

**ATLANTIS BY
MOONLIGHT
& OTHER
SHORT STORIES
VOLUME 2
1980**

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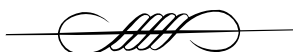
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This Edition published in 2017 as part of a collection created by Farrago & Farrago and featuring the work of members of Romiley Literary Circle

Cover by HTSP Graphics Division
Design & typesetting by HTSP Editorial Division,
10 SK6 4EG, Romiley, G.B. for Farrago & Farrago
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18. Something In The Blood...

01. Murder In The Park

A policeman approaching the end of his shift on a warm summer morning found the first victim in Hyde Park. Her age was nineteen. She was a typical London girl – one of the constant drift to the bright lights, who had come up from the West Country in search of a more interesting life and romance, and had settled instead for a job on the soft toy counter of a large department store. She had shared a modest flat in Wandsworth with two other London girls, one from Leeds, the other from Glasgow.

When the police constable found Julie Lyndon, she was lying on her back and partially screened from the tarmac path by a large oak tree. The expression of utter terror on her ashen face burned itself deeply in to the young PC's mind. He had never seen anything like it in his three years of pounding a beat.

His alarm by radio brought more of his uniformed colleagues and a swarm of detectives to the park. Blue canvas screens and a tent rose to hide the site of the murder from the eyes of early morning strollers and joggers. Routine was firmly in charge by the time one of the detectives made his first entries in a new incident log.

The girl was fully clothed apart from her left shoe, which was found a few yards from the body. Her handbag was still looped over her left arm, and the contents seemed intact. Her purse contained almost £20 in notes and coins.

These findings seemed to eliminate rape and robbery as motives for the attack. Smears of blood and what seemed to be bite marks on the victim's neck gave some of the detectives ideas, but none felt inclined to attract the ridicule that drawing the obvious conclusion would bring.

A photographer captured the position of the body and its surroundings. Ranks of uniformed policemen and women swept the tree-studded grass, radiating out in all directions from the fence of canvas screens. They discovered a fair number of interesting items but nothing of any real value to the case under investigation.

Those on the circulation list of the post mortem report found it interesting reading. It gave the cause of death as the all-purpose heart failure as a result of shock and loss of blood. The pathologist had added a list of observations under the *special remarks* heading, but he had declined to comment on them.

He had determined the dead girl's blood type as O rhesus positive. There were two punctures in her left external carotid artery, and a ring of impressions in the skin of her neck consistent with the bite of an adult human. What had appeared to be fresh blood in the region of the main punctures was, in fact, a mixture of the victim's blood and human saliva.

A blood typing based on the saliva gave the killer's blood group as type A rhesus positive – information that was of limited help in tracking him down but which would contribute to gaining a conviction when he was caught. There was also an anti-coagulant present in the saliva, which had kept the blood quite liquid even though Julie Lyndon had been dead for three to five hours before her discovery.

The dead girl had lost between one point five and two litres of blood; the equivalent of three to four donations at a

blood bank. The amount of blood found on her body and clothing, and on the ground beside her, did not account for the quantity lost.

Dirt found beneath the dead girl's fingernails matched samples taken from the place there she was found. Deep trenches in the soft earth indicated that she had clawed the ground in her death agony, and that the body had not been moved after the murder.

Everything pointed to Julie Lyndon having been the victim of a vampire, but no one dared to say so.

A jogger found another body in Green Park three mornings later. Plucking up courage on a slow news day, the papers screamed loudly about a *Carbon Copy Vampire Killing* shock horror. Someone had leaked both post mortem reports in exchange for an appropriate fee. As usual, most sensible people laughed at what the papers had to say and the pronouncements of their tame experts, and assumed that there was a homicidal maniac loose in London's parks.

Visits to those parks during the hours of darkness dropped off sharply. But if the ranks of civilian courting couples declined, then their numbers were more than made up by police decoy squads. Three days after the second murder, one such squad found itself with more on its collective hands than it had expected.

02. *Decoy Squad*

At two o'clock on a warm but overcast Wednesday early morning, a policewoman on decoy duty in civilian clothing was strolling across Regent's Park. Although sturdily built and a second dan black belt at karate, she was glad of the close attendance of a back-up squad.

Three brawny colleagues and a slightly-built detective sergeant were lurking at the bandstand, watching her through night glasses and keeping in constant and reassuring touch over their police radios.

Detective Sergeant Montory was armed with a regulation .38 revolver in case the squad ran in to a gang of three teenage thugs. Two of them were known to be armed with .22 target pistols and they had proved that they were not afraid to show off their weapons if their victims objected to being robbed.

The policewoman was walking slowly towards her colleagues, heading in a roughly north-easterly direction. About fifty yards from the bandstand, the earpiece buried in her thick, dark hair clicked softly and a male voice whispered, "Stand by, Sarah. We have another possible."

WPC Sarah Audley tried to control a surge of nervous excitement. Her heart began to pound in an annoying fashion, preparing her body for action. She seemed to be covering the ground in uncoordinated, almost lunar hops. Yet the more she concentrated on trying to walk normally, the less controlled her gait seemed to become. She kept telling herself that she was lurching along like a badly operated robot, and that this was just another false alarm – their fifth.

"He's approaching from behind you, across the grass," warned Detective Sergeant Montory. "Forty yards away now. About seven o'clock to you."

Giving the suspect every chance, WPC Audley paused to light a cigarette. She was just over forty yards from the bandstand. The man seemed completely uninterested in her. He was approaching the tarmac path almost at right angles and he would pass behind her if he maintained his course.

Blowing smoke carelessly in to the warm night air, WPC

Audley continued her slow progress along the path.

"He's on the path, coming up behind you," warned DS Montory. "Twenty yards away now. He's... Look out!" Montory finished in a scream.

The man on the path spread his arms. His light raincoat billowed out like a pair of wings. At impossible speed, he raced for the policewoman. She scarcely had time to turn before he was on her, bellowing a petrifying roar. Allowing her training to take control, WPC Audley fell onto her back, dug both feet in to his belly and heaved.

Her attacker's bellows ended in a whoosh of explosively expelled breath. He lofted in to the air, then hit the ground with a solid thud – with enough force to knock the wind out of an ox. Moments later, three large policemen landed heavily on top of him.

A muffled scream of rage and frustration escaped from the mound of human flesh. Then PC Paul Jamieson, fourteen stones of hard toughness, flew ten yards. After landing solidly on damp grass, he stayed down. Thirty stones in the form of PCs Colin Brenell and Richard Oliver attempted to bring the prisoner's arms close enough together to allow them to complete a hand-cuffing operation. The man threw them aside like plastic inflatables.

"Halt!" bellowed Detective Sergeant Montory. "I'm a police officer. I'm armed. Stop!" The warning rose to a reedy shriek.

As if accepting a challenge, the man spread his arms and rushed towards the gun. Madness shone in his wide, staring eyes, which failed to react to the direct beam of Montory's torch. Large, white teeth flashed in his gaping mouth. He was beyond threats and warnings.

The first bullet hit him in the centre of his chest at a range of twenty yards and had no apparent effect. The second

round caught his right arm, turning him slightly. The man continued to run, his face dark and congested. A hissing snarl burst from his huge mouth. Montory squeezed the trigger again and again, and continued to do so even when the weapon was empty.

Each bullet knocked the man backward a fraction more, until his legs were leading his body. Then he fell. But his momentum carried him on in to a sliding tackle. Montory fell onto a warm, wet body. He rolled off at once with a shriek of terror. Game for anything, PC Brenell picked himself up and dashed to Montory's assistance. But it was all over. The man was dead.

"Jamieson's out cold and I think Richie Oliver's got a broken arm, Sarge," reported WPC Audley in a ragged, out-of-breath pant. "God! Look at you!" Her torch showed a huge, glistening patch in the centre of DS Montory's dark tee-shirt.

"It's all his, fortunately." DS Montory slipped out of his anorak, then peeled the tee-shirt off cautiously. "How are you, Sarah?"

"I'm fine, Sarge," she assured him in an unconvinced tone.

"Whistle up an ambulance, then. How about you, Brenell?"

"Phuck a duck!" gasped PC Brenell, who was bending over the body. "Come and get a load of this!"

A siren began to wail toward them, drawn by the sound of many shots. Montory folded his tee-shirt so that the blood was on the inside. Then he joined Brenell, who was big and fairly slow but also dependable and almost completely imperturbable.

"Look at those phuckin' 'ampsteads, Sarge!" Brenell shone his torch onto the dead man's face.

The mouth was open to its full extent, the lips drawn right

back to thin ribbons, revealing a reasonably complete set of teeth. To his horror, Montory noted that the canine teeth projected a good quarter of an inch beyond the rest of the upper set,

"They can't be real," grasped WPC Audley, clutching Montory's arm in an absent but crushing grip.

Brenell bent over and tugged at one of the jutting canine teeth. "No, they're real enough. He must be the vampire killer for sure."

"They must be stuck on or something," mumbled Montory. "There's no such thing as vampires," he added, as if to reassure himself.

"You can't shoot a vampire." PC Oliver tucked his right arm in to his belt for support. "It's a stake through the heart job."

"How's your arm?" said WPC Audley.

"Feels a bit numb," Oliver replied. "Okay if I don't try and move it,"

"Should be an ambulance here any minute," said Montory. "Sarah, have a look at Jamieson. And everyone; no talking about what happened. The bosses will want a full statement from each of us. And I want them to be only what each of us saw and heard."

"Worried about putting six holes in a member of the public, Sarge?" grinned Oliver, discovering that lighting a cigarette one-handed is a remarkably easy task.

"You have to sign your life away before they'll issue you with a firearm," said Montory morosely, finding that he was still clenching the empty weapon. He stuffed it in to a shoulder holster. "And there's hell to pay if you even fire it, never mind *at* someone. I'm going to be very deeply in the shit if there's any suggestion that we cooked up some sort of a story to cover up a bollock dropped by me."

"If he could chuck us round like feathers, you didn't have much of a chance, Serge," rumbled Brenell. "And with them teeth, he's got to be a vampire."

"That's what I'm hoping our bosses are going to believe," said Montory. "But the trouble is, I'm not sure I'd believe it myself."

03. The Once-Living Legend

The dead man was identified as one Martin Andrew Shawcross, aged 23, an employee of one of the large clearing banks. He had lived alone in a small basement flat in an unfashionable suburb. Inquiries revealed that he had led a modest life but it had been as full as his far from generous salary allowed.

The last person to see him before the fatal ambush in Regent's Park turned out to have been his doctor, who had been treating him for what had seemed to be a moderately severe attack of influenza. Shawcross had reached a convalescent state.

His doctor and a colleague from the bank had visited him four days before his death. Both could state quite definitely that there had been nothing abnormal about his dental development the previous Saturday. Although his temperature had dropped from 102° to stabilize at just over 100°, Shawcross had been well on the road to recovery and he had been expecting to be told that he was fit for work when he kept an appointment with his doctor at the end of the week.

Detective Sergeant Montory and his decoy squad received a thorough grilling from their superiors, especially then it was discovered that Martin Andrew Shawcross's blood type was AB rhesus positive and that his bite did not match the

marks found on the necks of the vampire victims. But the police officers' accounts of the incident tallied in all important respects, even though they varied slightly as far as minor details were concerned. And the incontrovertible evidence of Shawcross's teeth proved that they had indeed trapped a vampire.

PC Oliver's broken arm, and the fact that PC Jamieson spent two days in hospital recovering from a mild concussion, told of a violent struggle. The tracks of the bullet's through Shawcross's body were consistent with DS Montory's account of a man rushing toward him but being forced to a stand-still by the hydrostatic shocks of repeated bullet impacts.

Shawcross had a powerful physique; he attended weight training sessions twice a week in order to keep fit between rugby seasons; but he was no Superman. How he had managed to throw three heavy and strong policemen around like straw dolls remained a mystery for the moment.

A quartet of pathologists worked on the body of Martin Shawcross for three days, during which time his upper canine teeth grew a further three point two millimetres. Doctor Oliver Thirvill and his colleagues discovered that a group of Shawcross's salivary glands now produced the anti-coagulant discovered in the blood of the two victims of what the newspapers had called the 'Vampire Killer'.

Shawcross had fangs, a means of keeping blood liquid and he seemed to have had the enormous strength of the creature of legend. But his blood type and his bite did not match those of the killer, who had already claimed two victims. The 'Park Fiend' was still at large.

Unreasonably, and quite against the evidence, many people chose to believe that they had heard the last of the maniac who was haunting central London. A week passed,

and there were no new vampire killings. Three or four nine double nine calls were investigated each evening, but each was found to be a false alarm given by someone of a nervous disposition or a sensation seeker.

Then a young housewife dashed in to a police station in SW12 in hysterics and fainted beside the reception counter. When revived, she told an audience of a policewoman, the desk sergeant and a nosy DC from the upper floor that a man had tried to attack her as she had been passing a nearby strike-bound building site.

As the time was three o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, the desk Sergeant's first action was to check her breath for a smell of drink. The woman did not appear to have taken alcohol recently. She was able to give a vague description of a tall, dark man of about forty with staring eyes and enormous teeth. Two patrol cars were despatched to the building site.

The four constables were unable to find anyone who answered to the description of the assailant either in the picket line or on the two acre site. They did, however, find that someone had been living in the ground floor of an almost-completed shop. And a four-day-old corpse in a hollow beneath a stack of hoarding panels.

'Real Vampire Killer Claims Third Victim', screamed the headlines. As the man found on the building site could not have been killed by Martin Shawcross, certain enemies of the police were hinting that Shawcross had been the victim of trigger-happy incompetents out to close a case at any price.

They were careful not to spell anything out, in order to steer a course around the libel laws, but there was a clear implication that the country would be a far better place if every member of the police force resigned at once and stopped making life a misery for innocent citizens.

04. *Horror At The Museum*

Horror At The Museum, shrieked the headlines of the evening papers the following day. The new Cromwell Museum on Wyndham Place, W1, found itself on the receiving end of an embarrassing amount of free publicity a fortnight after its grand opening.

To the frustration of a blood-thirsty public, there was very little left to see when they were allowed in to the building again. Neither of the principals of the morning's encounter was able to perform for the press. Most of the eye witnesses turned out to be blind, very imaginative but inconsistent, suffering from hysterical amnesia or just shy. One of them, however, turned out to be a star performer.

Horace J. Bronowsky III was an American in search of his roots. On the Thursday morning in question, he had packed his wife off on a tour of the shops, taken the Tube to Marble Arch because he liked to travel on the rather quaint British subway, and then he had walked about half a mile in a roughly northerly direction.

Reaching the Cromwell Museum, he had surrendered one of the quaintly different, seven-sided *half-pound pieces*, as his wife called them, and begun to browse.

According to a very expensive San Franciscan genealogist, an English branch of the Bronowsky family could be traced back to a bastard son of Richard, son of the dictator Oliver. It was with a sense of almost propriety that Horry Bronowsky The Third, a round, greying, mining engineer who had been too young for World War Two, in South America during the Korean Police Action and too old for Viet Nam, inspected weapons of war that formed part of his three-hundred-year-old heritage.

Arthur Dolan was not impressed by the history that

surrounded him. He had acquired his job as a museum attendant more on the strength of fourteen stones of muscle spread over a frame six feet two inches tall than on a bare pass in history at O-Level. His job was to provide the punters with a necessary minimum of information about the layout of the museum, and to ensure that they kept their grubby germans off the exhibits.

He had had his eye on one bloke for over twenty minutes. The man in question was tall, skinny and in need of a shave, but quite decently dressed. There was a sort of blank look in his dark eyes, as if he were about three-parts drunk, but there was no smell of booze around him and he wasn't staggering.

In a flash of perception, Dolan decided that the man who looked as though he couldn't quite understand what was happening around him was behaving like someone in a strange country. He couldn't cope properly with the language or the peculiar customs of the natives because he was as foreign as he looked. His drawn features retained the characteristic bluntness of an Eastern European. The man had to be a spy.

Arthur Dolan realised that all the little signs were there. The weird bloke was probably called Ivanof, and his contact was late. Ivanof's nerves were starting to jangle. He was trying to hide his increasing restlessness behind a blank mask in order to evade the attention of observant people – such as museum attendant Arthur Dolan.

And then the man's patience seemed to snap. The steady flow of punters through an exhibition of Cromwellian arms and armour had been dammed for the moment. Ivanof cast around the large, square room for another human presence. Then his gaze found Arthur Dolan, who struggled to contain a grin,

The foreigner's eyes seemed to double in size. His mouth stretched wide open to reveal long, white, canine teeth and blackish fillings. According to Horace J. Bronowsky III, who was studying manuscripts on the wall of a gallery that ran round three sides of the arms and armour exhibition room, the man's hands, clawed, rose upwards and outwards to shoulder level. He looked like a mad-as-hell grizzly bear, according to Bronowsky. Then the dark foreigner seemed to fly twenty feet. He landed on Art Dolan like a sack of coal. The pair of them crashed back against a display cabinet.

Dolan could remember nothing from the moment Ivanof landed on him until the leg of the display cabinet gave way, throwing both of them onto the floor. Then a terror-filled grey fog blew away abruptly. Dolan reacted vigorously to a threat to his life.

It was the penetrating sound of breaking glass that attracted other witnesses to the scene. Horace Bronowsky was running down broad, flat stairs to come to Dolan's aid during the first part of the attack and he had not seen his assailant draining blood from Dolan's neck. Bronowsky arrived at the door of the arms and armour room just after the two men had landed heavily on the floor.

Both men seemed stunned for a moment. Both struggled to their knees. And then the museum guard, his longish blonde hair tangled across his pale face, blood shining redly on the white throat exposed by the ripped-open collar of his dark blue shirt, grabbed a short sword from the floor and plunged it in to his attacker's belly with a two-handed shovelling motion.

His arms drew back like pistons. The gleaming blade shot forward again, and again, and again. By the time the spectators forced themselves in to motion, the guard and his attacker had collapsed in to the growing thick, red pool on

the glazed concrete floor.

Someone dashed out of the museum and flagged down a passing police car. By the time a measure of order had been re-established, every witness had seen the stabbed man's teeth and the punctures on the museum attendant's throat and knew that he or she had seen the Vampire Killer in action.

Many of the witnesses refused to believe that a genuine vampire with long fangs and a thirst for blood could have been done to death like a normal person by stabbing with a metal sword. The death implement became a wooden stake, a wooden sword, or a broom handle, which had snapped off to form a convenient stabbing weapon. Reality could be compromised automatically to preserve a legend.

Policemen accepted such invention their usual grave attention when they took down statements. When the time came for him to give his statement, Horace J. Bronowsky had already performed for the newspapers and he was able to give his account fluently and clearly. The only interruptions came when the detective constable, who was taking it all down, had trouble with Bronowsky's rather strangled, Georgia accent.

05. End Of An Episode

Arthur Dolan slipped in to a coma during the half mile ambulance journey to a nearby hospital. His temperature began to rise. He mumbled and rambled through a moderate fever for two days. Then he seemed to recover.

The dead man was identified as Jan Miklós Horvath, a recent arrival from Romania. Very little could be learned about him. Close inspection of his papers showed that they were above average forgeries. As he seemed to be a defector,

and he was conveniently dead, the Romanian authorities denied all knowledge of him.

Dr. Thirvill's team, which had examined the body of the other alleged vampire, Martin Shawcross, carried out the post mortem. As before, they found salivary glands that produced anti-coagulant, and that Horvath's upper canine teeth continued to grow after his death. Coincidentally, they stopped growing on the day Arthur Dolan recovered from his fever, having gained a further four millimetres in length.

Horvath's blood type was A rhesus positive and it matched the finer details of the samples taken from all three victims of vampire killings. The fact that his bite matched exactly the impressions in the victims' necks took a load off the minds of the police officers handling the cases.

A lack of further vampire murders and the desiccating effects of science killed public interest in the affair, as mirrored by the news services. Apart from maintaining a temperature of just over 100°, Arthur Dolan seemed unaffected by his encounter with a vampire. His doctors were puzzled by the fact that the punctures in his neck had healed completely within 36 hours, but they could do no more than record the information in Dolan's case notes.

Dolan made a brief and vague statement to the police. He had no memory of the events in the museum. A reporter, who sneaked in to the hospital disguised in a borrowed white coat, received very little for her pains. The saga of the London vampires died of starvation.

06. The Bit Becomes A Biter

It was Sunday, the day after Arthur Dolan's return to his senses. A long night had reached its lowest ebb with the start of the fourth hour of the morning. The whole city seemed to

have come to a dead stop. Colin Hopcroft, a roving hospital porter, who was returning to his station after a reviving cup of coffee, caught a glimpse of a wandering, pyjama-clad figure. He paused to watch. The man entered an open door, which was slammed shut violently. A muffled scream and a crash of falling glass followed.

Hopcroft broke in to a run. When he wrenched open the door of the nurses' rest room, he saw a student nurse and a patient struggling across a small table. Feeling quite heroic, he grabbed the man round the waist and heaved. When a flailing arm smashed him back in to the door, Hopcroft realised that he had made a mistake.

The smear of blood on the student nurse's neck began to look like a gallon. The man in the green-striped pyjamas towered a good six inches over the slightly-built porter. With his flushed, swollen face, blood-stained mouth, and staring, pop-eyes, he looked like a vision of imminent death.

Just when Hopcroft was on the point of giving himself up to an untimely death, the student proved that she had plenty of fighting spirit left. Carol Shaw, a nineteen year old Yorkshire lass, crashed a large, brown teapot against the back of her attacker's head. Blood began to mat his blonde hair. He spun round to stare at her with burning, black eyes. Then, without warning, he leapt at the window.

The window was open about a foot as a search for cool air on a hot night. Under the force of the impact, the bar leapt from its securing peg. A vertical pane stopped abruptly against brickwork, sending glass showering downwards. There was a hollow, metallic impact amid the glass shatters, then the silence of normal Sunday night-sounds.

Colin Hopcroft stared at the student nurse for a moment. Then his eyes rolled up and he hit the floor long after he had lost consciousness. The night sister and a doctor, who had

come to investigate the commotion, had to open the door of the rest room against the resistance of Hopcroft's limp body. They found the student nurse hanging out of the window, staring in to the diffuse grey and sodium morning.

Someone called the police. Arthur Dolan, the victim of the vampire killer's final assault, was missing. Nurse Shaw's throat showed tooth imprints and two scratches, which could have been caused, as she insisted, by unusually long canine teeth.

Most of the modest quantity of blood on her throat and uniform belonged to her attacker. Nurse Shaw was quite proud of the fact that she had managed to but him in the face when he threw her onto the table. He had managed to bite her neck only because she had been expecting a rape attempt. She left the interviewing police officers with a strong impression of a tough and capable young lady, who was well able to take care of herself.

A car below the first-floor window of the nurses' rest room and self-catering canteen sported a large dent in its roof. Broken glass and spots of blood were sprinkled liberally on the car and the tarmac around it.

If the police imagined that it would be an easy task to pick up a man roaming Paddington dressed only in a pair of dark green on white striped pyjamas, they were soon to be disillusioned. Despite thousands of hours of Sunday overtime, Arthur Dolan was not seen again until he chose to show himself.

07. Stilson-Struck

Arthur Dolan appeared again an hour after sunset on a hot and sticky Monday at Paddington goods yard, just over a quarter of a mile from the hospital. Stan Miller had no idea

that he was about to become a celebrity for a day. His thoughts drifted between his summer holiday in Brighton, which would begin at the weekend, the three pints of beer that he would consume between the end of his shift and closing time, his brilliant performance in a darts match the previous Friday and his work as a diesel fitter.

Miller had just completed a prolonged battle with a stubborn diesel shunter, which had brought his colleagues to the verge of tears of frustration on many occasions. Grinning with triumph, he tapped out a drum roll with a pair of stilsons on the muddy body of the cab. An animal snarl and a scraping of gravel set his heart fluttering and spun him round.

His initial impression, before he had time to mull it over and embroider it in to an impressive tale, was of a figure in a light-coloured suit leaping toward him, arms outstretched as if to seize him in a wrestling hold. Stan Miller's reaction was instinctive. He lashed out.

A stilson wrench landed on the figure's jaw, whipping his head to one side. He spun half round, hit the diesel shunter and flopped to the ground. One of the drivers arrived as Miller was inspecting his attacker.

"What the bloody 'ell's going on?" demanded Cobbie, a silver-haired veteran who had been driving engines since the war.

"This nut case came jumping out at me," replied Miller.

"He's in his pyjamas. And no shoes. He must be a nut case," agreed Cobbie, drawing on his foul-smelling pipe reflectively. "What you hit 'im with?"

"Fist."

"And all that scrap iron."

"Oh, yeah!" Miller noticed the heavy wrench in his right hand. "Looks like he's escaped from somewhere."

"Right!" Miller nodded nervously. "We'd better report him before he comes round again."

"Big bugger, ain't he?" remarked Cobbie.

"Too big for my liking," admitted Miller.

08. Teething Troubles

Three police cars, two vans, a detective inspector in a dinner jacket and a uniformed chief superintendent and his retinue arrived to take charge of a tall, heavily built man in hospital pyjamas. Arthur Dolan's jaw had swollen massively, and he was still unconscious when he was loaded in to a police van.

The growing mob of photographers and television film units pounced on Stan Miller and Cobbie when the police refused to allow them to photograph the prisoner. Miller enjoyed being the centre of attention. His opinion had not been much sought after in his thirty-seven years. A television reporter had been rude to Cobbie during the last rail strike. He attempted to set the record straight – and he was ignored.

Arthur Dolan woke up on the way back to the hospital. It took five beefy coppers to hold him down until a doctor could be summoned to sedate him. The sight of a police van heaving and rocking in the middle of the road like a storm-teased dinghy drew an embarrassingly large crowd from a couple of nearby pubs.

Instead of Paddington Hospital, Dolan was taken out of town, past Crystal Palace Park, to a more suitable institution: a secure psychiatric hospital in SE20. There, he spent a peaceful night. He consumed two mugs of sweet tea for breakfast but he refused solid food. The swelling on the right side of his jaw had acquired a blackish-green tinge but it seemed to be subsiding remarkably quickly.

An X-ray examination showed that the bone was unbroken

and that his upper canine teeth projected an unusual distance beyond the rest of his top set.

Dolan seemed quite rational to Dr. Charles Pain ton, who had been assigned to his case. He was bewildered and a little alarmed by large gaps in his memories of recent events, and puzzled that he could recall in fair detail a series of vivid and bizarre dreams.

As the morning progressed, he became increasingly restless. By midday, he was pacing his padded room in angry frustration. Just when Dr. Pain ton was considering sedating him, Dolan slipped in to a wild rage. He hurled himself around his room in a mad frenzy, growling and snarling like an angry wolf.

He wore himself out after an hour and sagged to the padded floor, gasping for breath. Two heavily built nurses entered his room to ease him in to a strait-waistcoat as a precaution. Dolan appeared to be quite lucid, if a little frightened, after his outburst. He was co-operative, and he did not complain about being placed under restraint.

Although he could remember nothing of his violent hour, his state of fatigue told him that he had been engaged in some form of extremely vigorous and uncontrolled action.

His psychiatrist attempted to question him about his outburst, staring in fascination at Dolan's upper canine teeth, which seemed to be causing him difficulty. The antics of Dolan's mouth suggested that the teeth were catching on his lower lip, and that he was aware that something was wrong, if not precisely what.

At the end of an unsatisfactory interview, Dr. Pain ton retired to his office to write further case notes. His patient had survived an assault by the man responsible for several 'vampire killings', as the newspapers had called them. He had then attempted a similar assault on a student nurse the

previous Sunday night, and he had tried to attack a diesel fitter a day later.

On the evidence, Arthur Dolan was a suggestible person who had been knocked off the rails slightly by the experience of being attacked by a vampire, real or deluded. It seemed that the fantasy had been passed on like a contagious disease. Tugging at a bushy, dark beard, which disguised the fact that he had very little chin, Charles Pain ton attempted to reconcile the very real fact of Dolan's lengthening canine teeth with a delusion.

Arthur Dolan suffered another attack of violent rage just before eleven o'clock that night, and again toward nine o'clock the following morning. He was able to take sweet tea and thin soup, but he vomited solid food within half an hour of consuming it. Dr. Pain ton was alarmed at the damage that he had inflicted on his lower lip and gum with his upper canine teeth during the fit. Comparisons with the X-rays taken the previous day showed that the teeth had grown an incredible two millimetres during the night.

After consulting his colleagues, the patient, who seemed quite rational, and a dental surgeon, Pain ton decided that Dolan's upper canine teeth were a hazard to his well-being and would have to be removed.

It was Ronnie Benson, a nurses, who spotted the pattern. When Dolan raged for an hour that evening, Benson pointed out that the interval between fits was decreasing by an hour, give or take twenty minutes. Charles Pain ton and his colleagues had noted that each attack seemed to drain more energy from their patient, but attempts to reduce their severity using drugs served only to prolong them.

Convinced that his patient's problem was medical not psychiatric, Dr. Pain ton called on the eminent pathologist Dr. Oliver Thirvill, who had conducted the post mortems on

the two vampires and all three victims. They calculated that the next attack would come at about two o'clock the next morning, and decided that blood samples taken before, after and, if possible, during the fit could help to determine their cause.

Much to the puzzlement of all concerned, Arthur Dolan's next fit began two hours late. In all, he spent three hours and forty minutes strapped to his bed. His doctors took a longer series of blood samples than planned. The small tubes of Dolan's blood were cooled rapidly to stop chemical reactions and stored in a refrigerated container. Dawn was breaking as Dr. Thirvill, looking disgustingly alert for that time of day, left for his laboratory in the centre of town.

Dr. Pain ton received word that the analyses of the blood samples had been completed in the early afternoon, as Arthur Dolan was writhing through his sixth fit. Afterwards, Dolan was weak and impatient to learn when he would receive some sort of treatment. While Dr. Pain ton was examining him, Dolan began to complain of soreness in his mouth. The doctor experienced a surge of uneasiness, but not surprise, when he found that the pits in Dolan's upper gum, left after the extraction of his canine teeth, had healed completely.

The swelling and heavy bruising of his jaw caused by a wildly-swung stilson wrench had disappeared in less than 36 hours. Similarly, the wounds inflicted by his canine teeth before their removal had also healed within hours. Dolan had an extraordinary, unhuman self-repair capacity.

When he took a closer look, Dr. Pain ton was astounded to find tiny spikes projecting from Dolan's gums in the two gaps in his upper teeth. New buds for the teeth had formed – a rare but not unheard of occurrence – and his replacement

teeth were starting to erupt with uncanny speed. Over an hour late, and feeling slightly stunned, Dr. Pain ton drove in to town to find out what the team of pathologists had discovered.

09. The Pathology Of The Condition

Dr. Oliver Thirvill was very tall, which forced him to stoop slightly to allow him to approach the rest of the human race. He dressed elegantly but slightly carelessly and he kept his exact age a mystery. Although hovering around retirement age, he could boast a full head of pure white hair and a relatively unlined face. Colleagues hinted, more than half seriously, that he had discovered the elixir of life a few years too late to achieve permanent youth.

Grey shadows under his blue eyes suggested that he was feeling a little less lively than normal. When he received Charles Pain ton in a cramped office strewn with books, loose and bound papers and folders in various colours, Thirvill was attempting to restore himself with a mug of coffee sweetened generously with honey.

Pain ton shifted a pile of books, balancing them precariously on top of another stack, and liberated a chair. Thirvill's secretary, a plump blonde who smelled of oranges, brought him a cup of coffee.

After an exchange of pleasantries, the doctors got down to business.

"A very interesting picture, Charles," Thirvill began through a cloud of smoke from a small cigar. "Your man Dolan seems to be producing a form of growth hormone. We've called it 'dentatropin' because of the effect on his teeth. It seems to have a relatively long lifetime in the blood, and it seems to increase to a threshold level.

"From what I saw last night, I'd say the subject becomes increasingly restless as he approaches the threshold, and his restlessness develops in to frenzy once he exceeds the threshold."

Pain ton nodded. "We assume that under normal circumstances, the patient would seek out a victim and make a vampire assault during the restless phase. Dolan seems to be somewhat inhibited by his artificial circumstances and the constant supervision. But why the frenzy?"

"The picture isn't too clear yet. But the frenzy seems to play an important part in an auto-regulation mechanism for dentatropin. We think that yet another hormone is involved. Perhaps a catecholamine similar to adrenaline." Thirvill draped a broad smile of satisfaction on his smooth face. "We seem to have stumbled on something new and rather fascinating, Charles."

"We've called the second hormone 'vampirine', by the way. I'd say it's produced in all humans at moments of great stress. In Dolan's case, stress as in the later stages of the frenzy."

"Here's something else new, and the reason why I was so late." Pain ton took a brown envelope from his briefcase and passed it across the cluttered desk.

"X-rays," remarked Thirvill, holding a sheet of negative up towards the window. "And what do they show?"

"Something tied in with your growth hormone," said Pain ton. "Remember how the extraordinary growth of his upper canines made it necessary to have Dolan's removed? Well, they seem to be growing back. And if that task is consuming dentatropin, we have an explanation for the increase in the interval between his fits."

"Reasonable," nodded Thirvill. "We seem to be witnessing medical history being made in a number of fields."

"Vampirism has become something of a joke," added Pain ton. "But I've been doing a little reading on the subject. One thing I've found is that the least unreliable case histories include two factors – the vampire goes out of his way to terrify his victim, and only human victims are acceptable. Such things as not being able to tolerate sunlight or the smell of garlic are included in the legend for dramatic effect."

"Interesting," nodded Thirvill. "So the vampire scares the hell out of his victim then stabilizes his own condition by drinking a litre or so of blood rich in vampirine. Which brings his dentatropin down to a comfortable level, and presumably inhibits further growth of his teeth for a day or two."

"It sounds almost reasonable when you say it quickly," laughed Pain ton.

"And when the vampire can't find a victim, there's an auto-stabilization mechanism available," added Thirvill. "Which, from the decreasing interval between Dolan's fits, seems to become less and less effective as time goes by, and doesn't affect the growth of his canines. In fact, it looks very much as if someone who doesn't indulge in his vampiric activities could end up looking something like a sabretoothed tiger. If he's not overtaken by a terminal frenzy in the meantime."

"There's a very real possibility of that," Pain ton pointed out. "He seems able to take less and less nourishment. How are things going on tracking down the cause of his condition?"

"You know June Evremont from down the road? She's on the track of a virus, so she says. It's proving rather difficult to isolate. And she's pretty certain that the human body doesn't produce antibodies for it."

"If we can't cure him, how about stabilizing him? That

could be possible if we had a supply of vampirine. And you've got your chemistry right."

"You mean, put vampirism on a par with diabetes or epilepsy?" laughed the pathologist. "The trouble is, we'd need a respectable sample of blood from someone in a state of terror in order to get a large enough sample of vampirine to determine its structure."

"We could always sneak through the audience of a horror film," suggested Pain ton. "When it reaches the climax."

"One of my lads went to see *Three Steps* the other night. That's supposed to have them screaming in the aisles."

"They'd be screaming even more if they caught us creeping about taking blood samples. But under controlled laboratory conditions..."

"A private showing of the film?" laughed Thirvill. "Our parsimonious administrators would never wear that. Interesting thought, though. A way of getting to see the latest films free on the NHS."

"I was thinking more of a simple injection of a suitable drug."

Thirvill picked a pair of blue-tinted glasses off the desk and slipped them on to peer at his young colleague with watery blue eyes. Pain ton was about half his age and did not strike him as the reckless sort. If anything, Pain ton's heavy features had slipped in to a rather more earnest expression than usual.

"They say you have to be slightly round the bend to become a trick cyclist," remarked the pathologist. His glasses slipped a fraction down his long, narrow nose when he raised his eyebrows. "I do believe you're serious about this injection business."

"It could be all over in an hour," said Pain ton slowly. "How much blood would you need?"

Thirvill shrugged. "Depends on the concentration of vampirine produced. But who would be daft enough to volunteer to be scared out of his wits?"

"If you've not forgotten how to handle a live patient, I could supply the drug and the experimental subject."

"What about the effects of taking blood from someone in a state of shock?" countered Thirvill. "And the after-effects of the drug?"

"We could take steps to minimize the gross physical effects. The 'scream stuff', as certain of my colleagues call it, will make me rave harmlessly for about a quarter of an hour. Then I'll drop off to sleep for half an hour and wake quite refreshed and none the worse for my experience.

"You should have more than enough time to tap off a litre or so of vampirine-rich blood. You could even give me an appropriate transfusion while I'm sleeping,"

"Well," admitted Thirvill, "it sounds possible if it's as straightforward as you make out."

"How long would it take you to synthesise a usable quantity once you know the structure?"

"If, as we suspect, it's not too different from adrenaline, perhaps a couple of days from start to finish. But can you take the risk of using an untried drug on a patient, Charles? What's wrong with giving Dolan 'scream stuff'? According to what you've just said, it will cut his fits by a factor of four."

"Prolonged exposure can have rather bad side-effects. Given the choice, I'm sure Dolan would prefer to give a chance to something that his own body produces naturally."

"Let's have a word with June Evremont first," cautioned Thirvill. "See how she's getting on with her virus hunt."

"Even if she's on the track of the vampirism virus, I think we're going to have to follow this line as well," said Pain ton,

reluctant to abandon what he considered to be one of his better ideas.

Four minutes brisk walk brought them to Dr. Evremont's laboratory. She was small, well rounded and the mother of two teenage children, whose pictures littered her desk. June Evremont also looked the worse for a sleepless night. After losing the psychiatrist with a few well-chosen technicalities, she took pity on Pain ton and gave him a brief account of her progress and theories on the vampirism virus.

Samples taken from all three known vampires; the Romanian Horvath, Martin Shawcross and Arthur Dolan, had told Dr. Evremont that the virus used human red blood cells as its host. Transmission, she thought, occurred via the blood of the vampire; the source being wounds caused in his own mouth by his fangs.

Infected blood mingles with the victim's in the presence of high concentrations of adrenal cortex hormones, which could increase the victim's susceptibility to the virus. If the victim did not die of shock during the attack, an undetermined incubation period followed.

Dr. Evremont had found indications that the virus's optimum growth rate occurred at a temperature of about 39°C or 102°F – the degree of fever experienced by both Martin Shawcross and Arthur Dolan. Thus the fever aided the spread of the virus through the victim's body – a reversal of the normal course of virus infections.

Once established, the virus held the body at a slightly elevated temperature in order to aid reproduction. As the virus seemed able to void triggering the human immune system, the vampire remained infected for life.

As well as triggering production of the growth hormone dentatropin, and thus promoting growth of the upper canine teeth and rapid healing of damaged tissues, the presence of

the virus reduced the lifetime of red blood corpuscles.

Thus ingestion of about one litre of a victim's blood every few days served to correct the vampire's consequent slight iron deficiency as well as providing vampirine to reduce an excessive level of dentatropin in the vampire's own blood.

Dr. Evremont explained that she expected success from a course of treatment using Interferon, but that she might need as much as 50 million units of the drug. She had been in touch with colleagues at a research laboratory at Beckenham in Kent, who were working on Interferon production by virus treatment of large cultures of human lymphoblastoid cells. Dr. Evremont had been promised a supply of Interferon as soon as the next batch had been purified.

A yawn pushed aside her professional mask. In conclusion, Dr. Evremont remarked that it would be useful if a vampire were a member of the nobility, or one of the idle rich. A vampire who had to work for a living, like a virologist, would find it a real problem to hide a set of quarter inch fangs. On that cheerful note, the group retired across the road to Dr. Evremont's 'business' pub, which had just opened its doors for the evening.

10. Screaming For Science

Dr. Thirvill carried out the experiment in induced hysteria in his main laboratory. Dr. Pain ton remarked that he found the dissecting table quite comfortable as he settled himself onto a thin layer of padding improvised from fire blankets. Oliver Thirvill and his two assistants felt less inclined to joke about the experiment.

After much discussion, they had decided to take one litre of Pain ton's blood. Annette Hall, one of the assistants, was standing by with a 500 millilitre transfusion pack, which

would Pain ton would receive at the end of the collection period.

Dr. Thirvill himself administered the injection. Pain ton's response to the drug cocktail was something of a disappointment. Exactly as he had described, his mouth began to form soundless half-words within two minutes. Then his eyes started to roll from side to side and his face to work in slow motion ripples, Jerry Dainley, the other assistant, started the flow of extracted blood in to a cooled container.

Dr. Hall, her long face tightened in to an expression of concentration started the flow of blood from the transfusion pack as Thirvill drew the hollow needle from Pain ton's other arm. Dainley had already weighed and balanced the first set of sample tubes for the centrifuge.

Charles Pain ton woke with a slight pain in his right arm and a raging thirst. He had poured himself a cup of coffee from the ever-ready pot and found himself a reasonably comfortable chair before his colleagues noticed that he was awake. All three were too busy preparing samples for injection in to the gas chromatograph and its on-line mass spectrometer.

11. Growth And Synthesis

Arthur Dolan's new teeth developed to normal size over the next two days. The time interval between his fits began to decrease again. Although Dr. Pain ton and his staff did their best to keep up his morale, Dolan started to despair of a cure for his condition ever being found.

He had lost two stones in little over a week. His complexion had acquired a muddy tint and he was starting to look very old and tired. Normally an active fellow, he played cricket or football according to the season, the inactivity of

the psychiatric hospital was a source of constant irritation. As the carrier of a contagious disease with homicidal side effects, his contacts with other people had to be restricted to members of the hospital staff and a daily visit of his parents. Reading had never figured on Dolan's list of hobbies. He spent most of his time in front of a television set, watching either current programs or videotapes, frustrated because he lacked the energy for a more strenuous pursuit.

Perhaps, and this alternative was becoming increasingly attractive, it would be better to escape and take his chances as an active vampire. This thought hovered at the back of Dolan's mind whenever one of his fits was due. The man who had attacked him in the Cromwell Museum had looked very fit and well behind a mask of uncertainty. Perhaps accepting his fate was the only way to stop himself feeling lousy all the time.

The more he thought about it, the less unattractive became the prospect of biting somebody's neck and allowing a torrent of warm, fresh blood to pour down his throat – blood that would bring him strength and stop him from going crazy every few hours. He felt confident that he would be able to beat the hospital's security arrangements. All that he needed was the strength to carry out his escape plan.

For Oliver Thirvill and his two assistants, the two days were a blend of intermittent activity and long periods spent watching analytical instruments performing exploratory scans at an annoyingly leisurely pace. Then, once they had determined the chemical formula and structure of the new hormone *vampirine*, they watched solutions refluxing in sparkling glassware, followed by the endless frothing of a reduction reaction.

The end product of their labours was a twenty-gramme sample of colourless crystals, which they sealed in to a

brown sample bottle labelled *Vampirine* in large, red letters. Dr. Thirvill then took the drug to the Elenray Nursing Home.

12. *Stabilizing Influence*

Dr. Thirvill reached the hospital at nine-thirty on a Saturday morning. Dr. Pain ton sent one of his nurses to take Arthur Dolan back to his room, then he accompanied Thirvill to the dispensary. They had decided to administer the vampirine orally, as this seemed to be the normal method. Unlike adrenaline, this hormone survived the digestive system.

The blood taken from Dr. Pain ton during the induced hysteria experiment had given them a figure for the quantity of hormone that a vampire could expect from a victim, within a probable error limit of one hundred percent.

"There, that should do it." Thirvill poured a measure dose in to a plastic tumbler. He replaced the stopper of a graduated flask containing a standard solution of vampirine in a bicarbonate buffer. "It's the minimum dose. We can adjust things as we go on."

"I always feel very nervous before an experiment on a human being," admitted Pain ton. "Almost as if I'm about to join in a round of Russian roulette."

"Worried about him drinking this, and then dropping dead immediately?" laughed Thirvill.

"It didn't kill your people, Jerry and Annette," returned the psychiatrist.

"Oh, they've tried it, then?" Thirvill didn't seem too surprised.

"I think you've tried it, too. What did it do for you, Oliver?"

"It almost put me to sleep."

"Jerry told me the same thing."

"It appears to be a depressive," added Thirvill. "Perhaps an anti-adrenaline. And as it's produced when the subject's in a state of terror, that could explain why people become paralysed with fright. A disorienting conflict between 'do something' adrenaline and 'do nothing' vampirine."

"It's an interesting theory," nodded Pain ton. "But it doesn't alter the fact that we have to try this on Dolan. He's deteriorating rapidly both physically and mentally. His metabolism seems to be turning over at an alarming rate. Possibly an effect of a relatively high concentration of dentatropin in his blood. And the fits aren't helping. If we do too much towards relieving his symptoms, we prolong the fit. Probably because we delay the release of vampirine."

"June Evremont thinks the Interferon will be ready around the middle of next week," said Thirvill. "There's so little of the stuff around, the competition for it is pretty stiff. Even a vampire has to take his turn in the queue."

"He might not last until next week if this doesn't work," Pain ton said sombrely. "His room's this way."

"Where the hell is he?" frowned Pain ton when they reached Arthur Dolan's room. He took a small radio transceiver from the pocket of his white coat and pressed the call button. "Control, give me Mick Billion."

"I'm looking for him, Doctor," replied a deep, South London voice, which flashed up a picture of a popular wrestling anti-hero in Thirvill's mind. "He's not in the television room or on the terrace."

"Well, he can't have gone far. Get some help and have a look in the grounds."

"Trouble?" asked Thirvill. "Vampire escapes from allegedly secure psychiatric hospital?"

"Dolan's in no condition to cause trouble," Pain ton said confidently. "He's just restless. His dentatropin level's due to

reach threshold between about ten and half past."

"Hope you're right," said Thirvill.

When found, Arthur Dolan was staggering through a small garden in a mental haze. In his own mind, he was fit and well, and creeping noiselessly through thick undergrowth in search of a victim.

According to the nurses who found him, he was blundering around in a clump of rhododendron bushes like a blind and drunken old man.

He was unable to resist when they eased him in to a wheelchair and trundled him back to his room. He was just about able to snarl at the nurses and show off his new fangs.

"Good morning again, Arthur," said Dr. Pain ton in a tone that was friendly without becoming patronizing. "This is one of my colleagues, Doctor Thirvill."

Dolan's shrunken face opened to show his new canine teeth behind a round smile. The smile faded when he realized that Thirvill had a hypodermic syringe at the ready and he intended to take a blood sample.

"Doctor Thirvill has brewed up something to help you, Arthur," Pain ton added optimistically, producing the half-filled plastic tumbler. "This is the drug we discussed yesterday."

Dolan wrinkled his nose in slow motion. "Not the blood?" he chuckled, almost to himself. "We all know it's in the blood." He dropped his eyes to contemplate large hands, fingers interlocked, in his lap.

"Why not put a drop of tomato juice in it, Doctor?" suggested the nurse, who did look rather like the wrestling anti-hero from the back. "He's taken a liking to tomato juice, and it'd make it look about right."

"Mick, you're a genius," said Pain ton in admiration, "You ought to be running this place."

The nurses helped Arthur Dolan to his bed. He sat on the edge of it and gulped down the red liquid greedily before moving to a prone position.

Very little happened for about ten minutes. Then Dolan sat up abruptly and grinned at the two doctors. His hollowed face conveyed the boyish enthusiasm of a decaying *roué*.

"I don't know what was in that stuff, gents," he announced happily. "But I feel bloody marvellous! And I'm starving."

Dolan improved almost visibly as the day progressed. His one regret was that Dr. Pain ton refused him a huge meal of steak and chips. After a week being fed liquids, it would take some time for his digestive system to readjust to solid food in decent quantities.

Dr. Thirvill headed back to town with a set of blood samples, which he had taken before, and at fifteen minute intervals after Dolan had drunk the solution of vampirine. He was able to report before lunchtime that the level of the hormone dentatropin in Dolan's blood had decreased below their measurement limit before he took the second blood sample.

Charles Pain ton left Elenray House in the evening glowing with achievement. As a small celebration, he had arranged to take his wife out to dinner. Her sister had agreed to baby-sit in exchange for some unspecified future favour. Arthur Dolan was sleeping peacefully when Pain ton called in at the hospital on his way home.

The news that he received when he answered his bedside telephone at twenty minutes to four the following morning settled in his stomach like a chunk of lead.

13. Victory And Defeat

"It's the phone, Oliver." Joanna Thirvill applied a probing elbow to her husband's back. "Are you awake?"

Dr. Thirvill replied with a formless grunt as he recognized the reason for regular chirps from his bedside table. Without opening his eyes, he stretched a questing arm out from the shelter of the bedclothes. The earpiece of the telephone settled coldly against his right ear.

"Thirvill. And this had better be important," he groaned.

"Oliver? This is Charles Pain ton. Are you awake?"

"About half and half. What is it, Charles?"

"It's Dolan. He's dead."

"What!?" Thirvill flashed awake immediately. "How?"

"We don't know." Pain ton sounded worried.

"What do you know?" demanded Thirvill.

"I left instructions for the night staff to look in on him every half hour. We know he was all right at three-fifteen because Doctor Vidden took a look at him while she was passing. But then one of the duty nurses made the routine check at half-past, he wasn't breathing. The nurse called Doctor Vidden and she attempted resuscitation. No luck."

"Any ideas on the cause of death?"

"Not really. Except that it was quick. I don't think it was his heart. That's always been very sound."

"You think it might have been caused by the vampirine?" said Thirvill.

"The what?" said his wife, who had been attempting to work out the nature of the conversation from her husband's contribution.

"It's possible," Pain ton admitted. "Even though it doesn't seem to have done you any harm. There's going to have to be a postmortem."

"And as soon as possible," agreed Thirvill. "When you've sorted out all the paperwork, bring him over to the lab."

"You're not going to do it yourself, are you?" Pain ton asked cautiously.

"As an interested party, I'd better not. But I know a good chap. He owes me a favour or two."

"All right. Sorry to be the bearer of such bad news, Oliver."

"I suppose you had as little choice in the matter as whoever phoned you. I'll see you later, Charles."

"You're not going out, Oliver?" said his wife when Thirvill switched on his bedside Lamp and aimed himself toward his clothes.

"I don't have much choice, Jo."

"But it's the middle of the night."

"I couldn't sleep now anyway," said Thirvill heavily.

"Where are you going? In to town? To the lab? Is it your vampire?"

"Yes to the last three questions. Go back to sleep, Jo. I'll tell you about it later."

The city was starting to crawl in to Sunday life when Oliver Thirvill piloted a young man with a neat, blond beard in to his office. Charles Pain ton stopped tugging at his own rather longer bush and started to his feet with the guilt of someone who had been on the point of dropping off to sleep.

"Charles, this is Neil Ryun," said Thirvill. "One of the bright sparks with the Home Office."

"Well?" demanded Pain ton, clasping the outstretched hand briefly.

"Aneurism," said Ryun shortly. "Of one of the cerebral arteries. It could have burst last month, or twenty years from now."

Pain ton sagged back in to his chair with an expression of relief on a drawn face. "So it's not a side effect of our treatment?"

"Hardly," said Ryun. "The fact that his blood pressure was bobbing up and down like a demented yo-yo two or three times a day didn't help. But he had the aneurism and he'd been infected by the vampire long before he arrived on your doorstep. Just by the way, his pituitary was producing the dentatropin, as you suspected."

"I keep telling myself I should have stayed with him. But he seemed to be improving so rapidly." Pain ton shook his head in disbelief. "We all thought he'd be back to normal in no time."

"Even if you'd stayed with him, it's unlikely you'd have been able to do anything for him," said Ryun "The rupture was sudden and massive."

"I suppose it's rather callous, worrying about my professional reputation at a time like this," Pain ton admitted.

"But perfectly natural," said Ryun. "You did your best for him. Rather more than your best, in fact. To the extent of allowing Oliver to practise legal vampirism on you while you were temporarily out of your mind. But that doesn't stop you being flayed alive if an ungrateful patient dies on you."

"All in all," mused Thirvill, "poor old Arthur had the cards stacked pretty heavily against him. And you weren't the only one worrying about his reputation, Charles. Thanks for turning out, Neil."

"A very interesting case," said Ryun. "Worth losing a few hours of sleep. Post mortems on vampires aren't too common. Especially on ones who died of natural causes. I wouldn't say no to a cup of coffee, though," he added, glancing across the office to the percolator.

"What happens now?" Pain ton asked as Thirvill attended

to the coffee. Swamped by the relieving knowledge that he had not caused his patient's death, he was quite prepared to leave any thinking to a representative of the authorities.

Ryun dropped in to a chair, suddenly weary, and produced a stubby pipe. "I'll pass a copy of my report on to the appropriate coroner. It'll be Irving, won't it? Shouldn't think there's any need for an inquest. Natural causes, even if the patient was unnatural. There'll have to be some sort of statement for the Press. Our people can handle that."

"I suppose we'll all be beating them off with clubs," said Thirvill sourly. "I'd better warn Joanna to bolt all the doors."

"Read all about it in the 'Daily Right To Know'," added Ryun. "We could do with World War Three starting this afternoon to take their tiny minds off vampires. Or is that not allowed on a Sunday?"

"One day's as good as another for starting a war," laughed Pain ton.

"But nothing ever happens when you want it to," added Thirvill.

14. Chain Transfer

Arthur Dolan was cremated on the following Wednesday. He received special precautions, including a sealed coffin, because he had been suffering from a still incurable viral infection at the time of his death. Relatives ran a gauntlet of representatives of the news media at the crematorium. A strong police presence was needed to keep ghouls and passing spectators at bay.

Despite scurrilous rumours to the effect that the experimental method of treatment mentioned in the Home Office press release had caused Dolan's death, his immediate family seemed to accept the facts. Drs. Pain ton and Thirvill

attended the simple service, setting asides nagging worry that they would be set upon by vengeful relatives. They were about to climb in to Pain ton's car for the return journey to the centre of town when a police inspector intercepted them.

Acting on his rather vague message, Pain ton drove to Paddington, to the hospital near the Cromwell Museum. A porter stationed at the reception desk escorted them to an office on the first floor. The name tag on the door read: 'Dr. A.M. Waters'. Finding the office empty, the porter frowned for a moment, invited the visitors to take chairs, and departed in search of instructions.

Dr. Waters breezed in to the room like a whirlwind, seeming to reach his desk almost before he had closed the office door. He was dressed well but comfortably, and he moved with a restless energy, which suggested that he played squash twice a week and golf in his spare time to use it up.

Pain ton introduced Thirvill, then he said, "Okay, Alan. What's the panic?"

"The nurse who was attacked by Dolan the weekend before last. She has a temperature of 102. In fact, her symptoms are very similar to Dolan's soon after he arrived here."

"Oh, bloody hell!" groaned Pain ton. "Don't say we've got another."

"What's been done?" added Thirvill, striking a practical note.

"We have her isolated." Waters brushed absently at his left sleeve. "One of your colleagues informed your virologist colleague, Dr. Evremont. She's taken blood samples. But I doubt there's been time for her to do much. And we're monitoring Nurse Shaw's dental development."

"That won't be a problem for a day or two," remarked Pain ton.

"We'll have to arrange to monitor her for dentatropin production," said Thirvill.

Waters blinked. "For what?"

"The hormone that induces development of the canine teeth," said Thirvill. "I think it would be useful if you came over to the lab to have a look at my copies of Dolan's case notes. And the notes on our work."

"Yes, that would be useful," nodded Waters. "You know, I have to keep telling myself this is really happening. To convince myself that we really have got a case of vampirism in the hospital. A clinical case, not a psychiatric one."

"A lot of people have had that problem. But it's real all right," Thirvill assured him. "And if it gets out of hand, it's not at all pretty."

Dr. June Evremont was delighted, in a purely professional way, that her work on the vampirism virus could be put to use. The death of Arthur Dolan had depressed her. She had been expecting to be told to abandon her research and move onto something more productive when official inertia caught up with her.

Aware that time was running out, she had stepped up her effort on the project in an attempt to reach some sort of conclusion before the axe fell. Suddenly, she had a reason to continue; or rather, her worrying had been a waste of nervous energy.

By the end of the afternoon, she had confirmed that nurse Carol Shaw's red blood cells were carrying the vampirism virus. When she telephoned Dr. Waters at the hospital, he accepted the news with calm resignation.

He was less happy when Dr. Evremont told him that she would not be in a position to begin to treat the viral infection for at least a week. She had lost her place in the Interferon queue when Arthur Dolan died, and she had been forced to

negotiate for another place. Despite the clear evidence given in the report on the post mortem examination of Arthur Dolan, Waters was reluctant to be associated with a new and untried method of treatment.

Neil Ryun, an impartial Home Office pathologist, had established the cause of death beyond question. But the idea of feeding a new hormone with a name like vampirine to a patient stabbed at his instinct for professional survival.

And yet the limited evidence showed that vampirine was an effective catalyst in the metabolism of the growth hormone dentatropin.

Thus, when Carol Shaw's fever dropped to the steady 100° of a fully infected vampire two days later, and Dr. Thirvill announced that her blood now contained a measurable concentration of dentatropin, Waters began to prepare himself mentally for the worst.

15. Vindication

The patient woke feeling restless the following morning. Carol Shaw was feeling quite irritable for no particular reason when the doctors visited her room after breakfast. A routine inspection of her teeth showed that both upper canines had increased in length by half a millimetre.

"So it's started, Doctor?" said Shaw, addressing the question to a point equidistant between Thirvill and Waters.

"I'm afraid so, Carol." Waters brushed absently at the crisp sleeve of a magnificently white labcoat.

"Can we get on with the treatment, then?" the nurse asked nervously, as if expecting her teeth to erupt suddenly. "I've not changed my mind since yesterday."

"All right," said Thirvill. "As I told you and your parents yesterday afternoon, the hormone treatment will stabilize

your condition, but not cure it. But as I explained, Doctor Evremont expects to begin that very soon." Realising that his speech was being wasted on an impatient patient, he produced a covered kidney dish. "First of all, I'll have to take another blood sample."

"I thought I was supposed to be the vampire," said the young nurse with an attempt at a smile.

Dr. Pain ton opened his mouth, then closed it again, deciding not to mention that the late Arthur Dolan had often made the same remark under similar circumstances.

After drawing off ten millilitres of blood, Thirvill nodded to Pain ton, who handed a glass half-filled with colourless liquid to the patient. Dr. Waters hovered in the background, associating himself loosely with the treatment, but not participating in it physically.

Carol Shaw gulped down a solution of vampirine, then lay back against the raised pillows and waited. Gradually, a smile spread across her face and a tense expression dissolved, "It's great!" she beamed. "I feel grand!"

"That seems to be the standard reaction," nodded Thirvill. "Taken alone, the hormone has a depressive effect. But if you're feeling restless due to dentatropin in your blood, the end result of a scrap between the hormones is a feeling of well-being. Which means, I'm afraid, that I'll need another blood sample."

"Take as much as you want," invited the patient. "When do I get some more of the hormone, Doctor?"

"Two days, perhaps three," said Thirvill.

"I could do with some of this as a pick-me-up after a hard night duty," remarked the nurse reflectively. "What's it called."

"It just has a number at the moment," said Dr. Waters hurriedly, reluctant to admit to a patient that she had just

taken a drug called vampirine. In spite of the nature of her complaint, he could not bring himself to make a reference to vampirism in a professional capacity.

Carol Shaw survived three more doses of vampirine, which helped to remove unreasonable doubts that the hormone was unsafe and had contributed to the death of Arthur Dolan. During her stabilization treatment, she attended church services on successive Sundays, thus demolishing several rather ridiculous myths.

Dr. Pain ton concluded that only mentally unstable vampires are unable to look on the Christian cross, and that stories of consecrated host and holy water producing burns like those of concentrated acid are based on a rather interesting hysterical reaction of a mind under great stress.

Then Dr. Evremont was able to treat the cause of Carol Shaw's symptoms. Forty injections of Interferon over a period of five days were required to remove all traces of the virus from her system. She left the hospital a celebrity, much to the delight of one of her uncles, who was a minor theatrical agent.

Offers for appearances on TV panel games flooded in, along with invitations to take a starring role in commercials for a range of unlikely products.

In her first year as a television, and later a film star, her accountant estimated that she made more money than she would have earned in her entire career, had she remained a nurse.

The vampire fiction industry went in to a mild decline when it was proved that the disease could be cured readily and simply. Those deprived of an income said evil things about Drs. Pain ton, Thirvill, and Evremont. Their remarks were echoed at meetings of the Romanian State Tourist

Board during discussions on the decline in the numbers of Western tourists taking hard currencies to the region of the Carpathian Mountains.

As for the conquerors of myth and legend, each made a decent but not excessive sum out of selling interviews to the news media. Then they grew tired of constant intrusions in to their professional and private lives. Assured of a place in medical history, they preferred to sink back in to modest obscurity.

Dr. Pain ton, in particular, realized that a single victory does not shine for a lifetime. Fame produces as many jealous enemies as admirers; watchers waiting to pounce on a mistake or a slight error of judgement.

Being a sensible and moderately ambitious man, he preferred to make his blunders out of the glare of the public spotlight.

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19. Lifetime Guarantee : Original Concept

Paul Bryan tapped respectfully on the door, then entered a fifth-floor office at the *Department of Consumer Interests* in London's power belt. He intruded in to the calm contentment of his boss's Wednesday afternoon. Sir Anthony Steele groaned softly before Bryan could give a reason for his visit.

"Is the problem really pressing?" warned his immediate superior, who was feeling reluctant to become involved in anything requiring too much thought after an early and very decent lunch at his club. "Can't it wait?" Sir Anthony was a master of the art of postponement; especially on a Wednesday afternoon.

"It's a matter that should be brought to your attention, Sir Anthony," Bryan persisted. "The trendex from the stats is positively alarming."

"English, Bryan, is the language of this Department," snapped Sir Anthony, stirred out of his apathy by indignation. "Such ridiculous jargon has no place here."

"The trends extrapolated from the latest statistical analysis of our random reliability survey are rather alarming, sir," Bryan expanded, glancing pointedly at the frail chair in front of a fine example of a Ministry desk, circa 1890.

"Sit, then." Sir Anthony removed his spidery, gold-rimmed spectacles to polish the lenses with a pink tissue.

Paul Bryan lowered himself carefully onto a pad of blue

plush and took the opportunity of polishing his own beetle-black horn-rims with a minor club tie. "I'm afraid it's a further development in connection with the lifetime guarantee products, Sir Anthony," he explained to the pink and brown blur in front of him.

"Surely that's been sorted out?" said his superior impatiently. "The test case went right through to the House of Lords, didn't it? Upheld the appeal? And a damn waste of everyone's time and money."

"They upheld the original court ruling, Sir Anthony," Brian pointed out apologetically. "That the manufacturers' definition that the 'lifetime' referred to in the guarantee means their guaranteed 'in-service' lifetime for the article, and it has nothing to do with the lifespan of the purchaser. The court ruled that if they stated that quite plainly in the documentation, no other construction could be placed on the term."

"Obvious to anyone with an ounce of sense," rumbled his superior. "But even if it's down in black and white, you still get an argument from these legal types."

"But the problem shown up by the statistics is in a slightly different area, sir," said Bryan, amazed at having been able to kick-start his superior in to thinking about the difficulty. "In the area of effective lifetime as applied to external damage received, not faulty manufacture."

"What?" grunted Sir Anthony, reaching for a cigar.

"The effective lifetime is reached when repair cost equals forty-five percent of purchase price or replacement cost, whichever is the lower," Bryan quoted.

"Well, yes," grunted Sir Anthony, passing beyond argument as he concentrated on the task of lighting a square cigar.

He suffered from the unfortunate failing of assuming that

his memory was virtually perfect, and he resorted to petty quibbles and sheer bluster if he found himself struggling. Thus Bryan felt compelled to add a wealth of background detail whenever he tried to discuss something with his superior.

The policy was grounded in self-protection, If he failed to provide a constant stream of information, the two of them just floundered helplessly in circles and nothing was ever achieved.

Paul Bryan took his post with the *Department of Consumer Interests* very seriously. He felt obliged to act, to formulate policy, or at the very least to make loud and discouraging noises, whenever he believed that the public was being cheated.

Bryan was just forty years old. He had started to develop a visible and demoralizing bald patch in his mousey hair and he was worried about an undeserved lack of advancement. He played badminton and golf often enough to maintain an athletic reputation, he belonged to a couple of fairly decent clubs and he made it his business to get to know the right people.

He was married to a wife who cared about her appearance. Kate could throw a good dinner party and she knew the wives and mistresses of the right people of her husband's acquaintance on a social basis. The Bryans had a modest two children; both bright, sensible, and doing well at decent grammar schools.

In his own opinion, and by any reasonable standards, Paul Bryan was a model civil servant and he deserved far better than his present lot. In fact, he needed more to maintain his lifestyle. The forces of erosion were at steady work in the Bryan household. But there was a serious obstacle in his path to further progress; a rotund, immovable object in the form

of Sir Anthony Steele.

His immediate superior was fifty-seven years old, chubby in an avuncular way, almost completely bald and a member of every Old Boy circle in Whitehall. His forms of exercise included eating well, opening bottles of fine wines and spirits, smoking square cigars and attempting to bankrupt his bookmaker.

He too had a wife. She spent eleven months of the year in Malta, enjoying a semi-colonial life with her widowed sister. He too had two children. His daughter was married to a thrusting US diplomat, who was attached to the embassy in Paris, and his son was a senior officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Sir Anthony Steele combined the functions of figurehead and barometer. His continuing presence in a senior post with the *DCI* helped to confirm that the 'Right Sort Of Chap' ruled in the civil service. That a good-natured duffer like Tony Steele had not been purged helped to bolster the confidence of colleagues who were marginally less incompetent.

Sir Anthony thrived, on the efforts of his subordinates. Their successes were his achievements. Any failures remained on the hands of the underling who had made the wrong decision. But, to do him justice, he always had a good word to say about his 'good people'. Those who let him down or badgered him did not exist. Thus he could blight an unfortunate's career by maintaining a cool silence when the offending name was mentioned.

Paul Bryan's name had triggered the odd silence recently. Colleagues on less than friendly terms had made it their business to inform him of brief gaps in the conversations of powerful men, knowing that Bryan was approaching a point of decision.

He could continue to do his job according to his conscience

and court excommunication because of the irritant effect on his superior. Or he could degenerate in to a non-irritant, buck-passing, paper-shuffling empire builder and become one of Sir Anthony's 'good people' again. Or he could select a third option.

Now that his cigar was burning evenly, Sir Anthony directed his round features towards his deputy. "The heart of the problem, Bryan," he warned. The meeting would be for information only. He could not take a meaningful decision so soon after a decent lunch. "Is this what Archer was burbling about before lunch?"

"No, that was the Metro Motors forty-thousand mile guarantee on their cyclo-charge engine," Bryan said evenly, refusing to be deflected but realizing that the topic would have to be covered before they could progress.

"They have a problem with their engine?" frowned Sir Anthony.

"No, sir. In fact, it's so good, they're offering to replace last year's body shell on their customers' cars with this year's. Other motor manufacturers have been complaining about unfair competition. They see a drop in their new vehicle sales. And their suppliers of parts and materials are none too pleased either."

"And how do you see our attitude?" invited Sir Anthony, poking a weather vane in to the climate of opinion.

"The idea makes a lot of sense." Bryan projected the logical conviction of a reasonable man. "The customer's vanity is satisfied and an otherwise sound vehicle is not devalued because its appearance is out of favour with the architects of waste," he added, hinting at his own plight in the personal vehicle department.

"Hmmm! Self-evident." Sir Anthony nodded gravely. "Sour grapes because they didn't come up with the idea

themselves."

"Actually," Bryan continued, moving on to the preferred topic, "I think the matter I wanted to bring to your attention could have a bearing on the motor industry. We have an early warning of a very disturbing trend."

"More from those witch doctors on the second floor?" Sir Anthony said sourly.

"It's going to be incredibly difficult to prove," Bryan persisted, "but the latest figures indicate a marked downward trend in claims made under the lifetime guarantees."

"There were never very many of them at the worst of times," Sir Anthony interrupted. "Because the crafty sods set the guaranteed lifetime so low. You're lucky to get some things out of the shop in one piece. And one of the few things I remember from a long and boring afternoon on the use of statistics is that one cannot draw many useful conclusions from a pennyworth of data."

"But initial indicators *can* throw up points to watch out for. And there is an indication that certain manufacturers could be introducing, quite deliberately, unstable components in to their L.G. products."

"Unstable components?" puffed Sir Anthony. "In their L.G. products? Ridiculous! What's the point?"

"It's to do with the question of effective lifetime, Sir Anthony," Bryan said patiently. "The ordinary lifetime guarantee only applies to workmanship. But, for an appropriate premium, it's possible to insure against accidental external damage. Up to the repair cost limit or forty-five percent of the purchase or replacement price."

"We have indications that unstable components could have been introduced in to certain products to ensure that moderate force produces major damage. Thus ensuring that replacement is necessary at the owner's expense, and getting

round his low-cost insurance."

"Evidence?" invited Sir Anthony. "And what's all this coy chat about indications? If things are dropping to bits, there should be discrepancies between materials used and specifications, or an obvious lowering of standards."

"It's not that straight forward, sir. We have some reports of catastrophic overloading of electrical equipment. All ones fitted with the new gallium arsenide ultra-mini-brains to control them. The ones some people are saying can come dangerously close to thinking for themselves. According to estimates of their capacity, there's certainly enough for them to be able to assess their subject device's degree of function constantly while they're directing them through their programmed tasks."

"What's catastrophic overloading?" interrupted Sir Anthony, demonstrating the pace of his mental processes on a Wednesday afternoon.

"Enough heat generation to fuse the most expensive parts of the device. And two owners electrocuted," Bryan added darkly. "But the most disturbing reports come from our Motor Vehicles Survey Unit. One of the trend spotters has suggested that the ultra-mini-brains which monitor a vehicle's functions could be programmed to recognize imminent failure, or even a rogue vehicle, and to cause a crash at the first suitable opportunity; preferably in to another proto-defective vehicle."

"Really!" chuckled Sir Anthony.

"There are indications of an upward trend in this direction, Sir Anthony."

"An upward trend in imagination, Bryan!" laughed Sir Anthony. "Suicidal mini-brains? Good God, man!"

"But it's something we ought to look in to," Bryan persisted. "Gallide mini-brains are becoming so small, they're

going in to practically everything. Lifetime guarantees depend on the improved reliability they can give. If the news ever got out that the brains can self-destruct defective products to circumvent guarantees, well, there could be a catastrophic decline in confidence in every branch of industry. Nobody would buy anything containing a mini-brain in case it blew up in his face. Reputable manufacturers would suffer as much as the crooks."

"I don't approve of panic-mongering, Bryan," huffed Sir Anthony. "You'd better have a word with that crew of idiot mathematicians on the second floor. Curb their over-developed imaginations. Well, I think we've had quite enough of this. Where's the Black Box?"

"I have it, Sir Anthony," surrendered Bryan.

"Wheel it in."

"Yes, Sir Anthony."

Bryan retired to his adjoining office to fetch their mini-computer Mark IX series 2600, which his superior insisted on calling the 'Black Box'.

As Bryan negotiated the change in carpet quality at the inter-office doorway, Sir Anthony Steele was turning his newspaper to the day's runners. He had already retrieved his form cassette and a small notepad from his gorgeous desk. Bryan parked the mini-computer beside his superior's antique and left by the door to the corridor.

A fortunate lift connection took him down three floors to the second without delay.

Bryan was not sure quite what would happen when Sir Anthony ran his horse selection program but he was certain that the gallide processing modules would not have appreciated the gentle warming that they had received from the flame of his cigarette lighter.

Paul Bryan was ambitious but very fair. He had delivered

his warning.

If Sir Anthony had taken the time to hear him out, his boss would have learned that the series 2600 mini-computer figured on the list of devices suspected of being capable of self-destruction to evade guarantees.

The dents inflicted in moments of frustration on the flanks of their *Black Box* by Sir Anthony's hand-made shoes would be clear evidence of external damage. His coming accident would be a tragedy. But perhaps his successor at the *Department of Consumer Interests* would have more vision. Perhaps he would be able to spot a threat and have the sense to neutralise it before it became a real danger.

As he pushed open the plate glass door to the computer section, Paul Bryan heard a faint bang. It could have been a backfire in the street. Or it could have come from above. And then he heard a distant bell; which sounded suspiciously like a fire alarm...



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20. The Coventry Box

Arthur Franks was what you might call a part-time professional, where crime was concerned. He was a joiner by trade, a skilled craftsman in wood, who could work as surely by eye as his less gifted colleagues could stumble along with the aid of measures and straight edges.

For beer money, he repaired antique furniture. A terribly respectable old chap, who was known as Sir Alf in the trade, paid cash for good work and silence. The more a damaged antique became the work of Artie Franks, the greater his silence bonus – which covered his own activities and those of Sir Alf's nephew, Tommy, who stained and varnished repairs to give the restored article 'visual continuity'.

Yet an above average income, sweetened by his untaxed bonuses, failed to keep Artie Franks solvent. Money seemed to evaporate from his pockets. And so he resorted to the occasional spot of gentle burglary to make ends meet.

He had had his eye on one particular house for some time. It was rather close to home, scarcely a quarter of a mile from the modest semi which he had inherited when his father had died. But the house lay on his usual route when he took an after-dark stroll for fresh air, or a Sunday afternoon ramble to shake his dinner down. He was thirty-eight years old, unmarried, something of a loner at times, and he took his walks partly as a concession to the need for exercise and partly to size up prospective targets.

The house was detached, one of a row on the eastern side of a fairly steep hill. Each long front garden was a pair of

untidy terraces linked by concrete steps. Elder Road looked as though it had been designed to test postmen to destruction.

Frequent observations had told Artie that 'The Meadows' was not a family home. When he looked beyond the white gate set in an undisciplined beech hedge, he never saw the toys – footballs, bicycles, and the like – which decorated the gardens of neighbours. Loud, teenage music never forced its way from behind the grime-mellowed, red brick walls. The pattern of lights after dark or on dull afternoons always suggested occupation by one person. The place looked as though it would reward handsomely a visit in the early hours of a dark morning. But it was uncomfortably close to home.

It was a Wednesday night in the middle of a cold April. Clouds that threatened, but had not yet delivered rain, deprived Artie of a view of the Moon and Venus in the east, and Jupiter and Mars to the south. He was feeling the pinch again. A catalogue of his troubles ran through his mind as he set out on a nocturnal stroll.

His car needed two new tyres. The reminder for his television licence had arrived that morning. An instalment of rates was due. And Sir Alf was on a working holiday in France, which meant that there would be no tax-free foreigners to help him out.

Breaking and entering was the last thing on his mind as he turned onto Elder Road near the top of the hill. But he couldn't help noticing that The Meadows was in darkness as he trailed past the white gate with its cast iron letters and the number '38' in black.

He found his feet taking him to the left half-way down the hill, and left again at the next junction.

Shall I or shan't I? he thought as he completed another side of the square, which would bring him back to Elder Road.

Two cars hurried up the hill at reckless speed. There was only Artie Franks out of doors to see them. A latch clicked gently. The white gate swung inwards on well-greased hinges. Astounded by his own audacity, Artie advanced to the frost-cracked, concrete steps. He was six feet above pavement level when he reached the house and slipped round to the back.

Every window that overlooked him was curtained or in darkness. A strangely pleasant feeling of detached confidence crept over him – as though he were watching somebody else taking the risk of a completely spur-of-the-moment job.

The catch slipped free with a minimum of resistance. Artie slid the lower window up cautiously. After checking behind the curtain for plants on the window sill and obstacles against the wall, he clambered in to the room. He left the window open, preserving an escape route in case of emergency.

The house was still. It felt empty.

Artie stood for a minute in the heavy darkness, nerving himself to proceed. Then he took a small pen-torch from a pocket and shone the spot of light around the room. It was much bigger than the largest room of his semi. Bookcases lined the wall to his right. Three armchairs faced the television. A door stood ajar in the opposite corner of the room. The candlestick on the telephone table by the door looked like silver. He crossed the room to investigate.

The owner of the house was prepared for a winter power black-out. Artie removed a healthy stub of candle and set it on the table beside the matchbox. He was examining the candlestick for hallmarks when a voice spoke.

Artie spun round, his torch beam flying unerringly to one of the armchairs – which had been unoccupied moments earlier.

The old man was slumped in a totally relaxed posture, almost as if he was pleased to see an intruder.

“You really didn’t see me,” said the man in a slow, heavy voice, which was filled with wonder.

Artie just gaped at him, frozen to the spot.

“I can’t put up any resistance,” continued the man. “I’ve had a coronary.”

“I’ll get you an ambulance,” Artie said automatically, shocked from the role of burglar to that of Samaritan.

The telephone behind the matchbox had keys instead of a dial; as if designed for gloved fingers.

“Emergency,” said a calm, almost casual female voice. “Which service do you require?”

“Ambulance,” said Artie. When the connection had been made, he gave the address. Then he was asked for his name. “I’m a neighbour,” he improvised. “You’d better hurry up. The old bloke’s had a coronary. He’s in a bad way.” Then he replaced the receiver.

“You’re probably wondering why you didn’t see me,” said the man in the chair. “Even though you shone your torch right at me. It works.”

“What works?” asked Artie, intrigued.

“My disrupter.” The man was holding a two-ounce tobacco tin.

“Think you should be talking?” Artie frowned, fixing the tin with his torch.

“I have to tell someone,” returned the man. “It acts as a repellent. It interferes with brain processes. The ones that decide which part of an overwhelming mass of sensory information is to be acted on. Stored in long and short term

memory. And which is to be ignored. It made you ignore me.”

“Oh!” said Artie. Nothing else came to mind.

Artie moved over to the chair and picked up the tobacco tin when the man pushed it a fraction of an inch along the arm towards him. There was a black, sliding switch in the side of the base, set to a minus sign scratched in to the plating. From every other angle, it looked like a normal, two-ounce tobacco tin.

“What does it do again?” He asked.

There was no reply. His torch beam met an unwavering stare. Artie Franks realized that he was standing, uninvited, in someone’s home; that the someone was dead; and that awkward questions would be asked when the ambulance arrived.

He clicked the light on as he left the room, and the hall light as he opened the front door, leaving them on as beacons to guide the ambulancemen. The tobacco tin was still in his gloved hand when he reached his home.

After a stiff drink of British vodka to steady his nerves, Artie investigated his prize. He used a twopence piece to pop the lid from the tin – to find a collection of electronic components, which looked like the guts of a calculator, and a small battery.

He was able to identify the multi-pronged, black oblongs as the homes of silicon chips. There were three in the top layer of components; perhaps more if he cared to find a screwdriver and investigate deeper. The device looked much too complicated for the likes of Artie Franks.

He pushed the switch towards the plus sign scored in to the metal. Nothing happened. There could have been a faint humming from the box of tricks, but it could equally well have been his imagination. He didn’t know what to expect

because he hadn't understood the explanation of the device's function. Wondering whether it was worth keeping, he switched it off, replaced the lid and went to bed.

By the following evening, Artie had sort of convinced himself that the tobacco tin's contents had stopped him seeing their creator. If the old bloke had been dying after a heart attack, he had to have been sitting in his chair when Artie had climbed in to the room. Yet Artie hadn't noticed him until he had spoken up. It was almost as if the box had made him invisible.

There was a way to test this theory without making too much of a fool of himself. Artie tucked the tobacco tin in to his anorak pocket and headed for the main road. Just before he reached *The Rising Sun*, he pushed the switch. The pub was less than a quarter full. He reached the bar and called a greeting to the landlord. He was ignored. He tried to catch the eyes of the barmaid. They looked right through him.

He stood at the bar for ten minutes. He could see himself in the mirrors, so he wasn't invisible. But by a tacit conspiracy, the rest of the world had sent him to Coventry. Life rolled on around him as if he were a streamlined object in a river. Nobody bumped in to him. When people looked in his direction, they failed to see him. As far as both customers and bar staff were concerned, Artie Franks was not there. It was a wonderful yet unnerving experience.

The novelty wore off. He turned towards the door to the street. People in motion avoided him effortlessly, adjusting their pace to pass safely around an invisible obstacle. He switched off the device in the car park and returned to the pub. The landlord spotted him as he pushed through the double doors and began to pull a pint of mild. Artie Franks was a member of the human race again.

He tested the device again at lunchtime the following day. He had slipped out of work to buy some cigarettes at the nearby supermarket, where they gave threepence off. The sounds of cash registers in operation attracted his larcenous attention as he headed for the cigarette booth. Reaching in to his anorak pocket, he slid the black switch to 'plus'. Then he stopped in front of a woman with a shopping trolley and stared at her.

She manoeuvred around him automatically, as if he were one of the stacks of cardboard cartons in the aisle. His faith reaffirmed, he hurried to the check-out counters.

A till clicked open. Artie hovered indecisively. When it opened again, he reached past the girl's hands as she scooped out change and removed a five pound note.

Suppose the battery runs out!

His fist clenched guiltily, crushing the note with a terrifying rustle. The cash drawer closed again and the girl began to click up the next set of purchases.

Artie raced for the exit. He had to lean against the front window of the supermarket to recover from his panic, sweating, his legs trembling. Life in the street continued without him. He had just pulled off the perfect crime.

After mopping his face with a crumpled handkerchief, he started to walk back along the street. He remembered to switch the device off before he entered the newsagent's, where he bought a new battery and a packet of cigarettes with his stolen five pound note.

The success of his lunchtime raid set Artie Franks thinking. Any accessible money was his for the taking, and at no risk. He could have emptied the till in the supermarket instead of taking one miserable fiver. He could have emptied every till in the place and just strolled away from the inevitable

confusion, and he should have left the device switched on and just helped himself to a packet of cigarettes and a battery in the newsagent's.

He was rich. All he had to do was actually assemble his fortune. Yet the very certainty of his wealth turned its gathering in to an unwelcome chore. He was like a prospector who, having achieved his life's ambition and stumbled across a field of gold nuggets, was too idle to pick them up.

On his way home, he had to pass his bank. He noticed that the door of the concrete and glass building was closed, but that the lights were on. Artie Franks felt himself come alive suddenly. This was where the money was kept. His money. The route to his wildest dreams lay beyond the bank's green door – which began to open as he looked at it.

Automatically his hand reached in to his anorak pocket and pushed the black switch on the tobacco tin. Without stopping to think, he raced for the door, swept along by an excitement which swamped his earlier, jaded views on money-grubbing.

Two of the cashiers were leaving. Artie slipped past them before the large blonde pulled the door shut. He was in!

The familiar counter and its partition wall faced him. There was a door at the right hand end. It opened when he turned the handle. He could see the manager sitting on one of the desks in the office area, discussing something with the tall bloke with the slight squint. Artie strolled past them with all the confidence of someone who knows that he has a brand new battery in his tobacco tin.

He knew where the strongroom was. Customers had had a view of it until five years earlier, when the layout of the bank had been remodelled. The door was massive and

painted pale green. He stepped in to a space the size of his bathroom at home and paused to gloat.

Disbelief and disappointment rocked him. There was no money! He was surrounded by files. His eyes darted around the strongroom frantically.

There it was.

He felt weak with relief as he penetrated deeper and saw the neat bundles of notes. They were stacked on shelves along the back wall.

Artie stared at his money, counting with his eyes, telling himself that he should have brought a carrier bag, yet confident that he would manage somehow to cram everything in to his pockets.

The crisp bundles of coloured paper drew his eyes and glued him to the spot, like a magnificent work of art or a pornographic film.

An ear-popping increase in pressure, darkness and a dull clang broke his trance. They had shut him in! Artie leapt for the door and began to pound on the smooth expense of metal with both fists, shouting at the top of his voice.

His hands were pulpy masses, smearing the door with unseen stickiness in the clinging darkness, and his voice had become a hoarse croak before he remembered the device in the tobacco tin. By then, it was too late. He was alone in the bank. The vault was unventilated, but it contained enough air to support an average but inactive human comfortably for at least twenty-four hours. Artie Franks had lost all sense of time in the smothering blackness of the strongroom.

As he slumped, exhausted, against the steel door, he attributed his breathing difficulties to stale air, not terror induced by confinement. In that awful isolation, his mind decided that he could not survive until morning and gave up the struggle. For him, the long, black night would never end.



21. The Maze Game

It was Saturday night. The most popular game show on holovision was approaching its climax. Three dimensional images, live from the Highway Hill studios of Britannia HV, were holding the eyes of twenty-nine million viewers. *The Maze Game* was said to be compulsive viewing; and not always by its sponsors.

Two eager contestants were standing beside scantily-clad studio girls at adjacent sides of the octagonal maze, which dominated the purpose-built studio. Two other hopefuls had already rejoined the audience, having failed the preliminary puzzle games. Tony Bruck, the smiling Master of Ceremonies, was concluding his build up.

"And now, friends," he beamed, flashing perfect, capped teeth at the holovision camera, "we come to the moment we've all been waiting for. And the big chance for Roger or Jim." He made an extravagant gesture in the general direction of the two survivors of the elimination rounds.

"For the benefit of new viewers," he twitched an extra millimetre onto his smile to suggest that everyone watched his show, thus making new viewers unlikely, "and to remind our two clever heat winners; they have four minutes to find a way through the maze to the centre. When he gets there, this week's winner will ring the golden bell and earn himself the magnificent sum of four thousand pounds!"

A burst of applause surged from the audience in response to a cue from behind the cameras.

"Nobody knows the path to the centre of the maze," added

the MC when the noise had died down a little. "Nobody but Mike, our almost human computer." He made his stock elaborate gesture towards an impressive display of winking, coloured lights to stage right. "And Mike, obeying signals from his random impulse circuit, will change the shape of the maze every twenty seconds by raising and lowering barrier walls. Perhaps bringing Roger and Jim closer, perhaps farther away from the golden bell. Well, we're ready. Mike is ready. Are you ready, Roger and. Jim?"

The two men nodded and showed him nervous grins. One was blond, forty, slightly hearty, and a family man. The other was tallish, dark, single, in his early twenties and a sailing enthusiast. The contest was age and experience against an impetuous youth.

"Against the clock and against each other," said Tony Bruck. "Gentlemen, you have four minutes to find a way through the maze. Four minutes to win four thousand pounds, and here's the count down."

The audience chanted with him. "Four! Three! Two! One! Maze!"

The studio girls opened golden doors in the matt black walls of the maze. One was tall, blonde, nineteen and almost dressed in red. Her colleague was a brunette and dressed in green, but they were virtually interchangeable.

Roger and Jim entered the maze. Audience factions raised a cheer for each of them. The black walls became vision screens to show views of the contestants from overhead cameras. A central display showed the walls of the maze as white lines and the contestants as a red and a green dot.

It was the custom of the MC, lovable Tony Bruck, who sold breakfast cereal and soft drinks to the masses at other times, to joke with his audience and solicit their cheers until the fifth maze change. Then he withdrew gradually, allowing the

natural fascination of the game to grip the audience.

But suddenly, within seconds of the third change, one of his most popular catch-phrases fell completely flat. In a moment of panic, the MC realized that the audience were buzzing among themselves, and some were pointing towards the central maze diagram.

"What's going on?" he muttered over his throat microphone to the control room, maintaining his usual bright, ventriloquist smile for the public.

"Count the marker spots, duckie," whispered in to his left ear. "Mike's having a brainstorm."

There were three moving spots of light on the maze diagram – one red, one green and one yellow.

"Well, folks," smiling Tony Bruck improvised in to his hand microphone, seeking to regain control of the mob, "I do believe our Mike has joined in the game tonight."

"Can't see anyone else in there," said the show's director in to Bruck's left ear. "Nothing from the overheads. Just the two bodies we started with."

"Yes, Mike's there in the maze in spirit if not in body," quipped the MC. "Let's give a big cheer for the yellow spot and see if that'll satisfy him."

The audience cheered and laughed in a mighty roar. But the yellow marker spot failed to take the hint. It continued its erratic progress through the maze.

"What the bloody hell's going on?" demanded jovial Tony Bruck – smiling, but through clenched teeth.

The audience were watching only the phantom yellow marker spot. Worse, they had started to cheer for it, which was having a misleading effect on the genuine contestants. Roger and Jim were assuming that the cheers were for them to indicate that they were on the right track, and they kept finding themselves lost in blind alleys.

"I don't know what's going on, duckie," complained the voice in the MC's earpiece. "Ask Mike."

The deeper voice of the show's technical director came onto the talk-back line. "I ran every check two hours ago and they came up perfect. But now, our friendly computer insists that his heat sensors can see three bodies in the idiot puzzle. Which is one more than the rest of us can see."

A buzz from the audience turned Tony Bruck's attention to the central maze diagram. The red spot and the yellow phantom were converging. They were both heading for the same alley in the maze. A thick silence spread through the studio audience.

Displaying great imagination, Peggy Wells, the director, selected a view of blond Roger's ruddy face, which was set in an expression of intense concentration. Roger turned a corner. His eyebrows lifted, his jaw dropped and his whole face opened in to an expression of total surprise.

Then a wall rose between the red and yellow spots, and an avenue to the heart of the maze opened suddenly.

"The bell! The bell!" chanted the audience, returning to the point of the game. Roger just stared at a featureless, white wall for ten seconds. Then the message penetrated. He took a couple of halting steps, then he charged for the golden bell. A mighty cheer burst from the studio audience when he hurdled a rising wall clumsily.

Like every previous winner, Roger seized the handle in both hands and jerked the bell up and down, his face locked in to an idiot grin of triumph.

With a low rumble, the entire maze retracted in to the studio floor to reveal Roger ringing the bell and Jim standing about five metres from him, looking lost and trying to hide his bitter disappointment behind a brave mask.

Studio girls appeared on the scene to whisk the loser in to

oblivion and to extract the bell from the winner's grasp before he shook it to pieces.

The usual thunderous applause rolled up to the presentation of the cheque for four thousand pounds, peaked again at Tony Bruck's wind up, and continued as a background to closing credits. Wind-down staff appeared to usher the audience from the studio – efficiently but without apparent haste.

The MC stiffened his brilliant smile. He always exchanged a few words of private congratulation with the winner of *The Maze Game* and his or her family. It was good for his image as a caring personality. It was an extra effort on this Saturday night. His show had come perilously close to disaster.

"Oh, hello, Tone," whined Roger, the victor, in a Midlands accent when the great man appeared. "I was just telling the wife. I saw this bloke in the maze. But the wife says she couldn't see him on the screen. But your computer did." The words poured out in a rapid, excited stream.

"I think Mike's been having a little joke with us," said the MC easily, waving the show's technical director over to help him out.

"No, I saw him, Tone," persisted Roger as Charles Unwin dragged himself away from the computer. "As clear as I see you. He had a sort of long coat or cloak on. And a funny hat. Now I think about it, he looked a bit like Dick Turpin. Know what I mean?"

"What do you think, Charles?" The MC put on a relaxed but fragile smile.

The technical director shrugged. "It's probably a ghost. A hologram reflection from one of the other studios. It does happen sometimes."

"He looked real enough to me." Roger looked relieved now that he had been given a proper technical explanation.

"He was walking towards me. Then he sort of turned sideways and disappeared."

"Well, we all know how real holograms appear," smiled the technical director. "Is it real, or is it HV?" he added, quoting the advertising slogan for one of the holovision set rental companies.

"Yeah, right," grinned Roger. "Well, thanks for everything, Tone."

"Our pleasure. And keep watching us, eh?" Tony Bruck maintained his professional smile, even though it wounded him deeply to be called 'Tone' in such a matey fashion.

"Oh, yes, Tone," whined Mrs. Roger. "We'll be watching next week. To see what Mike gets up to."

Tony Bruck watched one of the studio girls usher them away, then he hurried to the control room, trailing Charles Unwin, the technical director.

"Right, what the bloody hell was that about?" he demanded of the room in general. "I nearly had a bloody circus on my hands. And which studio's taping Dick Turpin, or something on bloody highwaymen?"

"Highwaymen?" repeated Adrian Hall, the show's producer.

"And what was that idiot computer up to?" Bruck continued without a pause. "Phantom spots in the maze, for God's sake! If anything like this ever happens again, there's going to be a few faces missing when we do the next show." The edge boiled off his fury, he stormed to his dressing room, slamming the control room door behind him.

"The piece of glass in that door has a charmed life," muttered Shirl, one of the production assistants.

"I think Sir's not pleased," added the technical director with clinical detachment, his tone suggesting that a swift kick in the right place would do a world of good.

"Ideas, anyone?" invited the producer, polishing a pair of large spectacles.

Stony, baffled silence met his words.

Adrian Hall retired behind his bronze-rimmed spectacles and fixed each person in turn with a penetrating stare. "Well, we'd better come up with some. And be sharp about it. Tony can chuck a lot of weight about. And we'll be underneath when it hits the ground."

Two hours later, a dispirited trio gathered around a table in the second floor canteen. "Anyone any farther on?" invited Peggy Wells, *The Maze Game's* director.

"I'll tell you something odd," said Shirl, a stately and heavily married production assistant. "You know Tony was going on about highwaymen? Well, I checked around. There's nothing like that in production here. And you know that open day they're having next week? I had to go through the information package on this place to make sure it's up to date. Did you know Highway Hill's a contraction of *Highwayman's Hill*? That they used to hang highwaymen just up the road from here a couple of hundred years ago?"

"I'll tell you something else strange," added Charles Unwin, the technical director. "We ran a full program of tests on Mike and he's working perfectly. But when I had a look at his inputs, I found he's programmed to track any temperature difference, not just a positive one."

"And what does that mean in English?" Peggy Wells drew delicate eyebrows together in a frown.

"As far as I can tell," explained the technical director, "the yellow spot that Mike threw up wasn't a warm, human body. It was a moving cold spot."

"You mean he was tracking a real ghost?" gasped the director, horrified.

Charles Unwin just shrugged. If he had been asked before the transmission whether he believed in ghosts, then he would have delivered an emphatic negative. Now, he wasn't so sure.

"Are we going to have it exorcised?" asked Shirl, not sure how seriously to take the discussion.

"I don't think that would be a terribly good idea," countered Charles Unwin.

"I agree," nodded Peggy Wells. "A haunted studio story could bounce right back at us. Just as a matter of interest, any volunteers to break the news to Adrian? Or Tony? I thought not," she added to end a pause. "We're going to have to keep this to ourselves. And take precautions for the future. Any ideas, Charles?"

The technical director slipped in to a professional frown. "For a start, we're going to have to reprogram Mike. No more cold spots on the display. And it might be an idea if we reprogrammed the maze shifts to a random time interval. So that Mike can guide the contestants away from our ghost."

"That sounds like you really are expecting Dick Turpin to come back," commented Shirl.

"If he's appeared once, he can do it again," said Peggy Wells. "And we can't allow a long-dead bandit to hold up the nation's number one HV show."

■ ■ ■

22. “Coughers To The Right, Please...”

I don't know whether you've ever been to one, but when the dear old Beeb say they're giving a concert before an 'invited' audience, the occasion isn't always as exclusive as it sounds. At any rate, the lunchtime concerts they do from time to time in the main hall at the university seem to be open to just about anyone who cares to attend.

I did see them stop one bloke once, but as he was about ninety and he looked as if he'd spent most of his years living rough, I wasn't too surprised.

But there could be a lot more to that anonymous gathering of humanity known as an audience than you might suspect at first glance. My suspicions in this direction were aroused at the last concert we attended. I arrived earlier than early, if you see what I mean. And for once, my dear wife wasn't waiting in the vestibule wearing that subtle smile – the one that asks, 'Are you really sure you're not late?'

I chased up and down the stairs to satisfy myself that she wasn't lurking on the gallery. Then I lit a cigarette and looked around for somewhere to put the ash. As my wife will tell you, I have a talent for getting my priorities reversed. I ended up beside what looked like a white umbrella stand filled with whitish sand. A couple of filters and a wisp of cellophane were there ahead of my contribution.

A strange feeling of irrational impatience always twangs my nerves whenever I'm waiting for Frances beside the door to a concert hall or a theatre. My sensible half knows that there's plenty of time, and that my wife will arrive at any

moment, guilt on her face but a laugh in her eyes. Any of our close friends will tell you we're always playing games. This one is called 'late-manship', or the art of convincing your partner that to arrive second is to be horribly late. But when I arrive first, the sight of people slipping in to the hall to claim all the best seats fills me with a ridiculous conviction that the *House Full* card will go up while I'm standing there, flicking ash onto pearly sand.

On the afternoon in question, I began, quite naturally, to cast envious glances at the lucky people moving past me. One of the maroon double doors had been locked open. An oldish man in a dark suit was standing beside it. The fabric reflected the vestibule lights when he showed me his back at a certain angle. His long face was folded in to an expression of concentration as he scanned the ranks of approaching music lovers for undesirables – not an easy task when students are concerned.

And then I noticed something. There were no tickets for the concert, but a couple of people had shown the old boy what looked like a season ticket in a plastic wallet. And he had returned a smile and a greeting; like a faithful old retainer at the door of a club.

My curiosity aroused, I was just about to move closer to try to get a look at one of the season tickets when a blunt object prodded in to my back.

"Okay, buster. This is a stick up," growled in to my right ear.

"So you got here at last," I said. "I was beginning to think you'd got the date mixed up."

Guilty but smiling, Frances took my arm. "You look like you've been here since yesterday. Are we going in?"

I pushed my cigarette in to the silvery sand and headed for the door. A rather under-nourished, sickly type cut in ahead

of us. He showed one of the walleted season tickets with one hand and coughed explosively in to the other.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the old fellow at the maroon doors. Then he added something that sounded very like, "Coughers to the right, please."

My attention locked onto the weedy sort, who was wearing a thick jersey, a jacket and an overcoat on a fairly warm afternoon. I allowed Frances to pilot me through the door and in to the hall. She has a talent for finding us somewhere decent to sit. Another old chap in a shiny suit intercepted the season ticket holder as he stepped in to the hall. They exchanged greetings, then the usher guided the invalid to the block of seats to the right of the central aisle.

"Hey!" said a voice. I became aware of a fist drumming lightly on my ribs. "Remember you're with someone," chuckled Frances.

"Sorry, love. I wasn't ignoring you deliberately," I apologised to her in the intimate mutter that we reserve for theatres.

"Which one are you admiring?" Frances murmured. "The blonde with the legs or the brunette with the shoulders?"

"Where?" I allowed my eyes to focus. The blonde in the blue dress had commandeered an aisle seat, which allowed her to cross her legs, right over left, and show both of them off to me. A row behind her and several seats in, I spotted the brunette. She was almost wearing a little black dress, which showed off the vaccination craters on her left arm and acres of creamy shoulder.

"Go on, what are you looking at?" Frances invited with a frown.

"Nothing, really," I explained. "I was thinking, actually."

"About what? Or whom?" my dear wife asked suspiciously.

We play the jealousy game occasionally. It's supposed to force your partner not to take you for granted. After only two years together, we play it for fun rather than seriously.

"I'm not too sure I've pinned anything down yet," I was too preoccupied to realize that there was a game on.

"Let me know if you come up with anything earth-shattering." Frances sensed my abstraction. She opened the secret world of her handbag. "Fancy a mint?"

"Thanks." I unwrapped a boiled sweet.

"I'm sure we've seen her before," Frances remarked, pointing discreetly to a well-built, fortyish woman in a red-spotted summer dress. Her cheeks were ruddy and her shiny, black handbag could have been sold as a small suitcase.

"As far as I can remember," I told her, "you were quite rude about her yellow tent."

"Oh, yes! I remember now," giggled Frances. "About two months ago. She had that amazingly squeaky cough that you refused to believe was genuine."

Coughers to the right, please, flitted through my mind. The old bloke in the shiny suit looked like a midget next to the heroic creation in red-spotted, white cotton. I watched him pick a white card off a seat, which must have groaned in protest when the tent lady sank her generous rump onto it. Buzzing in the audience, assisted by assorted squeaks and rumbles as the orchestra tuned up, drowned the cry of an outraged piece of furniture.

I watched several more special people take up positions in various parts of the audience. If coughers belonged on the right, what did they do on the left? I asked myself.

Then the time of the broadcast arrived. I shifted tracks in my mind. When there is an open microphone and an audience mainly of students, I always wonder whether

someone will submit to a devilish impulse to perform. It could be something crude, something witty, or even an obscure slogan. The content of the shouted message is unimportant. All that counts is a chance to ask afterwards, 'Did you hear me on Radio Three?'

The opening announcement passed off smoothly and the concert began. Frances enjoyed it. I could tell that from the way she propped her head on my shoulder and followed the tunes in a barely audible hum. I kept thinking about *Coughers to the right* – even when they were hacking all around us.

Afterwards, we retired up the road to the *Prince of Wales' Feathers* for a drink and a meal. The bank owed Frances an afternoon off and I had no more lectures that day. Armed with a pint apiece and two plates of sandwiches, we found ourselves a quiet corner. We usually have a big breakfast on concert days and a mid-morning snack, but my stomach was rumbling in protest and gurgles were sliding from left to right and back again. From the way her eyes were fixed on her chicken salad sandwiches, I could tell that Frances was just as ready for food.

We ate and drank in a reflective silence. Then Frances fixed her large, dark eyes on me and asked, "So have you worked it out? What was on your mind?"

"It's nothing earth-shattering," I told her. "Just something to do with your tent lady. And the bloke who went in just ahead of us. I could have sworn the bloke on the door told him, 'Coughers to the right, please.'"

"You what?" laughed Frances.

"It just seemed as though they were importing a few coughers in to the concert," I explained.

"What on earth for?" mocked my wife. "I'd have thought you'd get plenty in any average gathering of alleged music lovers."

"Ah, but these are trained specialists." I began to develop my fantasy. "I think the BBC plant them in the audience to stop people recording live broadcasts. After all, who's going to want to keep a fine performance if there's someone dying on the third row during the quiet passages? Or someone with a streaming cold sneezing and honking in to a hankie in the pauses?"

"You could edit that out."

"Ah, but the memory would linger on. When they reached that bit, it would destroy the performance for any dedicated music lover. Imagining the bloke in front praying the bloke with the cold doesn't miss his handkerchief and spray the back of his neck."

"You come up with some pretty revolting thoughts at times." Frances pulled a face.

I responded with an evil chuckle. Then I remembered to mention the season tickets. Frances frowned in to her beer for a moment, then she grinned.

"Perhaps they're friends of the orchestra. With passes to get good seats. The tent lady might be the conductor's mum."

"She's remarkably well-preserved if she is. Today's conductor couldn't give you much change out of fifty."

"Perhaps they're security people. A BBC version of the SAS. Ready to leap onto any troublemakers when they're on the air. That tent lady could crush anarchists to a pulp two at a time."

"Cliffy North reckons they have snipers hiding behind the organ pipes for that."

"That handbag of hers could be full of cough sweets," added Frances.

"To make her cough?" I returned to my theme. "All right, if you're not going to believe in my coughers, you've got to

admit you've noticed something very similar. When we listen to comedy shows on the radio. I reckon we'd know half the average audience if they laughed to introduce themselves, instead of shaking hands and exchanging names."

"Always assuming they're actually real people and not a recording."

"The BBC cheating?" I protested. "But think of the possibilities. You could make anything sound really great just by careful selection of your audience."

"You couldn't want to fill an audience with coughers," said Frances, playing along. "You'd never hear the music. And too many distinctive laughs would destroy your credibility."

"No, you'd seed your audience with stars. The rest would be reactors."

"Nuclear powered, no doubt," scoffed Frances.

"But you'd have to select your reactors carefully, according to the occasion. If you surround an irritating laugh with hostile reactors, you'll destroy the atmosphere of the whole show."

"Unless you're trying to create tension for a dramatic occasion," Frances suggested. "Some rotten person mocking the good guy."

"Good point." I nodded. "And you'd have to grade your reactors. Surround a good laugh with passive reactors to spread a mellow glow of contented enjoyment. A pocket of non-stop, screaming 'actives' would bring everything grinding to a full stop. Until the tent lady flattened them."

"You'd need applauders too. In case the show started to drag. People who'll clap anything. So the listening millions think they've missed something good through their own stupid inattention."

"And people to express surprise for indoor sports like

snooker and bowls. I think you'd have to classify them by direction of breath."

"What?" said Frances blankly.

"You'd have *whoofers*, who gasp outward," I demonstrated. "Or *suckers*, who specialize in the well known sharp intake of breath."

"There's a whole profession in there somewhere," laughed Frances. "There should be a union for them. The National Association of Reactors, Whoofers, Suckers, and Coughers."

"They'd probably string together a title that gives them a more pronounceable acronym," I mused. "I wonder if I could get in? It sounds a good way to stretch a mature student's miserable grant."

"I shouldn't think so," Frances said regretfully. "You probably have to be recruited, like spies. After all, the broadcasting people would never admit such a thing exists."

"We could always try getting some tickets for recordings," I suggested. "Then I could demonstrate my talents and hope to be discovered."

"And what are you going to be?"

"Guess," I invited.

As Frances thought it over, I began to regret the offer. I could tell that the reaction brewing behind my dear wife's large, brown eyes wasn't going to be terribly flattering. But it looked as though I'd invented a new game.



23. Real Time [Dominoes]

The River Thames was an oily, grey expanse, shot with patches of brilliant light. High and summer bright, the sun hovered beyond the Oval cricket ground like a beacon set to guide spectators to the Test Match. The minimal shadows cast by regularly spaced plane trees fell the wrong way, shading traffic on the road instead of broiling human beings.

One man did not appear to notice the heat. He seemed unaware of the exhaust fumes gathering in the air to assault, irritate, and desiccate noses and throats. His suit was a cunning blend of blue and green which admitted to being neither colour. It set him apart from more lightly dressed tourists. A black bowler with a curly brim, an umbrella carried in the manner of a sword stick and a briefcase in black leather-cloth and satin-finished aluminium combined to suggest that he was a businessman of the buccaneering sort.

His face was deceptive. The lines that were the rightful property of a forty eight-year-old face tended not to show when he held his face in a mask of concentration. As he ascended six worn, stone steps to a revolving door, there was an economical grace to his movements, which suggested that he spent very little time polishing a boardroom chair.

A long-case clock began to chime the half hour, leading Big Ben, as the revolving door decanted him in to the lobby of a six storey office building. Following a darker trail on the dark green carpet, he headed for the reception desk.

“Good morning, Major Dansby,” said a softly spoken,

headmasterly type with snowy hair and a nicotine and grey moustache.

“Good, George?” returned the Major, who was the head of the department’s courier section.

“Ah!” said George significantly. He accepted an angular signature in his log book, and added the time in green ball point. George was the department’s barometer. He would be set to ‘stormy’ until further notice.

“Thanks, George,” nodded Major Dansby when a door on his right clicked open. He entered a corridor as a messenger reached the reception desk.

“Good morning, Mr. Wells,” said George in a sombre tone, accepting a large manilla envelope.

“Morning, George,” said the young man. “Was that old Dansby I saw? Wearing his skull face?”

“The Major did look a trifle concerned,” George admitted as he signed a receipt book.

“That means trouble for someone,” remarked the messenger. “Unless he’s in it. ‘Cause the Union caught the head of the courier section doing his troops out of a job.”

At the end of the corridor, Major Dansby pushed an identity card in to a slot in the wall. Sensors read the data on the magnetic stripe embedded in the plastic wafer. Twin doors slid apart to reveal a lift.

Dansby touched the lowest panel on the control board and descended to sub-level three.

Revealing, shadowless lights managed to leach most of the colour from pastel orange corridor walls. Each of the nine office doors was steel, hidden behind white plastic laminate. Major Dansby thrust his identity card in to the wall slot beside room 913. Smoothly and noiselessly, a wall swallowed steel.

The man at the desk looked up as the door slid back in to

position, then glanced at his watch. "You've made good time, Major," he remarked.

"I think we can skip the preliminaries, Olly," Dansby threw over his shoulder as he arranged briefcase, bowler, and umbrella on a waist-high bookcase. "The security curtain around this job has been lifted just enough for them to tell me Maggie Clement's back. I've also heard something went wrong. What have they done to her?"

Ian Olliet tugged at the end of his nose to chase away an itch before replying. "She's alive, she's here, but she can't report."

"Lost her memory?" said the Major sourly. "So what does Dr. Jenson say?"

"Mostly, 'I told you so,'" said Olliet.

"That man's a pathological liar," growled Dansby. "You'd think a head-shrinker would be able to diagnose his own brand of deviation. *I told you so?* All we've ever had from him have been demands for money and equipment. And assurances we'd never regret the expenditure. All positive, no negative."

"Now he's saying he did warn us something like this would happen."

"Trying to wriggle out from under," scowled Dansby. "All right, Olly. You'd better tell me the worst."

Ian Olliet took a half full bottle of whisky and two glasses from the file drawer of his desk. As he poured, he began to explain the final chapter of what had appeared to be an excellent idea.

A world full of advanced technology conditions certain ways of thinking. The topic of information transfer turns the mind automatically to the machines that carry out this task. Radio sets can link the ends of the Earth at the speed of light. Vast

amounts of information can travel as sound and video signals on magnetic recording tape or images on ultra-fine grain photographic film as the elusive microdot. Codes become so complex in structure that they have to be created with the aid of computers and translated the same way.

In the clandestine world of intelligence-gathering, the machines become smaller and less recognizable to achieve a concealment unnecessary in the outside world. But no matter what its size, a radio transmitter in operation can be detected by a combination of advanced technology, patience and sheer good luck. And given an efficient security service, detection means elimination of both radio and its operator. Similarly, a courier with a tape recorder in his electric razor, or microfilm in her toothpaste, can be blown by a thorough search.

Dr. Paul Jenson had approached the problem of transferring intelligence information from a hostile environment to the safety of a London cellar from another angle. There is always a human factor somewhere in the chain linking machine and machine. Working from the premise that the Other Side's intelligence officers would not recognize a courier who did not require mechanical aids, Dr. Jenson had set out to create a human recording device.

He had convinced Major Dansby's superiors that it was possible to create a courier with complete access to his own memory. The end product of his training would be able to photograph complex plans in his mind after a single glance. Any spoken commentary would be remembered word for word; including the weight given to certain statements by stress or tone of voice.

Copies of documents, photographs, or recordings of secret meetings could be destroyed after passing through the hands of the courier to reduce significantly the chance of the Other

Side learning that the information had been leaked.

On returning home, the courier would be able to recite verbal material in to a tape recorder, and type out messages in cypher. Plans could be reproduced with the aid of a computer programmed to produce engineering drawings. Dr. Jenson had also claimed that significant details of photographs of military installations could be recreated in the same way.

The idea had seemed a little too good to be true to Major Dansby, but he had been able to recognize that many of his reservations stemmed from a profound distrust of the smooth Dr. Jenson.

After twenty-three years in the intelligence field, Dansby considered himself a good judge of character. Experience told him that the psychologist was skilled in the arts of manipulation of facts to suit his own purposes and swinging people to his point of view.

An exploration of the doctor's self-confidence under extreme interrogation might have set Major Dansby more at ease – told him whether he was dealing with a genius or a fraud. But that was out of the question. He had to be content with a cautious approach to Dr. Jenson's optimistic progress reports and the very convincing practical demonstrations held for the benefit of his superiors.

Maggie Clement had been selected at random from a group of volunteers. There was nothing exceptional about the guinea pig's appearance. She was neither stunningly beautiful nor appealingly helpless. In three years with Major Dansby's section, she had shown that she could be unobtrusive to the point of invisibility when things were going smoothly, and cool, capable and inventive in a crisis. In short, she was an ideal courier. Losing her services had given Major Dansby another reason to resent Dr. Jenson.

A fairly straightforward operation had been chosen as the first practical test of the *Courier Plus*, as Dr. Jenson termed his experimental subject. Maggie Clement had been sent to Geneva to pick up a list of names from a KGB agent planted in the World Health Organisation. He had seen a close colleague off on a one-way trip to Moscow and he had no desire to follow him as the ripples of a minor disaster spread outwards.

Those named on the list were not agents – rather they were sympathizers who would cooperate with the KGB for political satisfaction or financial gain. The information was intended as a demonstration of good faith and the worth of the potential defector.

Yet something had gone wrong. And it was to learn the nature of the disaster that Major Dansby had hurried back across the Atlantic, ending abruptly a liaison meeting in Washington.

Ian Olliet splashed amber liquid in to squat glasses. “Briefly, what happened was this, Major,” he said. “Your courier, Maggie Clement, made contact in Geneva as planned. As far as we can tell, things went smoothly after that. But they took her off the plane at Heathrow in some sort of cataleptic trance.”

“Did they get to her?” interrupted Major Dansby.

“No, it wasn’t the Sovyetskis,” said Olliet. “Our Dr. Jenson had a funny look on his face when he saw her, even though he wouldn’t say anything to me. So I gave his assistant a touch of the third degree. Suggested he could end up behind bars if he gave us false information or held anything back.

“Apparently, the good doctor had one or two problems during Clement’s training. But he didn’t think it worth bothering us with them. Some time ago, he noticed some-

thing odd about Clement's responses. A sort of delay between saying something to her and getting an answer. Like you get between an astronaut on the Moon and Mission Control.

"It was something to do with the mass of data that goes in to the brain every second of every day. The brain learns to block most of it out so it can concentrate on essentials. The way a clock in a room can be ticking away but you don't hear it because your brain says, 'Unimportant. Don't listen,' and blocks it out.

"But as Clement's memory got better, her blocks weakened. She was a bit like a kid with a new toy – using it all the time, even when Jenson didn't want her to play memory games. If she glanced at a shelf of books, she could remember titles, authors' names, details of the bindings, absolutely everything. And could became did. It became a sort of obsession to know her surroundings completely.

"As Jenson's assistant put it, she was letting too much in to her memory to handle it in real time. What he called a continuous present. She had to break off, check through her memories, then come back for more. At its worst, she was taking ten minutes to clear the backlog and just sort of living in short blinks."

Major Dansby's skull-face creased in to an expression of thinly controlled rage. "And he didn't think to tell us this?" he demanded.

Olliet shrugged. "Jenson thought he'd sorted it. Reinforced her sensory blocks and removed the obsession."

"And how long's she been in a coma?"

"Getting on for nine hours."

"Nine hours?! Nine bloody hours?!" repeated the Major incredulously. "Just what the hell does Jenson have to say to that?"

"He says the situation's rather more serious than what came up during Clement's training period," Olliet quoted. "But retrievable."

"Oh, he'd have to say that," scoffed the Major. "I suppose it's all Maggie Clement's fault as well?"

"Well, he is suggesting the collapse was due to a personality defect."

"Which he should have spotted," said the Major angrily. He prodded the edge of the desk with a forefinger to drive home his message. "Number onemanship time, Olly. Stick a recorder in your pocket for all future contacts with Jenson. See if you can catch him in the act of saying, 'I told you so.' Or blaming everything on a personality defect. And freeze all the reports to make sure he can't back up his claims with a few additions. If he's turned one of my operatives in to a zombie, Jenson is going to carry the can back unassisted."

"Right, Major," nodded Olliet.

"You said the situation's retrievable," Dansby added. "How?"

"I don't know whether you've ever seen one of these world record attempts on the telly," Olliet replied obliquely. "Where they set up thousands of dominoes, push one over and see how many others it can knock down? Jenson reckons a similar thing happened to Clement. If you can imagine each upright domino as a vacant memory slot, Jenson reckons the excitement of the last stage of a successful job was too much for her.

"Clement let her blocks slip and she got saturated with sights, sounds and so on. They knocked her dominoes over. Jenson reckons she's picking them up again while she's in the coma. Clearing a backlog of memory."

"But that's a never-ending job," protested the Major. "The body's always picking things up. Even when it's asleep. If

she's lost her blocks, she'll be knocking dominoes down even faster than she can pick them up."

"That's why he's got her in there, Major." Olliet turned a thumb towards the door to the next office.

Major Dansby rose smoothly from his chair and crossed the room with a purposeful stride, intent on a confrontation with Dr. Jenson.

"I think I ought to warn you..." Olliet began.

A white door slid aside. Major Dansby came to a dead stop, his face freezing in to a seamless mask. The large office was full of a huge, bright orange, inflated pool.

Totally submerged, a black diving suit floated freely in four feet of water.

The limbs were spread to give it the appearance of a sinister, four-and-a-half-pointed starfish. Umbilical tubes and cables trailed to the next office, like the wires from a large, black bomb to an exploder. The unexpected lake of orange water seemed to draw every scrap of warmth from Dansby's body.

His shoulders twitched as a shudder ran the length of his spine.

"I wanted to warn you about this," said Olliet apologetically as he caught up with Dansby. "It knocks you back a bit, seeing her like this. She's got tubes going in with air and food, and tubes going out for waste products. And sensors for pulse, respiration and so on. They've got her wired up like an astronaut."

"What have they done to her?" said Dansby weakly.

"Total sensory deprivation. Jenson reckons that's the only way to let her catch up with her dominoes. She sees nothing, hears nothing, feels nothing. Not even gravity while she's floating in the pool."

"But that can drive people insane," protested the Major.

Olliet shrugged helplessly, implying that he had no control over the situation.

"How long's she going to be like this?" persisted Dansby.

"As long as it takes. A few more minutes. Or maybe days. Jenson and his slave are in the end office, monitoring her brain waves, waiting for her to come out of it."

"But what happens when she wakes up?"

"He's going to try and keep her sedated and reinforce her blocks."

"With the prospect of this happening again if he fails?" scowled Dansby. "How's Maggie Clement going to live with something like this hanging over her head?"

"Dr. Jenson says he can sort it," said Olliet in a neutral tone.

"Dr. Jenson says a hell of a lot, but can he back it up?" demanded Major Dansby. "If he can't, I'm going to nail his hide to the wall for doing this to one of my people." Then, hiding cold, deadly anger behind a professional mask, he added, "You know, Olly, they'd have burned the good doctor at the stake as a witch three hundred years ago. I wonder if the Equipment Section have come up with a time machine yet?"

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24. The Face At The Window

I was wrenched from sleep by a shattering crash. Heart racing, my every sense straining, I lay perfectly still in the heavy gloom of my bedroom. Another terrifying detonation echoed and re-echoed immediately overhead. Rain lashed fiercely against my window. It was only a thunderstorm.

As I lay there, feeling hot and sticky, I began to wonder what had triggered my panic reaction. Had the thunderstorm set my heart pounding against my ribs; or the dream?

My dreams tend to fade pretty rapidly, but I was convinced that I had just emerged from a repeat. I had another set of memories from two days earlier of being surrounded by trees, then skating on a canal in bare feet, just sort of skimming over the surface of the water.

Somehow, in the illogical progression of a dream, I reached a house. I had a key for the front door, but it just opened before me in an entirely natural way. I found myself in a passage, heading for a door. There use someone in the room. Someone who wanted desperately to be released.

But as I approached, the door began to bulge, as though some large and dangerous animal were throwing itself against a sheet of rubber. The upper panel split from top to bottom with a violent splintering noise. And then, at the moment of greatest danger, I woke up. Naturally, the first time; unaided by a thunderstorm.

The storm blew itself out. When I slid my bedroom curtains apart, the sun was shining and the sky radiated a dazzling blue glow. The day seemed so inviting after the

violence of the night that I found myself drawn out in to it later in the morning. I strolled through the village, enjoying the clean freshness of the air.

At the crossroads, I found my feet taking me straight on instead of to the left and along my usual route around the base of Charlock Hill. Great grassy banks rose on either side of the sunken road. I entered a long, dripping tunnel. And then it struck me. Above my head was the canal.

I headed off to the left at the end of the tunnel, following a muddy path up through green-trunked trees to the canal bank. The tow path was a series of puddles of various depths, but I could keep my feet dry by sticking to the paved section beside the stone banks of the waterway.

I found myself in my own past. The canal had not seen me for perhaps twenty years. Not since I had chased sticklebacks with a sixpenny net on the end of four feet of garden cane, and collected frogspawn in a jam jar with a string handle.

The canal moved to the right in a long, gentle sweep. I was approaching the lock that stepped down from Spinner Pond's half-acre ellipse. And then, set back among the trees, opposite the second set of gates, I could see a house; *THE* house.

I knew that I was looking at the house in my dream, and I wondered what had caused my mind to release a memory fixed as a child. As I drew nearer, I began to ask myself whether its interior matched the speculations of my dream. I even paused at the start of an overgrown gravel path, which led to the right hand side of the house then circled to the back. But I spotted a face at a ground floor window. The face looked old and hostile.

I toyed with the idea of marching up to the front door and saying, "Look here, I've just had the most amazing dream about a house exactly like yours. Twice, in fact. Mind if I

come in and have a look around?" But I couldn't summon the nerve to go through with it.

Imagining my own reaction to such a lunatic request, I drifted casually on my way. About half a mile beyond Spinnow Pond, I came to a pub. I had no memory of a canal-side pub, but I concluded that it had failed to arouse much interest in my boyhood self. It was rather early but I yielded to an impulse and the dryness of my throat. I was the only customer in the cool, gloomy bar.

The landlord pulled me a pint. I felt rather sinful and Continental as I sipped beer in the morning and watched him rattling bottles onto the shelves behind the bar. Then he decided to chat. He asked whether I was an angler. I laughed and told him that I hadn't been near a stretch of water for years.

Our conversation turned to the lock-keeper's house. I was surprised to learn that it was just a rotting shell. The last occupant had been an old recluse called Carter. He had kept himself so much to himself that he had lain dead in his ground-floor bedroom for six weeks. And then some nosy kids had peered through a window and spotted him; sprawled on the floor, half way between his bed and the door.

Relatives had stripped the house of its heavy, Victorian furniture. The items that were not riddled with woodworm turned out to be valuable antiques. According to the landlord of the canal-side pub, the house was full of dry rot, wet rot, rising damp and falling ceilings. It stayed empty because you could build a nice, new, modern dwelling for what it would cost to put the crumbling wreck in to good order.

On my way home, I took another look at the house from the canal bank. Strangely, not a one of the visible windows was broken. This had led me to assume that the building was

occupied. Now, even from a range of about fifteen yards, I could see that the panes of glass were filthy, the paintwork was cracking away from dry, splintering wood and that one of the drainpipes had collapsed.

Any face seen at one of the windows had to belong to an intruder. Perhaps a tramp, or an adventurous child. It was even possible that I had seen the reflection of a cloud of suitable shape.

Two nights later, I had the dream again. I walked through a wood and skated on the lake. But this time, a face watched from a side window as I approached the house. Again, I found myself in the central passage with its rose wallpaper and deep blue carpet, on my way to let someone out of a room on the right. Again, the dark brown door began to writhe like a wild thing. Again I awoke after the panel split, but before the door could burst open.

I decided that I had to go back to the house. Perhaps if I could prove to myself that the interior did not belong in my dream, I would be able to break the chain of association and kill the nightmare.

It was a rather miserable morning. Dirty clouds heavy with rain threatened above the trees as I made my way to the canal. As I approached the front door of the house, one half of me was saying there's nothing to be afraid of, and the other half was asking how I knew. Guiltily, I prodded at the door. It sagged away from me.

I stepped in to a narrow hall, and in to my dream. The walls were grimy and peeling, but I recognised the rose-patterned paper. The blue carpet had gone. A web of leaf mould and filmy dust now covered the bare boards. And there, on my right, was the door. It was the same dark brown beneath layers of flaking varnish. The upper panel was split from top to bottom.

Without allowing myself time for thought, I pushed the door. It gave heavily. I stepped in to an empty room filled with an unpleasant smell of neglect and decay. The outside wall was alive with fungus. Dusty cobwebs trailed in the corners. Years of grime on the window turned the room in to a gloomy cave. It looked like something out of a *Hammer* film. It ponged like an ancient dustbin. I felt uneasy there, but only because I was trespassing.

The smell started to become a little too much. I turned back to the door. The floor sagged wetly. My foot plunged downwards. I pitched forward. My head struck the door. It slammed shut with enough force to shake the whole house.

I didn't knock myself out but I saw a fine display of brilliant lights for a few moments. There was a fierce pain above my left eye as I eased my foot out of the hole in the rotting boards. Treading cautiously, I took hold of the door-knob and pulled. It came away in my hand. I experienced my first jolt of panic when I heard the other doorknob bounce on the boards in the hall.

The door seemed to be jammed in its twisted frame. It opened inwards, which meant that I was on the wrong side for kicking it free. The window! I hurried across the room, then recoiled from a ghastly face. It was only my own reflection. I looked terrible and there was blood running down my face between left eye and ear.

I heaved, but nothing happened, Warped frames had locked top and bottom windows immovably shut. I was trapped.

For a moment, I experienced a sensation of great pressure, as though that stinking, crumbling house were pressing in on me. Perhaps I could break the door down, even though it seemed a lot more solid than the floor. Perhaps I could break through the floor and find a way out there. I spun round,

mind racing, looking for escape routes. Then it came to me.

Having been brought up to respect the property of others, I'm not surprised that breaking the window didn't occur to me immediately. I used my shoe, hopping on one foot, pressing back against the wall to avoid flying glass. The noise was quite frightening, and as I cleared the remaining tongues of glass from the frame to complete a safe opening, I had irrational visions of a couple of policemen waiting outside to arrest me for causing criminal damage.

The heavens opened as my feet touched the ground. I suppose I should have gone round to the front of the house and taken shelter until the rain went off, but I wanted to be away from it as quickly as possible.

My anorak received a much needed wash on the way home. I had picked up a dusting of fine, white powder from the ceiling when the door had slammed violently shut, driven by my head.

Fortunately, the rain had driven everyone indoors by the time I reached the village, I felt rather ridiculous holding a handkerchief to my head, which was bleeding freely from a tender spot just in to my hair. The rain falling in to the up-turned mouth of my sleeve and soaking its interior didn't help matters any, either.

I reached home with a bright red handkerchief. The flow of blood showed no signs of stopping. It took a couple of stitches to plug my leak. I don't think my doctor was too satisfied with an incoherent story about head-butting a door, but I was in no mood for talking. And I pleaded a very hazy memory of the incident at my next appointment,

I haven't had the dream since but it was three months before I took another stroll along the canal bank. An impulse took me straight on at the crossroads beyond the village one

afternoon. The canal looked much the same – sluggish and infested with vast quantities of green weed. But when I reached the lock, I stopped dead in my tracks. The house had gone!

I just stood there and stared. After a time, I began to take notice of what my eyes were telling me. Overgrown paths ran to a clearing among the trees and circled a low bulge of rubble, which the wood was beginning to reclaim. The house had existed. It had not been a product of my imagination.

I continued on to the pub, seeking information. Eyes followed me to the bar but I was used to that by now. I renewed my acquaintance with the landlord and mentioned the absence of the lock-keeper's house. He seemed quite pleased to be able to recite a mixture of fact and local legend, none of which had come out during our previous discussion.

Others, I learned, had seen the old and forbidding face at the side window of the house. The place was said to be haunted by Old Carter. I had trapped myself in his bedroom – the room in which he had been found dead, sprawled on the floor between his bed and the door.

Now, according to a new twist to the legend, Old Carter's ghost had escaped through his broken bedroom window. And as he no longer needed it to haunt, the house had fallen down!

Metaphysics aside, others had broken the rest of the windows within a week of my adventure in the house. And the front door had disappeared soon afterwards, presumably to become firewood. Then there had been a violent storm.

I remembered it well because gale-force winds had snapped the mast of my television aerial and I had been kept awake half the night by ghostly, metallic clankings against the chimney.

Those same winds had tumbled the chimney of the lock-

keeper's house and lifted slates like autumn leaves. In the end, the Council had condemned the building as a death trap for children. A gang of men had demolished the place and carted the rubble away, taking with them the material component of a local legend.

Apparently, they were still looking for any relatives of Old Carter in order to present them with a bill.

Then it was my turn to explain my memento of a curious dream and my investigation in to its cause. I told the landlord my doctor had shaved that part of my scalp to get at a wound. He was so fascinated by the fact that the hair had grown back pure white instead of black that he never did get around to asking how I came to injure myself. Which saved me the trouble of trotting out a pack of lies to cover up a curious and slightly embarrassing episode.

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25. The Old Man Knows

I suppose it creeps up on everyone at one time or another – an overwhelming urge to drop everything and get away for a while; to escape from the pressures of work, work-day journeys, the same old people in the same old surroundings, and the unchanging daily routines, which we build to smooth our lives.

Usually, you have to grit your teeth and soldier on. Holidays, the traditional release, tend not to come at the right times. And they usually require plenty of preparation. That's why it came as such a complete shock when I found myself able to throw a few essentials in to a bag and travel.

We had just come to the end of a contract. The team of myself, Albert and Stan had been working to all hours to satisfy what we had voted the company's *Awkward Customer of all Time*. Keeping up with our client's demands had reduced us to red-eyed zombies.

Everything revolved around the job. Albert was even complaining that it followed him in to his dreams. And when it was over, we were lost. We felt as though our purpose in life had been taken away from us.

The boss knew what to do. He had been through it all himself. At the end of the week, when we had satisfied ourselves that we had completed every last scrap of paperwork, he paraded us in his office. Struck dumb, we just sat there and listened to him telling us that we were getting a bonus and a holiday.

We still hadn't found our tongues properly by the time he

was showing us to the door and telling us to get lost for a fortnight.

The first thing that caught my eye and held my attention when I got home was the postcard. My neighbour on the right had sent it to me the previous year. I held wedged it in one of the supporting clips for the mirror over the fire and I had never bothered to take it down. My neighbour had delivered glowing reports about his fortnight on that Greek island, The climate was perfect and the natives friendly on the rocky pencil in the Mirtoon Sea.

Out of curiosity, I consulted my atlas. On page thirty-nine, I located a yellow blob about fifty miles south-west of Athens. Next, I took a trip next door to refresh my memory. The impulse traveller didn't need a visa, and there were no special vaccination requirements. And the larger banks on the mainland would cash ordinary cheques backed up by a Euro-cheque card.

I returned home to consult my phone book. I'm not noted for snap decisions, and I found it quite a novelty to be hurrying through all the preparations for a trip abroad. I heard someone with my voice speaking to a British Airways booking clerk. There was room on a flight to Athens the following morning, and it would be perfectly in order for me to pay for the ticket when I arrived at the airport.

After that, there was surprisingly little to do. I had to pack for two informal weeks, stop the milk and the papers, and remember my passport, chequebook and cheque card. And that was about it.

In the morning, I remembered to ask my neighbour to look in every other day to water my plants. Then I left for the airport, certain that there was something I hadn't done or I had forgotten to pack. But that's the way I always feel when

I have a plane to catch.

As I was travelling about a month before the start of the tourist season, nobody had decided to go on nuisance strike. My flight left on time. Three and a half hours later, I stepped onto Greek soil; or rather, Greek concrete. Athens was hot and sunny, and looked much more Greek than I had thought possible of a modern major city.

I made a phone call to a chap called Arri on the island, dropping the name of my neighbour as a reference. Although the connection made him sound as though he was at the bottom of the sea and using an electric toothbrush, I gathered that Arri would be delighted to put up an off-season guest. He promised to have everything ready for me by the following day, I said my goodbyes to the pressure cooker of civilization as I left my three-star hotel the next morning. A spectacular train ride of seventy miles brought me to Argos. Then I entered the dark ages of transport.

A stocky, deeply tanned chap with tightly curled, jet-black hair and a ready smile met me at the station. He was dressed in a navy blue jersey, shapeless dark grey trousers, and wellingtons with the tops turned down. He smelled of strong tobacco, not fish. Arri had had no trouble spotting me. As he explained on the way to his car, he had just looked for someone pale and English with plenty of luggage.

His car turned out to be a Jeep that looked like a left-over from the war. The next stage of my journey was a thirty-five mile drive to the southern coast of the little toe of the Peloponese peninsula.

I had been expecting a heart-stopping charge along, narrow, twisting roads carved in to the flanks of vertical mountains. Arri could certainly move his ancient and battered jeep, but he did so in a totally non-heroic fashion. I felt as safe with him as I had on the train.

It took us just under an hour to reach the coast. We transferred to a very fishy boat and chugged for half an hour over smooth, painfully blue water. The combination of sea and brilliant sky made me glad that I had invested in a pair of extra-dark sunglasses.

None of the crew seemed unduly troubled by the glare, but that was to be expected. The melanin in Mediterranean brown eyes allows them to tolerate higher light levels than northern blue, or so I had read somewhere.

I had travelled one hundred and twelve miles to cover a straight line distance of forty-nine, but the island made it all worth while. It looked like something out of a guide book. Clear, blue water lapped the shore. whitewashed walls echoed the harsh, white limestone of the cliffs.

Beyond the dark orange tiles of the village, the bulk of the island rose up and up in to a cloudless sky. The scene glowed with light that seemed to possess an almost overpowering vitality. The contrast with wet, grey-skied London could not have been more complete.

I spent my first week lounging on a beach of pure white sand or wandering about the island, exploring it in easy stages. It seemed a rather unpromising place to live, but the natives had things well under control. If the tourist industry was their jam, their bread and butter came from fishing. They also grew grapes for sultanas as well as the inevitable wine, figs, citrus fruit, and a few other odds and sods.

Chickens, goats, a few sheep and the occasional cow completed the agricultural side of life on the island.

As advertised, the human inhabitants were friendly. I also struck up a nodding acquaintance with a chubby, marmalade cat, who limped on his left hind leg. Quite a few of the people spoke a little English and they were prepared to chat

to the novelty of an out-of-season visitor. I found myself both repelled and fascinated by one character, however, even though we never acknowledged each other's existence openly.

He was enormous. His sheer size made it impossible to guess his age accurately, but white hair and a salt and pepper beard suggested sixty-plus. His huge, pendular jowls resembled a flesh-coloured surgical collar. He seemed to be wearing a tractor tyre around his middle. The belt at the junction of his collarless shirt, which was always blue, and his dark grey trousers had to be a full two yards long.

I never tired of watching that mountain of a man when he was making his daily pilgrimages to and from his house and a sort of café-pub. His bloated, diamond-shaped framed seemed to ripple and surge with independent life as he planted sandal-shod, perfectly normal feet on the cobbles. It seemed strange that someone so vast should have quite ordinary feet.

The Old Man ruled the island community. He would take up his position in a sturdy, wooden armchair on the seaward verandah of the café at about ten every morning. There he would remain, apart from a break for an afternoon siesta, until about six in the evening, receiving clients and working his way through several bottles of red wine.

He was the island's oracle. As far as I could gather, he combined the roles of doctor, vet, local arbitration and conciliation service, weather forecaster – the list was endless. Anyone with a problem consulted the Old Man.

Fishermen asked him where to trail their nets. Couples intending marriage sought his blessing. Even Arri, who seemed to be a very intelligent sort of bloke, ran to the Old Man whenever he had to make a decision.

'The Old Man knows' was the creed of the islanders. They

revered him. It was an adoration that I was unable to share. All I saw when I passed the café was a fat parasite. I think he must have sensed my disapproval. We never spoke, an interpreter would have been needed for his English was as deficient as my Greek, but he watched me as I watched him.

Part of my disapproval stemmed from his ridiculous size. I found it vaguely obscene that anyone would allow himself to put on so much surplus weight. There was also an element of jealousy. While I had been putting in eighteen-hour days, he had been sitting in his massive chair, swilling wine. The rest was a reaction to the respect shown him by the islanders. Perhaps some of his advice was sound, but I couldn't believe that any one person could achieve the Old Man's reputed god-like infallibility.

To me, he was a confidence trickster, preying on simple people and binding the more worldly ones like Arri with a force akin to superstition.

It must have been a reaction to the Old Man's daily inactivity, but at the end of a lazy week, I felt a sudden urge to get out and do something. Arri had mentioned casually that I was welcome to come along as a passenger on one of his fishing trips. I decided to take him up on the offer.

The morning air was even fresher and cleaner than usual after a thunderstorm in the night – one that the Old Man had predicted with the same accuracy as the weather forecast on the radio. I was looking forward to a day at sea as I strolled the half mile from my villa to the main centre of population. But when I reached the landing stage, I realized that something unusual was happening.

Goats and sheep were bleating in improvised pens. A couple of old boys were trying to persuade a reluctant cow to board one of the fishing boats. The entire population of the

island had gathered with their livestock and their most treasured possessions. And he was there, of course, sitting in his chair on the barnacled landing stage, directing operations like a ring master.

I hung about on the fringes of the crowd, unwilling to risk being trampled to death in the bustling mob. Nobody had any time for me and I was unable to make any sense of the constant chatter. And then Arri's boat chugged up to the landing stage. I forced a passage through the excited throng and managed to corner him as he was refreshing himself with a glass of wine.

The island was being evacuated. The Old Man had crawled out of bed at the unprecedented hour of six o'clock that morning to spread a premonition of disaster. Arri was unable to tell me any more. Like the rest of the population, he was prepared to accept the word of their prophet without question. The Old Man knew what was good for them. If he said flee from some nameless peril, then they would gather up their portable possessions and head for the mainland.

It was a challenge that I felt bound to accept. A battle between a modern, scientifically trained man and primitive superstition. I had to stay on the island. Arri tried to persuade me to change my mind, but I was adamant. I had come for a fortnight, and I intended to spend two full weeks on the island.

The Old Man was the last to leave. Three men heaved him onto the last boat and helped him to his chair. He sat facing the island. I watched the performance from one of the rope-smoothed bollards. The captain of the fishing boat turned to me to give me a last chance to change my mind. I slid the loop of the mooring rope from the bollard and threw it to one of the crewmen. I responded to the mockery in the Old Man's piggy eyes with a smile and a saluting wave.

Just you wait and see! The same unspoken message passed between us as the fishing boat began its five mile journey.

Most of the afternoon had flown. I returned to my modest villa to get something to eat. It felt strange to be king of the island. In fact, it was difficult to believe that I was alone. Birds were chirping outside my kitchen window. Only the sound of human voices was missing from the usual background.

After my meal, I wrote a few postcards, read for a while, then went out for a walk. I strolled down to the village as the sun was setting at my back. I sat for a while on the verandah of the café. It looked very empty now that the Old Man's chair had gone. Surprisingly, the general stillness had no effect on me.

I was totally convinced that nothing terrible was going to happen. Perhaps there would be another storm. Perhaps a giant boulder would be dislodged from its mountain perch and come crashing down to smash a path of destruction through the village. If so, I felt sure that it would miss me by a good half mile.

Sometime during the night, I emerged from sleep convinced that someone was knocking on my door. Then I remembered that there was no one else on the island. I lay awake for a while, then I dismissed the knocking as part of a dream. I woke up again an hour or so later. This time, I heard quite distinctly three taps on my door.

They're back! was my immediate reaction. *The Old Man has changed his mind, or told them the danger has passed, and they've all come back. That's probably Arri checking I'm still alive.*

I clicked the light on and strolled casually to the door. There were two more taps just before I opened it – onto an

empty street. Baffled and suddenly a little afraid, I peered out in to the lifting pre-dawn gloom.

With a plaintive yowl, a tubby shape began to limp towards the fan of light on the cobbles. I was no longer alone. My friend the marmalade cat had managed to get himself left behind.

Drinking coffee fortified with a dash of whisky, I watched my ally slurp up a saucer of warm milk then finish the tin of sardines that I had opened for my supper. Satisfied, the cat curled upon a chair to sleep off his meal. I went back to bed.

After dozing for an hour, I realized that the coffee wasn't going to let me sleep properly, I decided on an expedition to look for signs of disaster.

A couple of hours' uphill walking and a little scrambling would take me to a saddle in the island's spine. I would have a view of both coasts from there.

The marmalade cat came with me. We climbed in to a deathly stillness. It took me about half an hour to realize that I couldn't hear any birds. They were usually screaming their heads off at that hour of the morning.

When we reached our vantage point, the cat sat down to have a wash but his heart wasn't in it. His tail kept flicking restlessly and his large, green eyes kept looking for mine.

I scanned as much as I could see of the island's north and south coasts. Everything seemed to be in its place. About the only thing that struck me as odd was the sight of an awful lot of beach. The Mediterranean does have tides, but only of about a foot – certainly not enough to uncover that much of the sea bed.

The cat began to yowl piteously. When I tried to stroke him, he backed away and took a half-hearted snap at my hand. Then the ground shivered; very gently at first. A trickle of small stones cascaded down to our level.

The cat leapt at me as the mountain heaved again. I sat down before I could fall. I found myself on a trampoline, bouncing up and down and holding a cat who was digging his claws through my clothing and in to my flesh. Agony pushed away all realization of danger.

At last, I persuaded the cat to let go. The earthquake was over, but I hadn't noticed the end of the shocks. We had travelled about twenty feet, the cat and I.

The seat of my corduroy jeans had developed a set of interesting bald patches. I was bruised, clawed and shaken up. But I was still in one piece. And I had survived the Old Man's disaster.

A haze of dust misted the air. The island's tree population had taken a fair battering. Most of the houses on the seaward side of the village were just rubble. But the café had survived. With a laugh, I told myself that the islanders would attribute that to divine intervention by the Old Man.

Then I noticed the cat. He was looking the other way, towards the south, ears flattened against his skull. The Old Man hadn't finished with me yet.

I moved back to my original position on the very crest of the saddle and looked down. The missing tide was coming in – not gradually, but all at once. As it approached the shore, the wave just climbed up and up and up. It roared inland like a liquid battering ram, smashing and swallowing, hurling itself at the island in an all-out effort to sweep it away.

We were a good six hundred feet up, the cat and I, but salt droplets sprayed us and spattered in to the dust around us. Then a shrieking wind battered us to the ground. I collected a few more bruises. The cat just picked himself up and began to wash himself, stopping to pull a face every so often. He didn't seem to like the taste of salt.

We remained on our perch until about noon, until flocks of assorted birds returned to the island. The ground remained still, apart from the odd trickle when the wind nudged loose fragments to a lower level. My marmalade friend seemed quite willing to return to the villa for lunch when I started down. I found it quite ironic that the modern, scientifically trained man, who had scoffed at the Old Man's premonition, was now trusting the instinct of a lame cat.

Washed and changed, I was sitting on one of the bollards of the landing stage, stroking the cat, when the boats returned later in the afternoon. The Old Man was first ashore, treading carefully as though testing the landing stage to determine whether it could still support his weight. I gave him a big smile and wished him a nonchalant good afternoon. He beamed at me and returned the greeting in his own tongue.

Events had justified his decision to evacuate the island. My conviction that I could remain and survive had been equally valid. In our own ways, we had both won a victory over a common enemy. And out the battle had come a mutual respect – mine for his ability to predict an earthquake and his for the foolhardy courage of a man who was prepared to face a natural catastrophe for the sake of his beliefs.



26. Housebound

Podger and Jilly were quite excited when they found the empty house on Old Queen Street, which was known to the locals as Old Queer Street. They were getting rather turned down by life in their squat in pre-demolition Barrdale Road on the other side of the city centre. A commune run for the benefit of all seemed to be turning in to a rest home for *Dag*, which was short for Dagger and referred to the most prominent of his many tattoos.

He was big, twenty-five or six, and he didn't think twice about using his large fists or his army boots to back up his point of view. No one member of the commune could hope to stand up to him. Thus he had gradually slipped out of the rotas for cooking, shopping, cleaning and the rest.

His old lady, Sylvie, still did a bit now and again, but she was adopting Dag's attitude: why slave away when others were willing to do it for you? All in all, they were becoming a drag in all senses of the word.

The others had started to talk, always behind their backs, about moving on and leaving Dag and Sylvie to it. Dag had found the empty council house in the first place, which rather ruled out the alternative of ganging up and ordering him out.

Podger and Jilly did nothing about their find for a week. They took a look at the place every day, but they never saw any signs of occupation. Then Cath and Jim split one Friday afternoon while Dag was out. They rolled everything up in their sleeping bags and headed north for the motorway,

saying they were off to see some friends in Nottingham. They evaded questions about when they were coming back with all the dexterity of a politician.

Their departure marked a significant turning point in life at the squat. With three couples, and Dag and Sylvie, chores such as cooking and washing up came round once a week, and twice every sixth week. Now that they were down to four workers and two drones, the double turn would come every week. It was time to evaporate.

Podger and Jilly waited until the following morning, then they took another trip across town for a look at their house. It was as dirty and neglected as ever. When they peered through the grimy kitchen window, they could see that the dust on the floor had not been disturbed by human feet.

They could just about see the door between the kitchen and the living room. There seemed to be grey dust on the white knob – a sure sign that nobody had used it for a long time.

“Can we get in?” Jilly asked, meaning: did they dare defect from Dag’s squat?

“Through a window. Should be easy enough,” returned Podger, agreeing that the defection was on.

Dag was two streets away, getting through his Saturday lunchtime ration at the *Bell*, when they returned to Barrdale Road. In their contented, rather bovine fashion, Paul and Joanie watched as the deserters packed. Both were placid types and well suited to the role of slave. Jilly asked herself how long they would stick it when they realized that the housekeeping rota had come down to every other day. The depressing answer was: probably as long as the squat lasted.

Sylvie rolled home at what should have been lunchtime. She seemed quite annoyed when she learned there was no food ready. It was Podger’s turn to cook. But he, of course,

had been busy packing. Sylvie was too occupied with the lack of service to ask there they were going, for which Podger and Jilly were grateful.

Paul and Joanie had not bothered to ask.

Feeling like escaping prisoners, Podger and Jilly said their goodbyes and hurried to the bus stop. The driver made the expected cracks about going off to climb Mount Everest as they struggled with sleeping bags and rucksacks.

Ten minutes later, they hauled everything off the bus again to an accompaniment of advice on what to do if they met the *Abominable Snowman*.

A narrow, cobbled alley led to the yard at the back of the house. The gate muttered a protest as they pushed it open. Jilly made a mental note to apply some oil to the hinges. Podger slipped the catch on the kitchen window and slid inside with all the skill of a professional burglar.

Podger left cleaner streaks on the dusty porcelain sink. It took a bit of struggling to work the bolt on the back door free. Then Jilly was inside too. Time had compacted the dust on the floor in to cakes, which resembled felt mats, but there were still loose fragments to be stirred up by their feet to tickle their noses as they explored the ground floor of the house.

The kitchen was quite large and jutted from the back of the house. A decent-sized living room was made harder to decorate by a rectangular intrusion for the stairs. What the squatters thought would be a cupboard under the stairs turned out to be another staircase down to a small cellar of air raid shelter proportions.

The hall was a dingy cavern with dark brown walls. From the front room, the new occupants had a view of a small, overgrown garden, a straggling privet hedge and, across Old Queer Street, a petrol station.

"Looks okay," ventured Jilly. "If that toilet in the back yard works."

"Let's check it out before I start making keys," suggested Podger.

Although dusty and smelly, the plumbing worked, even though it sounded like a leaky high-pressure boiler when the cistern was filling. Surprisingly, the taps in the kitchen also worked. The hot tap ran rather rusty and at the same temperature as the cold tap, but they didn't need it.

Decent running water and a toilet that worked were all that Podger and Jilly needed. Everything else could be improvised. They had a camping stove for cooking and candles for light. And if the chimneys weren't blocked up, they would be able to burn the coal in the shed beside the toilet if the weather remained cold.

While Podger looked out his key blanks and his files, Jilly had a look in the cellar. Some kind person had left a collection of not too worn brushes under a crumpled dust sheet. Before starting work in the kitchen, she had a quick look upstairs. There was a door at the top of the stairs. It was locked. On her right, where she had expected to be able to see a landing, there was a wall instead of a banister. An unbroken expanse of the same dark brown as the hall rose from the cracking lino on the stair treads to a grimy ceiling.

Jilly mentioned the lack of access to the upper floor to Podger on her way back to the kitchen. Her old man just grunted and returned to the task of making a couple of keys to fit the front door of their new home. He lacked the sure touch of someone like Dave, who could mark out and file a key in three and a half minutes, or so he claimed. It would take Podger a good half hour to make the first key, and ten minutes more to make a copy for Jilly.

After clearing the dust from the window ledge, the sink

and the top of the cooker, Jilly sprayed some water on the floor and swept fluffy greyness in to the yard. A storm closed in on the city. Heavy rain began to pound the uneven paving stones in the yard. Jilly lit a candle and investigated the cupboard under the sink.

Apart from the oven of the abandoned cooker, it represented the only place to store anything. Podger wandered in to the kitchen with the keys as she was scrubbing vigorously. Suddenly, the candle became redundant.

"What's going on?" demanded Jilly, shooting out of the cupboard like a human cannonball.

"It started to get dark, so I switched the hall light on automatically," said Podger. "I was calling myself an idiot as the switch went down, then the light came on. Got any of that to spare?" He pointed to the steaming kettle on the camping stove, which Jilly had boiled to get hot water for washing out the cupboard. "I'm dying for a cuppa."

Jilly stared up at the light in its old fashioned, football-size globe of frosted glass.

"Hot water?" prompted Podger. "Any going? For some coffee?"

Jilly flapped a hand at him to shut him up and pushed herself upright, her roundish face creased in to a thoughtful expression. Fishing a lighter from a pocket of her jeans, she struggled with one of the gas taps on the chipped and filthy cooker. A blue and yellow flame plopped in to life. Dust on the pan supports sizzled and flared, like gunpowder.

"All mod cons," remarked Podger.

"It's weird," said Jilly slowly. "Water, gas, electric on. And coal in the shed out there. It's almost as if there's someone living here."

"Oh, sure!" scoffed Podger. "Someone who can walk on dust without leaving footprints."

"Well, yeah," admitted Jilly.

"No sense in wasting our gas if we can use this," Podger added, transferring their kettle to the cooker. "Fancy a brew?"

"If you're making one." Jilly returned to the cupboard under the sink to complete her scrubbing.

By nightfall, the back of the house was looking almost habitable. The kitchen and the living room had been cleaned up, and Jilly had washed the grime from the windows to let more light in to their new home. The front room, they had decided, could wait.

A cupboard in the cellar had yielded a set of dusty and slightly mouldy curtains. After shaking them vigorously in the yard and brushing away the creamy, greenish mould, Podger had hung them in the living room to shut out the less than beautiful view.

"Home sweet home, and no Dag," remarked Podger, throwing another lump of coal onto a bed of glowing embers.

Jilly finished zipping their sleeping bags together and returned to her coffee. They had dined on fish and chips from a shop at the end of the road. "It's a bit like camping out," she remarked. "With the light off and just the fire to see by. And the house for our tent."

"And the tent to ourselves," added Podger, slipping an arm round her and giving her a suggestive squeeze. "Unless you've got a headache?"

"I'll let you know when I've finished my coffee," grinned Jilly, her eyes sparkling in the firelight.

Just then, they heard a sound in the hall. It was a key entering the lock.

"Someone does live here, after all," gasped Jilly.

"Come on! Not the state the place is in," scoffed Podger. "It's probably just some bum of an estate agent making sure he hasn't got any squatters."

"Is he in for a shock!" chuckled Jilly.

As they waited to be discovered, the front door closed firmly. Feet stepped along the bare boards in the hall, then tapped up the stairs. Another door opened and closed. Podger lit a roll-up cigarette. He was half way through it before the visitors realized they could hear orchestral music – a record or *Radio Three*.

"Perhaps he never comes down here," said Jilly. "Come to think of it, there wasn't much muck on the stairs."

"Or in the hall," added Podger. "Compared to in here. And I'm not sure it is a bloke. That sounded more like a woman going up the stairs."

"You sure?"

"Not really," said Podger, "but perhaps we shouldn't make it too much of a shock when he or finds out about us."

There was no confrontation that week. Podger worked four nights at a printing plants for national newspapers, loading the papers in to distribution vans. There was enough money to buy a pair of folding camping chairs, a second-hand card table and an inflatable mattress to lift their sleeping bags off the floor. They found some dumped lengths of worn-out carpet. By chopping away the really bald patches and careful juggling, they managed to create a mosaic that covered the living room floor.

With a Chinese lantern shade on the light, and some posters on the walls to hide the worst parts of the wallpaper, their quarters began to acquire some character. Jilly started to make noises about painting. Feeling slightly alarmed, Podger left for the Saturday night/Sunday morning loading

shift. When he could get it, a shift on the Sunday papers usually paid enough to last them for a fortnight.

Jilly was fast asleep when he returned to the house as Sunday morning was starting to brighten. Trying not to make their inflated mattress squeal too much, Podger climbed in to his sleeping bag and got his head down. Jilly would wake him when their Sunday lunch was ready.

Later, as Podger was scraping his cheeks to give his beard a cultivated appearance, Jilly remarked, "I met her."

"Met who?" said Podger. "You been using this to shave your legs again?"

"I don't shave my legs," protested Jilly. "And I haven't touched your rotten old razor. You've been using that same blade for three months now. No wonder it's blunt."

"Oh! Have we got anything in the wine cellar?"

"There's a bottle of cider under the sink," laughed Jilly.

"Met who?" added Podger.

"What? Oh, I met her. The lady who lives upstairs. Her name's Susan Dyson."

"When was that?"

"Last night. After you'd gone. I heard someone come in about ten minutes later. I thought you'd forgotten something. So I looked out in to the hall. It was her coming in."

"So what happened?" Podger washed the last of the soap away. "Did she drop dead of a heart attack?"

"I think she was more surprised than frightened. So I explained we thought the place was empty and we'd moved in. So she came in for a cup of coffee."

"What did she think about us being here? Is she going to try and make trouble?"

Jilly shrugged. "She didn't seem too bothered. Mind out. I want to get to the sink to drain these veg."

"She didn't scream for the law or anything?"

"As long as we behave ourselves and don't wreck the place, we can stay as long as we want. She's got everything she needs upstairs."

"Sounds a bit too good to be true."

"She's quite nice," returned Jilly, defending their host.

"What's she like? A tasty bit of stuff?" grinned Podger.

"About forty-five but quite well preserved."

"Meow!"

"No, I didn't mean it like that. She's a doctor. She spends most of her time at the hospital, which is why we've not seen her before."

"Sounds a bit of a drag."

"Her own choice. Well, not really. She's got this skin disease."

"Catching?"

"No! She's sensitive to sunlight. Can't go out in it unprotected without coming out in blisters."

"Must make things awkward for her in summer."

"It does," nodded Jilly. "She has to wear gloves and long sleeves. And sort of barrier cream on her face."

"Here!" said Podger, breaking in to a grin. "You sure she's not a vampire?"

"Oh, you!" groaned Jilly. "She said it's a melanin deficiency or something. That's the stuff that colours hair and eyes, and makes you go brown in the sun. Only she can't. That's why she spends so much time at the hospital, working on a cure for herself and the others with the disease."

"Yeah," nodded Podger, "that would keep your nose to it. If you were going to get something out of it, an' all. And it explains why she's let this place go if she's not here much."

"She was quite pleased with what we've done down here.

She can just about manage to keep the place upstairs tidy. And I thought you were going to get the wine out? I'm ready to start dishing this up."

"Right." Podger fished the bottle of cider out of the cupboard under the sink. Collecting two mugs from the draining board, he carried their apple wine through in to the living room.

Encouraged by Dr. Dyson's acceptance of their presence, Podger began to think of ways to make their lives more comfortable. Some furniture was the obvious place to start. After working four nights and a Sunday, he felt rich enough to have a look at the second hand shop on Larson Row.

His return to the house was rather noisy. He had enlisted the aid of Craig and Mike and their van to transport his purchases. Their fee had been lunch in a pub at the end of Larson Row. Jilly came up from the cellar to find out what all the noise was about. Her short, blonde hair was tied up in an improvised turban and she had black smudges on her nose and right cheek.

"Who's your Paki friend, Podge?" laughed Craig as he supervised moving a settee in to the living room.

"What did you get?" said Jilly, too excited by the arrival of their own furniture to be bothered by remarks about her appearance.

"Go and brew up and we'll tell you when it's all here," returned Podger.

Jilly retired to the kitchen. Thumps and laughter moved in to the house. Then the kitchen door opened. "Right," said Podger. "That tea ready?"

"Just pouring." Jilly handed him two mugs. "What did you get us?"

"Come and see." Podger led the way in to the living room.

He handed his mugs to Craig and Mike, who were sprawled on the camping chairs, then he dropped onto the settee and waved Jilly over to join him. "This folds out in to a bed at night. That collection of timber becomes a dining table if we can remember how to put it back together. And I suppose you'll want that sideboard in the kitchen?"

"Yeah," said Jilly, suddenly strangely subdued.

"What's up?" Podger frowned at her.

"Dag was here a couple of hours ago."

"What? Why?"

"Someone must have told him where we are. He seemed to be looking the place over."

"What the hell for?"

"I hear they're going to be knocking Barrdale Road down soon," said Mike, scratching his bearded chin with the stem of his pipe. "Within the next couple of months. He must be looking for a new hole to go to."

"He had a good look at our front room," said Jilly.

"Good job we've not started on that yet," said Podger.

"Probably why he's not moved in already," said Craig. "That Sylvie's becoming a right lazy cow. And he won't lift a finger when there's some mug to slave for him."

"I'm not stopping if he comes here," said Jilly finally.

"How can we stop him, though?" protested Podger. "He's a bit big and out of his skull to argue with."

Craig assumed a thoughtful expression, then he raised a finger to point to the ceiling. "An idea," he said. The others watched him leave the room. His feet sounded hollowly on the bare, dusty boards of the front room.

"What's he up to?" said Podger.

"What's it like in there?" said Mike. "Nice and dry?"

"It would be if you got a fire going occasionally to air the place," said Jilly. "What are you up to, Craig?"

Craig dropped back in to his camping chair and picked his mug up. "Dag wouldn't be able to move in with you if there wasn't any room. And we're looking for somewhere to move our printing shop. Old Racky's asking too mucking fuch rent for Charles Street."

Podger and Jilly began to laugh.

"Derision or approval?" said Mike.

"He'll do his nut when he finds out you two have beat him to it," chuckled Podger. "As long as you don't make too much din with the doctor upstairs. She sometimes sleeps during the day."

"It's pretty quiet, and we'll set up some sonic insulation on the ceiling," promised Mike.

"Right!" Craig drained his mug. "Let's get the rest of Podge's stuff. Then we can get started cleaning up and moving our stuff in."

Podger and Jilly went upstairs to tell Doctor Dyson about the printing shop about an hour before her normal time of leaving for the hospital. Podger found himself fascinated by her milky skin and pure white eyebrows. Susan Dyson was about five feet six, the same height as Jilly, sturdily built and she wore her blonde hair in a shoulder-length helmet. The rest of her body was swathed in a pale blue trouser suit and black boots. She had a pair of blue cotton gloves tucked in to her belt.

"There's no need to be embarrassed," she said when Podger broke off a stare to shy away from eye contact. "I'm used to people looking."

"Sorry," said Podger with an awkward grin. "I just thought you'd be an albino with pink eyes and everything. But your eyes are blue and you've got blonde hair."

"The eyes are genuine, but this isn't." The doctor swept off

her wig to show a one-inch crew cut of pure white hair. "But look at my roots." She parted the pale fur above her left temple and leaned forward slightly.

Podger looked down uncomfortably, not sure what he was expected to notice. "They look like they could do with touching up," he admitted, spotting a growing discolouration towards the doctor's scalp.

"Yes, isn't it marvellous?" beamed Dr. Dyson. "We've finally found something that seems to be working."

"You mean you're cured?" gasped Jilly. "That's great!"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," said Dr. Dyson. "But we're optimistic. We think I've started to synthesize an active form of tyrosinase again. And last night, I held my arm under the sunlamp for a full thirty seconds without coming out in masses of blisters."

"Yeah, that's it," remarked Podger for no apparent reason, looking round the largest bedroom, which was a laboratory on the left and a sitting room on the right. After the sorry original condition of the ground floor, everything looked remarkably clean and well cared for. "Yeah!" Podger completed his insight. "I thought you'd have the windows painted black instead of just those net curtains on them."

"It's only direct sunlight that I can't tolerate," said Dr. Dyson. "Specifically, ultraviolet light. Ordinary window glass absorbs most of it, and I have special filters on the glass, which is why it has a bluish tinge."

"So this rotten weather suits you down to the ground?" said Jilly.

"Oh, yes," smiled Dr. Dyson. "I'm not wild about rain but this solid overcast we've had for the last week or so suits me perfectly."

"They're forecasting brighter weather for the end of the week," said Podger. "Will you be fixed up by then?"

"We estimate it well be at least a month before I can think about going out without any protection."

"In that case, we'll pray for rain," promised Podger. "So you don't mind about the printing? As long as they don't make too much row?"

"As long as they're not planning to run off and leave me with an electricity bill for a few hundred pounds."

"We'll get them to put something by," promised Jilly.

Craig and Mike spent three days cleaning, decorating and installing their printing equipment. Then they started to catch up on a backlog of orders. The weather brightened gradually. By Friday, the sun was leaking in warm bursts through thinning clouds.

Dag and Sylvie showed up the following morning. They said nothing when they discovered that Craig and Mike had taken over *their* room. But Dag did mention the cellar looked big enough for a bedroom. And Jilly realized he had no intention of sleeping down there himself. It looked as though Dag was planning to bring a couple of former slaves back under control.

Jilly retired to the kitchen to make some coffee for the visitors, wishing that Podger and the others would hurry up and get back. The three men were out trying to sell Craig and Mike's 'Your News', an organ of the local alternative press.

Their world record was thirty-seven copies out of a print run of one hundred sold one never-to-be-forgotten Saturday morning. More usually, they got rid of about twenty copies at twenty-five pence a time, and sold thirty or forty more during the week – about enough to cover their expenses and show a small profit on a labour of love. Jilly heard a door open and close. She returned to the living room with three mugs; and noticed that Dag was no longer there.

"He's gone for a look upstairs," said Sylvie casually.

"I've told him," groaned Jilly. "That's where the doctor lives. She won't want him tromping about."

"I don't think he'll disturb her," Sylvie shrugged. "He's just going to see if she's left any pills lying around. Prescription pads. You know."

"Oh, hell," moaned Jilly.

She raced in to the hall, heading for the stairs. Dag was six feet one and heavily built. There was nothing much Jilly could do against him, but she intended to try. Fortunately, the front door opened as she began to climb the stairs. The door at the top was ajar.

"Quick, Dag's up there with Susan," Jilly called to Podger. There was a crash and a female scream upstairs.

"Come on, lads," yelled Podger.

The cavalry pounded up the stairs. Individually, Dag could give them three or four inches in height and a couple of stones in weight. It remained to be seen how he would stand up to a mass attack. Jilly waited and listened at the foot of the stairs.

Something hit the floor with a tremendous thud. Then Dag appeared at the head of the stairs. He started downwards at a rush. His feet seemed to get tangled. Then he was flying. He landed heavily in the hall and stayed down. Attracted by the noise, Sylvie looked in to the hall.

"You've killed him," she screamed at Podger as he descended cautiously.

"No such luck," muttered Jilly.

Dr. Dyson, in green pyjamas and a long dressing gown, examined Dag and decided that he had a bad sprain of his left wrist but he was undamaged otherwise. While she bandaged his wrist and fixed him up with a sling, Podger took the opportunity to relieve Dag of his collection of lock

picks. Sylvie hung about near the front door, feeling rejected by everyone and lost without her protector.

Craig and Mike stood guard over the body, waiting for Dag to come round. Podger and Jilly went upstairs with the doctor to help her clear up after the battle.

"I've got a good mind to take him somewhere quiet and give him a bloody good kicking," growled Podger as he gathered up the wreckage of a potted plant.

"Break his other wrist," added Jilly.

"Let's just forget it," said Dr. Dyson through a yawn.

"We can't let him get away with it," said Podger. "That only encourages him. He's got away with too much in the past. I can't help feeling this is all our fault for not standing up to him."

"You do have a point, I suppose," said Dr. Dyson, collecting together two bottles, a wad of cotton wool and a hypodermic syringe.

"I wouldn't give him a pain-killing injection," Jilly remarked. "I'd give him something to make him scream."

"That must be one of the drawbacks of being a doctor," said Podger. "You have to treat bastards like decent human being."

Having administered the injection, Dr. Dyson climbed the stairs again and went back to bed, leaving Podger and Jilly to sort out the small bookcase that had been knocked over in the battle. Craig and Mike took Dag and Sylvie home. They wanted to be sure he would tell the right story – namely that, like an idiot, he had fallen down a flight of stairs. If he stuck to that, there would be no bother.

They were prepared to let Dag keep his pride intact to avoid becoming the targets of one of his grudges. They didn't want Dag seeking them out singly to show them who was boss. But they were prepared to make a liar out of him

if he tried to make anything of the incident; such as an heroic battle against impossible odds.

Despite the promises of the forecasters, a belt of cloud settled over the southern half of the country for several days. The North and Scotland enjoyed brilliant sunshine and comfortable temperatures, which was no consolation to shivering Southerners. Then the sun came out. Jilly finished painting the window frames and started long, vertical, Japanese landscapes down the white emulsioned walls.

Paul and Joanie wandered over from Barrdale Road to bring the news that the bulldozers would be arriving at the end of the month. They had found themselves somewhere else to live, but they weren't sure what Dag's plans were.

Giggling, Joanie explained that Dag wasn't showing his nose out of doors. He had been out sunbathing in one of the parks the previous Thursday. He had come home quite dark. By morning, he was as black as a lump of coal from the waist up. Nobody could understand what had happened and Dag was too embarrassed to see a doctor.

Later, Jilly invited Susan Dyson down to join the group for dinner. During the meal, Jilly brought up the subject of the doctor's treatment. Equally casually, Dr. Dyson said that it involved a course of injections at fortnightly intervals. The injections would encourage her body to produce melanin until the natural process could be re-established.

"And what would happen if you carried on with them after you got back to normal?" asked Podger, apparently at random.

"I'd be back to where I am now," smiled Susan Dyson. "If I went out in sunlight, my body would start to produce an excess of melanin. I'd tan very rapidly. If I didn't avoid the sun until the injection had worn off, why, I'd probably end

up as black as the ace of spades."

"And how long would you stay black?" asked Mike round a mouthful of spaghetti.

"At least a month," smiled the doctor. "Providing I stayed out of the sun and let my surplus tan fade."

"Long enough to start thinking you'd stay that way?" Craig grinned in to his pint mug of cider.

"Why ever should I think that?" laughed Dr. Dyson.

"*You* wouldn't think that," grinned Jilly. "But what about someone who wasn't in the know? Some right steaming rotten sod?"

"The experience might frighten him in to changing his ways," smiled Susan Dyson. "But I doubt it,"

"Should keep him very quiet for a week or two, though," grinned Podger. "And maybe give the demolition men a chuckle."

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27. According To The Evidence

"I got him in the water okay, then he went wild," said the man. He paused to strike a match and dipped his cigarette straight in to the chemical explosion.

"It took both of us to hold him down. There was water flying everywhere with him thrashing around. Both of us got soaked through. But he went quiet after a bit. And I had no trouble after that."

The speaker was around fifty, a sly-looking type who could have been the inspiration for the term 'artisan'. His baggy, grey flannels and scarecrow tweed jacket told of much hard manual work in the open air, as did his impressive tan.

His companion was small enough to have been a jockey in his younger years. There was something very horsey about his well-worn jeans and holey jersey.

They were conducting their terminal discussion in an intimate mutter, but the bar was so crowded that I couldn't help overhearing if I wanted to stand within ordering range of the counter.

And I wanted to hear the innocent explanation for what sounded like the details of a violent murder.

The experience of a friend had taught me not to leap to obvious conclusions. Terry had been on holiday in Cornwall at the time. He's a quite unrepentant bird watcher – he was just beginning back then – and a confirmed early riser. I know this because he once joined a group of us for a camping holiday in Devon. We didn't see too much of him

because Terry was usually leaping out of bed as we were crawling in to ours.

The last morning of his Cornish holiday was cold and grey. A wall of clouds at the other end of the Channel hid the rising sun. And it was a bit windy, to quote the man himself. If you can imagine half a gale blasting out of a deep freeze, that should give you some notion of Terry's idea of 'a bit windy'.

The time was about five o'clock and Terry had been wandering around with his binoculars for about an hour. He was sitting on a convenient chunk of rock, scanning faulted and broken cliffs for interesting bird life. His vantage point was the lower jaw of a rocky mouth called Bellion Cove, as far as I remember, about five miles from Lizard Point.

The tide was in. He could see waves lashing against most of the half mile arc of slick, black rock. Greyish water swirled around the massive and fantastic shapes that the eroding forces of Nature had carved from the mainland. It looked a rather inhospitable place and the bird life wasn't up to much. But the view helped to take the edge off Terry's disappointment.

After soaking it up for about a quarter of an hour, he was ready to move on. Then he spotted the car. It was dark green and in a rather sorry condition, Terry's binoculars showed him that the windscreen had been battered to crazed opacity, and he could see a ragged hole in the left-hand front wing.

He thought it was parked at first, abandoned. But it was moving, inching across wind-whipped grass. There was no one in the car but it was crawling up a slight incline in to the wind.

Several moments of bafflement passed until Terry realized that two men were pushing it – one at the back and one on the driver's side. The one at the back's head bobbed in to

view every so often, then lowered as he strained to overcome the resistance of at least two flat tyres.

It was like watching a slow motion film. The car reached the top of the bank, then it began to roll more easily. Faster and faster it went until it achieved a respectable walking pace. The man at the back lost his footing and sprawled flat on his face. His companion stood up and rubbed his back. The car trickled on and on. It reached the edge of the cliff and sagged in to space, turning lazily onto its back and shedding a door.

It hit the jagged rocks below with a combined crash and splash. The sound reached Terry an echo-like second and a half after the impact. He waited, but he was cheated out of the satisfying explosion of flames that American TV movies had taught him to expect. The car just grated in abrupt arcs as the insistent waves began to tear it to pieces.

When Terry returned his binoculars to the cliff top, the two men were hurrying away. The dumping polluters of the coastline were not hanging around to be discovered.

Terry spent the rest of the morning in the area, moving inland to the Australian-sounding moorland plateau of Goonhilly Downs to continue his bird spotting. Several hours on the treeless expanse of white heather worked up the inevitable thirst and sent him back-tracking in search of a friendly pub.

Binoculars, his bird book in a rain-proof plastic bag and the look of a man who had been up since dawn told the landlord that Terry was a bird-watcher. They exchanged a few words on his morning's sightings. A remark about a flying car took some time to penetrate as the landlord was turning away to take an order at the vital moment. But the man on the stool beside Terry's jumped and nearly dropped his beer.

The man, a heavy-set, outdoor type, listened casually but intently to a brief account of two men pushing a worn-out car over a cliff. When the landlord drifted away to attend to a group of regulars, the eavesdropper poured down a half-pint of mild and left abruptly. Terry took very little notice of his behaviour at the time. But he realized later that the man had shot off to avoid recognition.

Fortified by a pub lunch and a couple of pints, Terry headed back to the cliffs to see if the afternoon sun and a ten degree rise in temperature had brought anything to life. The tide had gone out and it was on its way back in again. Terry decided to follow a steep path down to the beach, intending to look at some rock pools and the remains of the car, if any. The waves pounding it had looked capable of reducing the vehicle to iron filings in a very short time.

Terry crunched across sand that gave like new, soft snow. Things were happening in Bellion Cove. The car was just a shell, impaled on a spike of rock, lacking doors, bonnet and a boot lid. Half a dozen spectators and as many uniforms surrounded the wreckage. Some of them were staring out to sea.

Modest waves were licking the sand about twenty yards to Terry's left. Fifty yards further out, a coastguard launch was swinging lazily at anchor. Terry's binoculars showed him a bored-looking frogman smoking a cigarette at the stern, gazing in resignation at the intermittent frothings of bubbles rising from a submerged colleague as he paid out a green rope.

There was anything but a greeting in the eyes of the nearest uniform, but the policeman made no attempt to move Terry on when he joined the small crowd. Terry found himself standing beside a youngster of about his own age, who was armed with two cameras and a cassette recorder.

Terry marked him down as a representative of the local paper, someone who might know what was going on and feel inclined to talk.

Appearances were not deceptive. The camera king answered to the name Colin and he knew all the facts. Terry asked what was so special about a dumped car. Colin told him it hadn't been dumped. The crew of a fishing boat had seen it drive over the edge of the cliff. A couple of police divers had been looking for the bodies for hours.

The reporter was both disappointed and delighted when Terry assured him that the car had not made its last journey under its own power, but pushed by two men. Shaking with laughter, Colin dragged him over to the group of policemen and coastguards and invited him to repeat his tale.

The official reaction was uniformly hostile; but nobody likes to be told that he has wasted a morning, even if a tragedy had becomes false alarm.

Lengthy discussions on radios of various types followed. A police *Land Rover* charged across the sands to collect Terry. The coastguard launch was still bobbing at anchor and the bubbles were still searching as he bumped up a steep path and along a rough track to the coast road.

At the police station, he told his story to a uniformed inspector. Then two detectives grilled him like a murder suspect, spending a good three-quarters of an hour trying to break his story down. Terry began to regret speaking up and to wonder whether he would ever be allowed out of the police station. But as one of the coppers explained to him later, they had to be absolutely sure he was telling the truth.

He was, of course. Well, most of it. The affair had blown up from a simple case of littering to a major waste of police and coastguard time. If caught, the two dumpers would be lucky not to be hung, drawn and quartered. At the very least,

there would be some sort of trial. And as this was the last day of his summer holiday, Terry would have to travel two hundred and fifty miles all the way back to Cornwall to give his evidence. And then trail all that way home afterwards.

Doing his duty as a citizen would involve the complete waste of one, perhaps two days. That was why he had told the police he'd been too busy watching the car bashing in to the rocks to take any notice of the dumpers.

The afternoon had flown by the time Terry emerged from the police station. He felt as if he had just escaped from Colditz as he blinked out in to a bright early evening. Being grilled by sceptical detectives, dictating a statement, waiting for it to be typed, signing it convinced that if it contained the smallest error he would be slung in gaol – none of this had been on the agenda for the last gasp of a holiday.

Fifty yards down the road from the police station was a pub. Terry reached it just in time to hear the welcome sound of bolts being withdrawn. A car drew up beside him as the friendly, red door was opening.

"Can I have a word, squire?" asked a voice with a local accent.

Terry groaned inwardly. Torn between a desire for a well-deserved pint and obedience conditioned by an afternoon in a police station, he approached the car. The door at the back opened. Terry climbed in without prompting. The car catapulted away from the kerb, driving Terry back in to the seat. It had reached the edge of the small town before Terry realized that the two men weren't coppers. In fact, the driver looked suspiciously like the bloke who had nearly lost his beer in the pub at lunchtime.

His kidnappers had nothing to say for themselves, which gave Terry some time to weigh up his position. They had to be the dumpers. They must have seen him watching their car

crashing about in the surf. In his fluorescent orange anorak and bright green bobble cap, Terry would have been very visible, even on a dull morning. He had to decide what they were going to do with him.

The silent treatment, Terry decided, was an attempt to intimidate him. He contemplated kicking his door open and diving out of the car. But the ground on his side of the road looked very rocky and very hard. Were they going to dump *him* off a cliff?

Terry dismissed the idea at once. Littering wasn't serious enough to justify murder to silence a witness. For the same reason, they weren't going to beat him up. He would be able to describe his attackers as he lay, plastered and wrapped in yards of bandage, in a too-short hospital bed. The frustration of a morning wasted looking for non-existent bodies would drive the police to connect his attackers with the dumped car and question them relentlessly until they admitted everything.

There would be threats and nothing else, Terry decided. Perhaps a token meaty fist waved under his nose. After all, the dumpers had got to him too late. He'd already told his story to the police. He was fireproof, All the dumpers could do was to order him to be very vague when he was asked to identify them.

The car slowed and turned left off the road, bouncing across a strip of uneven ground to stop about fifteen yards from the edge of a broken cliff. Terry stepped out of the car when invited to do so by the man beside him. The tide was on the way out for the second time that day.

His kidnappers allowed Terry to watch the greyish water lashing one of the off-shore pillars of rock for as long as it took the driver to light his pipe. He was about forty, the other perhaps five years younger. There was a strong family

resemblance of dimpled chin and bushy eyebrows.

Taking the initiative to save time, Terry launched in to an account of an interesting day. He began with a flying car and ended with a statement in the police station, and then, before the kidnappers could start their threats, Terry added the comforting news that he had been unable to describe the dumpers to the police.

Expressions of comical relief flooded onto the stern faces. Terry leaned against the car and grinned at them as the tension relaxed. Topping everything off, he explained that it was the last day of his holiday and he made clear his reluctance to waste time on their trial.

The brothers approved of his lack of public spirit and told him that the car had been dumped on them. Some kind person had abandoned it in the lane that led to the younger's house – minus number plates, battery and all other detachables. And with four flat and bald tyres. They had shoved it off the cliff at high tide, expecting the carcase to have been battered to portable scrap before anyone noticed it.

In the end, the brothers drove Terry over to Penzance and bought him a couple of pints while they were waiting for his train – seeing him safely out of the area with their secret.

I was on a similar pint-buying expedition when I found myself on the verge of my obvious conclusion. The sly-looking bloke had broken off his story to place an order. I pushed closer to the counter, determined to be next.

Suddenly, I became aware of a rhythmical thumping against my left calf. All became clear. I knew without looking down that the man who had seemed to be a callous murderer owned a large-ish, tail-wagging dog. An animal with a profound dislike of baths.

Which only goes to show, you can't trust everything you see and hear. Sometimes, it pays to keep an open mind, even

though that can be a side effect of a hole in the head. And it also pays to remember the old adage: 'When in doubt, do nowt!' Apart from keeping plenty of salt handy.

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28. In Nightmare Slumber Locked (I-IV)

I. Desert Mushrooms

The end of everything came with an insidious inevitability, but mercifully quickly. Many scenarios existed for the conflict that would do away with most of the human race and its works. The one most widely used by those who made a living out of international misunderstanding assumed a build up of East/West tension over a period of about three weeks. Purchasers of fall-out shelters were assured that they would have this warning interval in which to stock up with emergency supplies in an unobtrusive manner that would not alert ill-prepared neighbours, and to make noises at work about taking a holiday.

The actual warning period was considerably less and the danger came from an unexpected, if not unpredicted, direction. By the time the world's leaders realized that something was wrong, it was already too late.

There was not time enough to determine the source of the killer virus. Some thought that it had escaped, unnoticed or undisclosed, from a secret biological warfare research station. A hurried statistical survey suggested that its origin was European, possibly French. Others said that the virus had come from space.

The incubation period of the virus was long enough for it to have spread right around the world before it claimed the

first victims. Whatever its source, the plague was remarkably effective against human beings. Medical research workers were able to confirm that its cause was due to a virus, but the lacked time to prepare a counter-agent. In three short days, the human world came shuddering to a halt.

But in the final hours, as those yet undead came to terms with extinction in many ways, the wrappings came off some of the machinery of nuclear war. In underground weapon control centres, the fruits of many hours of lonely thought were put in to effect to prove that anything that one man can create, another can beat.

As reports of millions dead were underlined by the sight of colleagues slumping in to a terminal coma around them, angry officers and servicemen worked together to bypass interlocking safety mechanisms that required the ultimate consent of a dead president or other leader. They pushed *The Button* to pay off ancient scores, real and imagined, before the end of an era.

An insignificant fraction of the world's nuclear arsenal raced out of, and plunged back in to, the atmosphere. Desert mushrooms swelled above Washington – grave markers for the cremated dead and near to death, who had become an intimate part of a glassy wasteland.

Radioactive gales demolished the Lenin Stadium and blasted the Lenin Hills below Moscow. The United Nations building ceased to exist along with New York. Leningrad became a slag pit because of the city's name. Berlin disappeared, removing the only Western presence in the Greater Soviet Union. Nuclear hurricanes devastated Cuba and Nicaragua to pay off old scores held by the United States military.

But most of the final wrath was concentrated on smaller but just as irksome enemies. A US nuclear submarine

cruising off the Gulf of Omen targetted every major city in Iran, including the holy city of Qom, last resting place of the infamous Ayatollah Khomeini. A Soviet submarine performed a similar act of futile erasure against Israel. A double mushroom cloud rose above Jerusalem – one from each side of the Iron Curtain.

Clandestine Third World technology provided the means of the mutual extinction of New Delhi and Islamabad. China shot missiles at Soviet troops in disputed border areas, at Taiwan, and at Vietnam, receiving three independent strikes in the Peking area from Soviet sources.

Missiles from the United States added to Vietnam's funeral pyre and devastated North Korea.

Anti-EEC elements in the Royal Air Force launched a small flock of cruise missiles against Brussels and Strasbourg, and added Paris to the list for good measure. Dublin was also targeted in retaliation for recent IRA bombings. NATO introduced neutral Switzerland to the horrors of modern warfare. Their European neighbours were determined that those of the Swiss who survived the virus and emerged from the survival shelters, in to which they had retreated, would not inherit the Earth without a considerable struggle.

Great cities and their dead were cremated according to the whims of those able to launch nuclear weapons. Two Soviet cosmonauts, watching helplessly from their Salyut orbiting space station, reported a curious blue glow in the night-time atmosphere above destroyed cities.

Soon afterwards, there was no one left on the ground to acknowledge their transmissions.

Some evaded, survived or were not affected by the virus. Long after the event, historians were to estimate an effect rate for the plague of 99.9%, which left rather less than five million living humans, sixty percent of the pre-plague

population of Greater London, spread across an entire world. Isolation saved a relative handful from the virus, nuclear fire and the effects of wind-borne radioactive dust.

Scientific expeditions in the Arctic and Antarctic regions hovered over radios and shuddered, as did the crews of ships at sea on long voyages and those in the artificial world of a nuclear submarine. Nomads, members of remote communities and travellers who had been out of contact with the main body of infected mankind survived, as did an international expedition on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. They added up to an insignificant fraction of the rotting human mass.

A kind of madness gripped the survivors at first. It was a cushioning distortion of reality, which eased them through the initial horror. Some plumbed the depths of despair when they realized their position. Others saw their survival as a release from everyday drudgery. In the treasure house of an unpopulated world, there would be more than enough material goods to sustain them without much effort for the rest of their lives.

In the remoter parts of Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific Ocean, life went on as normal. Unaware of the removal of their more civilized cousins, simple peoples continued their grinding struggle with conventional disease and famine, or led a satisfying and well-ordered life, according to the fertility of their habitat.

Aware of the dangers of radiation after an unknown number of nuclear strikes against unknown targets, and in fear of the virus, the captains of nuclear submarines continued their secret patrols when they lost radio contact with their bases. They had geiger counters and other detectors to warn them of nuclear lingerings, but nothing to alert them to the presence of a plague virus.

Most of the vessels had a mixed crew, thanks to American feminist pressures and a shortage of trained personnel in the Soviet Union. Thoughts turned to the survival of the human race, creating new tensions in a confined environment

Scientists on the Antarctic icefields tried to contact unresponsive bases and waited for rescue ships that never came. They were denied the option available to their colleagues in the north – to wait for winter and then strike out for either Alaska or the Soviet Union over frozen seas.

As for the survivors of the virus in Europe....

II. England In Spring

Frank Arion woke from a daze. He was walking rather slowly but with a certain purpose. Unusual obstacles made his path erratic – the immobile bodies, mercifully few, abandoned possessions or too-heavy loot and vehicles stopped at eccentric angles on both road and pavement.

Realization and purpose seeped in to the vacuum of his consciousness. He was on his way home. The shops on either side of the road were a part of his routine, a sight absorbed and reinforced twice every working day. He knew that home lay five and a half minutes away, or seven if the traffic lights at the top of the hill were against him. But that was by car. He was on foot.

And at the top of the hill, silhouetted against a bright blue sky, the lights were as dark as their yellow-edged visibility shields. He paused to think, lowering himself onto an up-turned aluminium barrel, which someone had been trying to steal from the pub across the road.

He lit a cigarette and blew smoke in to the still air. He had been living in a state of foggy confusion for a day and a half. An unexciting spring Tuesday had begun with one-third of

the population of the British Isles dead in their beds. Most people had stayed at home to see to dead relatives after that terrible night, and died tidily and out of sight in their turn. Some ventured out, driven by the call of business or profession, or just sheer curiosity.

Frank Arion was a doctor. There had been no alternative but to hurry to the hospital as soon as he heard on his radio the breakfast-time news of a mysterious plague. The police also put in a token presence, doing their best for a few hours against opportunist looters and professional criminals. There was no public transport but getting to work, no matter what, was a point of honour for some. Many never completed their journey. Most of the rest died at their place of work or on the way home.

The hospital had become a nightmare charnel house by the evening of the first day. The sick and the weak fell early victims to the plague. Treatment of any sort became impossible because members of the staff were liable to succumb to the irresistible virus at any moment.

There was no power, no food and no one to clear up the mess. Battery-powered camping lanterns burned through the night, and on in to the following day because there was no one to switch them off. Frank Arion and two colleagues had dropped in to a sleep of exhaustion in the office of one of the consultants. He was the only one to awake.

That morning passed in a form of numbed madness. Finally, convinced that he was the only living soul in a major hospital, he had started for home. His car had been hopelessly blocked in the car park. He walked for five minutes before realizing that he was free to use any of the vehicles around him. He chose a police car. The crew had left it in pursuit of a looter and never returned.

Siren raising the hairs on the back of his neck, he picked

his way along the road, getting a kick out of driving on the wrong side. There was no law any more, but he still got a thrill out of breaking it. And then his eyes started to close and concentration became an effort. His speed fell away as his foot released the accelerator. He scraped the side of an abandoned car with a long, piercing screech as he came to a lurching halt.

I will not go to sleep, he told himself. "I WILL NOT GO TO SLEEP!" he shouted.

Kicking the door of the police car open, he staggered out in to the warm afternoon and began to walk. As a doctor, he knew only too well that a sudden loss of energy was the first symptom of the plague. Next, the victim lapsed in to unconsciousness and then progressively deeper in to coma until life became extinct, usually within forty minutes.

While walking home, he had passed in to a daze.

Frank Arion, sitting on an aluminium beer keg, raised an investigating hand to his nose. He had a vague recollection of stumbling in to a lamp post but there was no pain when he pressed his nose.

Was it possible that he had survived a very mild dose of the plague? He no longer felt sleepy – in fact, he could not recall ever having felt better. Some people were bound to survive the assault of the virus; if so, why not Frank Arion? Not a great scientist, philosopher, musician, painter, writer or the world's most respected and revered humanitarian, but a not-particularly-experienced member of the medical profession. Frank Arion, qualified less than a year and a half, had been chosen because of some peculiarity of his genetic makeup.

"Well, why not me?" he remarked to a fat gull. It was pecking at a sliced loaf in the middle of the road. The bird ignored him.

There was a yellow van parked outside one of the shops. Arion decided not to waste further time walking. The sliding driver's door of the van was unlocked but the ignition key was missing. As he had seen many a character do on television, he felt about under the dashboard and pulled free a handful of wires. Several minutes of cautious experimentation taught him how to hot-wire a vehicle.

He drove up the hill and turned right for home. There was a traffic jam on his suburb's main road. A lorry and a car with a caravan in tow were locked together across the full width of the road. Long lines of vehicles on either side of the blockage showed that death had overtaken them before the drivers had had a chance to turn round and take an alternative route. Arion used the pavement.

A deathly hush settled when he switched off the van's engine at his home by disconnecting two wires. He eased his front door open and closed it softly, reluctant to make a noise. His throat was dry. He walked through to the kitchen. Clear water flowed in to the glass when he turned a tap.

The kitchen lights didn't work. A brief stream gushed from his defrosted fridge when he opened the door. Fresh and frozen foods were already becoming things of the past. Tins would have to supply everything.

Perhaps I can learn to bake bread, he thought. Flour should last okay. And there should be plenty of dried yeast around.

Life without toast and sandwiches would be unthinkable. But he would have to organize some sort of oven first. His electric cooker was just so much scrap now. He would have to make adjustments to his lifestyle; a degree of adjustment approximating to 100%. And there were things to do in that direction before night came.

The shops on the Parade were gloomy inside and locked.

It was an act of quite enjoyable vandalism to break glass or force locks by sheer brute strength. He collected a camping stove, several cans of gas, a supply of candles and a couple of torches at the ironmonger's.

Butter, he thought, crossing the road.

That was another item that would disappear from his diet. Unless he took over a herd of cows. He wondered briefly what happened when milking time came round and there was no one to connect the cows to the machines. And what would happen to hens in batteries. They would die, of course, following the people who had put them there.

Rejecting thoughts of death, he collected a wheeled trolley at the supermarket and loaded it with perishables. Meat, a cream cake from a warming freezer and a vast quantity of mushrooms completed his shopping list. He intended making a pig of himself while he could.

Rattling home with his trolley, he stopped at an off-licence to pick up a couple of bottles of wine. The town was silent, as if waiting for something to happen. Arion kept getting the feeling that the bodies on the pavement would revive suddenly and catch him in the act of shop-breaking. He was quite relieved to reach the safety of his home.

The following morning, he began a clean-up operation. He drove to a nearby council depot in his hot-wired yellow van and taught himself how to use a mechanical digger. Then he selected one of the parks in the town and dug a series of long trenches. There were about two dozen bodies out in the streets but the vehicles in the central jam held enough to fill two of his trenches. He moved surplus vehicles off the roads, filling first the car parks and then the driveways of the town's larger houses. The wreckage of the lorry, car and caravan he towed in to the receiving yard of a nearby engineering works with the mechanical digger.

Time passed, but he could not be bothered keeping track of it. Yet some orderly part of his nature had collected three digital watches and left them counting the days in the top drawer of the chest of drawers in his bedroom.

As he laboured to remove reminders of the plague from his routes to various shops, he always kept a lookout for evidence of other survivors. He kept his ears open for the buzz of a light aircraft or the beating of a helicopter. Nobody came to look for him. He set traps for other foragers in shops; choice items balanced precariously or threads stretched across doorways. Nothing fell. No one broke his threads.

Finally, becoming increasingly depressed by the knowledge of death behind the doors and windows of every street of his home town, he decided to move on. His suburb was a relatively unimportant place. The population had been less than twenty thousand. The odds were heavily against other survivors bothering with it, or even happening to pass through the town.

He headed south, taking nothing with him but three pairs of comfortable shoes and his three digital watches, which he wrapped in dusters and sealed in a plastic bag. He had become part of the ultimate consumer society. There was so much of everything that he could just take something when he needed it and discard it after one use.

There was a dark blue Mercedes parked in front of the showroom of the nearest garage. He had always fancied it. Now, the vehicle was his for the taking. He syphoned petrol from other second-hand cars, which were destined to remain there, unwanted, until they became heaps of rust.

His path was a leisurely zig-zag. He stopped at each large town for half a day, exploring and looking for signs of life. Birds still flitted across the sky. Dogs and the occasional cat prowled with increasing boldness. But their masters seemed

to have become extinct; one with the dinosaurs and the dodo.

When he stopped, Arion found the eternal silence disturbing. He was used to seeing aircraft in the sky. Where he had lived and worked, there had always been the sound of a car or a train to demonstrate the presence of unseen others in motion. Human voices, kids shrieking, music and voices from too loud radios and televisions, he felt their absence keenly. He generally kept the cassette player in the car running, sometimes just to provide background noise, but he was always aware of something missing.

Once, he saw a pillar of smoke on the horizon. A surge of hope burst through him. And then the road drifted maddeningly around a low hill. But the smoke was still there when he cleared the obstruction. It had to be a beacon, a rallying signal. The grey billows said: 'Here we are! You are no longer alone. Here we are. Come and join us!'

Trembling with excitement, he drove faster and faster towards the dark cloud. He reached the crest of a rise, becoming alarmed by the size of what he had taken to be a signal. Looking down, he saw a small town. It was ablaze from end to end of the main street. Only the physical boundary of the open spaces around it held the conflagration in check. With no fire brigade to fight it, the fire would rage until it ran out of combustible material or heavy rain fell.

He turned away and headed to the south-east, depressed. Later in the day, he came to a city and decided to pause there for a while. He made no attempt to learn its name. He had long since shut his eyes to road signs. The pattern of streets was unfamiliar, showing that he had never been there before. His eyes touched the name of the city on shops but he refused to read it. His location was of no importance.

A city centre offered two advantages as a base – an

abundance of everything that he was likely to need and a lack of residential property, apart from hotels. There would be very few bodies to attract scavenging dogs and rats, even though soft-packaged goods in the supermarkets would provide the rats with an abundance of food until they had polished it off.

Others, he decided, would think along the same lines. If he was going to meet like-minded survivors, he would find them at the heart of a city.

He chose the ground floor of a furniture store as his temporary home. The sight of the burning town remained with him and made him reluctant to set up camp on an upper floor. Having survived the human race's greatest disaster, he had no intention of dying pointlessly, trapped by a fire.

A rapid learner, he had discovered that a battery-powered electric drill is an excellent substitute for a key. When he had gained access to the furniture store, he located the bed department. Reducing his task to the essentials, he struggled down a flight of stairs with a mattress and shifted furniture to make room for it.

He spent two days making himself comfortable – roaming the wide street, drilling doors to open them, exploring, cataloguing locations of useful items, poking and prying noisily and keeping half an eye open for any signs of other survivors. He met no one.

III. Brief Candle

On the third day, he wandered further afield. He found himself ignoring shops filled with electrical goods. It was irritating to realize that he could have anything he wanted in the way of televisions, video recorders, hi-fi systems and so

on. They were all useless without power to operate them. And, in the case of battery-powered radios and TVs, useless with no signals to receive.

A street of mixed Victorian and modern shops and offices opened out in to one of the city's squares. Frank Arion popped the tab on a can of cider and dropped the ring-pull tidily in to a waste basket on a lamp post. In the opposite corner of the square was the city's main library.

As he crossed to the first of a series of islands in the body of the square, he found his head turning, looking for non-existent traffic.

"What an idiot!" he said. He was becoming less inhibited about talking to himself aloud.

A rapid and rhythmical tapping noise intruded in to his attention. It sounded like running leather shoes on a hard floor. Then he realized that the noise was someone pecking at a typewriter.

Another survivor!

Frank Arion dropped his can of cider and stared wildly round the square, trying to locate the source of the typing. It stopped abruptly. He was looking toward the library. That was as good a place as any to start.

He climbed two shallow flights of steps and reached a revolving door. Expecting it to be locked, he gave it a tentative shove. The door rotated away from him. Encouraged, he advanced.

He explored the ground floor of the library with a growing sense of frustration. The mysterious typist was nowhere to be found. His own footsteps followed him eerily as he prowled from room to room, testing doors, looking in to offices that were unlocked and listening patiently at those that weren't.

Arriving back at the entrance hall, he wondered whether to explore up or down. And then he became aware of a

muffled throbbing sound. It diminished as he raced down a broad half circle of staircase.

Up, then, he decided.

The throbbing sound was coming from an office on the first floor. An orange cable snaked through a neat hole in the door in to the main reference hall of the library. Nervously, Arion followed it. He came to an indecisive stop the moment he spotted the man.

The other survivor was dressed in a spotless white pull-over and red corduroy jeans. His dark hair was short, and it looked as if it had been hacked roughly to keep it out of his eyes when he bent forward. His build was slender, his face almost fleshless, giving a cutting sharpness to chin and nose.

Totally absorbed by his task, he was bending over a small printing machine, watching the last of a slim wad of quarto sheets of gleaming white paper moving through the device.

Frank Arion watched the printer and felt a growing admiration for him. The throbbing noise was coming from a generator, which was placed across the corridor to remove distracting noise from the printer's working area. The ticking and a squeak from the printing machine were quite enough to fill the circular reference hell with endless descending echoes.

And the printer had proper lights, not the yellow glow of candles. A round dozen desk lamps reached out from the tops of the adjacent bookcases like strategically placed tentacles. Four of them were switched on to augment the grey daylight filtering through windows placed just below the reading room's dome.

The printer straightened up and switched the machine off. He had moved one of the long reading tables to make room for it. A smaller table and an elegant office desk filled the rest of the centre part of the aisle.

Nodding with satisfaction, he returned the last sheet to the pile of printed pages and carried then over to his desk.

Frank Arion waited for him to put them down, then cleared his throat apologetically. He was no longer sure how to make this first contact with another survivor.

He had devoted much thought to the subject, but now that the moment had arrived, he had rushed headlong in to it. All of his careful preparations for the occasion had scattered.

The printer turned. "Ah!" he said, as though to a colleague who had just slipped out to buy something. "Where have you been hiding yourself?"

"Nowhere." Arion shrugged as he struggled with an unanswerable question. "Just got here. Yesterday."

"Robert Dorning," said the printer, extending a greyish hand.

"Frank Arion," He shook the hand cautiously. None of the dirt came off, showing that it was deeply ingrained.

"Rather handy having the place to yourself," added Dorning. "You can get something done without people coming round to sling you out on your ear. Telling you you're making too much noise or it's closing time. I'm a writer, by the way. In spite of all this lot."

"Doctor," replied Arion, responding to a questioning inflection.

"Two equally useless professions," laughed the writer. "There's no one to read my work and no one for you to chop up and feed pills to."

"The lack of potential clients doesn't seem to have had much effect on you," Arion remarked, noting the typewriter on the desk.

Dorning shrugged. "Punters aren't too necessary to an author. Until after he's finished, of course. After all, they're not hanging over your shoulder during the creative process.

And you get so involved in that, there's no brain cells left to think about anything outside what you're writing."

"Yes, I see what you mean."

On the table behind the printing machine, Arion could see trays of type, spare frames, paper in various pastel colours, tubes of ink and a rack half filled with bottles of white wine. The typewriter on the desk was an expensive, manual office model. But there was no typing paper, just a stack of white record cards from a filing system.

"Are you dry?" asked the author. "Help yourself to some wine. And you can top me up at the same time."

Arion poured and took the glasses over to the desk, where the author had settled himself. Dorning had been drinking his wine French style, from a half-pint glass. Arion perched on an upturned wooden crate. Dorning stretched a long arm and plucked a book from the middle shelf of the left hand rack.

"They've made a proper mess of this edition," he remarked. "Bloody printers. If there's something to cock up, they'll manage it. And if there isn't anything, they'll invent something."

Arion sipped slightly sweet wine and slipped in to a vague frown as the author stripped the dust jacket from the book. Dorning pulled a roll of self-adhesive labels toward himself. Using a drawing pen and a stencil, he copied the letters and figures of the library's reference code. Then he crumpled the dust jacket and lobbed it over his shoulder. It hit the rim of a black plastic dustbin and bounced away to join several other plastic and paper discards.

"Shocking job. Everything's wrong with these," continued the author, half to himself. He picked up a number four scalpel with a shape C blade and scraped delicately at gold leaf. The title of the book and the author's name flaked away.

Frank Arion lit a cigarette. There was a well-filled ashtray on the desk. Smoking in a library seemed vaguely criminal but it was also the sort of behaviour designed to force other survivors out of hiding; either to complain or to cadge a light from him.

The author clamped the anonymous book in a padded vice. He wiped the scraped area of the imitation leather binding with cotton wool soaked in meths, blotted it dry and draped an oblong of gold leaf on the spine, using a pair of tweezers to avoid contact between his grey fingers and the precious metal.

Nimbly, and with the skill of a fair amount of practice, he used a set of letter punches and a small mallet to tap out a title and a name. Then he opened the book at the title page.

"They've got this all wrong, too," he remarked.

Using the scalpel, Dorning sliced out the offending piece of paper. He used it as a template to cut one of his printed pages down to size with the scalpel and a steel ruler. Then, crumpled in to a ball, the original title page flew over his right shoulder and in to the plastic dustbin. He painted a delicate line of adhesive along the inside edge of his own title page and positioned it in the book.

"Another one done," said the author in a satisfied tone.

He closed the amended volume. There was a piece of plain board on the other side of the typewriter. On top of it was a one kilogram weight of black metal. Dorning lifted the board and weight to retrieve another book. He passed it to Arion and set the weighted board on top of the latest corrected volume.

"Have to leave them for about five minutes, then they're nicely stuck," he explained to the visitor. "Nice job of binding, even if they have screwed up everything else."

"Mmm, yes," agreed Arion.

The author selected a record card and shook a bottle of correction fluid. Pretending to be looking at the book, Frank Arion watched him paint out the author's name and the title of the work. Dorning then rolled the record card in to his typewriter and added new information with a speed that told of familiarity. He dropped the corrected record card in to a blue file box, took a refreshing swig from his tumbler of sweetish white wine and then selected another book from the shelf on his left.

As the author was copying the library's reference code onto another label before discarding the dust jacket, Frank Arion considered the book in his hand. It was bound in red imitation leather. New gold leaf on the spine told him that the work was called *Brief Candle* and the author was one Robert Dorning.

Arion opened the book at the new title page and found the same information in square, uncompromising letters. The name of the original publisher on the spine was covered by the new label bearing the library's catalogue number. According to the new title page, the book had been published by 'The Library Press' in that year.

"Shove it back on the shelf when you've finished with it, will you?" asked the writer, scraping busily at a book spine with his scalpel.

"Right," said the doctor.

The long shelves were divided in to sections about two metres wide. New gold glittered from two and a half shelves. The books varied in size from about seven and a half to almost nine inches tall. The fattest was about three times the width of the slimmest. Red or blue imitation leather interrupted at random a riot of bindings in black or primary colours.

Each volume lacked a dust jacket. All of them were

entitled *Brief Candle* and written by someone called Robert Dorning.

Arion slotted the latest addition to the catalogue of vanity in to place. When he examined some of the earlier volumes, he learned that the writer had varied his title pages considerably, perhaps looking for the perfect design. He had begun conventionally enough with capitals before moving to italics. Then he had abandoned upper case letters before trying an *Olde Englishe* typeface.

Robert Dorning had survived an attempt to end the reign of the human race on Earth and he was as nutty as a fruit-cake, Arion told himself. It sounded like a rather scathing comment on the achievements of their species.

Arion drained his tumbler of wine. The author had completed his scraping with the scalpel. He was absorbed in the task of sweeping away the last traces of silver foil with a small paintbrush. Frank Arion set his tumbler quietly on a corner of the desk. He drifted away, looking casually at racks of books, until he came to an exit. He left rapidly, circling to the main staircase as silently as possible, and hurried out in to the afternoon.

Insanity had always been a matter of opinion, a greater or lesser deviation from patterns of behaviour established by an overwhelming majority. In this city, where Robert Dorning formed one-half of the population, who was to say which of them was mad? The one opinion counted neither more nor less than the other.

Frank Arion continued his exploration of the city, even though it had become an aimless ramble. He would have to move on. He would move on in the morning. It would be too depressing to remain in the city. The mere presence of the mad author in the library had cast a black shadow over the area.

He reached the fringes of the city, where houses replaced shops in the side streets, then he turned back toward the centre. At book shops, he turned his head away, afraid to look in case the display windows were full of copies of *Brief Candle* by Robert Dorning. That would be the next step.

When the mad author had spent however many years it took to alter every book in the library, he would fill the town with his creation. Only old age, or the frailty of the human body, would prevent him from reducing the world's literature to a single title.

Strangely, there was something to envy. Dorning had a purpose in life. He was not concerned with finding other survivors, the survival of the human race, rebuilding, preserving knowledge and skills through the coming dark age until there were people enough to need and use them. The author was perfectly content to spread like a parasitic growth through the library, shelf by shelf, rack by rack, floor by floor.

Arion considered returning to the library and asking Dorning whether he had ever written anything himself. But he rejected the idea. In the author's terms, the question made no sense. Dorning was surrounded by his works – a fact which would become more evident when he had corrected all of the errors made by ignorant printers.

It was a hot afternoon. The shattered glass doors of a supermarket attracted Arion's attention. Someone had driven a car inside but there was no body behind the wheel, suggesting that it had been an act of deliberate vandalism, perhaps a prelude to looting.

Arion made an unsatisfying meal of tinned salmon, opened by the combined tin and bottle opener that he wore round his neck like a hippy's pendant, and cream crackers, which the rats had overlooked. Dry crackers were no

substitute for fresh bread and butter. He washed the meal down with a half litre carton of orange juice. He would have preferred hot coffee, but that would have to wait until he regained his base in the furniture store.

He lit a cigarette and continued on his way. The day had given him grounds for cautious optimism. He had refused to believe that he was alone. Now, he had proof that others had survived the plague. His search, when he resumed it in the morning, would not seem such a pointless exercise.

IV. After Life

He searched for five days, sleeping in the back of his latest vehicle, an orange van, hurrying from one town to the next. He spent hours crawling along streets like echoing canyons, running an obstacle course of abandoned vehicles and ones that had become coffins.

Some of the bodies were in pretty bad condition, He had seen horrible sights during a red alert in the casualty department, but the nibbling of rats and the pecking of crows exceeded them. His medical training had hardened him to some extent, but he developed a technique of driving with his eyes fixed on a distant point and reacting to obstacles without looking too closely at them.

From time to time, he sounded his horn, then stopped the van and listened. The only sounds were ones that he himself made, and the scuttlings of rats in the supermarkets, and the hostile barking of a dog defending its territory against an intruder.

The van took him east and west across the country in his vaguely southern drift. He felt sure that he would find people in London, and an irrational reluctance to reach the capital in case he found it deserted.

'London 62' read a sign. He turned in that direction and found houses crowding together, as though some urban Doppler Effect was at work on either side of the road. Shops appeared and then took over. Rain began to lash the roof of the van.

The sun disappeared behind an unfriendly black cloud. A few minutes later, the rain ended as abruptly as it had begun. Sun flooded down to raise steam from the road. And then he heard something. His brakes locked. The van skidded slightly as he snatched it to a sudden halt. Frank Arion held his breath and listened. He had not been mistaken. Music, loud and modern, was playing somewhere close at hand.

He leapt out of the van. Crossing the road at a trot, he aimed himself for a narrow alley between two shops. The music grew louder. He stopped at the far end of the alley and turned his head to the left. A portable radio/cassette player the size of a small suitcase was standing on the wet pavement, unattended, throbbing out a wild beat.

Frowning, Arion moved towards the apparition. He had covered ten of the fifty yards to his destination when a strange figure emerged from one of the shops. Arion stopped dead to stare.

A young man of about twenty placed two bottles on the pavement beside the cassette player and adjusted the fit of his top hat, around which was tied a pale blue silk scarf. He was wearing a tight jacket in hunting scarlet, riding breeches and green-striped sneakers.

Three more youths, similarly attired, sauntered out of the shop. Two of them were carrying bottles. The third had several shotguns slung on his shoulders.

"Yoiks!" squealed one of the young men in a startled tone when he glanced casually down the street and spotted Frank Arion. "Benny! It's a Charlie!"

A fifth huntsman raced out of the shop. He was wearing a black bowler and a black jacket, and a bandolier of red cartridges. When he saw Frank Arion, he let out a yelp of joy. Then he threw his shotgun to his shoulder and loosed off both barrels. Arion turned and ran. The shot whistled well over his head but he had no intention of waiting for the homicidal young man to correct his aim.

Shouting and jeering, the huntsmen jogged after him. One of them celebrated the chase with short blasts on a horn. Arion turned in to an alley. It was the wrong one. When he reached the parallel road, the van looked an impossible distance away. He had left the engine running. Scrambling in to the driving seat as a blast from the shotgun rocked the vehicle, he released the brake and trod on the accelerator.

The van leapt forward. He thought for a moment that the engine would stall but it didn't. He turned a corner, and another, and another. He was just starting to descend from adrenaline-charged panic when a hunting horn tooted behind him.

The gang had piled in to taxis. They were charging after him. A shotgun poked out of a window to fire in his general direction. Arion fled round the first corner available. The huntsmen seemed to know every street and to be able to predict his every move. Arion began to despair of ever losing them.

The taxis cut him off from every direction, shotguns blasting and that insane horn tooting a song of derision. Then he took a wrong turning. The street came to a dead end at a fifteen foot wall. There was no time to reverse. Arion looked around wildly for an avenue of escape.

A window on his left had been broken. He hoisted himself up onto the sill as the taxi reached the mouth of the narrow street. He jumped in to blackness. A shotgun roared behind

him. Pellets ricocheted from a brick wall. The room was full of wooden crates. Arion stumbled over them to a door. It was locked.

Desperation drove his foot in to it. The door sagged in to another store room. Throwing himself towards a wedge of greyness, he found himself in a dark corridor. He followed it blindly. Suddenly, he found himself in the food hall of a department store.

Short blasts on the hunting horn punctuated shouts of "Yoiks!" and "Tally Ho!" behind him. Arion hurried between depleted shelves. A colony of rats burst out of the path of his flying feet. Lead pellets shattered a mirror on one of the pillars. Arion made for a corner of the store, hoping to find an exit. Fire doors let him in to a stair well. The street lay beyond plate glass doors. They were locked. He rattled them in helpless rage. Then a fire extinguisher caught his eye.

"Causing damage to property! That's a criminal offence," laughed a voice behind him. A reflection in the doors showed the huntsman in black standing ten yards away, his shotgun aimed at Frank Arion's back.

He dropped the fire extinguisher and turned to face his tormentors. So this is how it ends, he told himself bitterly. Shot to death by a bunch of lunatics in daft clothes.

"It's dogs, usually," said the leader of the gang. "It's a while since we had a real, live, human Charlie."

"Not got much to say for himself, has he?" said one of his satellites. "Ain't you gonna get down on your knees and beg for mercy, mister?"

Arion tried to force a sneer. "I won't give you the satisfaction, little boy."

The leader shrugged. "In that case, you might as well say goodbye, Charlie."

His shotgun roared. Arion tried to brace himself for the

killing impact. Acrid fumes billowed towards him. Toughened glass shattered behind him. But he was still alive.

His face becoming a pale mask of fear, the youth fired off the other barrel. More fumes billowed. Glass tinkled, less than before.

Frank Arion looked down. His clothes were a ragged, scorched mess but there was no blood. And amazingly, no pain. Thinking, 'Blanks!' he looked over his left shoulder. There was a jagged, gaping hole at the junction of the glass doors. He was standing directly in the line of fire. He turned back to five staring faces and five sets of bulging, white-rimmed eyes.

Then, as realization came, he began to laugh. He lifted his right hand and saw that it had become misty and indistinct.

"I'm dead," he chuckled. "Isn't that wild? I died in the plague but I just wouldn't admit it. My body's rotting somewhere on the way back from the hospital. I've been a real, genuine ghost for weeks. And I never knew it."

As if to prove to himself the validity of his conclusion, he stepped back. There was mild resistance, as if he had passed through a strong current of air, then he was outside the store. His ruined clothes had become a heap just inside the splintered doors. He was just a luminous glow in the air. One of the gang dropped his shotgun as Arion stepped back through crazed but solid glass. All five were frozen to the spot, incapable of thought or motion.

"Goodbye, Charlie, is it?" chuckled Arion. "I've got a good mind to hang on here and haunt you. But is that necessary?" he added as a thought struck him. "If it could happen to me... How many of you are ghosts too?"

A set of garments crumpled to the floor, empty. The other four huntsmen turned and fled, brief flashes of red until they disappeared behind a display rack. Nothing remained of the

young man in black. Frank Arion waited for final extinction. The glowing, after-life projection of his body dimmed slightly but it remained recognizable as a human outline.

Perhaps it's sheer belief in my own survival that's holding me together, he told himself. The mist thickened.

A grim refusal to admit defeat had sustained some part of his life force beyond the cancellation of his physical components. While walking home, battling with the debilitating effects of the virus, a separation had taken place of spirit and weak flesh.

All right, so I'm dead, he conceded. What difference has it made? I've been dead for weeks, but I've been moving around, driving the Merc and then the van, eating and drinking as normal. Even though I never feel too hungry or thirsty these days. They're probably habits left over from life. The mist became a waxy solid.

The point is, I'm still here. And indestructible. I can go anywhere, do anything, without being afraid of a pack of dogs or the rats. Furry and human ones alike.

His body, now restored to its normal tints, shuddered in reflex terror.

I can see the world – something I've always wanted to do. Perhaps I can walk to France. Along the bed of the Channel. And maybe I'll meet a like-minded female ghost. 'Incubus and succubus entwined in fruitless passion.' The quotation popped in to his mind. Or maybe we can start a race of ghosts.

The rats, frightened away by the roar of the shotgun, returned to peer at him cautiously. Frank Arion took a step back and found himself pressing against sharp glass. Then it seemed to give. He oozed out onto the street.

What I need is a new outfit, he decided. There was a fresh breeze blowing along the street but it lacked the power to

chill him. From that point on, clothes would be a form of decoration and a concession to human modesty, not a protection.

He was aware of the wetness of the pavement as he searched for a shop that offered quality clothes, but his feet remained dry. There was something dream-like and disturbing about wandering, stark naked, down a street in a strange town in full daylight.

He had a whole new world to explore, the realm of whatever he had become – Frank Arion, ghost. Perhaps he was immortal. Perhaps he would fade away after a time. Or just wink out of existence, like the youngster in black.

He found himself unable to explain that sudden disappearance. The young man had clearly possessed the force of personality and the strength of will necessary to sustain his ‘spirit’ beyond the death of his body. Perhaps he had been wiped away by shock.

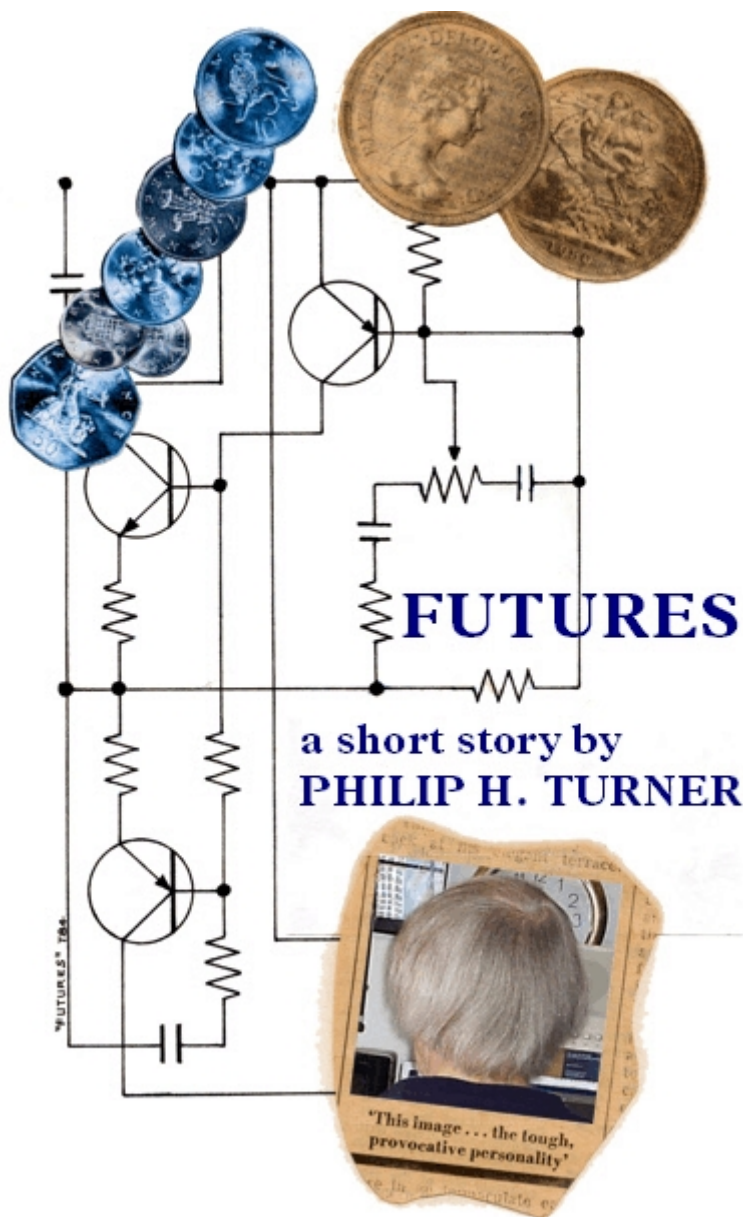
The combination of learning that his ‘Charlie’ could not be killed and the forces of doubt had served to disperse his lingering presence. It was a classic case of the bully going to pieces in the face of a challenge to his dominance.

I wonder if a ghost can get a suntan? Arion thought as he crossed a belt of sunlight.

He had so much to learn and so much to see. And he felt confident of one thing – the next few years would be very interesting indeed.



29. Futures



1: Pressure

Michael Darnby was really feeling the pinch. The forces of inflation were overtaking him relentlessly and there was very little that he could do to improve his position in life. He had just about enough money coming in for bare survival, but none for luxuries and reckless living – the frills that make life really worth living.

The problem of replacements was looming darkly on the horizon. He had been wearing the same clothes for years. They were starting to wear out. Everything had become thin, patched and frayed. He needed a new pair of shoes and two pairs of jeans right away. But he would be lucky if his budget could be stretched to one new item.

His main leisure activity was now reading – a pastime with the unbeatable advantage of costing nothing. He had acquired a respectable library during long-gone affluent days. Overflowing from assorted bookcases and improvised shelves around the house were more than two thousand paperbacks and five yards of hardbacks. He had reached the happy position of being able to dip in to his library and produce something that time had wiped from his memory. In fact, he had no real need ever to buy another book.

He did, however, buy a glossy fortnightly magazine and pass it off as an essential aid to sanity rather than a luxury. *Futures* came out on the second Friday of every month and reviewed new developments in science and technology. It was while scanning a new issue after an unexciting dinner at the end of an unexciting week that he found the article on psionic amplifiers.

The light-hearted piece offered an alternative to treasure-hunting with an expensive metal-detector.

This method's main advantage was that the exploration

phase could be carried out in the comfort of the treasure hunter's own home. It was also cheap and energy-saving. The device in the article needed no batteries and the operator did not have to waste money on petrol or train fares to transport it to a likely treasure site.

Psionics, as Darnby knew, and as the introduction to the article reminded him, is a para-science that deals with the use of mental powers. The field includes such phenomena as telepathy (thought-reading), telekinesis (moving objects without using physical contact, magnetism, electricity, etc.) and clairvoyance.

The author maintained that these talents are latent in most people, as dowsing is claimed to be, but too underdeveloped to be of any actual use. The purpose of his amplifier was to boost mental energies to a practical level, thus creating a power source for a Treasure Trawler.

Darnby interrupted his reading to look at a diagram of the psionic amplifier. He recognized conventional electronic bits – resistors, capacitors, transistors – set out in a baffling array.

The author had not thought fit to include one of the mighty microchips, the latest bright idea in the electronics industry for cramming more and more in to less and less space, but he did have a very fine line in pseudo-scientific jargon to lend an air of spurious authenticity to his piece.

Michael Darnby read through the rest of the article and concluded that the general idea was interesting as well as amusing. He turned the page and he was just about to begin yet another article on what NASA's Space Shuttle would do when it eventually got off the ground when he was interrupted...

There are TWO possible routes on from this point.

2A: Deflection

The phone began to ring. Darnby went out in to the hall. It was just a wrong number. He headed back to the living room. Just as he was closing the door, the phone rang again. The same voice asked for Reg. Darnby provided his local code and the number. The man on the other end of the line confirmed that he wanted that number and read out an address in Liverpool. That was when they discovered that he had been dialling 051 for the Liverpool area but getting connected somehow to the 061 Manchester area.

Darnby left him to sort the problem out with the phone company and went back to his magazine and the trials and tribulations of the much delayed Space Shuttle.

Later, he found himself unable to shake off the impression that he had come across something interesting, something worth trying out because it wouldn't cost him anything. But the idea had drifted too far away for him to retrieve.

END of this route – go to the end.

2B: Amplification

Let's just have another look at that article. The thought dragged Michael Darnby away from the Space Shuttle back to psionic amplifiers.

He turned the page and re-read the article. Then he looked out a sheet of centimetre graph paper. Calling himself a gullible idiot, he copied the circuit of the psionic amplifier, scaling it up to the recommended working size, using a ruler and a pencil to make a sketch that could be inked in when it was correct.

He completed the diagram by making six large dots at the ends of three open connections, which the author termed

gates. The one at the bottom labelled *INPUT* was the Power Input Gate. The operator had to touch its terminals (the large dots) with his index fingers when he attempted to use the amplifier.

Up at the top on the left was *COMP*, the Comparator Gate, a second, optional input, where the operator could place an example of the desired treasure to reinforce his own input signal. If everything went according to plan, untold riches would appear at the Output Gate in the top right corner, which was labelled *OUT*.

This is strictly for fun, Darnby told himself when the ink was dry on the final version. *But I've got to admit, the idea's daft enough to work.*

He folded his one and only £5 note twice and placed it across the big-dot terminals of the Comparator Gate. He unplugged his headphones from the hi-fi and put them on. Then he touched the dots of the Input Gate with his index fingers and closed his eyes.

The article had told him that the body is dominated by the logical, reasoning, conscious mind, which inhabits the left-hand lobe of the brain. Artistic talent and psionic abilities come from the dark realms of the subconscious, which lurks in the right-hand lobe of the brain. In order to use the psionic amplifier, he would have, somehow, to open a channel of communication between these two normally separate entities.

In practice, that meant slowing everything down to the leisurely crawl of his subconscious. He had to prevent the conscious from over-loading the blend with a torrent of information from his senses. Wearing headphones to exclude external sounds and closing his eyes would take him some way in that direction.

Getting the idea of placing the £5 note across the com-

parator gate was a stroke of genius, in Darnby's humble opinion. People lose money every day of the week. They drop coins, which vanish almost before they hit the ground. Other coins sneak out of pockets and search out dark crevices for their disappearing act. Banknotes also vanish in to thin air. It was this rich vein of hidden treasure that Darnby hoped to tap.

As he pressed his index fingers to the terminals of the Input Gate, he thought of pound notes slipping out of careless fingers, fivers flying away on grabbing breezes, tenners and twenties tunnelling down grids, and fifty-pence pieces burrowing busily in to the sands of holiday beaches.

Just like the ink-on-graph-paper circuit diagram of the psionic amplifier, the £5 note at the comparator gate was just a symbol, a suggestion. Michael Darnby concentrated on the thought of lost money and willed it to appear at the Output Gate. The form; note or coin; did not matter. If he could open a channel to the nation's vanished riches, sheer quantity would make up for low value. If necessary, he was willing to take treasure-trawled ten-pence pieces to his bank by wheelbarrow.

He concentrated for about ten minutes, aware that he had not the slightest idea how to go about teleporting lost money from its hiding places to his home. More or less as expected, nothing happened. His Output Gate remained visible and uncluttered by piles of tarnished coins or a mound of wrinkled banknotes.

The author of the article had warned that success with his Treasure Trawler might require patience and practice. One half of Darnby told him optimistically that, if he kept trying for long enough, he might make a breakthrough. His pessimistic left-brain called him a deluded idiot.

Feeling dry, he took the headphones off and retired to the

kitchen to make himself a mug of tea. The psionic amplifier, resting in lonely state on the dining table, re-captured his attention when he returned with a steaming mug...

There are TWO possible routes on from this point.

3A: Burial

This isn't the sort of thing a sensible person leaves lying around, Darnby told himself. If anyone else sees it, they'll start casting doubt on my sanity.

He tucked the diagram away in a handy cupboard, in the middle of a pile of old magazines, which had remained undisturbed for longer than he could remember.

About six months later, he decided to have one of his periodic clear-outs. Strict rules governed such occasions. Anything that he had not used since the last clear-out, anything that seemed unlikely to be needed again in the immediate future, had to go.

The magazines were an exception to the rule. He was hoping that they would acquire scarcity value eventually and that he would be able to sell them for an unreasonable price to a collector sometime in the future. It was an unreasonable sort of dream, but every-one should be allowed at least one such ambition.

While sorting through the pile, arranging the magazines in date order and looking for gaps in the sequence, he came across a circuit diagram. He puzzled over it for a while. It had no title and there was nothing to explain what the circuit did. He had not even bothered to add values for resistance and capacitance beside the components, or the code numbers of the transistors.

With a shrug, he crumpled the sheet of graph paper and threw it in to the fire. Whatever it was, the circuit diagram

was clearly redundant, and probably duplicated elsewhere in a more intelligible form. He assumed that it was some gadget that sounded essential on paper but which he had decided against building after proper thought.

END of this route – go to the end.

3B: Breakthrough

I'll leave this out, Darnby thought, looking down at the diagram of his psionic amplifier. I'll have a go at it in a while.

He was half hoping to produce out of thin air enough money to buy himself an extra pint when he went out to his local pub. This was sole concession to the urge for riotous living – shelling out a small fortune on a Friday night for a pint of liquid that was mainly good old water brightened with a little over-taxed alcohol.

He returned home at closing time feeling as skint as ever. He had made a late start to his drinking, and he had bought a pint and a half of bitter out of his own money. There was a half-way decent film on BBC 2 as that channel's late-night rubbish offering. It finished at half-past twelve, just as Michael Darnby's eyelids were starting to droop at the end of a long day. He switched off the television at the wall socket; taking his routine fire-prevention measures. He had never heard of a plugged-in television actually starting a fire, but there was no point in taking unnecessary chances.

You'd better do your stuff, mate, he told the psionic amplifier on the dining table. Before I have to spend that fiver on the Comparator Gate. Perhaps I'll have more luck in the morning after a night's sleep.

He switched the light off and plodded up the stairs, putting all doubts aside. He felt that it was important to maintain an unshakable belief in the amplifier's powers if he

were to stand any chance of success with it.

Keep the faith, he told himself. Maintain an unsupported belief in the unreasonable. That's the basis for things like religions, faith-healing and Voodoo assassinations. Anything that you believe is possible can actually happen – if you believe strongly enough and you're a good enough liar to yourself.

He wriggled in to a comfortable position in bed, thinking about the amplifier and wondering whether he could operate it by remote control. Perhaps he could connect himself to the Input Gate with immaterial beams of pure thought. Trying to imagine how many millions of pounds had been lost over the years, and how he would spend them if he could trawl them up, he drifted off to sleep.

He woke up, unassisted by artificial aids, at eight o'clock the following morning. A hollow gurgling in his digestive system hurried him through his ablutions and sent him leaping down the stairs two at a time in search of breakfast. He crossed the gloomy living room, drew the curtains with their abstract printed design, looked unenthusiastically out at a grey day and then reached for the kitchen doorknob.

His hand stopped in mid-air, two inches short of the doorknob. The spectacle on the dining table turned his head and drew his eyes like a magnet. The incredible had happened...

There are THREE possible routes on from this point.

4A: Counterpart

There were two £5 notes on his psionic amplifier; one quite new and neatly folded at the Comparator Gate, the other old and limply open at the Output Gate.

He stared down at them for a long time, thinking about bizarre optical illusions and people seeing things that

weren't there because they wanted to see them.

At last, he reached out a wary finger and touched the £5 note at the Output Gate. It felt real enough. He picked it up to examine it more closely. The note had received a lot of use and it had a faintly sour smell, as if it had been lurking somewhere damp and not too pleasant for a long time.

Encouraged by his success, Darnby set the note to one side and sat down at the table. Wearing his headphones and eyes closed, he placed his index fingers on the Output Gate of his psionic amplifier and willed more money to appear at the Output Gate. At intervals, he opened his eyes a crack to check on his progress.

Nothing happened. After another ten minutes, he abandoned the experiment. Breakfast had a higher priority than wasting time. But as he sliced bread to make toast, he resolved to attempt at intervals throughout the day to recover more lost fivers.

If the unlikely gadget had worked once, it could do so again...

Michael Darnby trawled one more £5 note during a day of intermittent attempts. It was as old and as smelly as the first one, and he summoned it under similar circumstances. The time was early evening; around half past six. He felt drained of energy for no particular reason. He found himself yawning.

His eyes felt gritty and their lids were starting to droop. The internal fires need stoking, he decided. Food equals energy. He would be wide awake again after his evening meal, but he could hear a timer ticking away in the kitchen. His re-heated dinner of odds and ends would not be hot enough until the timer rang.

He decided to continue his efforts to recreate his grand

achievement for the moment. Wearing his stereo headphones, unplugged, and touching the Input Gate of his psionic amplifier with his index fingers, he allowed his eyes to fall shut. A loud ringing ripped him from a light doze. And there it was, just waiting for him to notice it: another sad, old fiver, treasure-trawled to boost Michael Darnby's shattered local economy.

Over dinner, he started to lay a foundation of theory for the mode of operation of his psionic amplifier. The very best time to operate it, paradoxically, seemed to be on the edge of sleep, or perhaps during light doze, when the paranormal forces of his subconscious were liberated.

And if the amplifier itself was a symbol, just ink lines on a sheet of graph paper, perhaps he could take that concept a step further. One of the clearing banks had advertised its services in the paper that day. He cut out a picture of an impossible sum in notes and coins. Somewhere among his souvenirs was a fairly recent photograph of himself. He had needed one for an identity card and the photo-booth had supplied a strip of four.

Before climbing in to bed that night, he set out his psionic amplifier on the bedroom carpet. He placed the newspaper picture of a vast fortune across the Comparator Gate, then he decided to glue it down to ensure a good contact between the picture and the big-dot terminals. He did the same with his own photograph at the Input Gate. The pseudo-scientific symbology was complete now.

He attempted to go to sleep thinking about his experiment in order to direct his dreams to the right area. With any luck, he told himself, there would be a few thousand ancient fivers waiting for him in the morning...

There are TWO possible routes on from this point – go to Level 5A.

4B: Abundance

Michael Darnby could see the white corners of his sheet of graph paper. The rest was hidden under a veritable blue mountain. He had hit the jackpot.

At some moment during his slide in to sleep, he told himself, trying to rationalize the incredible, his conscious and subconscious minds had joined forces with the psionic amplifier. The weird trio had hit on the exact frequency necessary to trawl the best part of one hundred lost five-pound notes out of their hiding places.

It was a daft sort of explanation, but who cared? The reality of the heap of paper on his dining table was a slap in the eye for the sceptical part of him that still considered the idea of psionic treasure-trawling to be ridiculous nonsense.

Bubbling with endless, gloating glee, Darnby sat down to count his trawled haul...

There are FIVE possible routes on from this point – go to Level 5B.

4C: Equivalence

Ten fifty-pence pieces were stacked precisely one on top of the other with their sides aligned at his Output Gate. Success brought a measure of clarification. He had been expecting to conjure up one or more £5 notes, but the sum of money placed across the Comparator Gate was indeed just a symbol.

The presence of ten fifty-pence pieces at the Output Gate had to be significant and it looked as though the proper time to use his psionic amplifier was last thing at night, when his conscious mind was tired out and less likely to clutter up a communicating blend of left and right brain hemispheres with irrelevant observations.

Later in the day, while swatting an annoying fly, he noticed a curious hole in the window pane. It was more of a slot, really – neat and clean with perfectly straight edges. It looked as though it had been formed as part of a manufacturing process. He looked out a ruler and measured it. The slot was about an eighth of an inch wide and an inch and a quarter high. Curiously, the slot wasn't quite vertical.

A protractor, which had been gathering dust for years, told him that the slot was inclined at an angle of about 17° to the vertical. For want of a better solution, he stuck a strip of clear plastic tape over the slot to keep out draughts.

The idea of replacing the entire pane of glass just for the sake of such a small, clean hole seemed outrageous. He made a mental note to see if he could find a suitable transparent filling material the next time he went shopping. As to what had made the hole, or when it had been made, that was a baffling and annoying puzzle, and a distraction.

No solution to the problem of a permanent repair for his slotted window popped in to Michael Darnby's subconscious during the day. As he drew the abstract-patterned curtains on the blackness of another night, complete replacement seemed the only answer.

The psionic amplifier and his headphones were set out on the table, ready for his next experiment. Following the routine, he placed a folded £10 note on the Comparator Gate, touched the Input Gate with his index fingers and concentrated on trawling with closed eyes and blocked ears.

A muffled, ringing, plinking noise penetrated his earmuffs. He opened his eyes abruptly; to see a stack of fifty-pence pieces on the Output Gate of the amplifier.

Success! he thought, forgetting about the headphone-muffled plinking noise. *On with Phase Two!*

He had used his credit card to draw one-hundred pounds

from his bank that morning. He had been sensible enough to join a bank that had opted for Saturday-morning opening at selected branches. Offering a vote of thanks to an enlightened bank, he placed the wad of notes across the Comparator Gate.

He handled the money with exaggerated care, knowing that it was not his to spend. It was his emergency reserve and it had to go back in to the savings account as quickly as possible. Wondering how much one-hundred pounds in fifty-pees weighed, Darnby prepared to find out...

There are TWO possible routes on from this point – go to Level 5C.

5A1: Rationed

Michael Darnby woke in to a new day to the sound of heavy rain lashing against his window. The world seemed a cold and unwelcoming place. He stepped on paper when he slid out of bed in to cold air – but only with one foot. From that brief contact, he knew that he had not stepped onto a carpet of money. There was just one £5 note stuck to the sole of his right foot. It was not the untold riches of the newspaper picture, but it was better than a slap in the eye with a wet fish.

Darnby persevered with the Treasure Trawler at intervals through the day. He was no richer when he went to bed, leaving the circuit diagram with its glued-on accessories on the dining table.

He found a fairly new fiver at the Output Gate the following morning. The same thing happened the next day and the next. Some cosmic rationing system for luck had decided that he was worth £5 per day.

Still, it was tax-free and it was an apparently guaranteed

income that required no special effort on his behalf. Thirty-five pounds per week would buy quite a few luxuries – until inflation turned a fiver in to small change.

Life could be worse, he told himself as he wondered whether to dash out and spend his accumulated £25 or save up for something decent.

Decisions, decisions, he thought with a grin. *Money brings you nothing but trouble.*

END of this route – go to the end.

5A2: *Deluge*

At first, the inhabitants of Priory Street thought that there had been an earthquake or an airliner crashed on their town.

The terrible, grinding crash during the night had been just one of the semi-detached houses collapsing internally and taking a large chunk of its neighbour with it. The noise, confusion, fear and morbid interest roused the whole street. And then the riot began. It took three dozen baffled policemen to restore order. When a uniformed police inspector managed to get close enough to inspect the scene of the catastrophe, he found his torch beam lighting a bizarre spectacle.

According to the fire brigade's chief officer, who was supervised recovering bodies and survivors from the pair of houses, the floor of one of the bedrooms had collapsed, spilling a bed, its occupant, chests of drawers, bookcases and hundreds of paperback books in to the living room below.

And there was the money. It was everywhere. Bronze and silver coins threw back his torchlight. Notes of all denominations were growing soggy with the books in light drizzle. Scavenging neighbours had depleted the fortune somewhat, gathering up notes that had been blown in to the street, but

the coins filled the spaces between larger debris to a depth of at least three feet.

It was no wonder the floor had collapsed with all that weight of metal on it, the inspector reflected.

Where all the money had come from and how the occupant of the house had managed to store it until the moment of collapse were to remain mysteries. When they dug him out of the wreckage, Michael Darnby had no further use for his funeral fortune.

END of this route – go to the end.

5B1: Delusion

With trembling hands, Michael Darnby scooped the untidy heap of £5 notes in to a wad and began to count. His venture in to the realms of the para- normal had yielded the magnificent total of eighty-nine notes. He counted them four times, planning a major spending spree.

Breakfast forgotten, he thrust his trawled treasure in to the inside pocket of his jacket and left the house. There were one or two cars about, but very few people. Then he noticed that all the shops were shut.

With cheerful sarcasm, he reminded himself that he was out rather early on a Saturday morning.

He spotted a newsagent's across the road. At least he could buy a paper. Feeling rich, he stopped at the paperback rack and selected the first brand-new addition to his library for a long, long time. He took two fivers from his inside pocket and placed them on top of his usual newspaper and the book. Then he turned back to the rack to select another paperback.

He had noticed that one of the notes had been folded in to four recently. It was the one that he had placed across the

Comparator Gate of his psionic amplifier. The young assistant moved the book off the newspaper and gave the paper to another customer. One of the trawled £5 notes disappeared as she folded it.

"Just a minute," Darnby protested, "my money's in that."

The man with his newspaper unfolded it. "Nothing there, mate," he said with a shrug, even though the trawled £5 note was lying in plain view.

"What's this, then?" Darnby demanded, picking it up.

The man and the shop assistant exchanged puzzled glances, then looked back at his hand. With an expression of impatient pity, the man shrugged and headed for the door. The assistant gave Darnby a dirty look and turned to another customer.

"Is this what you're looking for?" The newsagent showed Darnby the folded fiver. He checked the price of the book, slipped it in to a paper bag and handed it over along with a penny coin as his change. Darnby accepted the bag awkwardly with the hand that held the rejected fiver.

He left the shop feeling embarrassed and a little shaken, having forgotten about buying a newspaper, which he could no longer afford anyway. As he was transferring the bag containing the budget-wrecking paperback book to his pocket, the £5 note made a bid for freedom. Darnby watched it drift to the pavement. No one walking past the fiver even glanced at it.

There was a low wall enclosing a raised bed of grass and a ring of flowers near the newsagent's. A youngster with a paint-splashed toolkit was sitting on it, waiting for a lift to work. Darnby joined him, keeping an eye on the £5 note on the pavement. It could have been invisible. The scattering of people out before the main shops opened, or on their way to a Saturday job, walked past it or even stepped on it.

Darnby lit a cigarette and tried to collect his thoughts. He slipped another note out of his inside pocket and examined it while seeming to read the blurb on the back of his book. It looked all right. He allowed a gust of wind to waft the rectangle of tired paper out of reach.

The people passing by continued on their courses undeflected. There were two £5 notes on the pavement for anyone cheeky enough to walk off with them. Nobody did.

It's faith, Darnby thought in disgust. An unsupported belief in the unreasonable. I've got myself believing in a mirage, in four hundred and forty-five quid's worth of wishful thinking.

He took the rest of the trawled treasure out of his pocket. It still looked and felt real enough to him. Pieces of blue paper took to the air, driven by the breeze along the main street. Darnby watched for a while as the town's early risers ignored a small fortune blowing around their ankles. Then he went home to tear up his psionic amplifier.

END of this route – go to the end.

5B2: Doubt

Michael Darnby lifted a limp sheet of paper off the mound, placed it on an area of table about a foot from the psionic amplifier and said: "One!" in a clear, ringing tone. He reached slowly for another fiver.

"Eighty-nine!" he said as he added the last note to a neat pile. He had drawn out the counting of his trawled treasure in a disgustingly self-satisfied fashion. He was £445 richer that morning.

I wonder if they're real? he thought suddenly.

Doubt bobbed to the surface of his mind like a cork released from the bottom of a tank of water. The fivers certainly looked and felt real enough. But what if the notes

were just an illusion? A spot of wishful thinking?

Hallucinations can seem solid and portable, indistinguishable from reality if they are strong enough. Sometimes, a belief can be taken dangerously too far.

What if I try and buy something with money only I can see? Darnby asked himself. *There I'd be, standing in a shop, holding out an empty hand. And everyone else would be wondering if it was a joke or the ravings of some dangerous lunatic.*

This boy's a fool, he told himself. Of course, the cash is real.

But the problem continued to worry him. He felt an irrational need to prove the existence or non-existence of his trawled treasure. All he had to do was solve the following problem: how does someone who may be hallucinating find out if a non-hallucinating observer can see a whole bunch of money without putting himself in to a potentially embarrassing position?

Darnby pushed away from the table to put the kettle on. There was no need to starve to death just because his screws might, or might not, be slightly loose. When he had two slices of bread steaming nicely under the grill, he took a mug down from the rack and opened the fridge door. As he was pouring milk in to the mug, ready to receive tea, the solution came to him.

His every-other-daily pinta arrived at about a quarter to eight during the week. But on Saturday, with money to collect, the milkman called about an hour later. As Michael Darnby didn't usually drag himself out of bed before ten on a Saturday morning, he had trained the milkman to look for the money hidden under an empty bottle, and to leave any change under a full one.

All he had to do was put one of his doubtful notes under the bottle – the bottle on the draining board that he had forgotten to put out the previous night. If the £5 note really

existed, the milkman wouldn't ring the bell in search of payment and Michael Darnby would be as rich as he imagined himself to be. At that point, a smell of charring bread invited him to suspend his line of thought and turn his toast over.

Armed with a mug of tea and a plate of marmaladed toast, he returned to the dining table. He found himself strangely reluctant to touch his windfall in case the neat stack of rather ancient notes popped in to oblivion like time-expired soap bubbles. His eyes focussed on the clock on the mantelpiece.

The milkman! he thought. *He'll be here anytime now.*

He collected the milk bottle from the draining board and hurried to the front door. An endless period of waiting followed.

As a watched kettle never boils, an expected tradesman never arrives. Eventually, he heard glassy rattlings at the front door. Michael Darnby held his breath. The bell remained silent.

Darnby sneaked to the front door a few minutes later. There was a full bottle of milk beside the outside doormat. And under that milk bottle... His change!

The psionically trawled money was real! His ridiculous doubts had been the products of an over-active imagination. It was a beautiful day and he was rich! Feeling weak with joy, he floated back to the living room, to his cooling second cup of tea and the first instalment of a free fortune.

END of this route – go to the end.

5B3: Loot

With a casual flick of his wrist, a grinning Michael Darnby tossed £445 back onto the table in the manner of someone used to throwing vast amounts of money around. As he

started to make his breakfast, he decided to put half of his windfall in the bank and to blow the rest on some clothes and other essentials; like a bottle of decent Scotch.

A couple of days later, during the evening of Banking Monday, a long double-ring on his doorbell caught Darnby up to his forearms in soapy water, doing the washing up. He found two hard-eyed men on the doorstep; a detective sergeant and a detective constable, who wanted to know where he had got the money that he had paid in to his bank during the morning.

Darnby asked them why they wanted to know, which failed to improve the attitude of his unwelcome visitors. They also wanted to know where he had been on the night of the 22nd of that month, when a safe had been robbed in a town less than ten miles away.

Realizing that he was on the edge of something serious, Darnby fell back on the truth. He sensed that his trawled money had been stolen and stashed, not lost. Even so, he felt confident that the detectives would have serious problems with trying to link him to the thieves or the scene of the crime.

The detectives neither laughed nor groaned in disbelief when they heard his explanation. They just invited him to think again at the police station. Darnby insisted on showing them his psionic amplifier and the article in *Futures*. The detectives were not impressed. He opened the bottom drawer of the sideboard and took out two bundles of notes, most of them new, the results of his efforts with the psionic amplifier on Saturday and Sunday nights.

Darnby had been planning to invest in some new hi-fi equipment at the weekend, given the same rate of recovery through the week. He had been hoping to negotiate some sort of discount if he waved a large amount of actual cash

under a salesperson's nose.

The detective constable took the cash out to the radio in their car to check on the numbers. He returned looking puzzled. Darnby had trawled cash from five separate robberies between London and central Scotland.

The detectives knew that they had stumbled across either a major criminal mastermind or a very minor mad scientist. Looking at Michael Darnby, they found themselves having to settle for the latter.

They allowed him to finish his washing up, then they hauled him down to the police station to tell his story to their inspector. He didn't believe it either but he was forced to admit that it had an illogical ring of truth.

In the end, the inspector got Darnby to sign a statement, which he referred on to his superiors. The decision on whether to prosecute Darnby for being in possession of stolen money belonged to someone at a higher level. If it was up to him, the inspector felt, he would prefer to forget the whole business. The case, if it ever came to court, could quite easily make a laughing stock of the local police force.

When a police car dropped him off at his home at last, Michael Darnby wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or terrified. The evening had been an interesting look at police procedures from the sharp end, but it could have ended with him looking at a cell door from the wrong side.

Darnby contemplated screwing up the psionic amplifier diagram and using it to light the fire after all the trouble that it had caused him. But a mercenary quivering shivered at the back of his mind. All right, so he couldn't keep the money that the psionic Treasure Trawler provided – not now that the police knew about him. But there had to be a finder's fee due, a ten per cent reward on anything that he recovered.

Perhaps there were elements of a business available. His

nightly take had fluctuated between two and over four hundred quid. If he could just average £300 per day over the week, his ten per cent would come to a decent £210 per week, which wasn't to be sniffed at. And he would be able to keep any trawled cash that wasn't claimed within three months.

He would be happy with that sort of a 'salary' – even happier if he could develop his talent and bring in more cash at each attempt. The police and the lawful owners of the money would be happy. Only the criminals, who had carried out the robberies, would not be happy. And as long as they didn't find out his address, Michael Darnby felt able to live with that.

END of this route – go to the end.

5B4: Sweeper

Including the £5 note that he had draped across the Comparator Gate, Michael Darnby had £450 to spend. He had been planning a cheap, stay-at-home weekend and a trip to the bank on Monday for 'existing-on cash'. The visit to the bank was no longer necessary now. Feeling quite cheerful, he left the money in a neat pile on the table and strolled in to the kitchen to get his breakfast ready.

After breakfast, he took a train in to town. When he began his shopping spree with his trawled wealth, he received a few nasty shocks. He was completely out of touch with a lot of prices. Everything seemed to have doubled since he had last bought for his wardrobe. In the end, he decided that he would have to go to the bank on Monday after all. His windfall would not stretch to luxuries plus routine expenses.

He returned home on the last train of a day that had ended with a modest dinner and a trip to the pictures. His duffle

bag and a carrier bag were full and his wallet was almost empty. Three or four pounds in change clanked reassuringly in his pockets.

His neighbour ambushed him the following morning as he was bringing the milk in. She was in her mid-forties, an energetic woman who spent ages digging her garden up if she couldn't find someone to talk to. Before realizing the direction of the conversation, he admitted that he had not lost any money.

Just about everyone else in the street had. Their money had disappeared mysteriously from wallets, piggy banks and secret stashes for special occasions. All in all, the best part of £150 had disappeared up and down the street. And the really puzzling aspect of the thefts was that just £5 notes had disappeared, never tens or twenties, and that just one or two notes had been taken from places where more had been available.

Darnby made appropriate noises at infrequent breaks in the catalogue of disaster. The ringing of a timer in his neighbour's kitchen distracted her and allowed him to escape. Darnby hurried in to his house. His neighbour had mentioned that the police had been up and down the street the day before and would be back to interview any people whom they had missed. It seemed a good idea to distribute his new clothing among the old rags and burn the wrappings and carrier bags before the police arrived to grill him.

He spent an uncomfortable half hour wondering what would happen when the rest of the street found out that he had not lost any money. His neighbour was sure to mention that fact in her next news bulletin.

The solution to his dilemma proved devastatingly simple when it occurred to him. All he had to do was say that his personal fortune had consisted of a couple of tenners and a

pocketful of change on Friday night. If he had had no £5 notes in his possession, then none could have been stolen! The story sounded reasonable enough. There remained the moral problem of his psionic amplifier. The money that it had helped him to acquire had not been entirely lost. It had included a vacuuming from his immediate surroundings. He could hardly continue to plunder his neighbours.

Perhaps he could move to a flat next door to a bank. The banks had plenty of money – including their periodic windfall profits, which opposition politicians are always suggesting should be taxed out of existence. Recycling their excess profits in to the economy, after doing himself a spot of good, amounted to a public service, he told himself.

With a warm internal glow, Michael Darnby poured himself a generous measure from a windfall bottle of sherry. A brand new and untouched bottle would look suspicious to a copper, who had called to investigate a spate of local burglaries. And he hadn't even touched the whisky!

There was an empty whisky bottle gathering dust in his bedroom. It was full of water and doing duty as a bookend. Feeling very devious, Darnby poured the water away and transferred whisky until he had two half-full bottles. Some of the accumulation of dust on the older whisky bottle helped to age its newer cousins.

Right, thought Michael Darnby, pouring out more sherry when his manoeuvres were complete, bring on the rubber hose. I have a complete answer to everything. I hope!

END of this route – go to the end.

5B5: Penetration

This is going to be a real pleasure, Michael Darnby told himself.

He began to scrape the loose mound of blue paper in to a

wad to make counting it easier. The limp notes refused to pack together in to a neat rectangle. Puzzled, he took hold of one of the fivers and tried to lift it off the heap. Another note came with it; and another; and another. The whole pile rose, joined and sagging like an ill-made, expanding Christmas decoration.

Using both hands, he explored one of the joins – and discovered that the notes were not stuck together as if glued. They were interwoven. Parts of one note intersected others. In places, one solid piece of paper had formed an X shape by passing through another solid sheet of paper.

Crazy as it seemed, the notes had to have gathered at the Output Gate of the psionic amplifier in a ghost-like condition and they had embraced their neighbours while solidifying.

Darnby lifted the mass all the way in to the air. A much newer note hung from the lowest point of the tangle, attached only by a corner. Three creases in it told him that he had found the £5 note that he had placed across the Comparator Gate.

Well, what do I do with this lot? he asked himself. Disgusted, he rested his chin on his fists and contemplated a fair but unspendable fortune.

Maybe I can cut them apart, he thought at last. *And leave only a set of narrow slits in the notes. If I stick them up with a bit of Sellotape, no one will ever suspect there's a little bit missing. Or maybe I can get more than the face value of the notes by selling the whole mess as a work of art; or a scientific curiosity. I bet the professor of physics at the university would be fascinated by a genuine impossibility like this.*

Whatever, there's nothing much I can do before breakfast, he decided. *Perhaps I should pin the amplifier to the wall next time, so the trawled money solidifies before it hits the floor and saves me the bother of cutting and sticking it back together again.*

The edge of excitement blunted for the moment, Darnby pushed away from the table. It was time to put the kettle on and do something about his internal rumblings. Making fried-egg sandwich sounded a good idea.

END of this route – go to the end.

5C1: Attraction

Had he bothered to investigate the source of the plinking noise, Michael Darnby would not have been so eager to continue his psionic treasure trawling.

There were two more slots in the window; in other panes, having exactly the same dimensions but inclined at a slightly steeper angle to the vertical than the original slot.

There were also new slots, each measuring one-eighth by one and a quarter inches, in the walls and ceiling, just like another slot, which had been formed the previous night but had remained unnoticed.

The police officers, who broke in to the house the next morning, reported that the place looked as if it had been machine-gunned with fifty-pence pieces. They found over two hundred of them scattered across a circuit diagram on the dining table, lying in front of the riddled corpse of a man in headphones that weren't plugged in.

The police found slots large enough to admit a fifty-pence piece cutting right through the structure of the house. Impossible as it seemed, the coins had passed cleanly through external and internal walls, windows and the roof on their way to the dining table. The paths of six of the coins had taken them through the head and upper body of the late Michael Darnby.

Later, as they were measuring and making diagrams of the flight paths of the fifty-pence pieces, the eyes of two of the

members of the forensic team met.

One grinned. The other responded with a slight shrug. Both knew that they were wasting their time, merely going through the motions of routine. This particular mystery was likely to remain baffling and unsolved.

END of this route – go to the end.

5C2: Caution

As he concentrated, Michael Darnby felt a sneeze coming on. He drew his handkerchief out of its trouser pocket to catch the explosion – and found that the handkerchief was a bit damp and not suitable for a satisfying blow. He took it up to the laundry basket and helped himself to a clean one from the supply in the airing cupboard.

Going downstairs, he noticed a dark patch on the wall. It was another of the clean-edged slots like the one in his window. He could see right through it in to the living room. Alarmed, Darnby turned and looked at the opposite wall. There was another slot in it, about ten feet up from the half-landing.

When he went up to the front bedroom, he found a slot in the stair wall and yet another slot in the ceiling at the front of the room, where the ceiling followed the slope of the roof.

Numbly, Darnby went downstairs and sat down in front of his psionic amplifier. In a rush of panic, he swept the £100 from the Comparator Gate. The house would look like a colander if he tried to trawl 200 lost fifty-pees! And the cost of repairing the Swiss-cheese effect already inflicted would be a lot more than the profits so far.

Darnby turned the psionic amplifier face down and toured the room, looking for slots and trying to work out just how much damage he had caused. If he had hit the hot-water tank

or its header-tank, for instance! He was dismayed by his own recklessness.

His problem was that he needed to use the Treasure Trawler now to pay for the damage to his home; unless he could sue *Futures* magazine and/or the author of the article. But first, he had to work out a way to use it safely.

Obviously, he would have to use it away from the house. But he also had the problem of keeping himself out of the line of fire.

Most short cuts usually take you miles out of your way, he thought bitterly. If he couldn't figure out a way to exploit his Treasure Trawler without killing himself, *Futures* magazine would have to head the list of economies to pay for repairs to his abused home. And what was he going to tell the people next door about the slots going through their half of the pair of semis?

END of this route – This is the very end of the story.

Author's note:

I wrote this short story in September of 1980, before the computer technology needed to create a hypertext story was available to the home user.

Fifteen years later, in September of 1995, there are much fancier hypertext programs on the market than the one what I wrote to display the HTML version of the story, but what really counts is the content of the story, not how it looks . . .

■ ■ ■

30. "Excuse me..."

Roger Chapell received fair warning that it was not going to be his day at five past eight. When he peered through bleary eyes at his watch, it took a few seconds for him to realize that his alarm clock had failed him. Bursting out of a warm bed in to a chilly morning, he flung on clothes and trod brutally in to his shoes.

He noticed something wrong with his left foot on the way to the bathroom. The heel of his left sock had wandered. Breathing fire, he sat down on the landing carpet and tugged angrily at the awkward garment.

His trousers were full of creases, most of them in the wrong places, but it was too late to change them. He had enough time for a wash and a rapid shave, but none for breakfast. Empty and irritated, he left the house one minute behind his usual timetable.

There was a ditherer in the newsagent's at the station, agonizing over the motor magazines. Roger Chapell fumed and counted out the right change for his paper. When the ditherer left, still not convinced that he had made the right choice, Roger Chapell started to ask for his paper. But a voice whined nasally at his elbow.

"Excuse me," it said with patient politeness, "but I was first."

The assistant switched her attention to the protestor. At that moment, wheels rumbled onto the bridge over the main road and a diesel train squealed to a halt.

Roger Chapell turned and raced out of the shop. He fought

a passage against the tide up two flights of stairs. The train was pulling out as he reached the platform. Despite protests from an officious porter, he made a dive for a door and scrambled aboard.

Just my luck, he thought. It had to be early today. And me with no paper and twenty boring minutes ahead of me.

He collapsed onto a seat, feeling hot and sticky, convinced that everyone was looking at him. As he mopped his brow with a corner of an unclean handkerchief, he noticed a few grins. And then he experienced a violent jolt of panic.

About twenty regulars boarded the front carriage of the eight twenty-three. He knew most of them by sight. But today, he couldn't see a single familiar face. And the carriage was much more crowded than usual.

With a sinking feeling, he looked across the aisle and through a window on his left. About half a mile beyond the station, the lines parted company. He could see the Weston Line looping down to the long tunnel. His train was heading up and around the hill towards Eastlea. The eight twenty-three had not arrived early. He was on the eight-nineteen running three minutes late.

Feeling an absolute idiot, he got out at the next station. By the time he had found out which bus would take him back to the Weston Line, it was pulling away from the stop on the other side of the road. He had to wait ten minutes for the next one.

He bought a paper at Weston Central station, and tried to read it during the wait for a number sixteen bus and the eight minute journey.

By the time he reached the office, he had still to absorb the front page – and that was mostly headlines and large photographs.

He endured with a patient smile *Good afternoon* from Mike

and *So good of you to join us* from Brian, not trusting himself to reply. As he unloaded his briefcase, he realized that he had forgotten to pack the sandwiches that he had made the previous night. He had also left his copy of the Bellin Survey file on the dining table, along with his calculator and his pen.

By ten o'clock, he had achieved precisely nothing. Twenty minutes had flown in patient detective work, tracking down an elusive colleague to borrow his copy of the Bellin Survey. And some idiot from across the corridor was monopolising the office's programmable calculator.

Roger Chapell expected to have to replace the ribbon and fit a new roll of paper to the calculator's printer before he could begin his own job.

Coffee, he thought. *At least I can have a cup of coffee.*

There was a machine in the corridor, in an alcove about ten yards from his office door. Buying his newspaper had taken most of his small change, but there was just enough left to feed the machine. It whirred reluctantly in to life when he pressed the selector panels, as though he had set a vast and rusty piece of machinery in to motion – an engine that was nowhere to be seen when the front of the machine was open for restocking. A white plastic cup dropped in to view. Brown liquid gushed down to fill the cup – and that liquid splashed hot, sticky and very wet all over his hand when he tried to lift the cup out of the machine.

Female heels tapped past him. "Don't use the coffee machine, Mr. Chapell," advised a departing teenage squeak. "There's something wrong with the cups."

"Thanks, Angie," Chapell replied patiently, drying his hand with his well-used handkerchief.

The seam of the plastic cup had split from rim to base. It had been just strong enough to contain coffee, but not strong enough to resist the slight crushing force of handling. He had

to be content with a drink of water from the fountain in the gents.

The morning continued in much the same vein. Chapell could not tell the youngster on the calculator to get lost because his was a priority job. But he needed the programmable calculator. His own job would take ten times as long on an ordinary hand model. Yet he could not leave the office to use one of the other programmable calculators because he was expecting an important phone call before noon.

For want of something better to do, he began to construct graphs based on the data that he had already processed.

Then a partial silence fell. Roger Chapell grew curious. He could hear a gentle whirring, but the calculator's printer had not ripped out a line of figures for a good five minutes. He stuck his head round the partition. The youngster had left the calculator alcove, taking his pieces of paper with him but leaving the calculator running.

Muttering under his breath, Roger Chapell changed seats and pressed the program erase key. He entered a string of symbols at the keyboard, then checked through the print-out. Everything looked all right. He tapped in a set of test figures. The calculator chewed them over for less than a second and spat out the right answer.

Encouraged, he tapped in the first set of experimental results. With a dying fall, the cooling fan whirled to a stop. The printer chattered nonsense feebly. When he checked the side of the device, the mains light had gone out.

Roger Chapell drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. The calculator had a tendency to blow its fuse if left running unused for long periods. He rang Maintenance and asked for the services of an electrician, explaining that it was only a two-minute job.

The man at the other end sucked at his teeth noisily. All of the electricians were on vitally important jobs. He was forced to settle for: 'Not before this afternoon, squire', knowing that the entire Maintenance staff would leap out on strike were he to change the fuse himself.

He was drawing some more graphs when the youngster from across the corridor breezed back and discovered that the calculator wasn't working. Roger Chapell drew some small satisfaction from being deliberately unhelpful, and from blaming the calculator's demise on the visitor's ill-treatment.

Tail between his legs, the youngster departed – to return less than a minute later with his boss. Mike and Brian sniggered quietly at their end of the long, narrow office.

Roger Chapell's instinctive reaction to 'What are you going to do about it?' questions was, 'Nothing!' The matter had passed in to the horny hands of Maintenance, and nothing that he could do or say would make their wheels grind any faster. Suspecting deliberate obstruction, the youngster's boss went to see Roger Chapell's boss to complain about a lack of inter-department cooperation.

After the confrontation had been resolved, a rebellious Roger Chapell was sent down to the basement to plead with the Maintenance foreman face to face. He returned with a firm promise that an electrician would leap in to action no later than two-fifteen that afternoon – which was more or less what he had been told on the phone.

Lunchtime came around with most of his graphs drawn. He had yet to receive his important phone call. Forgetting his sandwiches meant a trip to the cafeteria on the third floor with Mike and Brian.

Four feet of sand-gold linoleum separated the carpeted

dining area from the self-service counters. Just past the cash register, Roger Chapell's left foot landed on something soft and slippery. His tray went forward. He went back. The thud as he landed flat on his back on the lino coincided exactly with a shattering of crockery and the impact against a wall of a wooden tray and assorted eating irons.

More shaken than hurt, he lay on his back in the total silence and realized that he had reached a crossroads. Much of humour is based on the misfortunes of others. If he leapt to his feet and made light of the incident, he would become a laughing stock. So the best thing to do was take his time.

He lay there and kept his eyes closed until Mike and Brian asked him if he was all right and helped him carefully to his feet. By then, the accident had acquired a proper gravity. It was no longer funny that he had narrowly escaped serious injury despite the best efforts of some careless fool.

The canteen manager served him a replacement meal at a table, and insisted on adding a glass of red wine, also on the firm. Conversation filled the cafeteria again. But it was not until they were on the way back to their office that Mike felt able to suggest that his friend sue the firm for whiplash injuries.

The photocopier lived two doors down the corridor in Shirley Neal's office. Roger Chapell arrived with a fistful of graphs as she was on her way out to make a delivery. It was do-it-yourself time. While scanning the second copy of the third graph, the copier died on him.

A delicate mechanism costing thousands of pounds became a piece of unco-operative junk, fit only for supporting coffee mugs and swiss cheese plants. He drove his toe against one of the side-panels and gave vent to an animal howl of rage and frustration.

A door burst open behind him. Someone surged in to the office. "I thought I heard a scream," said an anxious voice.

Roger Chapell arranged his features in to the blankest of blank expressions and turned slowly.

"You what?" he invited, casting doubt on the sanity of the intruder.

"Thought I heard a scream," repeated Joe Raven of Technical Services.

"What have you been smoking?" laughed Roger Chapell.

His face pinking, Joe Raven scanned a quiet and orderly office, looking for evidence of violent crime. Finding none, he mumbled something and withdrew.

Shirley Neal returned as Roger Chapell was cramming graphs in to a blue folder. When he told her that he had just given the kiss of death to the photocopier, she just shrugged.

The machine had been 'acting funny' for the last couple of days. 'The man' was coming to fix it – hopefully, the next day.

Our calculator all over again, Roger Chapell told himself. His watch was showing two-thirty, and 'the man' from Maintenance had yet to put in an appearance.

Darkness crept over the city at the strange hour of three in the afternoon. His phone began to ring as Roger Chapell was reaching for the light switch. A supplement to the Bellin Survey had just arrived, his boss informed him. The new figures were to be included in his calculations.

Restraining himself with a mighty effort, Roger Chapell remarked that his wasted time could be considered practice for doing the job all over again. Mike and Brian yuk-yuked quietly in the background as he crumpled his graphs and hurled them at the waste paper bin.

Thick fog brought premature night. Everyone was allowed to go home at half past four. Roger Chapell decided to risk the bus because they were crawling along at slightly faster than his walking pace. Ten minutes later, the bus stalled at a set of traffic lights. The engine whirred painfully. The lights flickered on and off. The bus stayed put. As the station was only about half a mile away, he decided to walk.

Platform two of Weston Central station was packed solid. Half an hour after joining the mob, he learned that there was a signal fault on his line. An hour later, he popped like a cork from a champagne bottle from an overcrowded train at his home station. He was mildly surprised to learn that passengers were not squatting on the roof or clinging to the sides of the train, Asian-fashion.

Later in the evening, he settled down to watch the final episode of a serial on television. He had stayed in for the other five parts, and he was looking forward to finding out how it ended. Credit titles rolled over a rapid visual summary of the story so far. Just as the drama was getting under way, his set cracked explosively.

Thick, black smoke began to billow from the ventilation slots at the back. He reached the socket in a flying dive and yanked the plug out. Pausing only to open the transom window to let the smoke escape, he beat a hurried retreat.

Perhaps it's on at the pub, he thought.

He collected his jacket and dashed down the street and crossed the main road. The unco-operative bunch in the back bar were watching international football. Accepting that it was just not his day, he approached the bar. The barmaid smiled a greeting.

He was on the point of giving his order when a thin voice spoke at his elbow. "Excuse me," it whined, "but I was first."

This link with the beginnings of a dreadful day caused something to snap inside Roger Chapell. He reached blindly for the nearest glass. Then he poured a good half-pint of mild onto the protestor's head.

A narrow mouth fell open as sticky beer turned wispy hair in to rat tails and dripped onto sodden shoulders. Then, in terror of what might come next, the man fled the bar.

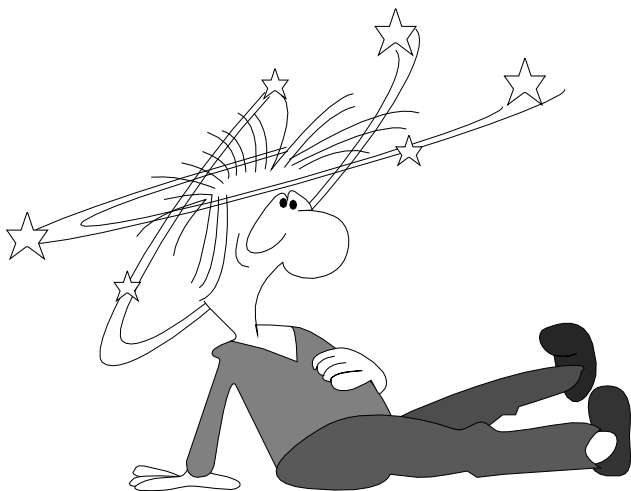
"Hey, mate," rumbled a bass voice. "That was my beer."

Roger Chapell turned slowly, clutching the empty glass guiltily. His eyes met a bearded chin. Its owner was six feet six tall and muscled in proportion. He resigned himself to a thumping. With any luck, he would be out of hospital in no more than six months.

But the stern face split in to a grin of pure delight and a massive paw was thrust towards him. "Put it there," added the giant. "He's been asking for that for years. What you drinking?"

Roger Chapell clasped the hand as laughter filled the room and relief made him feel weak at the knees. At last, he had reached a turning point in a black and frustrating day.

■ ■ ■



31. Atlantis By Moonlight

The island was called Atlantis. It had been named by a member of the first survey team, who had taken pride in his sense of irony. The Atlantis of Earth, whose sun was not visible to the naked eye in the night sky of Meikor Three, had perished in the greatest volcanic explosion in human history, three and a half thousand years before the start of Man's Atomic Age.

Meikor Three had died uncounted centuries later, blighted by a global total war. Only its alien Atlantis had survived untouched by nuclear death – apparently preserved by its isolation but abandoned for some reason.

Relays of archaeologists had poked through the island's single town but they had found little to justify their presence. The eight buildings were tall and graceful from a distance, showing the signs of at least two millennia of weathering at closer range, and quite empty. Every room of the structures offered blank walls and bare floors.

Everything portable had been stripped out by the inhabitants. There were signs of occupation – steps worn hollow by many feet, repairs carried out at significantly displaced times, but it was easy to imagine that the town had been built for people who had never moved in.

The rest of the planet was natural and unnatural desert, wild, probably mutated jungle, fused, radioactive, glassy wastelands, rich woodland that was peppered with radioactive hot spots, tundra, frozen steppes and polar ice caps that still sent the explorers' radiation detectors wild in places.

A high background radiation count over most of the large continents made Meikor Three much too hazardous for colonization. But, after a little cleaning up, Atlantis was still habitable.

Chad Leston knew this because he was there to stay. At about noon on Atlantis, a personnel shuttle had dived in to the atmosphere of Meikor Three, hovered at fifty metres over the square at the heart of Atlantis City to deposit thirteen assorted specimens of humanity and their basic survival kits, and lofted back to the orbiting Chiltan cruiser.

Leston knew that his new home resembled an insect's leg from orbit, even though he had not been offered the use of a viewscreen during the descent. The island was some 1,320 kilometres long and it varied in width from 32 to 196 kilometres. It sprawled between latitudes 20° and 24° in the northern hemisphere of Meikor Three.

400 kilometres to the west of the island lay the largest of the planet's unnamed continents. An unrelieved expanse of open sea stretched away for at least 5,000 kilometres in every other direction.

Leston also knew that its isolation, which had preserved Atlantis when the rest of the planet had been dying, made the island a very effective prison.

The archaeologists had concluded that Atlantis had been a combined nature reserve and holiday island. Only one town had been built to survive for any length of time. It lay at the centre of the arc of a bay on the southern coast.

Some evidence remained of log cabins dotted in tight groups around the island. Even such subsidiary dwellings had been stripped of all artefacts, like Atlantis City.

Chad Leston and a dozen others found themselves standing in the approximate centre of an expanse of smooth, pinkish, marble-like material. It seemed to absorb Meikor's

golden rays and return them as a soft glow – except in the region of the crack.

Leston soon became aware of a fierce heat beaming at him from a long, semi-circular depression, which approached to within two meters of his position. It looked as though a giant, returning from a swim in the clear waters of the bay, had indented a massive heel-print toward the centre of the hundred-meter square.

Leston picked up his tackle bag and headed away from the sea and the rest of the group. There was very little shade with Meikor almost directly overhead, but he could see inviting archways at the front of each of the sixty-metre towers. He had never been an outdoor man and he would have more than enough time later on to get to know the rest of the new arrivals.

Buildings clad in silky blue, light grey, pale rose, deepest black, and dazzling white lined three sides of the square. On the southern side, beyond a low wall of badly weathered sandstone, the ground sloped gently with a covering of bluish-green tendrils to a beach of pure white sand.

There were eight buildings around the square – three to east and west, and two facing the sea. The buildings around the square also had a square cross-section, rising from a twenty-metre base and tapering gently. Somehow, the architect had introduced a suggestion of curvature to soften harsh edges.

Leston entered the cool, shadowy interior beyond the archway of the left-hand of the buildings that faced the sea. He found himself in a great cubical hall, a dusty, featureless cavern of the same brilliant white as the exterior, lit from two tiers of vast windows.

He was alone with the sound of his own footsteps on an unblemished floor of the same pinkish material as the square

outside. As far as he could see, there was no obvious means of access to the upper floors of the tower.

On his left was a long ledge at a convenient height for sitting. He moved over to it to examine his survival kit. Spare clothes filled one half of his tackle bag. They were light, waterproof and soil-resistant, and they would last a lot longer than his two-year exile on Atlantis.

He also had survival rations for two months and a copy of the *Atlantis Handbook*, which gave geographical details of the island, an illustrated list of edible plants, hints on catching safe fish and trapping the food animals with which the island had been stocked, and then preparing them for cooking. He found page after page of potentially useful survival hints.

His survival kit also contained a compact medical diagnoser and a limited supply of drugs and dressings. The message seemed to be *Don't fall too ill, or else!* And there was a toolkit containing such essentials as scissors, cutlery, an Eversharp knife with a ten centimetre blade, which could be used for shaving, a small vibrosaw, a standard hand light-unit, a spare universal power pack and a solar-powered charging unit. He also wore, strapped to his left wrist, a combined chronometer, miniature diran complex, communicator, compass and the inevitable *Elapsed Time Counter*.

The *ETC* was showing the figure '973', a reflection of Meikor Three's shorter than standard day. When it reached zero, he and other 'expirers' would be summoned to a rendezvous for psychological profile testing. The results of those tests would decide whether they could be taken home to Chiltan or if they would be returned to Atlantis for the rest of their lives.

Chad Leston was a criminal, an inventive and persistent thief, who was always ready to accept a challenge. After extensive psychological probing and a double failure to

respond to rehabilitation training, the board of examiners on his home world of Chiltan had come to the conclusion that Leston had been born without a conscience and he had very little regard for the consequences of detection.

If he wanted something, he took it – covering his tracks very well, of course. He knew that he would suffer some inconvenience if he were caught, but the prospect did not bother him unduly. Exile to Atlantis was a left-handed admission that he had reached the top of the criminal tree.

The Governors of Chiltan considered themselves to be humane people. In response to growing public discontent with the cost of confining criminals for the protection of society, they had decided to conduct a great experiment. All criminals who failed to respond to two courses of rehabilitation training would be sentenced to two years' *Exile* on destroyed Meikor Three. If, at the end of their short *Exile*, they were still displaying antisocial tendencies, they would be abandoned there.

Naturally, criminals, their relatives, those involved in the prison, security, and legal industries, and political elements that counted criminals among their traditional supporters, joined together to oppose vigorously the concept of short and long periods of *Exile*. Equally naturally, the rest of the voting public favoured the idea.

Transporting an offender 5.3 light years to the Meikor system and the provision of a survival kit was significantly cheaper than containing the criminal in a prison for two or more years. And if the criminal was still not prepared to obey the rules of Chiltan society after his or her two-year period of isolation, the voters of Chiltan felt quite justified in washing their hands of the ingrate.

The experiment had been planned to last five years. Its deterrent effect, when the first *Exiles*, were announced was

dramatic. Serious crime figures plummeted. Hardened criminals weighed their life of crime and its rewards against comfortless exile in the tropical boredom of an abandoned playground of a long-extinct alien civilization.

Some changed their ways. Others left Chiltan for less penally enlightened worlds. The advantages of living beyond the law no longer outweighed the punishment. Many of the reformed criminals joined the *Abolish Exile* movement in an attempt to restore their lifestyle.

Despite their efforts to convince the great apathetic public of Chiltan to vote for re-admission of undesirables, the experiment became established practice.

Twenty years on, the shock effect of exile had faded. Chad Leston knew that there was very little chance of his ever finding his way back to Chiltan.

The *Exile* law had become part of the fabric of Chiltan life, and two long, miserable years on Atlantis were not likely to change him. But he remained hopeful that something would turn up, that he would find some way of escaping from that perfect prison.

Leaving the map on the ledge for study, he attached the sheath of the Eversharp knife to his belt and packed away the rest of his survival kit. He had been fed on the cruiser just before the shuttle took him down to his island exile. A drink would have gone down well, but he had not been issued with alcohol, leisure drugs or tobacco or a variant.

Perhaps there's a section on brewing in the handbook, he consoled himself.

He was sealing the flap of his tackle bag when he became aware of a movement. A male figure, wearing just ragged shorts and a pair of sandals, stood outlined and threatening in the archway at the entrance to the hall.

Rather self-consciously, Leston allowed his hand to stray

to the vicinity of the handle of his knife. He made no attempt to draw it from the sheath. He had never courted violence but the man in the archway was not to know that. Leston hoped that putting on a show of preparedness would make the other man think twice about trying to take advantage of a tender newcomer to the island of exile.

Realizing that he had been spotted, the intruder moved forward. He limped slightly on his left leg, and when he reached less contrasting lighting conditions, his sinister air vanished. He was just entering middle age, which made him half as old again as Chad Leston's thirty-one standard years.

The other man sported a fine head of ginger hair and a full beard, and his skin was tanned to a rich, dark brown. When he opened his mouth, Leston noticed immediately that he had lost one of his upper front teeth.

There could be no rebudding of defective teeth on Atlantis, merely extraction as an all-purpose form of practical dentistry.

"Larne Vendal," said the older man, coming to a halt a safe four metres from Leston. "I'm a sort of welcoming committee. I heard the shuttle come down just now."

"Chad Leston," replied the newcomer warily. There was nothing overtly threatening about Vendal but one could never be sure. "No one else bothered to look us over. Many people around here?"

"About twenty or thirty based in Atlantis City. A few hundred more dotted around within a couple of days' travel. Looking forward to your short visit?"

"If it is short."

"You don't sound very hopeful." Vendal smiled, showing the gap in his teeth again.

Leston found it strangely disturbing. Everyone on Chiltan had a complete set of perfect teeth. With a shrug, he replied,

"You get the impression once you're here, they don't want you back."

"Well, it's not so bad," Vendal assured him. "I'm on a long visit, myself. Been here ten years now."

"Vendal," said Leston thoughtfully. "Mining and exploration, wasn't it? You got away with millions. Something to do with a false prospectus. I remember the campaign to get you released."

"That's where the millions went," grinned Vendal. "They were never mine, so I can't complain. Glad to hear I've not been forgotten."

"You burned too many people to be forgotten. Quite a lot think you're living a life of luxury here with their money."

"People tend to believe what suits them best." The older man shrugged. "As you can see, I'm dressed in the height of Atlantean fashion." He glanced down at his ragged shorts with a scornful grin.

Leston knew that the material was supposed to remain 'as new' for at least four standard years. The shorts could have been a remnant of the prison uniform that Vendal had been wearing when he had been dumped on the island. They were long overdue for recycling – except that technology of that level did not exist on Atlantis.

"What are you going to do when they finally drop to pieces?" Leston inquired casually.

"Of course, you've not had the second lecture, have you?" returned Vendal. "Not yet. They keep track of us with these." He held up his left wrist to show his chronometer. "We get supply drops every so often. Clothes, boots, cleansers and so on. Enough for the replacement needs of the current population."

"Keeping your other outfits for special occasions?" suggested Leston.

"The clothing gen is a bit greedy at the moment." The older man shrugged again.

"The what?" frowned Leston.

"The gens are sort of syndicates, communes, something like that. Each of them controls one of the basics. If you want more clothes, you have to go to the Casor gen and do a week's work for them. When they find out about you, all the gens will want you to do your bit for them."

"I don't think I need any clothes right now." Leston looked down at his new outfit. "I've got enough stuff to last out a short visit."

"That's not the point," chuckled Vendal. "Everything on Atlantis is the property of one or other of the gens. Even the stuff you were landed with. I'd say you owe the Casor gen four weeks. And a week to the Mickels for that knife. Plus all the rest. All in all, I'd say you've got a busy six months ahead of you before you can call your time your own."

Leston stared at Vendal, alarm and suspicion written all over a thin face.

"You're thinking that's not fair," laughed Vendal. "Well, it isn't. But only in normal terms. Anything goes among the rejects on Atlantis. Your best bet is to hide your tackle bag and tell them it was stolen. They might believe you. Or you could head out in to the country and keep clear of all settled areas for a couple of years."

"Why are you telling me all this?" demanded Leston suspiciously. "What are you after?"

"News from home. Even the long visitors can't do without it."

"And when are they likely to come looking for me?"

"They'll be on their way now. The people who live in Atlantis City tend to be loners like me. The gens are based outside the city, where the crops grow. The nearest is the

Andras gen. They're boots. They'll be here in about half an hour."

Leston glanced down at his chronometer automatically, then he noticed again the crude sandals on Vendal's feet. "I see you've not done business with them recently."

"Saving them for the rainy season," smiled the older man. "Want me to mark the gen towns on your map?"

Leston clamped a stick of epton root between his white, even teeth and sucked in refreshing juices. He was unwilling to trust the older man but unable to fathom his motives.

"You think I'm trying to sell you a dry hole in the ground," laughed Vendal. "They all do. Trust is in exceedingly short supply on Atlantis."

"Which is why I'm wondering about you," returned Leston. "You might be trying to con me out of my tackle bag. Or you might be working with one of these gens to steer me in to a trap."

"And the one thing you can't do is take me at face value," added Vendal with a big smile. He seemed to be a cheerful sort. It could have been the masking, false good humour of a con merchant, but Leston sensed something deeper. Larne Vendal had to be up to something.

Chad Leston's head turned from the tanned long-visitor as he realized that someone was blowing a whistle not too far away. The sound wiped the grin from Vendal's dark face.

"I think the half hour was over-optimistic," he decided. "Those are gen whistles, directing a search for the new arrivals. Including you. So I'm off. You can come with me if you want. Or you can stay to say hello."

Leston gripped the sling of his tackle bag indecisively, watching the lean figure hurrying across the pinkish floor, his sandals making soft, slapping sounds. The whistles seemed to be getting nearer. He was trapped between two

unknowns but he felt inclined to accept Vendal at face value for the moment.

A whistle blasted just outside the archway, echoing screams of both pain and terror. Vendal had reached the far side of the cubical hall. Leston started to run towards him. A voice whooped in triumph behind him. Leston put on a burst of speed. Vendal had opened a doorway in the featureless wall. Leston headed straight for it.

A violent pain sliced through his left thigh. Agony spun Chad Leston round and smashed him to the floor. Vendal scuttled out of the doorway and tugged at his tackle bag. Leston's fist clenched reflexively.

There was a tugging at his belt. A knife blade flashed in front of his face.

Leston had a sudden vision of his tackle bag being carried away in Larne Vendal's greedy arms with his hand still grasping the carrying strap.

The next thing he knew, Vandal was tugging at his arm and urging him forward. His left leg screamed pain signals but the dragging sensation had gone. Feet pounded across the hall as Leston moved at his best speed, half crawling, half being dragged by Vendal. Then they entered darkness.

Coloured shapes exploding before his eyes. Leston sprawled on a hard, cold floor, unable to move, weakened hopelessly by the swamping pain in his left leg. A bright glow back-lit his kaleidoscope vision. Someone jarred his leg painfully. Then a cooling, soothing numbness swept the pain and the fogging of his vision sway.

"Feeling better?" asked Vendal, displaying an encouraging hint of his grin around a stick of epton root. He sucked noisily, devouring the uplifting flavour. "I haven't tasted this for a couple of centuries, feels like."

"My one luxury," said Leston automatically.

Vendal was holding his light unit. By the stark glow, Leston could see a lot of blood on the left leg of his uniform. At the top of the stain was a metal cross. Its arms were the length of a thumb. They expanded in width to about five millimetres at the tips and they pressed deeply in to the pale blue fabric.

"What happened?" grunted Leston.

"They don't give us firearms or energy weapons," said Vendal. "So some clever sobok re-invented bows and arrows. They got you with a man-catcher crossbow. Just a minute." He did something with the knife at the back of Leston's leg. Then he pushed. Leston watched in horror as a length of red-soaked wood emerged from the numb flesh.

"They attach a line to the other end of the bolt," added Vendal. "When it's gone through your leg, the business end opens out in to this cross shape." He demonstrated, flapping one of the arms up and down. They were hinged just below the point, forming a solid head in the closed position. "When they've hooked you, they either tie the line off or haul you in like a fish."

"How did we get away?" croaked Leston, his mouth painfully dry.

"There was only one of them," grinned Vendal. "And you couldn't let go of your tackle bag. So I borrowed your knife to cut the line and dragged you in here. Without a thought for my personal safety."

"And now I owe you something?"

"I do expect a certain measure of gratitude, yes," nodded Vendal. "Don't forget, I can always shove you out there to play with the gensters. The ones out there now wondering how to open the trap door."

Leston's head flew round – to see an unbroken expanse of wall. They were in a long, three-metre wide corridor. Deep

gloom thickened beyond the lens of light cast by Leston's light unit.

"We're all right," laughed Vendal, responding to the alarm on the younger man's paler than normal face. "They're not sure where the door is and they haven't got a key. Wouldn't know one if they tripped over it," he added, applying a dressing to Leston's thigh with an air of expertise. "The combination of my lucky accident and an inquiring mind isn't likely to occur again in a hurry."

"What's so special about this key?" asked Leston, staring up at the ceiling and trying to keep his mind off what had happened to his leg.

"It's half physical and half mental. There's a library in number four. That's the next building on this side of the square. Seaview Square, I call it. The archaeologists left a full record of what they found here. That's how I was able to find out what the key was. You use it to identify yourself to the door mechanism. Then it opens to mental commands afterwards."

"You just think it open?" said Leston incredulously.

"And closed. Very convenient when there's a genster after you. There. That should do you." Vendal looked down at the dressing with pride. "That arrow didn't do your muscles any good. Tore them up a treat. Missed the bone, though. Well, they do. If they smash your bones up, they have to look after you that much longer before you can work off what they decide you owe them."

"And how long will I be out of action?" asked Leston uneasily.

"And how much do you owe me for my medical services?" grinned Vendal. "I think a couple of sticks of epton root should cover that. As for your leg, you'll have to stay off it for about twenty hours. While the med-kit's accelerators

encourage your muscles to regrow. And take it easy for at least a day after that. Then you can run around as you were doing a few minutes ago."

"Feels like hours," grunted Leston. "Thanks. And help yourself to the epton root."

"I already have." smiled Vendal.

"Don't they know what does on here back home?"

"And why don't they do something about it, you mean? Why should they? All of us here have rejected the rules of Chiltan society. This place is supposed to be an awful warning to the short-stay visitors."

"It's that all right," Leston said with feeling. "Where are we now?"

"I think these are the original Atlanteans' equivalent of glider tubes to the upper floors." Vendal nodded toward the featureless northern wall of the corridor. "But there's no power for them. There are stairs at either end, though, if you fancy tramping fifty odd metres up to the top floor. There's only seven floors above us, as opposed to fourteen in most of the other buildings. This might have been some sort of exhibition complex."

"Where do you live?"

"Next door. In number four. I think it used to be an office building of sorts. Of course, there's nothing much left. *They* stripped the place. And I suppose the archaeologists cleared out everything they overlooked. It's just space now, divided in to units by bare walls. But the pattern of plumbing suggests offices. That's where our library is. On the first floor. The archaeologists found some keys. Opened up one of the stairways as far as the first floor. I suppose they wanted to put the diran complex out of reach of a hurricane tide."

"You get weather like that?"

"Oh, yes," smiled Vendal. "It's very typically tropical here. But as I was saying, the *diran* they gave us *Exiles* is a proper library with full reference channels, entertainment, everything. But not too many people use it themselves. The entertainment stuff reminds them too much of what they've been exiled from. And most of the reference material is irrelevant to life here.

"After all, what use is a detailed account of stellar physics or shipbuilding for beginners to the likes of us? Anyone using it usually wants medical information. This place is full of hypochondriacs. Or detailed information on agriculture, building, basic chemistry, stuff like that. Very little theory but plenty of practice."

"Now what happens?" Leston looked down at the white patch on his thigh and imagined the matching one on the back of his leg.

"Now we go to number four," said Vendal. "You need to rest and it's a bit more comfortable than here."

"How do we know when the mad archers have gone, though? So we can get out of this tunnel?"

"The stairs go down as well as up. There's a system of service tunnels connecting all the buildings. If you lean on me and take it slow, we'll be there before you know it."

The journey through long, dark tunnels lasted an eternity for Chad Leston. His injured leg swung loose and out of control, lacking all feeling and sense of belonging to the rest of his body, but mercifully without pain. As they moved along in their pool of light, he sucked on a stick of epton root and tried to ignore the passage of time.

They would reach their destination eventually, he knew. All he had to do was keep going until they arrived.

Leston found Larne Vendal's suite of rooms disturbing. The primitive furniture jarred with the stark, alien perfection

of the rooms with their smooth walls and precise harmonies. The furniture was made of wood, secured with wooden pegs at the joints and padded with cushions of hairy cloth that looked home-made.

Vendal's meagre possessions were set out on two trestle tables, like exhibits in a museum, but also ready to hand. A pair of boots and a coverall remained from his survival kit. The rest had been acquired from the appropriate gen. A set of nine hand-blown glass jars in misty green acted as his larder. They seemed a typical example of the depressed state of current technology on Atlantis.

Leston hovered in the doorway, bracing himself with his hands, while Vendal untied and rolled out a quilted mattress. They had decided that the injured man would be better off lying down. When Leston was settled comfortably, Vendal retired to a corner of the four by six metre room. Leston watched curiously as he poured water in to an earthenware pot, then cautiously poked two wires in to neat holes in a lifeless, grey wall.

"Odd place, this," remarked Vendal when he had adjusted the wires to his satisfaction. "All sorts of things work and all sorts of others don't. As you've seen, the doors do and the gliders don't. And there's plenty of power about if you can work out where to tap it."

"Useful," remarked Leston as the world started to recede at high speed.

Vendal checked the younger man's pulse in a professional manner, then he covered him with a thermal wrap taken from his tackle bag. The water in his dark brown pot started to bump and boil. Vendal tugged the wires of his immersion heater out of the wall and dropped leafy powder in to the pot, pinching it out of a glass bottle between finger and thumb.

Fermented and dried, the leaves of the native arcade plants offered an acceptable alternative to Terran teas, and there were beans that could be roasted to form an acceptable coffee substitute.

A woman of about Vendal's age appeared in the room as suddenly as if she had been teleported. She was deeply tanned, a brunette with laughing but secret eyes, and rather better dressed than her husband in a jungle-green one-piece and matching boots.

"I wish you wouldn't creep up on me," sighed Larne Vendal as his heart slowed from the shock of finding himself observed.

"I wanted to see what your latest catch looks like," returned Cassia Vendal, unrepentant.

"Skinny, pale and kept out of shock by the tissue-growth accelerator cocktail." Larne decanted orange liquid in to two glass cups.

"He might even be quite handsome when he's awake," said Cassia as she studied Leston's slack features. "Pity you couldn't get him out of the way before the gensters sniffed him out."

"Not much time and a high suspicion threshold."

"Bet they didn't like you cutting him free, either."

Larne shrugged. "I got to him first. Second has no claim."

"Anyway, he's going to be around here for a couple of days?"

"Which means you'll have to make yourself scarce in the morning."

"Look at all this lovely epton root!" crooned Cassia.

"Hands off!" Larne offered her a glass cup. "We don't want our young friend to think he's fallen among thieves."

"He's probably used to their company. I wonder what he's down here for?"

"The old unwritten code. You don't ask him, you just find out from the next lot down. Well, he should be out until this time tomorrow. How's lunch doing?"

"It's been ready for ages," his wife told him with a malicious smile. "I think your charm must be wearing thin."

Chad Leston awoke the following afternoon feeling weak and hollow. There was a faint throbbing above his left eye and his left thigh itched annoyingly. When he reached down to scratch the irritation, his hand met a ragged tear in his trouser leg and a slick, smooth dressing.

Memories flooded in. He had been marooned on Atlantis. He was in a room on the first floor of number four, Seaview Square. He was stuck in Atlantis City. Someone had shot a hole in his leg with a crossbow. And his tanned host was called Larne Vendal.

Sweeping the thermal wrap aside, Leston wriggled until he was sitting up with his back resting against the wall.

"Ah, you're with us again," Vendal remarked. "How's the leg today?"

"Itches."

"The plumbing's through there," added Vendal. "It looks a bit strange but everything does what it looks as though it should. And there's running water, hot and cold. The circulation system seems to have survived here and in a couple of the other buildings. Just touch the square I've painted on it and the door will open for you."

Leston eased himself to his feet cautiously. His injured leg had a tendency to give way if he tried to put too much weight on it, but he could move at a hopping limp.

A hairy, Atlantis-made blanket had been cemented with natural resin to the back of the door to mark its position. As Leston hobbled out of sight, Vendal plugged in his

immersion heater to brew a pot of arcade tea.

"I see what you mean about the plumbing," remarked Leston as he returned from the service module.

"Part of the evidence that the original Atlanteans were quite closely humanoid. Along with the size of the doorways, stairs, the height of handrails and sinks, and so on. And my evidence, of course," Vendal added in a throwaway fashion.

"Yours?" invited Leston, picking up the cue as he lowered himself onto one of the very basic chairs.

"I mentioned a key that opens all the doors for me just by thinking? I went swimming once, after a storm. A pretty huge one. The worst I've ever seen. I found the key at the tide-line, along with its owner."

"Its owner!?" burst from Leston.

"What was left of him. Or it. I got our diran complex to scan the skeleton – size and shape of bones, limits of possible relative movements, attachment areas of the muscles and ligaments, and so on. Assuming a human-type skin and muscular development, the diran came up with something very much like you and me. A bit shorter, perhaps, just under two metres, and rather more heavily built. But quite acceptably humanoid if you don't spot the hands and feet are a finger and toe short."

"Assuming your assumptions are valid," Leston pointed out.

"Yes, but given a similar skeleton, they could hardly have looked much different from us. They couldn't have had two heads or three eyes."

"They could have had green skin and been as ugly as a chirotan. And as bald."

"Unlikely," smiled Vendal. "Given the attachment areas and a gravity very similar to Chiltan's, what the diran projected for the features would be fairly accurate. And I'm

sure body hair played the same protective role it did in our own development."

"And he or it had the key?"

"A sheet of some ceramic material in a woven metal pouch. A centimetre thick and about the size of your hand. The diran had a key on its list of suggestions about what an alien would carry around with him. Took me weeks to figure out how to use it."

"Smart of you." Leston accepted a cup of arcade tea. "Hello, what's this?"

"Something we all get used to. The Atlantean equivalent of tea."

Leston sipped cautiously. "Not bad. Where's my bag? My stomach thinks my throat's been cut."

"Here it is," said Vendal, swinging the tackle bag onto the mattress. "Unless you'd like to try the native diet? It's quite a bit more filling than concentrates."

Leston shrugged. "Okay, I'll trade you a concentrate meal for one of yours."

"Nothing for nothing," Vendal said with a smile. He slipped in to another room and returned with a steaming glass bowl.

Leston dipped in to it with his fork and chewed thoughtfully. "Not bad," he admitted. "Tastes of fish."

"Caught this morning. We Atlantis City dwellers tend to be mainly vegetarians. There are plenty of grains and pulses growing wild just outside the city and you can store them for ages. Meat-eating involves catching and butchering live animals. Not the sort of thing everyone cares to do. But we trade dried meat for fish with the gens. Somehow, killing a fish comes easier than a warm-blooded animal."

"You do business with these gens?" Leston asked suspiciously.

"Gens trade and I'm a sort of one-man gen."

"And what's your speciality? Slightly damaged new arrivals?"

"Information. It's all very well having the sum total of human knowledge stored away in the diran complex, but it can be vervoek's own job solving a problem. If you don't know exactly the right questions to ask, you can spend day after day eliminating irrelevant information."

"And you know the right questions to ask?"

"I have a talent for extracting and reducing practical information from a mass of theory," Vendal said modestly. "How's the food?"

"It's a whole lot better than I expected," Leston admitted, digging in to the bowl again.

"I'll trade as much native stuff for your concentrates, meal for meal, as you want."

"Sounds like they're a bit of a delicacy here."

"A delicacy!" said Vendal with an unconvincing laugh. He changed the subject with suspicious speed. "How are things back on Chiltan?"

"Doesn't the shuttle squirt your diran an update when it drops visitors off?" said Leston with his mouth full.

"The human angle," Vendal said with a polished smile, which was spoilt only by the gap in upper teeth. "The scandals that don't reach the official records. That sort of thing."

They chatted fairly aimlessly for an Atlantean hour. Leston sensed that the older man's interest was fairly genuine but he couldn't shake off a feeling that he was being sounded out. And there was the business of the concentrates.

Those given to an outcast were intended to keep him (or her) alive until he could become familiar with the native diet. They were balanced, nourishing and about as interesting to

eat as vacuum-suit sealing-foam. They were certainly not in the same league as the vegetable and fish mixture that he had enjoyed for lunch.

Perhaps Vendal was going somewhere, Leston decided. On a long journey, on which the weight of his food supply would be significant. But where could he go? The nearest land lay four hundred kilometres distant – several days sailing for a raft. And what could he hope to find on the mainland apart from mutant vegetation and radioactive hot spots?

Even so, no matter how unlikely it, seemed, Vendal was definitely giving the impression of someone planning to go somewhere.

A muffled voice shouting the older man's name ended their conversation. Vendal explained that someone wanted to make use of his expertise with the diran complex. When he had gone, Leston pushed himself to his feet and limped across the room, using the furniture for additional support.

A long window offered a prospect of Seaview Square from first floor level. Beyond the pinkish square with its heel-like depression and a belt of white sand, he could see a small boat cutting across the shimmering blue of the bay, driven by a pure white sail. It was the sort of view that one would expect from a holiday hotel rather than an abandoned alien building on a prison island.

Leston scratched lazily at the dressing on the back of his leg. He was feeling drowsy again. Keeping his eyes open was just not worth the effort. He returned to the mattress and eased himself in to a prone position.

The room was in darkness when he woke again. After a few moments, Leston realized that he could see outlines. Meikor Three had a satellite. It was on the small side but the albedo

was relatively high. In the Atlantis handbook, it said that one could read by the light of the full moon.

Leston hobbled over to the window again. The moon was low in the sky, hidden from view by the grey bulk of number three, Seaview Square and casting long, dim shadows.

Suddenly, Leston became aware of a voice. It was humming a cheerful tune but there seemed to be an extra rhythmical element involved, as if the man were counting. There was a bright line on the left hand wall. When he investigated, Leston found a door which had not closed completely.

Unable to see a painted square, he ran his hand up and down the smooth surface until the door slid away to his right. Larne Vendal was sitting with his back turned at a trestle table in the other room, stacking concentrated rations in to a series of cubes by a portable light unit.

"You look like you've got enough of those to last you a year," observed Leston.

Vandal started guiltily and knocked over a wall of pink capsules. "Ah, you're awake again," he remarked, as if seeking time for thought.

"You're saving those up for something, aren't you?" Leston persisted.

Vandal frowned to himself thoughtfully as Leston dragged a chair up to the table. Then he shrugged. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you. I think I know where the original Atlanteans went. Well, not *where* exactly. But how they left here."

"I thought that was one of the great unsolved mysteries of the universe?"

"Being here concentrates the mind wonderfully," smiled Vendal. "I've had ten years to chew over what the archaeologists found. And do my own research. Ha!" He released

a short bark of laughter. "You should see the inside of six and seven. They're the grey and pink buildings on the western side of the square. I chipped so many holes in the walls tracing the power circuits, it's a wonder the places are still standing. That's how I knew where to tap in to the power circuits for my immersion heater. It was from comparing the two that I found out they used the same basic system in all the buildings. The power's the key. To how they left."

"Most people think they went up to orbit by shuttle, and then left on a slowliner," said Leston. "Some people say they're still travelling in suspended animation. At pretty close to light-speed now. And they'll have one bock of a job slowing down if they ever get to a habitable planet."

"They needed a theory and that's the one people can accept," said Vandal smugly, implying that he knew better.

"And what do you think?" Leston offered a stick of epton root to ease along the flow of information.

"Thanks," approved Vandal. "Yes, the power's the key. I think the square outside is a sort of solar converter. Assuming hundred-percent efficiency, there would be up to ten megawatts available at noon on a good day. Of course, in its present damaged condition, it's anybody's guess what the output is. Which explains why the doors work and the gliders don't."

"The door circuits are still intact," nodded Leston. "But what's this to do with where the Atlanteans went?"

"To cut a long story short, I've found a sort of gateway," beamed Vandal. "A set of circuits peculiar to that building."

"A gateway?" repeated Leston with a blank frown.

"A link to somewhere else. Perhaps a bridge to another planet that we haven't run across yet. Perhaps a doorway back in to this planet's past. I prefer the former myself. It fits

in with the original Atlanteans stripping this place of more or less every single artefact. And it avoids running in to paradoxes if they've gone to another part of this time frame."

"Taking everything possible to their new home?"

"Exactly that."

"And where is this gateway?"

"It's on the ground floor of number seven. Six and seven don't have any power, which is why I was able to do circuit tracing without frying myself."

"If there's no power, how did you find the gateway and what are you collecting the concentrates for? I thought you were off on a boat trip to the mainland."

"Ah, but there is power now," smiled Vendal. "I've done a spot of repair work. The only snag is, I can't keep the gateway open for longer than about fifteen minutes. The circuitry starts to get rather hot where I've made my connections. I'm afraid of melting something if I keep the gateway open longer. Of course, I tapped in to the night storage circuits so I could hook everything up during the day without frying myself."

"Have you been through it?" Leston interrupted, leaning closer as if to be sure of catching every word.

"And of course, I did the work during the day so I could see what I was doing." Vendal continued his planned explanation until the question registered. "What? Been through it? For a few minutes only."

"And?"

"It's quite a pleasant world. Green vegetation, blue sky and a wonderful, fresh smell in the air."

"What about the people, though? The Atlanteans?"

"I didn't see any of them but I was only there for a few minutes. I imagine they've settled elsewhere. That's why I'm collecting up these concentrates. To look for them."

"You think that's going to take a year?"

"Just a safety margin," smiled Vendal. "Until I know I can survive there. In case there's anything in the food that's poisonous to humans. I think that should be more than enough time for the Atlanteans to make it safe for me."

"What makes you so sure they'll go to all that trouble?" scoffed Leston.

"I'll be the most important person on the planet," Vendal told him confidently. "Just think: a visitor from a completely different species, a different culture, arriving by the gateway built by their ancestors. I'll be made for life. Compare that to scratching out a living here."

"Hmmm!" nodded Leston. "I see what you mean."

"They'll have had more than enough time to rebuild a decent level of technology. No gens to take everything off you then sell it back on their terms."

"Hmmm," said Leston thoughtfully as he realized that he had still to face that particular problem himself. "You're not looking for a partner, are you?"

Vendal shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it."

"I was just thinking," Leston said almost casually. "A visitor from another species would be a lot more welcome if he could take along something of his culture. How big is this gateway?"

"Big? About four metres square. Why?"

'Suppose you took a diran reader through. And the memory core?"

"I could never carry all that!" laughed Vendal. "Not with the food."

"Two people could. On a sort of sledge."

"The gens wouldn't like that!" laughed Vendal.

"The gens wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Nobody would. If the gateway overloads after we've used it,

we'll be away from here and free of the past. Who's to know if we edit the sections on ourselves in the memory core?"

"You know," Vandal decided, "it's a very attractive idea. And it would be a nice way of stabbing the gens in the back, taking the memory store."

"We'd really be made for life!" enthused Leston.

"Perhaps I do need a partner, after all," Vandal admitted. "Would you like to have a look at the gateway?"

"Yeah, why not? I think the leg can stand a short walk."

Vandal led the way to a set of stairs, using a light unit to guide them along inky corridors. Leston's limp had improved until it was only slightly worse than his host's.

Vandal switched the light off. Leston grew alarmed when he stepped out in to the moonlit square. His new partner assured him that it was quite safe to prowl around Atlantis City at night. Most people tended to lead a dawn-to-dusk existence in the absence of a system of electric lights.

The small, bright moon gave them long shadows as they approached the tall building in the middle of the western side of Seaview Square. Leston paused to rest on the ledge to the right of the entrance archway, Vandal continued deeper in to the gloomy interior, in to the corner.

Leston's eyes began to probe further in to the gloom of the hall. The ceiling was at least fifteen metres high. Long, window-shapes of moonlight competed with Vandal's splash of light in the corner.

Then a ghostly square formed, rising from the floor.

Leston could see the interior of the building all around the apparition, but within the bounds of the shimmering, pinkish glow, there was just deepest blackness.

"Night's probably the best time to see this thing anyway," remarked Vandal, his voice echoing faintly.

"Looks very impressive," said Leston.

"Hard to believe it's what it is, though," chuckled Vendal. His light bobbed toward the gateway.

Leston pushed to his feet and limped over to join Vendal.

"Here's proof it's real." Vendal showed his companion a large pebble, which years of sea-scouring had smoothed to a fine polish. "The stone that never came down." He pitched it forward with an underarm sweep.

The pebble flew in to pink-rimmed blackness. Leston waited for it to clatter and skitter on the hard floor of the hall. Inky elsewhere swallowed and retained the pebble and returned nothing to reveal its fate.

"Is it night there too?" said Leston.

Vendal shone the light unit on his chronometer and touched a key. "Yes, it's after sunset. Why? Oh, you mean because the gateway's black?"

Leston nodded in the moonlight.

"No, it's always like that. Day or night, it's always hole black. Night's a good time to see wherever it is," Vendal added, almost to himself. "It has three small, very bright moons, their planet. When they're together, you can almost see them racing each other across the sky. And the stars! You've never seen so many!"

"Closer to the heart of the galaxy, maybe?" suggested Leston, limping toward the misty pink and solid black shape.

"Could be."

"I suppose I could take a quick look?" Leston added.

Vendal shrugged. "Yes, if you want. But no more than about five minutes. Remember what I said about my connectors getting hot."

"I'll be back in four." Leston set the alarm of his chronometer.

When he reached what looked like a solid, black wall, he pushed out an exploratory arm. It disappeared – it was

swallowed up to the elbow without meeting resistance. Encouraged, Leston stepped right in to unrelieved blackness.

Larne Vendal watched the other man disappear. Then, guided by the light unit, he returned to the corner in which the gateway controls were located and touched a panel switch.

The pinkish glow disappeared. Moonlit window shapes reappeared in the hall. There was no point in wasting any more power on the gateway. Chad Leston wasn't coming back. None of the others had.

A soft whistle trilled a partial scale from the archway to the square.

"All right, I won't accuse you of creeping up on me," laughed Vendal.

"I see he's gone," observed Cassia, his wife. "And your conscience remains clear and your hands clean."

"There's a world of difference between killing someone for his tackle bag and giving him a chance to explore a new world and meet the *Builders Of The Gateway*," laughed Larne.

"You manage to sound like a high priest when you talk about the original Atlanteans."

"And if they bother to investigate his mysterious disappearance," Larne continued, "a spotless conscience and clean hands will keep both of us out of the reconstruction wards."

Arm in arm, they strolled out onto moonlit Seaview Square. A breath of wind was carrying the scent of jamman blossom out to meet the gentle rushing on an incoming tide. Larne Vendal bit the end of a stick of epton root and inhaled fresh euphoria.

He was a confidence trickster by inclination as much as by profession. Circumstances had reduced him to swindling greedy and gullible new arrivals out of their few possessions. But, as that was the only game available, he was content to

play it.

"That was a good idea of his," remarked Cassia. "Taking a reader and the diran memory core through."

"Yes, slightly more inventive than some," agreed her husband. "I must remember that. Might come in useful with the next one."

A door opened to a mental command. Larne Vandal switched on his light unit to guide them up a concealed stairway to the first floor. Their apartment glowed with soft light, which oozed out of the walls. The furnishings were rough and ready by Chiltan standards, but luxurious compared to the norm on Atlantis.

In her more poetic moments, Cassia Vandal likened her husband to a large, ginger spider, who lay in wait for innocent new arrivals. They were not married officially, of course, but their monogamous relationship was one that suited them.

'Suit yourself as long as you don't trespass on gen preserves' was the way of life on Atlantis. New arrivals were a grey area.

Larne Vandal picked up only the singles who ventured in to his buildings – numbers four and five, Seaview Square. His was a small drain on the gens' resources but his expertise with the diran complex was useful to them. They could live with his small predations. And the new arrivals added spice to Vandal's otherwise dull *Exile*.

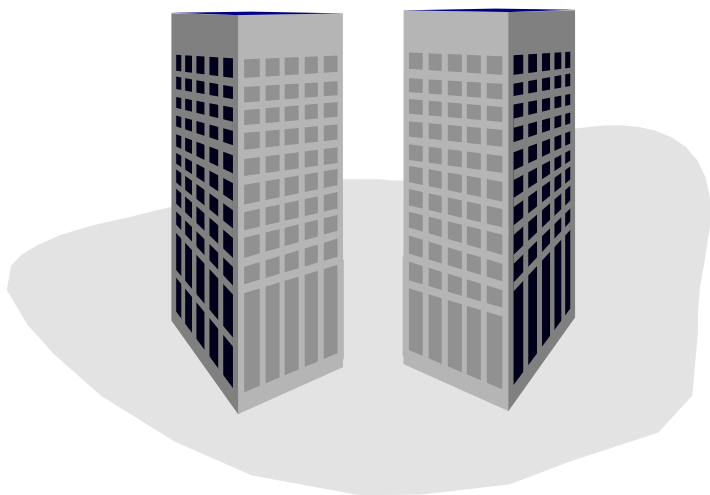
Next time the shuttle arrived to drop off Chiltan undesirables, update the diran and run an electronic census of the population of Atlantis, the count would come out at least one short.

But everyone on Atlantis was a reject and the odd lost reject was hardly worth the trouble of an investigation. But if the shuttle captain did happen to feel like obeying the

letter of regulations, Larne Vendal had a beautifully clear conscience.

The last time he had seen Chad Leston, the new arrival had been alive and well, moving under his own steam and following his own free will. Vendal could not be blamed if Leston had disappeared off somewhere, nobly leaving his survival, kit behind for the benefit of others.

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32. Champagne Days & Bitter Nights

A penetrating voice cut through the lunchtime roar in the pub. "It's him, isn't it?" carried along the bar to Roderick Vernon. "Him off the telly."

Roddy huddled deeper in to a threadbare overcoat and thought himself invisible. It didn't work.

"Afternoon, your Lordship," the man added in a matey bellow. "Slumming it with the peasants?"

Roddy directed a distant and patient smile towards a cheerful, flushed face.

"Where've we got to?" His unwanted friend said to the barmaid. "Another large Scotch and two port-and-lemon. Having one, your lordship? Champagne cocktail, is it?"

Roddy glanced down at the last few drops of his half of bitter. "No thanks, old boy," he drawled, bravely playing the expected role. "Have to be pushin' along to the studios, don't you know."

"Getting a quick bracer down first?" yelled the man, including the rest of the pub in his personal conversation with a television star.

"Somethin' like that," Roddy said with a vague smile. He tipped half a swallow of flat beer in to an aristocratic mouth and turned to leave. He had done quite well – a whole half-hour without being recognized by a fan.

"See you, your Lordship!" followed him to the door of the pub.

The street was cold and damp, but at least the rain had stopped. Roddy turned aimlessly to the left and plodded away with no particular destination in mind. Roderick Vernon, actor and television star, was 'resting'. Worse, he was hopelessly typecast.

To the nation's viewing public, he was Lord Simon – a struggling, modern silly ass, who muddled through somehow from one financial disaster to the next supported by the dubious activities of a crumbling retainer.

Mister Brighton, as he was always called, had swindled Lord Simon's father something rotten. Now, a guilty conscience drove him to shield the last of the line from the true horrors of reality. The nation had offered Mister Brighton a grudging respect for his resourcefulness. And Lord Simon's engaging charm had persuaded the audience to laugh at him without malice.

But the series was ancient history to the cast. Now, Roddy Vernon was drowning in the smothering embrace of his last part. Only the hope that there would be another series made him drop in to the role whenever a member of the viewing public recognized him. The ratings for the first series hadn't been spectacular, but it had been run against a flashy American space opera.

The Head of Drama was still making his mind up about whether to repeat series one, make a second, or just forget Lord Simon ever existed. In the meantime, Roddy Vernon was stuck in limbo.

He was beginning to hate Lord Simon – almost as much as he hated Colin Seaton, who had played Mister Brighton. Nobody recognised Colin in the street. He had been safely hidden behind the make-up that made him look about two hundred years old. And Colin was working.

Roddy had, been 'resting' for three months. Nobody was

prepared to cast Lord Simon. He would be too big a distraction. Instead of concentrating on the plot and the brilliant performances of his fellow players, the audience would start whispering about the hated Lord Simon when Roddy made his entrances and wondering when Mister Brighton would appear.

No, he was twenty-five years old, a star of television and unemployable in his chosen profession. One of his so-called friends had suggested changing his name and having some plastic surgery done.

The trouble was, not many plastic surgeons would operate for the ninety-two pence that had to last him until his unemployment benefit giro arrived. It was depressing to realize that the man in the pub had spent more on one round than Roddy could allow himself for a month's halves of bitter.

A taxi honked its horn and squealed its brakes when he started to cross blindly at an intersection. Roddy jumped back onto the pavement.

"Get you next time, your Lordship," called the taxi driver. "Changing the air in the tyres of the Rolls, are they?"

Roddy muttered a curse behind a vague smile. Eyes followed him across the road at a break in the traffic. There was 'him off the telly' in the flesh, incognito, wearing a scruffy old coat that he had borrowed from the crafty Mister Brighton.

Thin rain began to creep down from an oppressive, grey sky. Roddy realized that he was approaching Albert Bridge Road. As he was still a mile and a half from home, and he didn't want to get wet, he decided to go and annoy his agent until the rain went off.

Not that Mr. Andras Clifford will see me, Roddy told himself as he started up a steep flight of stairs.

Leopard-like, his agent lived in the sky. Only successful,

working actors would have the strength of body and spirit to attempt the climb. That was the theory behind Andy's second-floor retreat. Roddy Vernon was one of many awkward exceptions to the rule.

He tapped on a frosted glass-paned door and let himself in to the outer office. A welcoming blanket of central heating warmth embraced him. The look in the wide, brown eyes of Andy's secretary was decidedly chilly.

"Mr. Clifford has a very full diary today, I'm afraid," she said before Roddy could open his mouth. "And he's in conference at the moment."

"He might be able to spare me a few minutes," Roddy returned with an optimistic smile.

He lowered himself onto one of the rank of well-worn chairs and turned his attention to the photographs – Andy with the stars, pinned in artful disarray opposite the window with its view of Battersea Park.

Roddy dressed as Lord Simon in a 'soup and fish' full evening dress was there. He had slipped from the centre to the very edge of the display. Soon, his picture would be relegated to Andy's filing cabinet of has-beens.

With a rustle of nylon, the secretary disappeared in to the inner office. Roddy caught something about 'starting it to the right and letting the wind carry it back' while the door was open. Andy was watching golf on the office telly. But his enjoyment was about to be destroyed by the news that he was trapped in his lair by an out-of-work and unemployable television star.

Roddy could picture the look of irritation on Andy's round face. And the droop of the large cigar that he chewed like an adult's dummy rather than lighting it. Andy was another victim of type-casting. He looked like an agent – on the short side, tubby, aggressive and flattering by turns, with fading

red hair and an occasional trace of the Eastern European Jewish accent of his Romanian grandfather.

The blonde and distant secretary returned to offer Roddy a cup of coffee, knowing that he wouldn't go until he had received some reward for scaling the stairs. If his agent had run out of excuses and apologies for not turning up another part, Roddy was determined to recover Andy's fifteen percent of Lord Simon in cups of coffee.

He sipped coffee and glanced through a copy of *Drama Review* until the rain went off. Then he made a graceful exit and headed for darkest Clapham. One advantage of having an agent with an office south of the river was that he could visit Andy on foot and save the bus fare.

Half an hour later, he was climbing another flight of stairs in to a rising vacuum-cleaner roar. All the furniture in the flat's living room had been pushed over to the window wall. Stan was Hoovering furiously and singing an irritating jingle about shaving cream. He had just done *TWO!* commercials and he was disgustingly rich. And also in deadly danger of joining Roddy's hate list.

Stan heard the door slam and trod on a switch. "Your Lordship! Greetings, old bean," he said with a grin over the vacuum cleaner's dying whistle.

Roddy glowered menacingly.

"Sorry, forget the lordship," laughed Stan. "The point is, I'm entertaining tonight. I don't suppose you could manage to get lost until about lunchtime tomorrow?"

Roddy scooped loose change in to his right palm and stirred it around with his left index finger. "I wonder what the Savoy can offer for ninety-two pee?" he said to his worldly wealth.

"About ten seconds on the pavement outside," sighed Stan. He heaved a small fortune out of his hip pocket and

peeled off one of many fivers. "Here's a small loan. Think you'll manage on that?"

"To get smashed enough to get locked up for the night?" suggested Roddy, who was so out of practice at serious drinking that two pints made him light-headed.

He retired to his room to put together a survival kit. Stan was paying more than his fair share of the rent, as Roddy had when he had been earning decent money, which entitled Stan to take over the whole place for his romantic interludes.

There was only one word to describe Roddy's love life – disastrous. Every woman, including his contemporaries at drama school, expected to be taken out by Lord Simon. They expected Roddy to wear one of the three hundred and fifty guinea suits that Mister Brighton had blackmailed out of his tailor. They assumed that they would be wined and dined at an expensive restaurant, and then taken on to an exclusive club or casino.

They expected Roddy to spend more on them in one night than the dole provided in three months – just because that was how Lord Simon behaved on television and how Roddy had behaved when good money had been coming in. Now, he had no chance of competing with his aristocratic alter-ego.

Stan was the man with the money now. His five pounds V.A.T. (Vernon Absence Tax) meant nothing to him. He would spend ten times that amount before he dagged his ladyfriend across the threshold of their flat.

Roddy changed in to a slightly more respectable coat and slung his duffle bag over his right shoulder. Once he had persuaded someone to put him up for the night, he would be able to do five pounds worth of putting himself about – showing the flag, reminding the theatrical world that Roddy Vernon was still alive and available for work.

"You're a good egg, your Lordship," yelled Stan above the

vacuum cleaner as Roddy crossed the living room on his way out.

Roddy rippled his lips in a snarl and slammed the front door. Cold, damp air slapped him across the face when he stepped out onto the street. Two doors down, he climbed yet more stairs and knocked on a pink door.

Jenny didn't bother to ask him in when she saw the duffle bag. Her sister was there, visiting her, and the settee wasn't big enough for two. Roddy gave her a Lord Simon smile and said thanks anyway. There was always Nigel.

Nigel live a couple of miles away, on the other side of Clapham Common. Most people thought that he was queer, but Roddy knew that his affected behaviour was camouflage, designed to divert the suspicions of the husband of his Battersea girlfriend.

Roddy turned onto Clapham High Street and headed for the bus stop. He could afford the small extravagance.

"Hello, your Lordship," said an old dear with a bulky shopping bag.

Roddy flashed his Lord Simon smile and thought about growing a beard. Most of Clapham kept an eye open for Lord Simon but few believed that he actually lived there, in a modest flat on Homer Drive. Fortunately, his fans just let on to him and didn't demand autographs, as if knowing that they would get *Roderick Vernon* when they wanted *Lord Simon*.

Running feet approached from behind as he neared the bus stop. Roddy stepped to his left, out of the path of a woman with a pram. The feet caught up with him. Roddy checked his stride. Someone was running for a bus, perhaps his bus. But as he started to turn to look for a red shape, he felt a violent impact. Then he was flying sideways.

The next thing he knew, he was lying half in and half out

of a shop window, surrounded by broken glass and assorted tins.

He could hear muffled voices but he was too dazed to realize that they were speaking to him. Behind his trademark vacant blue eyes, his mind whirled in circles, struggling to accept that a shop window could be broken so easily. He had always thought of them as tough and unyielding, except to a vandal's brick.

Hands eased him out of the window frame, first to the pavement, and then onto a stretcher and in to an ambulance. The left side of his face hurt. From a long way off, he heard someone tell the driver to give his Lordship a smooth ride. Then the world just slipped away.

He woke again in a bed, surrounded by blue curtains. Keeping his eyes open proved rather difficult at first. By the time he had mastered the art, a doctor had arrived.

After 'Where am I?' and 'How do you feel?' had been disposed of, and Roddy had followed the doctor's finger successfully with his eyes, they got down to essentials.

Roddy would have to stay in hospital at least overnight for observation, which solved his problem over accommodation. As for the two-inch gash in his left cheek, it was deep but unlikely to leave much of a scar. And plastic surgery could be arranged later to wipe it away completely.

Roddy took the news about his face with a lot more fortitude than the doctor had been expecting. After all, they were talking about his fortune and Lord Simon wasn't covered with dirty great duelling scars like a Prussian fencing master.

In fact, Roddy was bubbling with inward joy when the doctor left him. A scar! A piece of the flying glass had sliced across Lord Simon's throat. He could play villains now. Lord Simon was as good as dead.

Curtains wafted. Andy Clifford breezed in to Roddy's isolation, cigar first. "Front page," he beamed, tossing an evening newspaper onto the bed. "The flowers are piling up to the ceiling. And I've got you a telly advert. For port. Very Lord Simon."

While his agent bubbled happily about how he looked after his clients, Roddy scanned through the story under the headline: *Lord Simon In Bizarre Accident*. The man who had knocked him through the shop window was in police custody for his own protection. Lord Simon's fans had been all for lynching him.

"Of course," Andy was saying when Roddy gave him his attention again, "you can't appear in the commercial as Lord Simon. Just a well-known TV personality."

"I reckon I can do a pretty good Al Capone now," suggested Roddy, turning his head to give Andy a better view of the huge dressing on his left cheek.

"He's marked! The boy's marked!" Andy gasped in horror.

"You can have fifteen percent of the scar," Roddy offered him generously.

His agent dropped onto the bedside chair, his cigar a crumpled mass in his right fist, his face a mask of despair.

"Cheer up," grinned Roddy with the mobile side of his face. "If they film me right profile, no one will ever know."

But I will, he told himself as a fifteen percent smile returned to Andy's chubby face.

Left profile, I'm a scar-faced bad guy. I'm half way out of Lord Simon's clutches. The other half of my freedom will come in time.

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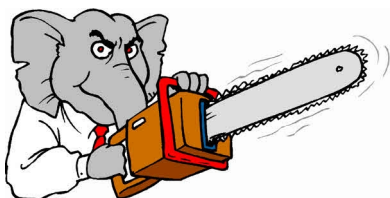
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