although he was not afraid of the act, he was afraid of its aftermath. It was

illogical, irrational, but not inexplicable. Stearman had claimed more than once that he himself feared no creature living or dead, but he would have added as a corollary that he would have preferred to face the living if given a choice.

He watched the pirates bury their bearded Captain and the man in the blue coat. Val's mind went racing on. The question was: What was to be done next? A boat, he thought, would be invaluable. The island was by no means impossible to live on, at the same time, if Zelby did not come back for them, and if they were to make any progress at all, they would have to find civilisation somewhere. Or would they?

Val toyed with thoughts like a stage balancer with Indian clubs. Suppose they remained where they were and either waited for Zelby, or got the saucer going on their own—a brave idea, thought Val, but easier thought than done!

He counted the remaining pirates. There were nine. So his original estimate of about a dozen had not been far out. Eleven had come ashore, two were already dead. He wondered whether he would be able to take the remaining nine, picking them off one at a time in the dark; reducing the odds ought not to be too difficult. Somehow killing deliberately went against the grain, but it would be difficult to stun and tie. To silence them ruthlessly and permanently would in all probability be pro- rather than anti-social. The only one for whom Val felt the slightest twinge of sympathy was the negro with the frightened falsetto voice. Life had probably done things to him which would have justified his present livelihood.

Stearman weighed up the proposition. Nine lives against the boat. Was there another boat on board the main pirate vessel, and where was that vessel? He was on the point of deciding not to take action against them when Hooky gave a sudden shout.

"What's that up there, through them trees?"

Bugle-eyes came and stood beside him.

"I don't know." His cracked voice resounded with fear,

"Blast!" thought Stearman, "they've seen the saucer." A plan formed in his mind. They would have to be disposed of now. The thought of the pirates interfering with the delicate interior of the saucer, and possibly, by their actions, condemning Val, La Noire and Elspeth to spend the remainder of their time in this seventeenth, eighteenth, or even early nineteenth century—wherever they were—did not seem reasonable. If it were the ship or the pirates, then the pirates would have to go. All their attention was on the ship. They stood staring at it like mortal men who see a fairy for the first time. Some fairy! thought Stearman grimly. The negro was furthest from it and nearest to Val. He was a vast man. Nature had endowed him with a big frame and he had done his best to fill it out. Val could almost imagine him roasting a whole chicken and delighting in the meal with primitive satisfaction. The delights of the palate were among Stearman's enthusiasms for life, and his sympathy towards the fat black giant grew rather stronger. It would have been utterly alien to Val's nature to bury a knife in the negro, as he had done without compunction into the bearded pirate captain. Besides, Val's motives might have been not entirely altruistic. There was just a slight odour of enlightened self-interest about them. Suppose he sent the negro back to the ship? Somebody would have to tell the tale and who better than this superstitious giant with the falsetto voice? Val could imagine him now with eyes rolling, hands outspread to emphasise his narrative. A cynical smile crossed Stearman's magnificently ugly face.

Yes, my friend, he thought to himself, you shall be the narrator. You shall be the rat, 'stout as Julius Cæsar,' that 'carries the commentary back to rat land,' as they say in the *Pied Piper*. You shall be the crippled boy who doesn't quite get into the mountain.

The big journalist-adventurer came out of the shadows, silent as a cat, his great left hand snaked out and closed over the negro's nose and mouth, like a pad of leather bananas.

His right locked around the ebony throat and jerked violently. The negro's arms were flailing, but not a sound came out. Val dragged him into the shadows.

"If you can understand what I'm saying move your head gently, just nod," he hissed.

A few yards away Hooky was waving his metal question mark and saying, "Who's coming to have a look at it, then?"

Their attention was so wrapped up in the saucer, Val felt there was little danger of his whisper being heard. The negro's head moved slowly, reluctantly. Val whispered, "If you make a sound I'll kill you, do you understand?"

Again the reluctant nod.

Val moved his hand and hissed, "Stand absolutely still."

He took the negro's pistols, dagger and sword, then, unfastening the man's leather belt, strapped his hands carefully behind his back, rolled him on to his face, bent his knees powerfully, and put the remaining turn of the belt around his ankles, putting it through the buckle again, and tucking it in. "Uncomfortable? In which case I'm sorry," murmured Stearman, "but at least you're alive."

"Who are you?" whispered the negro.

"I am the Great Spirit of the island," said Stearman. "Do you understand? I am the Great Spirit of the island. These men have angered me by coming here. They will all die as the Captain died and as Jackson died! This is my island, do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand, sah!" The negro's terrified whisper was so low that even Val could scarcely hear it. He took the sword in his hand, thrust the dagger into his belt, and crept to the edge of the shadow patch once more. The tall consumptive was standing at the edge of the group, nearest to the shadow. Val hesitated for an instant, and then, reversing the cutlass, he stunned the man with a quiet, glancing blow, caught him as he fell, and dragged him into the shadows beside the negro.

"Is he dead?" asked the ebony giant.

Stearman shook his head and put a finger to his lips. He removed the thin man's belt and trussed him expertly, as he had done the coloured man. He tore a strip of the thin man's coat and used it to gag them both, then crept back to look at the other seven. Hooky and Bugle-eyes were on their way towards the opening of the saucer. Seven to one was better odds than nine, thought Val, but it was still heavy going. If he made one mistake it would be his last. If he made one error of judgment he would not live to tell of it. Seven was reasonable odds to a fighter of Stearman's capacity, providing the others were unarmed—but they were not. They bristled like porcupines with the machinery of death and Val, though dauntless as ever, lacked the wild impetuosity of youth. Twenty-five years ago Stearman would have pitched into the seven of them, head down, both fists flailing . . . and probably, he told himself, with a rather ironic smile, he would have won! He would not have deserved to win, he would have done it by strength and surprise. But to the elements of strength and surprise, Time had added another factor, Val had experience, and experience makes a man less liable to rush headlong into a fight. He turned the cutlass in his hand, so that it was blade foremost again, and then, concealing himself behind the nearest of the palm trees, he drew the dagger that he had taken from the negro. He held it by the point, toying with it for a second; then came a swift, straightening movement of the arm, a flick of the wrist, and the dagger sang, like a winged predator of the night, its long silver beak pecking death between the shoulder blades of the nearest pirate. That one went down with a low moan. The others stopped dead in their tracks. Hooky and Bugle-eyes came back from the aperture of the saucer.

Val had achieved that much if nothing more.

"'Oo did this, then?" demanded Hooky.

"Where's Napoleon?" asked one of them.

That was interesting, thought Val. If the big coloured man

was nicknamed Napoleon, that gave him a fair indication of the date.

"And where's Long Jack?" asked Bugle-eyes.

"There's only six of us!" said Hooky.

They had lost all interest in the saucer now. A kind of superstitious fear had descended on all of them. Val wondered whether they would turn and leap for the boat.

"What are we doin' to do?" demanded Bugle-eyes.

The short, barrel-chested leader of the group looked around unhappily.

"I suppose we'd better go an' look for 'em," he said without much enthusiasm.

Val groped around for a piece of broken coral. He found one and threw it high and powerfully over the pirates' heads. It landed behind them, not far from the saucer, struck another piece of coral stone and bounced up with a sharp, reverberating 'clang' against the fuselage of the disc ship. Hooky turned on his heels, snatching for his pistol. Bugle-eyes pivoted on his peg-leg.

"Come out!" ordered Hooky.

"We can see yer!" lied Bugle-eyes, staring urgently in the direction of the sound.

Stearman leapt out of the shadows, seized the nearest pirate and vanished with him into the blackness under the trees. The thing was rapidly assuming the proportions of a comedy thriller, even a farce. Val gagged and bound his third living victim, and laid him carefully beside Napoleon and Long Jack.

"Freddy's gorn!" whispered a terrified voice, as the pirates re-examined their group. Val wondered how long it would be before their nerve broke.

"I fink we'd better get out of here!" gasped Bugle-eyes. He began making a track of footprint and small round holes in the direction of the beach and the boat.

"You're right!" agreed Hooky, and the remaining pirates

streaked away in Bugle-eyes' wake. For a man without a left foot he made remarkable progress!

Val thought, and thought fast. He wanted the boat. The question was the best way to get it.

Like a shadowy outline of a huge black predator, a wolf—a tiger—coming from the shadows, he loped into the moonlight, moving with a crouching run, his great arms almost touching the ground. La Noire and the girl watched from the tree, still making no sound. The silent running shadow that was Stearman overtook the last of the pirates, caught him deftly by the chin, and rabbit punched him into temporary oblivion; then Stearman dropped to the ground and waited to see whether he had been observed. There was only open beach between himself and the sea now. No cover. The men he pursued, although terrified, were nevertheless, ruthless. The more frightened they were, the more dangerous they would become. Bugle-eyes and Hooky certainly belonged to the 'shoot-first-and-ask-questions-afterwards' school. Val looked up covertly without moving his body. The unconscious pirate lay motionless a few feet away. The remaining fugitives continued to run. Memories of Agatha Christie's "Ten Little Nigger Boys" went through Stearman's mind. He leapt from the sand and raced on again, behind the fugitives. The hilt of his cutlass, reversed, cracked down on the head of the next man he overtook. The pirate went down with a low moan.

Three to go! Hooky, Bugle-eyes, and one swarthy rough-neck who was nameless as far as Val was concerned.

He felt like a knight or bishop left in a chess-end-game, mopping up pawns from behind, devouring them, with eager ferocity.

Hooky heard the low moan. He turned and saw Val! The pistol flashed into his hand as though by magic. Stearman flung himself sideways as the ball whistled through the air where he had been standing a few seconds before. Hooky hurled the empty pistol after its ball. It thudded to the sand

a few feet behind Val. The big journalist-adventurer's cutlass flicked through the air with the speed of a circus knife-thrower's exhibition blade. Hooky had no time to think about it. If he had he might have contemplated that it was impossible for a human arm to throw something as heavy so fast and with such deadly accuracy. The point of the flying cutlass sliced through his leather jerkin and kept on going. He didn't really feel pain, just surprise, incredulity, and a strange weakness. He was conscious of warm, dark blood, and as he pitched forward lifeless, the impact of the coral beach drove the blade clear through his thick body.

Bugle-eyes' pistol ball trimmed Stearman's jacket sleeve, and then the dagger Val had taken from another victim travelled across the intervening space and hit Bugle-eyes in the geometric centre of the chest. Thrown by the average man, the dagger would have been deflected by the pirate's thick sternum, but the well-balanced Damascus steel was not powered by an ordinary throw. Val was an unusually powerful man. His balance was such, his timing so perfect, that he punched and threw in a way that used every ounce of his weight and strength. Bugle-eyes clawed futilely at his chest, fell back, dying, and lay very still beside a reddening pool on the silver-grey sand.

The remaining pirate circled Stearman warily, cutlass and pistol drawn, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. Terror made him more dangerous. Val fainted towards his left; he leapt back. With mortal desperation he turned, and was actually moving in as Stearman leapt for him. The pistol went off. Val twisted lithely and the ball nicked his ribs as it passed. . . . He gave a sudden gasp of pain, but the interruption did not seriously impede his forward movement. He took the pirate's throat, coming in under the cutlass, swung him into the air and hurled him bodily at the coral sand. The buccaneer crashed to the beach. Val hurled his full weight on top of him. A swift heave cracked his skull on the coral like a coconut, and Val stood leaning on the boat, panting hard

and looking back with agreeable achievement at the pirate-strewn beach.

There was, he decided, considerable life in the old dog yet. He ran blood-stained fingers through iron-grey curls, and called to La Noire and Elspeth.

"Come on! I've got the boat."

The girls came down from the tree and began running towards the beach.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Elspeth.

One of the pirates moaned and stirred.

"I'll finish making this lot secure," said Val, "and then we'll decide what to do next."

The three of them worked swiftly with belts and torn clothing. When the surviving pirates were securely trussed, Val began to examine the boat.

"Despite the success of this present venture," he said modestly, "I don't really feel inclined to make a frontal attack on the ship which I assume is lying out there somewhere. Besides, three of us probably couldn't sail it."

"Well, what about the saucer?" asked La Noire. "We can't just leave it!"

"I know we can't. On the other hand, I don't feel particularly inclined to attempt flying it. It could land us anywhere. Too many imponderables involved!"

"On the other hand," put in Elspeth, "if we just set out to sea in an open boat, leaving the saucer behind——"

"No, I don't want to do that either," said Val. "I want possession of the boat——"

"Which we've got," pointed out La Noire.

"Our prisoners are going to present a problem if we're here for any length of time," said Stearman. "We can't just allow them to starve, neither can I kill them in cold blood."

"So?" asked Elspeth, casting a sidelong glance at the impaled Hooky and the transfixed Bugle-eyes and shuddering.

"So," said Stearman, imperturbably, "we must have a council of war! It is difficult to know what to do for the

best. We might stay by the saucer in the hope that Zelby will materialise, and re-set the direction for us. Or we can go on a reconnaissance and come back."

"Suppose we just go on a reconnaissance," said La Noire, "and Zelby comes while we've gone?"

"Yes—that's a problem," answered Val. He paused. "A big problem," he said again.

"Suppose we split up," said Elspeth. "Somebody stay by the saucer and somebody else go on reconnaissance?"

"You mean, suppose I went and left you two here?" said Val.

"It's a good idea," said La Noire. "On the other hand, Zelby might come with urgency. If the *Negons* are hot on his track, and if you weren't here——"

"Hmm," murmured Val. "That would mean you'd either have to leave without me, or——" He left the sentence unfinished.

"I'd be willing to wait by the saucer, if you and La Noire wanted to go," said Elspeth.

"I don't think one of you ought to be left alone," replied Val. "Suppose something went wrong as far as the prisoners were concerned? You'd be no match for one of those gentlemen on your own! They might be feeling rather vindictive!"

There was silence, thoughtful silence, for a few minutes, then La Noire said, "What about the coloured man, the one who sounded frightened?"

"I don't think he's quite like the others. Probably a runaway slave, or something," agreed Val.

"Suppose we freed him, he might—just *might*—be reliable."

"He's the best bet, I think," rejoined La Noire.

"In which case, if we could only be sure of him, we could leave him here with Elspeth to look after the saucer while you and I go off on a reconnaissance in the boat," said Stearman.

"Mmmm," agreed La Noire.

"Let's go and have a look at him," suggested Elspeth.

Val led the way back to the place where Napoleon, Long Jack and Freddy were tied. Val removed the negro's gag.

"Listen," he said gravely. "How would you like to live long enough to grow old?"

Napoleon's big eyes rolled in his head for a few seconds, and he said nothing. Finally he nodded.

"Who was the most terrible man you've ever met?" asked Stearman.

"I reckon the Captain!" said the negro.

"He's dead," said Val.

"Ah knows!" ejaculated Napoleon.

"Then who else would you say was a terrible man?"

"Ah'm mighty frightened of Mr. Hooky!" answered Napoleon.

"I've just killed him, too," said Stearman. "His body is on the beach."

The coloured boy's big eyes rolled again.

"If you feared those men—who are now dead—would you fear the man who killed them?"

"More dan words could say!" gasped Napoleon.

Somehow it was so incongruous Val wanted to laugh. Laughter seemed odd and irreverent in the presence of sanguinary, violent death. He checked it. The moonlight seemed cold, discerning, and unfunny.

"I could use you, if I could trust you."

"You can trust me, sah!"

"I wonder! What are you doing with this crew, anyway?"

"I escaped, sah!"

"I thought so! You wouldn't have been a pirate if you hadn't been a slave first, is that it? You wouldn't have chosen to kill, to steal, if you had been left a free and happy man in your own land?"

"No sah! I wouldn't, sah!"

Val looked at him intently.

There was a transparent honesty about the big negro.

"If I trust you, and you keep faith with me," said Stear-

man, "no harm will come to you. But if you fail me——" he shrugged and looked at the negro hard.

"What do you want me to do, sah?"

Val looked down at the helpless, bound forms of Freddy and Long Jack.

"Would you kill those men if I asked you to, if I ordered you to?"

The negro hesitated.

"Dey've been ma friends! For a long time," he said slowly. "I wouldn't *want* to kill dem. Have dey gotta be killed?"

The two bound and gagged prisoners looked up and there was desperate pleading in their eyes. Stearman looked at the negro again.

"If I said I would kill you if you didn't kill them, would you kill them then?"

"I still wouldn't want to. But I guess I'd have no choice, really."

He paused thoughtfully.

"Cause if you wants dem dead, and I don't kill 'em, you'll kill me anyway, and den kill dem."

Stearman sorted through this simple logic and smiled inwardly.

"Suppose I said that I'd share the treasure with the men who were left, the ones I haven't yet killed, and that if you wanted to you could kill the others, so there'd only be two shares. Would you kill them then?"

"Are you going to let me live if I don't kill dem?" asked Napoleon earnestly.

"Yes."

"But if I kill dem I get more treasure?"

"Yes."

"I wouldn't kill dem jus' for gold, specially not Long Jack and Freddy."

"I think that lets you out," said Stearman. "What do you think, La Noire?"

"I think so, too, darling."

"We think we can trust you," said Val. "Now, this is the real situation. You are going to guard the island for me. I'm going to leave the others tied up. They can have a little exercise, one at a time, under careful guard. You are going to be their jailer. You will explain to them about being their jailer. I'm taking the boat, so they can't get off the island. You're also going to guard the girl: *this girl*. You will obey every command she gives you."

"Yes, sah, I'll do that, sah."

"We shan't be away long," said Stearman.

"No, sah. Wh—wh—where you goin' sah?"

"That's my secret," said Val.

Napoleon was looking with open-mouthed amazement at the great, gleaming shape of the saucer.

"What is dat, sah?" he asked.

"That's a flying machine," replied Stearman.

"Flyin' machine, boss?"

"Yes. A flying machine," repeated Stearman.

"You mean dat t'ing goes up in the air like a bird?"

"The very same"

"Oh, man!" gasped Napoleon. He looked at the disc ship again with wonder.

There was an awed silence, then Val pointed away over the beach.

"The ship that you came in, where's that?" he demanded.

"We didn't come in a big ship, boss. We left her at Barbados."

"You mean you rowed here from Barbados, to this island? How far is it?"

"Oh, not far." The negro had no apparent concept of distance.

"How long did it take?"

"About a glass and a half."

Stearman translated this as roughly three-quarters of an hour. He wasn't sure whether nineteenth century seamen had

used the hour, or the half-hour, glass, for their chronological calculations.

"By the way," he asked casually, "they call you Napoleon. How's the war going?"

"The war, sah! I don't know. It don't affect us much out here!"

"Well, what's the date?" asked Val.

"The date, boss? Ain't shuh about dat, either."

"Damn it," said Val, "what year is it, Napoleon, *what year?*"

"Oh, I know dat all right, sah!"

"Good!" said Val.

Napoleon was beaming.

"It's 1820, sah, 1820!"

For some reason the date rang a bell in Stearman's mind. Barbados—but what—*what?* He heaved a sigh.

"You've got no idea what season it is, Nap?"

"Oh, yes, sah, I think Ah knows what season it is! It's kinda middle of April time."

That also rang a bell. Val wished he could remember. It was important. Something at the back of his mind was trying to tell him that was a link between what he was trying to remember and the whole incredible business of the saucer, but what? He shook his head, as though to sort out the recalcitrant thoughts . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

Strangers on the Shore

THE sun was just coming up over the horizon as Barbados came in sight. Val and La Noire were pulling steadily at the huge oars. The pirate boat had been designed for a larger crew than two, but Val's massive muscles compensated for the lack of men. La Noire rowed lithely and steadily, keeping the nose of the boat towards the coast of the island.

"I think we're approaching from the south," she said, softly.

Val rested the oars for a minute and looked up at the rising sun.

"We must be," he agreed, quietly.

The rowboat drifted on, as though borne by some friendly water sprite. Val gave an occasional guiding tug.

"Just get up into the bows and keep your eye on our direction," he said softly.

"Right, darling." She handed him her oar, and spreading his brawny chest and vast arms, Stearman nosed the boat on towards the southern shore of the island.

"I don't think I know very much about Barbados," he said, quietly, "do you?"

La Noire sighed.

"Once," she whispered, "but it was long ago——"

He looked at her.

"Would you like to tell me about it?"

She shook her head.

"Perhaps another time, darling."

"O.K."

She turned and looked away to the left, and back.

"Grenada," she murmured quietly, "*Grenada*."

Val wondered what was going through her mind; here in this early morning the mystery of the sea, and the mystery of this enigmatic Cleopatrine beauty who was his wife, blended together into an infinite question mark.

They beached the boat, and Val's great muscles cracked and strained as he pulled it up the beach. The pirate dinghy looked strangely incongruous: a blot of man-made crudery, on the smooth perfection of the sands. Val experienced a number of thoughts that were too deep for words, and almost he wished he were a part of the infinity of sun and sand, part of the mystery of the sea and sky, rather than one of the race of artisans who cut down the graceful splendour of trees and fashioned it into dinghies for pirates to sail. He smiled a slow, ponderous, enigmatic smile, then taking La Noire's hand he set off up the beach.

"What do you know about the island?" asked Val. His own geography was very vague as far as the West Indies were concerned.

"Well, Barbados is roughly pear-shaped," said La Noire, "we're coming in from the south. Bridgetown is the most important centre on the island, that would be to the north-west. Crane is a lot smaller, that's away to the east; they are both about the same distance from us. The only other town that I know of, of any size, is Speightstown, which is in the north."

"Oh," Val looked around; beyond the beach with its coral stone and sand he saw masses of lush tropical vegetation.

"Pretty fertile," he said, softly.

"Yes," she answered, "very much so."

"When Napoleon told me the date," said Val, "I had an odd sort of feeling that April of 1820 was *significant*."

La Noire looked at him searchingly.

"Yes, I think so, too," she said quietly. "But I can't think why it's significant."

"It's annoying, isn't it?" remarked Val.

Hand in hand the Stearmans went on up the beach. The sand took the marks of their progress, leaving four long lines of prints down to the sea and the boat. Val glanced along the high tide mark once more, and reckoned that barring a freak 'high' the boat ought to be all right.

They moved on until they reached the edge of the beach. La Noire snapped long, slim, graceful thumb and fingers, and her eyes lit up as though memory or inspiration had come to life, unexpectedly.

"Darling, *I know what it is!*"

"Yes," He cast her a quick, questioning glance.

"The date, darling! It was April 18th, 1820, and unless I'm very much mistaken we're very close to the place."

"Would you mind starting at the beginning and telling me just what this is!"

"In a minute! Can I just find out if this is the place?" asked La Noire.

"You love your mysteries, don't you?" said Val, and grinned resignedly. "O.K. We'll play it your way!"

The wild, fringe of lush, verdant plant life gave way to the unmistakable edge of a plantation. A negro with a pair of gay blue-and-white striped canvas trousers, worked away among the sugar cane.

"Hey," Val called across to him. He jumped and cowered as though expecting trouble.

"I've just come ashore," said Stearman, by way of explanation, "my ship was lost. Can you tell me if this is Barbados?"

"Yes, sah, this'm Barbados all right, sah!"

"Where's the nearest village?" enquired Val.

"That would be Oistin's, sah."

"How far is that?"

"'Bout mile and a half, sah."

The coloured plantation worker pointed with a trembling hand along a kind of track that led away from the groves of sugar cane to the right.

"Thank you," said Val.

"Dat's all right, sah!" The negro went back to his work, casting furtive glances at the Stearmans over his shoulder as he cut steadily at the canes.

Val and La Noire stepped boldly and briskly along the track. It was good to have a path of some sort along which to walk. It was a link with civilisation somehow, a road, a path, a track; it was a comforting, man-made thing.

A well-made road, a natural, blending road, was the co-operation of man and nature. The boat on the beach was the antithesis of this. It was man's disfigurement of the great open sand and the great open sea. Or was it?

Val rolled the thoughts around in his mind as a connoisseur rolls brandy around on his tongue.

A man stood by the side of the track, his hand on the bridle of his horse. His hair was white and very long, although his skin had the weather beaten tan of one who has spent a long time in a hot climate. Despite the heat he wore black robes and the white cloth at his throat left no doubt in Stearman's mind that this man was in Holy Orders. He smiled and held up his hand as he saw the Stearmans approaching.

"Good day, friends."

Val smiled back and held out a hand in greeting.

"You are strangers to our island?"

"Yes, our ship was lost. We came ashore in a small boat."

"Remarkable! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Thomas Orderson, rector of Christchurch, here in Oistin. Allow me to welcome you to the island."

"Stearman," said Val. "My wife La Noire, and my name is Valentine."

"Again, welcome to our island," said Orderson. "You must come with me to the rectory at once. You need food and rest after your ordeal!"

It was only at the mention of 'food and rest' that Val realised how right the rector was.

For a man of his years Orderson walked at a brisk and

sprightly pace, beside the Stearmans. He led them to the cool, white stone rectory at the side of the town. Beyond it Val could see Christchurch, and beyond that the graveyard. Orderson led them in through doors of stout, tropical hardwood.

"It would normally have been a long time before you encountered anyone but the coloured workers," he said, "but I always go a little way out of the town to think about the day and say a few quiet prayers for my parishioners."

He struck a gong.

"Would you like maize porage? Or perhaps English toast would be more to your liking—you are English?" There was a note of interrogation.

"Yes," agreed Val, "we're both British."

La Noire raised half an eyebrow at him, but Orderson noticed nothing.

A motherly-looking 'black mamma' arrived and looked enquiringly at the clergyman.

"You hit the gong, sah?"

"Oh, yes, Martha. We have some guests for breakfast. Poor shipwrecked mariners cast up on the shore of our little island! I'd like you to fetch them something, if you would. Maize porage and fresh milk from our goats would nourish them as quickly as anything. I think, don't you?"

"Yes, sah. I'll do that straight away, sah! And how about some bread and ham, and home-made pickles and spices?"

Val felt hunger mounting up like a tangible, living thing. He smiled and nodded.

"That would be excellent," he said. "I'm very grateful to you, Mr. Orderson."

The clergyman made a gesture implying that Val was to think nothing of it.

The beautifully seasoned maize porage arrived, and the Stearmans ate as though they had not seen food for several days.

"Allow me to show you up to the guest room," said the

clergyman when they had finished. "I don't expect you've slept much if you've spent the night at sea, then later you can tell me all about your misfortunes." He looked at Val a little curiously. "You'll pardon me for sounding like an ignorant colonial, but—are those the latest fashions in London, now—the suit?"

"Yes," said Val, quietly.

"Good gracious me, how strange! Still, one must move with the times, I suppose! Our communications are not what they might be, you know! Never mind!"

"Not everyone is wearing them," said Stearman.

"I must say they look quite practical," said the clergyman. "Quite practical."

Val and La Noire followed him up the stairs to the comfortably furnished bedroom, set out in early nineteenth century colonial style.

Not until the clergyman had wished them a pleasant rest, and closed the door, did Val's curiosity find an outlet in words.

"Are you going to tell me now?" he said. "This is driving me crazy! Is this the right place?"

La Noire nodded.

"Yes, darling, it is. The final clinch was His Reverence."

"Oh! I'm not altogether sure that I follow?" His voice held a question.

"Doesn't that name ring any bells?" she said. "April, 1820; the Reverend Thomas Orderson, D.D.?"

And suddenly Val felt as though a shutter had dropped away in his mind revealing the missing scenery.

"Christchurch," he said, "*of course!*"

Then everything rushed in together, like the waters of the Red Sea, drowning the Egyptians. Now that he knew, Val could sleep. The answering of the riddle had been the last onslaught upon the final redoubt of consciousness.

He slept heavily and long, his arms protectively around La Noire's lithe, graceful beauty. It was she who woke first, and

it was well past mid-day by the look of the sun. Val was conscious of a considerable hunger. He leapt out of bed, dressed and led the way downstairs. Martha was dusting in the hall as Val stood looking undecidedly around the rectory.

"I'll tell the master that you're wake, sah. You look a great deal better, and you, too, ma'am. I trust you're both feelin' better?"

"Yes, thank you," said La Noire, "but I'm hungry again, I'm afraid"

"So'm I!" exclaimed Val.

"I'll see about 'nother meal, sah. Would you like some more ham?"

"That would be wonderful!" answered Val. "We don't want to impose on your master's kindness."

"No imposition, my dear sir, no imposition at all; I assure you!"

Orderson appeared in the study doorway. "I have in fact just been completing my sermon, and I always find that a somewhat exhausting task. I, too, have not yet lunched. I would be honoured if you would join me, together with your lady wife."

"Martha was just talking about some more of that delicious ham," said Val

"Admirable suggestion," smiled Orderson.

Val felt a strange tingling excitement as he glanced over the clergyman's shoulder to the open doorway of the study, to the calendar on the clergyman's desk.

"Is that today's date?" he asked interestedly.

"Why, yes, yes."

"I'm afraid we rather lost track of time, with the shipwreck, you know."

"Of course; tut, tut, tut, most distressing for you!"

The calendar read April 18th, 1820.

Val and La Noire went through to the dining room again,

and found that Martha was already slicing ham and piling mealy potatoes upon large, blue Willow Pattern plates.

Val decorticated a jar of superb, home-made pickles and spread them copiously over the thick, home-cured ham.

Stearma was a big man, a very big man, and his appetite was in proportion to his bulk. When he was really hungry, as he was now, it seemed an almost impossible proposition to fill him. But he filled at last.

"Some wine?" Val nodded. "Some wine for our guests!" said Thomas Orderson.

"Yes, sah!" Martha departed in search of wine. She came back smiling. "I've got a bottle of '03, sah. That suitable for the occasion?"

"Admirable, admirable!" Orderson approved.

Martha poured fine red claret into the Jacobean glassware.

Orderson kept a good table, and a good cellar, thought Val, and there was something about the Jacobean glass which added a final touch of quality to the wine.

"May I congratulate you on a superb meal," he said.

"It was nothing very much, really, my dear sir, nothing very much." Orderson blushed a little. "Most welcome."

"And welcomingly served!" Stearman smiled at Martha, who was busily clearing away the debris.

"I wonder if you would care to join me in a game of chess?" asked Orderson.

"I don't mind," said Val. "I would rather enjoy it."

"Good, good." The parson produced a beautiful, hand-carved ivory set. Stearman looked at the design carefully for a few moments. Compared to twentieth century pieces he found the durling extravagance of the vicar's 'men' difficult to translate into terms of 'rook,' 'bishop,' 'pawn' and 'knight,' only the king and queen stood out like blast furnaces against a black-and-white landscape. The cleric concealed a pawn in either hand. Val indicated Orderson's left. The parson opened bronzed fingers to reveal a white pawn.

Val wondered whether two hundred years, or very nearly

so, had developed the game sufficiently to give him what would be tantamount to an unfair advantage over the Reverend Mister Orderson. Val opened with pawn to K4, and Orderson emulated the move. It was followed by pawn to Q4. The clergyman looked a little surprised but played up his own Queen's pawn. The four ivory warriors confronted one another in the centre of the board. Val played up his Queen's knight, and Orderson again followed suite. Stearman was contemplating his next move when there was a sudden rather excited knock at the door.

Martha returned from opening it to announce, rather excitedly:

"Lord Combermere, the Governor!"

Combermere was hard on her heels, as she announced him. Orderson stood up, smiling, and bowed to the Governor.

"An unexpected pleasure, my dear sir! To what are we indebted?"

"It's this business in your graveyard, Orderson."

"Oh, dear!" Orderson's face underwent a sudden change; it seemed to lose its pallor.

"I'm sorry, Your Excellency. I'm forgetting my manners. May I present Mr. and Mrs. Stearman, who have been unfortunate enough to suffer shipwreck recently, and whom I found this morning."

"Welcome to Barbados, Mr. Stearman, Madam." The governor bowed. "I am sorry that you arrive in unhappy circumstances! As British subjects I assume you will let me know if I can help you in any way. As representative of the Crown here, it is my duty to offer you both hospitality and protection. And," Combermere smiled at La Noire, "may I say what pleasure it would give me. You will be welcome at the official residence any time you like to call upon me, either socially or for Crown aid."

Stearman liked what he saw of Combermere. The man was big, no longer in the prime of life, but powerful. There was a direct, forceful approach about him. As a Whitehall poli-

tician or beaucocrat, he would have been a fish out of water, thought Val. But as Governor of a colony no doubt he was the ideal man to deal with everyday emergencies as they arose. He wore a long, pale blue, brocaded coat with elegant lace at the throat. He might have stepped straight from an historical extravaganza or a West End production of 'Berkeley Square.'

"What I really came about, Orderson, was this." The Governor sat on the edge of a mahogany armchair; it tilted slightly beneath his weight. Val put a considerate foot on the other side.

"Thankee," Combermere looked over his shoulder and nodded, "I'm forever falling off the blasted things! As I was saying, Orderson, it's the tomb again. Several of the interested parties have been round to see me today. In fact I've got them waiting on your doorstep this moment!"

"Your Excellency should bring them in," said Orderson. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine, and there aren't so many of us on Barbados that we stand upon ceremony with one another, least of all in Oistin!"

"Good! Gentlemen, you are invited to come into the study!" Combermere boomed the words over his shoulder. "I'll present you as you arrive! Honourable Nathan Lucas, Mr. Bowcher Clarke, Mr. Roland Cotton, and my secretary, Major Finch." Val shook hands with each of the men as they were introduced. Nathan Lucas was a tall, slim, scholarly looking man with quick, inquisitive eyes. Bowcher Clarke was shorter and heavier looking. Roland Cotton was greying at the temples and had the air of a prosperous British merchant visiting the island to examine his interests. Major Finch was tall, correct, middle-aged and efficient looking.

"Basically, what we've decided is this," said Combermere, when the introductions had been effected. "With your cooperation Your Reverence, I want to re-open the tomb."

"Yes, I was afraid it might be something like that," replied Orderson.

"You mean you're not in favour?"

"I'm not against such a move if you can convince me that it will accomplish something."

"I think it might," said Combermere.

Val looked from one to the other with interest, feigning ignorance. *But it was this that he had remembered!* Now, here they were, no longer names in a reference book, but men, living, breathing men. He was about to join them in their investigation.

"Briefly," began Combermere, "we've had an incredible mystery in this little village. It began nearly eight years ago—on July 6th, 1812. There's a tomb here in the Christchurch cemetery which was used in 1807 when Mrs. Goddard died. Nothing odd happened; a little girl called Mary Chase was buried there in 1808, and still nothing happened. You haven't heard anything of this, have you?"

"I am wondering," said Val, noncommittally.

"It's getting us quite a reputation, I'm afraid. But 1812 was the start of the mystery. Dorcas Chase, Mary's sister was being buried there in July. By the time they got in Mrs. Goddard's coffin was found tossed against the wall. Mary Chase's coffin was standing on its head in the corner opposite to the one in which it had been placed. We sorted them all out, put Dorcas with the others, sealed the vault, and left. Thomas Chase died about a month later. He was buried there; things were as they should be. Four years passed, and about September time in 1816 young Samuel Ames was buried there. A little later. Oh, it would be about mid-November of the same year, Samuel Brewster, cousin of Samuel Ames, was brought from St. Phillip. There'd been a bit of talk by this time, and quite a crowd waited to see the vault opened. We took the slab aside and the coffins were in complete disorder."

"I see," said Val.

"Complete disorder!" echoed the rector.

"The oldest one, Mrs. Goddard's coffin, was now in pieces.

The others were thrown all over the place, although some of them were lead cased and heavy."

"One of them required eight men to lift," said the rector.

"True, true," said Combermere. "We went over the place pretty thoroughly; couldn't find anything."

"Any sign of flooding?" asked Val.

"No, dry as a bone! Literally and metaphorically." Combermere laughed. It was not meant unkindly.

"Last year, in the middle of the summer——"

"July 7th," prompted the rector.

"Yes, you're right, July 7th," agreed Combermere. "Thomasina Clarke was duly buried. There had been such a fuss, of course, there were big crowds; I was invited to attend officially, and I did. I've been very, very interested in the thing ever since—but I'm getting my narrative out of order."

"Churchyard was absolutely packed," said the Rector.

"Yes, it was that!" agreed Combermere. "The labourers chipped away the cement seal; then they pulled the door aside."

"And?" prompted Val.

"You may well say 'and'," said Combermere, enjoying his narrative, "Mrs. Goddard's coffin was lying by the wall, where it had been placed—the one that came to pieces, if you remember?"

"Yes, yes, I do," said Stearman.

"The other coffins were all over the place."

"I distinctly felt a strange coldness," said Major Finch. "Distinctly!" he added emphatically.

"Yes, I thought I noticed something, but we went in, didn't we, Finch?"

"Yes, sir, we went in!"

"And what did you find?" asked Val.

"Nothing, my dear sir, nothing!" replied the Governor. "The vault was completely solid. There wasn't enough room for a jellyfish to have rolled up from the beach and trickled

between the cracks. We took precautions, you see," Combermere went on, "we took considerable precautions."

"We replaced the coffins decently and in order," said Finch.

"Then we sprinkled a smooth, half-inch layer of fine sand all across the floor," said the major.

"Hoping to find footprints?" suggested Val.

"Basically, yes!"

"Then we replaced the door, cemented it, and sealed it. In fact, I myself made several impressions with my own private seal."

"So did I!" said the Honourable Nathan Lucas.

"And I," put in Bowcher Clarke.

"In fact, all the present party made distinguishing marks on the cement, of one sort or another."

"Of one thing we are convinced," said Combermere, "nothing, absolutely nothing, could enter or leave the vault without showing some trace."

"Things came to a head just after lunch!" exclaimed the Honourable Nathan Lucas.

Bowcher Clarke nodded.

"After a long discussion we decided on a ceremonial re-opening."

"I mean, there's been time, now, hasn't there?" said Combermere.

Rowland Cotton nodded.

"I think it would clear the air on the whole matter, sir," said Major Finch, with his usual precision.

"Well, I have no objection, gentlemen," said Orderson.

He looked at the Stearmans. "I—er—would ask you to come with us, but on top of your ordeal by water I don't know whether you will feel in the mood for another by land, shall we say." He laughed. "All you need now is a flight through the air and you could say you had been exposed to hazards in all three elements!" He smiled at his own inane pun, harmless clerical humour.

Stearman took it in the spirit in which it was meant and smiled back.

"I'd like to come!" he said. Words were going through his mind like express trains. *The creeping coffins of Barbados!* He was involved in a mystery that he had often written about! This wasn't a story! And as far as Stearman was concerned there was no supernatural agency about. His mind was linking the coffins in the Christchurch vault with Zelby and some strange alien shadows called Negons.

Like a man in a dream he found himself following Orderson, Combermere and the others, towards the vault. It seemed odd that anything sinister could lie beneath those white, coral stone blocks. The afternoon sun of that nineteenth century day in Barbados was bright, clean, and awesome.

"Here's my seal," said Combermere.

"And mine!" added Lucas, triumphantly.

"The mark I made is down here," affirmed Clarke.

"Mine is a little above yours!" said Cotton.

"Mine is on the other side, of course, gentlemen." Major Finch indicated the mark he had made.

"Thompson made that mark over there, didn't he?" asked Combermere.

"Yes, and Howard's initials are over here. The mark I myself made is a little lower," said the rector.

"It's like cement—I mean it *is* cement—it's set like rock!" Combermere was stuttering in his excitement. "It's going to be a difficult thing to chip it away, isn't it?"

"See if we can get some plantation workers," said Lucas.

"Yes, a very good idea!" conceded Combermere.

Cotton and Clarke went off in the direction of the neighbouring plantation. While they were gone Combermere, Lucas and the others examined the outside carefully.

"There's no doubt about it," said the Governor, as he finally straightened up, "nothing's been touched. I don't see how anything could have happened here since the last burial."

"At least nothing has got in from the outside, in my opinion," said Stearman.

They looked at him with renewed interest.

"Have you ever investigated any matter of this kind before?" asked Combermere.

"Only indirectly," answered Val, choosing his words with care. "Many things in life are mysterious, gentlemen. I have made it my business, for some years, to examine mysteries."

"Ahm, fascinating," said Lucas.

They continued their exploration of the Barbados tomb's exterior. Val stamped around but there was no sound of a hollow, or passage anywhere. The labourers from the plantation arrived with a certain amount of trepidation, and some practical looking pick-axes.

It was not easy to chip the cement away from the door. When the last pick blow had done its work, Val moved forward and took hold of the side of the marble slab. Two burly plantation labourers took hold of the other side. Bowcher Clarke and Major Finch hovered beside Stearman, ready to take a piece of slab, when there was room for them to get a grip on it.

"Mind your feet, gentlemen," said Stearman with a grin.

The marble slab was massive, weighty. Stearman drew a deep breath and heaved. The plantation labourers were big men and accustomed to long hours of desperate toil, but the pair of them were scarcely able to keep pace with Stearman's lift. The slab came back with an interesting crunch.

The accompaniment of a scraping, rasping noise came from inside the tomb. Val's mind went back to all the accounts he had read, and he could feel the short hairs rising on the nape of his neck. There was something macabre and weird about the scrape of the coffins. One more powerful heave and the slab was back. Another scrape was followed by a heavy thud. Combermere gasped with astonishment.

"God bless us all! Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" cried Orderson devoutly.

The end of a coffin, upside down, now protruded, truculently from the vault.

"Must have been leaning against the door," panted Stearman.

"That might have been what the scraping sound was," rejoined Combermere.

To give the Governor his due, he was first into the vault. Finch followed him. Val and La Noire moved in next, and were followed by Bowcher Clarke and the others.

Nathan Lucas produced paper and a pencil. He began writing furiously as the party moved around the inside of the mysterious tomb.

"There's not a mark on the sand anywhere," said Combermere. "Look!" Apart from their own footsteps the sand was as white and smooth as the beach after the tide has receded.

"No sign of a watermark, either," said Stearman, looking carefully at the walls.

"Dry," said Combermere, "absolutely dry."

"Look at the coffins! They're all over the place," gasped Finch.

"Is there any kind of order in them?" asked Cotton, "or are they just haphazard?"

"Order?" asked Val.

"Well, it looked almost as if they might have been rotated in some way. I'm not a scientist of any kind, all this new chemistry and so on that you read about in the Press from time to time is a lot of mumbo jumbo as far as I'm concerned, but there's no doubt some people see something in it, I mean——" he broke off, "I don't know what I mean. I just wondered, that's all. Somebody was writing to *The Times* only the other day about a new kind of motor, something to do with steam, I believe. I like horses myself, always have done, always will!" There was a glimmer of what Val suspected to be the truth, in Cotton's remarks.

"I think you might be on to something," he said.

"I think this settles the matter as far as I'm concerned." Combermere turned, and led the way out of the tomb.

"What do you mean, Your Excellency?" asked Finch.

"Unless Mr. Orderson has any objection, I would like to see this tomb left open. Re-inter those who can find no rest here, and let there be no more burials."

"Excellent idea, gentlemen," said Orderson. He spoke like a man in a dream. "Whether this is the work of any supernatural agency, or some hitherto unguessed scientific force beyond our comprehension, I don't know; but whatever it is, I think we would be well advised to leave it alone. It may be that elemental spirits resent our use of this place."

"Or it may be nothing of the kind," said Val. "It may be that Mr. Cotton is right, that there are strange forces we do not yet understand, but which are as natural as the wind and the water."

"In either case I think it would be dangerous to oppose them," said Bowcher Clarke, "whether they be part of nature or beyond it."

CHAPTER NINE

Back to the Island

VAL and La Noire had made a pretext of an after dinner constitutional; they were walking hand in hand down the dark road from Oistin to the southern beach, beyond the little plantation where the pirates' boat was wedged above high-water mark. Val felt the dainty fingers within his own, felt the contrast of the flawless skin against his rough, battle-scarred hands. La Noire's fingers nestled inside her husband's great palm, like tiny fledglings protected by a battered old nest, still strong despite its rough hewn appearance. Stearman looked up at the stars, equatorial and southern stars. They had not moved much in a hundred and forty-five years, he thought. The constellations in the mid-1960's were, to all intents and purposes identical to those he saw now on this April night in the year of grace, one thousand eight hundred and twenty. Yet even as he looked Val knew that his total weight of astronomical knowledge was meagre; it meant that any deduction he might try to make, or any conclusion he might attempt to draw, would be more than likely empty at best and fallacious at worst.

He sniffed the air thoughtfully and appreciatively. There was a warm scent of spice and the freshness of palms and canes. He listened to the sound of surf on the coral beach. His mind winged over countless centuries, and he thought of the patient life-work of the little coral creatures, living in their colonies, dying, leaving behind their tiny shells, each one a minute brick in the great building of the island. What did they do beyond the beach? Their reefs and shoals, forming lagoons and barriers, giving protection on the one hand, and destruction on the other. By themselves nothing—less

than nothing: in colonies, imponderably strong; united we stand, thought Stearman, divided we fall; another truism, another platitude, another maxim. He smiled wryly to himself in the darkness. The moon came up, gentle and low. They reached the edge of the luxuriant growth of verdant, tropical plants, and stepped out across the coral strand separating the sea from the fertile soil of the island. "I think we ought to get back to Elspeth," said La Noire. "I'm worried about her."

Val nodded.

"I think so, too," he said. "The coffin business may have mystified Combermere and his friends, and given the Reverend Orderson a nasty touch of the apocalypitics and the eschatological nadgers, but as far as I can read the omens I would blame the rotating cadaver boxes on friend Zelby."

"Yes, I think so, too," said La Noire.

"That all?" asked Val.

"There is another possibility," said La Noire.

They were halfway across the beach now; there were white, luminous microscopic things in clusters close to the surface of the sea.

"It has to be one or the other," said Val.

"I hope it's Zelby!"

"So do I!"

"If it's not, is there anything we can do about it?"

"If it's the *Negons* they are probably mainly concerned with their saucer," said Val.

"Yeeesss," La Noire had grown very thoughtful.

The beach ended in a line of moonlit surf a hundred yards ahead of them. The black shape of the boat rested just above the high tide line. The moonlight cast shadows above spiral shells, giving the beach the appearance of a bizarre graveyard in a piece of *avant guard* art. Val and La Noire had slowed their pace as though both were reluctant to go back to the boat and the island where Elspeth Jermyn waited with Napoleon and the trussed pirates.

"Suppose the *Negons* came and took their saucer," said La Noire quietly.

"Suppose they took Elspeth," added Val.

"Suppose it was too late," went on La Noire.

"You mean what could we do if they'd already come?" Val shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps we were wrong to leave."

"Silly of me," said La Noire, "but I suppose it's the night and the stars, the breeze, the sound of the sea and the beach, all these things are so real, so romantic . . ."

"Were you about to say that you wished we could stay, forever, here?" said Val. "Think of what we would be leaving behind," he went on. "Mac, the *Globe*, and all that goes to make up twentieth century life, fast cars, night life, television . . ."

"Would it really be such a sacrifice?" asked La Noire, thoughtfully.

"What has this age to offer in place of it?" asked Val.

"Moonlight on the beach," she answered.

"Aren't there any moonlit beaches left in the twentieth century?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose there must be some if we take the trouble to look for them, if only we can find them . . ."

"There must always be moonlit beaches," said Stearman, quietly. "They are part of something inside man, they can't ever be lost completely." He grinned. "It's just that the more fast cars we make the further we have to drive them to find solitude."

"Which those same cars have destroyed," said La Noire. "Odd, isn't it? Life is a paradox."

"It's more than a paradox, if what the *Negons* showed us is real."

La Noire shrugged, and her beautiful hair moved gently against the nape of her neck and on the edges of her shoulders.

"There has to be something even beyond the *Negons*. Zelby has to be right."

They had reached the boat. Val put his hand on the gun-whale.

"This was just so much whimsy, wasn't it?" he said quietly.

She nodded.

"Yes, darling."

He put his arm around her waist and they looked out over the surf.

"We couldn't abandon Elspeth."

"Of course not!"

"Sometimes I used to dream," said Val, "dream of stepping off the roundabout of time."

"Would you like to?" asked La Noire.

"I don't often think about it," said Val, "I have realised that——" he hesitated. "Look, darling, I know we've always hedged around this subject; I've never been keen to bring it up, and I don't think you have; when I've been on the verge of saying something, you've turned the idea away. I think I must say it now."

"Are you sure you want to?" she asked.

The night had grown suddenly still. The surf seemed to be listening. The ocean was holding its breath. The breeze died down almost to nothing. Val could hear the beating of his own heart. "I think it's as good a time as any," he said. He smiled rather wryly. "A lot of men would say 'there's no time like the present,' as far as I'm concerned there's no time like the past, 145 years in the past, and quite a way away in distance as well——"

"Go on, darling." La Noire took his great right hand in both of hers and leaned back a little. He could feel a strange tension in her.

"It must be over twenty years now," said Stearman softly, "over twenty years since we first met."

"Yes," she breathed.

"A few weeks ago I was looking at some old photographs. You haven't changed, not by one scrap. It's not clever make-

up; there's more to it than that. It isn't just physical appearance. There're a lot of other things, too."

"Such as?" her voice was strangely breathless.

"All the things you know, darling. The way old places are familiar, more than familiar."

She nodded.

"It's been on my mind a long time," said Val. "Almost since the day we met. Every month, every year makes the feeling stronger." He laughed. "And now I've got to say it."

The sea was still hushed, the breeze still motionless. La Noire held her breath, her eyes as wide, as dark and as bright as the starry heavens, flashing with tiny points of light amid a deep infinite darkness.

"Are you immortal?" The words were wrung from Stearman as though they had been torn from him against his will by some great supernatural force.

La Noire looked back at him steadily.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know; but I do know that even if you're not, there is much more to you than normal human mortality."

She nodded quietly.

"There was once a race that was old before the ancient empires," she said quietly.

"Who were the ancient empires?" asked Val. "Egypt? Babylon?"

She nodded.

"But we were before them."

"Are you a Cretan?" asked Val.

"My people are older than Crete, older than Minos."

Val looked out over the sea again, counting waves, watching white horses racing to destruction in the moonlight.

"Are we really talking about this at last?" said Val, speaking very softly.

"Val, will this come between us? Can you still love me?"

"Of course!"

"Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything!"

"You're not, you're not——" she hesitated.

"Jealous, do you mean, because your life span is so much better than mine? No, my darling, I'm not jealous, I'm *glad*. I'm very, *very* glad. I'm sorry I can't join you. I'd like to; I suppose there's a streak in every man that wants to be immortal, but I don't begrudge it to you because I can't have it. It just gives me a sense of deep joy to know that it's yours."

She sighed, and then laid her head on his shoulder, crying unashamedly.

After a long time Val noticed a strange bright light from the corner of his eye.

"That could be coming from the island," he said. "It could also mean trouble." And thought was lost in action . . .

He launched the pirate row-boat with a powerful heave of muscle-knotted shoulders. It skimmed with surprising lightness across the surface of the Caribbean towards the small, nameless island where he and La Noire had left Elspeth and the pirates.

It all seemed strangely dream-like to Stearman as he rowed, and yet his real inner consciousness, his ultimate self, was prepared to accept it as the truth, prepared to accept it as a reality.

"I'm sure you are right about the coffins," said La Noire.

"The more you think about it the more obvious it becomes," said Val. "Just assume that it was Zelby . . ."

"Wouldn't it be more likely to be he than the Negons?"

"Support your argument!" said Val with a grin.

"I mean if the Negons realised what Zelby had done, they, as past masters of saucer operation, would have been able to find us immediately. Whoever is trying to find us is doing it by guess-work. Although the errors are only small, he's getting his time shift co-ordinates slightly wrong."

"Yes. I would accept that, and it does point to Zelby rather than Negons," agreed Val. It seemed to lend a light-

ness to his rowing, and they returned to the island in less time than it had taken them to reach Barbados. As Val and La Noire hauled the boat powerfully up on the beach, Elspeth and Napoleon ran to meet them.

The negro was chattering his teeth, and rolling his eyes. Elspeth looked happy and excited.

"You saw our signal, then?"

"We saw something," said Val. "We assumed it was a signal."

"Dr. Zelby's back," said Elspeth.

"D-d-d-d-dis man," said Napoleon, "dis man, sah, he jus' appeared! He jus' appeared kinda outa *nowhere*!"

"It's all right," said Val, "but it would take too long to explain; there's nothing to be frightened about. The man who appeared is Dr. Zelby; he's a good friend, a useful friend."

"Ah sure is relieved to hear you say dat, sah. Ah, sho' is relieved." The coloured boy regained some small measure of control over his chattering teeth.

"He really did throw a scare into me, sir, yes he did!" Napoleon's teeth were still chattering audibly as he spoke.

Val led the way back towards the saucer. He looked at Zelby with a mixture of awe and admiration. There was gentle irony in his voice.

"I hope you know what you've done to the chroniclers of the unusual," he said. "The field you set up in an attempt to locate us had an odd effect on some lead coffins."

Zelby smiled a thin, wry smile. He fingered his beard.

"When I read the story for the first time," he said dryly, "I was interested in the occult, and I thought, in my rather naive way, that here was a mystery science would be unable to explain away. I imagined great supernatural forces at work, forces so powerful that in their psychic limbs lead caskets glided like bubbles in the gala moments of the Dance Macabre. In more erratic flights of fancy I saw the supernatural strength of zombies at work among the dead. I saw

foul ghouls and fiendish werewolves with the eye of the mind, and I said 'here is a link between the world of mortal men and the supernatural, and I clasped this mystery in my mind with such strange events as the devil's footprints, the loss of the *Waratah*, the abandonment of the *Mury Celeste*, the mysteries of Easter Island, the appearance of Casper Hauser in Nuremberg, and the vanishing of Benjamin Bathurst. I classed it in my mind with names like D. D. Home and levitation. I thought of sea monsters, unidentified flying objects, and the vanishing lighthouse keepers of the north." Now there was undeniable humour in his voice. "But what do I find? Neither ghouls, nor werewolf, no zombie, but *me*— I find that it is I, myself, who moved the creeping coffins of Barbados. And not with chicanery nor prestidigitation, but with a scientific electro-magnetic ray impulse, travelling across not only space but time, coming down inside the universe, from outside. The tip of a badly aimed vortex!"

"Tell us more," said Val eagerly

"There is really very little more to tell," said Zelby. "I knew the Negons were coming, and thought they were comparatively powerless to harm me you were not in the same position, so I had to get you back inside, what is still to you," he looked at La Noire knowingly. "and even to you, madam, the *real* world. It was better to misplace you by a few years or a few miles, than to have the Negons attack while you were up there"

"You say they are unable to harm you?" asked Elspeth. "How is that Doctor?"

"You remember discovering my corpse on the floor of my laboratory?" he said casually, as casually as though he were discussing an old raincoat which had been inadvertently left hanging in a friend's hall.

"Yes," answered Val.

"It was, from what I can remember, rather an unpleasant corpse," said Zelby, choosing his words with care. "Most of the middle had gone."

"Yes," said Val, quietly. "It was hardly the sort of thing to leave lying around, if you follow me."

"*Eviscerated* is the term that comes most readily to mind," acknowledged Zelby. The dry humour which Elspeth remembered from his letter, was becoming more pronounced the longer he spoke. "The Negons are unable to harm me, because having passed beyond terrestrial death—for want of a better term—I am vibrating at a very different frequency from theirs!" He spread his hands. "I would tell you more if I could, I assure you. My reticence is by no means deliberate. You must remember that all my data was acquired for terrestrial life. Although I am now outside time, and, to a certain extent, also outside space, I have about as much mastery of my environment as a very small toddler has over his or her legs. The analogy is quite an accurate one. My powers of movement and balance in the greater world, as I like to think of it, are developing with practice. I cannot say with time, because there appears to be no real chronology here. Once you are on this side it feels as though you've never been anywhere else. Memories of terrestrial life exist, but not necessarily in proper order. It is as though a man of vivid imagination had been to a library and there read a great many books. His imagination is so vivid that each book seems real to him; and while he is actually in process of reading it, in a sense, he lives out the lives of his characters. He becomes, in a sense, a part of the plot, and *while he is reading the book is reality to him*; it's his life. When he puts the book down again and comes out of the library he realises that the library is only that, and the stories he has read are only words between printed covers. What he cannot remember always, or what he is not able to reproduce with complete accuracy, on every occasion, is the order in which he read the books. Now that he is no longer involved in them, nor in allowing his sensitive imagination to have full reign and free play, he looks at them so objectively that, even though the impact is not lost, it is reduced drastically. So

you see, although I still have my ordinary space/time survival data, I have it in the wrong order to some extent, and I am, at the same time, attempting to learn new survival data. The whole affair is greatly complicated by the interference of the Negons in human society." He paused.

"This is all very confusing," said La Noire, "even to me." He looked at her searchingly.

"It is made more confusing by the existence of the probability tracks," he said, quietly.

"Yes," agreed Val.

"However," went on Zelby, "the great thing now is to return the three of you to the mid-1960's and, if possible, London of the mid-1960's. The threat presented by the Negons is in a sense not as drastic as at first appeared, yet in another sense, a thousand times more so." He went on, "The real purpose of life, as I see it now, is almost as a kind of training ground, a preparation, a battle school, in which psychic qualities can be developed. If the Negons break into and influence human society to such an extent that we are without real purpose, and it seems only a stage set, only a strange charade with human beings as puppets—mindless and helpless—then those qualities which can only be developed in a world which seems absolutely real will not be developed."

He shrugged.

"I am not the world's greatest orator, and the intervention of the process we call death, has not improved my powers of self expression. Come."

He opened the portal of the ship and gestured to Val, La Noire and Elspeth to go inside.

"You had better tell your apprentice that he can release the others and take them back to Barbados, or anywhere else they want to go," he said quietly. "If Combermere knows they're on the island they'll be better off dead," he added.

"How do you know about Combermere?" asked Val.

"If you could see things, as I can, from the other side,

you wouldn't ask an obvious question like that. For me to explain to you how I can be in several places at once in a three dimensional world would be like trying to explain the colour red to a man who has been blind from birth."

"Forget it," said Stearman. "I take the analogy."

"Make yourselves comfortable," said Zelby, closing the door of the saucer.

"Where are we going now?" asked Val.

"Providing I haven't made any errors," said Zelby, "we should be going back to within striking distance of your flat, and as close as I can get you in time to the point where the Negon interrupted you."

CHAPTER TEN

Crossfire

ZELBY smiled with an almost benign authority. There was something almost patronising about him. Val had a kind of instinctive feeling that Zelby was exhibiting the over confidence that precedes a brisk, and spectacular fall. His brows furrowed as though he were on the verge of saying something critical or cautionary.

La Noire's deeper, more sensitive instincts, her greater knowledge and experience of humanity, warned her, too, that all was not well. But like Val, she hesitated to voice either her doubts or her criticism. Elspeth saw the uneasiness on the faces of the Stearmans and her psychological training told her that in some way Zelby and the saucer were at the root of their misgivings. The doctor was doing things with the controls. A humming noise that grew until it sounded as though the universe was changing gear, filled the ship until the scintillating dodecahedron began to revolve. The facets disappeared from view, the revolving movement slowed, paused for a moment, and then accelerated again, as

though to Val's way of thinking, a car had faltered, misfired, and then picked up as the engine began to warm. The saucer rushed through the greyness.

Elspeth wanted to say something, but stopped to analyse her own desire to speak, and realised it bore too close a parallel to the feelings of St. Peter on the mount of Transfiguration. It was an almost pathological urge to say something, and speaking for the sake of hearing one's own voice seemed pointless to Elspeth. Zelby was doing more things to the controls. He was pressing buttons and manipulating handles. All sorts of paradoxical ideas went through Stearman's mind. There were things about the ship that were as anachronistic as its door and observation ports, as far as the Negons were concerned. It was obvious to him that they had either adopted the ship from some other rightful parent, or they had once been physical enough to need doors and controls. Val wondered which it was; and if the Negons had ever possessed a true humanity he wondered what form their humanity had taken. Terrestrial or something *other*?

"I'm afraid," began Zelby, and Val's suspicions erupted in a climax of doubt.

"What's wrong?" The rich baritone was not critical, but there was certainly an edge to it.

Somehow the situation seemed so incongruous to Stearman that he could nearly see the funny side of it . . . but not quite. Zelby, as a non-physical entity, was peculiar: just acceptable scientifically, logically and rationally, but all the same weird and disconcerting. A psychic entity who was inefficient increased his humanity but put himself almost in the same category as H. G. Wells' classic "inexperienced ghost." An inefficient psychic entity was, paradoxically, to Val's way of thinking, both more and less real than an awe-inspiring psychic entity. Because Zelby could still make mistakes it seemed all the more reasonable and possible to believe in him, yet there was an almost farcical air of impossible comedy about the whole thing. Stearman got a very strong

impression that if he had been reading about it, or watching it on the silver screen, he would have found it intensely funny. On the other hand, being *involved* in it was anything but funny.

La Noire and Elspeth were on their feet, moving towards the centre of the ship where the psychic Zelby wrestled with recalcitrant controls. There was a sound of something breaking, a noise like tearing metal, and the greyness vanished; it was as though they had been watching a film sequence, which had cut suddenly from fog on Dartmoor to the brightly lit interior of the prison governor's office . . .

"We've landed," said the doctor.

"Well?" said La Noire, quietly, and uncharacteristically. She looked less sympathetic than Val.

Elspeth looked inquiringly at Zelby.

"What's happened?"

He looked from one to the other.

"They are closer than I expected," he said rather unhappily. "They were able to use an influence beam——" he shrugged. "It would be a very difficult thing to explain."

"What exactly is it?"

"It's outside any concept of terrestrial science with which you might be familiar. I was just getting to the edge of it," he looked at Elspeth. "The programme cards, they held the secret. What has happened to us goes to prove that I was right. If only I can get you back eventually, the data on those programming cards will erect a shield which the Negons will be unable to penetrate, but the very fact that my data was correct works against us. It was a two-edged weapon, I fear. The Negons are able to reach us through the continuum; they threw out our time co-ordinate, and although they struck our space co-ordinate as well, according to the dials they haven't done us too much harm in that field. The probability track stabiliser was too strong for them, but we are still a long way in the past."

"How far?" asked Val.

Zelby consulted the dials, then shook his head.

"We've come forward very little," he said. "This shows something close to the quarter century mark."

"You mean from where we were?" demanded Val.

"Hm-hm, perhaps a bit more than that, so we'd be round about 1845, 1850." Zelby hesitated. "Perhaps a bit later, 1855 even."

"I see." Val also hesitated. He thought that 1855 ought to ring a bell, and at the moment it didn't. He had an uneasy sensation akin to that which had been created by the knowledge that he was on Barbados in 1820.

"You've no idea where we are?"

"Oh, yes, they weren't able to hit my space co-ordinates as powerfully as they jammed our timing," explained Zelby.

"Well," said Val, "are you going to be more specific?"

He was not the most even tempered of men. Fleet Street does not produce a breed renowned for their equanimity. The events of the last few hours would have been enough to tax the patience of saints.

"Well, according to calculations," went on Zelby, "we should be round about latitude 3W and longitude 51N."

"That doesn't tell me very much," said Stearman, "I'm not basically a navigator, you know. Where are we? England? Mid-Atlantic? *Where?*"

"We were heading home from the Caribbean, heading north-west from the Caribbean," said Zelby.

"You mean we're now floating around somewhere in the Atlantic?" asked Val again. "The saucer feels as though it's down, but I can't see a damn thing out there. It's pitch dark."

La Noire was peering through the nearest of the observation ports.

"I think it's snowing," she said.

"Snowing!" ejaculated Val.

"Hmm, we're certainly on land."

Zelby was consulting some kind of three dimensional charting device on the side of the vast, silver-grey unit.

"What's that?" enquired Stearman.

"Just a moment." Zelby pressed another button and punched tape appeared, like a thin, white tongue being thrust rudely between the sparse, insolent, metal lips of the computer.

"Well?" Elspeth could scarcely contain herself.

"South Devon," announced Zelby.

Again Stearman felt as though he ought to know the connection between 1855, a winter's day in 1855 at that, and south Devon.

"The only way to find out for sure," said Zelby, "is to go out and have a look."

Val sounded a little dubious. "The last time I got out," he murmured, half to himself and half to the others, "I found myself taking on Captain Kidd, and half the buccaneers in the Caribbean!"

Zelby gave a dry, sardonic laugh.

"If this is Devon, not Cornwall, I don't think we shall encounter any pirates! Penzance, I believe, was their Gilbertian rendezvous!"

Even Val could not prevent himself from smiling a little. It was difficult not to smile at the dry humour which Zelby evinced from time to time. The doctor moved over and unfastened the doors. Val went out first, followed by La Noire and Elspeth. There was a high pitched whining sound from the computer. Val raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"Warning note," said Zelby. "Negons aren't far away, probably going to attack."

"That's a delightful thought!" conceded Stearman. "What do we do now?"

"It might help considerably if we knew where we were," answered Zelby. "The more accurately I can pin-point my position, the more accurately I can take bearings when we take off."

"You intend to take evasive action then?" asked Val. interrogatively.

"It would be our best course, yes," answered Zelby.

La Noire and Elspeth exchanged meaningful glances; La Noire's deep, dark, mysterious eyes seemed to say: If he does as well next time as he did this time, I don't know where we shall finish up! Like Val, she was trying to associate the winter of 1855 with south Devon. Having alighted, the suspicions that had formed in her mind about the snow, as she looked through the observation port, were confirmed. It was snowing. There was already a fair covering on the ground. There were no tors or high land masses anywhere to be seen on the darkened horizon, but with the snow and the very dim light reflecting up from it there was so little to be seen that this was not surprising.

Zelby produced cylinders of gleaming grey metal alloy from inside the mysterious cubic structure, that served, or appeared to serve, both as computer and power unit. He handed one to Stearman and kept the other himself. Light from the cylinder flashed out like a gleaming sword in front of them. Snow flakes, caught in the beam, reflected and refracted.

"It's only a guess," said Zelby at last, "but I think that's the estuary of the Exe just ahead of us." Before he had time to say more there came a screaming, warning whine from inside the saucer. He glanced over his shoulder. Elspeth was staring at the warning indicator as though it was a dangerous wild animal, on the point of savaging her. Zelby frowned, stood undecided for a moment, looking out through the open door and then back towards the indicator.

"We'll have to risk it," he said, suddenly and cryptically.

Stearman didn't know what it was they had to risk, but he wasn't keen on the inference. Elspeth, looking up through the curved plasto-glass of the observation port opposite the door, saw lights in the sky, disc-shaped lights, descending: swooping like illuminated owls.

"If they get us on the ground we're done for." Zelby's voice sounded strangely matter-of-fact.

"Suppose they attacked *you* directly," said Val, "could you die *again*?"

"I don't know," said Zelby, with commendable candour. "I just don't know . . . I thought I was safe . . . now I have doubts."

Phrases like 'the second death' were going through La Noire's esoteric mind. Zelby closed the doors and did urgent, desperate things to the control panel. The saucer leapt upwards as though the ground upon which it had rested had suddenly become incredibly hot! Val was flung off balance and clutched at the side of the saucer to steady himself. Elspeth and La Noire rolled across the floor in helpless disarray. Val regained his own balance and caught them before they struck the side of the saucer.

Zelby was hanging on to the controls, and there was a look of strained desperation on his face that brooked no question. The disc ship shivered and shook with blood chilling vibrations; through the reeling observation ports Val and his companions saw streaks of strange, pale grey light leaping towards them from the three opposing vessels. Where the grey beams struck the snow strange curved marks appeared, as though the power of the hostile weapon was unable to operate effectively at low temperatures, or as though punches were being pulled when the weapon operators realised they had reached the wrong target.

The three discs were now at eleven, twelve and one o'clock high and coming down fast. Zelby flung the controls back and forth, pressing buttons like an insane typist out to beat the world speed record, or a berserk accordionist playing 'The Flight of the Bumble Bee' with his bass studs!

The disc ship spun like a gigantic coin flipped by a gambling gargantuan. The deadly silver streaks continued to flash past. Val and La Noire clung to Elspeth, and hung on to the saucer's rim fittings while Zelby wrestled with the

controls with all the dramatic impact of a Greek statue of *Conflict*, brought up to date by an imaginative modern sculptor.

There was a rift in the snow clouds, and as Zelby dived low again to evade the withering fire of his pursuers the south Devon countryside opened out like a great white and silver panorama, the backdrop to a stage on which the unequal duel was being fought out.

Topsham, Lymington, Exmouth, Dawlish and Teignmouth could all be seen and the heights above Starcross in the west were visible like the wings of a settling cosmic predator. Then the clouds closed in again and Zelby climbed steeply.

For an instant the pursuit was taken by surprise; the fugitives were out of range of the deadly grey-white weapons . . . temporarily at least.

"Are there no armaments on the ship?" asked Val, to whom running had always seemed a poor substitute for retaliation.

"Nothing very powerful," apologised Zelby. "Those three against us are Negon battle cruisers, or their equivalent. This is primarily an observation ship, a merchantman, if you take the analogy."

"No armaments at all, then?" Val's voice sounded incredulous. "Surely there must be *something*?"

"I don't know all that much about them," confessed Zelby. "I've learnt a lot in a short time, but I'm still something of an amateur."

"Right, tell me what there is then," said Val, "no matter how ineffective."

"There's a magnetic repeller screen, but that's defensive rather than offensive."

"Look out! Here they come again!" shouted Elspeth, cutting across Zelby's words.

The grey-white pencil-weapons raked across the clouds above the saucer again; where two of the beams struck each other there was a brilliant white spot in the sky, a pyro-

technic fusion as bright as a magnesium flare. Streaks of green and red fire flashed out from the collision spot.

"It's only a matter of time before they hit us, unless we can do something," said La Noire, with a kind of practical pessimism.

"I'll try and get the repellers up," replied Zelby. He made quick movements with the controls and the dodecahedron began to glow with a slightly purple tint.

"I think we're all right now," Zelby didn't sound too sure of himself.

The incongruity of an 'uncertain ghost' presented itself strongly to Stearman's mind again. He wanted to laugh. The three gleaming discs began to circle.

"Like Indians attacking a wagon train," said Elspeth, with a brave attempt at humour.

"Aye, we can load the muskets," said Stearman. His mind conjured up a picture of the dramatic defence of the settlers in the pioneering days of the Old West, and as the eye of the mind gave him a picture of smoke and flame belching from the muzzle of a discharging musket, another idea presented itself to him.

"Does this thing throw out any kind of exhaust, like a rocket?" he asked.

"No, nothing of that kind," answered Zelby, flatly. "Were you hoping to use it as a weapon?"

"Crossed my mind," answered Val. His voice did not completely conceal his disappointment. There had to be *something*. He thought of the adventures in which he had been involved in the past. He thought of stories which he had read. Always, *always* at the last minute something had turned up! He wondered whether what seemed now to have amounted to something akin to a charmed existence had made him regard Serendipity as his birthright. Maybe he had believed for too long in things that turned up! Maybe they only came if you didn't take them for granted? Maybe they were a kind of reward for people who didn't expect the easy

way out? Perhaps the whole thing was a series of coincidences! This was neither the time nor the place for involved metaphysical or ethical speculation, thought Val. La Noire left the rim and moved across to the centre. She stood studying a mass of dials, buttons, levers and control switches at the top: the console of the grey-cased unit.

"Is there any kind of ejector apparatus?" she asked suddenly. "Any means of disposing of rubbish, for example?"

"That would be as anachronistic as the door opening mechanism, if there was one," answered Zelby. "I never really thought about it."

"Look out!" cried Elspeth again. The Negon discs were converging on them, their grey weapon beams flashing like angry knives of light in the wintry Devon sky.

"Yes, that's the ejector," said Zelby, and pointed.

"Where would you put the stuff?" La Noire clung on to the side of the casing. Val and Elspeth hung on to their respective places on the rim. The saucer ducked and shook, as Zelby flung it out of the way of the pencil beams.

"This is like an end game in chess, where the king is opposed by the enemy king, bishop and knight," he gritted.

"Don't forget that even the king can take!" said La Noire, "and that neither knight nor bishop is a 'strong' piece and can be forked."

"True," agreed Zelby, and pressed another button as one of the white beams came so close that it was deflected from their electro-magnetic force field in a shower of bright red and green sparks. The saucer was trembling, like an aspen leaf in the breeze.

"Can you get above one of them," roared Val, "then we could use the ejector, as La Noire says."

"I'll try," answered Zelby.

"It looks as though they are playing into our hands!" said Stearman. His eyes flashed from the centre panel, through the observation port. One of the Negon disc ships was trying to get underneath Zelby's craft.

"There's the ejector lock aperture," said the doctor, pointing to his right. It was half way between the rim and the central dodecahedron.

"What can we eject?" she asked.

"Anything that's detachable!"

Val took hold of a stanchion handle. He could think of no better description for the oddly curved metal projection, and looked questioningly at Zelby.

"I don't think it's essential!" called the doctor.

Val flung his weight against it with a powerful wrench and the stanchion came away in his hand. He tossed it carefully to La Noire. She caught it deftly, opened the door of the ejector hatch, thrust it inside, closed the hatch, and nodded to Zelby.

"He's right underneath," said Val.

Zelby fired the ejector button. There was a hissing, plopping sound, a sibilant, eruptive noise. The alien disc ship had not raised its own defence force field. A man does not usually go duck shooting wearing a bullet-proof waistcoat.

The impact of the improvised weapon seemed violently out of proportion to its size. Val realised that it was the enemy saucer's own speed which had provided most of the devastating force. He wondered for several minutes about the place of luck in the great scheme of things. The metal fragment struck one of the visiports on the enemy's rim, where there was a weakness between the metal and the plastoglass. At that speed the sudden inrush of air must have been fantastic, even for anything as nebulous as a black shadow. Neron But the metal handle had done more. It was a spanner in the works literally and metaphorically. The metal disc ship spun on its edge for a moment, twisting and whirling in a hopelessly erratic manner. Then, like an old fashioned bi-plane, in a stall, it went screeching down into the wide, deep estuary of the Exe.

There was a morbid splash and as Val, La Noire and Elspeth stared out through the observation ports, they saw

shards of ice and cascades of cold water mounting like the wings of some liquid flying serpent in the centre of the estuary.

Val looked across to the opposite port.

"They're coming in again," he announced.

"Right!" Zelby seemed to have taken fresh courage from the destruction of the first of their pursuers.

"They won't be at all sure whether we did that or whether it was an accident," he said with a kind of grim satisfaction.

Stearman couldn't help wondering how a spirit must feel, when in an oddly physical way, it destroys those who killed its body while it was mortal. He thought if he had been Zelby he would have derived quite a lot of satisfaction from the operation, but perhaps on the Other Side, vengeance was too menial a motive to be of any service to a resurrected mind.

Perhaps 'resurrected' was the wrong term, thought Val again: a *liberated* mind, a mind unhampered by the confines of a body.

"They're going!" said Elspeth.

"You're right," agreed La Noire.

Zelby locked the controls so that the disc ship hovered. Val and the doctor joined the two girls on the far side of the ejector hatch.

"Yes, they're going. I wonder why?" said Zelby.

"It could be that they assumed we had a weapon they didn't understand because of the loss of their ship," said Val.

"Very likely, very likely," agreed Zelby. Val looked at the others, particularly at La Noire, then with a slow smile she turned to Zelby.

"Do you think, as the urgency is over, we could take more time adjusting the controls?"

Zelby would have blushed had he still been human. As it was he smiled, a broad, apologetic smile.

"*Touché*, madam, and well deserved!" he said softly. "I will indeed do my best."

La Noire went over to the controls. Val watched without making any suggestions; Elspeth stood on the other side, shifting her weight restlessly from one foot to the other. Once or twice her lips began to part, as though she was on the verge of saying something, but she didn't speak.

Val remained silent as Zelby's long, purposeful finger came down on the vital button. The disc ship seemed to lose itself in a grey mist. The Devon countryside melted into a canescence which was vaguer than the snow clouds. Val was aware of a blackness other than the blackness of night. They were moving through hyperspace, moving through time, moving through the co-ordinates of infinity, in a way that defied the human mind to follow the ship's path. The process slowed and reversed itself. Black gave way to grey, and grey, in turn, dissolved and broadcast its strands into the neon lit London night.

Val felt a strange power seize him. He was in a vortex, he knew it. The vortex was carrying him back to the place from which it had taken him.

As though from a thousand years past, or a thousand miles distant, he heard the faintest of echoes of a voice calling: 'Good-bye' . . . and he knew that it was Zelby.

The next thing he was certain of was sprawling on his own lounging carpet. A moment later La Noire landed beside him, followed by a dishevelled, breathless Elspeth.

"So, we're back," said Val.

"And we've cleared up two of the world's greatest unsolved mysteries!" said La Noire.

"I think the solutions pose problems greater than the mysteries they've cleared!" returned Stearman as he helped them to their feet.

"You told me about the Barbados coffins," said Elspeth, "and I understood that, but what was the second mystery?"

"The Devil's Footprints," answered Stearman, "in February, 1855."

"Oh, I know the story! Of course!" said Elspeth. "The mysterious trail that appeared overnight!"

"Now we know what caused it," said Val. "Those pencil weapons of the Negons, when they raked through the air after us. There were one or two moments when we were flying very, very low. I actually glimpsed lines of marks on the ground."

There was a thoughtful silence, and La Noire said, "I'll make some coffee."

"I must get back to the hostel as soon as I can; I want to get the programme sheets: you know, Zelby's vibration formula: the one that will prevent the Negons from interfering again, from using us as a kind of stage set."

"Forget the coffee," said Val. "First things first! Let's get the programme sheets!"

He ran out to the lift with Elspeth. La Noire was close behind. Val cursed the slowness of the mechanical descent. He always found it quicker to run down the stairs! But he knew that the lift would be faster for the three of them together. It seemed to crawl down with irritating slowness. It stopped at last and they raced for the garage. Stearman cursed the cold engine, as with choke fully out he nosed the powerful sports saloon through the darkness of the London night.

They reached the university hostel and Val waited anxiously outside as Elspeth ran in to check the programming sheets, which she had left in the locker beside her bed. It took several seconds before her fingers were sufficiently under control to fumble the key into the lock, turn it . . .

. . . and find the locker empty.

Where was Zelby's formula?

Just for one terrifying second the girl thought she saw a black shadow out of the corner of her eye, slinking away through a hole in reality.

She walked back slowly, like a girl in a trance. Val and La Noire didn't have to ask, *and somehow reality never seemed quite the same again. . . .*

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