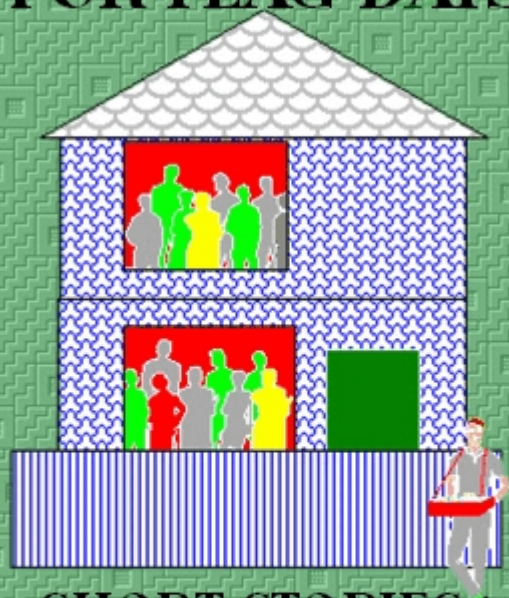


INDOOR GAMES FOR FLAG DAYS



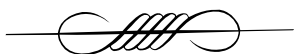
SHORT STORIES
VOLUME ONE
1975-1979

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01. The Hidden Face
JOHN PATTERSON

MS Found Among My Father's Papers

Several weeks have passed since the occurrence of those events, which I shall describe here, and I feel able now to approach the task objectively. As I write, I have my journal to hand, but I feel sure that my memory will need little assistance from this source. Accounts of the climax of my 'adventure' have appeared in the newspapers, but I believe that we have been successful in concealing the strangest facts from those not connected directly with the affair, and we have thereby evaded a great deal of unwelcome attention.

Nevertheless, I feel bound to set down a personal account of this singular affair, if only for my own reference in years to come. I am certain that, with the passage of time, my most exact memories will assume the character of those fantastic recollections, which one may retain after a dream..., or a nightmare. This account may be my sole means of convincing myself that any of that which follows really happened to me.

On reflection, I find that I must begin my story three weeks before the main sequence of events, in order to add a degree of perspective to that which occurred.

My first year at the University was drawing to a close. My colleagues in the Department of History seemed to be thinking only of their plans for the coming long vacation as the exceptional summer of the year 1902 unfolded before us. I, for my part, had made no such plans; other than to spend some time in the main library, making necessary improvements to my lecture notes. I confess that I was enjoying the state of lassitude that accompanies the end of the academic year.

The normal, genteel hubbub was dying away as if some great engine were running down, and a blanket of tranquillity seemed to be descending on the whole district. At times like these, the University seems to close in upon itself, to create an island, which is almost totally isolated from the rest of the world, and it is quite easy to lose all sense of the passage of time.

It was during the first week of my solitary studies that there came in to my possession a catalogue of an exhibition of Mayan artefacts, which was held some thirty years ago. This fateful discovery was made quite by chance while browsing through a pile of second-hand books in a small shop near the University. I noted with interest that the exhibition had been opened by our own Professor Maddock, and placed the catalogue carefully to one side, intending to show it to the Professor when next we met.

Two weeks later, I realized that I had completed the greater part of my work in the library. I decided, therefore, to take a break from my labours. Perhaps I had over-estimated the amount of work involved, or I had found the atmosphere at the University very much to my liking, but my work had turned to pleasure and it had proceeded that much faster.

The weather being fine and warm, I packed a few essentials, including a stout pair of boots, and took the train to South Wales. After a week or so of enjoying the countryside on foot, I felt sure that I would be able to return to the University refreshed and with a renewed enthusiasm for the remainder of my researches.

And thus I found myself, five weeks ago to the day, at an inn near the border of Glamorganshire and Brecknockshire. I arrived, somewhat fatigued, in the early evening. The innkeeper managed to convey the impression that I had been fortunate to secure room and board for the night. As I seemed to be the only guest, I merely assumed that he had

seen better times, and was trying to keep up appearances.

I was just finishing a most excellent dinner, cooked by the innkeeper's wife and served by one of the local girls, when I chanced to hear the name 'Mavender'. The name seemed familiar to me for some reason, which I could not find, and I glanced across at its source. Two men of middle years, presumably locals, were sitting at the bar, clutching tarnished, pewter tankards.

These gentlemen, I learned, were discussing the hire of a wagon for some purpose connected with 'The Mavenders'. Unfortunately, they chose to misinterpret my interest in their dealings, and rather pointedly turned their backs on me to continued their discussion in their native Welsh.

It was not until I retired to my spartan but clean room that I recalled that the name Mavender was featured prominently in the catalogue of the Mayan exhibition. Looking quickly through a few papers that I had brought with me (I am unable to sever my academic ties completely, even when on holiday), I found the catalogue and observed that one of the main exhibitors had been the Mavender family.

Was this a coincidence? I asked myself. Mavender is by no means a common name. Having arrived in this part of the country almost by chance, I felt bound to investigate.

The following morning, I asked the inn-keeper if he knew of a family called Mavender in the district. He was able to give me directions for reaching The Mavender House, his tone of voice implying the capital letters. Being himself a relative newcomer to the district, as someone with expertise in Welsh accents would, no doubt, have discerned, the innkeeper could tell me little of the family, or so he said. He did know, however, that the household included two brothers, both aged over sixty, and that the younger was generally referred to as 'The Professor'.

Fortified by a hearty breakfast, I set out in the direction indicated by the innkeeper. My way lay along a well-worn

cart track, which the dry weather had turned exceedingly dusty. The track tended to follow the contours of the land, winding in a leisurely fashion around a series of low hills. Consequently, I soon lost all sense of time and direction.

After walking unhurriedly for what seemed like an hour, but only five and twenty minutes by my pocket watch, I paused to take stock of my progress. The track emerged from behind one hill to my rear and disappeared around another before me. The ground rose fairly steeply to my right, but levelled out for a considerable stretch on my left before climbing yet another grassy and rocky hump. In short, I had no indication as to whether I had travelled one mile or one hundred.

My only hope of re-establishing my bearings lay in reaching level terms with my surroundings. With this thought in mind, I abandoned the track and assailed the bank on my right. As luck would have it, I located the inn almost immediately. I had started a scan of my surroundings with the sun at my back; and there, by the merest chance, was the inn—a little to my right and about a mile and a half away.

From my vantage point, I was able to follow the track with my eyes as it wound its way in to the village, up to and around the base of my hill, on in to a gentle valley and past a massive country house of dark stone. This, I judged, must be my destination.

Shading my eyes against the glare of the sun, I could just make out that the house had been built in the shape of a letter 'U', and that the cart track appeared to swing round to the rear of the house. Then, in a flash of geographical inspiration, I realized that the house faced south, and that I was looking at the north-west corner.

Encouraged by the knowledge that my objective was now close at hand, I scrambled back down to the track and continued briskly on my way. The hills swallowed me again,

but I now knew their secrets and no longer harboured a townsman's fear of becoming lost in them.

A high, stone wall, much in need of repair, paralleled the track on the western side of the house. The wall ended abruptly at its northern end in a grass-covered mound of rubble, which curved away from me to disappear in to a tangled copse. The wall at the front of the house was in equally bad repair. Had the ornamental iron gates not been standing wide open, I could easily have effected an entrance through one of the numerous gaps in the ancient stonework.

As I walked along the drive, I cast an eye over the house. I was impressed at once by the skill of the architect. Although constructed of unyielding granite, the overall effect close to was not of solidity and the qualities of a fortress. The architect had contrived, somehow, an aura of delicacy about the building, which, in spite of its size, was clearly a family home.

I beat a smart tattoo on a brightly polished brass knocker and waited. The iron-shod front door was opened by an elderly servant, who looked so frail that the slightest breath of air might carry him away. This worthy admitted me, then shuffled off to find his master, bearing my calling card on a silver tray.

I was admiring the spacious entrance hall, when I heard a door open behind me. Turning from a series of age-blackened and obviously venerable landscapes, I was amazed to see a white-haired gentleman bearing athletically down on me, waving a stout walking stick. In stepping backwards to avoid a blow aimed at my head, I missed my footing and stretched my length on the marble floor.

As I was preparing to roll to one side or the other to evade the next assault, a male voice shouted: "Michael! Control yourself!"

Startled, my attacker ceased his murderous attentions.

I observed, from my rather ignominious vantage point, that the servant had returned, accompanied by his master and a matronly lady. The Professor, as my saviour was soon to become known to me, rushed forward and proceeded to lead my attacker away. I was so overwhelmed at my reception that I could do no more than watch the pair of them disappear along an oak-lined passage.

"Are you hurt, young man?" The elderly lady was bending over me with a look of concern on her round face.

Of an instant, I became painfully aware of my ridiculous position and scrambled to my feet with as much dignity as I could muster. I assured her that my pride had suffered greater damage than my person, and introduced myself. The lady, in turn, introduced herself as Mrs. Mavender, and insisted that I accompany her to the library for a restoring cup of tea.

Professor Mavender joined us shortly after the tea arrived, by which time I had learned that Michael was his brother and that Mrs. Mavender was their aunt; evidently a very much younger sister of one of their parents. The Professor apologized profusely for his brother's behaviour, explaining that he had not been in the best of health in recent weeks. Apparently, my appearance had reminded brother Michael of a person, who had caused him great distress in the past. In the light of our short acquaintance, I chose not to press him to enlarge on the subject, and assured the Professor that I was unharmed.

When we were all comfortably at ease, I told the Professor of the chain of events that had led me to his house. He agreed that our meeting had a remarkable history; and a most dramatic beginning. When I produced the catalogue, Mrs. Mavender left us, observing with a smile that the Professor's 'archaeological nonsense' was much too deep for a mere woman.

Left to ourselves, the Professor and I fell to discussing the

items mentioned in the catalogue. I found my host to be a most charming gentleman, and came rapidly to the conclusion that he had a remarkably extensive knowledge of his subject. Although, strictly speaking, the way of life of the South American Indian is not one of my main fields of interest, the Professor painted such a vivid picture of his travels and discoveries that I began to regret that I had paid less than total attention to his fascinating speciality. Despite a gap of over thirty years, he was able to recall in great detail the exhibits of his colleagues, and to explain their relationship with, and relative significance to, his own contribution.

Our discussion led naturally to an examination of a number of the books in the Professor's library in order to illustrate his discourse. I was astonished to find that, in certain aspects, it was superior to the excellent library at the University. When I remarked on this fact, the Professor swelled slightly with pride and promptly invited me to spend some time among his books making notes, if I so wished. I accepted eagerly.

The Professor seemed to welcome the company of a fellow historian, even though my role was mainly that of audience, and brushed aside my suggestion that I was keeping him from his work. He insisted that I share a cold lunch, which was served in the library, and we spent an enjoyable day exploring its treasures. As a result of his kindness, I did not leave the house until the late afternoon, having accepted an invitation to dinner.

The walk back to the inn did not seem as long as my pilgrimage of the morning, probably for the reason that I spent most of the journey reflecting on the mass of information that the Professor had spread before me. I would certainly be the envy of my colleagues at the University for having made such a valuable acquaintance.

I felt not the slightest regret at this change of plan. Admittedly, I had lost my walking holiday and I had merely

exchanged one library for another, but the loss was a small sacrifice compared to the value of the opportunity to gather knowledge that presented itself.

The innkeeper's wife looked suitably impressed when I announced that I would be dining with the Mavenders that evening, and would probably be staying at the inn for the rest of the week. Later, I overheard her say to her husband that it had not taken me long to establish myself in the highest social circle locally. The innkeeper, however, took the attitude that he expected his guests to move in such circles, but treated me with slightly more respect thereafter. I could not help but wonder if he had been in service in a grand house before coming to this inn. It was an explanation that accounted for his demeanour.

Fortunately, I had been given to understand that dinner in the Mavender household was not a formal affair. I was thus attired in my one and only presentable suit (having carefully trimmed the cuffs of the jacket) when the Professor's carriage arrived to collect me.

Professor Mavender was at the door to greet me, and invited me to his study for a glass of sherry. I must confess to a certain feeling of apprehension when his brother joined us, but my fears proved groundless. Michael Mavender seemed to have changed completely, and he apologized most handsomely for his behaviour. Indeed, I could scarcely credit that this charming old gentleman had attacked me so violently earlier in the day.

At dinner, I had the opportunity to meet the remaining members of the household. In addition to the Professor and his brother, and their aunt, the table was graced by the presence of the Professor's wife, a handsome woman some ten years her husband's junior, and their daughter Margaret.

I must admit to being rather taken with Miss Mavender, an

attractive young lady of my own age. Alas, we exchanged no more than a dozen words during the meal, the conversation being dominated by the Professor and his brother.

During a lull in the conversation, Mrs. Mavender informed me that she and her aunt both took an interest in the garden. I was forced to admit that, as a city dweller, I had neither great knowledge of, nor expertise in the field of horticulture, but I had spent many a pleasant hour in the parks within easy reach of the University. This avenue of conversation was cut short when Michael made a remark to his brother about one of their adventures in the rain forests of South America, and I spent the rest of the meal hanging on the words of these two intrepid explorers.

They had a seemingly endless fund of stories of strange people and even stranger places, which they had visited during the course of their explorations. The ladies had evidently heard most of the stories before, but ever and anon they would cease their private whisperings and listen as intently as I to a new memoir.

I remember nothing of the meal itself. I recollect only that I consumed everything placed before me and drained my wine glass at regular intervals. I was so totally caught up in the narrative of the brothers Mavender, that the most perfect of meals would have been wasted on me.

After dinner, the Professor, his brother and I retired to the Professor's study, where I was offered a glass of excellent port wine and a cigar. Michael seemed now to have accepted me as one of the family, and fell to explaining his work on the Mayan numerical system and the details of their calendars.

Although I have never achieved any great expertise in the field of mathematics, I found, to my surprise, that Michael was able to explain quite complex details with astonishing clarity. One naturally assumed that a person, who resorts to violence, is unintelligent. This is clearly not so in the case of

Michael Mavender, and illustrates how misleading one's first impression of a stranger can be. Had he submitted to academic discipline, he too could have achieved the same status as his brother.

During Michael's discourse, I noted several references to the coming weekend. On trying to question him about the significance of his remarks, he became evasive and quickly changed the subject, which I found most curious.

I took my leave of the Mavenders towards eleven o'clock. The night being fine and bright, the moon was almost full, I decided to walk back to the inn. I arrived, still aglow with port wine, just as the innkeeper was preparing to lock up for the night. Somewhat relieved, as I had realized eventually the lateness of the hour, and I had been wondering whether he might have retired, I bade him a cheery good-night and sought my bed in the best of humour.

I rose rather late the next day, and I was still at breakfast when the Professor entered the inn. He told me that he had business in the village, and placed his carriage at my disposal. Assured that I would not be inconveniencing him, I gathered together my writing materials, and I was soon on my way to the Mavender residence.

The ancient servant had evidently been instructed to expect me, and he showed me immediately to the library. I gained the impression that he did not entirely approve of my presence, and that the look that he gave me when he departed was reserved for those, who might be suspected of having designs on the family silver.

To our mutual surprise, I found Miss Mavender in the library, poring over a weighty tome. As we stumbled in to conversation, I learned that she acted as her father's secretary. for my part, I explained more fully the circumstances that had brought me to her home. That matter had not been touched on at dinner the previous evening.

I had brought the catalogue with me, and I was able to

show it to her. Indeed, I was now carrying that catalogue with me at all times, as if it were a passport. While Miss Mavender was examining my talisman, I suddenly realized that, although I had heard a great deal about the items mentioned in the catalogue, I had yet to hear an account of how they had come in to the possession of the brothers Mavender. When I mentioned this to Miss Mavender, she seemed rather taken aback, and answered my questions reluctantly. I assigned this to a natural reticence and continued my questions, little realizing that I was rattling the family skeletons.

Her story commenced some forty years in the past with an account of an expedition to the Yucatan Peninsula of South America. Both her father and her uncle were participants in this essentially family expedition, which was led by their uncle, Professor Edwin Mavender. The success of the expedition, I learned, was marred by tragedy. Four days before docking at Southampton on the homeward voyage, their ship had run in to a violent storm. Against all advice, Edwin Mavender had ventured from his cabin to check the security of the deck cargo's lashings, and was lost overboard, never to be seen again.

A second expedition, led by Miss Mavender's father, was made two years later, and the most interesting items from the two expeditions had formed the core of the exhibition described in my catalogue.

I thought it strange that the younger of the two brothers should have taken command of the second expedition, but I learned that this was the wish of the elder. Michael Mavender, while being the intellectual equal of his brother, freely admitted that he lacked the necessary patience to cope with the details of the day-to-day running of the venture.

The most significant discoveries of the first expedition were located in a cave, found quite by chance while Michael was hunting wild pig. Although situated some distance from

any population centre, the cave had the character of a temple, in that it contained what appeared to be a large, carved altar stone, but none of the other trappings of religion.

In fact, it was the very simplicity of this heathen place of worship, which made it atypical of the Mayan culture, that excited the imagination of the members of the expedition. The only immediate evidence of human use of the cave was the altar stone and the six groups of carvings on it. The first group consisted of the Mayan god of death, Ahpuch, accompanied by a dog and a vulture. The remaining five groups consisted of a date and a grid of narrowly spaced horizontal and vertical lines.

Each date was different with regard to day, month and year, and the differences between the ascending years followed no logical pattern. It was suggested that some image had been carved beside each date, and that when the ritual, for which the image had been required, reached completion, the image had been effaced with a network of lines. This theory was the subject of a deal of speculation, but as the evidence was open to many interpretations, it could be neither proved nor disproved.

The walls of the cave were subjected to minute examination, but they were found to be untouched by the stonemason's chisel. At this point, Professor (Edwin) Mavender had had the altar stone removed from the cave so that he could excavate the floor.

His decision had led to the unearthing of further obscure, and in some cases unsavoury, ancient objects.

Behind the altar had been buried a large, irregular piece of jade, one face of which was almost perfectly flat. This face had been inscribed with the skeletal form of Ahpuch. In the furthest corner of the cave, five sets of bones were found, each of which turned out to be an almost complete human skeleton. Only the five skulls were missing.

The final discovery, made just inside the entrance of the cave, was a stone jar containing a number of flints. Although the flints had been carefully worked in to a range of designs, and clearly had some special purpose, nobody, then or since, had been able to divine their purpose.

The prize discoveries of the second expedition were two inscribed stelae, or standing stones, and a document written in sixteenth century Spanish and dated 1566. The stone columns were of identical dimensions, and the inscriptions on them were in excellent condition. It was the document, however, that caused the greatest stir in academic circles. It purported to be a translation of the Mayan script on the stelae.

Unfortunately, no key has yet been devised for Mayan script, and the text of the document could not be verified. Further, the alleged translation proved to be very free, rather than literal, and it was of little help in the decipherment of other Mayan writings. The stelae were dated, however, and these dates agreed with those on the Spanish document. If the translations could be accepted as accurate, then the stelae had been erected as records of disastrous earthquakes, which had occurred in the years 325 and 343 A.D.

The Mavenders exhibits aroused a great deal of interest, especially when it was observed that the dates on the stelae corresponded to the dates beside the second and third effaced carvings on the altar stone. Over the next few years, the Mavender artefacts had appeared in numerous exhibitions up and down the country before being put in to storage in this very house.

"Do you mean that they are still here?" I asked, interrupting Miss Mavender's narrative.

"Indeed, they are," she replied. "A limited number of the artefacts are on permanent loan to various museums, but the majority of the items listed in your catalogue are here, including the very ones, which we have been discussing."

"Would it be possible for me to see them?" I asked hopefully.

"You had better seek permission from my father," she answered. "The Mayan Collection and other valuables are kept in the cellars, and only father and Uncle Michael have keys."

I made a mental note to approach the Professor at a suitable moment, and begged Miss Mavender to continue with her history.

She took up the story from a point some twenty years in the past. It seems that a number of documents, similar to the one brought home by the second expedition, had been shown to be skilful forgeries. This work, carried out by a brilliant young Dutch scientist, had led to doubt being cast upon the authenticity of all similar 'translations'.

Although it could never be proven that the Mavender document was other than genuine, Michael Mavender's vigorous defence of the family's honour, coupled with his quick temper and excitable nature, had attracted a great deal of attention from certain elements of the press.

It has always been the opinion of the family that it was the harassment, which he received at the hands of these 'gentlemen', and the unhappy coincidence of the sudden death of his wife, that brought on an attack of brain fever, which left Michael on the edge of the grave for some considerable time.

Michael Mavender's recovery was painfully slow, and Miss Margaret remarked that all through her childhood, there had been an area of the house, which she had not been permitted to enter for fear of disturbing her uncle. I can well imagine the fantasies, which the mind of a young child would weave around the circumstances of her mysterious uncle's isolation.

Since that terrible time, her uncle has led the life of a recluse, seldom venturing far from the house, but still

maintaining contact with a selected few former colleagues and friends by letter. He has retained his fiery temper, but seldom allows himself to be provoked in to displaying it, preferring to refuse to continue an argument rather than let it get out of hand.

I expressed my sympathy for the way an unkind fate had mistreated her uncle, and realized that he must have taken me for a newspaper reporter when he attacked me the previous morning.

We were still deep in conversation when the Professor joined us for lunch. I was wondering how to ask him for permission to examine the Mayan artefacts when Miss Margaret broached the subject. The Professor told us that he was unable to escort us personally, having pressing business elsewhere. Fortunately, his brother was working in the cellars at that moment, and he might be persuaded to take on the role of guide and lecturer.

We entered the cellars by a massive oak door, which had been let in to the side of the main staircase. Hollow-sounding, wooden steps led us down to a grey, stone floor. Drawn by the sounds of hammering, we found Michael Mavender in a small room under the west wing of the house. It seemed that I was fortunate enough to have arrived as Michael was engaged in the tediously demanding task of packing a number of their trophies. They were, I understood, to be loaned to one of the Professor's colleagues for further study.

Michael seemed glad of an excuse to take a break from his labours. Starting with the articles that he had yet to pack, he led us from room to room of the family's private museum. As we proceeded along a central passage in the direction of the west wing, Michael informed me that we were approaching the most interesting relics. We reached the end of the corridor, and turned left. I stopped dead in my tracks.

The entrance to the room before us had been painted to resemble the mouth of an elaborately styled dragon. Michael smiled at my reaction, remarking, "Surprised, eh, young man?"

"Yes," was my rather feeble reply. "It certainly is very striking. Who is the artist?"

Michael bowed slightly in my direction. "You see before you the results of my humble efforts. For reasons, which will become clear to you in a few moments, I wished this entrance to resemble that of a Mayan temple."

The wavering gas light gave a hint of movement to the beast; until Michael turned up the jet. It must have been my imagination, but I sensed malevolence in the yellow, staring eyes on the wall. The gaping mouth seemed to have a most predatory set.

Michael led the way, and I was unable to repress a shudder as we followed him through the mouth in to the room beyond. Here, I found many of the items listed in my catalogue and described by Miss Mavender during our talk. One of the stelaes was standing against the back wall of the room. The altar stone had been placed in front of the inscribed standing stone, with the carvings facing the doorway.

"Are there not two of them?" I asked, indicating the stele.

"Yes, the other one is here." Michael pointed to a coffin-sized wooden box, which I had passed on my way in. "We are sending it to a colleague of Edward's, along with the other objects. Not that he is likely to learn anything new from them." His last statement was uttered rather petulantly, I thought.

Making an all-inclusive gesture, Michael continued, "Everything you see here is connected with the religious aspects of the Mayan culture. Some of the articles are unique, and there has been a certain amount of, ah, debate as to their connection with the normal Mayan religious practices. But

this need not concern us. Any intelligent person must be satisfied that Edward and myself have demonstrated their significance beyond any reasonable doubt."

I detected the shades of ancient academic battles in his words. I ran my eyes over the articles displayed on two long, wooden benches. The Spanish parchment curled in a glass case. Next to it, I saw a stone jar, a red velvet cloth covered with sparkling pieces of flint and a large lump of greenish rock.

A veritable profusion of implements, curious ornaments and articles, which I could not identify immediately, overflowed onto the second bench. Mercifully, the five headless skeletons were nowhere to be seen.

I picked up the lump of jade and weighed it idly in my hands. Then I saw the strange image scratched deeply in to its smooth face.

"We believe that this was used to despatch sacrificial victims," Michael remarked over my shoulder. Pulling open a drawer in the bench, he showed me a collection of dirty, yellowed bones. "We found five skeletons, all headless, curiously enough, buried near the altar. It is my opinion that the piece of jade you have there was used as a hammer to crack the skull of the victim, See, there, that is the image of the Mayan god of death." A long, dusty finger with a broken nail tapped the jade hammer. "Yes, the last thing the poor beggars saw was their god of death descending to snuff out their life."

I could see from the look on her face that Miss Margaret found the thought as distasteful as I did. As one, we turned to face the altar. Michael crouched down beside the carvings, folding his limbs in an almost insect-like fashion, and proceeded to explain their connection with the stelae. Although I had already heard the story from Miss Margaret, I did not interrupt the old gentleman for fear of offending him. My forbearance was amply rewarded, however, when

Michael completed the known facts and proceeded to interpret them.

He crossed the room to a store cupboard and brought back a battered, bull's eye lantern. He searched through several pockets, muttering something, then he crossed to one of the gas mantles and picked up a taper. When the lantern was burning to his satisfaction, he directed the beam onto each of the grids of horizontal and vertical lines in turn.

"Now then, young man," he said, "examine these closely and tell me what you find."

I examined the grids minutely, but I was unable to find a single unique feature in any of them. Neither, as demonstrated by the look of puzzled concentration on her oval face, could Miss Margaret. But I did notice that the raised, square segments, formed by the grid's channels, were not always complete. Corners were missing and the top surfaces were not always flat. Lacking anything more constructive to say, I mentioned this fact to our guide.

"Aha!" said Michael dramatically. "You have a keen pair of eyes, young man." He began to pace up and down before us in the manner favoured by generations of lecturers, myself included, I confess. "This vital observation leads inevitably to the conclusion that a design was carved on the altar, and then obliterated. And the fact that there is no significant difference between any of these," he tapped the five effaced carvings in turn with his long index finger, "tells us that it was the same image every time. Almost certainly, that of a secret and terrible aspect of the Mayan god of death.

"I believe that knowledge of the existence of the temple, which we found more by good luck than academic prowess, I must confess..." Michael smiled, almost apologetically. "Yes, its existence was confined to a select band within the priesthood. Furthermore, I would say that this particular temple was used only at times of great danger to the local community.

"In their early days, the Maya were relatively peaceable folk, and seldom indulged in human sacrifices in other than extreme circumstances. At such times, the sacrifice was a public affair. Which raises the question: what was the purpose behind the clandestine blood-letting ritual, which took place in a secluded cave?"

"It does sound as though we are dealing with a secret sect," I remarked, almost apologetically, unsure whether the question might not be a rhetorical one. One never knows when dealing with those of an academic turn of mind.

"Many of my colleagues lack such perception," said Michael, a shade bitterly. "Let us examine the stele." He picked up the lantern and directed its beam on the remaining standing stone. "Here is our clue," he said, tapping a group of symbols. "You are aware that the Maya used a special year of three hundred and sixty days, called a 'tun', to calculate the passage of time? And that it was their custom to erect a stele in their temples to mark the end of each twenty-year period, or 'katun'?"

I nodded slowly in agreement, recalling that Michael had lectured in some detail on that topic the previous evening.

"Now, then," Michael resumed, "We have a translation, which tells us that part of the text deals with an earthquake on this particular date." He tapped again the group of symbols, on which he was shining the lantern. "The last day of the 'katun'."

"The Maya believed that the world might end on such a day, did they not?" I interrupted.

"Precisely so!" cried Michael. "The earthquake must have caused them to think that their last hour had come." He crossed the room to the long crate by the doorway, and lifted the lid. "Here, we have a similar story. Another earthquake, this time occurring on one of the unlucky days of their calendar."

Noticing a frown on my face as I tried to digest this piece

of information, Michael broke off his narrative to give me an explanation. It seemed that, according to one of their calendars, the Mayan year was divided in to eighteen months of twenty days. The remaining five days of the year, which did not fit in to this scheme, were considered to be unlucky.

"And so," Michael continued, moving back to the altar, "I believe that the temple was used only under the most extreme circumstances. Five times only in three hundred years, for that is the interval between the first and last dates, a select band of priests entered the rude temple, carved an image on the altar, and carried out a bloody and violent sacrifice.

"The prisoner would, undoubtedly, have been a high-ranking prisoner, captured during an attack on their neighbours. Having completed the ritual, the priests then obliterated the image to preserve the secret of their cult.

"One final piece of evidence remains. On the base of that stele," he indicated the crate with his lantern beam, "we found an effaced carving. It would seem that some person inscribed the forbidden image where it would never be seen, and that either the same or a different person tried to obliterate it at a later date.

"The latter piece of work may have been carried out hurriedly, possibly immediately prior to the erection of the stele. I base this conclusion on the fact that the work of the second mason is clumsy in the extreme, and he has not attempted to follow the prescribed pattern of lines used on the altar."

I thought privately that Michael's impressive theory was based on rather slender evidence, but I refrained from making any criticism as I was unsure of the reaction that the wrong form of words might precipitate.

I contented myself with asking him whether he knew anything of the circumstances of the other sacrifices, which

he believed had taken place in the temple.

Michael placed his hand on the altar. "Our only source of information is this altar. In particular, the dates carved upon it. These tell us that the three unexplained sacrifices all took place on 'unlucky' days for the Maya. I would judge that a natural disaster took place on each of these occasions, or possibly even a disaster of human origins."

"I still fail to understand the reason for the sacrifices," I said. "They did not prevent, say, an earthquake."

"No, indeed," replied Michael. "For the earthquake was a sign that a sacrifice was necessary, and would not cease until after the ritual had been carried out."

At this point, Michael announced that we had seen everything, implying that the tour was at an end. I thanked him warmly for acting as such an excellent guide. We parted company, Miss Margaret and I returning to the library, and Michael to his packing.

Soon afterwards, the Professor returned home and invited us to take afternoon tea with him. Our conversation revolved around the treasures, which I had been permitted to examine, and Michael's theories.

I sensed that the Professor was not in full agreement with his brother's ideas. With a smile, he asked whether Michael had shared his latest discovery with us. Miss Margaret and I shook our heads.

Settling himself comfortably in his chair, the Professor began: "As you know, Michael's favourite pursuit is Mayan calendars. Last week, I discovered him deep in a set of computations, which showed ultimately that this coming Saturday is the one thousand six hundredth anniversary, in Mayan years, of the erection of the older stele."

"And also the end of the present 'katun', in that case," I added after a moment's reflection.

"True," continued the Professor, "and there is more. An

anniversary of the erection of the second stele also falls on Saturday."

"But how is that possible?" I broke in. "If I remember correctly, both yourself and your brother have told me that there are only eighteen years between them."

"This anniversary is not quite so simple," smiled the Professor. Do not forget that the Maya could assign two separate dates to every day of the year: one in terms of their secular calendar, and the other in terms of a sacred calendar. Now, as the two years were of different lengths, we find that a particular combination of dates is repeated only every fifty-two years.

"On Saturday, the combination of dates, sacred and secular, of the earthquake recorded on the more recent stele will be repeated for the thirtieth time."

I was not sure quite how to treat this revelation. The Professor quite plainly looked upon it as merely an interesting scrap of information. His brother, on the other hand, the Professor seemed to imply, looked for a deeper significance.

By now, my mind was awlirl with all that I had seen and heard during the day. I returned to the inn a short time later, having decided to spend the evening making notes while everything was still fresh in my mind.

I was awakened early the next morning by a commotion beneath my window. Looking out, I observed many of the villagers and local farmers busily loading carts with a variety of goods.

Aha, I thought, they must be preparing for market in a neighbouring town. Pleased with my deduction, I went back to bed. I was now wide awake, and the continuing noise made sleep impossible. Admitting defeat, I washed, shaved, dressed and went downstairs in search of my breakfast.

The inn was packed to overflowing with people. I decided

that it would be futile to try to order breakfast at that moment, and went for a walk. To my surprise, the village was almost deserted when I returned. Being a town dweller, I had not realized what an event the local market was. My sole companions at breakfast were two tabby cats and a large dog.

I spent most of the day alone in the Mavenders' library, making notes and jotting down titles and the names of authors of books, which I thought might be valuable additions to the main library at the University. It was during the course of my reading that I stumbled across a most curious list of names, written in the margin of a work on the religious beliefs of the Maya. Two columns of dates and names appeared thus:-

1843	Mary
1862	Edwin
1882	Mary
1902	?

Edwin, I reasoned, must be the uncle of the brothers Mavender, lost at sea during the return voyage from their first expedition to South America. The second Mary could well be the late wife of Michael Mavender. But who was the first Mary? With the aid of the family Bible, I confirmed my conclusions, and learned that the first-named on the list was a twin sister of Michael's. She had died at the age of six years.

Just as the ancient Maya had lived under the shadow of a twenty-year cycle of potential disaster, which reached a peak on the last day of the 'katun', so recent generations of the Mavender family seemed to have been dogged by a similar cycle of death.

I guessed the author of the list to be Michael, in the light of

his mathematical obsession. It did not, however, seem likely that the chain would be continued this year. All five members of the family appeared to be in good health.

The Professor invited me to dinner again that evening. As on the previous occasion, I was captivated by the conversation, but managed to reserve part of my attention for the meal. Thus I was able to enjoy both an excellent repast and new adventures of the brothers Mavender.

Afterwards, I again joined the Professor and his brother in the study. The evening passed pleasantly and inconsequentially, and I find that only one incident remains firmly fixed in my mind.

I recall that I was seated beside the fire, and had just been handed a glass of port wine by Michael. I had tasted the wine, and then placed the glass on a table at the side of my chair. Then the whole world seemed to shudder.

The wine glass seemed to jump back in to my hand. I leapt to my feet with an exclamation, allowing the glass to fall to the stone hearth and shatter.

The Professor and Michael took the incident quite calmly, and told me that such tremors were infrequent but a common event, connected in some way with the activities of the local coal mining industry. I expressed surprise that the miners were at work during the night, then realized the foolishness of my remark. Of what consequence is the time of day to those who toil in the bowels of the earth?

The debris was soon cleared away, and I was entrusted with another glass. I must confess to a feeling of unease, which persisted through the evening. It was a not unnatural reaction of one whose faith in the solidity of the ground that he trod had been shaken badly.

The following day was Saturday—the end of the current ‘katun’, according to Michael’s calculations. The day began badly for me. To my intense annoyance, I was roused early

for the second morning in succession. Everybody in the village seemed to have gathered beneath my window, each trying to shout louder than his neighbour. When I reached the ground floor of the inn, I was able to piece together scraps of conversation.

I learned that the local magistrate, Colonel somebody-or-other, had gone for his habitual early morning ride, and that his horse had returned to its stable without him. The village constable was in evidence, moving through the crowd, trying to organize search parties. I did not envy him his task of creating order from that chaos.

My news received a mixed reception when I arrived at the Mavender House for my last visit. I had planned to set out for Bristol in the afternoon, to visit friends before returning to the University. The ladies expressed concern for the Colonel's safety, whereas the Professor remarked, drily, that Colonel Broughton, for such was his name, was over-fond of his drink, and was probably still feeling the effects of the previous night's consumption.

Furthermore, he continued, it was unlikely that he would notice falling down one of his own coal mines, let alone a slight fall from a horse. The Professor's wife reproved her husband for saying such things before a guest, but she was unable to hide her complete agreement with every word that he had uttered.

At that moment, the door to the cellars opened and Michael Mavender and a red-faced gentleman emerged, carrying a large, wooden crate between them. Those about me reacted as if they had seen a ghost. Confusion reigned until the Colonel restored order in his best military manner.

Explanations passed backwards and forwards. We learned that the Colonel had, indeed, been thrown by his horse. While walking home, he had encountered Michael, who had placed the Mavenders' carriage at his disposal. Michael had

then asked the Colonel's opinion on some wine, which he had purchased recently.

On arriving at the Mavender House, the two gentlemen had, quite naturally, gone straight to the wine cellar. After spending some time there, they had headed back to ground level, passing through part of the museum on the way. Here, the Colonel had noticed the last of the boxes of Mayan artefacts, which Michael had been packing when I had visited the cellars.

The Colonel had insisted on helping Michael to carry the box to ground level, and thus they had arrived in our presence.

Having witnessed the solution to the morning's mystery, I retired to the library to make a few, final notes, and to complete my list of books.

By eleven o'clock, I had finished my work. I was greatly pleased when Miss Margaret joined me and rang for tea. Note-taking can be a very dry business. I remember little of our conversation, other than that I expressed my gratitude for her father's hospitality an embarrassing number of times. When we had finished our tea, I asked Miss Margaret whether I might have a last look at her Uncle Michael's 'temple' before I left.

We located her uncle and the Colonel at the back of the house. They were supervising the activities of three muscular youths, who were engaged in loading Michael's boxes onto a cart. We waited until they had finished before approaching Michael with my request. He agreed readily, and the Colonel, who seemed in no hurry to return home, announced that he would accompany us.

We passed along the gas-lit corridor, and through the mouth of Michael's basement dragon. To his disgust, Michael found that the gas lights in the temple would not work, due to some unexplained interruption of the supply. Fortunately,

a box of candles was to be found in an adjoining room, and we soon had light.

I could not help but notice the changes that had been made in the short interval since my last visit. Earlier, the pieces of delicately worked flint, with their polished, black edges, had been strewn haphazardly on their piece of red velvet. Now, they were arranged in to an unearthly design. There was something mesmerizing about the pattern.

Perhaps it was the shifting candle light reflecting at random from the polished, worked surfaces of the pieces of flint, but I found it almost impossible to take in their arrangement. By this, I mean that as soon as I fixed my eyes on any one particular detail, they were drawn immediately elsewhere.

Turning from this vision of chaos, I observed that a seventh pair of markings had been chalked on to the front face of the altar. I recognized the left-hand symbols as a date rendered in the Mayan fashion. The right-hand drawing may well have been a representation of the pattern formed by the pieces of flint.

"You see that I have unlocked their secret," said Michael proudly, noting the direction of my gaze.

"Yes, indeed," I replied. "But I fail to understand the significance of the markings on the altar."

"Just a whim," Michael told me. "I believe now that Mayan priests used to gather in the cave that I found on the last day of the 'katun' in order to be on hand should their services be required. Perhaps they would paint these very symbols on the altar as a guide for a skilled mason, should a sacrifice become necessary."

"Damn savages," muttered the Colonel, as he picked up the jade hammer. "Bloodthirsty lot, eh, what?" he said in a louder voice as he moved over to the altar. Then, turning to me, he burst out: "Fetch that light closer, me lad." His eyes seemed fixed on the surface of the altar.

Michael, standing beside the slab of stone, and Miss Margaret, who was standing in front of it, gazed at the Colonel in puzzlement. I picked up a nearby candlestick and brought it over to the Colonel.

"Hold this, old boy." The Colonel passed the hammer to Michael. "Now then, look at this!"

He lowered his face to within an inch of the apparently featureless top surface of the altar. The rest of us crowded closer, straining to make out what he could see.

Then the room danced. Miss Margaret and I were flung in to a heap on the floor. As I fell, I saw Michael lose his footing. I heard his despairing cry as the jade hammer slipped from his grasp. He struggled to grip it; in vain. The heavy stone hit the Colonel full on the head, driving his face against the top of the altar with a dull, liquid, crunching sound.

The floor heaved again. A thick gout of blood bubbled from the Colonel's mouth and out on to the top of the altar. It ran a little way, then seemed to sink in to the polished surface. The room shuddered again, dislodging a snow-like shower of flakes of whitewash from the ceiling. Miss Margaret tried to reach her feet. Michael stood stock still, staring at the Colonel with a look of horror and disbelief on his face.

The stone floor bounced, seeming to throw everything in the room up in to the air. The stele hopped towards Michael, then slowly toppled forward. A warning died in my throat as it crushed him against the altar. His blood mingled with the Colonel's, to be sucked in greedily by the solid rock.

A crack sprang from floor to ceiling in the back wall of the room. My ears filled with the sounds of grinding stone and shrieking timbers. A sharp, splintering noise issued from the altar. I think that I saw the Colonel's headless body slump to the floor. I think that I saw Michael Mavender's head begin to sink in to the top of the altar.

I seized Miss Margaret's hand and tried to drag her to the door. My legs were trembling violently, making it difficult to walk. I could not tell whether they were being shaken by my fear or by the floor.

A sudden pull on my hand turned me round. Miss Margaret had been thrown backwards off her feet. As I went to help her, I happened to glance past her at the long benches. The flints were dancing! The strange design had somehow transformed itself into an unhuman face with an obscene leer, and its component parts seemed to be leaping up and down gleefully on their bed of blood red velvet cloth.

With a shriek, I caught Miss Margaret up in my arms and raced away from that dreadful sight. I was in such a state of terror that I had the utmost difficulty in finding my way to the stairs up to the entrance hall. All of the candles in the cellar had gone out, and I could scarcely breathe for the suffocating stench of gas. Perhaps by instinct, I reached a grey glow, and found myself at the foot of the staircase.

After an age of struggling upward at a slower and slower pace, I burst into the entrance hall and almost knocked the Professor to the floor. He relieved me of my burden and led the way to the front gardens. We joined the rest of the family and the servants some two hundred yards from the house.

The Professor gave his daughter into the care of her mother, then seized my hand and thanked me for saving Miss Margaret's life with tears in his eyes. At length, I was able to catch my breath sufficiently to break the news of the deaths of his brother and the Colonel in the cellars, and to ask what had happened.

My mouth dropped open when the Professor told me that there had been an earthquake. That was a logical conclusion from my experiences in the cellars, but, at the time, I had been beyond logic. I was on the verge of making a foolish remark, when a loud, snapping noise from the direction of the house claimed the attention of the assembled company.

We turned in time to see an enormous crack spreading up the front wall of the west wing. With a terrible roar, that part of the house just disappeared before our eyes. A huge cloud of dust spread outwards. Then we were all hurled to the ground. An ear-shattering explosion and a scorching blast of fiery air burst from the wreckage. Debris showered in all directions. When the dust haze cleared, we could see a beautiful blue and yellow column of flame rising from a broken gas pipe.

There is little more to add to this record, other than clarification of certain points. As newspaper accounts of the time relate, our 'earthquake' was thought to be the result of the collapse of an ancient and long-forgotten mine working, which had run beneath the west wing of the house. The bodies of Michael Mavender and the Colonel were never recovered. They lie forever entombed in the ruins of Michael's temple.

I said nothing of the circumstances of their deaths at the inquest, other than that they had been crushed by falling masonry. Miss Margaret, it transpired, had seen nothing of their demise, and I judged that abbreviation would bring less distress to the two families, the Mavenders and the Colonel's, than a full account of the true facts.

Indeed, were I to reveal that which I have set down here, I am sure that I would be declared, at worst, insane, at best, a fool.

My upbringing and my education move me to dismiss as mere coincidence the fact that the 'earthquake' occurred on that particular Saturday, of all days. But my dreams are filled with horrific visions of that which I dare not believe I ever witnessed. Headless bodies dance in white mists, which, ever and anon, part to reveal the hideous flint pattern, grinning at me as it performs its dreadful contortions.

Awake, I see visions of the Mavender House after the

catastrophe. Some considerable time after the 'earthquake' seemed to be over, the Professor and I ventured indoors. The air outside was still filled with dust from the collapsed west wing. Inside, there was tranquillity. Not an item was disturbed in the east wing and the central part of the house, not a cup had fallen from the dresser in the kitchen, not a petal had fallen from the vases of flowers in the public rooms.

The walls, as far as we could tell, were undamaged, the structure of the remaining part of the house still sound. And such was the opinion of a surveyor, whom the Professor consulted before he dared to permit the ladies to return to their home. When we ventured in to the cellars, we found an unbroken wall of rough stone where the entrance to the rooms under the west wing had been.

I find myself driven to the conclusion that the ground had opened, swallowing the west wing of the house, while leaving the rest of the building totally undisturbed. But there must be some other explanation for the events, which occurred in and around Michael Mavender's temple. For what rational being could possibly believe that some nameless, ancient deity had required the heads of two sacrificial victims to prevent a far more wide-spread disaster on that terrible double anniversary?



Author's Note: This story continues in Volume Seven of the collected works.

02. The Star Stone

ALAN MARSHALL

Jed Armstrong first saw the star stone at the end of a hard day's work in the fields, clearing blocked ditches. The evening was summer hot, and he was looking forward to a long, cool drink and something to eat.

About half way across the dusty yard, heading for the farmhouse, he happened to glance up at the sky. What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks. A white ball of light was heading straight for him.

Before he could move, it had rushed over his head with a noise like an express train and disappeared in the direction of the wood. After five weeks of hot, dry weather, Jed was well aware of the dangers of fire.

Pausing only to dip an old sack in the water trough, he ran towards the wood. He was joined by his dog, Bramble, who thought that this was a new game, and ran around him in wide circles, barking excitedly.

Finding the shooting star proved to be very easy, for the white-hot stone had, indeed, started a small fire in the parched undergrowth.

"Good job we got here quick, Bramble," muttered Jed, beating at burning grass and twigs with the wet sack. The dog remained at a safe distance, prowling back and forth upwind of the smoke and barking encouragement.

The sun had set by the time the fire was out and Jed had damped down the charred area with water from the nearby Padborn Brook. He tried to pick up the blackened, melted, fragment of stone from the skies, but found that it was much too hot to touch. Using a convenient stick, he pushed it into his bucket, where it sizzled gently as it boiled away a small puddle of water.

"Come on, Bramble, home," called Jed.

The dog approached, sniffed cautiously at the bucket, then ran on ahead to investigate a nearby rabbit burrow.

After supper, Jed found that the meteorite fragment had cooled enough for him to be able to handle it. He lifted it out of the bucket and carried it into the farmhouse. After spreading an old newspaper on the table, he set his prize down and took a close look at it.

The object was dark, about twice the size of a man's fist, and melted smooth. As he turned it over and over, specks of glass-like material caught the lamp light giving the impression that he was holding an orb studded with precious gems. Amused by his fancy, he moved it to the dresser and settled down with his accounts.

The next day, Jed's younger brother, Nathaniel, arrived from the village to help him with some repairs to the big barn. Nat had seen the shooting star himself, and he was very keen to hear his brother's story and view the piece of stone that Jed had recovered from the scene of the fire. With mixed feelings, Jed took Nat into the farmhouse.

Earlier in the day, Jed had shown his trophy to the postman and the man from the village, who sharpened knives. Both visitors had enjoyed his story, but they had seemed unimpressed by the main exhibit. Perhaps they had found it hard to believe that what looked like a very ordinary piece of rock could have been the true source of fire from the skies.

"Don't look much, do it?" the postman had said.

"What you going t'do with a thing like that, anyway?" the knife-grinder had asked with a loud sniff.

Nat, on the other hand, was fascinated by the meteorite. "You know what it is, don't you?" he asked, turning it over and over in his strong hands.

"Surprise me," invited Jed.

"It's a Star Stone."

"A what?" Jed looked puzzled.

"It's a Star Stone," Nat repeated with a grin. "A star that's fallen from the sky and lost its shine. Did you remember you've got to make a wish when you see one coming down?"

"But the stars weren't out when this hit the ground. How do you explain that, smartie?" Jed's grin was even broader than his brother's.

"Look at these lines on it." Nat changed the subject quickly. "You could almost say this is a primitive work of art. This bit could be a duck, and there's a bloke doing something peculiar, and this bit here..."

"Is an idiot called Nat!" finished Jed, taking the stone from his brother and putting it back on the dresser. "Work of art!"

Grinning, the brothers left the farmhouse with the toolkit, heading for the barn.

That evening, Jed was showered with questions about the star stone. He had gone down to the village for a quiet pint and a game of darts, but he had found himself the centre of attention. Nat, he learned, had told his wife about the star stone. His two children had overheard and they had told their friends. Nat's wife had told her neighbour, who had told the baker, who had told all his customers.

The story was all round the village before evening. Interest in the star stone was so great that old Mendells, the landlord of *The Plough*, lent Jed his car so that he could pop back to the farm to fetch his trophy.

Jed propped himself against the bar and allowed his brother to ramble on about the shapes that he said he could see among the flow-marks on the stone, and how a museum would pay a fortune for a similar object if it had been discovered by someone famous.

The stone was passed from hand to hand, and, as the evening wore on, more and more fanciful shapes were

discovered as imaginations were liberated in direct proportion to the amount of beer consumed.

Ted Mendells looked more and more cheerful as the pub filled up. When Jed left at closing time, the landlord positively beamed at him as he wished Jed a very good night, the while offering up a prayer for more such discoveries. Mendells was sure that this was the first time that a Wednesday night's takings had ever exceeded those of a good Saturday night.

The moon was high in a cloudless sky when Jed arrived home. Bramble was lying in front of the kitchen door, waiting for him. The dog looked up as if to say: *Where have you been all night?* before curling up in the basket in his personal corner of the kitchen and going to sleep.

Jed lit the lamp and dumped the stone on the table. An oil lamp's yellow glow seemed to suit the big, old kitchen more than the harsh, brightness of electricity. As he lit a last cigarette, a flash of light attracted his eye.

"Nat and his shapes!" Jed drew a chair up to the table, captivated by the shifting glitter as the lamp flame danced across the stone. "Wait a minute, though..."

His eyes started to follow a pattern of lines. But the lamp flickered suddenly and he lost it.

"You're as daft as Nat," he told himself in disgust. "Time you were in bed, me lad."

Every household in the village had run out of eggs on Thursday. All day, Jed was on the receiving end of a steady stream of women and children; all wanting to buy eggs and other farm produce, and, just by the way, to take a look at the famous star stone. In Jed's opinion, a rather ordinary-looking piece of rock had acquired a renown out of all reasonable proportion.

It was not Jed's nature to be rude to people, and so he

suffered the invasion in silence. His final visitor arrived just as he was clearing the table after his supper. He opened the kitchen door to find the diminutive figure of the Reverend Percival Lolpratt on his doorstep. Jed's heart sank.

To say that the Reverend Lolpratt was not well liked in the village would be to understate matters severely. In common with many small men, he had the large fault of wanting to dominate all those around him. Unfortunately, he was in a position to do so.

Few of the village folk were able to stand up to his expressions of pious horror at the fate of the soul of someone who was reluctant to carry out *The Church's Bidding*. Those who dared to defy him became the subject of thinly disguised threats of damnation, delivered from the pulpit in Lolpratt's peculiarly deep voice.

That voice was a source of wonder to the villagers, especially in the pub on a Friday night, when there would be a great deal of speculation as to why the Almighty had given to somebody so small the voice of a man twice his size. The discussion generally came to an end when someone put on a deep voice and ordered the assembled company not to question *the ways of the Almighty*, Lolpratt's favourite phrase.

"Evening, vicar," said Jed, looking down at his visitor without enthusiasm. "Bit late to be calling on people, isn't it?"

"My duties to my parishioners occupy most of my day, Jedidiah," rebuked the vicar, advancing into the kitchen. "Thus I must confine social calls to the evening."

"And what do I owe the pleasure of this social visit to?" asked Jed.

The Reverend Lolpratt looked at him sharply, but he was unable to detect signs of either mirth or sarcasm on Jed's round, tanned face. "I have come to see this object that came to earth in the parish. I believe people are calling it the *Star Stone*."

Put on his guard by the vicar's peculiar turn of phrase, Jed passed him the meteorite. Lolpratt pulled his pince-nez from his breast pocket to squint through them.

"A truly remarkable object," he said at last, tapping the stone gently with his pince-nez. "We must give thanks to Our Lord that he blesses us with such wonders."

"Amen to that," muttered Jed.

"Yes," continued the vicar, "I think the best thing to do is let me look after this for you. I could, perhaps, put it on display at the vicarage. In a suitable cabinet, perhaps."

"No, thanks, vicar."

Lolpratt's chain of thought was interrupted by Jed plucking the stone from his grasp. "I say!" he spluttered indignantly, colour flooding to his cheeks.

"Sorry, vicar, thought you'd finished with it," remarked Jed, quite unabashed. He turned and replaced the stone on the dresser shelf, which, by some strange coincidence, lay above the vicar's reach.

"Well, really, Jedidiah!" protested the Reverend Lolpratt. "That object belongs to the whole parish and it should be kept at the vicarage."

"I found it on *my* land and it belongs to *me*," said Jed stubbornly. "And besides, everyone in the parish must have seen it by now. And those that haven't know where to come for a look."

"Very well, Jedidiah," conceded the vicar. "If this is what your conscience tells you, I shall not argue. I ask only that you reflect on the matter. I shall call on you again in the morning, when I hope your attitude will be more reasonable. I expect to see you in church on Sunday. My text will concern the evils of cupidity."

"I'm sure you'll be able to tell us all about that, vicar," returned Jed evenly. "Good evening to you."

The Reverend Lolpratt struggled onto his horse and galloped away. He imagined that he cut quite a dashing

figure mounted. It was, perhaps, for the best that he was unaware of acquiring the nickname *Jesus's Jockey* in certain quarters.

Jed reached the star stone down from the dresser and eased himself into the armchair beside the fireplace. Bramble padded over to him and placed his chin on his master's thigh, making himself available for stroking before he curled up at Jed's feet.

"Looks like Pint-Size Percy is going to be after me on Sunday, Bramble," remarked Jed as he imagined the Reverend Lolpratt's voice booming through the church, and many a significant glance being directed at Jed's pew.

'What was that?' he asked himself, peering more closely at the stone.

Wish the vicar would forget about this thing.

His mind seemed to be running along two parallel tracks. 'Yes, if I turn it this way a bit...'

A nice little lapse of memory, that's what he needs.

'Yes, right, now a bit this way...'

Keep his mind off pinching other people's property.

'Looks like a tunnel, but it seems to be going round and round and...'

Dawn was breaking when Jed woke with the star stone still in his hands. He pushed out of the chair cautiously. Although his arms and legs felt stiff, he was not in the least bit tired. In fact, he felt as refreshed as if he had enjoyed a full night's sleep in his bed.

Towards midday, Jed was sitting in the yard, perched on an up-turned orange box by the barn, repairing burst stitching on a leather belt, when he heard a horse approaching. He looked across the road. His heart sank, as usual, when he observed the vicar's hat bobbing up and down behind the hedge. Jed dumped the belt on his box and moved across the

yard to open the gate. The Reverend Lolpratt rode past him to the mounting block by the farmhouse door.

"Morning, vicar. What brings you here?" Jed called after him in what he hoped was a neutral tone.

"Good morning, Jedidiah," replied Lolpratt as he struggled off the horse. Then he actually gave Jed a warm, friendly smile. "We have something to discuss, do we not?"

"Do we, vicar?" Jed refused to give an inch.

"Well, I thought we did. In fact, I'm sure I had some reason for coming here, but I can't quite remember what it is."

Jed breathed a silent sigh of relief. "You sure it was me you wanted to see?"

"Well, I certainly thought so." The Reverend Lolpratt sounded uncharacteristically unsure of himself, which made a pleasant change from his usual aggressive assertiveness. "This is most annoying. Never mind, I'm sure I shall remember presently." He scrambled back into the saddle.

Jed moved over to the gate to open it again. "Sorry you had a wasted journey, vicar," he remarked, suppressing a grin.

"A journey to see one of my flock is never a wasted one, Jedidiah," pronounced the Reverend Lolpratt. "Good morning."

"Morning, vicar." Jed closed the gate and watched him ride away down the lane. "What's happened to Pint-Size Percy?" he added to Bramble when his visitor was out of earshot.

The same question found its way to the lips of most of the people in the nearby village that morning. The vicar was uncharacteristically polite to everybody, and seemed to be in a daze. Most surprised of all was Mrs. Mayberry.

A month earlier, she had been coerced into making a set of loose covers for the vicar's three-piece suite. The vicar had

thanked her and praised her work, but he had made no mention of payment.

Mrs. Mayberry had been afraid to mention the subject in case the vicar gave her one of his lectures on how those who did good works for the church received their reward in heaven.

On that particular morning, however, with her daughter's birthday coming up, she had nerved herself to ask about the covers. She was almost sure that he would offer no payment, but an end to the uncertainty would be a relief, and she would know for certain that she would have to find the money for a present elsewhere.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather," she told her neighbour afterwards. "He actually took out his wallet and gave me a fair price for the covers! What do you think of that?"

Her neighbour, who had also suffered in the name of *good works for the church*, was amazed. She was prepared to believe the story only because Mrs. Mayberry was still clutching the money in her hand.

The miracle, however, was short-lived. By the weekend, the Reverend Lolpratt was back to his normal, obnoxious self. All that remained of his sudden burst of goodwill was a few happy memories of bills unexpectedly paid. And, of course, the continuing residence of the star stone at Jed's farmhouse.

The summer continued hot and dry, and the chief topic of conversation among the local farmers was the lack of rain. Everyone else sympathized with the farmers publicly, but their neighbours were glad of the fine weather in private.

One night, Jed strolled into the pub to find Max Fortnell holding court. Max owned the largest farm in the district, and considered himself the unofficial leader of the local farmers. He claimed to be an expert on most matters. Jed

joined the group to find that Max was lecturing on one of his favourite topics: the weather.

Max's technique was to try to blind his audience with science. He attempted to start his lecture using as many technical terms as possible in the shortest space of time. Although he didn't understand properly the meaning of many of the words, he was a natural orator. If challenged, he soon managed to confuse the issue so that he appeared to be the only one who knew what he was talking about.

Max was of the opinion that the drought would continue for at least another month. In fact, he was so sure of himself that he was offering free beer for everyone if it rained the next day. His offer drew loud laughter and ribald comments to the effect that Max knew when to bet on a sure thing.

Jed's dearest wish was that Max would be proved wrong in some spectacular way. Something that would show everyone that the know-all wasn't quite as clever as he thought he was. Back at the farm, he sat down in the armchair beside the fire to have a last smoke before going to bed. A mug of cocoa steamed on the ledge beside him. Bramble was asleep in his basket. Without being aware of having picked it up, Jed found the star stone in his work-hardened hands.

'Wouldn't it be something if it rained tomorrow,' he mused as he traced melted and frozen ridges with a finger. 'That'd show Maxie where he gets off.'

The lamplight caught a cluster of crystals, drawing his eyes to them. Jed settled himself more comfortably in the chair, thinking about know-all Max and the pattern that seemed to be forming as his brain connected parts of the star stone, joining up cosmic dots. His cigarette burned away in the ashtray, forgotten, as his eyes drifted shut.

A clap of thunder dragged Jed from his doze. Bramble moved out of his basket and stood beside the chair, whining

softly. Half asleep, Jed reached out to pat the dog. He told him, "It's only thunder, boy. We might be in for a drop of rain, that's all."

Rain! The star stone rolled from his lap as Jed stumbled to the window. A half moon was fighting its way in and out of heavy clouds. Streamers of lighting were joining earth and sky in the east. Jed opened the kitchen door as the first heavy drops bounced into the dust of the farmyard. He shook a joyful fist in the direction of the Fortnell farm and shouted into the night: "See you in the pub, Maxie!"

Then he went to bed a happy man.

The expert, of course, had an explanation. When Jed reached *The Plough* the following evening, Max Fortnell was lecturing to a large audience on freak weather conditions. His happy audience was agreeing with him and drinking beer at Max's expense.

Ted Mendells, the landlord, was also in a good mood. He and his wife were serving beer as fast as humanly possible. It would be another good night for them.

Max was a little subdued for a week or so, but, as in the case of the Reverend Lolpratt, he soon returned to his normal self. Life in and around the village continued at its usual easy pace. A good harvest raised everyone's spirits, even when the vicar went round claiming his share for the harvest festival.

Jed saw little of his brother, as prosperous times meant that many people decided that they could afford to have all sorts of jobs done. Local tradesmen, like carpenters, were in great demand. Thus Jed was pleasantly surprised when Nat paid him a visit one morning.

"Hello! Run out of wood, or something?" grinned Jed.

"No, I just came to tell you to keep an eye open for the Squire's dog," said Nat.

"I always do! If you don't watch out, the Black Beast'll have you."

"No, it's disappeared. The Squire's going mad looking for it. He's offering fifty pounds reward for anyone that finds it."

"That's worth having," nodded Jed. "But I hope it stays lost. It's a nasty brute."

The dog in question was a large, black animal of indeterminate ancestry. Only the Squire, who clung to an honourary title, could approach it without running a serious risk of being bitten. Indeed, only a series of generous payments of compensation to the animal's victims had prevented it from being destroyed years earlier.

After delivering the news, Nat continued on his way. Jed looked down at Bramble, who was scratching at the door to show that he wanted to go out.

"Reckon you're worth fifty pounds, me old mate?" asked Jed.

Bramble barked agreement and reached up to the latch.

Jed was feeling less than his best that day. He had gone to sleep in his chair the previous evening, and he had wakened stiff and sore with the star stone wedged down the side of the chair. He had felt a vague uneasiness when putting it back on its shelf. There was nothing that he could put his finger on, but it seemed to have something to do with the events of the previous evening.

The trouble was, his recollections were so tangled up with half-remembered fragments of a vivid dream that he couldn't be sure what had or had not really happened.

He could remember Sam Miller's complaints about dogs chasing and even killing his sheep. And Miller's threat to shoot the next dog that he saw on his land. That had not been part of the dream. But what about his offer to help using the star stone? That had to have been in his dream. How could a piece of stone be of any help? Perhaps his dream self had meant that he would throw it at the troublesome dogs!

‘Oh, well,’ thought Jed in the end. ‘Why waste time worrying about a dream? I’d better get going again. Otherwise, I’ll get nothing done today.’

The Squire’s dog was found four days later by a group of hikers; at the bottom of a thirty-foot drop at the old quarry. Although the animal had died of a broken neck, it was covered in blood. This puzzled the hikers until one of their number found the remains of two sheep near the edge of the quarry.

Nobody was sorry that the *Black Beast* had come to a sticky end. Sam Miller and the other sheep farmers were particularly glad that a killer dog would trouble them no more. The Squire, on the other hand, was so grief-stricken that he paid up without protest when asked for compensation for the sheep that his pet had killed. The habit had been deeply ingrained.

The weather grew colder as winter took over from autumn. The star stone remained on its shelf, untouched and half forgotten, as if in hibernation. Its novelty had worn off. Jed had even told himself on several occasions that he should get rid of it, but he had never got round to throwing it away.

The events surrounding the death of the Squire’s dog gradually faded from his memory as time went by, but he never lost a vague feeling of unease whenever he looked at the star stone.

Nat’s visits to the farm suddenly became more frequent. When Jed remarked on this, Nat confessed, rather reluctantly, that he was avoiding the vicar.

“Aren’t we all?” said Jed with a grin.

“It’s no laughing matter,” his brother replied. “The vicar’s after me to do one of his *little jobs*. And I know for a fact it’ll take me a week or so, and I’ll be lucky to see any money this

side of Christmas, if at all."

Jed's grin vanished. "How long do you reckon you can avoid him?"

"I don't know," shrugged Nat. "The trouble is, I reckon he's been talking to the wife. And you know what it's like when she starts dropping hints all the time."

Jed nodded in sympathy. Nat's wife usually got her way, and she was a strong supporter of the local church.

Soon afterwards, Nat surrendered to the inevitable and started the vicar's *little job*, accepting that doing a week's work for nothing was the price of domestic peace. Not the least of his miseries was the continual presence of the Reverend Lolpratt, who seemed to think that Nat was incapable of doing anything without his constant supervision.

As Nat had feared, the job did take a week to complete; a week that seemed to last forever. Nat felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders when he presented the vicar with his bill and beat a hasty retreat from the vicarage. Then he tried to start his van.

Fortunately, the garage was just round the corner. Fred, the mechanic, had the time to come and help Nat push the van into the repair shop. Both men knew that the vehicle was on its last legs. It came as no surprise to Nat when Fred told him that it would be wiser to buy another van rather than waste money trying to patch up his old wreck.

Nat discussed the matter with his wife. She agreed that they did need a new van, and they could just about afford one if Nat could manage to obtain prompt payment for all the work that he had done recently. When he explained his predicament to his clients, they settled up with him promptly; with one exception.

The Reverend Lolpratt seemed quite annoyed that Nat had dared to mention payment so soon after completing the job.

Nat left the vicarage gloomily. He had been assured, haughtily, that he would get his money. He was not sure when.

He knew, of course, that he could always ask for a loan at the bank if the vicar took his time about paying. But Nat was slightly afraid of the bank manager, even though they had been at school together, and both he and his brother had been brought up to pay their own way in cash, and to do without if they didn't have the money.

A week passed, and Nat became increasingly desperate. Even with his brother's help, he was still forty pounds short of the price of the good second-hand van that he had seen in the garage, and his wife flatly refused to allow him to *annoy the vicar*, as she put it.

Feeling very embarrassed, Nat went to the bank and asked to see the manager. Much to his surprise, the interview was not the ordeal that he had been expecting. The manager listened to his story sympathetically, more so when Nat let slip that the vicar owed him more than he needed to buy the van. Nat walked out of the bank smiling, having obtained his loan, and headed straight for the garage.

That evening, he drove his new van to the farm to show it off to his brother. Jed joked about the condition of the van at first, but he agreed in the end that his brother had got a bargain. Over a cup of coffee, Nat poured out the story behind the purchase of the van.

Both brothers had harsh words to say about the vicar's way of doing business. What really annoyed Nat was not so much the delay in payment as the inconvenience that he had suffered.

It was dark when Nat left the farm. Jed told him that it would give Nat a chance to find out if his headlights worked. Jed banked up the kitchen fire and, on impulse, he took the star stone down from its shelf. After blowing the dust off it,

he sat in front of the fire to look at its smooth, striated shape.

Firelight flashed from the crystals that dotted its surface. Jed slumped deeper in his chair.

'The vicar again,' he thought. 'It's funny how whenever anyone's in trouble, it's usually someone like Pint-Size Percy at the bottom of it.'

I wonder why I never got rid of this thing?

'A vicar's supposed to help people. I wonder what we did to get stuck with Percy?'

I suppose it's quite pretty, in an odd sort of way, but it's not really the sort of thing I like.

'The trouble is, there's nothing we can do to get rid of him. Pity we don't elect the vicar, like the local council. He'd soon be out of a job!'

It's got a certain novelty value. There can't be many people who've got their own, private shooting star. I could have got a good price for it if I'd sold it. I suppose the only reason I've still got it is Percy wanted it.

'Percy again!' His two trains of thought collided and merged. 'We'd all be well rid of him.' This was his last thought before he dozed off.

Jed felt terrible when he woke up. He was so stiff that he could hardly move, and his head was throbbing with the worst headache of his life. After forcing down a couple of aspirins, he crawled off to bed and spent the rest of the morning there, dozing fitfully.

He was feeling slightly better when he got up in the early afternoon; mainly because Bramble had come upstairs to find out why he had not been fed. Jed had just put the kettle on to make a cup of tea when Nat's van pulled up in front of the farmhouse.

Nat burst through the door and asked:

"Heard the news, Jed? The vicar's dead!"

Jed's mouth fell open. "What happened?" he gasped.

"Gas explosion. Happened about half an hour ago. Wrecked the vicarage and broke half the windows in the village. They're still sweeping up broken glass."

"I know everyone hated him, but I wouldn't have wished that on anyone." Jed dropped onto a chair. "Who'd have thought it possible?"

Nat glanced at his watch. "Well, I'd better be getting back. I just came over to give you the news."

Jed followed his brother out into the yard and closed the gate after his van. Nat waved and sped off down the road towards the village. Jed went back into the farmhouse in a daze. He moved the boiling kettle off the flame. But as he crossed the kitchen to fetch the teapot, he tripped and almost fell over the star stone, which was lying in the middle of the floor.

"This damn thing," he growled.

He picked up the star stone, opened the back door, and threw it as far as he could. The star stone sailed through the air on its last flight and splashed into a ditch.

"Good riddance!" Jed called after it.

The whole village attended the Reverend Lolpratt's funeral service, which was conducted by no less a person than the Bishop. In due course, the vicarage was rebuilt and a new vicar took up residence. He was a young man, just out of college and full of enthusiasm, but still slightly unsure of himself. He was a complete contrast to the late and largely unlamented Percival Lolpratt.

Pint-Size Percy had left his affairs in something of a mess, through no fault of his own, and it looked as though it would take a long time to sort out his estate. As Nat remarked to Jed one evening:

"Looks like I'll still have to wait for what he owed me. Just when I needed it, as well, with Christmas coming."

"All you have to do is put the right crosses on your

football pools coupon," remarked Jed.

"I always do," complained Nat. "It's not my fault if the wrong teams draw, is it?"

Later, when Nat had gone, Jed switched the wireless on and sat down in front of the fire with Bramble at his feet. A sudden gust of wind under the kitchen door sent a flurry of sparks racing up the chimney as a log collapsed.

'Just like a bunch of little shooting stars,' thought Jed.



03. Towards 'O.B.T.'
PHILIP H. TURNER*February 29th*

I suppose it has been the ambition of most people, or has at least crossed their minds, that it would be very nice if they could collect their thoughts sufficiently to be able to write a book. Or, for the benefit of those who have already dabbled in the literary art, a novel.

I'm willing to bet that the country is strewn with the bones of thousands of brainchildren in all stages of development from a few ideas scribbled on a scrap of paper to the complete, and possibly much rejected, Work Of Art.

I too have been guilty of such daydreams, imagining myself as a rich and famous author, or better still, just rich. The second thoughts are prompted by a rapidly formed opinion on the price of fame: namely, that these days, it's much too high to pay.

I don't think I would like to be in the position of having every bugger and his dog thinking that they have the right to break into my private life, photograph me, or just show off to their friends by being bloody rude to me in public. No, I don't think I would enjoy being public property one little bit.

I don't really see myself as another John Creasy or a Moorcock; churning out books (novels) by the dozen (he wrote, starting the fourth successive paragraph with 'I'). I (what, again?) see myself rather as a Frederick Forsyth type; a few titles that just about everyone has heard of, and enormous sales.

Coming back to the point of being rich, it would be much better, from my point of view, if my work(s) sold steadily over a long period, rather than exploding to the top of the best-seller list for a short while. As long as they sold fast enough to stop the publisher remaindering them, I'd be sure

of a steady income over a period of years, and the taxman would get a smaller bite. Either way, I'd be able to afford a new typewriter ribbon. this decaying wreck is one of my better ones.

I don't know whether the above is some sort of deep insight into my character; the fact that I have the money aspect of my brilliant novel mapped out, in broad terms, although I am nowhere near actually writing it. Psychiatrists, amateur and professional, please form an orderly queue at the bottom of the page.

March 2nd

Enough of these ramblings, let's get down to de facts, man. Of course, I've already devoted a considerable amount of thought to My Book. A lot of the background is pretty well sorted out, as well as some of the characters. And I've even written a few bits and pieces to try to establish the 'mood' of the work.

But, as I wrote yesterday—no, the day before, I had Monday off—I am nowhere near ready to write my masterpiece. Even if I could work out a first-rate plot and flesh it out with a cast of 'real' characters and locations, I know that the level of writing wouldn't do them justice.

There's a special 'vivid' quality built in to some stories, which is imparted only when the author has formed a genuine rapport with h/is/er characters and their actions. (Note the use of the all-purpose possessive adjective. Smart, innit?)

I admit that I've noticed 'dead' patches in my own work. By this, I mean that characters move from point A to point B, or hold a conversation, but the reader has no real sense of location. The story degenerates to the level of the transcript of a tape recording. One can hear the participants' footsteps, but one can glean no information on their surroundings.

When this kind of rot sets in, working through an otherwise interesting and informative passage can become something of an exercise in will-power.

It's all a question of semantics, really. I want to load the writing such that my message (whatever it turns out to be) is driven into my reader's mind like a stake into the heart of a vampire (quel artistry!). I want the reader to have a strong mental picture of each of the characters, the places they visit and inhabit, and in which they might snuff it.

If I were to add at this point that I also want the Moon for my birthday, then it wouldn't seem too out of place. Still, I may be on the track of something to help me get my head together.

The actual 'breakthrough' came as a result of one of the coincidences on which all scientific progress depends (he wrote; modestly, but well aware of his own achievements).

A week or so ago, I happened to be minding the fort at a mate's shop while he went out on one of his famous 'I'll only be five minutes' type expeditions. Having nothing much to do, the shop being empty, I was glancing through an underground magazine, which some kind person had chucked under the counter.

The mag was full of the usual rubbish, but there was one interesting article. It was by some bloke with an unmemorable name, and it was about 'enhancement of writing potential', or something similar.

Anyway, the idea was that by swallowing the seeds of a not very exotic plant (readily available from all good gardening shops), this guy claimed that his thoughts became clearer, and it was easier for him to get them down on paper in a form that he found satisfying. The idea sounded quite plausible, but the author then proceeded to demolish his own argument by presenting a number of poems; some written with and some without the benefit of enhancement.

Well, I thought that all the poetry was pretty crappy. In

fact, the imagery and structure of his straight poems seemed marginally better. But the difference was of the same order as that between 'bad' and 'rotten'. In the end, I decided that the article was more science fiction than science fact.

All the above came flooding back last Saturday, when I had been glancing through an agricultural journal that my brother had left lying about the house. I am something of a confirmed glancer, as the observant reader will have gathered by now.

The thing that caught my eye was an article, which described at great length how a humble weed had suddenly become of tremendous importance to the pharmaceutical industry. Apparently, the men in white coats had been waving their test tubes about and spending thousands and thousands of pounds trying to synthesize wonder drug 'X' cheaply. And all the time, there had been this weed, quietly making the stuff by the bucketful, and practically for free, as well!

The article even went into the details of the industrial process used to extract the Vital Substance (no, not Certain Substance). In fact, there was so much in the article that I think the author was paid by the yard.

Aha! thought the Great Brain as his grey matter churned. This looks easy enough. Why not try it on the famous seeds?

I'll tell you why not, replied the Voice of Practicality. It's nearly half past seven and the bloody shops are shut!

Practicality, one ; Great Brain, nil.

I had no trouble getting enough of the seeds when the shops opened. But I did collect a few odd looks when I mentioned the quantity. I also needed some toluene, which the local chemist couldn't supply. The source I finally tracked down was some stuff for diluting typewriter correction fluid!

I got another odd look from the guy in the stationery shop when I bought three half-pint cans. I ignored the look

because it was none of his business what I wanted them for.

I've avoided giving any details of the raw materials and the extraction process here for two reasons: a) it would spoil my flow, and b) if it doesn't work, there's no point in wasting the reader's time and maybe boring him/her.

I've just thought of a third reason (nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition, Cardinal Biggles!)—suppose some unprincipled person gets a look at my notes while I'm still testing miracle ingredient 'X'? If the extract is any good, they've got My Secret. If not, they've got a good laugh at my expense. Or am I just being paranoid? Possibly.

So anyway, (this piece is being written in a pretty bloody casual style, isn't it?), anyway — if everything goes to plan, I may just add an experimental section at the end as an appendix. And then again, if I decide there's any money to be made out of 'enhanced' writing, I'll probably keep the whole thing to myself.

March 3rd

The extraction of the Vital Ingredient 'X' from the seeds had to wait until today, when I'd be alone in the house. The reason being that the final stage of the process requires the evaporation of a reasonable quantity of toluene, and I didn't want the rest of the household complaining about the smell and asking what I was doing.

The end result of my labours was about 20 milligrams of yellowish powder, and a terrible pong of toluene. By the time I'd got the place ventilated, it was getting on for evening and time to call it a day.

March 5th

My next problems were a) how to take 'X', and b) the dose. From what I remembered of the magazine article, I

calculated that I would only need something like one milligram of my extract, if that. Unfortunately, the most obvious method of obtaining a reasonably accurate small dose, making up a dilute solution, was ruled out as I didn't think 'X' would dissolve in anything I could drink safely. And besides, I didn't really have enough to do any experimenting.

The guy who wrote the article in the underground magazine had found that he had to chew the whole seeds before swallowing them, and that just chewing them did nothing for him. Alternatively, if he swallowed the seeds without chewing them, he got a fairly weak 'buzz' after about twenty minutes.

The seeds have a fairly unpleasant, bitter taste, he wrote, and so he ended up hacking them into little bits with a razor blade before swallowing the debris. I concluded from this that some chemical reaction takes place in the stomach to transform 'X' into the Active Ingredient. Always assuming that my extract contained the right stuff, I would have to get it into a form that I could swallow.

Of course, the Great Brain thrashed about a bit and came up with the idea of dispersing 'X' in some harmless powder, such as, well, what?

First of all, I thought of crushing some aspirins, or better still, Milk of Magnesia tablets and mixing 'X' in with them. Then, why not use something already powdered, like sugar or salt?

At last, came the stroke of genius—I would disperse some of my precious stock of 'X' in icing sugar! Thus I would have a dispersing medium, which was already a fine powder. And by adding water to the mixture, I would be able to make tablets of icing, which, when dry, I could swallow without trouble.

As I write, four blobs of icing 'n 'X' are setting to form Mark I blast-off pills.

March 10th

Alone, at last! Well, folks, today's the day! I've got tripewrotter and paper all ready to go, and some nice sounds circulating on the hi-fi system in the background. When I finish this entry, I'll drop one of my famous tabs, which should contain about half a milligram of 'X'. More later. Farewell, cruel world!

March 11th

Well, it worked! I couldn't write any more yesterday; I was feeling too shattered. In fact, I didn't really start feeling human again until about four or five hours after I took the 'writing pill'.

Well, as I was saying, I dropped the tab and zap, bang, crunch—the next thing I knew, I was in agony! My head, shoulders, back and hands all seemed to be in competition for 'Ache of the Year Award'. My hands ached from the tips of my fingers to my wrists with a deep, biting pain that seemed to come straight from the bones, and I couldn't move my fingers.

A motorway of pain ran down from my right temple, along my face, and into my throat. I had no feeling at all in my legs, which, I suppose, was just as well. Otherwise, there would have been another competitor in the Pain Handicap.

My hands had turned an interesting mixture of blue and purple from the cold. I forced myself to tuck them under my arms to try to thaw them out a little. Then I lay back in the chair, closed my eyes, and suffered for what felt like hours. At some stage, I drifted off to sleep.

I was feeling slightly better when I woke up and tried to sort out what had happened. The first thing I noticed was that I had been writing something—there was a nearly finished page in the typewriter and an untidy heap next to

the neat stack of blank paper. That was it: I'd been hunched over the typewriter for who knows how long and my muscles were now protesting vigorously. No wonder I felt such a wreck!

I peered at the top, right-hand corner of the sheet of paper in the typewriter — and saw 'OBT 18'. I had written 18 pages! Or around 7,000 words of 1½-spaced draft. I must have been going like the clappers to get that much done. I usually spend half my time correcting typing errors, and 18 pages was definitely a new World Record, as far as I'm concerned.

(For those unfamiliar with the system, I generally put the initials of the title of whatever I'm writing in front of the page number. It makes life a hell of a lot easier if two or more manuscripts get shuffled. Needless to say, such a brilliant system has its imitators.)

I reached over to pick up one of the completed pages, and found, to my dismay, that my fingers were still on strike. They seemed to be stuck in a claw-like posture. Try as I might, I couldn't get a twitch out of them. Poor fingers, overworked and frozen to death!

The least I could do was try to thaw them out a bit. After a bit of a struggle, I managed to manoeuvre the typewriter off my lap and onto the floor, and staggered downstairs. Hell! The bloody fire was nearly out. Well, I could always get something for my headache now I was here. And that was the start of my troubles. It's at such times that one learns to appreciate the miracle of engineering known as an opposable finger and thumb.

First, I had to dig about under the kitchen sink for the aspirin bottle, and then try to pick it up between the palms of my unco-operative hands. I returned to the living room, sat down, and clenched the bottle between my slim, blond knees. (I wonder if anyone can tell me where that phrase comes from?)

I felt quite proud of myself when I managed to unscrew

the cap—but I'd forgotten about the stupid sod, who decided that all aspirin bottles should have a bit of cotton wool in them to stop you getting the aspirins out.

Showing a remarkable degree of restraint, I put the bottle on the table and went to look for the tweezers (located on top of the fridge, naturally enough). Then came the contortionist act—I had to grip the bottle between my knees, hold the tweezers in my teeth, and bend forward to dig them into the cotton wool. I pressed the jaws together with my hands and slowly dragged the cotton wool out.

I had cracked it now. All I had to do was shake some of the aspirins onto the table, slide them onto my hand, and consume same (the aspirins, not my hand). It said *take two to four* on the label. I reckoned my case called for at least six. I had had enough practice at not using my fingers to make getting a drink of water a relatively easy task—I only dropped the glass once, and the Gods must have been on my side for once because it didn't break!

I cleared up after myself as best I could and headed back upstairs to my work room. I managed to plug the fan heater in, and after holding my hands in front of it for about ten minutes, they started working again, which was a great relief.

By now, the aspirins had started to work too, and I began to look at what I had written 'under the influence'. It was everything I'd hoped it would be, and more. Semantic warfare with a vengeance. As an experiment, I tried skimming through about five pages, and found that I picked up enough detail to maintain continuity when I went back to reading with more care.

The images took on a depth and clarity that was in direct proportion to the attention paid by the reader. I think I'm qualified to judge on this, as, for all practical purposes, I was reading the piece for the first time. As a matter of fact, I only read through my efforts once, to see how much stuck in my

mind. Although I know my memory is not normally that good, I find that, about 12 hours later, I can still recall exactly names, places, events—in fact, I think I could reproduce the entire text verbatim if pushed!

Before I started this experiment, I had hoped to be able to write something that I could sell. Surprisingly enough, I find that the end product of my ‘enhancement’ test is sufficient reward in itself for my pains (literally ‘pains’), and whether or not anyone else agrees with my opinion of its literary merit has become a matter of supreme indifference to me.

March 12th

Obviously, the original dose was much too high. I’m still working very much in the dark. But I’ve decided to try about one tenth of a milligram of ‘X’ for my next experiment. I recognize that my output will probably decrease significantly, but I want to experience the actual writing phase. I can always increase the dose if things move along too slowly; making sure, of course, that the after-effects aren’t too heavy. I’ve heard of suffering for one’s Art, but it doesn’t do to take these things to extremes.

Thinking about it, it’s easier to chop one of my Mark I tablets into quarters than to make up a tenth of a milligram tab. I’ll do this.

March 16th

J. wandered round earlier in the evening. Found him looking through the ms of O.B.T. He wanted to see some more, and was quite disappointed when I told him that was all there was. Then he wanted to meet the author—told him that wasn’t possible at the moment; perfectly true, as the author was me on a drug-bash. But perhaps at some unspecified time in the future (downright lie). I wonder what the

consequences would be if I admitted I'd written the novel 'under the influence of drugs'? None, probably.

March 17th

Here we are again! It's Wednesday and time for another literary adventure. Into the mouth, over the gums, look out, stomach, here it comes!

Later

Feeling fine. This is what happened:—

I was sitting in my chair, eyes closed and typewriter at the ready, waiting for some change that would tell me that 'X' had taken control. Then, all at once, I was taking page 19 out of the tripewriter and rolling in another sheet of paper—the writing process had crept up on me unawares. It had started without me! I know this sounds rather unlikely, but that's the way it happened, honest!

So, what's enhanced writing all about? Well, it seems to be a process directed by the unconscious. I was aware of the story line only as it reached the paper before me, and I had no idea what was going to come next. I found I could just sit there and either watch the story growing before my eyes, or let my attention wander. It was as if my body were part of a teleprinter; producing a message but having no part in its creation.

I heard a rushing sound on the stairs, a pause, then the same sound again. The door rustled across the carpet as it was pushed open. A large, ginger cat hopped up onto the bed, stopped to see what I was up to, then continued on his way. He had the decency to give me a very guilty look before stepping onto the window ledge via the top of a cassette deck!

Ginger turned his attention to the great outdoors. His tail twitched hungrily as he soaked up late morning sun and watched the birds commuting between the bare branches of the sycamore tree and pieces of bread in the back garden.

After a while, when he had completed that part of the day's routine to his satisfaction, Ginger jumped to the floor. He gave me an ingratiating smile, then sauntered away. I listened to him hopping down the stairs, and jumped at the bang he made when an over-vigorous push on the living room door sent it crashing into a coffee table.

I looked down at my typewriter. The flow continued, seemingly undisturbed by the sudden noise. Ginger was back almost immediately. He jumped onto the bed, planted both front paws firmly on the arm of my chair, and told me in no uncertain terms that he was hungry.

I was now in a dilemma. On the one hand, I was reluctant to leave my post at the typewriter while I was 'hot'. But on the other hand, I had a hungry cat by my side. And anyone who has ever lived with a cat will know that they always get their own way. Ginger, for instance, will start off by making a reasonable request. If it is ignored; which, in his terms, means that the victim fails to spring into action immediately; he becomes peevish.

In this frame of mind, his next step is to make a nuisance of himself; sometimes vocally, sometimes by threatening to sharpen his claws on an expensive piece of furniture, or even the victim's leg! Another tactic is to smother the victim with an embarrassingly false display of affection. Showing great imagination, he never seems to use the same ploy twice running. This time, he achieved his object by trying to climb onto my lap and overflowing onto my typewriter.

Knowing that I'd get no peace until he'd been fed, I dumped cat and typewriter on the floor. It didn't seem to matter that I'd stopped in the middle of a sentence. I was suddenly quite sure that the flow would remain suspended,

the thoughts and words forming an orderly queue in my head, like a line of vehicles at a red traffic light, until such time as I put fingers to keyboard again.

And this is exactly what happened. I left Ginger tucking into his dinner, went back upstairs, picked up the typewriter again, and I was away. Page 24 joined the ever-growing pile, and the Drug-Fiend raced on into the next part of his masterpiece.

By the time I had completed a further 7,000 words of O.B.T., my ribbon was leaving grey and fairly illegible impressions. The time had come to invest in a new one, which entailed a trip on the train into town.

There's quite a long tunnel about a mile from my home station. Every driver on the route must know exactly where it is: or does the guard switch on the lights? Anyway, on the return journey, a couple of minutes from home, everything went black as the train dived into this tunnel. Cursing the idle sod who hadn't bothered to switch the lights on, I set my book aside for the moment.

CLACK!

March 10th

Observant readers should now be thinking: he's got his chronology screwed up, or words to that effect. If you're not thinking this now, please don't waste any more of your valuable time—switch the TV on, or go to the pub. You're not in the groove. For the benefit of anyone still left with me, the date is correct—no fooling! How come? Well, let's go back a bit...

CLACK!

What the hell was that? It's only the cassette deck switching

itself off at the end of a tape. I looked down at the typewriter. No paper in it. I must have been interrupted at the end of a page. I wait, but no more paper goes into the machine. That must be the end of the session. Time to read the next episode of the story. Hang about! There's only one pile of paper beside me, and it's all blank!

The simple fact of the matter is that I've lived through eight days of my life, and written about a fifth of a fantastically brilliant novel, and it's all been in my mind. I must have been 'living' at a hell of a rate, as it all happened in the time it takes to play one side of a C90.

At the moment, I have nothing to show for my experiment — apart from memories. I can recall all sorts of things from my week under 'X'; including, obviously, the above log entries. And most important of all, the three dozen pages of the novel, the first instalment of which I read on 'March 11th' — tomorrow, would you believe!

I can safely say that my experiment has been an unqualified success. Admittedly, I didn't manage to type anything while I was under the influence of 'X'. But just the same, I've got the start of O.B.T. stored in my memory, ready to go down on paper any time I feel like bashing keys. Not that I'm looking forward to that particular chore.

But what matters most is that the novel can be created by this method: that I can access a different way of thinking which allows me to organize and order my thoughts effortlessly, and cuts out the repetition and chaos of an imperfect memory and plodding, linear thought processes. The fact that I have to write the words out afterwards is of no importance.

Also of interest is this alternate life of mine, and the question of whether it has any relevance to my real life. Reading through my log, I can see obvious differences.

I'm not writing anything down during the creation phase, I have no idea who J. is (see 'March 16th'), and we've not had

a cat since Theo died.

Perhaps I go into a logical dream world, as opposed to the more usual anarchic mess that most dreams turn out to be. Perhaps I've had a glimpse of a possible future. Perhaps I should be arranging for the alternative me to have a look at some racing results and football scores, just in case.

Future Plans

1. Going into town tomorrow. It might be an idea to buy some ribbons and a big box of paper. I should get some gentle typing done afterwards to:
2. Get up to date with O.B.T., and then:
3. Another session with the dreaded 'X' to build up a further collection of memories.

* * *

Extract from the *LANCHESTER EVENING NEWS*,
Stop Press column, 11.3.76.

TUNNEL TRAGEDY

One man died and 12 were injured when a suburban train was derailed inside a tunnel on the approach to Elston Junction.

A BR spokesman said vandals blocked the line, and the driver had no time to stop.

The line should be clear again in time for tomorrow's morning rush hour.



Author's Note:

After reading the first draft of the story on March 11th, 1976, Chuck Partington suggested that I assign all rights to him in case my prediction for the train journey home came true.

Luckily for British Rail's insurance company, we lost a fine ending, which would have placed a delightful question mark at the conclusion of both this story and my literary career.

P.H.T.

04. The Flasher

GORDON RANGE

I call myself *The Flasher*. Now that I have your undivided attention, let me say, first of all, that I don't mean the type that goes around in a scruffy raincoat and not much else. I'd better explain.

It all started a few months ago. Three and a half, to be exact. I was making one of my infrequent trips to London, when I was mugged for the first time. Almost mugged, I should say. It's funny (peculiar) really, you read the stories in the papers and think, 'how awful' when it happens to someone else. You never dream it could ever happen to *you*, though.

It certainly didn't occur to me that I could be taking a risk, not at that time of night, anyway. There were still plenty of other people about. None, admittedly, in my compartment of the Tube train, but that was only because the two girls and an off-duty postman got out at the last station.

So you can imagine the surprise, shock, sheer heart-stopping terror I felt when all of a sudden, there was this guy there, waving a screwdriver a couple of inches from my left eye and, well, demanding money with menaces is about the best way of putting it.

I was paralyzed. I couldn't have moved to save my life. All I could see was this screwdriver, chrome blade and yellow plastic handle, clutched in a dirty hand with filthy fingernails. My heart started to race. I could hardly breathe. I was trembling with a mixture of rage, fear and probably half a dozen other emotions. Then they started to laugh.

One of them had a sort of mocking, deep laugh. The other's was more of a shrill, high-pitched giggle. The laughter told me that there were two of them. My eyes were locked immovably on the screwdriver.

The laughter did it, I'm sure of that. The callous, brutal enjoyment of the uncontrolled panic of an intended victim. Suddenly, the screwdriver withdrew, releasing its stranglehold on my attention. The muggers were backing away from me. I felt my body rise to its feet, driven by a terrible rage.

I was vibrating with raw, primitive fury. I saw their faces for the first time, twisted masks of incomprehension with staring eyes and wide-open mouths, which were making random noises.

All this was impressed on my mind in a split second. Then my vision seemed to blur, as though the air around me had suddenly become translucent.

I heard a noise. My eyes focussed on the source automatically. I saw the yellow-handled screwdriver bounce what must have been a second time and come to almost-rest on the slatted floor, rolling slightly with the motion of the train. There was a hoarse gasp close to me. My head whipped back and my right arm rose in an instinctive gesture of self-defence.

One of my attackers was backing away from *me*, eyes straining from their sockets. I watched him back slowly down the compartment, right to the end, and then scabble frantically at this obstruction. Just when he looked set to try and fight his way through the door to the next compartment, the train pulled in to a station.

The kid was out of the compartment and running down the platform so fast, I thought his shoes would catch fire. It was hard to believe that I hadn't imagined his presence. The doors closed and the train started again with a jerk that almost made me lose my balance. I sat down automatically. Something bumped against my foot.

It was a screwdriver with a yellow plastic handle. The panic symptoms returned. Where was its owner? Not here, anyway. I fumbled my cigar case from my pocket and managed the almost impossible feat of getting one of the

short cigars into my mouth and lighting it with hands that were trembling violently.

I found myself totally incapable of rational thought. All I could do was sit and smoke, and watch the yellow-handled screwdriver moving in short arcs toward and away from me. About half way down the cigar, I heard the name of my destination. I managed to escape from the Tube train a fraction of a second before it continued on its endless circuit of central London.

The porter who had shouted the name of his station seemed ready to make a crack about my tardiness. Something in my expression made him think again. I found my way back to the hotel by means of an internal guidance system, which didn't require conscious planning on my part.

In the now familiar confines of my room, I rummaged through my duffle bag for the silver flask of medicinal whisky. I took a good, big drink from it, then replaced the cap. I remember putting the flask on the bedside table and sitting on the bed, feeling utterly drained.

I woke up sometime in the night, fully clothed and lying on the floor directly in the path of a fiendish draft from the open window. My neck and the muscles of my right arm and leg screamed a protest when I tried to move. As a gesture to propriety, I kicked off my shoes before crawling into bed. I didn't think I'd ever get to sleep, but, mercifully, I drifted off as the night gloom began to lift.

The following morning, I woke up cautiously. The stabs of pain from the right-hand side of my body were an unwelcome assurance that the events of the previous night had not been a dream. Perhaps the worst part of getting dressed when one dare not bend too freely is putting one's socks on.

Quite deliberately, I refrained from thinking about the events in the Tube train until I had finished my hotel breakfast. I don't normally eat much at this time of day, but

having paid for egg, bacon, coffee and toast, I feel bound to get my money's worth. I tried to distract myself by attempting to read the morning paper, but failed miserably. On my second scan of page two, I realized that my brain had quite enough on its mind, thank you, and was not accepting new information until the backlog had been digested to its satisfaction.

Different tactics were called for. If I couldn't stop unwanted thoughts from creeping up on me, I could, at least, employ a mental policeman to *keep them moving*, to prevent them from stopping long enough for me to focus on them. I had a good reason for not wanting to think about my adventure; after-effects lingered on.

The shallowest recollection triggered a cold sweat and uncontrollable trembling of my extremities. Not wishing to make a fool of myself at the breakfast table, I had to evade all memories of my narrow escape from first-hand experience of armed robbery.

Going back up the stairs afterwards, I suddenly realized that I might not have been all that clever having breakfast just because I'd paid for it. Suppose I had a really severe attack of the recollections? I might just end up chucking the whole lot down the bog.

Oh, well. It was a bit late to worry about that. If it happened, it happened.

Back in my room, I sat and pretended to read the paper until the hotel cleaning staff had discharged their obligation to neatness. Settling myself more comfortably in the rather spartan chair, I allowed the newspaper to slide to the floor and let my thoughts crash back fourteen or so hours.

I tried to put myself into the position of a possible fourth party, watching from a distance and filling in details, which I had either not seen or had been too preoccupied to take in.

There I was, in the first set of seats by the door alcove, facing the direction of travel and reading a book. Where was

the book? It was in the pocket of my anorak. How it got there, I don't know. But I hadn't lost it half-read, and that was all that mattered.

Enter the bad guys. As the hypothetical fourth party, I found that I could be quite clinical, if not flippant about what could easily have been an even more traumatic experience.

The scene reminded me of one from the film *Death Wish*; where Charles Bronson blasts the baddies from behind his newspaper; the only difference being that I was reading a book. And I didn't have a gun.

I was sitting on the aisle seat. The one with the screwdriver plants a knee on the window seat and waves the offensive weapon in my face. His mate is standing in the aisle to block a possible line of retreat. I do my famous demonstration of someone in a blind panic. Then what? The bad guys start to get off on my reaction.

Then what? I had no idea on the morning after. I could remember them backing away from me for some reason; the one with the screwdriver dropping it as I exuded an aura of almost liquid hate; the totally unexpected flight of his companion. And then there was the question of where Mr. Screwdriver had gone.

I returned to my role of disinterested observer to try to sort out what had happened. They are both standing in front of me, in the alcove between the doors. Just shapes, though. I have no idea what they look like, or what they're wearing. I'm on my feet too, and I think I'm in the aisle as well, so that I have a possible escape route.

My vision blurred at that point, but the muggers couldn't have got past me without my knowing it. When I can see again, the screwdriver is on the deck and bad guy number two is backing away from me, looking as if he has had a mind-shattering shock, always assuming he had a mind to shatter.

The fate of Mr. Screwdriver remained unresolved. I

returned home with my nerves slightly shattered, and with a profound distrust of the London Underground system. But on the plus side; my wallet was still mine, if depleted by the predations of London hoteliers and shop owners. I was all for dismissing the episode as one of life's little mysteries and trying to forget the whole thing. Intentions and events, however, do not always coincide.

I gained a startling insight into the Great Tube Train Mystery about two months later. It was late evening, about a quarter past ten: after a late, summer sunset but still in the twilight period. But not dark because all the street lights were on.

Not really thinking about it, I did something I'd done lots of times before—I crossed the road by a system of underpasses less than a mile from the city centre. But tonight, I was ambushed by a gang of yobbos. Two of them were shorter than me. One had a knife, and the other had what looked like a cut-throat razor taped into the open position. Number three was a couple of inches taller than my five feet eleven and looked capable of doing me grievous bodily harm without artificial aids.

Strangely enough, I felt quite calm. I had a sense of, not quite *déjà vu*, but certainly *similar vu*. The very familiarity of the situation seemed to rob it of all menace. That and having survived a similar predicament more or less intact.

The yobbos moved closer, grinning and supremely confident of having a spot of fun and coming away a few quid richer. I remember putting my right hand into my trouser pocket to get hold of my keys. A Yale key held in a clenched fist with the business end projecting between the fingers can do a lot of damage to an opponent's face. Always assuming you can get that close.

In this case, faced with a knife, a razor and a gorilla's first cousin, the odds didn't look too hot. But I made the gesture anyway.

Oddly enough, I didn't consider flight as an alternative. Looking back, running for it made a lot of sense. Fuelled by pure adrenaline, I should have been able to keep ahead of them until they lost interest. Always assuming I didn't fall over something, as always happens during a film or television chase.

But I stood my ground. The yobbos moved closer. I sensed an all too familiar increase in my heart and breathing rates. I began to quiver. The yobbos mistook this for a sign of fear. They couldn't have been wider from the mark. It was pure Berserker rage. Then one of them laughed.

That was the trigger. The air around the armed yobbos seemed to shimmer. Knife and razor clattered to the ground. Before the astonished eyes of myself and the third, unarmed yobbo, his mates just vanished.

This was too much for the gorilla. His mouth fell open a yard. He gave me one terror-filled look, then he took to his heels like a startled rabbit. It was a bit too much for me, too. I felt drained, confused, I didn't know what. I had to lean against the wall of the underpass for about five minutes before I was able to stand up without staggering like a drunk. No running from the scene of the crime for me.

And crime it could well be, I recall thinking at the time. I had just disposed of two armed thugs by some means, which I certainly couldn't explain. Were they still alive? Where they dead? If they were, I couldn't be charged with murder in the absence of bodies. Not that any sane person would believe the truth. Not that I had any idea what the truth was anyway. Not that...

I gave my face a mental slap to stop my thoughts racing round in hysterical circles. By now, my body had decided that it could walk again. I continued on to the station, my mind still trying to race in all directions simultaneously.

Of course, I missed my train by five minutes. Which meant that I had to wait twenty-five minutes for the next one.

Which, in turn, meant that I missed the first half hour of the late night rubbish film on the box. As I had been looking forward to this film all week, I figured that it squared things for whatever had happened to the vanishing yobbos. And if their large mate's hair turned white overnight, well, that was his share of the blame.

The following evening, I thought for a while that I had gained an insight into, if not the exact nature, then certainly something of the general principles behind what had happened to the yobbos.

I was watching Granada's six o'clock magazine programme with half an eye, waiting for them to get through the boring old local news at the beginning, when one of the items attracted my attention.

Someone, whose name I had missed, had complained about vandalism in underpasses. Then they went into a film sequence. The camera dutifully jerked across sections of graffiti-covered walls in a manner that suggested that all the interesting or crude bits had been chopped out.

Then they reached the spot where I had met the yobbos. Much to my surprise, the camera tracked upwards to the ceiling and stopped on two blackened patches. The news-reader then went into a speil about tramps and/or vandals lighting fires in the city's underpasses, but blithely ignored the fact that there were no corresponding scorch marks on the floor beneath the sections of singed ceiling.

This conjured up a mental picture of tramps dragging fires around with them in little carts; which made a certain sort of sense for someone of no fixed abode.

Then came a second mental picture of one dirty old tramp booting another and saying something like: "You fool! You forgot about the ceilings. Now, our secret is in danger."

I wonder if other people get these insane ideas while watching what is supposed to be a serious item on the telly.

Buy mild hilarity degenerated into more serious thoughts.

Heat. Was that the key? Was what I had done a form of pyrokinesis? Vibration of the component molecules of an object to raise its temperature to melting point, combustion point, or even flash point — the point of instant vaporization?

The essence of a good theory was there, in that it fitted the known facts. The shimmering of the air had to be a heat haze. The instantaneous disappearance of my attackers happened because they were flashed from solid to gas by an enormous and rapid rise of temperature. And in case you think I've made the latter up, flashing in this sense is a scientific term in common use.

By the end of the television programme, I was almost believing my theory. I was even thinking of getting hold of the London evening papers for the night after my visit to see if any mention had been made of a slightly singed Tube train. Then common sense reared its ugly head.

What happens when a solid or a liquid is flashed to a gas at high speed? A solid like TNT or a liquid like nitroglycerine. The effect is known as an explosion! So how come I was still in one piece?

Alas, my theory is either incomplete or totally wrong. But no matter. The fact remains that twice, under conditions of immediate physical danger, I have disposed of armed assailants and emerged from the situation unharmed. Not knowing how the process works doesn't stop it working. I don't suppose plants are up on the theory of photosynthesis, but they grow well enough when the sun shines.

A multitude of questions remains; the most obvious being — why I disposed of only 50% of my attackers in the first encounter and two-thirds in the second? Could it be that my 'talent' improves with use, and that if I'm attacked a third time, I'll be able to flash three thugs?

Or is it a discrimination of levels of threat?

The armed thugs were flashed first, which put the rest to flight. Perhaps the weaponless ones would have been next on

the list if they'd kept coming. Further research is called for.

I wonder if I can learn to control the process, to use it at will. Or is it just a raw, basic self-defence mechanism, which has evolved out of the normal human mind? I wonder if I could use it to, say, light a cigarette without exterminating the whole thing? Is it a technique that can be taught to others, like Kung Fu? For self-defence only, of course. That question's going to remain unanswered. Boasting about my talent could get me into some pretty heavy situations like:

"I flashed a couple of burglars last night, constable."

"Yes, sir. Of course, you did. Now, you just sit here quietly until the nice doctor comes."

Or even:

"Did you really, sir? How about coming down to the station and telling us all about it? Remembering, of course, that anything you say can be given in evidence."

Nevertheless, *I* can walk about at night and go into dark corners with a feeling of perfect security. Not too many others can say that in these violent times. And I can dream. Wouldn't it be nice to:

- Flash the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he puts too much extra tax on a bottle of Scotch?

- Flash anyone who plays a dirty trick on you, cheats you, or otherwise incurs your displeasure?

- Be the only one able to do this so you're always the flasher, never the flashee?

This is the road to absolute corruption.

I could even become a Super-Hero Crime Fighter; but not one of the sort who wears a flashy(!) costume to attract attention, and a mask to conceal their true identity.

I am cast from a more modest mould. So watch out, you Men of Steel, you Caped Crusaders.

If I ever get this thing together, you may find yourselves taking a back seat to The Flasher!

✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂

Author's Note:

This story is continued later in this volume of the collection. The author decided that he couldn't get away with leaving the phenomenon of Flashing in such an unexplained state.

05. Andy And The Vampire

HENRY T. SMITH

Andy took one last toke at the bones of a very juicy joint, then chucked the remnants into the fire. He was floating nicely but his mouth felt as dry as several deserts.

What I need is a drink, he thought.

But the gin bottle was empty. So was the half-pint tonic bottle. He looked at the empty bottles for a few disgusted seconds, then took them out to the dustbin and flung them in. They broke with a satisfying crash. Water. Yecch! But that was all there was. It was a little better than nothing. And it would put the fire out.

While he was in the kitchen, he decided on a midnight snack. So he got busy with bread and butter, hoping that there was something decent in the fridge.

Bloody hell! Andy looked up from slicing a firming loaf. Where's that draught coming from?

The back door was still open. He pushed it to with a foot and returned to his butty making. Suddenly, he stopped.

What the hell have I been smoking!? he asked himself. I'm sure I saw a bat on the window ledge. Right! There it is.

As he stared at the vision, willing it to vanish into thin air. So it did; in a sort of way.

The bat transformed itself into a pillar of white smoke, which then condensed into a man dressed in either the height of fashion or a very ancient suit. Its battered condition suggested archaic, if not prehistoric. As Andy gaped at him, the man bowed stiffly from the waist and said:

"Mumble, mumble."

"Huh?" said Andy blankly.

"Mumble, mumble," repeated the man. At least, that's what it sounded like to Andy.

"Whatcha say there, man?" said Andy.

"Aha! You are Inglis, no?" said the man.

"I am English, yes," said Andy. "Are you puttin' me on?"
"Pliz?"

"I mean, what do you expect in bloody England, man?"

"Yes," said the visitor. "Am making explain of myself. I am on mysterious tour. Am not certain where I am appearing."

"Oh!" said Andy, baffled. "Who the hell are you, anyway?" The man looked too weird even for the drug squad.

"I have the honour to presenting myself. I am being Compte Crudala." The visitor bowed again.

"I'm Andy." Andy bowed in self-conscious imitation of the intruder. "And this is my hovel. Three quid a week, the roof leaks, but only when it rains, and there's a damp patch in every room. Whatcha want, anyway?"

"I am being vompeer," said the Compte. "Am craving of your bloods."

"Ho, ho!" Andy extended a leg in the visitor's direction. "Pull that, it's got bells on it."

"Is more usual to be biting of the neck. But if you are insisting..." The man took a step forward.

"Hang about." Andy withdrew his leg as he found standing on one slightly beyond his capabilities. "Look, mate, either you tell me what you want or piss off out of it. I can't say fairer than that."

"I have explained already." The compte assumed a pained expression as he managed to get his grammar right for the first time. "Are you not understanding? I am wanting your bloods."

"What are you, a bleeding vampire, or something," demanded Andy, becoming tired of the hallucination. What the hell was in that grass he asked himself. A ton and a half of THC?

"Yess, yess," persisted the compte, nodding vigorously. "You are making comprehend. I am vompeer. I am desiring of the bloods."

"Sod you, mate. Get out of that!" Andy shouted in triumph, snatching up the bread knife and a passing fork to improvise a cross. He held it up so that the shadow cast by the light over the sink fell squarely on the alleged vampire, who smiled gratitude.

"Am not needing instruments of cut. Am using own identifications." He opened his mouth wider to display a matched pair of three-quarters-of-an-inch-long, yellowish fangs. "Is quite sufficient, thanking you."

"It's the sign of the Cross!" howled Andy in disgust. "You're supposed to be paralyzed."

"Aha!" said the vampire. "I am observing. But you are making the error. I am not Christian vompeer."

"Balls!" scoffed Andy. "You've got to be."

"Regrettably, not myself. I am never baptize." A small tear of regret trickled down one cheek.

"Gotcha!" Andy leapt forward to belt him over the head with a foot of very solid sausage. "Garlic! Shrivell up and die, matey!"

The vampire rubbed his head gingerly. A small tear of pain trickled down his other cheek. "Misunderstanding again. Vompeers are liking of garlic. Is essential to cookery of some dish."

"You mean, there's nothing I can use to stop you?" frowned Andy.

The vampire scanned the kitchen rapidly, then beamed. "Yes, there is not."

"It's not my lucky day, is it?" said Andy reflectively. "Are you in a hurry?"

"What meaning?" returned the compte suspiciously.

"I mean, are you in a rush to drink my blood?" Andy shuddered at the thought. "Or can I have a last request, like?"

"You are wanting me to singing?" said the vampire doubtfully.

"No, you bloody idiot! I mean, can I eat my butties and smoke a last joint before I join the ranks of the living dead?"

"No time for cookings."

"You what?"

"No time for smoking of joints of meat. I must to my grave return before morning."

"Geez! What an idiot! I didn't mean joints of meat. I mean... Oh, never mind. Just watch."

Andy had finished his sandwich by now, building it on auto-pilot. He slid the creation onto a plate, wondering if he would ever have to bother with another lot of washing up, and led the way into his spartan living room, where he squatted on the thread-bare rug in front of the fire. "What's this about returning to your grave?" he asked. "Does that mean you'll shrivel up and die if sunlight falls on you?"

"Where are you getting such story?" said the compte, amazed. "Grave is being English slang word for bed."

"Rats!"

"Where?"

"What?"

"Where are rats?" The vampire sounded both alarmed and disgusted.

"What? Oh! That's just a slang expression. A real one. Not like grave being slang for bed."

"Is!" protested the vampire. "No, am using wrong word. Is being different word meaning hole in ground."

Andy forced himself to think even though his skull felt stuffed with cotton wool. It was a way of staying remotely in touch with reality. "Pit?" he realized eventually.

"Yes." The vampire gave him an unexpected thumbs up. "Whatever word." He dismissed the English language with a wave of a long-fingered hand. "Vompeer have to sleep after all night being on prowl."

"Why the hell don't you go out during the day?" said Andy through a mouthful of sandwich.

The vampire shrugged vaguely. "Most people not at home in day. You ask plenty questions."

"Well, I need to know these things. For when you gobble all my blood and I join the ranks of the living dead."

The vampire assumed a puzzled look. "You are saying this two times now. Is joke, yes?"

"Is no bloody joke," said Andy uncertainly. "You mean that's not true either?"

"You are believing that without bloods you are still living?" said the vampire incredulously.

"That's the way you got to be a vampire in the first place, wasn't it?" said Andy indignantly. "Another vampire came and drank your blood when you were still human. And gave you the disease that made you one of the living dead."

The compe began to rock from side to side, laughing helplessly. Then a measure of control returned. "Of a silliness, this idea. Vompeering is hereditary. I am vompeer because mother and father also vompeer. When I am drinking of your bloods, you are dying, not becoming vompeer. If so, world become full of vompeer and no one to drink blood of."

Andy looked vaguely disappointed, and began to build a nice, fat joint with the remains of his stash. He lit up, drew smoke deep into his lungs, and leaned against an easy chair, smiling.

"You are finish eating?" asked the vampire hopefully.

"Hang about. You said I could smoke a joint as well." Andy held up the roach for the vampire's inspection.

"Ah, smoking cigarlet, not meat. Is called *joint* now?" The vampire inhaled. "Is of strange odour."

"You smoke? Want to try it?"

"If you are pleasing." The compe took a big drag; and almost exploded from coughing.

"Try a smaller drag. And hold it in your lungs as long as you can. You do have lungs, don't you?"

"For the breathing? Yes, have got." The compte wiped his streaming eyes on a shirt cuff and tried again.

"Tell me one thing," said Andy. "Why do vampires drink blood instead of eating food like the rest of us?"

"Am eating too," said the compte in a far-away voice.

"What?!" gasped Andy.

"Am eating too. Is just that we cannot enjoy foreign food. Something wrong with cookings." The compte picked up a spare garlic sausage sandwich and nibbled at it cautiously. Then he stopped, looked at it quizzically, and took a larger bite. Then he crammed the whole sandwich into his mouth and chewed happily.

"I thought you couldn't eat the food?" protested Andy, sneaking a sandwich before the vampire could clear the plate.

"I am not understanding either." The compte sprayed crumbs in all directions in a most unaristocratic fashion.

"It's German garlic sausage," mused Andy. "It's from your own country, so you can eat it. But the bread isn't. And the butter's Irish."

"Not being from Germany," mumbled the compte through another sandwich.

A mental light bulb glowed. "Maybe it's the dope!"

The compte drew dense, bushy black eyebrows together. "Pliz?"

"Maybe you need a smoke before you can eat foreign food."

"No," said the compte, not completely sure what Andy was going on about. "Am smoking of cigarlet before." He crammed the last sandwich into his mouth.

"This isn't tobacco, mate," Andy pointed out. "Well, not much of it. I reckon you've never smoked this stuff before."

The vampire thought it over, then nodded, his mouth too full for speech. "You have right answer," he managed after vigorous chewing. "Taste is like at home."

"I guess it's obvious, really. You can do all sorts of things stoned you'd never dream of doing in your right mind. Like eating revolting foreign food."

"There is being more of food? And joints."

"What's up?" grinned Andy. "You're acting like you haven't had a decent meal for ages."

"Not eating of food since leaving Old Country," said the compte sadly.

"How many days ago was that?"

"It is the tenth of April of year 1754 since I am leaving."

"Well, burn my brain!" said Andy with great feeling. "Why the hell did you leave in the first place?"

The vampire looked very uncomfortable and changed the subject hurriedly. He was mildly stoned, but not uninhibited enough to reveal that embarrassing episode to a stranger. "Food, joint," he prompted.

"I'm okay for food, but I'm out of grass." Andy displayed a few brown pinheads of resin in his stash tin.

"Grass is easy getting. Is big park near."

"No, no. Grass is just a slang name for the stuff. It's got nothing to do with the stuff that grows on lawns."

"You can get more?"

"I don't know. I'm a bit stony right now."

"Pliz?" frowned the compte.

"I'm...never mind. How are you fixed for cash?"

"Why am I needing money? A vompeer take what he want. Who will stop him?"

"You've got a point there, matey." A thought struck Andy. "Tell me, when you change into a puff of smoke, can you put something into your pocket and take it with you?"

"Of course. Anything on person or in pocket of garment affected by spell of change." The compte looked at a signet ring with a blood-red ruby on his left hand, then produced a silver box from an inside pocket. "If not, would appear naked. Very bad in winter." He ran a finger up and down the

lapel of his black, formal jacket.

"Great! I've just thought of a place where they've got lots and lots of grass. Where a bloke like you could get us plenty."

"Great, also," beamed the compte. "If I am getting of grass, you will be preparing of food?"

Andy nodded with a smile. The vampire giggled and moved closer to him. He had a faint smell of something ancient; pleasant, like old books rather than a graveyard reek.

"Are you keeping of secret?"

"I guess so," shrugged Andy.

"Am heartfully sick of bloods," whispered the compte, his dark eyes scanning the room as if in search of eavesdroppers.

"I suppose you would be after all that time," said Andy, unmoved by such heresy. "I had a tooth out a while ago. My mouth was full of blood for ages afterwards. That was enough to make me sick of the taste." He crawled away to a corner of the room, and returned with a crumpled evening newspaper.

"Grass," said the vampire urgently.

Andy tore a section from an inside page and handed it to his visitor. "This is what you're looking for. They're about so big." He demonstrated an object the size of a one-kilo bag of sugar with his hands. "And you might have to look around a bit before you find them. But for chrisse sakes, don't let anybody see you. Okay?"

The compte nodded eagerly, then decided that he ought to be shaking his head. "Where?"

"Just down the road from here. Where the cross-Channel ferries dock. The Customs grabbed this lot out of a van this morning, so the grass should still be there."

"Customs!" The vampire wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"You think you can find the place? It's only about a mile away."

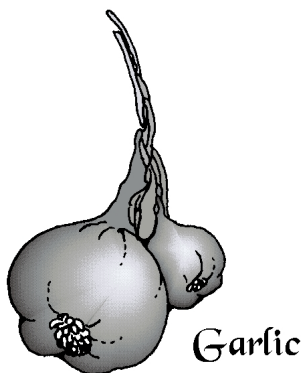
"I find," nodded the compte. "Which way?"

Andy led him to the back door. He pointed in the general direction of the waxing Moon. "Go that way till you come to the sea, then left a bit."

"Good." The vampire began to dissolve into a column of white mist.

"And if you can lay your hands on a couple of bottles of wine and some brandy..." added Andy, ever the optimist.

A small, dark object flapped away to merge with the night. Half convinced that he was in a dream, or hallucinating, Andy closed the back door and picked up the bread knife and went into sandwich-making mode.



06. The Flasher Subdued

GORDON RANGE

Hi! Remember me? I'm The Flasher. That's right, the bedbug who was shouting his mouth off about becoming a Super-Hero and all. What's that? I can't be him 'coz I'm not cocky enough? Well, you wouldn't be so cocky if you'd been on the receiving end of some of the things that've happened to me recently. In fact, it's a source of constant wonder that I've not woken up some morning to find my hair snowy white, or all over the pillow.

But let's get back to my previous literary masterpiece, when The Flasher was still new and full of wonder, and he had only three notches on his strange device. About then, I was trying to get my talent to work in a small way, the idea being to use it for lighting cigars, fires—in the grate at home—and the gas cooker when the piezo-electric device decided not to co-operate.

If I could manage these simple tasks, I planned to move on to something more complex, such as boiling a kettle—the water in it, not the aluminium case—or making a quick baked potato.

The trouble was, I didn't have a handle on the process. But I was sure that all I needed to do was press a mental button to trigger the effect; after setting the power to an appropriate level. I wouldn't want to burn the house down while trying to bake a potato.

Consider my predicament, then. First, I had to find the room that contained the button. Then I had to recognize the button itself, and figure out how to work it. Mind you, *button* was just a convenient label for the triggering device. It could equally well have been something needing a mental pull, or even a smart tap with a wet cucumber, for all I knew.

I didn't think that last suggestion was as daft as it sounds; thinking along witchcraft lines. If one accepts that the rituals

and the eye of newt, toe of rat, etc. can be considered as sensory programming of the mental computer, getting it into the right state for throwing the switches required to turn someone into a frog, then pyrokinesis triggered by wet cucumbers might not be so far over the edge!

To anyone who thinks this is a load of old rubbish, let me challenge them to prove it's bunkum. In common with many theories put forward by the lunatic fringe, and not so fringe, it's grounded, like any good religion, on pretty unassailable foundations; composed not of strength but sheer inaccessibility.

But enough of this. Let's get down to what happened next. I'd just written up my account of the birth of The Flasher and sent it, pseudominously, to the editor of a science fiction magazine. I was waiting to see which would come back; the manuscript or a cheque. (The former returned, of course.)

The day was Wednesday. It was raining fairly monotonously, and I didn't feel like work. Slumped in my armchair in my workroom cum bedroom, I was trying to think of something to do. Guilt feelings from sitting around not doing anything were having a pretty disruptive effect on my thoughts.

I decided to play all my Atomic Rooster albums. That would keep me in background sounds for a couple of hours. Then; why not try some flashing experiments? Lighting a match; that ought to be a relatively simple task for a budding pyromaniac.

Anyone coming into the room at that time could have been forgiven for thinking that I'd gone out of my mind. There I was, sitting with my feet up, holding an ordinary match at eye level, trying to light it with the power of thought, or something.

I let my thoughts run free, associating everything that came into my head with a command for the match to burn. At one stage, I was even whispering, "Burn, you bastard,

burn!" at it, like an enthusiastic witch-finder. There was no one else in the house at the time, but that didn't stop me feeling a proper twit when I realized what I was doing.

I kept this up all through side 2 of *Death Walks Behind You*. Okay, so my albums aren't in the proper order, and I'd put this record in its sleeve backwards the last time I played it. Anyway, towards the end, I was only devoting 1½ eyes to the match; the other half an eye was on the pick-up arm.

The idea of this was to catch it before it got to the endless loop round the label. On most records, all that happens at this stage is that you hear a rhythmical *pop...pop...pop...* until you get round to turning the record over or changing it. This particular pressing is different; it goes:

Kachunka...FIZZCRASH!?!...FIZZCRASH*!?!...*

The run-off to the groove round the middle sounds as if it's doing dreadful damage to the stylus. Hence my vigilance.

At the last moment, my attention was diverted by a noisy plane, which seemed to be doing its best to leave tyre tracks on our roof. We live quite a long way from Ringway, but they seem to do a lot of turning over our area, either stacking or lining themselves up with the runway at the end of a flight corridor.

I was brought back to the job in hand by a loud: *FIZZCRASH*!?!* from the stereo system. Two things happened then. One: I jumped to my feet. Two: the match caught fire; not just the head, but the whole thing! Making a suitable comment of surprise and pain, I dropped it. Fortunately, it landed on the carpet, not me.

I now had a scorched finger and thumb, and a ditto carpet. The damage to the carpet was very slight; it had a biggish hole in it to start with, so one more mild scar wasn't going to make much difference. And my reflexes had been fast enough to spare me the need for lavish medical attention.

I turned the record over and took stock of the situation. I had pressed the button, or whatever. There could be no

doubt about that! But there had been a marked lack of control. In its present state, my method of lighting cigars seemed to be a good way of giving them up, and required a pair of asbestos gloves as a necessary accessory.

Having selected another match, I tried again, this time holding it in a pair of tweezers. Nothing happened, and continued not to do so until the end of the album, when I gave up. Intermittent experiments since that day were uniformly unsuccessful. Whichever button I pressed had been operated by pure accident, and it seemed to have been lost again.

But then history did repeat itself. My next flash took place under potentially very dangerous circumstances; for me, that is. I had found my way to a weekend pop festival. In fact, one of my drinking companions had told me that he had a spare place in his car and a spare ticket, and did I want to go? Silly question!

The Saturday passed without incident. After crawling out of bed at an unhealthily early hour and spending half a day on the road, we arrived at the festival site. It was our driver's idea to get there at around lunchtime. And, as he had promised, we were able to pick a reasonable spot with a good view of the stage.

Most of the bands during the afternoon were very second division. I'd heard of all of them, but their music was completely unfamiliar. There were a few pleasant surprises, but on the whole, the music tended to be very average until the first division rolled up at around seven in the evening. Mind you, there was lots to do. If you didn't like the music, you could watch the freaks; see what the well-dressed idiot was wearing these days. Or have a giggle at the boppers trying to shake themselves to pieces.

Another game we played was trying to spot who was smoking the noble weed; not an easy task on such occasions. The very distinctive smell of dope seemed to be coming from

any direction the wind happened to choose.

Of course, the jolly old fuzz were active. Later on, we actually saw a bust going down (score 50 points) on a bunch of idiots, who were snorting something from miniature spoons; probably coke. And right out in the open! For once, it was the heads who got the jeers when they were raked in. I mean, such a lack of discretion deserves to be stomped on.

After that, the air cleared somewhat. Literally, I mean. the grass smokers packed it in for a while until the heat had died down. Cooking smells took over, plus a few chemical whiffs from the bogs when the wind was in the right direction.

The music went on till about 11:30 p.m. Then the official part of the celebration ended for the day. By some strange coincidence, the place was full of guitar bums. Camp fire folk clubs formed and reformed, as they do at such events.

There was an absolutely enormous amount of booze in circulation. I know, we'd brought our fair share. The main problem was finding somewhere comfortable to sit and drink it. After the months of sun, the ground was rock hard; a bit like corrugated brick, which was infinitely preferable to the usual festival mud, I might add. Still, we got used to it, or it seemed to matter less and less as the night wore on.

Strangely enough, I survived the night's drinking. In fact, although I didn't crawl into my borrowed sleeping bag until the early hours of Sunday morning, I woke up at the amazing hour of 6:30 a.m., feeling no pain and as refreshed as if I'd had a proper night's sleep.

There were one or ten bodies in circulation when I went to empty the reservoir and have a wash. Some of them, from the way they were staggering around, looking like the living dead, hadn't got round to sleeping yet. Others, as I was to learn shortly, had more sinister motives for being out and about. I was on my way back to the tent, thinking about getting some coffee together, when I found out just how sinister.

I was about fifteen yards or so from my tent when the flap opened and this scruffy herbert sneaked out, clutching my anorak in his dirty paw. Knowing that you do get a few thieves at such gatherings, none of the crowd I'd come with had brought anything particularly valuable. One guy had brought a camera, and I had a small tranny, but we made sure that we had them on us at all times, along with out wallets, of course.

So anyway, there I was, being ripped off by this ratbag. I think he saw me at about the time I saw him. In his panic to get away, he tripped over the trailing anorak and one of the guy ropes of the tent. Fortunately, he dropped my anorak. Unfortunately, he didn't break his greasy neck.

Well, he started running and I started running after him. Then I stopped. The familiar build-up to a flash had started. I tried to stop myself. The trouble was, I couldn't. When you're quivering with righteous indignation at becoming an almost-victim, and the blood's full of adrenaline, and you're all set to stomp some thieving bastard to a soggy pulp, it's impossible to cool off in a couple of seconds.

Somehow, my time sense managed to speed up. You know how the *Six Million Dollar Man* and his bionic girlfriend, Jamie, run in slow motion when they're supposed to be going at about 60 mph? Well, this guy seemed to be doing the same.

All at once, the air around him began to waver and to take on a translucent quality. There was nothing I could do to stop it. The man began to shrink, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Then he vanished. At the same instant, the desiccated leaves directly above him on the overhanging branch of a crooked oak tree burst into flames and were gone in seconds, leaving a collection of black skeletons.

I had done it again!

My first reaction was to panic. After all, I'd just flashed a guy in full view of about a dozen people. Then reason

prevailed. I was a good twenty yards from where he'd disappeared, so there was no way I could be connected with what had happened. The spectators unfroze gradually and began to drift towards the oak tree. Not wishing to be different, I closed in with the others, collecting my anorak on the way.

"See that, man?" a bearded giant whispered to his tiny companion in an awed tone.

"Where'd he go?" wondered the blond dwarf.

We stood beneath the scorched leaves and speculated. Attracted to a crowd, others joined us. Increasingly distorted accounts of the event were paraded. It was UFOs. He'd been translated to a higher astral plane. Some joker had put acid in the water supply and we'd imagined it. I left the crowd as a very earnest type in gaudy kaftan and rope-soled sandals was expounding on mass hallucinations, and a small group of red-eyed scarecrows was vowing that they hadn't touched a drop of water since their arrival.

I needed to think. I made some instant coffee and retired to my tent. My mates emerged from hiding soon afterwards. I could hear them discussing me in not very complimentary terms. They didn't approve of people who stayed in bed half the day, which I thought was bloody cheeky for ten to seven in the morning. But I ignored the insults because I felt that I was On To Something.

Perhaps compression was the key. Perhaps the flashing process didn't involve combustion after all. Every physicist knows that when a gas is compressed rapidly, its temperature rises. It's just the reverse of the Joule-Kelvin effect. But I wasn't squashing a gas into a smaller container.

The human body is mainly water, which is a notoriously incompressible fluid. Even allowing for the free space in the lungs and the body cavity, it would take an enormous amount of energy to crush an adult thief to vanishing point.

Unless a dimensional rupture was involved, I thought,

becoming very SF.

So there was the latest theory: someone attacks either my person or my property. I become slightly annoyed and exert an enormous crushing force on the bad guy. He begins to shrink. The fabric of our common set of space and time dimensions shrieks out against the compressive force. It ruptures. Exit the bad guy to elsewhere and elsewhen, with an attendant heat flash to mark his passing.

But the exciting thing was, I was just about sure that I knew where to find the trigger and how to press it.

I was somewhat preoccupied for the rest of the day. Fortunately, that could be ascribed to wanting to concentrate on the music, which was what we were there for, after all. I was like a young kid with a real, genuine gun; looking at it, touching it, but keeping my sticky fingers well clear of the trigger of my strange talent; for the moment.

Back home, on Monday morning, sitting in my typing chair, I had the *gun* out of its holster, but I was lost for something to try my talent on. Looking round the room, my eyes fell on a wooden dinosaur perched on top of one of my speakers. It was a diplodocus, coiled in rather an unlikely fashion, and carved from fairly soft, light-coloured wood.

The beast was unvarnished and bore a huge stain across its broad back where some careless idiot had splashed half a bottle of green ink onto it. I had acquired the creature at a jumble sale for the magnificent sum of 50p.

As new, unblemished ones were on sale at the local art and craft shop for a fiver, it had seemed a bargain at the time. I'd had plans to try to bleach the stain away, but I hadn't done anything about it. In the meantime, I had become rather fed up with my green and white dinosaur, and I was contemplating slinging it.

What followed was a fortunate accident. I retrieved my dusty dinosaur from the left-hand speaker and took it

downstairs. I went out into the garden and set the beast on top of a pile of ashes left over from a recent bonfire. Then I retired three or four paces for safety's sake and reached for the trigger.

There was no need to work myself into a violent rage; that had served only to nudge me into the right frame of mind for using my talent. Coldly, dispassionately, I was able to initiate the process that caused the dinosaur to start to shrink, and shrink and shrink...

A road drill started abruptly, hammering and jarring away in the next street, breaking my concentration.

When I approached the remains of the bonfire again, the dinosaur was still there, yet altered. A green and white object just over a foot long, between the curl of its neck and the reverse bend of its tail, had become four inches of dark glitter.

My first attempt to pick it up ended in failure. It slipped through my fingers because I hadn't allowed for the fact that it had retained its original weight of about a pound and a half. My grip had allowed for the weight of a less dense, wooden object of the reduced size.

I was absolutely thrilled with the failure of my experiment. The dinosaur had an absolutely smooth, rainbow finish; as though the surface had been inscribed with a diffraction grating. A rough density calculation, using the kitchen scales and a measuring jug calibrated in fluid ounces, gave me a figure in the region of 18 grams per cc; just less than that of gold.

The compressed wood wasn't soft, however. When I placed it on the concrete path in front of the coal shed and belted it with the coal hammer, the concrete came off worst. I did no damage at all to the miniature dinosaur. Even a diamond glass-cutter made no impression on it.

Allowing my scientific training to take over, I carried out some more experiments on some sticks of firewood

borrowed from the coal shed. I called it a morning after using up about half the bundle.

The contraction process had some of the characteristics of a chain reaction, in that it tended to run away from me at a certain point. If I didn't stop it in time, the stick of firewood just vanished off the face of the Earth; which was probably very close to the truth. Refining my density measurement technique, I discovered that I could reach a maximum value of about 21 grams per cc, but there was a lot of luck involved. But I could stop the process fairly reproducibly at a value of about 16 grams per cc; just less than the density of my dinosaur.

Yielding to a mercenary impulse, I took the dinosaur to the local art and craft shop in the afternoon. Such a beautiful object had to be worth a lot more than 50p now. But as things turned out, it stayed in my duffle bag, unsold.

The bloke who had made the wooden dinosaurs was in the shop when I arrived, checking on sales, which were doing badly. As he turned away, looking pretty fed up, I bought an artist's brush that I didn't really need and hurried after him.

He was pushing seventy, the dinosaur man, and seemed quite pleased when I told him I had one of his creations, and would be interested in seeing any others he'd made.

As we walked to his home, which is a couple of streets from where I live, I learned that his name is Roger Hobson, but everyone calls him Chip because he used to be a carpenter. He'd been making dinosaurs for years, but he had been trying to sell them only for about six months to supplement his inflation-ravaged pension.

The shed in his garden was stuffed with them. Each wall was lined with shelves packed with wooden beasties from long ago. Chip told me that there were over a hundred of them and started throwing names around; *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, *Stegosaurus*, *Diplodocus*, all the big carnivores and herbivores were there, plus a seasoning of pterodactyls,

sabre-toothed tigers, mammoths and similar smaller fry.

Chip trotted out Latin names for species I'd never heard of, and seemed to know just about everything there was to know about their habits and lives. He seemed to be interested in all types of extinct animal, not just dinosaurs.

I produced my condensed dinosaur at the end of the lecture. He found it hard to believe that I'd made it out of one of his wooden models, but he was forced to admit that the workmanship was his own. Then I hit him with my proposition. Suppose he let me have a few samples of his work. I'd treat them with my special process, and he could take them to the arty and crafty man to see what they'd bring.

Well, that was it. He could see that my secret process had converted a rather ordinary, wooden dinosaur into high-quality merchandise. The sort of thing that could be sold as either an executive paperweight or just a dust-collecting ornament.

I took away a half dozen assorted extinct animals, and returned the following morning with the condensed versions. Chip wandered round to my place about half an hour later, looking highly delighted. He shoved pound notes into my hot, sticky hand and couldn't stop grinning. We had a cup of coffee spiked with Scottish Magic to celebrate.

Thanks to a stroke of enormous luck, a lady in a fur coat and pearls (on a warm, summer afternoon) had been inspecting a rather unexciting water-colour landscape when Chip had arrived at the art and craft shop. While the owner had fawned over his customer, Chip had unloaded our dinosaurs onto the counter and waited to be noticed.

The blue-rinsed pillar of local society had looked down her aristocratic nose at him, then she had gone into raptures over his wares. After about five minutes spent agonizing over her choice, she had coughed up thirty-five quid for a condensed *Stegosaurus*, and vowed to return later in the week.

The owner of the art and craft shop had been rather cheesed off at not making anything out of the deal, but Chip had pointed out that the woman intended coming back, and that the opportunity for further profit existed. After some hard bargaining, Chip had agreed to let him have the remaining five dinosaurs on sale or return at a figure of £28 each.

As he explained to me, he thought it perfectly fair that we should each make twice as much as the art and craft man. After all, we'd done all the work, and the dinosaurs practically sold themselves.

We got rid of a dozen dinosaurs over the next fortnight, and the bloke at the art and craft shop had orders for nine more when Chip rolled up for the money. As he can make only four in a good week, we decided not to be greedy and keep just behind demand, adding no more than a couple from stock to his week's production.

So that's our routine now. Every Tuesday morning, Chip rolls up at my place with half a dozen assorted wooden dinosaurs. He strolls down the village to the art and craft shop with six condensed, mirror-bright beasties in the afternoon. He returns with £168, half of which he turns over to me. It'll be more in a few months' time, when we make our first upward adjustment to cover inflation.

So that's why The Flasher's subdued. I no longer think that flashing is something to joke about. Anything that brings in enough to support my writing habit for thirty seconds' effort per week should be treated with the utmost awe and reverence, in my opinion!



07. Thanks, But No Thanks!

ROBERT DORNING

The world is full of rejected authors; I know, I'm one of them. But are we downhearted? Well, to be perfectly honest, yes, we are at times. Having people say *no* to you all the time can be discouraging.

One of the most depressing moments in an author's life comes when he opens a stamped, self-addressed envelope to find his first rejection slip. But he learns that the blow becomes softer with each successive *Thanks, but no thanks*.

Once he reaches double figures, the author has usually mastered the art of accepting such set-backs philosophically. He is now in the correct frame of mind to join the Association of Rejected Authors and to play The Rejection Game.

This popular game is played in all literate regions of the world. Rules vary slightly from country to country, but the following are those most commonly adopted. The example of the rules that apply to the Prose League, Novels Division will illustrate the basics.

Rule 1 The author must write an original novel, [fiction or faction] of more than 50,000 words.

Rule 2 A completed typescript, typed in the regulation fashion on one side of previously unused typing paper of reasonable quality, must be available for inspection by scrutineers at all times. Any author who receives a rejection for an unwritten work will be deemed to have obtained it by fraudulent means, and will not be allowed to count it towards his or her score.

Rule 3 The author must prepare a synopsis of the novel and, optionally, select a sample passage, to create a package that any reasonable person would find an irresistible temptation.

Rule 4 A synopsis of any particular novel may not be submitted to more than one publisher at a time. Any author found guilty of multiple submissions will be suspended for the remainder of the current season.

Rule 5 Any number of works may be touted simultaneously, provided that a typescript of each is available for scrutiny according to Rule 2. It is in the author's interests to circulate a maximum number of works (see scoring).

Rule 6 Any author whose work is accepted for publication by a reputable publisher—vanity publishing being specifically excluded—will be expelled immediately from the Society.

Scoring The author receives one point for a rejection of the first novel, two points for a rejection of the second novel if the first novel is also on offer, three points for a rejection of a third novel provided that the first two are on offer, and so on.

Note As long as he or she follows these simple rules and records his or her scores on an official scorecard, the author is entitled to compete for the title of *The Most Rejected Author Of The Year*. This award is presented annually at a modest ceremony held on the morning of April 1st at a location most convenient to the award winner.

Happy writing...!



08. Ultimate Sacrifice

ROBERT DORNING

Very few people were surprised when the Gammans landed. A huge row had been raging in the Western world about suppression of unexplained UFO reports. After six months of denials, *politician* had become an even dirtier word than usual and not a few people suspected that the world had, indeed, been taken over by little green men, who were trying to conceal their presence.

The arrival of the Gammans came as a great relief to most parties. Governments were able to put them on television and say: *Look, here they are. No covering up.* The rest of the population had real, genuine UFOs and UFO-nauts to stare at. For the paranoid, the landing was proof that the aliens had been on Earth for years, and that showing themselves now was just a cheap trick.

An impossible number of people lay claim to having tagged the name *Gammans* to the aliens. It was taken, inevitably, from a television series showing on both sides of the Atlantic. To the Americans, who were watching their second series, the Gammans were old friends. Great Britain had only just discovered them. Thus it required no great effort of imagination on the part of the English-speaking press to call the visitors *Gammans*.

Much to the delight of science fiction fans the world over, the alien visitors stepped out of a saucer-shaped craft. To the utter ecstasy of the world's *cosmics*, they chose to do so on the day of the summer solstice, and at Stonehenge.

Once the initial contact shock had faded and people were able to look at the visitors, to find out what an alien really looked like behind the impenetrable wall of *different*, there was deep disappointment in store.

The Gammans looked exactly *like us* to European and North American commentators; which meant that they had

a human distribution of limbs, eyes, ears, noses and mouths. Their skin was the collection of mottled shades of pink of the northern *white* man. Each of the males had a full head of hair, which became a beard without change of texture or pigmentation.

Both sexes either cut their hair short, or grew a one-inch fur. There were no unusual colours. Of the party of ten, two had blackest fur/hair, four were various tints of blonde, three were richer shades of brown and one female was positively mousey.

Naturally enough, the Gammans spoke neither English nor any other Earthly tongue.

They had not spent *many cycles of rotation of your planet* listening to radio and television transmissions in order to decode our languages. They could not communicate from the moment they set foot on our ball of dirt. In fact, they said that they had spent all of three hours in orbit, dodging satellites and other space junk while looking for an interesting landing site.

Their lack of language cramped politicians to the point of anguish. When the British prime minister attempted to deliver a political harangue of welcome, he suffered the ultimate humiliation of a vanishing audience. The Gammans had just spotted a dog; a strange life-form of infinitely more interest than one of the natives half-shouting incomprehensible noises, which were often accompanied by vaguely obscene gestures.

When two of Gammans had devoted half a day to learning sufficient English for their purposes, it became clear that they were true Philistines. The general public rejoiced at their lack of interest in any part of the art world that smelled of deliberate cult obscurity.

Representation and humour of the banana-skin-slide variety appealed slightly to the visitors, but nothing else. Music, high and low, was a total mystery to them. Most

things *modern* by Earth standards left them icily cold. Although they travelled extensively, the Gammans tended to turn their well-shaped noses up at the show-pieces that the government officials normally inflict on Very Important Visitors. They were interested only in remnants from the ancient world and spectacular natural phenomena.

After visiting practically every castle in Europe, the Gammans decided that it might be worth their while to have a look at the rest of the planet. As they required tourist guides, but refused to allow earthpersons into their spacecraft, the British government lent the visitors a Concorde. The Gammans were rather dismayed to learn that the world's fastest passenger aircraft could reach only twice the speed of sound, but they accepted the offer; thus triggering hurried legislation by governments that had banned the aircraft on noise and pollution grounds.

The Gammans looked just like scuba divers in their shiny, one-piece suits. Shut off from the world by skin-tight gloves and semi-flexible, bubble-helmets, they seemed able to leave their spacecraft for long periods without discomfort. In all their time on Earth, not one of them showed a need for food or drink, or a desire to eliminate waste products. They were perfect, inexhaustible, rubber-necking, very choosy tourists.

Then it happened. People who had seen the films *Alternative Three* and *Capricorn One*, which dealt with the cover up of a Mars landing and a bogus landing respectively, decided that the aliens were a hoax. Although almost universally scorned, such stories did have a certain persuasive façade of truth. The so-called aliens did look a bit too human to be true.

Inevitably, a Californian gun-freak resolved the matter in the traditional fashion. The Gammans had just visited a redwood grove. They were on their way back to the airport at San Francisco and their Concorde when the eternal nightmare of the Secret Service became fact; some nut case

took a shot at them.

A crowd of spectators had spilled onto the road, forcing the motorcade to a halt. Suddenly, there was a bright blue flash from the helmet of one of the females; a non-English speaker, who had chosen to remain nameless.

The female picked up a curious piece of flattened metal and showed it to one of her companions. Two more Gammans had been hit by flying lead before one of the English speakers asked a guard what the pieces of metal were.

Guns zipped out of shoulder holsters. A human wall formed round the Gammans. A fourth helmet flashed blue as the visitors were forced to the floor of their car. The Gammans realized slowly that some damn native was firing metal pellets at them with evil intent.

One of their number produced a featureless metal tube from a pocket. He pushed a gap in the security screen and aimed the tube at a fifth floor hotel room. The window and a large section of the wall turned red and vanished. It was just like an optical effect in a science fiction film, except that this was real. Something inside the room glowed redly for an instant, then it disappeared too.

That put the matter beyond question. With such technology at their disposal, the Gammans could not possibly be an Earthly hoax. Although they refused to discuss the secrets of their defence systems and their weapons, science correspondents spewed forth a torrent of articles on force fields and energy weapons.

After visiting various Indian sites in South America, the Gammans zoomed across the sea to China, and then returned to England via Far, Middle and Near East. Countries such as Australia and Japan, the USSR, most of Africa and other territories ignored by the unearthly tourists seethed with impotent rage, but dared say nothing for fear of attracting mocking sympathy from others more fortunate.

As the French ambassador to the United Nations was heard to remark to a Soviet colleague, there was very little that the slighted nations could do other than kidnap the aliens and inflict a guided tour by force. The Soviet ambassador's reply is not on record.

Exchange of information between humans and Gammans tended to be somewhat one-sided at first. Once it had been established that the aliens were not interested in Earth's cultural achievements, there seemed little prospect of trade. Thanks to what the Americans termed a *Primitive To Superior Culture Contact Situation Inferiority Complex*, it was assumed that no terrestrial technological achievement could be of the remotest interest to the visitors.

It is impossible to say who was the more surprised when the Gammans discovered body scanners. The idea of being able to use X-rays, microwaves and ultrasonics to examine the interior of the human body, without having to resort to slicing it open, seemed to appeal to the alien visitors.

A delighted Secretary of State for Health quickly arranged a tour of a London teaching hospital to demonstrate a range of such devices. Gamman watchers interpreted their facial expressions during the tour as signalling pleasure. Some saw a deeper emotion. But the different arrangement of Gamman facial muscles made expression-reading very difficult.

The British Government suddenly found itself in the position of being able to trade with the Gammans. Realizing that whatever the aliens offered would be spied out and otherwise stolen by friends and enemies alike, the prime minister announced that any information received would be used for the good of all humanity. To his disgust, most people dismissed his self-satisfied announcement as no more than a piece of cheap political baloney.

Not wishing to receive an unexpected visit from a fleet of conquering Earth vessels, the Gammans declined politely to divulge the secret of their star drive and their weapons. Their

hosts were disappointed, but not unduly so. The two sides agreed, after two days of more or less continuous negotiations, to swap the secrets of the Gamman personal defence screen for a broad selection of body-scanning devices and a small mountain of technical literature on their use.

Having seen all that they wished of Earth, the visitors left almost as soon as the last crate had been loaded aboard their flying saucer. The politicians tried to turn their departure into a junket involving interminable speeches on Earth's contribution to Gamman medical science. Their intended victims foiled them by lifting their vessel while the government, Her Majesty's opposition and international politicians were in transit between London and Salisbury Plain.

Safely in orbit, the Gammans marched their exploration modules into their storage pods and inspected their spoils with eager observation apparatus. The machines looked even more impressive than when seen through the remote equipment and the visual apparatus of the exploration modules.

Technicians had assembled the equipment, and it was ready for testing, by the time the scout vessel reached the mother ship on the far side of the Moon. A receiving hatch closed, sealing a huge gash in the side of a globe-shaped vessel. The boarding tunnel oozed out to link up with the nested scout ship. Almost before the orange *link established* indicator had glowed to life, the Most High of the Highest was hurrying to join the lesser beings in the scout ship.

The Most High of the Highest exchanged a bare minimum of salutations before commanding a demonstration of a body scanner. Thirty-one humans had allowed larcenous stirrings to over-come their fear of the unknown, and had crept through a very loose security cordon to liberate something, anything, from the alien spacecraft.

The first captive produced was female. It began to emit

painfully loud aerial vibrations as soon as it saw the assembled Presence. Then it collapsed with an idiot grin on its face. The Most High inspected the creature briefly, and failed to produce a reaction by stirring it with a walking appendage. The Most High declared it Unfit.

Two servitors dragged the creature away. If it passed an edibility test, it would be consigned to the lower orders' protein vats. If not, it would be dumped into the recycling system.

A second captive human was brought to the Presence unrevived. This one was a male. The scanning began. After a time interval of about one Earth hour, it was pronounced Unfit. Several imperfections had been detected. True, they were not gross deviations from the ideal human anatomy, as specified in the Terran reference works, but the Most High required a perfect specimen for this special occasion.

By the end of the shipwatch, over half of the captives had been examined and rejected. The Most High of the Highest was beginning to indicate impatience and veiled irritation at the poor quality of the harvest.

An air of nervousness, coupled with an urgent desire to please, hung over the Presence as prisoner number 18 was floated from its storage compartment and strapped to the main scanner's examination table. The servitors gathered round the controls and began their work with an efficiency born of practice.

Depression began to lift as the examination proceeded to the final stages. Cautious pleasure signals were exchanged between individuals, and the collective aura of the Presence took on a glow of hope.

Just before the end of the last scan, the pulsed vibration of a communicator edged into the Presence. A senior servitor announced that although humans were inedible, they were a source of many valuable organic chemicals, and that experiments designed to culture various organs were

proceeding satisfactorily. Within moments of this heartening announcement, the senior examining servitor moved away from the scanner controls, making no attempt to conceal tired elation. The human female was Fit.

Beaming congratulations, the Most High of the Highest withdrew to make preparations. The pleasant duty of announcing that the ceremony would take place at the end of the current watch fell to The Second Most High.

The entire crew of forty-five individuals assembled in the Hall of the Presence at the appointed time. An air of reverend anticipation cloaked the gathering. All but the Most High of the Highest moved rapidly to appointed positions in the Configuration of Regeneration, observation apparatus enraptured by the perfect human female enclosed in the delicately carved rock crystal cylinder before them.

With lingering slowness, the Most High of the Highest took up the focal position at the heart of the Presence. Grasping appendages raised a bejewelled controller into the air. Delicate pressure on one of the controls brought the human to full consciousness. Before it could do more than open its eyes, brilliant golden flame surged through the cylinder, consuming it in a microsecond.

A shudder of gratification convulsed the Presence. Then forty-five sets of observation apparatus turned to gaze on the heart of the Configuration.

"We have rendered our race an incalculable service," communicated the Most High of the Highest. Agreement surged through the Presence. "We are gathered at the dawn of a new age. The terrible danger of consuming the life force of an imperfect animal is past. With the devices obtained at so little cost from the disgusting barbarians of Earth, we shall be able to select only perfect animals to renew our life force. Our race stands at the threshold of a new golden age. We shall be honoured for all time."

The Presence surged to a tide of well-being. Feeling

restored, and eager to return to their home world, the Gammans offered ritual thanks to the Most High of the Highest. Then the servitors, those forming the outer circles of the Configuration, moved away unobtrusively to their stations. Their betters were still wallowing in self-congratulation when their giant globe lifted from a lunar plain to begin its homeward journey.



09. Approaching ALAN MARSHALL

They had named the town Jordan's Crossing after Silas Jordan, who had spent the greater part of his adult life telling anyone who would listen that the railroad would cross the Red River at that point. As soon as he had been able to scrape the money together, he had even gone ahead and built a fine, sturdy wooden bridge to take the tracks. As things turned out, he was close. When it reached those parts, the railroad chose to cross the river 22 miles upstream, and again 40 miles downstream of the town.

But Silas Jordan was no fool. While waiting for the railroad, he had built a hut and installed a guard beside the bridge to collect a toll from all users. As there was no decent ford for a dozen miles up- and down-stream, and traders with a heavily laden wagon preferred to use a bridge to struggling through a river, the crossing had become a meeting place, and then a town.

Silas Jordan grew in prosperity with the town, and he was the natural choice when the place grew big enough to need a mayor. His son became the sheriff soon afterwards, establishing a tradition of public service and law enforcement in the Jordan family.

Jordan's Crossing has never had a serious crime problem. Anyone who feels like raising a little hell generally goes south, across the state line into Louisiana. Shrieveport has infinitely more to offer than the rather straight-laced Jordan's Crossing; which is why outsiders wanting to raise hell pass the town by.

Indeed, a sheriff has had to use his official .45 revolver in anger only once before, and that was at the turn of the century. The back-shooting of Jumping Jim Hawkins and the Dog Creek Kid outraged traditionalists. Others applauded

the sheriff's decision to march his posse into the saloon and blast the desperate duo as they stood at the bar. Those people agreed that no criminal deserves an even break.

Their opponents held that the outlaws could not be all bad if they had disposed of the town drunk; an ancient, evil-smelling, whining character, who had haunted the alley beside the saloon. The desperados had also accounted for the parson's dog; a huge, badly cross-bred creature that had been given to barking frantically in the middle of the night and biting without provocation.

Jim Hawkins and the Kid had proved that bad guys are not necessarily all bad, but they had caused enough trouble to make their own deaths inevitable, if not desirable. The current sheriff, Wild Bill Ford, was pushing sixty, as scrawny as a starving dog, volatile and a Jordan on his mother's side. He had been a peace officer since the Second World War. Apart from a trip to Korea in the early Fifties, he had spent his entire professional life in and around Jordan's Crossing.

He could draw his revolver from an oiled leather holster faster than a rattlesnake could strike. Much to his disgust, an opportunity to demonstrate his draw in the line of duty arose maybe once or twice a year; always only to show an out-of-towner the error of his ways. Just showing the huge, gleaming weapon invariably had the desired deterrent effect.

The only time he got to fire the weapon was on the night of the Moon landing, back in '69, when a visiting reveller was frightened by a fast draw, thinking that Wild Bill was going to shoot him instead of just arresting him for being drunk. When he started to run, Wild Bill fired a shot into the air to warn him to stop. The guy just speeded up and kept running into the night, which saved the town the cost of locking him up until he sobered up.

Feeling more comfortable with a gun in his hand than a pen, Wild Bill generally left all the office work to his deputies. He preferred to hold himself in readiness for

emergencies. Thus he was left with plenty of free time to practise his draw.

His senior deputy, Earl Jordan, was a great-four-times-grandnephew of Silas, and thought of himself as one of the town's personalities. He was big, as only Texicans can be big, but tended to keep out of fights as he didn't think much of getting hurt; which was rather strange in view of his hobby - keeping lonely wives company.

Jake, the other deputy, usually looked after the office when the sheriff was out practising his draw and Earl was consoling. Jake used words as generously as if he had been issued with ten of them at birth and he had already used up nine. He never spoke when a shrug would do. No one knew what his other names were, if, indeed, he had any. He was usually to be found sunning himself on the porch of the sheriff's office, sprawled in an ancient rocking chair with his feet on the hitching rail, hacking at a piece of wood with a switchblade knife and chewing tobacco.

Of all the lawmen in town, the inactive Jake caused the most resentment. Hard-working citizens could not accept that their tax dollars were going to support a confirmed whittler. People would come up to him and stare. Then they would ask something like: "What you doin' there, boy?"

Jake would respond with either a long, slow look, or a laconic, "Whittlin'," and continue with his self-appointed task of reducing his piece of wood to shavings. A stream of dark brown tobacco juice would then fly over the rail and into Jake's personal drain.

His interrogator would generally release a pointed snort of disgust and retire defeated. But no one ever suggested booting Jake out of his job. He had an uncanny knack of finding lost property; anything from a misplaced lucky silver dollar to the tractor old man Barnett abandoned in dense woodland around Cymbal Hollow while he was high on Rooster Cogburn's moonshine.

The town's matchmakers found Jake a perpetual challenge. They were always telling him that a man of his age, all of twenty-two, should be thinking of settling down and raising a family with some nice girl. The thought of being able to settle even more than his customary almost total immobility in front of the sheriff's office seemed to appeal to Jake. Leastways, he always responded to such suggestions with a grin. And Jake has a way of grinning that sets the face of any respectable woman to burning.

These three heroes were busy with their self-appointed tasks when the news sidled into town. Fast-drawing, consoling, whittling; they little realized that the burden of protecting the population of Jordan's Crossing from a myth was about to fall on their shoulders.

THREE DIE IN MOTEL HORROR, read the headline of the newspaper that the stranger dropped on the counter of the town's one and only bar. "I was there last night," remarked the traveller, noticing Old Henry's interest in the story. "Couldn't hardly sleep for all the sireens."

"*Black magic*," read Henry Kenton, the chief barman and proprietor of Henry's Bar. "*Bodies torn open and horribly mangled. One victim totally drained of blood!*"

"There was cops, and ambulances, and the medical examiner, and guys from the DA's office, newspapers, television. Why can't people get knocked off during the day and let a guy get some sleep?"

"*Bestial blood ritual*," read Henry. "*Most shocking crime in the city's history. Cult ritual ceremony feared.*"

"I mean, why the hell do they need sireens? A stiff ain't goin' nowhere. And the guy that did it sure as hell ain't gonna stick around afterwards. There should be a law agin it. Hit me again, old timer."

Henry refilled the stranger's glass with beer then continued to read aloud in his reedy voice. "*The police are baffled by this horrible and inhuman crime.*"

"Bet nothing like that ever happens here, am I right or am I right?" said the stranger, licking foam from his bushy moustache.

"You want this?" Henry tapped the news-paper hopefully.

"Nah, keep it," said the traveller with a magnanimous wave of a manicured hand. "Guess I'd better hit the road. I hope to hell I get some sleep tonight."

"Take it easy," murmured Henry in farewell, not lifting his eyes from the newspaper. *"The room looked as though it had been hit by a cyclone. Casual and enormous destruction."*

"Yeah," said the traveller, heading for the long evening shadows in the main street. "Nice, quiet town you got here. Pity you can't teach a few others..."

A passing truck with a loud exhaust deprived an uninterested Henry of the remainder of the remark.

Debbie Austin had been one of Garrett's more popular citizens. She was thirty-eight when death stopped her time-clock, still pretty but sliding slowly, and not too fussy any more. She also tended to forget to charge when she got drunk, which was most nights. A passing truck driver brought the story to Henry's Bar.

The ten-year-old had let out a scream heard clean to the other side of the town when she had found the body, half in and half out of the river. Only becoming wedged between two of the jetty's supports had prevented Debbie's body from being carried clear down to the Gulf of Mexico to feed sea-going fish.

Mind-twitching screams had given way to a pregnant vacuum when the doctor had arrived to shoot a sedative into the child. Eyeing the needle suspiciously before her mother had carried her away, the kid had announced sleepily that she had screamed louder than the woman on tele-vision the night before.

When they had pulled the body properly onto the bank,

everyone had remarked on how pale Debbie had looked; as if she had been in the river for a week. But that plainly wasn't the reason because she had been up to her tricks the night before. And besides, her bone dry shoes had never been immersed in the river. And she was kind of shrivelled up, not blown up.

And then the doctor had said something about two curious punctures on the left exterior carotid artery, which had brought Garrett's sheriff to the point of imitating one of Wild Bill fast draws to blow the doctor's head off.

Vampires! It was a vampire as done it!

The story had been all over Garrett inside ten minutes. It had travelled 114 miles to Jordan's Crossing before noon of the same day. Henry smiled for the rest of the afternoon. He tended to live from one juicy murder to the next, and there had been six fairly routine days between the *Cyclone Killer* of Dallas and Garrett's *Vampire*.

Henry was smiling his *horrible murder* smile again two days later. A pair of drifters had been found beside their chopper bikes, no more than a mile beyond Garrett. Both were completely bloodless and they had been savagely attacked by something with very sharp teeth and long, powerful claws.

One of the bikers had been found clutching a .357 Magnum revolver. But even though the gun was empty, there was no evidence that the bullets had done the killer any harm.

As the sheriff of Garrett remarked to his deputy, the case was one hell of a way to begin a working week.

An epidemic of French cookery hit Jordan's Crossing on Saturday of the same week. Why else would Oscar Jackson's entire stock of garlic have disappeared in a morning? That another bloodless body had turned up in the neigh-bouring

town of Longbaugh had nothing to do with the avalanche of garlic sales. Nobody, but nobody would admit to believing in vampires. And in the same way; nobody, but nobody was impressed by Henry's map.

It was inevitable that bloodthirsty old Henry would be the one to spot the correlation. Garrett lay 53 miles slightly north-east of Dallas. If a straight line connecting city and town was extended for a further 59 miles, it reached Longbaugh. 55 miles further on, the line passed within a mile of Jordan's Crossing.

When Henry taped his map to a mirror beside the bar counter, nervous citizens demanded that he take it down in case it frightened children. As Old Henry didn't let no kids into his bar, he just laughed.

Doubly irritated, these same citizens demanded that Wild Bill lock him up as a public nuisance. Wild Bill just referred them to Earl, and retired to the vacant lot beside the sheriff's office to practise his draw.

To nobody's surprise, Earl was not to be found. And nobody thought it was worth trying to stir Jake into action. Henry stayed out of jail.

Rudy Charles began to make a small fortune when they found a second body in Longbaugh after the weekend. A frantic phone call to his supplier in Shrieveport brought fresh supplies of crucifixes of all sizes; small ones on a long chain, which would dangle well down inside a man's shirt and not be seen; larger ones for nailing to the wall over a person's bed; even luminous and electric ones for good visibility at night.

Displaying true Jordan spirit, the Reverend Jonas Spooner thundered out a condemnation of unholy crosses at his next service, telling his congregation that they were wasting their money on worthless junk as there had been no religious conviction behind the manufacture of Rudy's crosses. A

steady stream of visitors sneaked into the reverend's back parlour that evening, seeking a blessing for an unholy cross and prepared to make a donation to the fund for repairing leaks in the church roof.

In spite of all these precautions, Bobby Scott, who filled in as the town's drunk for about one week a month, when he could afford not to work, was found beside his pick-up truck in the car park behind Henry's Bar. He was just as cold, dead, shrivelled and drained as Debbie Austin and all the others. His neck was all scratched and tore up around a pair of bruised punctures.

Wild Bill, the sheriff, took the attack on one of his citizens as a personal insult and stomped off to practise his draw so as to be ready when he caught up with the varmint responsible. Earl was nowhere to be found, as usual. So the town was treated to the sight of Jake in motion, tidying up the scene of the crime and reporting the facts to the state capital as laconically as possible.

There was some speculation as to whether the vampire would strike again in a hurry. As Henry pointed out, at least a quart and a half of Bobby Scott's nine pints of blood had to be pure corn dew, and, in his opinion, it would take the vampire at least a week to sleep it off.

Rather than looking for a coffin containing a drunken sleeper with a bloodstained grin of contentment draped across his face, the good people of Jordan's Crossing decided on more direct action. They tried to lynch Tolly Heth when he returned from a trip to Dallas in his truck.

Some educated idiot had remembered that the world's most celebrated vampire, Count Dracula, had originated in Transylvania, which was slap in the middle of Romania, which was where Tolly's parents had fled from when the Russians had marched in.

Tolly was standing in the bed of his own pick-up truck, hands tied behind his back and a rope round his neck, when

the sheriff came storming into town, returning from a wild goose chase. Jake had managed to get off a brief radio call for help before the mob had grabbed him and locked him in one of his own cells.

Every light flashing red, blue or amber and siren wailing fit to bust, Wild Bill Ford churned up an enormous dust cloud when he broadsided his patrol car to a tyre-screaming halt. The lynch-mob became a helpless, milling swarm of coughing, sneezers. Even the star guest, despite his elevation, received his share of the dust; which almost made him lose his footing and swing himself.

After shooting through the rope and then lifting a couple of hats into the air to prove that his aim was as good as his draw, the sheriff proceeded to remind those present that Tolly had been playing poker with some of the town's leading citizens at the time of Bobby Scott's murder, and if he was a vampire, like they thought, what was he doing out in full daylight anyhow? There were a lot of red faces in town that day. A token number of blushers spent the rest of it in jail; to give them time to reflect on how close they had come to murder.

A couple of hot-shot, city slicker, homicide cops arrived from the state capital later in the afternoon, intending to solve the simple murder of Bobby Scott in five minutes flat. They returned to Little Rock that same evening, completely baffled, which seemed to give Wild Bill Ford enormous satisfaction.

Earl Jordan was in great demand when darkness fell; not only as a comforter but also as a protector. As Henry remarked after studying the science page of a three-day-old Northern newspaper, "I reckon Earl could stand some of this here cloning."

Despite the combined wills of around five thousand people, the sun set behind the cotton fields as usual. It was not a

night to be alone, or so rampant males assured their intended female partners. Lights burned through the night. Telephones rang constantly as people assured them-selves that friends and relatives were still alive.

Welcome dawn arrived. Relief turned to shock and fright when a bloodless body was discovered in a car just outside town. The vampire's latest victim was a salesman, who had decided to spend the night in his car and pocket the hotel allowance.

Heckle and Jeckle, the homicide cops, wandered over from Little Rock for a look, and wandered back home again none the wiser.

The town council demanded action. Sheriff Wild Bill Ford offered his badge to any of them who thought that he could do a better job of protecting the people of Jordan's Crossing. Unwilling to move into the firing line, none of the council members accepted the opportunity.

There was talk of bringing the State Troopers in, but Wild Bill told the council that he wanted to trap the killer, not scare him or it away. he flatly refused to use the word *vampire* on account of he didn't believe in them.

Strangers began to arrive in Jordan's Crossing. They were met with general hostility until the town's traders got the message from Garrett and Longbaugh. As soon as they realized that they had a tourist boom on their hands, they opened their hearts and their stores, and set to fleecing the visitors every whichway. Prices rocketed; except to locals, who weren't prepared to have more than a reasonable profit made out of them.

Requests to view the graves of victims led to Clyde Earp, a descendent of Virgil and the town's mortician, coming to an arrangement with the Reverend Spooner. Two simple wooden crosses appeared on a plot just outside the town's Boot Hill, even though the bodies of the deceased were still in police custody.

Jake, the whittler, became the target of all sorts of cracks about making stakes to drive through the vampire's heart. He replied to each of them with either a shrug or a grin, according to the sex of the cracker. He had gotten hold of a piece of light yellow boxwood from some-where. Those who noticed that he wasn't hacking away at the usual piece of pine decided that a harder wood offered more of a challenge.

Around noon, Jake suddenly stopped his whittling and slid his feet from the porch rail. With a thoughtful look on his young face, he squirted a jet of dark liquid at his personal drain, then disappeared into Mike Jefferson's back room for an hour or so. Mike kept a small lathe and a complete set of wood-working tools in there, and ran a small carpentry and repair business in his spare time.

Jake was back to converting a stick of pine into a tent peg in the afternoon. He seemed to have lost all interest in boxwood. Unfortunately for some, Wild Bill had not lost all interest in law enforcement. Disturbed constantly during lunch by complaints of visitors dumping their vehicles in traditional parking spaces, he sent Jake out to issue some traffic citations, then retired to the vacant lot behind the sheriff's office to practise his draw in front of a crowd of spellbound kids and out-of-town adults.

A shotgun blast ripped that night apart. Driven by an impulse, Dan Stonely had looked into his daughter Kate's room on his way to bed. He found a stranger bending over her. His charge of buckshot ripped clean through the intruder and demolished a window.

Startled rather than injured, the cloaked figure turned his glowing, red eyes to the door-way. Then he grinned, displaying a set of blackened, broken fangs and started toward Dan. His wife, Beth, saved the day. She ripped the crucifix from around her neck and hurled it at the man-fiend. There was a sizzling noise like ham in a frying pan, and the

man leapt through the wrecked window with a scream of agony.

Jake was out of the sheriff's office and running almost before the first splinters of glass from Kate Stonely's window hit the ground. Earl Jordan leapt out of bed in a flash, much to the disappointment of the lady he was protecting. But she had nothing to worry about. First of all, Earl couldn't find his pants. Then one of his boots went missing. By the time he was decent, everything was over.

Main Street became a blaze of lights as the sound of Dan Stonely's shot chased across the cotton fields. Folks were on the sidewalk even before the vampire took his dive through Kate's bedroom window. The entire town formed a double line to watch Jake chasing the vampire down Main Street towards the bridge.

Some people took pot shots at the vampire. but that didn't seem to slow him down none, even if it did scare the hell out of those on the other side of the street, who suffered near misses.

An avenue of the Reverend Spooner's specially blessed crosses formed when the vampire tried to cut between Henry's Bar and Clyde Earp's funeral parlour, denying him an escape route to the cotton fields. And above the shrieks of encouragement for Jake came the sound of Wild Bill Ford driving his patrol car up the river bank road towards the bridge.

Engine roaring, siren a-wailing, and a-glowing with crosses on account of he'd stuck masking tape on his headlights and flashers, he slid the car to a stop at an angle across the road so that the cross-beamed headlights formed a fence between the bridge and the avenue of cross-bearers.

Those on the south side of town began to run too, keeping pace with the vampire but not getting too close.

"The bridge! Block the goddam bridge!" hollered the mayor.

Wild Bill Ford took no notice. He just stood beside the patrol car and eased his gun in its holster, ready for the draw of his life.

"Block the goddam fornicatin' bridge, you dumb son of a bitch!" hollered those citizens of Jordan's Crossing with breath left over from running.

Wild Bill just grinned and eased into his gun-fighter's crouch.

The vampire reached the bridge and started to run across it. The whole town, apart from Jake, was screaming and yelling at Wild Bill. Jake began to slow down as he reached the bridge. Wild Bill continued to grin and gun-fighter crouch beside his patrol car.

You couldn't make out none of the words that were screeched in an overlapping cacophony at the sheriff, but it was plain what the townsfolk meant. Not one of them seemed to appreciate that Wild Bill wanted the killer in front of him and the townsfolk behind him, so that he could open fire without the risk of hitting a friend.

Then it happened. The vampire stopped dead, as if he'd been hit by a truck, sort of teetering on his toes with his arms spread wide for balance. Seems he must have forgotten that no vampire can cross running water. So he turned towards Wild Bill, who was blocking his only route to freedom.

Ducking and weaving, hiding his face behind his cloak when the rotating red and blue crosses shadowed by the patrol car's lights fell on him, the vampire snaked back along the bridge to within five yards of Wild Bill Ford. Jordan's Crossing held its collective breath.

"Okay, boy, that's far enough," snarled Wild Bill, fingers poised over the hand-polished butt of his massive, .45 revolver. "One more step and you get it."

Wild Bill was fast, but the vampire was faster. With a wild scream of terrible delight, he threw himself on the sheriff. Before Wild Bill could clear his holster, the vampire grabbed

him by the throat and his belt, lifted him easily; up, over his head to the full stretch of his arms.

He turned slightly to show off his strength more clearly to the now silent townsfolk. Then the creature threw Wild Bill clear over the patrol car, over the road, the ditch, the rail fence and way into the cotton field beyond. While the crowd gasped in fear and horror, the vampire covered his face with his cloak and grabbed the patrol car's roof light unit. He tore it right off the car and hurled it half way across the river.

The laugh that he bellowed as he turned and bared his decaying fangs at the town was enough to freeze a house on fire. But someone didn't freeze. A jet of sticky, dark brown juice spurted four yards to hit the vampire fair and square in the left eye from the side.

His pride wounded, his eye stinging like hell, the vampire turned to Jake with a scream of rage. Having seen how fast the critter could move, Jake was ready for him. He had his gun in his hand. And as soon as the vampire was facing him, he shot him through the heart.

The vampire was half way into another of his spine-crawling laughs when a black gusher hosed from his chest and slapped into the dust, misting the toecaps of Jake's boots. Jake took careful aim and put four more holes in him for good measure.

A mighty cheer from the crowd drowned the worst of the vampire's screams of unendurable agony. He clamped his arms across his chest to try to stop the flow of blood, and seemed to fold in on himself. Then he jack-knifed to the ground and lay there, twitching.

Keeping the monster covered, Jake moved slowly closer to the vampire.

"How?" gasped the vampire, clawing at his blood-soaked shirt.

"How d'you do it, boy?" called the mayor, who had arrived at the head of a stampede of cross-bearers.

"Ooooh!" groaned Wild Bill Ford, who had landed on his gun when he had hit the sun-baked earth of the cotton field.

"Come back to bed, darlin'," urged the lady whom Earl Jordan was protecting, trying to drag him away from the bedroom window, which had a view of the bridge.

"Gee! Look at him shrivel up!" shrilled Billy Casper, the school teacher's kid.

"How?" groaned a distant voice from the decaying, shifting mass of dust in the old clothes at Jake's feet.

"Yeah, how?" insisted the population of Jordan's Crossing.

Jake squirted a dark brown stream of tobacco juice into the vampire's other eye just before it crumbled. Then Jake hitched up his pants and broke his revolver. He took out the remaining live round and dropped it onto the vampire's sunken jacket. At the end of the sparkling brass case, which glowed in the massed beams of two dozen torches, the cartridge ended in a light-yellow dome.

"Well, I'll be dipped..." breathed the mayor.

Jake nodded slowly as the final breath sighed out of the vampire's body, then he managed to string together two words:

"Wooden bullets."



10. "Please Look At The List..."

L. GORDON RANGE

They keep the hospital's supply of whole blood in a set of refrigerators in the basement of the west wing. You can hardly move for people down there during the day. What, with the mortuary taking up most of the right-hand side of the corridor, and the various stores on the left side, you get all sorts wandering around all through the day.

And it's always cold down there. I think so, anyway. Of course, the doctors say it's just psychological, and I suppose it is. What, with all the stiffs in the drawers in the Cadaver Room, and the things that go on next door, where they slice them apart, it's enough to freeze anyone's blood. And believe me, there's always a lot of that down there.

Like I said, there's the whole blood store on the left of the corridor, two doors down. Unless you're coming in from the emergency exit to the car park. And there's the door to the butchers' shop facing it. They always seem to be hacking some poor sod to pieces in there; either doing a post mortem or just practising.

But that's during the day. It's different at night. Unless there's a panic on, which doesn't happen that often. The basement's a different place at night. For one thing, you could stand in that corridor for an hour and not meet anyone. Two hours between one and five o'clock. And it's a bit creepy down there.

They have every light in the place going during the day. But at night, there's just one; in the middle of the corridor. That's painted white, apart from the floor and the doors, but it's long enough to be quite gloomy and spooky at the unlit ends. Saving energy and cutting costs, it's called, putting the lights off. So they can afford to give a bit more to us ancillary staff (fat chance!); the ones that toil ceaselessly to preserve human life for a mere pittance.

The whole blood store's quite a good place to nip off for a crafty smoke. There's a little records room before you get to where they keep the red and sticky. It's about big enough for a desk, a posh chair with a head rest and padding on the arms, and half a dozen grey filing cabinets, where they keep lists of what they've got and how much. If you ask me, I don't think all six are about blood. But they keep them locked, so I've never been able to find out. But the main thing about this records room is the ventilation.

Looking from the dark green door from the corridor, the desk is pushed into the far corner, facing the wall on the right. Then there's a row of four filing cabinets, backs to the wall, a door to the blood room, then two more filing cabinets up against the corridor wall, with just enough space to open the drawers of the one in the corner without the blood room door hitting it if someone comes out.

Of course, whoever's opening the drawer would be clobbered, but it's a hospital, after all. We can fix up bashed people. We're not so good on filing cabinets, though.

There's nothing on the left-hand wall of the records room, apart from about a dozen coats of cream paint and a white labcoat on a plastic hook. Nothing, that is, until you get level with the desk. Behind the chair, at about head height when you're sitting, is a grill about six inches square. It's all slobbered up with cream paint at the edges, and the white plastic cover of the switch beside it is splashed with cream too. That's contract painters for you: get it done fast and messy.

Still, the great thing about this grill is that there's a small extractor fan behind it. Small, but very efficient. I think the firm that makes it also goes in for wind tunnels. A bloke can put his feet up on the desk, lean back in the very comfortable, black vinyl chair, light up and have all the evidence whipped away over his left shoulder. Very handy in view of all the no smoking signs.

Me smoking in the basement, sir? No way, sir! Wouldn't dream of it, sir. Sniff, sniff. Put puzzled frown on boat race. I can't smell smoke, can you, sir? If you kick up enough of a fuss about a false accusation, the spying lurker might not ask what you're doing in there in the first place. That's the theory of it, anyway.

It was a Wednesday night when it happened. I like Wednesdays. They're usually pretty quiet. They're a time for getting odd jobs done, and there's plenty of opportunities for creeping away to have a smoke next door to the blood room.

The time was about three in the morning, and I was between breaks. If you're on the night shift, it's like being between lunch and your afternoon tea break. There was nothing much doing. Nobody needed anything pushed, pulled, fetched or carried. So there I was, next door to the blood room, about to have a smoke.

I'd got the fan switched on, and I was sitting comfortably with my feet on the desk, on a piece of paper so as not to leave a size 10 mark, when I heard a noise. I was dipping the end of a cigarette into the flame of my lighter at the time, so I didn't think anything of it. Then it came to me. It was just like the sound of someone taking a milk bottle out of a fridge. Only we had plenty of bottles in fridges, but they didn't have milk in them.

Cool as a block of ice, I dimped the ciggy and switched the extractor fan off. Some rotten sod had come down for some blood just when I felt like a smoke. It was time to bale out till they buggered off.

Then it struck me. The light had been off in the records room when I arrived. And there's a huge gap under the blood room door. I'd have seen a patch of light two foot six wide and six feet long if the light had been on in there. Whoever it was had to be creeping around in the dark.

I don't know why, but I decided to have a look. I didn't have the faintest idea what I was going to say, but I just had

to find out who was lurking around with the lights out.

He had one of the fridge doors open when I swanned into the blood room. And there was one of those big camping lanterns, powered by a bloody big battery, on top of the fridge, which answered one question.

You know, when you step into a room like that, and you see a bloke who looks just like Dracula, right down to a set of sword-like fangs sticking down over his lower lip, drinking chilled blood straight from the bottle as calm as you please, you don't think the obvious. You don't think you've run into a real, genuine vampire. You just start laughing and wondering which of your bloody daft mates is trying to scare seven kinds and seven colours out of you.

And then it's too late.

His eyes were yellow, not red, and they were bloody enormous. I felt like I was falling into them at first. Except that I couldn't budge. I couldn't have moved a muscle to save my life.

"What do we have here?" said the bloke in that sort of clear, sharp voice they use when they're doing Shakespeare on the telly.

I couldn't say a word. I was frozen to the spot with an idiot grin on my face, holding the handle of the blood room door in one hand and a dimped fag in the other.

"A meal on the hoof," laughed the vampire.

He had a tough, battered sort of face, more like a boxer than your vampire count. And he seemed to be enjoying himself so much that I wouldn't have been scared if he hadn't been drinking blood straight from the bottle. And if I hadn't been stuck rigid. Then he started towards me. I'd have screamed the place down if I'd been able to do anything other than grin. I nearly turned my eyes right round in their sockets, trying to keep them on him.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself," said the vampire, all polite in the way that some people are when they're

making fun of you, "but it hardly seems worth while."

There was a click behind me and the over-head neon lights flickered on. Then he came back into view again. He was half a head taller than me, and I'm six foot. And big; like an American football player in all the gear under his black cloak. The black silk shirt sleeves sticking out of slits in the cloak looked as though they were full of legs, not arms. His face was pale, even a bit bluish, as if he'd been in a fridge himself for a couple of weeks. Come to think of it, if he hadn't been moving around, I'd have said he belonged across the corridor in the Cadaver Room.

"How old are you?" said the vampire, half to himself. He was leaning on one of the right-hand bank of fridges now, holding the bottle like a glass at a party. "Twenty-four?"

I blinked my eyes twice. Don't ask me why, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. And eyelids were about the only bits of me left under my command, apart from my eyes.

The vampire laughed, dead chuffed. Like you do when you tell a cat to sit and it does, because cats don't usually take a blind bit of notice of what you tell them.

"Ah, an intelligent food beast," he said in his sort of stagey voice. "Twenty-five?"

I blinked once. I was 25 years, 8 months and 15 days old; and looked like sticking at that.

"And healthy?"

I blinked again. Well, he could see there was nothing much wrong with me. I wouldn't be at work else. I did get the odd pains in my right leg when the weather turned chilly, and I had my share of colds when they were going around, but there was nothing wrong with me then. Apart from being frozen to the spot.

"Good, good," grinned the vampire, showing me the rest of his teeth. The big fangs were a gleaming white, but the rest of his hampsteads were a rather mouldy yellow and covered in black bits. It looked like he didn't brush them very often.

"It's very important that the food beast be healthy," continued the vampire. "One doesn't want to catch anything from one's dinner, does one?" Which made three, by my count. He took a healthy swig from the bottle. "That's the reason a good many of my colleagues prefer bottled to draught. The preservatives are something of an acquired taste, but one can be sure of the quality.

"We blame modern medicine for the decline in blood quality. You have no idea how many perfectly disgusting specimens are still walking the streets thanks to modern medicine. The drugs pumped into them can give their blood a perfectly filthy aftertaste. And have rather unpleasant effects on ourselves. Disease does disgusting things to blood; but some of the cures they're using these days! Whatever happened to the survival of the fittest, I ask myself?"

The vampire gulped down the last of the cocktail in his bottle, as if he'd been rabbiting in a pub and it'd made him a bit dry. "Are you a blood donor?"

I started to shake my head. It wouldn't move, but I happened to blink at that moment.

"Very public spirited," remarked the vampire, looking down a nose like a squashed tomato at me. He screwed the cap back on the blood bottle and put it into a black plastic briefcase with an aluminium frame. Then he gave me another of his grins. "One must dispose of one's empties in a tidy fashion. And now you, my fine, healthy friend."

He was very tidy. There was none of the leaping onto the victim, growling like a mad dog and teeth flashing. Squinting down, I could just see his black silk cuffs and the pale hands sticking out of them, covered in a mass of thick, curly hairs as black as his shirt. He tugged my tie off. Then he unbuttoned my shirt at the neck.

It was all happening so fast. I'd just about realized that it was goodbye, Mr. Rimmer (that's me), when his fangs shot downwards, out of my line of sight, heading for my throat.

There was no pain. In fact, I could feel nothing. I thought I could feel him sucking at my neck, but it was just imagination.

Then he was staggering away, trying to scream and spit out blood at the same time. He looked in a real bad way. His face was bluer, and he wasn't breathing; more sort of croaking in his throat.

I wanted to throw up too when he suddenly doubled over and spewed out about a gallon of blood. It must have been the stench that made me faint, standing up, still holding the handle of the blood room door in one hand and a dimp in the other.

The rest, as they say, is history. A copper saw this bloke staggering about in the staff car park and dragged him to Casualty. By the time they'd woken the doctor up and hauled him down the corridor to the examination cubicle, the bloke had gone. All they found on the couch was a set of old clothes full of a musty, dark grey powder; and a briefcase full of our blood bottles, a couple of them empty, which sent them down to the blood room.

I found out later that they had to fill me up with muscle relaxants to get me loose from the handle of the blood room door and straightened out on a stretcher. Dr. Maxwell, the Casualty consultant, was dead dischuffed when I woke up, two days later. He'd never seen anything like the state they'd found me in; muscles locked solid with blood trickling down my neck. And he wouldn't believe me when I told him I couldn't remember anything. Neither would anyone else.

The papers made proper buggers of themselves for a while. But the Great British Public lost interest before they got round to offering me enough readies to bring my memory back. I'd had a chance to think about number one, you see, after the vampire had moaned and groaned away and before they'd found me.

Never mind about six pints of clotting blood on the floor of the blood room. Forget an open fridge and a lit camping lantern stuck on top of the fridge. If I started answering questions, then some bugger would be sure to ask what I was doing in the west wing basement in the first place.

So these days, whenever I sneak away for a smoke next door to the blood room, I always remember that night. And how smart I was to keep my trap firmly shut afterwards. You might think I'd be scared to go down there, especially at night, in case I meet one of the vampire's mates. But I know I'm safe. And I'll tell the next vampire why, if he gives me half a chance.

Before they let you become a blood donor, they show you a list of disgusting diseases and ask you if you've been in contact with jaundice. Well, I've had it. And that's why I'm not a blood donor.

Like the vampire said, there's lots of perfectly disgusting specimens walking the streets, thanks to modern medicine. Which is probably why the world isn't overrun by hungry vampires and I can still enjoy a smoke next door to the blood room.



11. Incantations in a
Horse-Drawn Carriage
HENRY T. SMITH

And yet, thought Carson Parret, there remained the question of the footprints in the snow. Two sets now left Albert Rognell's house; Chilver's and his own. Where were Eggmont's?

He felt a sudden jarring shock. Parret caught his balance as his feet began to slide on the icy pavement. Limping slightly on his right leg, he reached the snow-bound yard at the front of the inn. The hands on the double-faced clock above the main entrance to the aptly named *Time Waits For No Man* formed a straight line across the right-hand dial. It was eleven minutes past eight on that February morning.

A battered two-wheeler, which had clearly brought a pre-dawn passenger from the nearby town of Fellchester, was standing at the door of the inn. The driver, a heap of immobile old clothes perched at the rear of his cab, took no notice of a prospective passenger at first. He showed evidence of life only when Parret told him that he wished to be conveyed to Delf Hill, which lay on the fellow's route back to town. Only then did the driver prove that he was not asleep, or even frozen to death, by nodding minimally and inviting Parret to board.

Parret turned the brass handle, which glowed from the frequent application of hands rather than polish, and felt a nip of chilled metal through his leather glove. He was grateful that he had been spared a trudge of a mile and three-quarters across snow-covered fields. There was a silvery sheen on the iron stirrup. Parret stamped snow from his boots, then stepped up cautiously into the cab's dank interior.

The tiny trap in the roof opened. Realizing that the driver

did not intend to speak, Parret gave his full address and tried to make himself comfortable on the hard seat. The driver commenced a long, liquid sniff; which was mercifully muffled by the closing of the trap. Parret's own nose began to moisten in sympathy.

He was still feeling slightly confused. The half-mile walk from Rognell's home to the village of Cheyne Crossing had been twenty minutes of short, careful steps along an icy track. Preoccupied with the prospect of a forceful contact with the ground at any moment, there had been no time for him to come to terms with the problem of the footprints. As the cab began its two and a half mile journey at little more than walking pace, Parret steered his thoughts back to the early hours of that morning.

The affair had started pleasantly enough, he reflected, folding his arms across his narrow chest as if to crush his body heat deeper; to stop it escaping the confines of the tweed winter coat that the first deluges of snow had persuaded him to buy.

Aglow with the warmth and sense of good fellowship conferred by four pints of excellent ale, he and Chilver had jumped at the chance to continue the evening at Rognell's rambling house on the outskirts of Cheyne Crossing. Eggmont had been with them too.

They had encountered him outside the *Goat and Compasses*, though. Parret could remember the four of them cramming into a passing cab, a four-wheeler fortunately, and making the reverse of his present journey.

The crackle of ice beneath the cab's wheels acquired a background of hollow drumming as the vehicle moved onto the wooden decking of the iron bridge. Parret glanced casually through the grimy, frosted window.

Looking out into the sullen gloom of a winter morning, he could see a winding depression in the snow-covered countryside. The ice on the River Cheyne was a good five

inches thick in most places.

Guy Chilver had staggered off into the night just after two o'clock, chasing a blob of yellow light from his small lantern. His tracks had been the ones that Parret had followed into Cheyne Crossing. Their leave-taking had been noisy, with Eggmont shouting a warning about wolves after their departing companion. Parret recalled that there had been some discussion of reports of the creatures moving closer than usual to towns and villages in this colder than normal winter. Towns in eastern Europe, that is to say. The last British wolf had died one hundred and seventy years earlier in the north of Scotland.

Rognell had dismissed Eggmont's horror stories of attacks on humans as fairy tales, maintaining that wolves are rather timid creatures. Which meant that Eggmont had been with them still after Chilver had gone. But when he, Parret, had taken his leave, there had been just the two of them present, himself and Rognell. It was odd that he had no recollection of Eggmont's departure.

Folklore had become the theme of the night. Sitting in Rognell's crowded library, basking in the red glow of a huge log fire, its light augmented by half a dozen candles rather than the gas lamps, the four of them had chased the topic for half of the night.

Before removing his top coat, Rognell had braved the chill of his wine cellar to fetch up a half-dozen of ten-year-old Estelle, setting the surplus bottles on the window ledge, leaving them behind the velvet curtains to preserve their chill. Chilver had made a remark about their freezing solid. Eggmont had protested that their host was being too generous with his best vintage.

Waving all objections aside, Rognell had damned them with the heartiness of long acquaintance, proclaiming that he had every intention of consuming his bottle and a half, frozen or not.

Such generosity was typical of Rognell, Parret reflected. A fine, outgoing fellow, but prone to folly. Especially after the third quart of ale. And last night! Rognell had excelled himself last night...

The cab stopped abruptly, lifting Parret then returning him with a bump to the hard, wooden seat. Loud cries claimed his attention as a carter encouraged his team to straighten their waggon. It had slewed across the narrow street that bisected Cheyne Crossing, blocking Cheyne Drive from pavement to pavement. Parret could see two green-shuttered shops, butcher and baker, then three small cottages in grey, local stone on the left side of the street. Four cottages, fronted with minute, stone-walled gardens, faced them on the right.

Then the street crossed the frozen river Cheyne by an icicle-hung, iron bridge before marching out of sight into bleak, snow-blanketed countryside, which was divided into irregular shapes by black, skeletal hedges. After about a quarter of a mile, Cheyne Drive merged with the slightly wider Deacon Way. Delf Hill, where Parret lived, lay a mile and three-quarters east of south of Cheyne Crossing, but two and a half rutted, bumpy miles distant by road.

Parret's chain of thought continued with the cab. Rognell had produced a mountain of food sometime after Chilver's departure; at around three o'clock in the morning. Parret could remember pausing in the pursuit of a pickled onion with his fork to count the silvery chimes from an over-ornate carriage clock. Their leisurely meal had lasted for at least an hour, the consumption of food being interrupted frequently by an interminable but agreeable mild argument.

The backbone of the disagreement had been an exchange of folklore between Rognell and Eggmont. Parret's contribution had been unwavering scepticism. He could remember few of the details, but Rognell had taken his total lack of belief that folk tales contained any substance at their root as a challenge to his powers of persuasion.

Eggmont was a believer. He had been Rognell's faithful ally. His initial protestations of, '*Well, it works!*' or '*There must be something in it or it would have been forgotten!*' soon became a triumphant '*There, you see!*' tagged on every time Rognell provided a scientific explanation for some improbable folk myth.

Collecting folk legends was Rognell's current diversion. There was no denying his energy in the pursuit of the unlikely. In a matter of months, he had filled two large notebooks with tales, official explanations by experts, and his own ideas. His reference works filled three shelves of the glass-fronted bookcases that lined the walls of his library.

Parret could not help but wonder how long it would last. His friend seemed to have a voracious appetite for hobbies. At the ripe old age of four and twenty, he showed no signs of *settling down*. On the contrary, his investigative zeal increased with the passing years.

And yet, Parret realized, only the absent Chilver had *settled down*, married well, and embarked on the task of raising children to further the glory of the Empire and comfort him in his declining years. Eggmont, who seemed to be slipping into the role of confirmed bachelor, had been quite scathing, in a good natured way, when Chilver had announced that it was high time that he returned to his wife and family.

Eggmont, his round face glowing, had contributed what he termed *practical folklore* to the discussion. Most of it had to do with the weather and other country concerns, which was not surprising since he had spent at least fifteen of his five and twenty summers on his uncle's farm in North Devonshire.

The focus of their exchanges had shifted gradually during the course of the mid-night meal. By the end of it, all three participants had reached the last drops of their second bottle of Rognell's white Estelle, and life had become a pleasant fog. Perhaps this was why the volume of their statements had increased, and the mild and often meaningless insults

had not led to blows. Violence had been restricted to a verbal plane. And then Rognell had begun to talk about magic and the supernatural.

The cab turned left onto Deacon Way, presenting its blunt flank to the chill east wind. Parret could feel the vehicle rock gently in response to each wintry gust. The morning's ration of snow was falling as small grains rather than the fluffy, flat flakes of the previous evening and night. A huge drift was forming against the beech hedge on the right-hand side as the wind scoured Deacon Way. In fact, it was difficult to tell whether the snow-mist drifting across the road was falling from the sky, or had been picked up from the ground by the icy blasts.

The night had been windy, Parret recalled. Windows had boomed and rattled, and there had been the occasional surge of smoke forced back down the chimney. Small wonder, therefore, that the talk had turned to the occult.

Rognell's ally had deserted him at this point. Eggmont had taken up a position somewhere between his host's belief and Parret's scepticism. Undaunted, Rognell had continued to put forward his views, advancing gradually from vague generalities to specific instances.

Building on Eggmont's parting warning to Chilver, Rognell had argued that werewolf legends were based in fact, that it *was* possible to turn a human being into a wolf.

Parret could still experience a stirring of annoyance when he thought about what had followed. The whole thing had been a trick, he told himself; an illusion cooked up between Rognell and Eggmont to make a fool of him. The alternative was too horrible to consider. If Rognell had really...

A block of frozen mud, broken from the rim by a heavy farm cart, had formed a bridge across one of the petrified ruts in Deacon Way. The wheel of Parret's cab found it unerringly as the vehicle turned from Cheyne Drive into the wider main highway.

An abrupt climb became an equally precipitate fall. Parret's hat met the roof of the two-wheeler with enough force to drive his head an inch further into his headgear. Easing himself free, he cursed both the driver and the weather in an undertone.

It was a miserable morning; perhaps atonement for the splendid night at Rognell's house. Tiredness was just starting to catch up with him. He found keeping his eyes open an increasingly difficult task. Yet an entertaining night, Parret thought. Well worth the lost sleep. Especially after Eggmont had challenged Rognell to prove his claims, and Rognell...

He fell suddenly, jerking downwards. Parret's eyes flew open as he was precipitated from sleep, wondering what had happened. A steady carriage-creaking, the crunch of wheels on hard-packed snow, and the tiresome jingle of harness told him that he was still in the cab. Looking beyond the straining horse, he could see a meeting of hedges less than fifty yards ahead.

How would the vehicle cope with the slight incline when it turned left onto rising Deacon Way? he wondered. A vision of sliding back-wards for three miles before fetching up in the river at Cheyne Bottom flashed through his mind. Perhaps it was just as well that the Cheyne was safely frozen.

I am a fanciful fool, Parret decided. And gullible, too. But it was difficult to recall when Rognell and Eggmont had found the opportunity to hatch their scheme. Rognell, he decided with hindsight, had been almost transparently provocative when asserting that magic is science that has not yet been explained, and that it is indeed possible to turn a man into a wolf. And Eggmont's challenge, when Rognell had claimed to know the secret, had been very convincing. Parret was prepared to admit that he had been taken in well and truly.

Involving both himself and Eggmont in the preparations had been a master-stroke on Rognell's part. By the time the

trio had cleared furniture and carpets from the upstairs room, measured and painted a white pentacle within a seven-foot circle, and then mixed the potions that Rognell had insisted were necessary, they had consumed a further bottle of excellent white Estelle between them. Parret could recall being persuaded that Rognell would not allow them to expend so much energy to no purpose, and that, if not a transformation, then something spectacular was planned.

And then had come the argument; which had been particularly well staged, Parret was forced to admit. It had seemed so logical that Eggmont remove his garments. Whoever heard of a wolf roaming the snows in a tweed suit and Gaines boots? And the fire that they had lit before beginning the preparations had developed into a roaring blaze, casting warmth to every corner of the large room.

It was cold in the bouncing cab; even colder now that it was heading down Parswood Lane and into the teeth of a biting east wind. Delf Hill merged with solid white clouds on Parret's right. The town of the same name lay round the next turning. He would be home in a few minutes.

Parret tried to recall the point in the proceedings at which he had taken his eyes from the circle and its enclosed pentangle. Certainly the rigmarole, delivered as a low, murmured chant, and the interminable gestures of Rognell's hands, arms, indeed his whole body at times, now seemed calculated to dull his interest and his wits, to force his attention to wander.

Dressed in a tight dressing gown of black silk, his strong face a maze of shifting shadows as he turned and weaved in the fire and candle light, Rognell had given a performance which would have been totally convincing, and not a little frightening, to a sober stranger.

As a somewhat intoxicated friend, however, Parret had found the opus at first interesting and amusing, then a little tedious, and finally boring.

How long, Parret wondered, had Eggmont taken, naked save for a woollen blanket, to make the door from the circle? A matter of seconds. But for Rognell to produce a wolf and lead it to the heart of the pentacle covered by an identical blanket? And why had he not heard the scamper of claws on the polished wooden floor? Parret asked himself. Surely it was unthinkable that Rognell had, in fact, turned their mutual friend Rupert Eggmont into a wolf? And yet the evidence seemed to point in that direction...

The cab skidded slightly as it negotiated the left turn into Parswood Lane, crushing Parret into a corner. Snow blew into his face. He raised his muffler and tilted his hat forward to protect his face from the direct blast of a numbing east wind. This was the last lap. The cab had perhaps a mile of frozen road to cover.

A shudder convulsed his body as Parret recalled the mild horror experienced when Rognell had led the surprisingly docile wolf to the front door and sent it on its way towards the dark angles of the wood to the north of his home.

Then belated reason accounted for the apparent irresponsibility. Parret had lost sight of the animal almost as soon as it had moved out of the wedge of light cast by the gas lamp in the hall. Its silvery-grey coat was an excellent match to snow at night.

Clearly, the beast had been trained to circle the house. Eggmont, Rognell's co-conspirator, had been waiting at the rear to lure the *wolf* into the kitchen.

Yet it was strange that Rognell had refused to admit the deception. And that Eggmont had not reappeared. But he had, most probably, dressed quietly and sneaked to his home behind Cheyne Crossing after securing the *wolf*.

Parret and Rognell had returned to the warmth of the ground floor library after closing the front door on the frozen night. Rognell had been jubilant at the success of his experiment; Parret, in merry good humour, prepared to go

some way with the pretence. Rognell had been vastly amused by his guest's transparent façade.

"Self-deceiving unbelief," he had contended, provides the necromancer with a cloak of invisibility. "Superstitious fools may burn or hang a harmless old woman for looking askant at one of their number, yet the true sorcerer could turn the parson into a goat while he delivered his sermon, and walk from the church unhindered because the congregation would be convinced that they had seen nothing more than a trick."

His scepticism rising through a wine-fog, Parret had raised an important objection. "What," he had asked with a penetrating smile, "would the congregation think if the sorcerer did not reverse the spell? Might not some of them start to believe that their eyes had shown them the exact truth?"

Rognell had laughed and poured wine generously, explaining that certain elements of self-protection for the sorcerer are always included in an enchantment. The parson could not be turned into a goat without the attendant shield of disbelief being forced upon the audience.

"And should they resist?" Parret had insisted.

"Then such resistance would be overcome," had been the dark reply. The enchantment placed the burden of finding a way to rationalize the incredible squarely upon the shoulders of each individual witness. Those who struggled against the spell would soon discover that one's own spirit is an unconquerable foe. The memories of such people would be eased away from dangerous channel until self-deception had dredged a safe passage through the shallows of past reality.

"Indeed," Rognell had added as he puffed contentedly at his favourite pipe, "the same would apply to the victim when he recovered. The shock and confusion of finding himself in a wolf- or goat-body would be washed from the mind as snow melts from a roof."

"But the difference in mass, in body tissue," Parret had

insisted. The wolf had not equalled Eggmont's generous bulk.

Rognell had smiled wisely before producing a wooden cone from a cupboard. The cone was painted royal blue, and measured one foot tall with a base diameter of some six inches.

"Suppose a body possesses more dimensions than our senses can detect," Rognell had explained, removing the top part of the cone to display a red-painted circular face. Suppose a race of three-dimensional beings perceived themselves in only two dimensions, and believed themselves to be no more than circles. Suppose a cone-thaumaturgist discovered a method of rotating himself with respect to his plane of existence.

Rognell had removed another part from the top of the cone and tilted it until the blood-red oval was horizontal.

"This is a model of the surfaces produced by taking sections of a cone," Rognell had explained in his best schoolmaster manner. "It shows that the circle-being would now appear as an ellipse to his fellows. Further rotated, such that the plane of existence intersects the base of the cone, the being becomes an hyperbola, and then a parabola."

Rognell had then replaced the missing parts to reconstruct the cone. "The being remains unchanged," he had continued. "Only the angle at which he is viewed alters, and with it, his perceived mass. Size is no more than a matter of perspective. A two-dimensional section of a cone may be infinitely small, as at the tip, or as large as the base diameter.

"In ancient Egypt, the followers of Bast were reputed to be able to transform themselves into cats. In Transylvania, men have become bats. There is a tradition of werewolves in Germany. And the Esquimaux of the Arctic regions speak of transformations to snowy bears. Could not these travellers' tales be evidence that Man is a multi-dimensional being?

"If a cone can become radically different creatures in the

eyes of a two-dimensional being, may not Man in his various aspects, seen from different viewpoints, be a mouse, a wolf, a whale; or even the incarnation of the Evil One with horns and a forked tail?"

There had been an element of mockery in Rognell's smile, hinting to Parret that his new hobby had given him access to dark secrets. Contenting himself with accepting the charade in order not to offend his host, Parret had asked, mildly, how Rognell proposed to reverse the transformation if he had released the 'wolf' into the woods.

"The man-shape is the most stable for a human being," Rognell had explained. When the force of the spell wore off, the werewolf would snap back to his original form as a ball raised up a slope rolls back to the lowest point when released. But it would be as well to keep out of Eggmont's way until it happened; in a matter of a few hours.

The true wolf, despite lurid tales to the contrary, seldom if ever attacks Man except as a last resort; but an ignorant werewolf might. The psychic explosion of another person's violent death at the werewolf's hands would release all magical bonds prematurely and leave the newly transformed man naked and bloody in the snow, unable to leave the scene of his ghastly crime without leaving damning tracks.

From the catastrophe would come further reinforcement of werewolf legends, and a powerful impetus towards erasure of his experience from the former werewolf's mind.

"But would not the werewolf avenge himself on his tormentor rather than attacking an innocent?" Parret had protested.

"Your *innocent* is the more likely aggressor," Rognell had chuckled. "For attacks by Man on wolf are infinitely more frequent than vice versa, despite the so-called evidence of travellers' tales. And an attack on the werewolf's *tormentor* would be a result of an accident or extreme carelessness on the part of the sorcerer.

"For the werewolf would be under the same constraints of disbelief as any witness to his transformation. He would not be able to admit to himself that anything unusual had happened; still less that his *tormentor* had been the engineer of his predicament. And no prudent sorcerer would venture forth from his home until the dawn of a new day had caused to expire the enchantments of the night."

Rognell could always be relied upon to make fascinating and often bizarre conversation, Parret reflected.

The guest had done little more than act the part of audience from that point onward. His host had rambled into an account of a recent holiday in eastern Europe and his fascinating discoveries in neglected archives.

Then came an abrupt change in external sounds. Parret realized that the cab had halted outside his home. He dismounted cautiously, reflecting that eastern Europe offered an over-rich diet of folklore to the traveller. Rognell must have picked up his werebat tales there. And his magical knowledge...

The world seemed to lurch, but it was only the left-hand wheel of the cab surmounting an irregularity in the ice-bound road. Parret became aware of his surroundings again. He could hear the grinding of iron-shod wheels on frozen snow and the squeak of a drying axle. A frigid east wind carried a ripe smell of horse back to him.

He could see the familiar buildings of Delf Hill around him. A continuous overcast of clouds heavy with snow was keeping the impotent winter sun at bay, reducing the pre-dawn brightening to a gloomy half hour. It was a raw, grey day; one to hold at arm's length and forget as soon as possible.

Turning right at the ironmonger, the cab clattered on for twenty yards, then stopped. Parret climbed down stiffly, numbed by both the cold and lack of movement.

Lost in thought, he had been rather careless about his

posture during the journey. A troublesome ache in his left shoulder lingered as a reminder. The rather sullen cab driver, entombed in bulky layers of dark woollens against the biting cold, accepted coins with an offensive lack of grace, conveying his absolute disinclination to remove his gloves to search for change. Parret turned his narrow back on the bulbous red nose and the rat-like, glittering eyes, which were all that could be seen between a dark green muffler and a black knitted cap.

On the area in front of the house, where the previous night's snow had been cleared and the morning's hard powder had been scoured away by the wind, white frost slicked the pavement, bringing a treacherous gloss; yet there was a liquid drop at the end of each of the icicles hanging from the porch eaves.

Three cautious steps brought Parret to a varnished wooden gate set in a black, iron fence. To his left were stone flags, in which was set the cast iron cover of the coal hole. Against the fence which marked the boundary with the next property stood two iron-hooped tubs, made from a discarded beer barrel and painted peeling white. Skeletons of twiggy bushes sprouted through a blanket of icy snow.

The lock on the front door turned reluctantly when he inserted his pocket-warm key with fingers chilled to the bone despite his thick gloves. Something snagged the dark green door as he pushed it open, making the brass knocker clank in surprise.

Parret retrieved a damp envelope from the floor and dropped it on the hall table. The interior of the house seemed even colder than the frozen outdoors. He paused to wipe a dripping nose, then looked at the name on the envelope. The letter was not for him.

His rooms on the first floor were pervaded by a deep winter chill, which set his nose running again the instant he crossed the threshold. Frost on the windows of his sitting

room beckoned the white vapour plumes that billowed past his chapped lips. A heap of cold ashes mocked him from the overflowing grate; white from wood, pale grey and black cinders from coal.

Parret's bedroom seemed even colder than the frigid sitting room. His bed was a wreck, unmade for several days, the sheets and blankets lacking co-ordination. He dragged the bed away from the wall, scraping wooden legs across cracked linoleum, giving an extra tug at the precise moment required to overcome the added resistance of an upturning split. He wrestled sheets and blankets into rough orientation, then tucked them beneath the mattress at the sides and foot of the bed to form a pocket.

Only then did he shed his topcoat and long muffler, his fingers in their dark blue woollen cocoons coping clumsily with horn buttons and stiff, new material. His suit was a crumpled mess, in urgent need of the services of an iron. Yet he hung it tidily beside his overcoat, wincing when the bitter air closed about his leg to make each sandy hair stand erect.

Retaining underwear, socks, and gloves, he slid gingerly into a pair of thick flannel pyjamas. He was shaking violently with cold as he edged between icy sheets. And his nose had started to run again. Dabbing at it with a handkerchief, he wriggled deeper into the chilly wasteland of his bed. Rubbing his legs against the sheets in a violent scissor movement generated some warmth, but his feet remained blocks of ice.

He was tired, yet far from sleep. The movement required to take him from immobility in the cab to his bed had woken him somewhat. His eyes felt raw and full of grit. His head ached slightly at the temples. If only it were warmer, he decided, there might be a chance of his sinking into sleep.

If only he could resolve the nagging mystery. He tried to push it from his thoughts, but the puzzle continued to tug annoyingly. It was a question of footprints in the snow. Two

sets now left Albert Rognell's imposing home; Chilver's and his own. Where were Eggmont's?

He fell suddenly and heavily. Cursing the ice, Carson Parret brushed loose snow from his over-coat and looked toward the village guiltily. Fortunately, his tumble had not been noticed by the visible inhabitants of Cheyne Crossing. It was strange, he reflected, that something entirely beyond his control should create such total embarrassment.

The distinctive pattern of Chilver's overshoes ran on ahead of him, none of the footprints obscured by Eggmont's broader and heavier tread. Parret concluded that the second deserter from Rognell's impromptu party had taken the longer route along the road instead of trusting the less certain footing of the short cut. He began to wish that he had followed Eggmont's example, picturing his friend warm and asleep in his bed, perhaps with a residual smile of contentment at the success of the trick which he and Rognell had sprung on Parret.

Looking ahead to gauge the remaining distance, Parret spotted a cab in the yard of the inn. Perhaps he would be spared a two-mile struggle through treacherous, snow-covered fields. Abandoning caution, he quickened his pace, praying that the cab would not leave before he reached the aptly named *Time Waits For No Man*. The time, by the right-hand dial of the double-faced clock over the inn's front door, was eleven minutes past eight on that February morning.



12. It Makes You Think...

MERIK KATURYAN

Brent slouched into the office and threw himself into a padded swivelling armchair with a force that bruised Allen's sensibilities. His colleague's cavalier treatment of property that didn't belong to him offended Allen deeply. Brent lit a cigarette and threw his spent match at the ashtray on the long table. He missed his target, but made no move to pick up the misguided missile. After flicking a few white flakes of ash onto the dark green carpet, he fixed Allen with a worried frown.

"You know the work you've been doing on Krylan verbs?"

"Hmm," grunted Allen, hoping that a surly response would tell Brent to stop bothering him.

"I think some of the tonal modifications can apply to nouns as well," continued Brent, flicking more ash onto the carpet.

"I don't think the ashtray's full yet," said Allen pointedly.

"You know that bloke?" Brent's voice checked slightly after *know*, and rose in an early questioning inflection. "That Estegan?" he finished.

"*Human Scientist Marries Man From Space*," quoted Allen bitterly. He would never ever forgive Alison for divorcing him to marry one of the aliens. Even though they were humanoid to an extraordinary degree; firmly muscled athletes with excellent minds; and could, perhaps, according to some authorities, interbreed with humans; it was an act of massive disloyalty both to himself and to her species. Brian Allen may have been on the wrong side of forty and slipping comfortably to seed, but the face that looked at him from his shaving mirror was one hundred percent human. And he wasn't so bad-looking.

"I think the Krylans can apply aspects of mood to both nouns and adjectives," resumed Brent, scattering Allen's

thoughts. "You know his name, Estegan?"

"Its!" grunted Allen fiercely.

"What?" said Brent blankly.

"*Its* name," growled Allen. "*His* is a human possessive adjective."

"Whatever." Brent flapped an impatient hand. "The point is, the latest translation of *its* name is *Widower*."

"How tragic. So what?" growled Allen.

"I've just been replaying some of his tapes. *Its* tapes. Estegan's tapes," frowned Brent. "The thing is, when he says his name, he uses the tonal modifier that conveys an active rather than a passive mood. It makes you think, doesn't it? What Alison might have let herself in for."

"Doesn't it just?" returned Allen, his face expanding into a really cheerful expression for the first time in many months.



13. Partnership

PETER LEAR

A typical pub argument had developed. The time was ten past ten on a chilly Wednesday night in early spring. There were about a dozen people in the vault of the *Railway Arms*, the smallest of the town's seven pubs. Eight of them were playing cards at two adjoining tables. Big Terry and Brian were playing darts.

And me and Clive were waiting for them to start dealing out jacks for a game of crib, Bruce Green recalled.

He no longer had any idea who had started the argument, but it had grown to involve the entire group. Opinions were being exchanged in increasingly provocative language; the sort that could have led to a fight had not each remark been delivered with the relaxed calm of the drinking man engaged in playing cards or darts.

In the end, Clive had gone out to his car to fetch a map, saying that he didn't give a bugger how far it was from Leeds to Newcastle, and he was getting bloody fed up of hearing about it.

"Thought you'd gone home, mate," called John when Clive returned, the better part of ten minutes later.

"I was thinking of it," grinned Clive. He dropped the map of Great Britain and a map measurer onto the table in front of John. "Perhaps we can get a bit of peace now."

Barry, who was a draughtsman, examined the measuring device while John unfolded the map. It consisted of a small wheel geared to a rotating scale.

"Cut," ordered Alec.

Barry cut the cards. Alec began to deal nine cards apiece to the four players. The map was upside down to John.

"Leave it. I'll do it." Barry set the scale to zero and began to wheel along one of the red lines, heading north for Scotch Corner and then the start of the motorway.

"Thought I was going to have to drink this myself." Bruce hooked a thumb at the fresh half of lager standing beside Clive's almost empty glass.

"Ah, you got them in." Clive dropped onto the stool. He drained his first glass and offered a packet of cigarettes. "Yeah, it was funny. There was these two buggers hanging around the car when I got there. I thought they were going to nick it at first."

"Nick that heap?" scoffed Bruce.

"It goes okay," said Clive defensively. "Anyway, they could have been after the radio, or something. Rum pair of buggers. The bloke was about thirty. He'd got a real smart leather jacket. Wouldn't mind one like it myself. Must have him cost a bob or two. And he was dead tall. I only came up to his nose. But you should have seen the nose on him! You could have chopped chips with it."

"You know these two, do you?" interrupted Bruce.

"The bloke looked a bit familiar. I'm sure I've seen him before. But not the woman. She was a bit of a puzzle; she looked too young to be his mother, but a bit too old to be his wife. And she wasn't dressed for a night like this. Made me shiver just looking at her. All she had on was a summer frock and a thin cardie."

"But what were they up to?" said Bruce.

"Just looking at the car. Yeah, I know it sounds daft, but the bloke told me they used to own it. Must have been at different times, though. He was from Lancashire or Yorkshire. Somewhere up North. And dead working class, you know? The woman was dead posh. She sounded like a BBC announcer. You know what I mean?"

"And they were just looking at the car?" Brian sounded sceptical.

"That's right. The bloke wanted to know how it was running. So I said it was okay. You remember that leak in the radiator? She wanted to know about that. Then the bloke

wanted to know if the rear window still lets water in when it rains. So I told him I'd put some of that silicone goo on it. And yes, I'd found the squeak in the boot."

"Sounds like the car meant a lot to them," said Bruce.

"Yeah, that's why I was gone so long," said Clive. "They asked me a couple more things. then I remembered what I was there for and I dived into the car to get the map. Then the bloke said, 'See you again soon.' And when I looked again, they'd gone."

"Like you said," remarked Bruce, "a rum pair of buggers."

"So if I can get this straight," said the uniformed policeman. "Mr. Tyrell had two half pints of lager?"

"That's right," said Bruce Green, swinging his eyes down from the room's white ceiling. The policeman was sitting beside the bed and Bruce found looking at him from a prone position rather uncomfortable. "We'd just dropped in for the last half hour on the way home from work."

"And you don't remember accident?"

"Not really." Bruce shrugged, then wished he hadn't. The bruises were quite painful. "We were stopped at the lights at the bottom of Upper Carlton Street, waiting to turn right. Then all of a sudden, we were going sideways. I must have hit my head on the window. And the next thing I know, it's Thursday and I'm in hospital."

"They've told you about Mr. Tyrell?" asked the policeman. He was a career sergeant of indeterminate age, who looked as though he had been born a sergeant and would die drawing a sergeant's pension.

"Yes, they told me Clive had been.... killed. But not what happened."

"Funny, that," said the policeman. "His car should never have been on the road. But that's what saved your life. You see, it was the rear half of one insurance write-off welded onto the front half of another. When the lorry hit you, it just

broke in two and you were thrown clear."

"The lorry?" repeated Bruce.

"The driver lost his brakes on Derbyshire Hill. Then, when he went over the roadworks just before the lights, he lost control. The ruts twisted the wheel out of his hands."

"Yes, I know, they've been like that for a month."

"So," said the policeman, writing in his notebook, "you were stationary at the lights when the collision occurred?"

"That's right. Why, does the lorry driver say different?"

"Just routine, sir." The policeman became official for a moment. "We have to take a statement from everyone involved."

"It was hardly worth your while coming all this way. They're letting me out tomorrow and I live just round the corner from the police station."

"Gets me out of the office, sir." The policeman made no mention of being able to enjoy an uninterrupted liquid lunch after leaving Bruce. "And it's my job," he added, mainly for self-reassurance.

"Not much fun, though, visiting a place like this."

"That's true. Still, you can usually get a decent cup of tea out of them."

"And you say Clive's car was two bits stuck together? But it had an M.O.T. and everything."

"An M.O.T. is no guarantee a car is road-worthy, sir. It's not comprehensive enough. You know, I was called out to that accident, too. The one where the two cars were written off."

"You were?" Bruce displayed a morbid interest. "What happened?"

"It was just up the road from here. Last summer. Two o'clock in the morning, pissing down with rain for the first time in a month. The roads were all greasy with rubber dust. Not that it made anyone slow down.

"One of the cars skidded at that bend near the baths.

Ended up turned right round on the other side of the road. The other one went up the back of it. The woman driving that car was killed. And the bloke in the back of the one that skidded. It was his car, but a mate was driving him and his wife home from a party."

"So much for not drinking and driving," remarked Bruce. "If he'd risked it, he'd still be alive today."

The policeman just cleared this throat and said, "Hmmm!" Then he slipped his notebook into a pocket of his anorak and struggled into the green and white garment. "Quite famous, he was, the bloke. Always played the villain in films. He was in one on BBC One last Friday. Roger Neston?"

"The name sounds vaguely familiar," admitted Bruce. "What did he look like?"

"Thirtyish, very tall, proper Yorkshire, and a nose you could slice bread with. The woman worked for the BBC, too. Radio, not telly. She was an announcer on Radio Three. I didn't know she was forty-odd. Mind you, the way the BBC gets them to talk, it's a job telling anything from the voice. Are you all right, sir?" The policeman leaned closer to the bed, noting Bruce's pallor. "Shall I ring for the nurse?"

Poor bugger looks like he's seen a ghost, he added to himself.



14. Lifetime Guarantee

HENRY T. SMITH

McIver Home Libraries
15, Hart Gdns,
London, W1E 5Mw.

35, Riverside Ave,
Mortlake,
London, SW14 7ER.

25th July, 1979

Dear Sirs,

Please send me further details of your computer home reference library system, as advertised in this month's edition of 'Education World'. I am mainly interested in the System 42L, for which you are offering a lifetime guarantee on the first five units installed. I hope that I will be one of the lucky ones.

Yours faithfully,

J.M. Bancroft.

+ + + + +

McIver Home Library Corporation
15, Hart Gardens
London W1E 5MW.

Mr. J.M. Bancroft
35, Riverside Avenue
Mortlake
London SW14 7ER.

27th July, 1979.

Dear Mr. Bancroft,

Thank you for your letter of 25th July expressing interest in our System 42L. The enclosed booklet describes the System fully. In the event of your having further questions, I have arranged for Mr. Stollion, one of our representatives, to call on you at six p.m. on Monday evening (30th July).

I would like to take this opportunity of reminding you that our lifetime guarantee applies only to units purchased before 31.8.79.

Yours sincerely,

ARTHUR L. KIRKLAN.
Area Manager, Marketing Division.

encl. TM/8017—*A Guide To The System 42L.*

**McIver Home Library Corporation
15, Hart Gardens
London W1E 5MW.**

Mr. J.M. Bancroft
35, Riverside Avenue
Mortlake
London SW14 7ER.

31st July, 1979.

Dear Mr. Bancroft,

As you can imagine, the response to our advertisement has been such that only those placing an immediate order for the System 42L have qualified for the lifetime guarantee on parts and servicing.

I am writing to confirm that you are one of the fortunate five, and that we shall arrange for installation at your convenience on receipt of the agreed deposit of £950.00

Yours sincerely,

Rudyard S. Stollion.
Southern Marketing Division.

35, Riverside Ave,
Mortlake,
London, SW14 7ER.

19th August, 1979.

Dear Mr. Stollion,

Our System 42L electronic home library was installed on Thursday, the 16th, and the whole family are very pleased with it. I am afraid, however, that one of the kiddies had a slight accident with the knob on the first stage scan control of the Central Organiser. I would like, therefore, to take advantage of the lifetime guarantee to have it repaired.

Yours faithfully,

J.M. Bancroft.

P.S. Enclosed please find one of the Service and Repair chits from the booklet of the same supplied with the guarantee.

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McIver Home Library Corporation
15, Hart Gardens
London W1E 5MW.

Mr. J.M. Bancroft
35, Riverside Avenue
Mortlake
London SW14 7ER.

21st August, 1979.

Dear Mr. Bancroft,

I was sorry to hear of your accident so soon after installation of your personal System 42L. Although the construction of the components is robust and designed to cope with a certain amount of rough handling, you will find in your *User's Manual* a recommendation in the introduction that young children be allowed to use the system only under the supervision of an adult.

Although your guarantee covers only failures of components due to manufacturing defects and the effects of fair wear and tear, our service engineer will replace the damaged component free of charge as a gesture of goodwill.

I trust that you will have no further problems with your personal System 42L.

Your sincerely,

C.B. Doyle,
Service Administration Controller.

35, Riverside Ave,
Mortlake,
London, SW14 7ER.

2nd September, 1979.

Dear Mr. Doyle,

Something appears to have gone wrong with one of the library modules in our System 42L. Nothing happens when we try to access the section between CAN AND CAT. As one of my lads has to do a project on medieval castles, we would appreciate it if you could send someone to sort out the trouble as soon as possible.

Yours faithfully,

J.M. Bancroft.

P.S. I have enclosed another repair chit from the guarantee.

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McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Consumer Services / Heath Passage / NW3.
TO : Colin Doyle/ Service Admin/ Hart Gdns/ W1
RE : System 42L, serial number 218475
DATE: Thursday, September 6th, 1979.

Dear Colin, bit of a problem here. The engineer's reports says the breakdown was caused by a dollop of jam in the works! Flavour unspecified. Bancroft pointed out that he was covered for accidental damage by his lifetime guarantee and refused to pay for the service call.

As Bancroft says, no one drops jam into something worth nearly three kiloquid deliberately! In view of all the rhubarb about our System being so reliable that we could offer a lifetime guarantee on it, I'm turning to you for a policy decision. Do we send him a bill, or what?

Regards, Alec Crossfield.

+ + + + +

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Service Admin.- Hart Gardens - W1.
TO : Consumer Service - Heath Passage - NW3.
RE : System 42L, serial number 218475
DATE: Monday, September 10th, 1979.

Dear Alec, no charge. Consumer Relations are very proud of the lifetime guarantee. As long as that gang are involved, tread very carefully when one of our LG clients makes a claim.

Regards, Colin Doyle.

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: the Director, Consumer Support Division.

TO : C.B. Doyle

RE : System 42L, serial number 218475

DATE: Tuesday, July 29th, 1980.

Dear Doyle, I am rather disturbed by the Bancroft file. Our records show that he has made a claim for service and repairs at least twice a month for the best part of a year. A library system which cost Mr. Bancroft £2785 has already received first aid to the tune of £3109! And there are God knows how many years left to run of his wretched lifetime guarantee.

In view of the fact that expenditure on servicing the other four LG Systems totals £38 for the same period, I must insist that a far tougher line be taken on the definitions both of what constitutes an accident, and of what is fair wear and tear in the case of the Bancroft System. As he appears to have raised a brood which would put a mob of football hooligans in the shade, there may be trouble in reaching agreement. But we must remember that McI.H.L.C. is **NOT** a charitable institution run to pick up the pieces after Bancroft's destructive tribe.

I trust you will give the matter your urgent consideration.

Regards, Robin Elter.

+ + + + +

McIHLC ***** OFFICE NOTEPAD

DATE: 30.7.80

RE : Jackie, please photocopy the attached memo from R.E. when you go to Hope Street. The copy's to go with my memo to Alec Crossfield. Thanx! Colin D.

p.s. - when's the wretched man coming to fix our copier?

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Service Admin. - Hart Gardens - W1.
TO : Consumer Service - Heath Passage - NW3.
RE : System 42L, serial number 218475
DATE: Wednesday, July 30th, 1980.

Dear Alec, enclosed without comment a photocopy of a memo from the Big White Chief. I understand that the lunatic who dreamed up the idea of a lifetime guarantee has already received the chop. I have no desire to follow him to the block.
Regards, Colin Doyle.

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McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Consumer Services / Heath Passage / NW3
TO : Colin Doyle/ Service Admin/ Hart Gdns/ W1
RE : System 42L, serial number 218475
DATE: Thursday, July 31st, 1980.

Dear Colin, further to the memo from the BWC, I've been having a word with the service engineers who've done work on the Bancroft System. Apparently, their 42L looks like it's been sat on by an elephant, or dropped from a great height, or both. Thanks to the lunatic LG, they seem to feel free to kick hell out of their System, drop jam in the works, and commit other and similar Luddite atrocities.

The trouble is, Bancroft has been dropping hints about writing to a certain television program about all the trouble (alleged) he's been having with his System 42L. And said television program is not without teeth (ho, ho!) Jocular comments have also been made about the neighbours thinking he's got one of our engineers for a lodger. What about the negative publicity if we pull the plug on him? You're the one with his toe stuck in the political hot water. What's the current temperature?

Regards, Alec Crossfield.

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Doyle
TO : Alec Crossfield
RE : Bancroft
DATE: 4.8.80

Dear Alec, the Big White Chief is of the opinion that Bancroft has been encouraged to abuse his guarantee by the slackness of certain parties in the Service Division. But negative publicity is to be avoided at **ALL COSTS!** Yet we are required to come up with a solution to the problem. Preferably a cheap one. Any ideas? I'm prepared to consider anything and everything to drag us out of the shit.

Regards, Colin Doyle.

+ + + + +

MCI.H.L.C. <<>> TELEPHONE NOTE PAD

CALLER : Mr. Smith TIME : 2.17 p.m.
FOR : Mr. Crossfield DATE : 5/8/80
CALL TAKEN BY : Alice
MESSAGE : Mr. Smith will meet you in the
Red Lion tonite at 5.30.

....extract from the expense account of Alec Crossfield for the week ending 8th August, 1980....

	£ . p
Petrol	17.16
Technical Consultation Fee - paid	150.00
committed	350.00
Lunches	13.78
Misc. expenses	12.49

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McIver Home Library Corporation + + + + + Internal Memo

FROM: Alec Crossfield
TO : Colin Doyle
RE : Bancroft System
DATE: 8th August, '80.

Dear Colin, I have taken expert advice on our situation re Bancroft: see attached expenses sheet. He has us over a barrel in many ways, but my expert was able to make a number of useful suggestions. I have been promised action within a week. If you could stall the BWC, preferably without telling him anything, we ought to have the pair of them off our backs fairly soon.

Regards, Alec Crossfield.

MCLH.L.C. <<>> TELEPHONE NOTE PAD

CALLER : Mr. Smith TIME : 11.55 a.m.
 FOR : Mr. Crossfield DATE : 14/8/80
 CALL TAKEN BY : Alice
 MESSAGE : Mr. Smith has left town for business reasons, but will contact you when he returns in two weeks.

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Doyle
TO : Crossfield
RE : Bancroft
DATE: 21/8

Dear Alec, see attached photocopy. So much for your consultant.
There could be questions about your expenses.
Regards, C.D.

+ + + + +

copy for Alec Crossfield

Mr. C.B. Doyle,	35, Riverside Ave.
Service Administration	
Controller,	Mortlake,
McIver Home Library Corp.,	London SW14 7ER.
15, Hart Gardens,	
London W1E 5MW.	19th August, 1980.

Dear Mr. Doyle,

Our System 42L is on the blink again. Would you please send an engineer round to fix it as soon as possible. I have enclosed one of the repair chits from the new book.

Yours faithfully

Andrew Bancroft.

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Alec Crossfield
TO : Colin Doyle
RE : Bancroft
DATE: Friday, 22nd August.

Dear Colin, don't panic. See attached copy of letter to Bancrofts. Don't ask questions - you wouldn't like the answers. Re expenses, I need the £350 committed to consultation fees next week.
Regards, Alec C.

copy for Colin Doyle

**McIver Home Library Corporation
Consumer Service Unit
63 Heath Passage
Hampstead Heath
London NW3 12AY.**

Mr A. Bancroft
35 Riverside Avenue
Mortlake
London SW14 7ER.

22nd August, 1980.

Dear Mr. Bancroft,

I am returning the Service and Repair Invoice sent to us with your letter of 19th August for the correct signature. Our records show that the Agreement in question exists between ourselves and Mr. J.M. Bancroft.

I am sorry to hear that you are having trouble with your System 42L, and hope to effect a speedy repair.

Yours sincerely,

Alec M. Crossfield.
Consumer Service Unit Manager.

McIver Home Library Corporation+++++Internal Memo

FROM: Alec Crossfield
TO : Colin Doyle
RE : Bancroft
DATE: Wednesday, 27th August.

Dear Colin, an ominous silence from you since my last missive. Here are two more copies of letters for your collection. You might mention to the BWC that the Bancroft problem has resolved itself. I've taken legal advice, and it should stick. I also need the balance (£350) of the consultation fees soonest.

Regards, Alec.

copy for Colin Doyle

35, Riverside Ave,
Mortlake,
London, SW14 7ER.

25th August, 1980

Dear Mr. Crossfield,

I understand my son has been writing to you about our Home Library. I'm afraid it's not possible for my husband to sign the form as he passed away after a terrible accident on the 14th last. I have signed it as next of kin, and hope this will be OK.

Yours sincerely,

Doreen Bancroft (Mrs.)

copy for Mr Doyle

**McIver Home Library Corporation
Consumer Service Unit
63 Heath Passage
Hampstead Heath
London NW3 12AY.**

Mrs. D. Bancroft
35 Riverside Avenue
Mortlake
London SW14 7ER.

27th August, 1980.

Dear Mrs. Bancroft,

Please allow me to express my sympathy at your time of great loss. Unfortunately, the Lifetime Guarantee on your System 42L was a contract between McIver HLC and your late husband, and was not transferable to his next of kin.

Should you require repairs to your System 42L, we would be pleased to arrange a visit by one of our service engineers. The minimum charge for such a visit is £8.50, exclusive of VAT, parts and labour being extra.

Yours sincerely,

Alec M. Crossfield.
Consumer Service Unit Manager.

McIver Home Library Corporation++++++Internal Memo

FROM: Service Admin.- Hart Gardens - W1.
TO : Consumer Service - Heath Passage - NW3.
RE : System 42L, serial number 218475
DATE: Thursday, August 28th, 1980.

Dear Alec, you bastard! You might have mentioned in your last-but-one memo that Bancroft had fallen under a Tube train. No wonder you said I wouldn't like the answers to questions about your expenses. 500 quid in consultation fees! The balance of which has been approved, probably in a rush of euphoria, and should have reached you by now.

Still, looking on the bright side, we've saved at least £3,000 pa now that the Bancroft Millstone has fallen from around our necks. Draper of Promotions has been fighting a rearguard action, but the Big White Chief is coming round to the view that we were the victims of reckless advertising. But let's keep our eyes open a little wider in future.

Regards, Colin Doyle.

MCI.H.L.C. <>> TELEPHONE NOTE PAD

CALLER : Mr. Smith TIME : 1.40 pm.

FOR : Mr. Crossfield DATE : 29/8

CALL TAKEN BY : Helen

MESSAGE : Mr. S will meet you in the Red Lion
at 5.30 pm. this evening to complete your
business. Trusts that (service?) contract
fullfilled to your satisfaction.

p.s. - he sounds a bit like a spy or the
Mafia, doesn't he? - H.

✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂ ✂

15. Time, The Concealer
PETER LEAR

"I reckon we're on to a good thing here." Colly Hopkins scratched his thick, black sideboard with a podgy index finger, releasing flakes of dandruff into a shaft of sunlight. He was sitting with his back to one of the grime-filled, frosted side windows of a town centre pub called *The Wanting Nail*. Facing him sat Lenny Frazer, his pinched features drawn together into an expression of deep concentration.

"Three weekends, you said?" encouraged Frazer.

"Right," nodded Hopkins. "I've watched the place Sat'day and Sunday night for the last three weekends. No sign of any lights. No one going in or out. No milk or papers delivered."

"Big house like that, must be full of stuff."

"It is. I went and cleaned their windows on Wednesday. There's a lot of junk, like. But about a couple of grand's worth of good stuff."

"So what's the set-up?"

"We'll do it tomorrow night, Sat'day. About half ten. It should be pretty dark, and if we can get out of the place by half eleven, the pubs'll still be chucking out and the Old Bill won't look twice at us."

"Right," grinned Frazer, "I like that."

"Okay," Hopkins got down to details, "there's a sort of alley across the road. You'll park the van there. There's a bedroom window that just sort of drops open. I'll get in there, check the place over, then open a side door on the right-hand side of the house. When I give you the signal, you drive over, we load up, then off. There's a good, big hedge all round the place, so once you get the van to the door, no one's going to be able to see us; from the front or next door."

"Sounds like a good one," said Frazer. He had spent five of his twenty-eight years in various prisons, but he had been

enjoying a run of good luck since teaming up with Hopkins, two years earlier.

"All my jobs are good ones," said Hopkins smugly. He was a compact, twenty-seven-year-old, who played football every Sunday without regard to the season. Nine months in prison had prevented him from making an occasion of his twenty-first birthday, but the experience had surrounded him with willing tutors.

Since his release, he had acquired a respectable if dull job as a labourer in a timber yard, a reputation as a cautious but successful gambler, a wife whose full figure was starting to overflow and two loud kids.

He was not a greedy man. Six or eight major burglaries in a year sufficed to maintain his very comfortable lifestyle, and his prosperity could be ascribed to picking outsiders and backing them quite modestly. Claiming that he had put a pony on a ten-to-one shot explained away half his share of the proceeds of an average burglary.

Frazer poured the remains of his pint into his narrow mouth. "Fancy another?"

Hopkins glanced at his half full glass of brown ale. "No, I'll not bother. I'll have to be getting back to work in about five minutes. I don't want to get the sack."

"No, you'd be in dead stuck, wouldn't you?" grinned Fraser.

Behind the main road through the growing town of Greckam, the houses were spaced at more comfortable intervals. Leafy trees and sprouting hedges helped to break up the good work of street lights into overlapping pools of shadow. Tewfik Avenue was deserted, but lights and music beyond the continuous hedge barrier confirmed that the avenue was not uninhabited.

As Colly Hopkins shinned up a substantial cast-iron drainpipe, his thoughts were on the interior of the house. The

possibility of being spotted during his ascent was so remote that the professional burglar did not worry about it.

A bedroom window at the side of the house surrendered without protest. Hopkins brushed through the gap between sill and window, to find a cheap carpet beneath his feet. He began a rapid exploration.

In an alley, which ran between two hedges to provide access to a small park, Lenny Frazer drew on his cigarette. The van was dark blue, and merged well with the night. He was half way through one of his king-size cigarettes. There would be time enough to finish it before he was needed.

The radio transceiver on the seat beside him was a cheap model with a range of half a mile. In common with other users of a device slightly more advanced than a child's toy, neither he nor Hopkins had bothered to buy the licence required by optimistic bureaucrats.

The transceiver crackled, emitted a static hiccup, then a voice said: "Joe, there's a phone call."

Frazer pressed the send button on his own transceiver. "Tell them I'm out."

The exchange meant that Hopkins was in the house, he had checked the upper floor and he was now about to investigate the ground floor for occupants.

Hopkins eased down a flight of stairs, keeping close to the wall to reduce the risk of revealing creaks. He reached the ground floor and turned right, towards the front of the house, following a spot of torchlight no bigger than a twopence piece, swinging his torch like a blind man swings a cane.

Having established that all three ground floor rooms and the kitchen were unoccupied, he returned to the passage and headed for the side door. Suddenly, there was light spilling from behind a large, solid silhouette directly in front of him. Then stars. Then blackness.

"What the bloody hell?" Eric Rush nursed his right wrist and kicked at the cellar door again. It hit an unexpected obstacle again and recoiled.

"What's all the bad language about?" asked David Fennel as he caught up with his colleague.

"Hello, who's this?" Rush had switched on the passage light and discovered the reason why the cellar door had not swung open as far as the rubber stop near the wall.

"Looks like a burglar," grinned Fennel, taking in the dark clothing, a balaclava helmet and the small torch on the floor beside the unconscious man.

"Well, bloody hell!" said Rush in wonder.

"I suppose we'd better phone the police and resign ourselves to having flatfoots tramping all over the place," sighed Fennel. "And asking us silly questions half the night."

"Perhaps not." Rush frowned at the still figure on the floor, considering. Then his frown melted into an expression of enlightenment. Fennel, who had seen this cogitation process in action many times, waited patiently for the oracle to pronounce.

They were unlikely companions, who had met at their university's squash club. Both were bright young men fading into their late thirties. Rush was a senior lecturer in the Department of Physics. Fennel moved in the dusty circles of the Department of Ancient History. An archaeologist by profession, he was also interested in electronics, and therefore able to assist Rush in the construction phase of their joint project.

Certain anomalies, reported in the scientific literature as intellectual curiosities, had led Rush to the conclusion that time travel was possible under special circumstances. Their principal objective was to construct a form of time-trawler. They hoped to be able to recover important antiquities just before the instant of their assumed destruction.

If Rush's theory was correct, they would not be creating

damaging anomalies by doing so. After three years of weekend work, they had succeeded in building a relatively low-powered device, which they were in the process of testing. They were feeling cautiously optimistic after sending objects and small animals on trips through time. They had not dared to experiment on themselves, however.

"You know," said Rush slowly, "there's another way of doing this. If we turn our sleepy friend over to the law, they'll probably find he's been at this for years and shove him inside for five years. Suppose we try out our Mark I time trawler on him? Let him pay off his debt to society by serving the cause of science?"

"What if something goes wrong?" stalled Fennel. "But why should it? All the testing we've done has been successful. Okay, let's try your experiment in penology."

The two scientists carried Hopkins down to the main cellar and placed him on a large plastic tray. The tray was the size of a coffin lid. Rush had been using it as a supporting shelf for a collection of spectroscopic equipment borrowed from the university.

"Now then," Rush scanned the laboratory, "we need somewhere to put him. If we're going to send him into the past, we can only do so if we don't create paradoxes. As we have no memories of tripping over him, it has to be somewhere we've not been for a few days."

"What about in there?" Fennel pointed to a boxed-in rack of transformers and control circuitry. "We've never used the room behind there because it's so damp. He could have been in there for a couple of years and we'd have been none the wiser."

"A touch of brilliance," grinned Rush. He closed a switch set in the side of the cabinet. With a faint hum, retractable castors descended to raise the collection of instruments a few centimetres from the floor. He pulled out half a dozen plugs and pushed the rack aside like a sliding door.

The unused cellar room had a damp, earthy smell. Irregular patches of black mould dotted the whitewashed wall at the rear of the building. Rush and Fennel lowered the tray to the dusty concrete floor. With mounting excitement, they returned to the main cellar.

"Let's try a double experiment," suggested Rush. "We know it's possible to send things a limited time into the future. Let's send him a couple of days into the past, then two into the future."

"Can we do that?" frowned Fennel.

"Oh, yes. Remember the *time as a railway* explanation? What we're doing is giving him an excursion ticket. He'll travel back down the line two stations, and we'll catch up with him two stations further on."

"Fine in theory, but will it work in practice?"

"Let's find out," grinned Rush.

It took them five minutes to bring the unconscious burglar in the next room into a satisfactory focus on the time trawler. Then they tossed a coin to decide who would press the transmit button. Fennel won the honour. His thumb poised over the green panel-switch, he paused and looked at Rush.

"What if he wakes up? We're sending him on a four-day excursion. Running into a door isn't going to keep him quiet for that long."

"Yes, I didn't think of that. But it won't be four days subjective time for him, if the theory's right, but yes, you're right, we'd better give him something to keep him quiet, just in case. Can't have him running around two days ago, can we?"

"There's that stuff we used on the test animals."

"Yes, that sounds about right for our *Homo Burglarensis*," grinned Rush.

Eric Rush tapped figures into a calculator, then injected the burglar with a dose appropriate for his body weight to keep him unconscious for an hour; twice the calculated subjective

time of his voyage through the days. Then Fennel pressed the button that would send Colly Hopkins on his round trip.

When the scientists had shut down their equipment, they pulled out the plugs and pushed the rack aside. They looked eagerly into the side room. Burglar and tray had gone.

"What do you make of that?" said Fennel.

"Interesting," remarked Rush. "I'd imagine he's hovering two days in the future now, waiting for us to catch up with him. After spending ten minutes in the past while we refocussed on him."

"What now?" said Fennel.

"Now, we just wait till Monday night. At precisely 10:46, we'll catch up with him and he'll have lost a couple of days of his life."

"Or gained two days. If he hasn't lived them yet, we've added them on to his life expectancy."

"Yes, that might be true," nodded Rush. "Still, it should be interesting to be able to ask one of our experimental subjects whether he notices any ill effects. Or any effects at all. All it seemed to do to next door's cat was make him hungry."

"Two days as opposed to five years," said Fennel thoughtfully. "Sounds a fair rate of exchange. This is going to be in the way now," he added as they returned to the main laboratory.

"We can put it back where it belongs for the moment." Rush moved the heavy rack of instruments back to the doorway and retracted the castors. When it settled into its former position, the huge blue cabinet looked as if it had never been moved.

Lenny Frazer finished his cigarette. Five minutes later, he lit another one. By a quarter to eleven on his dashboard clock, he was starting to become impatient. After another cigarette, anxious. He waited another quarter of an hour. Then, unable to restrain himself, he crossed the road and advanced

cautiously up the drive of the darkened house.

He circled the building, trying back and side doors on his way. The house was closed and silent. It had apparently swallowed Colly Hopkins. All the windows on the ground floor were closed and secure.

Frazer contemplated going into the house to look for his partner, but he had no head for heights and he had no idea which was the window that was easy to open. The only way to get into the house, as far as he could tell, was to break a ground-floor window. He knew that the sound of shattering glass would carry a long way at that time of night.

He retired to the concealment of the hedge at the front of the garden. Some time later, lights appeared in various parts of the house. Frazer returned to the van hurriedly, expecting the police to arrive at any moment. An hour passed very slowly.

A Panda car on its routine patrol drove past, but the occupant ignored the house. By now, Frazer had brought the van out onto the road. He had felt vulnerable in the alley. Concealed in the back of the vehicle, he smoked another cigarette. Then he went home, trying to work out what was going on and failing completely.

A day of indecision followed. Lenny Frazer took a stroll through the park where Colly Hopkins usually played football in the afternoon. There was a game in progress, but no sign of his partner.

By Monday morning, Frazer had convinced himself that Hopkins had disturbed someone in the house and that he had been forced to make a run for it, abandoning his partner in the van. Hopkins had either managed to escape, in which case he was in hiding, or he had been arrested. There was no other reason for not contacting his partner to tell him why their weekend job had failed.

After a normal Monday spent driving a forklift truck

around a warehouse, Frazer returned to his bachelor flat with a Chinese meal from the shop on the corner of the long, winding street. He had just arranged all the foil containers within easy reach on his card table, and switched on his television, when the telephone rang.

Beryl Hopkins was ringing round her husband's friends and acquaintances, seeking news of the missing Colly. After telling her, quite truthfully, that he knew nothing, Lenny Frazer returned to his meal in a thoughtful frame of mind. The police would have told his wife if they had arrested him. But if he wasn't in a cell somewhere, where was he?

Frazer switched the television off at nine o'clock and retired to the *Froggat Arms* in the next street. His luck was out with the cards. He managed to get into three games of Don, and lost all of them. But he was able to use the time between games for some further deep thinking.

There had been people in the house. Perhaps Colly had fallen down some stairs and was hiding there with a broken leg. No, he would have given himself up. Which meant that he might be injured in some other way and unable to move. There was only one way to help him, really. It would be tough on Colly, but it seemed necessary.

The Rush/Fennel partnership carried out their weekend experimental work at night in order to take advantage of off-peak electricity tariffs. This meant that they were usually quite tired on Monday evenings, having spent the previous night experimenting and the day working at the university. It was their custom to sleep from six p.m. on Monday until about six a.m. on Tuesday in order to get back into phase with the normal day and night cycle of activity.

On this Monday night, however, Fennel had taken advantage of one of Rush's guest rooms, and they intended to rise at ten-fifteen so that they would have time for a quick meal before the present overtook their burglar.

The insistence of a doorbell dragged the scientists from sleep at about fourteen minutes past ten. Rush dragged on his trousers and a shirt, and staggered downstairs to find out who was hammering on the front door. Fennel decided that he might as well get up and use the bathroom. He felt in need of a reviving shower.

"Police, sir," said the chubbier of the two uniformed constables when Rush opened the front door. "We had a report of someone climbing up one of your drainpipes." He paused, inviting a reaction from the violated householder.

Rush stared at him for a moment, then retreated behind his hand to conceal a yawn. "Sorry, I've been doing a lot of work at night and I've been trying to catch up on my sleep. I'm not quite with it. Someone climbing one of my drainpipes? When?"

"The call came in about ten minutes ago, sir," said the constable in an efficient tone, which hinted at underlying ruthlessness and had probably been copied from a television detective. "Do you have some form of identification on you, sir?"

"Me?" frowned Rush. "Well, yes." He found his university identity card in his shirt pocket.

"We have to check, sir," said the policeman. He looked at the photograph and the address. "Some of these lads are bloody cheeky. We've had a look around outside, Dr. Rush, and there's marks on a drainpipe at the side of the house. We've got a couple more men watching outside in case he tries to climb out again. Now, we'd like to come in and look for him."

"Yes, of course," said Rush, slightly stunned. He stepped out of their way.

"This is the way upstairs, sir?" asked the chubby constable, pausing at the foot of the staircase.

"Er, yes." Rush was thrown off balance by such a superfluous question. "Oh, I have a colleague here, staying with me. Doctor Fennel. Just in case you happen to bump in to him."

Unable to communicate without being overheard, Rush and Fennel reached agreement by default. The best thing to do, they decided, was to say nothing and let the policemen get on with their search. Uniformed figures poked their noses into every room, every cupboard, under every bed, and even through the hatch that led to the coal bunker.

As 10:46 and the return of their burglar to the present and possible full consciousness approached, the thoroughness of the search bit deeper and deeper into the scientists' nerves. Then the chubby policeman noticed the door to the cellars. It was set in the side of the staircase, painted the same colour and not obviously a door at first glance.

"What's down there, sir?" he asked. Not finding the burglar had frustrated the policemen to roughly the same degree as their extended stay was working on Rush and Fennel.

"It's only the cellar," said Fennel dismissively.

"If we've looked everywhere else, I reckon we might as well look down here," said the chubby constable, who had sun-baked mud-flats of wrinkles around his penetrating, dark brown eyes.

Rush looked ready to argue but Fennel opened the door. "A quick look can't hurt. Just don't touch anything, though. We have a lot of delicate instruments set up."

The policemen took five minutes to decide that there was no one hiding in the main cellar and the side room that was used to store surplus equipment. As if expecting a priest hole behind it, the younger, taller constable gave the cabinet of transformers and control circuitry a tentative shove. He soon learned that it was not to be pushed around.

Rush and Fennel breathed joint sighs of relief when the policemen left the house, baffled, at 10:44. They scampered down to the cellars at once and lowered the retractable castors. The instrument cabinet moved reluctantly away

from the wall. Their burglar and the tray on which he was resting had not yet returned. A chronometer display on the control panel warned them that he was still ten seconds in the future.

The ringing of a timer at the end of its count seemed to trigger a sudden outward burst of damp air. Rush and Fennel blinked reflexively, then hurried over to the figure on the tray, trailing wires from inspection lamps.

"He doesn't seem to be breathing very deeply," said Fennel. "How much longer will the drug depress his metabolism?"

"He doesn't seem to be doing much of anything," said Rush, taking a swipe at an orbiting fly. "I think he's dead!" There was total surprise in his voice.

"Dead?" repeated Fennel. "That's impossible. How?"

The fly settled on the burglar's nose, attracting Rush's attention to a thin trickle of blood from a small hole in the cheek. There was another small hole in the burglar's brow, near the hairline, a third beside his right ear, and two more concealed by his hair.

"I don't suppose you remember that paper on the theory of prior residence, do you?" Rush remarked.

"Not really," said Fennel. "Why, does it have a bearing?"

"It's to do with the prevention of paradox in time travel. Suppose some insect has been flying around in here. When we put him where we did, we evidently put him into the path the insect had followed in the past. As the insect has already done its flying, a paradox is only prevented if it flies right through his head as if it wasn't there."

"You mean, we killed him?" gasped Fennel.

"Well, to be strictly accurate, the fly killed him. But I suppose, technically, we might be accessories. But the fault's really his for breaking in here in the first place."

"Do we bring those coppers back?"

"Let's not dash into anything, Dave. For a start, our story

is going to sound rather bizarre. And for another, I don't feel like being dragged through the courts and probably slung in gaol."

"Good point," admitted Fennel. "We'll have to get rid of the body somehow."

"How does one get rid of a body?"

"One of the traditional ways is to cut it up and shove it in the furnace."

"I don't think I could stomach the butchery," shuddered Rush.

"Nor me. How about an acid bath?"

"It's a thought. I wonder where we could get hold of enough phosphoric acid? That dissolves the bones faster than the traditional sulphuric."

"We're going to have to come up with a discreet source pretty speedily. In the meantime, what do we do with him?"

"Just seal him up in one of the polythene rubbish bags for the moment," Rush decided. "And leave him in here."

After making his telephone call to the police, Lenny Frazer got his van out of the garage and motored round to Tewfik Avenue. He saw two police cars parked outside the house when he drove past. With feelings of vengeful satisfaction, he headed for home.

Further thought had convinced him that the outraged householder had beaten Colly up, had gone too far, and had been landed with a corpse.

Four policemen left the grounds of Eric Rush's house about twenty minutes later. They held a brief conference beside their cars, then they drove away in different directions to resume their patrols.

"I've been thinking," Eric Rush said when he joined his archaeologist friend at lunch the following day.

"About what?" David Fennel leaned forward across the

table. The refectory could be a rather deafening place at times.

"Remember our Saturday visitor had what we thought was a transistor radio in his pocket? Well, I went home and had a closer look at it earlier on. It's really a cheap radio transceiver. I think he must have had a pal outside, keeping a lookout. And I think the pal must be wondering where our visitor is."

"Hence that rum visit from the boys in blue last night?"

"But he can't have told them the full story because they were two days late."

"Which means we have to get rid of him in a hurry. Before the pal becomes more explicit. You know, the pal might even be watching your house. Which rather rules out dragging gallons of phosphoric acid back there."

"And we could have the police sniffing round again," agreed Rush, "looking for recent building work, and signs we've been digging up the garden, or the cellar floor. "We'd better get our thinking caps on."

"Anything?" said David Fennel when Eric Rush let him into the house on Tewfik Avenue at the end of the afternoon. Rush had been able to go straight home to stand guard. Fennel had had two lectures to deliver.

"Nothing," said the physicist. "I take it you've not been struck by inspiration?"

"About all I can think of is cutting him up small, shoving him through the mincer on your food processor, and flushing..."

"I don't think you need go on," interrupted Rush with a shudder. He started down the stairs to the cellars. "I wonder how long you can keep a dead body hanging around before it starts to stink the place out?"

"That depends on the conditions of storage. Temperature, humidity, availability of oxygen, and so on. Pity you don't

have a deep freeze."

"I don't think I'd fancy anything out of it in the future if we'd been keeping a dead body in it."

"You know," mused Fennel, "it's rather ironic. My profession involves digging up the dead of the past at times, and one of the dead of the present is liable to bring an otherwise promising career to an abrupt halt."

"The past," muttered Rush. "Mummies! I wonder?"

"Hello, are you starting to crack up, Eric?"

"No, I was just thinking. Suppose the police start to suspect us of a recent murder? But what, if the worst came to the worst, if the only body they were able to find was so ancient, the owner had to have died long before this house was ever built?"

"And how would you achieve that?" scoffed Fennel.

"It's laughably simple," grinned Rush. "I've lived here for fifteen years, and I've never once been up in the loft. Looking up there didn't even occur to those coppers. Suppose we seal him up tightly in a polythene bag and send him back in time fifteen years? Then let him get to the present in real time. And then move him a short distance and repeat the process. And keep repeating it?"

"Won't we be creating anomalies if we populate the past of your loft with increasingly ancient burglar remains?" frowned Fennel.

"Oh, no. Nobody has memories of the recent past of my loft, whether or not populated with burglar remains. It's a blank space in the past, if you like. And we can fill it in the same way that one can add marginal notes to a completed text book. We'd only create paradox if a living person spent consecutive periods in the same fifteen-year stretch of the past. Because the second time around, he'd not have any memories from the first time around of being with his future self. If you follow me?"

"Barely, if at all," said Fennel. "But a dead man has no

memories? That's your point?"

"That's it precisely. And if we put some sachets of silica gel desiccant in with him, that ought to speed up the ageing process."

"The ones you, er, *acquired* to keep the instruments dry in case it was damp down here?"

"The very ones. Well, what do you think?"

"What are we waiting for?" encouraged Fennel.

Colly Hopkins, dried and fifteen years dead, was a shadow of his former self. His garments clothed a shrunken skeleton, and his digital watch had stopped due to the expiry of its battery fourteen years previously.

By eight o'clock, the mummified body was over three hundred and fifty years old. David Fennel had burned the burglar's clothes. He fused metal items, such as the zip from the burglar's trousers and his digital watch, to an unrecognizable blob with some improvised thermite powder.

After a pause for dinner and a rest from dashing up and down stairs, Rush and Fennel continued their task. Once the flesh had gone, moving the bones became a one-man job. Part way through the night, while Rush was taking his turn to sleep, Fennel took the precaution of extracting most of the corpse's teeth.

Modern fillings and a body from the Dark Ages did not go well together. He hammered everything to coarse grit and flushed it down the toilet.

Their uninvited visitor was almost two thousand years old by morning, and the past history of most of the loft had been filled with Colly Hopkins. Repeated moving had reduced the skeleton to individual bones. The burglar's ribcage and pelvic girdle had not survived intact the experience of being heaved around in a cavalier fashion, and his right femur was now in three pieces.

Well satisfied with their work, Rush and Fennel took the

bones down to the cellar and began to think of removing the night's grime followed by breakfast.

Neither Tuesday's local-radio news nor the *Thorminster Evening News* carried a report of either a burglar or a body being found in a house on Tewfik Avenue, Greckam. Lenny Frazer listened to the local radio station's breakfast bulletin on Wednesday morning. A few minutes later, he made a telephone call. Beryl Hopkins confirmed that her husband had neither returned home nor contacted her.

The sequence of events began to make sense to Frazer. Colly Hopkins had been caught in the act and done to death. When searching the house on Monday, the police had been looking for a man in hiding. When they should have been seeking was a dead body. Frazer decided that it was his public duty to spill some beans and set the police on the right track. Revenge was his public duty.

The doorbell dragged Eric Rush from his breakfast. When he opened the front door, he found himself looking down from an advantage of two steps on a pair of callers, whose eyes shouted *copper*.

"Good morning, sir," said the shorter of them. "You are Doctor Eric Rush?"

"That's right," admitted Rush cautiously.

"I am Detective Inspector Kellet and this is Detective Sergeant Leraime."

Both men showed a warrant card with a speed that proved ownership of a small, plastic wallet containing a printed card, but prevented any form of close examination.

"You'd better come in," said Rush. He led them to the dining room, where they found David Fennel and two half-eaten breakfasts.

"What can we do for you?" said Fennel when introductions had been made.

"We have reason to believe your house was broken into on Saturday night, sir," the inspector told Rush.

"Saturday? You mean Monday, surely?" he replied.

"No, there was some confusion over the original call. It was Saturday."

"That explains how the chap got away," remarked Fennel.

"Have you missed anything, sir?" DS Leraime asked Rush.

"No, can't say I have," he replied with suitable academic vagueness.

"Would you mind having a look around?" suggested the DI.

"As long as it doesn't take all day." Rush glanced at his watch. The time was eight-thirty. Neither he nor Fennel was required at the university before ten.

A look around the house for missing possessions developed into a full-scale search for the remains of Colin Rodney Hopkins. Rush explained the disturbance of the dust in the loft by telling the detectives that he and Fennel had been up there taking measurements to work out the cost of insulation.

The search moved down to the cellars when Inspector Kellet suggested that the motive for the burglary could have been the theft of research secrets. After examining the main cellar and a side room used for storage, the sergeant paused in front of the massive cabinet containing the transformers and control circuitry.

"Aren't there two side cellars in these houses, sir," he asked, a smirk in his voice.

"That's right," nodded Rush guiltlessly. He lowered the castors and pulled the cabinet aside. "As you can see, the room is rather damp. I've been meaning to do something about it, but I've never got round to it."

The damp, dingy room was empty, apart from a small heap of dust beside the door and a forgotten sweeping brush, which Rush reclaimed. "So that's where I left it," he

remarked absently. He swept the dust onto a small shovel and emptied the shovel into a waste bin.

Thwarted, the detectives turned their attention to a crate on the work bench. The wooden box was three feet long, two wide and about a foot deep.

"And what's in here, sir?" asked DI Kellet.

"Just bones," said Fennel casually. "Mine, actually."

"Bones?" repeated DS Lorraine significantly.

"I'm an archaeologist," explained Fennel. "Be careful with that," he added when Kellet, Hamlet like, plucked a skull from the box. "The bones are about two thousand years old and rather brittle."

"Looks like there's a complete skeleton in here," said the inspector. "And I understand there are ways of treating bones to make them look a lot older than they are."

"I think you'll find they're rather too young to be another Piltdown Man," said Fennel.

"But maybe young enough to be contemporary?"

"What?" said Rush, displaying studied incomprehension.

"Well, sir, we have a slight problem," said the inspector. "A man called Colin Hopkins entered your house on Saturday evening at around ten-thirty with intent to commit burglary. He hasn't been seen since. He's on our books as a missing person, in fact. And now we find a skeleton."

"And?" invited Fennel patiently.

"And I'd like to take these bones away for forensic examination."

"You think that's your burglar?" scoffed Rush.

"Just checking, sir," said the inspector in a sinister tone. "We have to eliminate all the possibilities."

"Are you planning to arrest us?" said Fennel.

"Not, sir, not at the moment," said the inspector.

"I should bloody well think not," said Rush with a convincing show of indignation.

"But I would like you to inform us if you intend to leave

the area, sir. Write him a receipt, Sergeant."

Detective Inspector Frank Kellet received a telephone call at lunchtime the following day. He pushed aside a small mountain of paper and found the telephone lurking behind it.

"John Romney, Frank," said the caller. "About your bones."

"Ah, good. What have you forensicked out of them?" said Kellet eagerly.

"I've had a good look at them under the microscope. They're very old, and they've been knocked about a bit over the years. There's quite a considerable difference in age between the newer and older fractures. But I can safely say the most recent were made long before you or I were born."

"That couldn't be faked, could it?"

"Not a chance. He rotted away quite naturally. There's still a certain amount of identifiable tissue adhering to the bones. There's no way that could be faked. And there's no way this ancient Briton could have been climbing drainpipes a couple of days ago. I could send samples off for carbon-14 dating if you're willing to pay for it. But I'm sure the results will agree with Doctor Fennel's opinion of two thousand years old."

"Oh, well, we'll draw the line there," said Kellet philosophically. "Thanks anyway, John. I'll send someone over to collect the bones."

Kellet replaced the receiver and stared moodily at his paper-covered desk. Solving a nice, juicy murder, in which the victim had been reduced to a boxful of bones, would have looked very good on his record. Now, it looked as if the more likely explanation was true. Colly Hopkins had grown tired of his fading wife and he had done a bunk with a girlfriend. And, more than likely, he had the proceeds of a decent number of burglaries to live on. It happened all the time.

"Got my bones back," David Fennel told his physicist colleague when he joined him in his laboratory for a three o'clock cup of tea.

"Oh, good," said Rush. "What did they say?"

"The sergeant brought them back. He was vaguely apologetic, but his attitude said everyone's guilty of something. They just didn't find out what we're guilty of this time."

"Typical!" snorted Rush. "And what did you do with him? With Mr. X?"

"There's a huge collection of bits and pieces our Victorian predecessors gathered and never bothered to catalogue. I put him in among it, down in one of the air raid shelters."

"So it's over. But it could all boil up again if we tell the world about our time trawler."

"It probably has," said Fennel. "I bet there are a few headlines about us in the newspapers of the future. And all sorts of academics making a reputation by ripping ours to shreds."

"As long as those headlines aren't written until we're just heaps of bones like our burglar," grinned Rush, "I don't think we have anything to worry about."



16. The Man On The Wire

PHILIP H. TURNER

The attack failed to reach its objectives. Suitably dressed up in appropriate jargon, this brief information would appear in the report, along with the emotionless numbers that stood for dead bodies, damaged bodies that still clung to life, and those who went over the top with the rest and were never seen again.

The mud got some of them. Alive or dead, it could swallow an army; smoothly, ruthlessly, efficiently and without leaving a trace. Some of the survivors thought that those were the lucky ones.

Not for the lost, the endless shelling, bad food, stinking trenches, huge rats, disease and their army's miserable existence, the only purpose of which was to gather at the ladders every so often as mindless groups of uniforms.

It was always the same. Whistles blowing. Young officers leading, men with just twenty-one days to live on average, leading the way over the trench-tops, shouting encouragement against the tap-tap-tap of the machine guns and enveloping shell concussions for a few seconds, then toppling back dead onto the men waiting to scale the ladders.

Terrified uniforms following tapes through their own wire, wading through clinging mud and falling into the shell holes that pock-marked no man's land, and then hoping to find gaps in the enemy's wire.

And all the time, machine guns mowing them down by the hundred. And all the time, shells diving into mud, raising dark brown fountains full of jagged shrapnel, shells fired by their own artillery dropping short from worn-out barrels, shells built by their own womenfolk killing them.

Sometimes, they were able to reach the enemy trenches and occupied them; only to be beaten back by a counter-attack a few hours or a few days later. Other days were like today; the

killing machine opposite reduced their numbers to a handful, too few to hold a single bunker, let alone a complete trench system, and the attack became an even more shameful waste of human lives.

Then the survivors turned back, scrambling for the doubtful safety of their own lines, trying to save themselves, perhaps only to be sent out tomorrow on an equally ill-considered assault.

On any day, in any direction, the foul-smelling ocean of mud was an obstacle. It was always an enemy, never a friend bringing an end to the misery of trench warfare. Those who fell into its clutches fought a loud, hysterical battle before being overwhelmed.

Two of the men in mud-soaked uniforms dived into a fresh shell hole, trying not to breathe until the white, suffocating vapours had finished seeping out of broken earth, but needing breath desperately to fill lungs straining to make up for a panic-stricken dash.

They took in short, convulsive gulps of foul air, retching as fumes from spent explosive tore at their throats. Opaque water began to well up from its lowest point with lazy confidence, as though the crater were sinking. Stretched on the crumbling earth walls, they paused between the angry fire of tracers above their heads and the cold, dark liquid at their feet.

The Corporal wriggled up to take a look over the edge of the crater. He was short and dark, and he had lost the left sleeve of his battledress blouse. With a startled oath, he ducked back as machine gun bullets slashed at him, breaking soil from the rim of the shell hole to send it plopping into the deepening pool of muddy water.

Looks like they've got our range, remarked the Corporal.

The other man responded with a grunt. There was no need to say anything. They both knew the score. They were marked men. If they showed their noses above the protection of their

refuge, the machine gunners would take great pleasure in finishing them off.

It was a cat and mouse game that their own machine gunners played too. The only sensible thing to do was to accept their position and be glad that they were out of range of hand grenades thrown from the enemy trenches. There was no point in looking on their predicament as a challenge, in trying to sneak back to their own lines to prove that they were superior to the enemy's machine gunners.

The two men in the crater reached an unspoken agreement to wait until dark, then to crawl back to their trenches in the dark spells between the flares fired at random to expose soldiers trying this trick. As long as their own side didn't become too trigger happy when they were unable to give the new password, and the occasional shells avoided their piece of ground, they would be all right.

The Corporal lit a cigarette and closed his eyes. Light rain began to wash the dark mud from his face. He held his hand cupped over the cigarette to keep it dry. The war had passed over him for a while. He was his own man. He may have been lying on his back in an evil-smelling crater with death stalking him, muddy, cold and becoming wetter in the rain, but control of his own life, within the severe limitations of his environment, had been returned to the Corporal for an afternoon.

Lying on his back on the enemy's side of the crater, the other man could see a low hill on his left, and just sky and the crater in every other direction. They were trapped in an island of shattered wooden stakes and barbed wire. Some of it was theirs, some the enemy's. They had been fighting backwards and forwards over that stretch of ground for longer than anyone could remember. No man's land was full of such wood and metal pockets.

The rain passed on, sweeping along no man's land to another sector of the front. Streamers of sun burrowed down through the grey clouds like golden pillars. One of them sparked from something metallic on his left. He glanced in that direction.

There is a man hanging on the wire. No matter how unlikely it seems, his eye had passed over the shape earlier without identifying it. The man has lost his helmet, and his arms are raised as though in surrender. He seems to be kneeling, but his knees are a good two inches from the ground. The sagging, rusted wire supports his full weight.

He looks at the man on the wire, but fails to recognize him. They are quite close; about the distance between the two platforms of a railway station. He can see the man's features clearly. He has an expression of mild surprise on his chubby, very young face, and he seems to be completely unmarked. Apart from cakes of mud on his elbows and small splashes on his trouser legs, he looks remarkably clean.

As he watches, tiny rivers of red begin to trickle from the man's pale left cheek and then his left wrist; the latter stream meandering through a belt of coppery hairs and into his sleeve. This means that the man on the wire is alive. Corpses don't bleed, or so he had been told.

His eyes are open; not wide, not staring, just fixed in an unblinking contemplation of a point a few yards in front of his knees. He is facing the enemy. He had to have copped his packet during the advance. If so, why has he only just started to bleed?

Perhaps he moved moments earlier. Perhaps he has just died, given up the struggle to hold his vulnerable flesh clear of the cruel barbs. Perhaps his veins have not yet realized that their host is dead and that corpse's shouldn't bleed.

It has become very quiet. The gunners have stopped their barrage. They just lob the occasional shell over to harass those making their way back, wriggling from fold to fold in the broken ground.

Irritated by the lack of movement at the crater rim, or by the occasional billows of smoke as the Corporal breathes out fumes from his cigarette with his eyes closed, or perhaps because they are running short of moving targets, the enemy machine gunners turn their attention to the man on the wire.

A short burst sings through the spiked curls and wire loops on his left, carrying with it red tracer fireflies. Then they correct their aim.

He watches the man on the wire dance under bullet impacts, like a snagged puppet being jerked by a master impatient to free it. Then the strings break, or the machine gun stops firing. Although his body has become an oozing, stained rag, the expression of the man on the wire has not changed.

It could be that the machine gunners were trying to provoke a reaction from us. But when I glance at the Corporal, his eyes are still closed and he has finished his cigarette. He is just lying against the damp earth, rifle cradled in his arms, looking like a sleeping child clutching his favourite toy.

The man on the wire is looking at me with his level gaze, as if he expects me to do something. But he is a dead thing. He has passed beyond the enemy's power to hurt him. And if he can no longer care what indignities are inflicted on his body, why should I?

Some time later, the sun breaks free of the clouds entirely and begins to shine into my eyes. My throat is thick with thirst, but darkness and relief are a long way off. Soon, I will begin to feel hunger. But I'm used to that.

Then something plops into the dark earth beside my left hand. I glance at the grenade incuriously. I can see three horizontal and three vertical grooves in the cast-iron casing. And a thread of smoke leaking through a light film of mud at its base. And then...

"We nearly lost him then." Frank da Silbre ripped a tissue from the box at his side and pantomimed mopping a streaming brow.

Tina Sherell parted the thin lips of her small, tight mouth to show fashionably green teeth. "They get like that sometimes," she remarked with a shrug. "That's why we're here."

"Funny how the really brilliant visualizers can become so unstable towards the end of a contract," said da Silbre as he

checked the instrument readings on his monitor board.

"No surprise in this case. Not with all the pressure on him."

"Everything's stable now."

"Yes," nodded Sherell, "he's sleeping. We pulled him out just in time."

"Even so," da Silbre lit a cigarette and inhaled hungrily, "he'll need extra careful watching from now on."

"So, okay, we'll watch him," said Sherell impatiently. "That's our job, isn't it?" She found very wearing da Silbre's constant dramatizing of what he considered to be no more than a routine job.

Fortunately, Morgan's suicidal lapse showed that the project was very nearly completed. She would have to suffer only about a further week of her colleague's close company before they passed into the editing stage, for which da Silbre would not be required.

da Silbre began to chant one of his childish mnemonics as he checked that the equipment had been shut down in the correct order. Gritting her teeth, Tina Sherell slipped the memory wafer into a bright green storage cube and left the control room. She pushed rapidly into the wide corridor. Head down, she rushed to the viewing room, ignoring those who nodded or called a greeting to her.

At the viewing room, she slotted the cube into its space on the grid, then rechecked both reference numbers. Morgan would be absolutely impossible if he was unable to find the cube the following morning. Even misplacing a cube by one slot in the grid made it invisible to Morgan; which would have the knock-on effect of making the next session with him a total waste of time.

Sherell checked that the room's hush screens were switched on, then she screamed a long, deafening, throat-tearing expression of the revulsion that welled up when she thought of one single, more-than-necessary recording session

with Frank da Silbre at her side. She felt much better afterwards.

It was night on the other side of the right-hand, window wall of the corridor. Corben of Promotions asked her how the project was going as she waited for the lift. Sherell told him that it was on target, and that Morgan seemed very pleased with the work thus far.

It was merely empty, verbal fencing. Promotions staff were terribly aware of the problems of being creative to order, but they could never resist the temptation to probe for advance information on projects in preparation. They wanted the extra time to prepare a pre-release celebration, especially when someone of Morgan's standing was involved.

Sherell descended two floors and clicked through the door of the modest night canteen. She had time for a cup of tea and a sandwich. Billings of Accounts was deep in conversation with Gross, the Marketing Director. Sherell nodded a greeting to them, but chose a table on the other side of the room, where she could be alone. Her slightly drawn expression told the handful of people in the canteen that she needed to unwind after a tough recording session.

She bit into juicy, curried chicken between slices of whole-meal bread. Billings was neighing softly, which suggested that Gross was telling him one of his shark-fishing stories. Behind them, an off-duty commissionaire was reading a newspaper and smoking a short, fat cigar. The two couples at opposite ends of the room were from Production. Sherell knew one of the women slightly and was careful not to catch her eye.

She stirred a half-spoonful of brown sugar into her tea, allowing the sparkling interaction of the overhead lights and the ripples on the liquid surface to exert a soothing, self-hypnotic, relaxing effect. But her concern for Morgan refused to go away completely.

Morgan woke on a comfortable couch in the muted lights of a room about four metres square. The stink of foul mud and burn explosives had been replaced by the fresh smell of a light, cool sheet. They had peeled away his clinging sensation-suit, and with it, the wet roughness of his woollen uniform. He was lying warm and naked beneath the comforting shelter of the sheet.

He stretched out a hand. The beaker was there. He had only to open his fingers to grasp it. He lifted his head fractionally from the wedge-shaped pillow and poured the pale green liquid down his throat. It felt cool and refreshing.

Strength spread outwards from an inner core. Morgan set the beaker back on the table and threw the sheet aside.

He found a fresh set of clothes draped over the chair beside the couch. There was a slight dragging pain in his right arm. A bulky pressure dressing covered the point at which they had inserted a hypodermic needle into a vein, the invasion that was his lifeline.

The commissionaire opened the door for him and wished him a respectful good night as Morgan stepped out into the night. He lived about a kilometre from the studios, on the other side of the city centre. Instead of hailing a cruising taxi, he decided to walk. A fine collection of stars glittered beyond the weather dome, and an edge of pure white Moon could be seen between two tall office buildings. He never knew whether it was a fine night or just an illusion projected onto the underside of the dome.

He worked his way through the crowd flooding out of one of the city's three live theatres. Then he crossed the almost deserted wastes of the shopping centre. By the time he reached his apartment block, he was starting to feel quite tired. The project was taking more than usual out of him; perhaps because he had been reluctant to take it on.

As usual, he had been forced into a compromise. The

studio management had agreed to back his own project on life on Stone Age Milos if he accepted the Military History Society's commission on aspects of warfare.

A state akin to warfare had existed between himself and the Society almost from the start. It was all to do with the question of scale. The Society wanted to show an overall picture of the development of weapons and the changes of strategy enforced by each new invention.

Morgan preferred to work at an individual level, to chart the effects of change on a small, perhaps atypical group of people. As always, there had been a process of negotiation and compromise.

His reputation as a leader in the field of total involvement displays had shielded him from attempts to ride rough-shod over his personal interpretation of the project. But there was always a point at which the demands of the client, the person paying the bills, had to be obeyed.

Although professional pride prevented him from rushing the commission and making less than his best of it, Morgan would be glad when it was over.

He woke once during the night, clinging to the tatters of a dream. At first, he could make no sense of his impression. Then he trapped the source. It was a blend of the day's recording session and a childhood memory. He had been eleven when he had made his final visit to his great grandfather.

The old man had been in his nineties, frail and slipping away, but still lucid and accepting without regret the peaceful end to a long life. Both had known that it was their last meeting. His great grandfather had given him an intricately carved, Indian box in dark wood. He had shown the boy how to work the pattern of sliding, interlocking panels that secured the lid. The unexpected weight of the box had been due to the contents of five internal shelves. Twenty

tiny, Victorian sovereigns were recessed into each of them.

Morgan had also received a key ring made from a First World War victory medal. He still carried it, along with three keys for which he had no locks. There was an angel on one side of the round medal, perhaps the legendary Angel of Mons, her detail worn smooth by the years. He could just make out *THE GREAT WAR FOR CIVILISATION 1914-1919* on the other side, a reminder that the Armistice at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918 had merely stopped the fighting so that the politicians could thrash out the deal that became the Treaty of Versailles the following year.

His great grandfather had been shot through the right lung in late September of 1916, an impossibly long time ago, during the first battle of the Somme. That had been his third gift: the very bullet sealed in a block of clear plastic. Morgan could remember being told, on another occasion, something of the truth of that battle, of the weary desperation of fighting backwards and forwards over the same piece of ground, and of the surprising capacity of the human mind to adapt to the unthinkable.

His great grandfather has also told him about the men hanging on the wire after every attack. But it had been done gently, as an abstract image, almost as though his great grandfather had been describing a piece of sculpture. Not that Morgan would have been too troubled by the unclouded reality; he had been quite a bloodthirsty child, much to the horror of his parents.

The account had provoked curiosity rather than fear and nightmares; impressed deeply an image that was reinforced whenever he opened the box of sovereigns or looked at the bullet in the plastic block. This was the first time that it had ever visited him in his dreams. As far as he could recall, he had been very near to the man on the wire in his dream, but the face remained indistinct.

Finding himself unable to sleep, he pushed aside the single sheet on his bed and padded out of the bedroom to his study. He mixed himself a brandy drowned in soda and sipped it slowly, turning the block of clear plastic over in his hand. The nose of the sliver of lead was blunted as a result of the collision with one of his great grandfather's ribs. It was strange to realize that an instrument of death had saved his life.

Great grandfather Bourne had been invalided out of the army when his wound had refused to heal properly. Less than a dozen members of his company had survived the carnage of the Somme, and only two of them had lived to celebrate the Armistice, two years later.

The brandy began to do its work. Morgan started to feel sleepy again. He made a mental note to include elements of his great grandfather's story when he added perfecting touches to the sensations recorded during the day. Perhaps the creation of one really powerful image would bring some fire to the project.

The constant war of attrition with the Military History Society had blunted his creative edge. But there was only about a month's work left. When it was over, he could dump the project on the technical department and fly away to the Greek Islands to continue his research on Milos for a couple of months.

The technical department would set up his displays in the Military History Society's new exhibition hall. He would have to return home for about a week to make final adjustments. He always had to make sure that, when members of the public touched the sensation bars at empathy stations in front of the visuals, they would receive a full and accurate experience of Morgan's images.

But after the grand opening, he would be able to forget that he had ever experienced the wearisome commission.

As the week's work progressed, Tina Sherell became increasingly worried about Morgan. Frank da Silbre, despite his professed concern for their charge and his endless statements of their heavy responsibility, seemed content to watch the monitor displays, ready to pull Morgan out of a suicidal trap. And when the lights on the monitor board died, so did his interest in Morgan and what he was doing.

Coldness grew between Sherell and da Silbre. They went out of their way to avoid contacts other than their enforced meetings in the monitor room. Their behaviour was noted and commented on, but no one at the studio complex found it unusual.

After all, they were coming to the end of a commission with the ace empathizer, and life around intensely creative people is nothing if not difficult.

On the Friday, just before lunch, Sherell managed to catch Ted Orison in a free moment. When she assured him that the matter was urgent, and that she would take up no more than ten minutes of his valuable time, the studio's Artistic Director offered her a seat and a friendly ear.

"It's Morgan, as you've probably guessed," began Sherell. "This week, he's really started to drain away. We've pulled him away from a World War One hand grenade. He nearly stepped into the path of a tank while he was looking at a dead Italian strung out on barbed wire in a World War Two desert. Again in Vietnam, there was a body just sitting in the jungle. Morg started to go round it and triggered a booby trap. If we'd been half a second longer stopping him off, he'd be dead now.

"They've proved an imaginative empath in a sensation trance can achieve his own death just by identifying with a death event. That's a fact, Ted. No matter what medical cobbling went on when Coppan, Julien, Edmonds and all the rest were explained away as heart disease. I think his subconscious is screaming for him to end this project. I think

Morg's had it."

"All right, Tina." Orison held up both hands to stem the flood. "I'm on your side. So you think Morg's found his core image?"

"What? Oh, yes." Deflected, Sherell paused to gather her thoughts. "I think he's saying that war to him is an ordinary man with an expression of mild astonishment on his face, not really knowing what it's all about or why he's in the front line. And dead before he knew he was in danger."

"And who is this dead man? Morgan?"

"We don't know who he is, Ted." Sherell shook her head vaguely. "He's just a rather blank, young face. I don't think Morg means him to be anyone in particular. He's just a symbol."

"So what do you want me to do?" Orison asked now that her passion had been dammed.

"He's desperately tired, Ted." She gave him a small smile to acknowledge that she had been manipulated into a more reasoning frame of mind. "All the more so because of the battle of wills he's had with the Society all through the project. I think they've had more than enough out of him for what they're paying."

"And what does Frank think of that?"

"Frank can't see further than the effect on his own career if we admit we can't protect Morg any more," said Sherell bitterly.

"Yes," nodded Orison, "it's no secret you two have been having a few problems. All right, Tina. I'll look over this week's recordings. Then I'll have a chat with Morgan. You're not recording this afternoon, are you?"

"Morg's going back over some of the earlier scenes."

"Right." Orison checked the time with a rather theatrical glance at his desk chronometer. "We're agreed, then?"

"Thanks, Ted," grinned Sherell, pushing out of her chair. "Enjoy your lunch."

Morgan seemed both relieved and reluctant when Ted Orison told him that he needed a rest for his own good. After putting up token resistance, he accepted Orison's decision to authorize one more scene for his current project.

The alternative to topping the project off immediately with this last scene, taking a short break, was unacceptable to Morgan. He knew that he would not be able to concentrate on his research on Milos under the shadow of a return to the Military History Society's commission after his break.

"After all," Orison brought his argument to a conclusion, "every long war since Vietnam has been a very similar guerilla conflict, for the most part. Vietnam has been the trend-setter."

"I suppose you're right." Morgan admitted, accepting one more compromise gratefully.

"Take a couple of days away to sort out your ideas, Morg," added Orison generously.

"What about the client?" Morgan sought to protect himself from all angles.

"I'll handle the client. But I don't think there'll be any come-backs."

"I've just realized," laughed Morgan, "take a couple of days out, you said. It's the bloody weekend tomorrow."

"Is it?" Orison looked at his desk calendar for confirmation. "Sod it! Caught in a professional platitude. But seriously, Morg. If you feel you need the time, take a couple of days more at the beginning of next week. And give Tina an outline of what you plan to do before you record the last scene."

"Am I getting that bad?"

"You're getting tired, Morg. And I don't have to tell you what that means, do I?"

"I know." Morgan made a weary gesture. "It's been, well, a struggle, Ted."

"That's why it's time to top things off."

"Before I crack up?" Morgan grinned wryly.

"You're valuable to us, Morg. I know." Orison laughed aloud at Morgan's sceptical expression. "If only as a means of making money for the studios. So what do you say?"

"You're right, of course," nodded Morgan. "One more scene. Something special to top everything off. A projection. To demonstrate constancy and continuation. And there's a theme I haven't explored fully yet."

"Good! Good!" Orison led him to the office door. "One last shove and it's over."

Morgan headed down the corridor to the lift, lost in thought and mumbling to himself.

Morgan added just one day to his weekend break, then he appeared at the studios with his briefcase. When he inverted it over Tina Sherell's desk, a tiny scrap of paper fluttered out. It had scarcely reached the polished plastic before Morgan was racing to his recording chamber, shouting for his dressers.

"He calls this a script?" said Frank da Silbre, turning his attention from his monitor board to a fragment of paper, which barely covered his palm.

Sherell replied with a grunt of confirmation. A comment and an answering grunt had become their normal mode of conversation of late.

"This scene is going to be about fighting spirit," read da Silbre. "Fighting spirit can be defined as a state of acute resentment that builds up at the end of a long campaign. Every blow struck by the enemy increases a desire for vengeance instead of making the soldier question his presence in the war zone. Wants to kill ten of them for every one of his own casualties. Where did he write this? On the way up here in the lift? And what does he mean by including a twist to demonstrate the ultimate absurdity of war at an individual level?"

Sherell replied with a shrug. "Just make sure you watch him like a hawk."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered da Silbre.

Hunted by a superior force, the star cruiser *Corona* had almost reached the limit of its endurance. The jump-craft's eleven crew members knew that it was about to fight its last battle. There would be no surrender. Every one of them was determined to sell his or her life as dearly as possible. The enemy would never forget the passing of the *Corona*.

And then, when all was ready for the final plunge into oblivion, the news arrived. A stunned communications officer handed a printed message flimsy to the captain. The electrifying gong of the action alert echoed into silence.

The captain's voice on the vessel's broadcast system filled an expectant vacuum.

Devreitei, he began slowly, *I have just been advised that agreement has been reached on the question of the Royce Corridor. We are ordered to cease hostilities immediately. Confirmation of the cease fire has been received from the enemy squadron.*

A stunned silence filled the j-craft as the crew digested their captain's announcement.

"That's the twist," laughed Frank da Silbre. He leaned back from his monitor board and stretched vigorously. "Want one?" He offered a silver cigarette case.

Tina Sherell refused with a quick shake of her head. She kept her eyes concentrated on her monitor board, but she did take a sip from the thermomug of tea, which had been steaming, neglected, by her side for over half an hour.

"All that for nothing," remarked da Silbre. "So that's what he meant by absurdity. The big wind-up followed by the big let-down."

“Hmm,” grunted Sherell.

As we're all aware, added the captain of the Corona, we are painfully short of fuel. And our former enemies may be difficult about further supplies. I, of course, will be staying with the craft. But the rest of you have my permission to take the shuttle. You'll be able to make our base in the Coriades System quite comfortably. You might as well take your overdue leave somewhere civilized as hang about here.

The tension of impending death dissolved into a form of confused relief, which contained elements of frustration. After taking his leave of each member of the crew of ten, the captain retired to the navigation area and seemed to lose himself in thought before the displays. He had reduced the enemy squadron from seven to five by superior tactics and extreme good luck. Now, they were grouped in a loose W formation in front of a distant gas cloud, which looked vaguely like a human figure standing with its arms raised in either surrender or supplication.

“There's the core image again,” commented Tina Sherell.

Frank da Silbre replied with a grunt of acknowledgement. He was already making plans to finish the session and run.

The captain of the *Corona* made a minute adjustment to the course information that the navigation officer had fed into the j-craft's brain before the news of peace.

Shuttle away, Captain, reported the first officer, monitoring the data change on her console. The apparently permanent folds of strain on her grey face had smoothed to faint lines.

I rather expected this, Adessa, said the captain.

We've been through everything two years of war could throw at us, you and I, and the Corona, Brent, smiled the first officer. *I think I've earned the right to see it through to a finish.*

Perhaps you have, conceded the captain. *Ektrak,* he added, almost in passing.

The jump sequence begins. A gallide and noble metal brain at

the heart of the *Corona* executes track computations necessary to bring the j-craft to the required remergence point after the jump, and stands by to tap a precise amount of power from the drive store. While doing so, it considers reports from sensors in all parts of the craft to confirm that the *Corona* is ready to jump.

Debraviget, says the captain, calling for routine confirmation of jump readiness.

Debravigal 'st. After another check of its sensors, the vessel's brain makes an affirmative reply, introducing a slight pause so that command and response do not run together. Then it waits for the final jump code.

Funny how they can bring a war to a full stop in seconds, muses the first officer.

They seem to think humans are machines, too, agrees the captain.

da Silbre drained his coffee mug and glanced across at Sherell. She was hunched over her monitor screen, intent on the scene tapped from Morgan's imagination. His seat whispered back on its gliders, bringing da Silbre within an easy stretch of the coffee pot.

You'd think they'd have realized we're not machines by now, smiles First Officer Lein. *And we're subject to inertia*.

Tina Sherell glanced to her left. Her eyes returned automatically to her screen, then her head twitched back leftwards to the gap where da Silbre should have been.

The most powerful force in the universe, inertia, agrees Captain Morgan with a grim smile.

"Frank!" screamed Sherell. "Get *back* here!"

At the same moment...

lanovext! says Captain Morgan through his broadening smile of triumph.

The *Corona's* brain verifies voice, code word and the state of readiness of the j-craft. Inaudible echoes of the command are still ringing round the control centre as the j-craft snaps away from one position and reemerges phantoseconds later and millions of kilometres distant, embracing almost completely the command craft of the enemy squadron.

Matter fights matter, resisting interpenetration, raising both craft to star-core temperatures.

For a minimal, vengeful, concluding fragment of time, the gas-cloud man on the wire seemed to wink.



17. *Siege Condition: Inside Job*
ALAN L. MARSHALL

It was just another Tuesday afternoon to Roger Hogan, a moderately successful writer, who had been on the edge of a break-through to greater things for at least two years. He was having a lurk in Dodbury's, which was the only shop in town that dealt in second-hand books.

At just past two-thirty on an overcast afternoon, there were two others in the shop a young girl called Tracy, who was Mr. Dodbury's niece, and a rather choleric sixty-year-old. His name was Prescott, Hogan knew, because of a recent strike at Prescott's haulage business and the publicity arising from the old man's bitter statements in the local newspapers.

Then the afternoon became something special. Three men in stocking masks burst into the bookshop. One of the raiders, a short, slight figure in a painter's overall, used a sawn-off shotgun to herd customers and shop assistant into a corner. Another, a hefty teenager in jeans and a red nylon anorak, cleared out the till.

The third raider had a more rewarding target in mind. He plucked a crowbar from his black leather jacket and levered open a locked display cabinet. A collection of respectable but not particularly rare first editions disappeared rapidly but gently into a small suitcase. Everything seemed to be going well for the raiders. Then a siren began to approach the shop.

"You said there was no alarm," yelled the man with the shotgun.

The siren drew nearer, then flared loudly. A man stood framed in the shop doorway for a moment, staring at the masked painter armed with a shotgun, struggling to believe that he was witnessing an armed robbery in a bookshop.

"You! Get in here!" yelled the man with the shotgun.

As the weapon began to turn toward him, the man leapt back into the street. The shop door sighed shut, cutting down

the siren again.

"Out the back," ordered the man with the suitcase in a calm, level voice.

The youngster at the till opened a door behind the counter and bolted through it.

"Come on, you too," ordered the man with the shotgun. Behind him, an ambulance charged past the shop, siren blaring.

The shop assistant and the two customers shuffled nervously to the door, hearts pounding from a mixture of fear and excitement, fear and uncertainty. They entered a black cavern, which

stacks of cardboard cartons had converted into a maze.

"I can't find the door," called the teenager. "It's too dark."

"Where's the light?" The deeper voice belonged to the man with the suitcase. "It must be near the door."

Neon brilliance flickered into life to flood the room with green-tinted white.

"Here's the door!" yelled the shrill voice of the youngster. "Oh, shit!"

"What?" said the man with the shotgun.

"One goes to the bog. The other one's locked," called the teenager from a square partitioned off in a rear corner of the store room. "There's no way out, Stanno."

"Key?" demanded the leader of the gang.

"My uncle's got it," squeaked Tracy Dodbury.

"Right, it's a blag job!" shouted the man with the shotgun. "We go out the front. Come one, Piker!"

He turned and rushed back into the shop. A uniformed figure was peering round the displays in the front window. The policeman ducked back out of sight the moment he spotted the shotgun.

Just to show that he meant business, Stanno loosed off one barrel at the window. Glass flew and crashed, leaving a ragged hole at the focus of a ray system of cracks.

A laugh bubbled in Stanno's throat. Then he saw the van. It moved across the pavement and parked, blocking the shop doorway. Stanno skidded to an indecisive halt. His two companions stopped behind him, watching a wall of darkness moving across the shop's punctured front window. The police had stopped a furniture van. They were trapped.

"We're stuck," shrilled Piker, the youngster.

"Back in here. Watch those three," ordered the man with the suitcase. "We've got to think."

The trio crowded back into the store room. Their leader kicked back at the door, but caught it when it rebounded, leaving it partially open so that he could listen for movement of the vehicular barricades.

"Bog," muttered Piker apologetically as he headed for the partitioned area.

The leader of the gang placed his suitcase carefully on a heap of cartons, then looked the prisoners over. Tracy Dodbury was about sixteen or seventeen, and looked as if she had only just left school. She was clearly terrified by the sight of the shotgun and prepared to do anything to co-operate with the raiders.

One of the customers looked vaguely familiar, the one whose half circle of pure white hair framed a freckled dome. A flushed face and a fierce scowl suggested that Arnold Prescott was more annoyed than frightened.

The third prisoner, Roger Hogan, was a man of about thirty. He was enjoying himself. The hand holding his cigarette trembled gently with excitement and his probing, blue eyes were absorbing every detail. He could be a real danger in the witness box.

"Is there a window in there, Piker?" asked Stanno into flushing noises behind the partition.

"About two inches square," moaned the youngster. "And there's pigs at the back. What do we do, Joe?"

"Hang loose," advised their leader.

Tension wound down from a peak to a plateau. The three prisoners stood silently in a corner, awaiting orders. None were forthcoming. The leather jacketed man called Joe seemed to have run out of inspiration.

After several uneventful minutes, Hogan drifted over to stand near Joe, who was scanning the titles in a box of remainders. Joe glanced at Hogan, saw that he was smoking, and breathed an envious sigh.

"Couldn't half do with a fag," he muttered, trying to drown his normal delivery in a good Lancashire accent.

"Bit tricky, smoking with half a pair of tights over your head," remarked Hogan. "Must be a bit hot in there, too. You could always make a hole for your mouth."

"Never thought of that," admitted Joe. "Lend us your fag."

Hogan passed it to him. Joe blew ash away from the glowing tip, then pulled the nylon mesh away from his face. Squinting down awkwardly, he melted a neat hole. Joe returned the cigarette and took a packet from the breast pocket of his leather jacket.

"Bloody hell! That's better," he sighed, blowing out a streamer of smoke.

"Just as a matter of interest," said Hogan, turning over books in the carton of assorted remainders, "how long are you going to keep us stuck here before you pack it in?"

"Pack it in?" scoffed Joe. "You've got to be joking, squire. We've got everything on our side. Three hostages. The pigs can't do nothing."

"You look quite an intelligent bloke behind that comical mask," said Hogan. "You can't think hostages are going to do you any good. Every siege like this has ended the same way. The bag guys either give up, or they're made to give up when the good guys dash in mob-handed with stuff like tear gas and concussive grenades."

"I don't think he's ready to give up quietly." Joe nodded at Stanno, who was perched on a carton of books, cradling

his shotgun and keeping an eye on the shop assistant. "Not yet a while, anyway."

"I see what you mean," nodded Hogan. "Leadership is effective only if the Other Ranks want to be led. But look what you've got for hostages. Look at the old bloke, Old Prescott. Pushing sixty-five. And he didn't get that nose drinking tea. And look at his face. His normal expression is a scowl."

"So what?" shrugged Joe.

"So he's a prime candidate for a coronary, that's what. Hard drinker, always steamed up about something. I bet his blood pressure's sky high. He's still a bit scared at the moment. But he's going to get over that. And then he's going to start boiling."

"So what again?"

"So what are you going to do if he has a heart attack? Fancy giving him the kiss of life?"

"I'd rather give it to the chick." Joe put on a twisted grin behind his mask.

"Yes, I bet that's what she's thinking. Your mate with the shotgun keeps staring at her. And so does the kid. She's probably working herself into a panic, expecting a gang-bang."

"Nothing like a spot of wishful thinking," grinned Joe.

"It may be wishful thinking from where you're standing, but what's going on in her head is what you have to worry about. She could get so worked up that the slightest, most innocent move towards her could slip her into a state of hysteria. Then she's liable to defend herself."

"She couldn't put up much of a fight," said Joe dismissively.

"Don't be too sure of that. You've seen the *Incredible Hulk* on TV? Okay, it's comic stuff, but like a lot of things, it's based on a grain of truth. People in a state of hysteria can draw on physical powers not normally available to them.

You've heard of the Berserkers, of course?"

"Mad Norsemen."

"They're a prime example. Killing machines who could go on fighting after receiving wounds that would have finished off a normal person. Now, I'm not saying you could compare the girl to a great, hairy Norseman with a battle axe. But if she does go off the edge, it could take some stopping her. And suppose she hurts your mate with the gun? He looks the type to retaliate without a second thought. He could, quite easily, hit her a bit too hard."

"There's lots *ifs* and *buts* in there, pal."

"True, but in our present, highly artificial situation, you've got to admit there's a high probability of the old bloke or the girl going off pop."

"We're back to *so what* again."

"So you're facing, say, five years for armed robbery at the moment. If you behave yourself, you could be out in three years' time. But if one of your hostages croaks, for any reason at all, you're looking at life. And I don't mean nine years, I mean twenty-five as your minimum. How old are you now? Middle thirties?"

Joe nodded thoughtfully.

"You'll be pushing sixty when they let you out. You'll be like Old Prescott. All those years life wasted. And nothing to look forward to at the end of it. Too old and too broke to do any catching up. Your future would be five years on Social Security, then an old age pension."

"Pretty depressing, eh?" remarked Joe.

"But somewhat avoidable if you explain the score to your mates and get them to pack it in," suggested Hogan.

"No chance of that." Joe broke into a grin behind his mask. "Even if there's no hope of getting out of here, we've got to give them a run for their money. If the worst comes to the worst, we could always sell our story to the papers to make enough for a decent defence."

"What you're trying to tell me is that we're stuck here at least for the rest of the day? And perhaps longer? Until you work out some brilliant and original gimmick that's going to let you get away with it? Or you've drummed up enough public interest?"

"That's about the size of it," nodded Joe.

"In that case, I hope you manage to trade the girl and the old bloke for some food. Otherwise, I might try to walk out that door." Hogan nodded across the room to the door to the shop.

"We'll see. Not hungry, are you?"

"Not yet. But I could do with a brew."

Joe followed the direction of Hogan's glance to a small table beside the sink. It offered an electric kettle and a large tin of Nescafé, and a carton of milk projected out from behind the tin of instant coffee.

"The girl can do that," Joe said. "It should take her mind off gang bangs and wrecking the place."

"For the moment. Have you read this? I think I've read some of his others." Hogan turned the spine of a jacketless hardback toward the masked man.

"It's not bad. Holds your attention right through. But the ending's a bit silly."

"Let's hope we're not here long enough for me to get that far." Hogan took the book over to the carton that he had selected as his personal chair for the siege, sat down, and began to read with apparently total concentration.

Over coffee, the raiders held a whispered conference in a corner of the store room. Their voices rose rapidly to audibility as Stanno disagreed with Joe's suggestion that they face the inevitable and give up a bad job.

"We're getting out of here," Stanno decided, his shotgun clutched tightly to his chest as a symbol of authority to rule.

"Any ideas on how?" said Joe patiently.

"I saw a film once," remarked Hogan, almost at random. "The two men strapped a shotgun to the hostage's chest with the muzzle tight up against his chin. Then they tied some weights..."

"Who asked you?" sneered Stanno. "Button it."

"They tied weights to the trigger and walked out carrying them," continued Hogan stubbornly.

"What are you getting at?" frowned Joe.

"Hoi!" protested the red-faced Arnold Prescott, who had been simmering in silence, torn between indignation and fear. "Whose side are you on?"

Hogan ignored him and looked at Joe. "The idea was, if the police shot either of them, he'd drop his weight and the hostage would get his face blown off."

"I'm making a mental note of every word you say," puffed Prescott importantly. "I'll report you to the police as an accessory if you help them. You'll share a cell with them."

"You!" said Stanno violently. "Button your lip." He sighted along the short barrel of the shotgun at Prescott's ruddy face.

"That's very interesting," said Joe. "And did they get away with it?"

"For a while, yes," said Hogan. "But you can't let the bad guys get away with it in a film."

"You'd have to tie his hands behind his back," offered Piker. "Stop him grabbing the ropes."

"Thanks!" said Joe in wasted sarcasm. "Pity we've only got one shotgun."

"You could use them as messengers," Hogan turned a thumb toward the other hostages. "You need someone to warn the police what you're planning."

"We could, yes," said Joe.

"I like it," said Stanno. "The pigs won't dare do nothing. Hang about, though. It's your idea. What's in it for you?"

"It gets me out of here," said Hogan. "I don't fancy the

idea of three or four days stuck in here with you lot."

"I'll buy that," said Stanno. "But how do you know we won't drop one of these weights of yours? Just for fun, like." He managed a smug leer behind his stocking mask.

"A dead hostage is no hostage at all," said Hogan patiently. "You need me alive as long as you're in range of the police marksmen. And you daren't dump me other than alive and in good health."

"Why not?" demanded Stanno.

"Use your loaf," sighed Joe. "If we get away now, all the fuzz have got on us is a two-bob robbery and a dent in their pride. But if they're looking for a bunch of murderers..."

"They might go a bit," said Piker.

"Okay, you two, on yer bikes," said Stanno, making a decision for the group. "Tell the pigs that we'll be out in ten minutes. We want an unmarked car with a full tank. And if it's not there, we start walking. And tell 'em my arms get tired pretty bloody quick if I'm carrying something heavy."

"We can't just go out there," protested Prescott. "The place will be surrounded by armed police. They might shoot us."

"Tough!" sneered Stanno.

"They can't shoot without orders," said Hogan. "Or without giving a challenge. And by the time they've done that, they'll have seen who you are."

"Right," agreed Joe. He opened wider the door from the store room to the shop. "On your way. Tell the fuzz about the shotgun and the car. Ten minutes. Then we come out."

His colour managed to rise another notch, but under the threat of Stanno's shotgun, Prescott edged slowly and nervously through the doorway into the shop, hands raised to shoulder level. The shop assistant followed him, taking care to remain shielded by Prescott's generous figure. The police had moved the van away from the street door. A bell jangled when it opened.

"Off they go, quaking in their boots," laughed Joe. "Off to

get us a ticket out of here."

"I shouldn't think they'll need to say much," said Hogan. "The police will have set up the usual listening devices by now. They'll have heard every word of the plan."

"So they'll get the message straight," grinned Stanno.

"For what it's worth," nodded Hogan. "Now, here's the bad news. You're all under arrest."

"You're a copper?" gasped Piker.

"Not exactly," said Hogan. "C.I.D. Customs Investigation Department. But I have the same powers of arrest."

"Show us your warrant card," demanded Stanno.

"We have special dispensation not to carry one," said Hogan. "The nature of the job makes it unwise to carry official identity cards."

"So he's a pig," said Stanno. "Nothing's changed."

"Apart from everything," countered Hogan. "You no longer have a civilian hostage. There won't be any deal."

"That's true," said Joe absently.

"Crap!" snarled Stanno. "Let's beat him up a bit and find out if he's for real."

"That's not a very good idea," said Hogan quickly. "Remember, the place is bugged."

"So what?" sneered Stanno.

"As your mate said," Hogan pointed out, "this is only a two-bob robbery at the moment. But if you start beating me up, it becomes robbery with violence. That's going to add years to your sentence, especially if it's all documented on tape. Right, Joe?"

"Hmmm!" grunted Joe thoughtfully.

"The thing to do now is think of yourselves," continued Hogan. "You've had a bit of bad luck and the job's gone sour on you. The sensible thing to do is make a minimum of trouble and collect a minimum sentence."

"I'm still for beating him up," snarled Stanno.

"Five minutes' fun for you equals five more years inside

for you and your mates," Hogan told him. "With the whole prison laughing at you for being stupid enough to clobber me with half the local police force listening in. Look, if you give up now, I'll put in a good word for you. Keep messing everyone about and you'll only end up doing more time. Think about it."

"Is this right, Joe," said Piker.

"More or less," admitted Joe.

"I could just smash your bloody face in, pig," Stanno told Hogan fiercely.

"You could just come out of prison in time to collect your old age pension if you smash a bit too hard," Hogan reminded him. "Look, no one's going to say your bottle's gone if you think with your brains instead of your shotgun." He leaned against a stack of cartons and slouched in order not to tower over the slightly built Stanno. "Where's the sense in making more trouble for yourself?"

"All right." Joe voted for surrender. "We jack it in. What do we do now?"

"Jack it in?" repeated Stanno indignantly.

"You can hang on here," Joe told him. "But he's right." He nodded at Hogan. "We've run out of luck. Let's make the best we can of it."

Stanno thrust a cigarette into the hole in his stocking mask and brought a match up to it. He drew on the cigarette several times, his squashed features contracted into a frown behind the mask. Then he pulled it off, leaving greasy hair in ragged spikes.

"Bugger it!" he said shortly.

"Leave the shotgun on those boxes," said Hogan.

"I'm gonna finish me fag first," said Stanno rebelliously.

"Ten minutes more won't hurt," shrugged Hogan.

"Bog," said Piker apologetically, heading for the partitioned-off corner of the store room.

"Your crash, mate," said Joe. "I'd better save these."

Hogan passed him a cigarette, then lit one for himself. He was feeling surprisingly calm and in control. He had been expecting an attack of the shakes now that matters had been resolved in his favour, now that he had won in a difficult and dangerous encounter.

Perhaps the shakes would come later. Perhaps he would be spared the embarrassment of going to pieces in front of witnesses.

"I'll say this for you, Mr. Hogan," said Detective Inspector Poole when Hogan had completed his witness statement, "you've got plenty of imagination."

"A writer needs a good imagination," grinned Hogan. He drained his whisky glass. "I needed that."

"But you took a bit of a risk," continued Poole, topping up the glasses again. They had retired to his office while waiting for the statement to be typed out for Hogan's signature. "Suggesting that trick with the shotgun."

"Not really. That bloke Joe's got plenty of imagination, too. I couldn't see him letting the others do anything stupid."

"But where did you get the idea to tell them you were from the Customs Investigation?"

"I'm working on a TV series about the C.I.D. With any luck, it'll do for the Customs what things like *Softly Cars* and *The Sweeney* did for the police."

"In what sense?" said the D.I., holding a neutral expression.

"The positive aspects, of course," said Hogan innocently. "Proving that even Customs officials are human. Without getting too sickening about their private lives, of course."

"But even so," Poole returned to his point, "you were taking a hell of a risk."

"As I told them, I didn't want to be stuck in there for several days."

"You chose a dangerous way of doing it."

"Well, to tell you the truth," said Hogan, rather uncomfortably, "I wanted to be out today. There's a serial on TV tonight and I didn't want to miss the last episode."

"You risked your life just to see a TV programme," said the inspector incredulously.

"Well, not just for that." Hogan paused to collect his thoughts. "It was more of a game in the end. Those blokes were screwing my life up. I suppose I was a bit annoyed about it. So I did something to screw theirs up. But that's strictly between the two of us, okay?"

"I've heard dafter motives for serious crimes," admitted Poole. "You'd make a good con-man, Mr. Hogan."

"That's what a writer is, really," said Hogan with a shrug. "Someone who puts a story in front of a reader and tells him or her something that *could* happen. That bloke Joe reads a lot, you know. He was the perfect mark for a literary con-man."

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Produced by HTSP Editorial Division, 10 SK6 4EG, GB.

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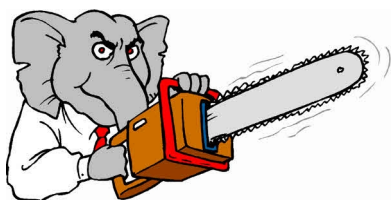
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