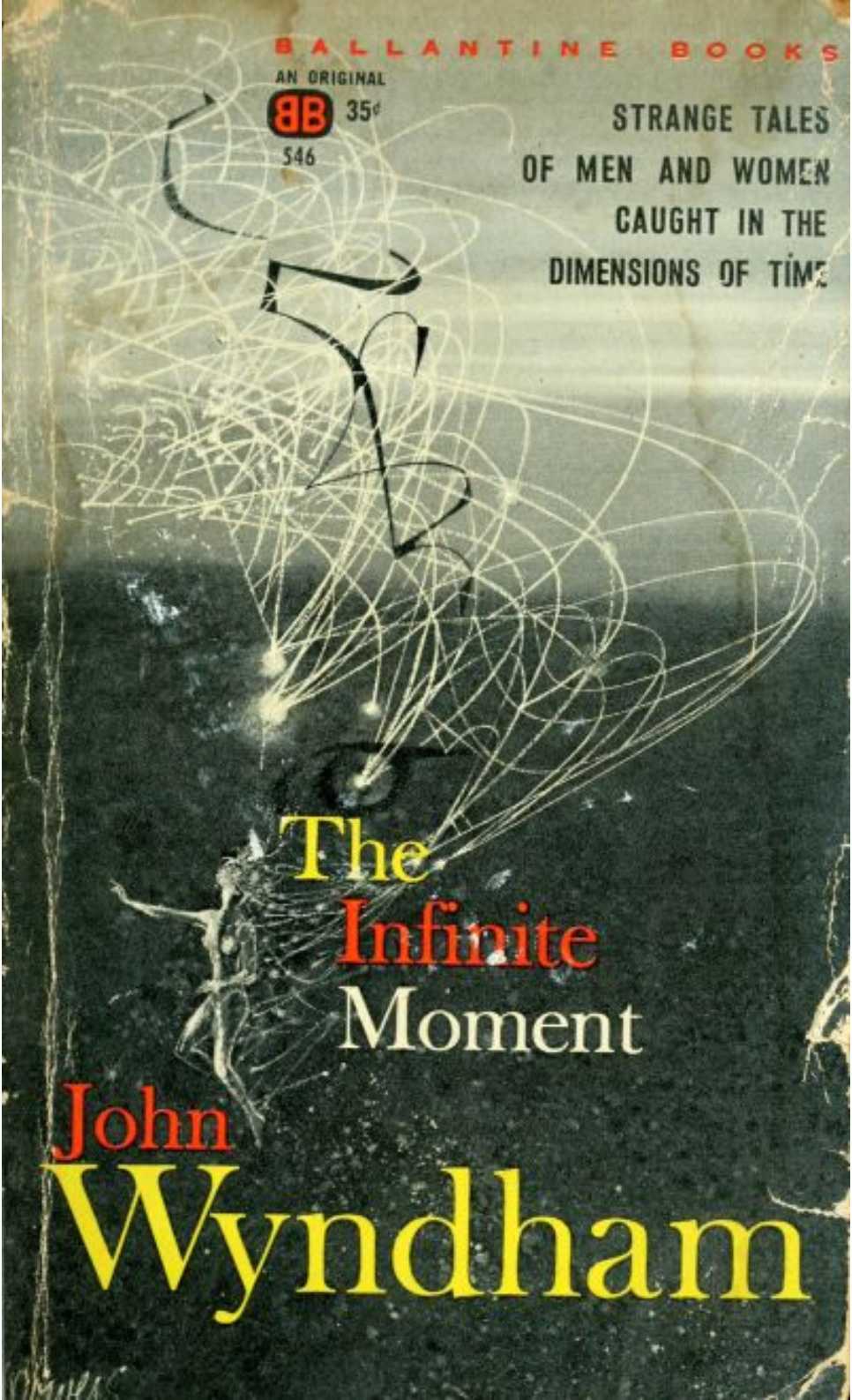
BALLANTINE BOOKS
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STRANGE TALES
OF MEN AND WOMEN
CAUGHT IN THE
DIMENSIONS OF TIME
The Infinite Moment
John Wyndham

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FRIGHTENINGLY REAL, completely believable, here are six stories of people who find themselves suddenly living in another year of their own lives:

Consider Her Ways—one of Wyndham's most famous novelettes, describes with chilling logic a world of women without men.

Odd—a chance encounter with someone living fifty years in the past, a casual remark that is worth millions of dollars. *What was it?*

Random Quest—a young man defies all logic to find the woman he married and lost—because he *knows* she is still living in some parallel world of time.

With the casual ease of a master writer, John Wyndham gives flesh and substance to that strange moment when the bottom suddenly drops out from under us and we meet ourselves in the future or the past—ourselves as we will be, or might have been.

by John Wyndham

Day of the Triffids

Out of the Deeps

Re-Birth

The Midwich Cuckoos

Tales of Gooseflesh and Laughter

The Outward Urge

This is an original publication—not a reprint

JOHN WYNDHAM

BALLANTINE BOOKS NEW YORK

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THE INFINITE MOMENT

✻ Consider Her Ways

✻

✻ There was nothing but myself.

I hung in a timeless, spaceless, forceless void that was neither light, nor dark. I had entity, but no form; awareness, but no senses; mind, but no memory. I wondered, is this—this nothingness—my soul? And it seemed that I had wondered that always, and should go on wondering it for ever. . .

But, somehow, timelessness ceased. I became aware that there *was* a force: that I was being moved, and that spacelessness had, therefore, ceased, too. There was nothing to show that I moved; I knew simply that I was being drawn. I felt happy because I knew there was something or someone to whom I wanted to be drawn. I had no other wish than to turn like a compass-needle, and then fall through the void. . .

But I was disappointed. No smooth, swift fall followed. Instead, other forces fastened on me. I was pulled this way, and then that. I did not know how I knew it; there was no outside reference, no fixed point, no direction, even; yet I could feel that I was tugged hither and thither, as though against the resistance of some inner gyroscope. It was as if one force were in command of me for a time, only to weaken and lose me to a new force. Then I would seem to slide towards an unknown point, until I was arrested, and diverted upon another course. I wafted this way and that, with the sense of awareness continually growing firmer; and I wondered whether rival forces were fighting for me, good and evil, perhaps, or life and death. . .

The sense of pulling back and forth became more definite until I was almost jerked from one course to another. Then abruptly, the feeling of struggle finished. I had a sense of travelling faster and faster still, plunging like a wandering meteorite that had been trapped at last. . .

✻ ✻ ✻

'All right,' said a voice, 'Resuscitation was a little retarded, for some reason. Better make a note of that on her card. What's the number? Oh, only her fourth time. Yes, certainly make a note. It's all right. Here she comes!'

It was a woman's voice speaking, with a slightly unfamiliar accent. The surface I was lying on shook under me. I opened my eyes, saw the ceiling moving along above me, and let them close. Presently, another voice, again with an unfamiliar intonation, spoke to me:

'Drink this,' she said.

A hand lifted my head, and a cup was pressed against my lips. After I had drunk the stuff I lay back with my eyes closed again. I dozed for a little while, and came out of it feeling stronger. For some minutes I lay looking up at the ceiling and wondering vaguely where I was. I could not recall any ceiling that was painted just this pinkish shade of cream. Then, suddenly, while I was still gazing up at the ceiling, I was shocked, just as if something had hit my mind a sharp blow. I was frighteningly aware that it was not just the pinkish ceiling that was unfamiliar—*everything* was unfamiliar. Where there should have been memories there was just a great gap. I had no idea who I was, or where I was; I could recall nothing of how or why I came to be here . . . in a rush of panic I tried to sit up, but a hand pressed me back, and presently held the cup to my lips again.

'You're quite all right. Just relax,' the same voice told me, reassuringly.

I wanted to ask questions, but somehow I felt immensely weary, and everything was too much trouble. The first rush of panic subsided, leaving me lethargic. I wondered what had happened to me—had I been in an accident, perhaps? Was this the kind of thing that happened when one was badly shocked? I did not know, and now for the moment I did not care: I was being looked after. I felt so drowsy that the questions could wait.

I suppose I dozed, and it may have been for a few minutes, or for an hour. I know only that when I opened my eyes again I felt calmer—more puzzled than alarmed—and I lay for a time without moving. I had recovered enough grasp now to console myself with the thought that if there had been an accident, at least there was no pain.

Presently I gained a little more energy, and, with it, curiosity to know where I was. I rolled my head on the pillow to see more of the surroundings.

A few feet away I saw a contrivance on wheels, something between a bed and a trolley. On it, asleep with her mouth open was the most enormous woman I had ever seen. I stared, wondering whether it was some kind of cage over her to take the weight of the covers that gave her the mountainous look, but the movement of her breathing soon showed me that it was not. Then I looked beyond her and saw two more trolleys, both supporting equally enormous women.

I studied the nearest one more closely, and discovered to my surprise that she was quite young—not more than twenty-two, or twenty-three, I guessed. Her face was a little plump, perhaps, but by no means over-fat; indeed, with her fresh, healthy young colouring and her short cropped gold curls, she was quite pretty. I fell to wondering what curious disorder of the glands could cause such a degree of anomaly at her age.

Ten minutes or so passed, and there was a sound of brisk, businesslike footsteps approaching. A voice inquired:

'How are you feeling now?'

I rolled my head to the other side, and found myself looking into a face almost level with my own. For a moment I thought its owner must be a child, then I saw that the features under the white cap were certainly not less than thirty years old. Without waiting for a reply she reached under the bedclothes and took my pulse. Its rate appeared to satisfy her, for she nodded confidently.

'You'll be all right now, Mother,' she told me.

I stared at her, blankly.

'The car's only just outside the door there. Do you think you can walk it?' she went on.

Bemusedly, I asked:

'What car?'

'Why, to take you home, of course,' she said, with professional patience. 'Come along now.' And she pulled away the bedclothes.

I started to move, and looked down. What I saw there held me fixed. I lifted my arm. It was like nothing so much as a plump, white bolster with a ridiculous little hand attached at the end. I stared at it in horror. Then I heard a far-off scream as I fainted. . .

When I opened my eyes again there was a woman—a normal-sized woman—in a white overall with a stethoscope round her neck, frowning at me in perplexity. The white-capped woman I had taken for a child stood beside her, reaching only a little above her elbow.

'——I don't know, Doctor,' she was saying. 'She just suddenly screamed, and fainted.'

'What is it? What's happened to me? I know I'm not like this—I'm not, I'm not,' I said, and I could hear my own voice wailing the words.

The doctor went on looking puzzled.

'What does she mean?' she asked.

‘I’ve no idea, Doctor,’ said the small one. ‘It was quite sudden, as if she’d had some kind of shock—but I don’t know why.’

‘Well, she’s been passed and signed-off, and, anyway, she can’t stay here. We need the room,’ said the doctor. ‘I’d better give her a sedative.’

‘But what’s happened? Who am I? There’s something terribly wrong. I know I’m not like this. P-please t-tell me——’ I implored her, and then somehow lost myself in a stammer and a muddle.

The doctor’s manner became soothing. She laid a hand gently on my shoulder.

‘That’s all right, Mother. There’s nothing to worry about. Just take things quietly. We’ll soon have you back home.’

Another white-capped assistant, no taller than the first, hurried up with a syringe, and handed it to the doctor.

‘No!’ I protested. ‘I want to know where I am. Who am I? Who are you? What’s happened to me?’ I tried to slap the syringe out of her hand, but both the small assistants flung themselves on my arm, and held on to it while she pressed in the needle.

It was a sedative, all right. It did not put me out, but it detached me. An odd feeling: I seemed to be floating a few feet outside myself and considering me with an unnatural calmness. I was able, or felt that I was able, to evaluate matters with intelligent clarity. . .

Evidently I was suffering from amnesia. A shock of some kind had caused me to ‘lose my memory,’ as it is often put. Obviously it was only a very small part of my memory that had gone—just the personal part, who I was, what I was, where I lived—all the mechanism for day to day getting along seemed to be intact: I’d not forgotten how to talk, or how to think, and I seemed to have quite a well-stored mind to think with.

On the other hand there was a nagging conviction that everything about me was somehow *wrong*. I *knew*, somehow, that I’d never before seen the place I was in; I *knew*, too, that there was something queer about the presence of the two small nurses; above all, I *knew*, with absolute certainty, that this massive form lying here was not mine. I could not recall what face I ought to see in a mirror, not even whether it would be dark or fair, or old or young, but there was no shadow of doubt in my mind that whatever it was like, it had never topped such a shape as I had now.

—And there were the other enormous young women, too. Obviously, it could not be a matter of glandular disorder in all of us, or there’d not be this talk of sending me ‘home,’ wherever that might be. . .

I was still arguing the situation with myself in, thanks no doubt to the sedative, a most reasonable-seeming manner, though without making any progress at all, when the ceiling above my head began to move again, and I realised I was being wheeled along. Doors opened at the end of the room, and the trolley tilted a little beneath me as we went down a gentle ramp beyond.

At the foot of the ramp, an ambulance-like car, with a pink coachwork polished until it gleamed, was waiting with the rear doors open. I observed interestedly that I was playing a part in a routine procedure. A team of eight diminutive attendants carried out the task of transferring me from the trolley to a sprung couch in the ambulance as if it were a kind of drill. Two of them lingered after the rest to tuck in my coverings and place another pillow behind my head. Then they got out, closing the doors behind them, and in a minute or two we started off.

It was at this point—and possibly the sedative helped in this, too—that I began to have an increasing sense of balance and a feeling that I was perceiving the situation. Probably there *had* been an accident, as I had suspected, but obviously my error, and the chief cause of my alarm, proceeded from my assumption that I was a stage further on than I actually was. I had assumed that after an interval I had recovered consciousness in these baffling circumstances, whereas the true state of affairs must clearly be that I had *not* recovered consciousness. I must be still in a suspended state, very likely with concussion, and this was a dream, or hallucination. Presently, I should wake up in conditions that would at least be sensible, if not necessarily familiar.

I wondered now that this consoling and stabilising thought had not occurred to me before, and decided that it was the alarming sense of detailed reality that had thrown me into panic. It had been astonishingly stupid of me to be taken in to the extent of imagining that I really was a kind of Gulliver among rather oversize Lilliputians. It was quite characteristic of most dreams, too, that I should lack a clear knowledge of my identity, so we did not need to be surprised at that. The thing to do was to take an intelligent interest in all I observed: the whole thing must be chockful of symbolic content which it would be most interesting to work out later.

The discovery quite altered my attitude and I looked about me with a new attention. It struck me as odd right away that there was so much circumstantial detail, and all of it in focus—there was none of that sense of foreground in sharp relief against a muzzy, or even nonexistent, background that one usually meets in a dream. Everything was presented with a most convincing, three-dimensional solidity. My own sensations, too, seemed

perfectly valid. The injection, in particular, had been quite acutely authentic. The illusion of reality fascinated me into taking mental notes with some care.

The interior of the van, or ambulance, or whatever it was, was finished in the same shell-pink as the outside—except for the roof, which was powder-blue with a scatter of small silver stars. Against the front partition were mounted several cupboards, with plated handles. My couch, or stretcher, lay along the left side: on the other were two fixed seats, rather small, and upholstered in a semi-glazed material to match the colour of the rest. Two long windows on each side left little solid wall. Each of them was provided with curtains of a fine net, gathered back now in pink braid loops, and had a roller blind furled above it. Simply by turning my head on the pillow I was able to observe the passing scenery—though somewhat jerkily, for either the springing of the vehicle scarcely matched its appointments, or the road surface was bad: whichever the cause, I was glad my own couch was independently and quite comfortably sprung.

The external view did not offer a great deal of variety save in its hues. Our way was lined by buildings standing back behind some twenty yards of tidy lawn. Each block was three storeys high, about fifty yards long, and had a tiled roof of somewhat low pitch, suggesting a vaguely Italian influence. Structurally the blocks appeared identical, but each was differently coloured, with contrasting window-frames and doors, and carefully-considered, uniform curtains. I could see no one behind the windows, indeed there appeared to be no one about at all except here and there a woman in overalls mowing a lawn, or tending one of the inset flower-beds.

Further back from the road, perhaps two hundred yards away, stood larger, taller, more utilitarian-looking blocks, some of them with high, factory-type chimneys. I thought they might actually be factories of some kind, but at the distance, and because I had no more than fugitive views of them between the foreground blocks, I could not be sure.

The road itself seldom ran straight for more than a hundred yards at a stretch, and its windings made one wonder whether the builders had not been more concerned to follow a contour line than a direction. There was little other traffic, and what there was consisted of lorries, large or small, mostly large. They were painted in one primary colour or other, with only a five-fold combination of letters and figures on their sides for further identification. In design they might have been any lorries anywhere.

We continued this uneventful progress at a modest pace for some twenty minutes, until we came to a stretch where the road was under repair. The car slowed, and the workers moved to one side, out of our way. As we crawled

forward over the broken surface I was able to get a good look at them. They were all women or girls dressed in denim-like trousers, sleeveless singlets, and working boots. All had their hair cut quite short, and a few wore hats. They were tall and broad-shouldered, bronzed and healthy-looking. The biceps of their arms were like a man's, and the hafts of their picks and shovels rested in the hard, strong hands of manual toilers.

They watched with concern as the car edged its way on to the rough patch, but when it drew level with them they transferred their attention, and jostled and craned to look inside at me.

They smiled widely, showing strong white teeth in their browned faces. All of them raised their right hands, making some sign to me, still smiling. Their goodwill was so evident that I smiled back. They walked along, keeping pace with the crawling car, looking at me expectantly while their smiles faded into puzzlement. They were saying something but I could not hear the words. Some of them insistently repeated the sign. Their disappointed look made it clear that I was expected to respond with more than a smile. The only way that occurred to me was to raise my own right hand in imitation of their gesture. It was at least a qualified success; their faces brightened though a rather puzzled look remained. Then the car lurched on to the made-up road again, and their still somewhat troubled faces slid back as we speeded up to our former sedate pace. More dream symbols, of course—but certainly not one of the stock symbols from the book. What on earth, I wondered, could a party of friendly Amazons, equipped with navvying implements instead of bows, stand for in my subconscious? Something frustrated, I imagined. A suppressed desire to dominate? I did not seem to be getting much farther along that line when we passed the last of the variegated but nevertheless monotonous blocks, and ran into open country.

The flower-beds had shown me already that it was spring, and now I was able to look on healthy pastures, and neat arable fields already touched with green; there was a haze like green smoke along the trim hedges, and some of the trees in the tidily placed spinneys were in young leaf. The sun was shining with a bright benignity upon the most precise countryside I had ever seen; only the cattle dotted about the fields introduced a slight disorder into the careful dispositions. The farmhouses themselves were part of the pattern; hollow squares of neat buildings with an acre or so of vegetable garden on one side, an orchard on another, and a rickyard on a third. There was a suggestion of a doll's landscape about it—Grandma Moses, but tidied up and rationalized. I could see no random cottages, casually sited sheds, or unplanned outgrowths from the farm buildings. And what, I asked myself,

should we conclude from this rather pathological exhibition of tidiness? That I was a more uncertain person than I had supposed, one who was subconsciously yearning for simplicity and security? Well, well. . .

An open lorry which must have been travelling ahead of us turned off down a lane bordered by beautifully laid hedges, towards one of the farms. There were half a dozen young women in it, holding implements of some kind; Amazons, again. One of them, looking back, drew the attention of the rest to us. They raised their hands in the same sign that the others had made, and then waved cheerfully. I waved back.

Rather bewildering, I thought: Amazons for domination *and* this landscape, for passive security: the two did not seem to tie up very well.

We trundled on, at our unambitious pace of twenty miles an hour or so, for what I guessed to be three-quarters of an hour, with the prospect changing very little. The country undulated gently and appeared to continue like that to the foot of a line of low, blue hills many miles away. The tidy farmhouses went by with almost the regularity of milestones, though with something like twice the frequency. Occasionally there were working-parties in the fields; more rarely, one saw individuals busy about the farm, and others hoeing with tractors, but they were all too far off for me to make out any details. Presently, however, came a change.

Off to the left of the road, stretching back at right-angles to it for more than a mile, appeared a row of trees. At first I thought it just a wood, but then I noted that the trunks were evenly spaced, and the trees themselves topped and pruned until they gave more the impression of a high fence.

The end of it came to within twenty feet of the road, where it turned, and we ran along beside it for almost half a mile until the car slowed, turned to the left and stopped in front of a pair of tall gates. There were a couple of toots on the horn.

The gates were ornamental, and possibly of wrought iron under their pink paint. The archway that they barred was stucco-covered, and painted the same colour.

Why, I inquired of myself, this prevalence of pink, which I regard as a namby-pamby colour, anyway? Flesh-colour? Symbolic of an ardency for the flesh which I had insufficiently gratified? I scarcely thought so. Not pink. Surely a burning red . . . I don't think I know anyone who can be really ardent in a pink way. . .

While we waited, a feeling that there was something wrong with the gatehouse grew upon me. The structure was a single-storey building, standing against the left, inner side of the archway, and coloured to match it.

The woodwork was pale blue, and there were white net curtains at the windows. The door opened, and a middle-aged woman in a white blouse-and-trouser suit came out. She was bare-headed, with a few grey locks in her short, dark hair. Seeing me, she raised her hand in the same sign the Amazons had used, though perfunctorily, and walked over to open the gates. It was only as she pushed them back to admit us that I suddenly saw how small she was—certainly not over four feet tall. And that explained what was wrong with the gatehouse: it was built entirely to her scale. . .

I went on staring at her and her little house as we passed. Well, what about that? Mythology is rich in gnomes and 'little people,' and they are fairly pervasive of dreams, too, so somebody, I am sure, must have decided that they are a standard symbol of something, but for the moment I did not recall what it was. Would it be repressed philoprogenitiveness, or was that too unsubtle? I stowed that away, too, for later contemplation and brought my attention back to the surroundings.

We were on our way, unhurriedly, along something more like a drive than a road, with surroundings that suggested a compromise between a public garden and a municipal housing-estate. There were wide lawns of an unblemished velvet green, set here and there with flower-beds, delicate groups of silver birch, and occasional, larger, single trees. Among them stood pink, three-storey blocks, dotted about, seemingly to no particular plan.

A couple of the Amazon-types in singlets and trousers of a faded rust-red were engaged in planting-out a bed close beside the drive, and we had to pause while they dragged their handcart full of tulips on to the grass to let us pass. They gave me the unusual salute and amiable grin as we went by.

A moment later I had a feeling that something had gone wrong with my sight, for as we passed one block we came in sight of another. It was white instead of pink, but otherwise exactly similar to the rest—except that it was scaled down by at least one-third. . .

I blinked at it and stared hard, but it continued to seem just the same size.

A little further on, a grotesquely huge woman in pink draperies was walking slowly and heavily across a lawn. She was accompanied by three of the small, white-suited women looking, in contrast, like children, or very animated dolls: one was involuntarily reminded of tugs fussing round a liner.

I began to feel swamped: the proliferation and combination of symbols was getting well out of my class.

The car forked to the right, and presently we drew up before a flight of steps leading to one of the pink buildings—a normal-sized building, but still not free from oddity, for the steps were divided by a central balustrade; those to the left of it were normal, those to the right, smaller and more numerous.

Three toots on the horn announced our arrival. In about ten seconds half a dozen small women appeared in the doorway and came running down the right-hand side of the steps. A door slammed as the driver got out and went to meet them. When she came into my range of view I saw that she was one of the little ones, too, but not in white as the rest were; she wore a shining pink suit like a livery that exactly matched the car.

They had a word together before they came round to open the door behind me, then a voice said brightly:

'Welcome, Mother Orchis. Welcome home.'

The couch, or stretcher, slid back on runners, and between them they lowered it to the ground. One young woman whose blouse was badged with a pink St Andrew's cross on the left breast leaned over me. She inquired considerately:

'Do you think you can walk, Mother?'

It did not seem the moment to inquire into the form of address. I was obviously the only possible target for the question.

'Walk?' I repeated. 'Of course I can walk.' And I sat up, with about eight hands assisting me.

'Of course' had been an overstatement. I realised that by the time I had been heaved to my feet. Even with all the help that was going on around me it was an exertion which brought on heavy breathing. I looked down at the monstrous form that billowed under my pink draperies, with a sickly revulsion and a feeling that whatever this particular mass of symbolism disguised, it was likely to prove a distasteful revelation later on. I tried a step. 'Walk' was scarcely the word for my progress. It felt like, and must have looked like, a slow series of forward surges. The women, at little more than my elbow height, fluttered about me like a flock of anxious hens. Once started, I was determined to go on, and I progressed with a kind of wave-motion, first across a few yards of gravel, and then, with ponderous deliberation, up the left-hand side of the steps.

There was a perceptible sense of relief and triumph all around as I reached the summit. We paused there a few moments for me to regain my breath, then we moved on into the building. A corridor led straight ahead, with three or four closed doors on each side, at the end it branched right and

left. We took the left arm, and, at the end of it, I came face to face, for the first time since the hallucination had set in, with a mirror.

It took every volt of my resolution not to panic again at what I saw in it. The first few seconds of my stare were spent in fighting down a leaping hysteria.

In front of me stood an outrageous travesty: an elephantine female form, looking the more huge for its pink swathings. Mercifully, they covered everything but the head and hands, but these exposures were themselves another kind of shock, for the hands, though soft and dimpled and looking utterly out of proportion, were not uncomely, and the head and face were those of a girl.

She was pretty, too. She could not have been more than twenty-one, if that. Her curling fair hair was touched with auburn lights, and cut in a kind of bob. The complexion of her face was pink and cream, her mouth was gentle, and red without any artifice. She looked back at me, and at the little women anxiously clustering round me, from a pair of blue-green eyes beneath lightly arched brows. And this delicate face, this little Fragonard, was set upon that monstrous body: no less outrageously might a blossom of freesia sprout from a turnip.

When I moved my lips, hers moved; when I bent my arms, hers bent; and yet, once I got the better of that threatening panic, she ceased to be a reflection. She was nothing like me, so she must be a stranger whom I was observing, though in a most bewildering way. My panic and revulsion gave way to sadness, an aching pity for her. I could weep for the shame of it. I did. I watched the tears brim on her lower lids; mistily, I saw them overflow.

One of the little women beside me caught hold of my hand.

'Mother Orchis, dear, what's the matter?' she asked, full of concern.

I could not tell her: I had no clear idea myself. The image in the mirror shook her head, with tears running down her cheeks. Small hands patted me here and there; small, soothing voices encouraged me onward. The next door was opened for me and I was led into the room beyond, amid concerned fussing.

We entered a place that struck me as a cross between a boudoir and a ward. The boudoir impression was sustained by a great deal of pink—in the carpet, coverlets, cushions, lampshades, and filmy window-curtains; the ward motif, by an array of six divans, or couches, one of which was unoccupied.

It was a large enough room for three couches, separated by a chest, chair and table for each, to be arranged on either side without an effect of

crowding, and the open space in the middle was still big enough to contain several expansive easy-chairs and a central table bearing an intricate flower-arrangement. A not-displeasing scent faintly pervaded the place, and from somewhere came the subdued sound of a string-quartet in a sentimental mood. Five of the bed-couches were already mountainously occupied. Two of my attendant party detached themselves and hurried ahead to turn back the pink satin cover on the sixth.

Faces from all the five other beds were turned towards me. Three of them smiling in welcome, the other two less committal.

'Hallo, Orchis,' one of them greeted me in a friendly tone. Then, with a touch of concern she added: 'What's the matter, dear? Did you have a bad time?'

I looked at her. She had a kindly, plumply pretty face, framed by light-brown hair as she lay back against a cushion. The face looked about twenty-three or twenty-four years old. The rest of her was a huge mound of pink satin. I couldn't make any reply, but I did my best to return her smile as we passed.

Our convoy hove-to by the empty bed. After some preparation and positioning I was helped into it by all hands, and a cushion was arranged behind my head.

The exertion of my journey from the car had been considerable, and I was thankful to relax. While two of the little women pulled up the coverlet and arranged it over me, another produced a handkerchief and dabbed gently at my cheeks. She encouraged me:

'There you are, dear. Safely home again now. You'll be quite all right when you've rested a bit. Just try to sleep for a little.'

'What's the matter with her?' inquired a forthright voice from one of the other beds. 'Did she make a mess of it?'

The little woman with the handkerchief—she was the one who wore the St. Andrew's cross and appeared to be in charge of the operation—turned her head sharply.

'There's no need for that tone, Mother Hazel. Of course Mother Orchis had four beautiful babies—didn't you, dear?' she added to me. 'She's just a bit tired after the journey, that's all.'

'H'mph,' said the girl addressed, in an unaccommodating tone, but she made no further comment.

A degree of fussing continued. Presently the small woman handed me a glass of something that looked like water, but had unsuspected strength. I spluttered a little at the first taste, but quickly felt the better for it. After a

little more tidying and ordering, my retinue departed leaving me propped against my cushion, with the eyes of the five other monstrous women dwelling upon me speculatively.

An awkward silence was broken by the girl who had greeted me as I came in.

'Where did they send you for your holiday, Orchis?'

'Holiday?' I asked blankly.

She and the rest stared at me in astonishment.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' I told them.

They went on staring, stupidly, stolidly.

'It can't have been much of a holiday,' observed one, obviously puzzled. 'I'll not forget my last one. They sent me to the sea, and gave me a little car so that I could get about everywhere. Everybody was lovely to us, and there were only six Mothers there, including me. Did you go by the sea, or in the mountains?'

They were determined to be inquisitive, and one would have to make some answer sooner or later. I chose what seemed the simplest way out for the moment.

'I can't remember,' I said. 'I can't remember a thing. I seem to have lost my memory altogether.'

That was not very sympathetically received, either.

'Oh,' said the one who had been addressed as Hazel, with a degree of satisfaction. 'I thought there was something. And I suppose you can't even remember for certain whether your babies were Grade One this time, Orchis?'

'Don't be stupid, Hazel,' one of the others told her. 'Of course they were Grade One. If they'd not been, Orchis wouldn't be back here now—she'd have been re-rated as a Class Two Mother, and sent to Whitewich.' In a more kindly tone she asked me: 'When did it happen, Orchis?'

'I—I don't know,' I said. 'I can't remember anything before this morning at the hospital. It's all gone entirely.'

'Hospital!' repeated Hazel, scornfully.

'She must mean the Centre,' said the other. 'But do you mean to say you can't even remember *us*, Orchis?'

'No,' I admitted, shaking my head. 'I'm sorry, but everything before I came round in the Hosp—in the Centre, is all blank.'

'That's queer,' Hazel said, in an unsympathetic tone. 'Do they know?'

One of the others took my part.

'Of course they're bound to know. I expect they don't think that remembering or not has anything to do with having Grade One babies. And why should it, anyway? But look, Orchis——'

'Why not let her rest for a bit,' another cut in. 'I don't suppose she's feeling too good after the Centre, and the journey, and getting in here. I never do myself. Don't take any notice of them, Orchis, dear. You just go to sleep for a bit. You'll probably find it's all quite all right when you wake up.'

I accepted her suggestion gratefully. The whole thing was far too bewildering to cope with at the moment; moreover, I did feel exhausted. I thanked her for her advice, and lay back on my pillow. In so far as the closing of one's eyes can be made ostentatious, I made it so. What was more surprising was that, if one can be said to sleep within an hallucination or a dream, I slept. . .

In the moment of waking, before opening my eyes, I had a flash of hope that I should find the illusion had spent itself. Unfortunately, it had not. A hand was shaking my shoulder gently, and the first thing that I saw was the face of the little women's leader, close to mine.

In the way of nurses she said:

'There, Mother Orchis, dear. You'll be feeling a lot better after that nice sleep, won't you?'

Beyond her, two more of the small women were carrying a short-legged bed-tray towards me. They set it down so that it bridged me, and was convenient to reach. I stared at the load on it. It was, with no exception, the most enormous and nourishing meal I had ever seen put before one person. The first sight of it revolted me—but then I became aware of a schism within, for it did not revolt the physical form that I occupied: that, in fact, had a watering mouth, and was eager to begin. An inner part of me marvelled in a kind of semi-detachment while the rest consumed two or three fish, a whole chicken, some slices of meat, a pile of vegetables, fruit hidden under mounds of stiff cream, and more than a quart of milk, without any sense of surfeit. Occasional glances showed me that the other 'Mothers' were dealing just as thoroughly with the contents of their similar trays.

I caught one or two curious looks from them, but they were too seriously occupied to take up their inquisition again at the moment. I wondered how to fend them off later, and it occurred to me that if only I had a book or a magazine I might be able to bury myself effectively, if not very politely, in it.

When the attendants returned I asked the badged one if she could let me have something to read. The effect of such a simple request was astonishing: the two who were removing my tray all but dropped it. The one beside me gaped for an amazed moment before she collected her wits. She looked at me, first with suspicion, and then with concern.

'Not feeling quite yourself yet, dear?' she suggested.

'But I am,' I protested. 'I'm quite all right now.'

The look of concern persisted, however.

'If I were you I'd try to sleep again,' she advised.

'But I don't want to. I'd just like to read quietly,' I objected.

She patted my shoulder, a little uncertainly.

'I'm afraid you've had an exhausting time, Mother. Never mind, I'm sure it'll pass quite soon.'

I felt impatient. 'What's wrong with wanting to read?' I demanded.

She smiled a smug, professional-nurse smile.

'There, there, dear. Just you try to rest a little more. Why, bless me, what on earth would a Mother want with knowing how to read?'

With that she tidied my coverlet, and bustled away, leaving me to the wide-eyed stares of my five companions. Hazel gave a kind of contemptuous snigger; otherwise there was no audible comment for several minutes.

I had reached a stage where the persistence of the hallucination was beginning to wear away my detachment. I could feel that under a little more pressure I should be losing my confidence and starting to doubt its unreality. I did not at all care for its calm continuity. Inconsequent exaggerations and jumps, foolish perceptives, indeed any of the usual dream characteristics would have been reassuring, but, instead, it continued to present obvious nonsense, with an alarming air of conviction and consequence. Effects, for instance, were unmistakably following causes. I began to have an uncomfortable feeling that were one to dig deep enough one might begin to find logical causes for the absurdities, too. The integration was far too good for mental comfort—even the fact that I had enjoyed my meal as if I were fully awake, and was consciously feeling the better for it, encouraged the disturbing quality of reality.

'Read!' Hazel said suddenly, with a scornful laugh. 'And write, too, I suppose?'

‘Well, why not?’ I retorted.

They all gazed at me more attentively than ever, and then exchanged meaning glances among themselves. Two of them smiled at one another. I demanded irritably: ‘What on earth’s wrong with that? Am I supposed not to be able to read or write, or something?’

One said kindly, soothingly:

‘Orchis, dear. Don’t you think it would be better if you were to ask to see the doctor?—Just for a check up?’

‘No,’ I told her flatly. ‘There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m just trying to understand. I simply ask for a book, and you all look at me as if I were mad. Why?’

After an awkward pause the same one said humouringly, and almost in the words of the little attendant:

‘Orchis, dear, do try to pull yourself together. What sort of good would reading and writing be to a Mother. How could they help her to have better babies?’

‘There are other things in life besides having babies,’ I said, shortly.

If they had been surprised before, they were thunderstruck now. Even Hazel seemed bereft of suitable comment. Their idiotic astonishment exasperated me and made me suddenly sick of the whole nonsensical business. Temporarily, I *did* forget to be the detached observer of a dream.

‘Damn it,’ I broke out. ‘What *is* all this rubbish? Orchis! Mother Orchis! —for God’s sake! Where am I? Is this some kind of lunatic asylum?’

I stared at them, angrily, loathing the sight of them, wondering if they were all in some spiteful complicity against me. Somehow I was quite convinced in my own mind that whoever, or whatever I was, I was not a mother. I said so, forcibly, and then, to my annoyance, burst into tears.

For lack of anything else to use, I dabbed at my eyes with my sleeve. When I could see clearly again I found that four of them were looking at me with kindly concern. Hazel, however, was not.

‘I said there was something queer about her,’ she told the others, triumphantly. ‘She’s mad, that’s what it is.’

The one who had been most kindly disposed before, tried again:

‘But, Orchis, *of course* you are a Mother. You’re a Class One Mother—with three births registered. Twelve fine Grade One babies, dear. You *can’t* have forgotten that!’

For some reason I wept again. I had a feeling that something was trying to break through the blankness in my mind; but I did not know what it was,

only that it made me feel intensely miserable.

'Oh, this is cruel, cruel! Why can't I stop it? Why won't it go away and leave me?' I pleaded. 'There's a horrible cruel mockery here—but I don't understand it. What's wrong with me? I'm not obsessional—I'm not—I—oh, can't somebody help me. . . ?'

I kept my eyes tight shut for a time, willing with all my mind that the whole hallucination should fade and disappear.

But it did not. When I looked again they were still there, their silly, pretty faces gaping stupidly at me across the revolting mounds of pink satin.

'I'm going to get out of this,' I said.

It was a tremendous effort to raise myself to a sitting position. I was aware of the rest watching me, wide-eyed, while I made it. I struggled to get my feet round and over the side of the bed, but they were all tangled in the satin coverlet and I could not reach to free them. It was the true, desperate frustration of a dream. I heard my voice pleading: 'Help me! Oh, Donald, darling, please help me. . .'

And suddenly, as if the word 'Donald' had released a spring, something seemed to click in my head. The shutter in my mind opened, not entirely, but enough to let me know who I was. I understood, suddenly, where the cruelty had lain.

I looked at the others again. They were still staring half-bewildered, half-alarmed. I gave up the attempt to move, and lay back on my pillow again.

'You can't fool me any more,' I told them. 'I know who I am now.'

'But, Mother Orchis——' one began.

'Stop that,' I snapped at her. I seemed to have swung suddenly out of self-pity into a kind of masochistic callousness. 'I am *not* a mother,' I said harshly. 'I am just a woman who, for a short time, had a husband, and who hoped—but only hoped—that she would have babies by him.'

A pause followed that; a rather odd pause, where there should have been at least a murmur. What I had said did not seem to have registered. The faces showed no understanding; they were as uncomprehending as dolls.

Presently, the most friendly one seemed to feel an obligation to break up the silence. With a little vertical crease between her brows: 'What,' she inquired tentatively, 'what is a husband?'

I looked hard from one face to another. There was no trace of guile in any of them; nothing but puzzled speculation such as one sometimes sees in a child's eyes. I felt close to hysteria for a moment; then I took a grip of myself. Very well, then, since the hallucination would not leave me alone, I

would play it at its own game, and see what came of that. I began to explain with a kind of deadpan, simple-word seriousness:

'A husband is a man whom a woman takes. . .'

Evidently, from their expressions I was not very enlightening. However, they let me go on for three or four sentences without interruption. Then, when I paused for breath, the kindly one chipped in with a point which she evidently felt needed clearing up:

'But what,' she asked, in evident perplexity, 'what is a man?'

* * *

A cool silence hung over the room after my exposition. I had an impression I had been sent to Coventry, or semi-Coventry, by them, but I did not bother to test it. I was too much occupied trying to force the door of my memory further open, and finding that beyond a certain point it would not budge.

I knew now that I was Jane. I had been Jane Summers, and had become Jane Waterleigh when I had married Donald.

I was—had been—twenty-four when we were married: just twenty-five when Donald was killed, six months later. And there it stopped. It seemed like yesterday, but I couldn't tell. . .

Before that, everything was perfectly clear. My parents and friends, my home, my school, my training, my job, as Dr Summers, at the Wraychester Hospital. I could remember my first sight of Donald when they brought him in one evening with a broken leg—and all that followed. . .

I could remember now the face that I ought to see in a looking-glass—and it was certainly nothing like that I had seen in the corridor outside—it should be more oval, with a complexion looking faintly suntanned; with a smaller, neater mouth; surrounded by chestnut hair that curled naturally; with brown eyes rather wide apart and perhaps a little grave as a rule.

I knew, too, how the rest of me should look—slender, long-legged, with small, firm breasts—a nice body, but one that I had simply taken for granted until Donald gave me pride in it by loving it. . .

I looked down at the repulsive mound of pink satin, and shuddered. A sense of outrage came welling up. I longed for Donald to comfort and pet me and love me and tell me it would be all right; that I wasn't as I was seeing myself at all, and that it *really was* a dream. At the same time I was stricken with horror at the thought that he should ever see me gross and obese like this. And then I remembered that Donald would never see me

again at all—never any more—and I was wretched and miserable, and the tears trickled down my cheeks again.

The five others just went on looking at me, wide-eyed and wondering. Half an hour passed, still in silence, then the door opened to admit a whole troop of the little women, all in white suits. I saw Hazel look at me, and then at the leader. She seemed about to speak, and then to change her mind. The little women split up, two to a couch. Standing one on each other, they stripped away the coverlet, rolled up their sleeves, and set to work at massage.

At first it was not unpleasant, and quite soothing. One lay back and relaxed. Presently, however, I liked it less: soon I found it offensive.

'Stop that!' I told the one on the right, sharply.

She paused, smiled at me amiably, though a trifle uncertainly, and then continued.

'I said stop it,' I told her, pushing her away.

Her eyes met mine. They were troubled and hurt, although a professional smile still curved her mouth.

'I mean it,' I added, curtly.

She continued to hesitate, and glanced across at her partner on the further side of the bed.

'You, too,' I told the other. 'That'll do.'

She did not even pause in her rhythm. The one on the right plucked a decision and returned. She restarted just what I had stopped. I reached out and pushed her, harder this time. There must have been a lot more muscle in that bolster of an arm than one would have supposed. The shove carried her half across the room, and she tripped and fell.

All movement in the room suddenly ceased. Everybody stared, first at her, and then at me. The pause was brief. They all set to work again. I pushed away the girl on the left, too, though more gently. The other one picked herself up. She was crying and she looked frightened, but she set her jaw doggedly and started to come back.

'You keep away from me, you little horrors,' I told them threateningly.

That checked them. They stood off, and looked miserably at one another. The one with the badge of seniority fussed up.

'What's the trouble, Mother Orchis?' she inquired.

I told her. She looked puzzled.

'But that's quite right,' she expostulated.

'Not for me. I don't like it, and I won't have it,' I replied.

She stood awkwardly, at a loss.

Hazel's voice came from the other side of the room:

'Orchis is off her head. She's been telling us the most disgusting things. She's quite mad.'

The little woman turned to regard her, and then looked inquiringly at one of the others. When the girl confirmed with a nod and an expression of distaste she turned back to me, giving me a searching inspection.

'You two go and report,' she told my discomfited masseuses.

They were both crying now, and they went wretchedly down the room together. The one in charge gave me another long thoughtful look, and then followed them.

A few minutes later all the rest had packed-up and gone. The six of us were alone again. It was Hazel who broke the ensuing silence.

'That was a bitchy piece of work. The poor little devils were only doing their job,' she observed.

'If that's their job, I don't like it,' I told her.

'So you just get them a beating, poor things. But I suppose that's the lost memory again. You wouldn't remember that a Servitor who upsets a Mother is beaten, would you?' she added sarcastically.

'Beaten?' I repeated, uneasily.

'Yes, beaten,' she mimicked. 'But you don't care what becomes of them, do you? I don't know what's happened to you while you were away, but whatever it was it seems to have produced a thoroughly nasty result. I never did care for you, Orchis, though the others thought I was wrong. Well, now we all know.'

None of the rest offered any comment. The feeling that they shared her opinion was strong, but luckily I was spared confirmation by the opening of the door.

The senior attendant re-entered with half a dozen small myrmidons, but this time the group was dominated by a handsome woman of about thirty. Her appearance gave me immense relief. She was neither little, nor Amazonian, nor was she huge. Her present company made her look a little over-tall, perhaps, but I judged her at about five-foot-ten; a normal, pleasant-featured young woman with brown hair, cut somewhat short, and a pleated black skirt showing beneath a white overall. The senior attendant was almost trotting to keep up with her longer steps, and was saying something about delusions and 'only back from the Centre today, Doctor.'

The woman stopped beside my couch while the smaller women huddled together, looking at me with some misgiving. She thrust a thermometer into my mouth and held my wrist. Satisfied on both these counts, she inquired:

'Headache? Any other aches or pains?'

'No,' I told her.

She regarded me carefully. I looked back at her.

'What—?' she began.

'She's mad,' Hazel put in from the other side of the room. 'She says she's lost her memory and doesn't know us.'

'She's been talking about horrid, disgusting things,' added one of the others.

'She's got delusions. She thinks she can read and write,' Hazel supplemented.

The doctor smiled at that.

'Do you?' she asked me.

'I don't see why not—but it should be easy enough to prove,' I replied, brusquely.

She looked startled, a little taken aback, then she recovered her tolerant half-smile.

'All right,' she said, humouring me.

She pulled a small note-pad out of her pocket and offered it to me, with a pencil. The pencil felt a little odd in my hand; the fingers did not fall into place readily on it, nevertheless I wrote:

'I'm only too well aware that I have delusions—and that you are part of them.'

Hazel tittered as I handed the pad back.

The doctor's jaw did not actually drop, but her smile came right off. She looked at me very hard indeed. The rest of the room, seeing her expression, went quiet, as though I had performed some startling feat of magic. The doctor turned towards Hazel.

'What sort of things has she been telling you?' she inquired.

Hazel hesitated, then she blurted out:

'Horrible things. She's been talking about two human sexes—just as if we were like the animals. It was disgusting!'

The doctor considered a moment, then she told the senior attendant:

'Better get her along to the sick-bay. I'll examine her there.'

As she walked off there was a rush of little women to fetch a low trolley from the corner to the side of my couch. A dozen hands assisted me on to it, and then wheeled me briskly away.

* * *

'Now,' said the doctor grimly, 'let's get down to it. Who told you all this stuff about two human sexes? I want her name.'

We were alone in a small room with a gold-dotted pink wallpaper. The attendants, after transferring me from the trolley to a couch again, had taken themselves off. The doctor was sitting with a pad on her knee and a pencil at the ready. Her manner was that of an unbluffable inquisitor.

I was not feeling tactful. I told her not to be a fool.

She looked staggered, flushed with anger for a moment, and then took a hold on herself. She went on:

'After you left the Clinic you had your holiday, of course. Now, where did they send you?'

'I don't know,' I replied. 'All I can tell you is what I told the others—that this hallucination or delusion, or whatever it is, started in that hospital place you call the Centre.'

With resolute patience she said:

'Look here, Orchis. You were perfectly normal when you left here six weeks ago. You went to the Clinic and had your babies in the ordinary way. *But* between then and now somebody has been filling your head with all this rubbish—and teaching you to read and write, as well. Now you are going to tell me who that somebody was. I warn you you won't get away with this loss of memory nonsense with me. If you are able to remember this nauseating stuff you told the others, then you're able to remember where you got it from.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake talk sense,' I told her. She flushed again.

'I can find out from the Clinic where they sent you, and I can find out from the Rest Home who were your chief associates while you were there, but I don't want to waste time following up all your contacts, so I'm asking you to save trouble by telling me now. You might just as well. We don't want to have to *make* you talk,' she concluded, ominously.

I shook my head.

'You're on the wrong track. As far as I am concerned this whole hallucination, including my connection with this Orchis, began somehow at

the Centre—how it happened I can't tell you, and what happened to her before that just isn't there to be remembered.'

She frowned, obviously disturbed.

'What hallucination?' she inquired, carefully.

'Why, this fantastic set-up—and you, too.' I waved my hand to include it all. 'This revolting great body, all those little women, everything. Obviously it is all some projection of the subconscious—and the state of my subconscious is worrying me, for it's certainly no wish-fulfilment.'

She went on staring at me, more worried now.

'Who on earth has been telling you about the subconscious and wish-fulfilments?' she asked, uncertainly.

'I don't see why, even in an hallucination, I am expected to be an illiterate moron,' I replied.

'But a Mother doesn't know anything about such things. She doesn't need to.'

'Listen,' I said. 'I've told you, as I've told those poor grotesques in the other room, that I am *not* a Mother. What I am is just an unfortunate M.B. who is having some kind of nightmare.'

'M.B.?' she inquired, vaguely.

'Bachelor of Medicine. I practise medicine,' I told her.

She went on looking at me curiously. Her eyes wandered over my mountainous form, uncertainly.

'You are claiming to be a doctor?' she said, in an odd voice.

'Coloquially—yes,' I agreed.

There was indignation mixed with bewilderment as she protested:

'But this is sheer nonsense! You were brought up and developed to a Mother. You *are* a Mother. Just look at you!'

'Yes,' I said, bitterly. 'Just look at me!'

There was a pause.

'It seems to me,' I suggested at last, 'that, hallucination or not, we shan't get much further simply by going on accusing one another of talking nonsense. Suppose you explain to me what this place is, and who you think I am. It might jog my memory.'

She countered that. 'Suppose,' she said, 'that first you tell me what you *can* remember. It would give me more idea of what is puzzling you.'

'Very well,' I agreed, and launched upon a potted history of myself as far as I could recollect it—up to the time, that is to say, when Donald's aircraft

crashed.

* * *

It was foolish for me to fall for that one. Of course, she had no intention of telling me anything. When she had listened to all I had to say, she went away, leaving me impotently furious.

I waited until the place quietened down. The music had been switched off. An attendant had looked in to inquire, with an air of polishing-off the day's duties, whether there was anything I wanted, and presently there was nothing to be heard. I let a margin of half an hour elapse, and then struggled to get up—taking it by very easy stages this time. The greatest part of the effort was to get to my feet from a sitting position, but I managed it at the cost of heavy breathing. Presently I crossed to the door, and found it unfastened. I held it a little open, listening. There was no sound of movement in the corridor, so I pulled it wide open, and set out to discover what I could about the place. All the doors of the rooms were shut. Putting my ear close to them I could hear regular, heavy breathing behind some, but there were no other sounds in the stillness. I kept on, turning several corners, until I recognised the front door ahead of me. I tried the latch, and found that it was neither barred nor bolted. I paused again, listening for some moments, and then pulled it open and stepped outside.

The park-like garden stretched out before me, sharp-shadowed in the moonlight. Through the trees to the right was a glint of water, to the left was a house similar to the one behind me, with not a light showing in any of its windows.

I wondered what to do next. Trapped in this huge carcass, all but helpless in it, there was very little I could do, but I decided to go on and at least find out what I could while I had the chance. I went forward to the edge of the steps that I had earlier climbed from the ambulance, and started down them cautiously, holding on to the balustrade.

'Mother,' said a sharp, incisive voice behind me. 'What are you doing?'

I turned and saw one of the little women, her white suit gleaming in the moonlight. She was alone. I made no reply, but took another step down. I could have wept at the outrage of the heavy, ungainly body, and the caution it imposed on me.

'Come back. Come back at once,' she told me.

I took no notice. She came pattering down after me and laid hold of my draperies.

‘Mother,’ she said again. ‘You must come back. You’ll catch cold out here.’

I started to take another step, and she pulled at the draperies to hold me back. I leant forward against the pull. There was a sharp tearing sound as the material gave. I swung round, and lost my balance. The last thing I saw was the rest of the flight of steps coming up to meet me. . .

* * *

As I opened my eyes a voice said:

‘That’s better, but it was very naughty of you, Mother Orchis. And lucky it wasn’t a lot worse. Such a silly thing to do. I’m ashamed of you—really, I am.’

My head was aching, and I was exasperated to find that the whole stupid business was still going on; altogether, I was in no mood for reproachful drip. I told her to go to hell. Her small face goggled at me for a moment, and then became icily prim. She applied a piece of lint and plaster to the left side of my forehead, in silence, and then departed, stiffly.

Reluctantly, I had to admit to myself that she was perfectly right. What on earth had I been expecting to do—what on earth *could* I do, encumbered by this horrible mass of flesh? A great surge of loathing for it and a feeling of helpless frustration brought me to the verge of tears again. I longed for my own nice, slim body that pleased me and did what I asked of it. I remembered how Donald had once pointed to a young tree swaying in the wind, and introduced it to me as my twin sister. And only a day or two ago. . .

Then, suddenly, I made a discovery which brought me struggling to sit up. The blank part of my mind had filled up. I could remember everything . . . The effort made my head throb, so I relaxed and lay back once more, recalling it all, right up to the point where the needle was withdrawn and someone swabbed my arm. . .

But what had happened after that? Dreams and hallucinations I had expected . . . but not the sharpfocused, detailed sense of reality . . . not this state which was like a nightmare made solid. . .

What, what in heaven’s name, had they done to me. . . ?

* * *

I must have fallen asleep again, for when I opened my eyes there was daylight outside, and a covey of little women had arrived to attend to my

toilet.

They spread their sheets dextrously and rolled me this way and that with expert technique as they cleaned me up. I suffered their industry patiently, feeling the fresher for it, and glad to discover that the headache had all but gone.

When we were almost at the end of our ablutions there came a peremptory knock, and without invitation two figures, dressed in black uniforms with silver buttons, entered. They were the Amazon type, tall, broad, well set-up and handsome. The little women dropped everything and fled with squeaks of dismay into the far corner of the room where they cowered in a huddle.

The two gave me the familiar salute. With an odd mixture of decision and deference one of them inquired:

'You are Orchis—Mother Orchis?'

'That's what they're calling me,' I admitted.

The girl hesitated, then, in a tone rather more pleading than ordering, she said:

'I have orders for your arrest, Mother. You will please come with us.'

An excited, incredulous twittering broke out among the little women in the corner. The uniformed girl quelled them with a look.

'Get the Mother dressed and make her ready,' she commanded.

The little women came out of their corner hesitantly, directing nervous, propitiatory smiles towards the pair. The second one told them briskly, though not altogether unkindly:

'Come along now. Jump to it.'

They jumped.

I was almost swathed in my pink draperies again when the doctor strode in. She frowned at the two in uniform.

'What's all this? What are you doing here?' she demanded.

The leader of the two explained.

'Arrest!' exclaimed the doctor. 'Arrest a Mother! I never heard of such nonsense. What's the charge?'

The uniformed girl said, a little sheepishly:

'She is accused of Reactionism.'

The doctor simply stared at her.

'A Reactionist Mother! What'll you people think of next? Go on, get out, both of you.'

The young woman protested:

'We have our orders, Doctor.'

'Rubbish. There's no authority. Have you ever heard of a Mother being arrested?'

'No, Doctor.'

'Well, you aren't going to make a precedent now. Go on.'

The uniformed girl hesitated unhappily, then an idea occurred to her.

'If you would let me have a signed refusal to surrender the Mother. . . ?' she suggested helpfully.

When the two had departed, quite satisfied with their piece of paper, the doctor looked at the little women gloomily.

'You can't help tattling, you servitors, can you? Anything you happen to hear goes through the lot of you like a fire in a cornfield, and makes trouble all round. Well, if I hear any more of this I shall know where it comes from.' She turned to me. 'And you, Mother Orchis, will in future please restrict yourself to yes-and-no in the hearing of these nattering little pests. I'll see you again shortly. We want to ask you some questions,' she added, and went out, leaving a subdued, industrious silence behind her.

She returned just as the tray which had held my gargantuan breakfast was being removed, and not alone. The four women who accompanied her, and looked as normal as herself, were followed by a number of little women lugging in chairs which they arranged beside my couch. When they had departed, the five women, all in white overalls, sat down and regarded me as if I were an exhibit. One appeared to be much the same age as the first doctor, two nearer fifty, and one sixty, or more.

'Now, Mother Orchis,' said the doctor, with an air of opening the proceedings, 'it is quite clear that something highly unusual has taken place. Naturally we are interested to understand just what and, if possible why. You don't need to worry about those police this morning—it was quite improper of them to come here at all. This is simply an enquiry—a scientific enquiry—to establish what has happened.'

'You can't want to understand more than I do,' I replied. I looked at them, at the room about me, and finally at my massive prone form. 'I am aware that all this must be an hallucination, but what is troubling me most is that I have always supposed that any hallucination must be deficient in at least one dimension—must lack reality to some of the senses. But this does not. I have all my senses, and can use them. Nothing is insubstantial: I am

trapped in flesh that is very palpably too, too solid. The only striking deficiency, so far as I can see, is reason—even symbolic reason.'

The four women stared at me in astonishment. The doctor gave them a sort of now-perhaps-you'll-believe-me glance, and then turned to me again.

'We'll start with a few questions,' she said.

'Before you begin,' I put in, 'I have something to add to what I told you last night. It has come back to me.'

'Perhaps the knock when you fell,' she suggested, looking at my piece of plaster. 'What were you trying to do?'

I ignored that. 'I think I'd better tell you the missing part—it might help—a bit, anyway.'

'Very well,' she agreed. 'You told me you were—er—married, and that your—er—husband was killed soon afterwards.' She glanced at the others; their blankness of expression was somehow studious. 'It was the part after that that was missing,' she added.

'Yes,' I said. 'He was a test-pilot,' I explained to them. 'It happened six months after we were married—only one month before his contract was due to expire.

'After that, an aunt took me away for some weeks. I don't suppose I'll ever remember that part very well—I—I wasn't noticing anything very much. . .

'But then I remember waking up one morning and suddenly seeing things differently, and telling myself that I couldn't go on like that. I knew I must have some work, something that would keep me busy.

'Dr Hellyer, who is in charge of the Wraychester Hospital where I was working before I was married, told me he would be glad to have me with them again. So I went back, and worked very hard, so that I did not have much time to think. That would be about eight months ago, now.

'Then one day Dr Hellyer spoke about a drug that a friend of his had succeeded in synthesizing. I don't think he was really asking for volunteers, but I offered to try it out. From what he said it sounded as if the drug might have some quite important properties. It struck me as a chance to do something useful. Sooner or later, someone would try it, and as I didn't have any ties and didn't care very much what happened, anyway, I thought I might as well be the one to try it.'

The spokesman doctor interrupted to ask:

'What was this drug?'

'It's called chuinjuatin,' I told her. 'Do you know it?'

She shook her head. One of the others put in:

'I've heard the name. What is it?'

'It's a narcotic,' I told her. 'The original form is in the leaves of a tree that grows chiefly in the south of Venezuela. The tribe of Indians who live there discovered it somehow, like others did quinine and mescalin. And in much the same way they use it for orgies. Some of them sit and chew the leaves—they have to chew about six ounces of them—and gradually they go into a zombie-like, trance state. It lasts three or four days during which they are quite helpless and incapable of doing the simplest thing for themselves, so that other members of the tribe are appointed to look after them as if they were children, and to guard them.

'It's necessary to guard them because the Indian belief is that chuinjuatin liberates the spirit from the body, setting it free to wander anywhere in space and time, and the guardian's most important job is to see that no other wandering spirit shall slip into the body while the true owner is away. When the subjects recover they claim to have had wonderful mystical experiences. There seem to be no physical ill effects, and no craving results from it. The mystical experiences, though, are said to be intense, and clearly remembered.

'Dr Hellyer's friend had tested his synthesized chuinjuatin on a number of laboratory animals and worked out the dosage, and tolerances, and that kind of thing, but what he could not tell of course, was what validity, if any, the reports of the mystical experiences had. Presumably they were the product of the drug's influence on the nervous system—but whether that effect produced a sensation of pleasure, ecstasy, awe, fear, horror, or any of a dozen more, it was impossible to tell without a human guinea-pig. So that was what I volunteered for.'

I stopped. I looked at their serious, puzzled faces, and at the billow of pink satin in front of me.

'In fact,' I added, 'it appears to have produced a combination of the absurd, the incomprehensible, and the grotesque.'

They were earnest women, these, not be sidetracked. They were there to disprove an anomaly—if they could.

'I see,' said the spokeswoman with an air of preserving reasonableness, rather than meaning anything. She glanced down at a paper on which she had made a note from time to time.

'Now, can you give us the time and date at which this experiment took place?'

I could, and did, and after that the questions went on and on and on. . .

The least satisfactory part of it from my point of view was that even though my answers caused them to grow more uncertain of themselves as we went on, they did at least get them; whereas when I put a question it was usually evaded, or answered perfunctorily, as an unimportant digression.

They went on steadily, and only broke off when my next meal arrived. Then they went away, leaving me thankfully in peace—but little the wiser. I half expected them to return, but when they did not I fell into a doze from which I was awakened by the incursion of a cluster of the little women, once more. They brought a trolley with them, and in a short time were wheeling me out of the building on it—but not by the way I had arrived. This time we went down a ramp where another, or the same, pink ambulance waited at the bottom. When they had me safely loaded aboard, three of them climbed in, too, to keep me company. They were chattering as they did so, and they kept it up inconsequently, and mostly incomprehensibly, for the whole hour and a half of the journey that ensued.

The countryside differed little from that I had already seen. Once we were outside the gates there were the same tidy fields and standardised farms. The occasional built-up areas were not extensive and consisted of the same types of blocks close by, and we ran on the same, not very good, road surfaces. There were groups of the Amazon-types, and, more rarely, individuals, to be seen at work in the fields; the sparse traffic was lorries, large or small, and occasional buses, but with never a private car to be seen. My illusion, I reflected, was remarkably consistent in its details. Not a single group of Amazons, for instance, failed to raise its right hands in friendly, respectful greeting to the pink car.

Once, we crossed a cutting. Looking down from the bridge I thought at first that we were over the dried bed of a canal, but then I noticed a post leaning at a crazy angle among the grass and weeds: most of its attachments had fallen off, but there were enough left to identify it as a railway-signal.

We passed through one concentration of identical blocks which was in size, though in no other way, quite a town, and then, two or three miles further on, ran through an ornamental gateway into a kind of park.

In one way it was not unlike the estate we had left, for everything was meticulously tended; the lawns like velvet, the flower-beds vivid with spring blossoms, but it differed essentially in that the buildings were not blocks. They were houses, quite small for the most part, and varied in style, often no larger than roomy cottages. The place had a subduing effect on my small companions; for the first time they left off chattering, and gazed about them with obvious awe.

The driver stopped once to inquire the way of an overalled Amazon who was striding along with a hod on her shoulder. She directed us, and gave me a cheerful, respectful grin through the window, and presently we drew up again in front of a neat little two-storey Regency-style house.

This time there was no trolley. The little women, assisted by the driver, fussed over helping me out, and then half-supported me into the house, in a kind of buttressing formation.

Inside, I was manœuvred with some difficulty through a door on the left, and found myself in a beautiful room, elegantly decorated and furnished in the period-style of the house. A white-haired woman in a purple silk dress was sitting in a wingchair beside a wood fire. Both her face and her hands told of considerable age, but she looked at me from keen, lively eyes.

'Welcome, my dear,' she said, in a voice which had no trace of the quaver I half-expected.

Her glance went to a chair. Then she looked at me again, and thought better of it.

'I expect you'd be more comfortable on the couch,' she suggested.

I regarded the couch—a genuine Georgian piece, I thought—doubtfully.

'Will it stand it?' I wondered.

'Oh, I think so,' she said, but not too certainly.

The retinue deposited me there carefully, and stood by with anxious expressions. When it was clear that though it creaked, it was probably going to hold, the old lady shooed them away, and rang a little silver bell. A diminutive figure, a perfect parlourmaid three-foot-ten in height, entered.

'The brown sherry, please, Mildred,' instructed the old lady. 'You'll take sherry, my dear?' she added to me.

'Yes—yes, thank you,' I said faintly. After a pause I added: 'You will excuse me, Mrs—er—Miss——?'

'Oh, I should have introduced myself. My name is Laura—not Miss, or Mrs, just Laura. You, I know, are Orchis—Mother Orchis.'

'So they tell me,' I owned, distastefully.

We studied one another. For the first time since the hallucination had set in I saw sympathy, even pity, in someone else's eyes. I looked round the room again, noticing the perfection of details.

'This is—I'm not mad, am I?' I asked.

She shook her head slowly, but before she could reply the miniature parlourmaid returned, bearing a cut-glass decanter and glasses on a silver tray. As she poured out a glass for each of us I saw the old lady glance from

her to me and back again, as though comparing us. There was a curious uninterpretable expression on her face. I made an effort.

'Shouldn't it be Madeira?' I suggested.

She looked surprised, and then smiled, and nodded appreciatively.

'I think you have accomplished the purpose of this visit in one sentence,' she said.

The parlourmaid left, and we raised our glasses. The old lady sipped at hers and then placed it on an occasional table beside her.

'Nevertheless,' she went on, 'we had better go into it a little more. Did they tell you why they have sent you to me, my dear?'

'No,' I shook my head.

'It is because I am a historian,' she informed me. 'Access to history is a privilege. It is not granted to many of us nowadays—and then somewhat reluctantly. Fortunately, a feeling that no branches of knowledge should be allowed to perish entirely still exists—though some of them are pursued at the cost of a certain political suspicion.' She smiled deprecatingly, and then went on. 'So when confirmation is required it is necessary to appeal to a specialist. Did they give you any report on their diagnosis?'

I shook my head again.

'I thought not. So like the profession, isn't it? Well, I'll tell you what they told me on the telephone from the Mothers' Home, and we shall have a better idea of what we are about. I was informed that you have been interviewed by several doctors whom you have interested, puzzled—and I suspect, distressed—very much, poor things. None of them has more than a minimum smattering of history, you see. Well, briefly, two of them are of the opinion that you are suffering from delusions of a schizophrenic nature: and three are inclined to think you are a genuine case of transferred personality. It is an extremely rare condition. There are not more than three reliably documented cases, and one that is more debatable, they tell me; but of those confirmed two are associated with the drug chuinjuatin, and the third with a drug of very similar properties.

'Now, the majority of three found your answers coherent for the most part, and felt that they were authentically circumstantial. That is to say that nothing you told them conflicted directly with what they know, but, since they know so little outside their professional field, they found a great deal of the rest both hard to believe and impossible to check. Therefore, I, with my better means of checking, have been asked for my opinion.'

She paused, and looked me thoughtfully over.

‘I rather think,’ she added, ‘that this is going to be one of the most curiously interesting things that has happened to me in my quite long life.—Your glass is empty, my dear.’

‘Transferred personality,’ I repeated wonderingly, as I held out my glass. ‘Now, if *that* were possible—’

‘Oh, there’s no doubt about the *possibility*. Those three cases I mentioned are fully authenticated.’

‘It might be that—almost,’ I admitted. ‘At least, in some ways it might be—but not in others. There *is* this nightmare quality. *You* seem perfectly normal to me, but look at me, myself—and at your little maid! There’s certainly an element of delusion. I *seem* to be here, like this, and talking to you—but it can’t really be so, so where am I?’

‘I can understand, better than most, I think, how unreal this must seem to you. In fact, I have spent so much of my time in books that it sometimes seems unreal to me—as if I did not quite belong anywhere. Now, tell me my dear, when were you born?’

I told her. She thought for a moment.

‘H’m,’ she said. ‘George the Sixth—but you’d not remember the second big war?’

‘No,’ I agreed.

‘But—you might remember the coronation of the next Monarch? Whose was that?’

‘Elizabeth—Elizabeth the Second. My mother took me to see the procession,’ I told her.

‘Do you remember anything about it?’

‘Not a lot really—except that it rained, nearly all day,’ I admitted.

We went on like that for a little while, then she smiled, reassuringly.

‘Well, I don’t think we need any more to establish our point. I’ve heard about that coronation before—at second hand. It must have been a wonderful scene in the abbey.’ She mused a moment, and gave a little sigh. ‘You’ve been very patient with me, my dear. It is only fair that you should have your turn—but I’m afraid you must prepare yourself for some shocks.’

‘I think I must be inured after my last thirty-six hours—or what has appeared to be thirty-six hours,’ I told her.

‘I doubt it,’ she said, looking at me seriously.

‘Tell me,’ I asked her. ‘Please explain it all—if you can.’

‘Your glass, my dear. Then I’ll get the crux of it over.’

She poured for each of us, then she asked:

'What strikes you as the oddest feature of your experience, so far?'

I considered. 'There's so much—'

'Might it not be that you have not seen a single man?' she suggested.

I thought back. I remembered the wondering tone of one of the Mothers asking: 'What is a man?'

'That's certainly one of them,' I agreed. 'Where are they?'

She shook her head, watching me steadily.

'There aren't any, my dear. Not any more. None at all.'

I simply went on staring at her. Her expression was perfectly serious and sympathetic. There was no trace of guile there, or deception, while I struggled with the idea. At last I managed:

'But—but that's impossible! There must be some somewhere. . . You couldn't—I mean, how?—I mean. . .' My expostulation trailed off in confusion.

She shook her head.

'I know it must seem impossible to you, Jane—may I call you Jane? But it is so. I am an old woman now, nearly eighty, and in all my long life I have never seen a man—save in old pictures and photographs. Drink your sherry, my dear. It will do you good.' She paused. 'I'm afraid this upsets you.'

I obeyed, too bewildered for further comment at the moment, protesting inwardly, yet not altogether disbelieving, for certainly I had not seen one man, nor sign of any. She went on quietly, giving me time to collect my wits:

'I can understand a little how you must feel. I haven't had to learn all my history entirely from books, you see. When I was a girl, sixteen or seventeen, I used to listen to my grandmother. She was as old then as I am now, but her memory was still very good. I was able almost to see the places she talked about—but they were part of such a different world that it was difficult for me to understand how she felt. When she spoke about the young man she had been engaged to, tears would roll down her cheeks, even then—not just for him, of course, but for the whole world that she had known as a girl. I was sorry for her, although I could not really understand how she felt.—How should I? But now that I am old, too, and have read so much, I am perhaps a little nearer to understanding her feelings, I think.' She looked at me curiously. 'And you, my dear. Perhaps you, too, were engaged to be married?'

'I was married—for a little time,' I told her.

She contemplated that for some seconds, then:

'It must be a very strange experience to be owned,' she remarked, reflectively.

'Owned?' I exclaimed, in astonishment.

'Ruled by a husband,' she explained, sympathetically.

I stared at her.

'But it—it wasn't like that—it wasn't like that at all,' I protested. 'It was —' But there I broke off, with tears too close. To sheer her away I asked:

'But what happened? What on earth happened to the men?'

'They all died,' she told me. 'They fell sick. Nobody could do anything for them, so they died. In little more than a year they were all gone—all but a very few.'

'But surely—surely everything would collapse?'

'Oh, yes. Very largely it did. It was very bad. There was a dreadful lot of starvation. The industrial parts were the worst hit, of course. In the more backward countries and in rural areas women were able to turn to the land and till it to keep themselves and their children alive, but almost all the large organisations broke down entirely. Transport ceased very soon: petrol ran out, and no coal was being mined. It was quite a dreadful state of affairs because although there were a great many women, and they had outnumbered the men, in fact, they had only really been important as consumers and spenders of money. So when the crisis came it turned out that scarcely any of them knew how to do any of the important things because they had nearly all been owned by men, and had to lead their lives as pets and parasites.'

I started to protest, but her frail hand waved me aside.

'It wasn't their fault—not entirely,' she explained. 'They were caught up in a process, and everything conspired against their escape. It was a long process, going right back to the eleventh century, in Southern France. The Romantic conception started there as an elegant and amusing fashion for the leisured classes. Gradually, as time went on, it permeated through most levels of society, but it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that its commercial possibilities were intelligently perceived, and not until the twentieth that it was really exploited.

'At the beginning of the twentieth century women were starting to have their chance to lead useful, creative, interesting lives. But that did not suit commerce: it needed them much more as mass-consumers than as producers —except on the most routine levels. So Romance was adopted and

developed as a weapon against their further progress and to promote consumption, and it was used intensively.

'Women must never for a moment be allowed to forget their sex, and compete as equals. Everything had to have a "feminine angle" which must be different from the masculine angle, and be dinned in without ceasing. It would have been unpopular for manufacturers actually to issue an order "back to the kitchen," but there were other ways. A profession without a difference, called "housewife," could be invented. The kitchen could be glorified and made more expensive; it could be made to seem desirable, and it could be shown that the way to realise this heart's desire was through marriage. So the presses turned out, by the hundred thousand a week, journals which concentrated the attention of women ceaselessly and relentlessly upon selling themselves to some man in order that they might achieve some small, uneconomic unit of a home upon which money could be spent.

'Whole trades adopted the romantic approach and the glamour was spread thicker and thicker in the articles, the write-ups, and most of all in the advertisements. Romance found a place in everything that women might buy from underclothes to motor-cycles, from "health" foods to kitchen stoves, from deodorants to foreign travel, until soon they were too bemused to be amused any more.

'The air was filled with frustrated moanings. Women maundered in front of microscopes yearning only to "surrender," and "give themselves," to adore and to be adored. The cinema most of all maintained the propaganda, persuading the main and important part of their audience, which was female, that nothing in life was worth achieving but dewy-eyed passivity in the strong arms of Romance. The pressure became such that the majority of young women spent all their leisure time dreaming of Romance, and the means of securing it. They were brought to a state of honestly believing that to be owned by some man and set down in a little brick box to buy all the things that the manufacturers wanted them to buy would be the highest form of bliss that life could offer.'

'But—' I began to protest again. The old lady was now well launched, however, and swept on without a check.

'All this could not help distorting society, of course. The divorce-rate went up. Real life simply could not come near to providing the degree of romantic glamour which was being represented as every girl's proper inheritance. There was probably, in the aggregate, more disappointment, disillusion, and dissatisfaction among women than there had ever been before. Yet, with this ridiculous and ornamented ideal grained-in by

unceasing propaganda, what could a conscientious idealist do but take steps to break up the short-weight marriage she had made, and seek elsewhere for the ideal which was hers, she understood, by right?

'It was a wretched state of affairs brought about by deliberately promoted dissatisfaction; a kind of rat-race with, somewhere safely out of reach, the glamorised romantic ideal always luring. Perhaps an exceptional few almost attained it, but, for all except those very few, it was a cruel, tantalising sham on which they spent themselves, and of course their money, in vain.'

This time I did get in my protest.

'But it wasn't like that. Some of what you say may be true—but that's all the superficial part. It didn't feel a bit like the way you put it. I was in it. I *know*.'

She shook her head reprovingly.

'There is such a thing as being too close to make a proper evaluation. At a distance we are able to see more clearly. We can perceive it for what it was—a gross and heartless exploitation of the weaker-willed majority. Some women of education and resolution were able to withstand it, of course, but at a cost. There must always be a painful price for resisting majority pressure—even they could not always, altogether escape the feeling that they might be wrong, and that the rat-racers were having the better time of it.

'You see, the great hopes for the emancipation of women with which the century had started had been outflanked. Purchasing-power had passed into the hands of the ill-educated and highly-suggestible. The desire for Romance is essentially a selfish wish, and when it is encouraged to dominate every other it breaks down all corporate loyalties. The individual woman thus separated from, and yet at the same time thrust into competition with, all other women was almost defenceless; she became the prey of organised suggestion. When it was represented to her that the lack of certain goods or amenities would be fatal to Romance she became alarmed and, thus, eminently exploitable. She could only believe what she was told, and spent a great deal of time worrying about whether she was doing all the right things to encourage Romance. Thus, she became, in a new, a subtler way, more exploited, more dependent, and less creative than she had ever been before.'

'Well,' I said, 'this is the most curiously unrecognisable account of my world that I have ever heard—it's like something copied, but with all the proportions wrong. And as for "less creative"—well, perhaps families were

smaller, but women still went on having babies. The population was still increasing.'

The old lady's eyes dwelt on me a moment.

'You are undoubtedly a thought-child of your time, in some ways,' she observed. 'What makes you think there is anything creative about having babies? Would you call a plant-pot creative because seeds grow in it? It is a mechanical operation—and, like most mechanical operations, is most easily performed by the least intelligent. Now, bringing up a child, educating, helping her to become a *person*, that *is* creative. But unfortunately, in the time we are speaking of, women had, in the main, been successfully conditioned into bringing up their daughters to be unintelligent consumers, like themselves.'

'But,' I said helplessly, 'I *know* the time. It's my time. This is all distorted.'

'The perspective of history must be truer,' she told me again, unimpressed, and went on: 'But if what happened *had* to happen, then it chose a fortunate time to happen. A hundred years earlier, even fifty years earlier, it would very likely have meant extinction. Fifty years later might easily have been too late—it might have come upon a world in which *all* women had profitably restricted to domesticity and consumership. Luckily, however, in the middle of the century some women were still entering the professions, and by far the greatest number of professional women was to be found in medicine—which is to say that they were only really numerous in, and skilled in, the very profession which immediately became of vital importance if we were to survive at all.

'I have no medical knowledge, so I cannot give you any details of the steps they took. All I can tell you is that there was intensive research on lines which will probably be more obvious to you than they are to me.

'A species, even our species, has great will to survive, and the doctors saw to it that the will had the means of expression. Through all the hunger, and the chaos, and the other privations, babies somehow continued to be born. They had to be. Reconstruction could wait: the priority was the new generation that would help in the reconstruction, and then inherit it. So babies were born: the girl babies lived, the boy babies died. That was distressing, and wasteful, too, and so, presently, only girl babies were born—again, the means by which that could be achieved will be easier for you to understand than for me.

'It is, they tell me, not nearly so remarkable as it would appear at first. The locust, it seems, will continue to produce female locusts without male,

or any other kind of assistance; the aphis, too, is able to go on breeding alone and in seclusion, certainly for eight generations, perhaps more. So it would be a poor thing if we, with all our knowledge and powers of research to assist us, should find ourselves inferior to the locust and the aphis in this respect, would it not?'

She paused, looking at me somewhat quizzically for my response. Perhaps she expected amazed—or possibly shocked—disbelief. If so, I disappointed her: technical achievements have ceased to arouse simple wonder since atomic physics showed how the barriers fall before the pressure of a good brains-team. One can take it that most things are possible: whether they are desirable, or worth doing, is a different matter—and one that seemed to me particularly pertinent to her question. I asked her:

'And what is it that you have achieved?'

'Survival,' she said, simply.

'Materially,' I agreed, 'I suppose you have. But when it has cost all the rest, when love, art, poetry, excitement, and physical joy have all been sacrificed to mere continued existence, what is left but a soulless waste? What reason is there any longer for survival?'

'As to the reason, I don't know—except that survival is a desire common to all species. I am quite sure that the *reason* for that desire was no clearer in the twentieth century than it is now. But, for the rest, why should you assume that they are *gone*? Did not Sappho write poetry? And your assumption that the possession of a soul depends upon a duality of sexes surprises me: it has so often been held that the two are in some sort of conflict, has it not?'

'As a historian who must have studied men, women, and motives you should have taken my meaning better,' I told her.

She shook her head, with reproof. 'You are so much the conditioned product of your age, my dear. They told you, on all levels, from the works of Freud to that of the most nugatory magazines for women, that it was sex, civilised into romantic love, that made the world go round—and you believed them. But the world continues to go round for others, too—for the insects, the fish, the birds, the animals—and how much do you suppose they know of romantic love, even in brief mating-seasons? They hoodwinked you, my dear. Between them they channelled your interests and ambitions along all courses that were socially convenient, economically profitable, and almost harmless.'

I shook my head.

'I just don't believe it. Oh, yes, you know something of my world—from the outside. But you don't understand it, or feel it.'

'That's your conditioning, my dear,' she told me, calmly.

Her repeated assumption irritated me. I asked:

'Suppose I were to believe what you say, what is it, then, that *does* make the world go round?'

'That's simple, my dear. It is the will to power. We have that as babies; we have it still in old age. It occurs in men and women alike. It is more fundamental, and more desirable, than sex; I tell you, you were misled—exploited, sublimated for economic convenience.

'After the disease had struck, women ceased, for the first time in history, to be an exploited class. Without male rulers to confuse and divert them they began to perceive that all true power resides in the female principle. The male had served only one brief and useful purpose; for the rest of his life he was a painful and costly parasite.

'As they became aware of power, the doctors grasped it. In twenty years they were in full control. With them were the few women engineers, architects, lawyers, administrators, some teachers, and so on, but it was the doctors who held the keys of life and death. The future was in their hands and, as things began gradually to revive, they, together with the other professions, remained the dominant class and became known as the Doctorate. It assumed authority; it made the laws; it enforced them.

'There was opposition, of course. Neither the memory of the old days, nor the effect of twenty years of lawlessness, could be wiped out at once, but the doctors had the whiphand—any woman who wanted a child had to come to them, and they saw to it that she was satisfactorily settled in a community. The roving gangs dwindled away, and gradually order was restored.

'Later on, they faced better-organised opposition. There was a party which contended that the disease which had struck down the men had run its course, and the balance could, and should, be restored—they were known as Reactionists, and they became an embarrassment.

'Most of the Council of the Doctorate still had clear memories of a system which used every weakness of women, and had been no more than a more civilised culmination of their exploitation through the ages. They remembered how they themselves had only grudgingly been allowed to qualify for their careers. They were now in command: they felt no obligation to surrender their power and authority, and eventually, no doubt, their freedom to a creature whom they had proved to be biologically, and in all other ways, expendable. They refused unanimously to take a step that would

lead to corporate suicide, and the Reactionists were proscribed as a subversive criminal organisation.

'That, however, was just a palliative. It quickly became clear that they were attacking a symptom and neglecting the cause. The Council was driven to realise that it had an unbalanced society at its hands—a society that was capable of continuity, but was in structure, you might say, little more than the residue of a vanished form. It could not continue in that truncated shape, and as long as it tried to disaffection would increase. Therefore, if power was to become stable, a new form suitable to the circumstances must be found.

'In deciding the shape it should take, the natural tendencies of the little-educated and uneducated woman were carefully considered—such qualities as her feeling for hierarchical principles and her disposition to respect artificial distinctions—You will no doubt recollect that in your own time any fool of a woman whose husband was ennobled or honoured at once acquired increased respect and envy from other women though she remained the same fool; and also, that any gathering or society of unoccupied women would soon become obsessionally enmeshed in the creation and preservation of social distinctions. Allied to this is the high value they usually place upon a feeling of security. Important, too, is the capacity for devoted self-sacrifice, and slavery to conscience within the canons of any local convention. We are naturally very biddable creatures. Most of us are happiest when we are being orthodox, however odd our customs may appear to an outsider; the difficulty in handling us lies chiefly in establishing the required standards of orthodoxy.

'Obviously, the broad outline of a system which was going to stand any chance of success, would have to provide scope for these and other characteristic traits. It must be a scheme where the interplay of forces would preserve equilibrium and respect for authority. The details of such an organisation, however, were less easy to determine.

'An extensive study of social forms and orders was undertaken but for several years every plan put forward was rejected as in some way unsuitable. The architecture of that finally chosen was said, though I do not know with how much truth, to have been inspired by the Bible—a book at that time still unprohibited, and the source of much unrest—I am told that it ran something like: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways."

'The Council appears to have felt that this advice, suitably modified, could be expected to lead to a state of affairs which would provide most of the requisite characteristics.

'A four-class system was chosen as the basis, and strong differentiations were gradually introduced. These, now that they have become well established, greatly help to ensure stability—there is scope for ambition within one's class but none for passing from one class to another. Thus, we have the Doctorate—the educated ruling-class, fifty per cent of whom are actually of the medical profession. The Mothers, whose title is self-explanatory. The Servitors who are numerous and, for psychological reasons, small. The Workers, who are physically and muscularly strong, to do the heavier work. All the three lower classes respect the authority of the Doctorate. Both the employed classes revere the Mothers. The Servitors consider themselves more favoured in their tasks than the Workers; and the Workers tend to regard the puniness of the Servitors with a semi-affectionate contempt.

'So you see a balance has been struck, and though it works somewhat crudely as yet, no doubt it will improve. It seems likely, for instance, that it would be advantageous to introduce sub-divisions into the Servitor class before long, and the police are thought by some to be put at a disadvantage by having no more than a little education to distinguish them from the ordinary Worker. . .'

She went on explaining with increasing detail while the enormity of the whole process gradually grew upon me.

'Ants!' I broke in suddenly. 'The ant-nest! You've taken *that* for your model?'

She looked surprised, either at my tone, or the fact that what she was saying had taken so long to register.

'And why not?' she asked. 'Surely it is one of the most enduring social patterns that nature has evolved—though of course some adaptation—'

'You're—are you telling me that only the Mothers have children?' I demanded.

'Oh, members of the Doctorate do, too, when they wish,' she assured me.

'But—but—'

'The Council decides the ratios,' she went on to explain. 'The doctors at the clinic examine the babies and allocate them suitably to the different classes. After that, of course, it is just a matter of seeing to their specialised feeding, glandular control, and proper training.'

'But,' I objected wildly. 'What's it *for*? Where's the sense in it? What's the good of being alive, like that?'

'Well, what *is* the sense in being alive? You tell me,' she suggested.

‘But we’re *meant* to love and be loved, to have babies we love by people we love.’

‘There’s your conditioning again; glorifying and romanticising primitive animalism. Surely you consider that we are superior to the animals?’

‘Of course I do, but—’

‘Love, you say, but what can you know of the love there can be between mother and daughter when there are no men to introduce jealousy? Do you know of any purer sentiment than the love of a girl for her little sisters?’

‘But you don’t understand,’ I protested again. ‘How should you understand a love that colours the whole world? How it centres in your heart and reaches out from there to pervade your whole being, how it can affect everything you are, everything you touch, everything you hear. . . It can hurt dreadfully, I know, oh I know, but it can run like sunlight in your veins. . . It can make you a garden out of a slum; brocade out of rags; music out of a speaking voice. It can show you a whole universe in someone else’s eyes. Oh, you don’t understand . . . you don’t know . . . you can’t. . . Oh, Donald, darling, how can I show her what she’s never even guessed at. . . ?’

There was an uncertain pause, but presently she said:

‘Naturally, in your form of society it was necessary for you to be given such a conditioned reaction, but you can scarcely expect us to surrender our freedom, to connive at our own re-subjection, by calling our oppressors into existence again.’

‘Oh, you *won’t* understand. It was only the more stupid men and women who were continually at war with one another. Lots of us were complementary. We were pairs who formed units.’

She smiled. ‘My dear, either you are surprisingly ill-informed on your own period, or else the stupidity you speak of was astonishingly dominant. Neither as myself, nor as a historian, can I consider that we should be justified in resurrecting such a state of affairs. A primitive stage of our development has now given way to a civilised era. Woman, who is the vessel of life, had the misfortune to find man necessary for a time, but now she does no longer. Are you suggesting that such a useless and dangerous encumbrance ought to be preserved, out of sheer sentimentality? I will admit that we have lost some minor conveniences—you will have noticed, I expect, that we are less inventive mechanically, and tend to copy the patterns we have inherited; but that troubles us very little; our interests lie not in the inorganic, but in the organic and the sentient. Perhaps men could show us how to travel twice as fast, or how to fly to the moon, or how to kill more people more quickly; but it does not seem to us that such kinds of

knowledge would be good payment for re-enslaving ourselves. No, our kind of world suits us better—all of us except a few Reactionists. You have seen our Servitors. They are a little timid in manner, perhaps, but are they oppressed, or sad? Don't they chatter among themselves as brightly and perkily as sparrows? And the Workers—those you called the Amazons—don't they look strong, healthy, and cheerful?'

'But you're robbing them all—robbing them of their birthright.'

'You mustn't give me cant, my dear. Did not your social system conspire to rob a woman of her "birthright" unless she married? You not only let her know it, but you socially rubbed it in: here, our Servitors and Workers do not know it, and they are not worried by a sense of inadequacy. Motherhood is the function of the Mothers, and understood as such.'

I shook my head. 'Nevertheless, they *are* being robbed. A woman has a right to love—'

For once she was a little impatient as she cut me short.

'You keep repeating to me the propaganda of your age. The love you talk about, my dear, existed in your little sheltered part of the world by polite and profitable convention. You were scarcely ever allowed to see its other face, unglamorised by Romance. *You* were never openly bought and sold, like livestock; *you* never had to sell yourself to the first-comer in order to live; *you* did not happen to be one of the women who through the centuries have screamed in agony and suffered and died under invaders in a sacked city—nor were you ever flung into a pit of fire to be saved from them; *you* were never compelled to suttee upon your dead husband's pyre; *you* did not have to spend your whole life imprisoned in a harem; *you* were never part of the cargo of a slave-ship; *you* never retained your own life at the pleasure of your lord and master. . .

'That is the other side—the age-long side. There is going to be no more of such things. They are finished at last. Dare you suggest that we should call them back, to suffer them all again?'

'But most of these things had already gone,' I protested. 'The world was getting better.'

'Was it?' she said. 'I wonder if the women of Berlin thought so when it fell? Was it, indeed?—Or was it on the edge of a new barbarism?'

'But if you can only get rid of evil by throwing out the good, too, what is there left?'

'There is a great deal. Man was only a means to an end. We needed him in order to have babies. The rest of his vitality accounted for all the misery in the world. We are a great deal better off without him.'

‘So you really consider that you’ve improved on nature?’ I suggested.

‘Tcha!’ she said, impatient with my tone. ‘Civilisation *is* improvement on nature. Would you want to live in a cave, and have most of your babies die in infancy?’

‘There are some things, some fundamental things—’ I began, but she checked me, holding up her hand for silence.

Outside, the long shadows had crept across the lawns. In the evening quiet I could hear a choir of women’s voices singing, a little distance away. We listened for some minutes until the song was finished.

‘Beautiful!’ said the old lady. ‘Could angels themselves sing more sweetly! They sound happy enough, don’t they? Our own lovely children—two of my granddaughters are there among them. They *are* happy, and they’ve reason to be happy: they’re not growing up into a world where they must gamble on the goodwill of some man to keep them; they’ll never need to be servile before a lord and master; they’ll never stand in danger of rape and butchery, either. Listen to them!’

Another song had started and came lilting lightly to us out of the dusk.

‘Why are you crying?’ the old lady asked me as it ended.

‘I know it’s stupid—I don’t really believe any of this is what it seems to be—so I suppose I’m crying for all you would have lost if it were true,’ I told her. ‘There should be lovers out there under the trees; they should be listening hand in hand to that song while they watch the moon rise. But there are no lovers now, there won’t be any more. . .’ I looked back at her.

‘Did you ever read the lines: “Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air?” Can’t you feel the forlornness of this world you’ve made? Do you *really* not understand?’ I asked.

‘I know you’ve only seen a little of us, and do *you* not begin to understand what it can be like when women are no longer forced to fight one another for the favours of men?’ she countered.

We talked on while the dusk gave way to darkness and the lights of other houses started to twinkle through the trees. Her reading had been wide. It had given her even an affection for some periods of the past, but her approval of her own era was unshaken. She felt no aridity in it. Always it was my ‘conditioning’ which prevented me from seeing that the golden age of woman had begun at last.

‘You cling to too many myths,’ she told me. ‘You speak of a full life, and your instance is some unfortunate woman hugging her chains in a suburban villa. Full life, fiddlesticks! But it was convenient for the traders that she

could be made to think so. A truly full life would be an exceedingly short one, in any form of society.'

And so on. . .

At length, the little parlourmaid reappeared to say that my attendants were ready to leave when it should be convenient. But there was one thing I very much wanted to know before I left. I put the question to the old lady.

'Please tell me. How did it—how could it—happen?'

'Simply by accident, my dear—though it was the kind of accident that was entirely the product of its time. A piece of research which showed unexpected, secondary results, that's all.'

'But how?'

'Rather curiously—almost irrelevantly, you might say. Did you ever hear of a man called Perrigan?'

'Perrigan?' I repeated. 'I don't think so, it's an uncommon name.'

'It became very commonly known indeed,' she assured me. 'Doctor Perrigan was a biologist, and his concern was the extermination of rats—particularly the brown rat, which used to do a great deal of expensive damage.

'His approach to the problem was to find a disease which would attack them fatally. In order to produce it he took as his basis a virus infection often fatal to rabbits—or, rather, a group of virus infections that were highly selective, and also unstable since they were highly liable to mutation. Indeed, there was so much variation in the strains that when infection of rabbits in Australia was tried, it was only at the sixth attempt that it was successful; all the earlier strains died out as the rabbits developed immunity. It was tried in other places, too, though with indifferent success until a still more effective strain was started in France, and ran through the rabbit population of Europe.

'Well, taking some of these viruses as a basis, Perrigan induced new mutations by irradiation and succeeded in producing a variant that would attack rats. That was not enough, however, and he continued his work until he had a strain that had enough of its ancestral selectivity to attack only the brown rat, and with great virulence.

'In that way he settled the question of a long-standing pest, for there are no brown rats now. But something went amiss. It is still an open question whether the successful virus mutated again, or whether one of his earlier experimental viruses was accidentally liberated by escaped "carrier" rats, but that's academic. The important thing is that somehow a strain capable of attacking human beings got loose, and that it was already widely

disseminated before it was traced—also, that once it was free, it spread with devastating speed; too fast for any effective steps to be taken to check it.

'The majority of women were found to be immune; and of the ten per cent or so whom it attacked over eighty per cent recovered. Among men, however, there was almost no immunity, and the few recoveries were only partial. A few men were preserved by the most elaborate precautions, but they could not be kept confined for ever, and in the end the virus, which had a remarkable capacity for dormancy, got them, too.'

Inevitably several questions of professional interest occurred to me, but for an answer she shook her head.

'I'm afraid I can't help you there. Possibly the medical people will be willing to explain,' she said, but her expression was doubtful.

I manœuvred myself into a sitting position on the side of the couch.

'I see,' I said. 'Just an accident—yes, I suppose one could scarcely think of it happening any other way.'

'Unless,' she remarked, 'unless one were to look upon it as divine intervention.'

'Isn't that a little impious?'

'I was thinking of the Death of the Firstborn,' she said, reflectively.

There did not seem to be an immediate answer to that. Instead, I asked:

'Can you honestly tell me that you never have the feeling that you are living in a dreary kind of nightmare?'

'Never,' she said. 'There *was* a nightmare—but it's over now. Listen!'

The voices of the choir, reinforced now by an orchestra, reached us distantly out of the darkened garden. No, they were not dreary: they even sounded almost exultant—but then, poor things, how were they to understand. . . ?

My attendants arrived and helped me to my feet. I thanked the old lady for her patience with me and her kindness. But she shook her head.

'My dear, it is I who am indebted to you. In a short time I have learnt more about the conditioning of women in a mixed society than all my books were able to tell me in the rest of my long life. I hope, my dear, that the doctors will find some way of enabling you to forget it, and live happily here with us.'

At the door I paused and turned, still helpfully shored up by my attendants.

'Laura,' I said, using her name for the first time. 'So many of your arguments are right—yet, over all, you're, oh, so *wrong*. Did you never read

of lovers? Did you never, as a girl, sigh for a Romeo who would say: "It is the east, and Laura is the sun!"?'

'I think not. Though I have read the play. A pretty, idealised tale—I wonder how much heartbreak it has given to how many would-be Juliets? But I would set a question against yours, my dear Jane. Did you ever see Goya's cycle of pictures called "The Horrors of War"?'

* * *

The pink car did not return me to the 'Home.' Our destination turned out to be a more austere and hospital-like building where I was fussed into bed in a room alone. In the morning, after my massive breakfast, three new doctors visited me. Their manner was more social than professional, and we chatted amiably for half an hour. They had evidently been fully informed on my conversation with the old lady, and they were not averse to answering my questions. Indeed, they found some amusement in many of them, though I found none, for there was nothing consolingly vague in what they told me—it all sounded too disturbingly practicable, once the technique had been worked out. At the end of that time, however, their mood changed. One of them, with an air of getting down to business, said:

'You will understand that you present us with a problem. Your fellow Mothers, of course, are scarcely susceptible to Reactionist disaffection—though you have in quite a short time managed to disgust and bewilder them considerably—but on others less stable your influence might be more serious. It is not just a matter of what you may say; your difference from the rest is implicit in your whole attitude. You cannot help that, and, frankly, we do not see how you, as a woman of education, could possibly adapt yourself to the placid, unthinking acceptance that is expected of a Mother. You would quickly feel frustrated beyond endurance. Furthermore, it is clear that the conditioning you have had under your system prevents you from feeling any goodwill towards ours.'

I took that straight; simply as a judgment without bias. Moreover, I could not dispute it. The prospect of spending the rest of my life in pink, scented, soft-musicked illiteracy, interrupted, one gathered, only by the production of quadruplet daughters at regular intervals, would certainly have me violently unhinged in a very short time.

'And so—what?' I asked. 'Can you reduce this great carcass to normal shape and size?'

She shook her head. 'I imagine not—though I don't know that it has ever been attempted. But even if it were possible, you would be just as much of a

misfit in the Doctorate—and far more of a liability as a Reactionist influence.'

I could understand that, too.

'What, then?' I inquired.

She hesitated, then she said gently:

'The only practicable proposal we can make is that you should agree to a hypnotic treatment which will remove your memory.'

As the meaning of that came home to me I had to fight off a rush of panic. After all, I told myself, they were being reasonable with me. I must do my best to respond sensibly. Nevertheless, some minutes must have passed before I answered, unsteadily:

'You are asking me to commit suicide. My mind *is* my memories: they are me. If I lose them I shall die, just as surely as if you were to kill my—this body.'

They did not dispute that. How could they?

There is just one thing that makes my life worth living—knowing that you moved me, my sweet, sweet Donald. It is only in my memory that you live now. If you ever leave there you will die again—and for ever.

'No!' I told them. 'No! No!'

* * *

At intervals during the day small servitors staggered in under the weight of my meals. Between their visits I had only my thoughts to occupy me, and they were not good company.

'Frankly,' one of the doctors had put it to me, not unsympathetically, 'we can see no alternative. For years after it happened the annual figures of mental breakdowns were our greatest worry—even though the women then could keep themselves fully occupied with the tremendous amount of work that had to be done, so many of them could not adjust. And we can't even offer you work.'

I knew that it was a fair warning she was giving me—and I knew that, unless the hallucination which seemed to grow more real all the time could soon be induced to dissolve, I was trapped.

During the long day and the following night I tried my hardest to get back to the objectivity I had managed earlier, but I failed. The whole dialectic was too strong for me now; my senses too consciously aware of my surroundings; the air of consequence and coherence too convincingly persistent. . .

When they had let me have twenty-four hours to think it over, the same trio visited me again.

'I think,' I told them, 'that I understand better now. What you are offering me is painless oblivion, in place of a breakdown followed by oblivion—and you see no other choice.'

'We don't,' admitted the spokeswoman, and the other two nodded. 'But, of course, for the hypnosis we shall need your co-operation.'

'I realise that,' I told her, 'and I also see now that in the circumstances it would be obstinately futile to withhold it. So I—I—yes, I'm willing to give it—but on one condition.'

They looked at me questioningly.

'It is this,' I explained, 'that you will try one other course first. I want you to give me an injection of chuinjuatin. I want it in precisely the same strength as I had it before—I can tell you the dose.'

'You see, whether this is an intense hallucination, or whether it is some kind of projection which makes it seem very similar, it must have something to do with that drug. I'm sure it must—nothing remotely like this has ever happened to me before. So, I thought that if I could repeat the condition—or, would you say, believe myself to be repeating the condition?—there may be just a chance . . . I don't know. It may be simply silly . . . but even if nothing comes of it, it can't make things worse in any way now, can it? So, will you let me try it. . . ?'

The three of them considered for some moments.

'I can see no reason why not. . .' said one.

The spokeswoman nodded.

'I shouldn't think there'll be any difficulty with authorization in the circumstances,' she agreed. 'If you want to try, it's fair to let you, but—I'd not count on it too much. . .'

In the afternoon half a dozen small servitors arrived, bustling round, making me and the room ready, with anxious industry. Presently there came one more, scarcely tall enough to see over the trolley of bottles, trays and phials which she pushed to my bedside.

The three doctors entered together. One of the little servitors began rolling up my sleeve. The doctor who had done most of the talking looked at me, kindly, but seriously.

'This is a sheer gamble, you know that?' she said.

'I know. But it's my only chance. I'm willing to take it.'

She nodded, picked up the syringe, and charged it while the little servitor swabbed my monstrous arm. She approached the bedside, and hesitated.

'Go on,' I told her. 'What is there for me here, anyway?'

She nodded, and pressed in the needle. . .

* * *

Now, I have written the foregoing for a purpose. I shall deposit it with my bank, where it will remain unread unless it should be needed.

I have spoken of it to no one. The report on the effect of chuinjuatin—the one that I made to Dr Hellyer where I described my sensation as simply one of floating in space—was false. The foregoing was my true experience.

I concealed it because after I came round, when I found that I was back in my own body in my normal world, the experience haunted me as vividly as if it had been actuality. The details were too sharp, too vivid, for me to get them out of my mind. It overhung me all the time, like a threat. It would not leave me alone. . .

I did not dare to tell Dr Hellyer how it worried me—he would have put me under treatment. If my other friends did not take it seriously enough to recommend treatment, too, then they would have laughed over it, and amused themselves at my expense interpreting the symbolism. So I kept it to myself.

As I went over parts of it again and again in detail, I grew angry with myself for not asking the old lady for more facts, things like dates, and details that could be verified. If, for instance, the thing should, by her account, have started two or three years ago, then the whole sense of threat would fall to pieces: it would all be discredited. But it had not occurred to me to ask that crucial question. . . And then, as I went on thinking about it, I remembered that there was one, just one, piece of information that I could check, and I made inquiries. I wish now that I had not, but I felt forced to. . .

So I have discovered that:

There *is* a Dr Perrigan, he is a biologist, he *does* work with rabbits and rats. . .

He is quite well known in his field. He has published papers on pest-control in a number of journals. It is no secret that he is evolving new strains of myxomatosis intended to attack rats; indeed, he has already developed a group of them and calls them mucosimorbus, though he has not yet succeeded in making them either stable or selective enough for general use. . .

But I had never heard of this man or his work until his name was mentioned by the old lady in my 'hallucination'. . .

I have given a great deal of thought to this whole matter. What sort of experience is it that I have recorded above? If it should be a kind of pre-vision of an inevitable, predestined future, then nothing anyone could do would change it. But that does not seem to me to make sense: it is what has happened, and is happening now, that determines the future. Therefore, there must be a great number of *possible* futures, each a possible consequence of what is being done now. It seems to me that under chuinjuatin I saw *one* of those futures. . .

It was, I think, a warning of what *may* happen—unless it is prevented. . .

The whole idea is so repulsive, so misconceived, it amounts to such a monstrous aberration of the normal course, that failure to heed the warning would be neglect of duty to one's kind.

I shall, therefore, on my own responsibility and without taking any other person into my confidence, do my best to ensure that such a state as I have described *cannot* come about.

Should it happen that any other person is unjustly accused of doing, or of assisting me to do, what I intend to do, this document must stand in his defence. That is why I have written it.

It is my own unaided decision that Dr Perrigan must not be permitted to continue his work.

(Signed) JANE WATERLEIGH.

* * *

The solicitor stared at the signature for some moments; then he nodded.

'And so,' he said, 'she then took her car and drove over to Perrigan's—with this tragic result.

'From the little I do know of her, I'd say that she probably did her best to persuade him to give up his work—though she can scarcely have expected any success with that. It is difficult to imagine a man who would be willing to give up the work of years on account of what must sound to him like a sort of gipsy's warning. So, clearly, she went there prepared to fall back on direct action, if necessary. It looks as if the police are quite right when they suppose her to have shot him deliberately; but not so right when they suppose that she burnt the place down to hide evidence of the crime. The statement makes it pretty obvious that her main intention in doing that was to wipe out Perrigan's work.'

He shook his head. 'Poor girl! There's a clear conviction of duty in her last page or two: the sort of simplified clarity that drives martyrs on, regardless of consequences. She has never denied that she did it. What she wouldn't tell the police is *why* she did it.'

He paused again, before he added: 'Anyway, thank goodness for this document. It ought at least to save her life. I should be very surprised indeed if a plea of insanity could fail, backed up by this.' He tapped the pile of manuscript with his finger. 'It's a lucky thing she put off her intention of taking it to her bank.'

Dr Hellyer's face was lined and worried.

'I blame myself most bitterly for the whole thing,' he said. 'I ought never to have let her try the damned drug in the first place, but I thought she was over the shock of her husband's death. She was trying to keep her time fully occupied, and she was anxious to volunteer. You've met her enough to know how purposeful she can be. She saw it as a chance to contribute something to medical knowledge—which it was, of course. But I ought to have been more careful, and I ought to have seen afterwards that there was something wrong. The real responsibility for this thing runs right back to me.'

'H'm,' said the solicitor. 'Putting that forward as a main line of defence isn't going to do you a lot of good professionally, you know, Hellyer.'

'Possibly not. I can look after that when we come to it. The point is that I hold a responsibility for her as a member of my staff, if for no other reason. It can't be denied that if I had refused her offer to take part in the experiment, this would not have happened. Therefore it seems to me that we ought to be able to argue a state of temporary insanity; that the balance of her mind was disturbed by the effects of the drug which I administered. And if we can get that as a verdict it will result in detention at a mental hospital for observation and treatment—perhaps quite a short spell of treatment.'

'I can't say. We can certainly put it up to counsel and see what he thinks of it.'

'It's valid, too,' Hellyer persisted. 'People like Jane don't do murder if they are in their right minds, not unless they're really in a corner, then they do it more cleverly. Certainly they don't murder perfect strangers. Clearly, the drug caused an hallucination sufficiently vivid to confuse her to a point where she was unable to make a proper distinction between the actual and the hypothetical. She got into a state where she believed the mirage was real, and acted accordingly.'

'Yes. Yes. I suppose one might put it that way,' agreed the solicitor. He looked down again at the pile of paper before him. 'The whole account is, of

course, unreasonable,' he said, 'and yet it is pervaded throughout with such an air of reasonableness. I wonder. . .' He paused pensively, and went on: 'This expendability of the male, Hellyer. She doesn't seem to find it so much incredible, as undesirable. That seems odd in itself to a layman who takes the natural order for granted, but would you, as a medical scientist, say it was—well, not impossible, in theory?'

Dr Hellyer frowned.

'That's very much the kind of question one wants more notice of. It would be very rash to proclaim it *impossible*. Considering it purely as an abstract problem, I can see two or three lines of approach. . . Of course, if an utterly improbable situation were to arise calling for intensive research—research, that is, on the sort of scale they tackled the atom—well, who can tell. . . ?' He shrugged.

The solicitor nodded again.

'That's just what I was getting at,' he observed. 'Basically it is only just such a little way off the beam; quite near enough to possibility to be faintly disturbing. Mind you, as far as the defence is concerned, her air of thorough conviction, taken in conjunction with the near-plausibility of the thing will probably help. But, for my part, it is just that nearness that is enough to make me a trifle uneasy.'

The doctor looked at him rather sharply.

'Oh, come! Really now! A hardboiled solicitor, too! Don't tell me you're going in for fantasy-building. Anyway, if you are, you'll have to conjure up another one. If Jane, poor girl, has settled one thing, it is that there's no future in this particular fantasy. Perrigan's finished with, and all his work's gone up in smoke and fire.'

'H'm,' said the solicitor, again. 'All the same, it would be more satisfactory if we knew of some way other than this'—he tapped the pile of papers—'some other way in which she is likely to have acquired some knowledge of Perrigan and his work. There is, as far as one knows, *no* other way in which he can have come into her orbit at all—unless, perhaps, she takes an interest in veterinary subjects?'

'She doesn't. I'm sure of that,' Hellyer told him, shaking his head.

'Well, that, then, remains one slightly disturbing aspect. And there is another. You'll think it foolish of me, I'm sure—and no doubt time will prove you right to do so—but I have to admit I'd be feeling just a bit easier in my mind if Jane had been just a bit more thorough in her inquiries before she went into action.'

'Meaning—?' asked Dr Hellyer, looking puzzled.

‘Only that she does not seem to have found out that there is a son. But there is, you see. He appears to have taken quite a close interest in his father’s work, and is determined that it shan’t be wasted. In fact he has already announced that he will do his best to carry it on with the very few specimens that were saved from the fire. . .

‘Laudably filial, no doubt. All the same it does disturb me a little to find that he, also, happens to be a D.Sc., a bio-chemist; and that, very naturally, his name, too, is Perrigan. . .’

✻ Odd
✻

✻ When, on a day in the late December of 1958, Mr Reginald Aster called upon the legal firm of Cropthorne, Daggit, and Howe, of Bedford Row, at their invitation, he found himself received by a Mr Fratton, an amiable young man, barely out of his twenties, but now head of the firm in succession to the defunct Messrs C, D & H.

And when Mr Aster was informed by Mr Fratton that under the terms of the late Sir Andrew Vincell's will he was a beneficiary to the extent of six thousand Ordinary Shares in British Vinvinyl, Ltd., Mr Aster appeared, as Mr Fratton expressed it to a colleague later, to miss for a while on several plugs.

The relevant clause added that the bequest was made 'in recognition of a most valuable service which he once rendered me.' The nature of this service was not specified, nor was it any of Mr Fratton's business to inquire into it, but the veil over his curiosity was scarcely opaque.

The windfall, standing just then at 83s. 6d. per share, came at a fortunate moment in Mr Aster's affairs. Realisation of a small part of the shares enabled him to settle one or two pressing problems, and in the course of this re-ordering, the two men met several times. At length there came a time when Mr Fratton, urged on by curiosity, stepped slightly closer to the edge of professional discretion than he usually permitted himself, to remark in a tentative fashion:

'You did not know Sir Andrew very well, did you?'

It was the kind of advance that Mr Aster could easily have discouraged had he wished to, but, in fact, he made no attempt at parry. Instead, he looked thoughtful, and eyed Mr Fratton with speculation.

'I met Sir Andrew once,' he said. 'For perhaps an hour and a half.'

'That is rather what I thought,' said Mr Fratton, allowing his perplexity to become a little more evident. 'Sometime last June, wasn't it?'

'The twenty-fifth of June,' Mr Aster agreed.

'But never before that?'

'No—nor since.'

Mr Fratton shook his head uncomprehendingly.

After a pause Mr Aster said:

'You know, there's something pretty rum about this.'

Mr Fratton nodded, but made no comment. Aster went on:

'I'd rather like to—well, look here, are you free for dinner tomorrow?'

Mr Fratton was, and when the dinner was finished they retired to a quiet corner of the club lounge with coffee and cigars. After a few moments of consideration Aster said:

'I must admit I'd feel happier if this Vincell business was a bit clearer. I don't see—well, there's something altogether off-beat about it. I might as well tell you the whole thing. Here's what happened:'

* * *

The twenty-fifth of June was a pleasant evening in an unpleasant summer. I was just strolling home enjoying it. In no hurry at all, and just wondering whether I would turn in for a drink somewhere when I saw this old man. He was standing on the pavement in Thanet Street, holding on to the railings with one hand, and looking about him in a dazed, glassy-eyed way.

Well, in our part of London, as you know, there are plenty of strangers from all over the world, particularly in the summer, and quite a few of them look a bit lost. But this old man—well on in the seventies, I judged—was not that sort. Certainly no tourist. In fact, elegant was the word that occurred to me when I saw him. He had a grey, pointed beard, carefully trimmed, a black felt hat meticulously brushed; a dark suit of excellent cloth and cut; his shoes were expensive; so was his discreetly beautiful silk tie. Gentlemen of this type are not altogether unknown to us in our parts, but they are likely to be off their usual beat; and alone, and in a glassy-eyed condition in public, they are quite rare. One or two people walking ahead of me glanced at him briefly, had the reflex thought about his condition, and passed on. I did not; he did not appear to me to be ordinarily fuddled—more, indeed, as if he were frightened. . . So I paused beside him.

'Are you unwell?' I asked him. 'Would you like me to call a taxi?'

He turned to look at me. His eyes were bewildered, but it was an intelligent face, slightly ascetic, and made to look the thinner by bushy white eyebrows. He seemed to bring me into focus only slowly; his response came more slowly still, and with an effort.

'No,' he said, uncertainly, 'no, thank you. I—I am not unwell.'

It did not appear to be the full truth, but neither was it a definite dismissal, and, having made the approach, I did not care to leave him like that.

'You have had a shock,' I told him.

His eyes were on the traffic in the street. He nodded, but said nothing.

'There is a hospital just a couple of streets away—' I began. But he shook his head.

'No,' he said again. 'I shall be all right in a minute or two.'

He still did not tell me to go away, and I had a feeling that he did not want me to. His eyes turned this way and that, and then down at himself. At that, he became quite still and tense, staring down at his clothes with an astonishment that could not be anything but real. He let go of the railings, lifted his arm to look at his sleeve, then he noticed his hand—a shapely, well-kept hand, but thin with age, knuckles withered, blue veins prominent. It wore a gold signet ring on the little finger. . .

Well, we have all read of eyes bulging, but that is the only time I have seen it happen. They looked ready to pop out, and the extended hand began to shake distressingly. He tried to speak, but nothing came. I began to fear that he might be in for a heart attack.

'The hospital—' I began again, but once more he shook his head.

I did not know quite what to do, but I thought he ought to sit down; and brandy often helps, too. He said neither yes nor no to my suggestion, but came with me acquiescently across the street and into the Wilburn Hotel. I steered him to a table in the bar there, and sent for double brandies for both of us. When I turned back from the waiter, the old man was staring across the room with an expression of horror. I looked over there quickly. It was himself he was staring at, in a mirror.

He watched himself intently as he took off his hat and put it down on a chair beside him; then he put up his hand, still trembling, to touch first his beard, and then his handsome silver hair. After that, he sat quite still, staring.

I was relieved when the drinks came. So, evidently, was he. He took just a little soda with his, and then drank the lot. Presently his hand grew steadier, a little colour came into his cheeks, but he continued to stare ahead. Then with a sudden air of resolution he got up.

'Excuse me a moment,' he said, politely.

He crossed the room. For fully two minutes he stood studying himself at short range in the glass. Then he turned and came back. Though not assured,

he had an air of more decision, and he signed to the waiter, pointing to our glasses. Looking at me curiously, he said as he sat down again:

'I owe you an apology. You have been extremely kind.'

'Not at all,' I assured him. 'I'm glad to be of any help. Obviously you must have had a nasty shock of some sort.'

'Er—several shocks,' he admitted, and added: 'It is curious how real the figments of a dream can seem when one is taken unaware by them.'

There did not seem to be any useful response to that, so I attempted none.

'Quite unnerving at first,' he added, with a kind of forced brightness.

'What happened?' I asked, feeling still at sea.

'My own fault, entirely my own fault—but I was in a hurry,' he explained. 'I started to cross the road behind a tram, then I saw the one coming in the opposite direction, almost on top of me. I can only think it must have hit me.'

'Oh,' I said, 'er—oh, indeed. Er—where did this happen?'

'Just outside here, in Thanet Street,' he told me.

'You—you don't seem to be hurt,' I remarked.

'Not exactly,' he agreed, doubtfully. 'No, I don't seem to be hurt.'

He did not, nor even ruffled. His clothing was, as I have said, immaculate—besides, they tore up the tram rails in Thanet Street about twenty-five years ago. I wondered if I should tell him that, and decided to postpone it. The waiter brought our glasses. The old man felt in his waistcoat pocket, and then looked down in consternation.

'My sovereign-case! My watch. . . !' he exclaimed.

I dealt with the waiter by handing him a one-pound note. The old man watched intently. When the waiter had given me my change and left:

'If you will excuse me,' I said, 'I think this shock must have caused you a lapse of memory. You do—er—you do remember who you are?'

With his finger still in his waistcoat pocket, and a trace of suspicion in his eyes, he looked at me hard.

'Who I am? Of course I do. I am Andrew Vincell. I live quite close here, in Hart Street.'

I hesitated, then I said:

'There *was* a Hart Street near here. But they changed the name—in the 'thirties, I think; before the war, anyway.'

The superficial confidence which he had summoned up deserted him, and he sat quite still for some moments. Then he felt in the inside pocket of his jacket, and pulled out a wallet. It was made of fine leather, had gold corners, and was stamped with the initials A.V. He eyed it curiously as he laid it on the table. Then he opened it. From the left side he pulled a one-pound note, and frowned at it in a puzzled way; then a five-pound note, which seemed to puzzle him still more.

Without comment he felt in the pocket again, and brought out a slender book clearly intended to pair with the wallet. It, too, bore the initials A.V. in the lower right-hand corner, and in the upper it was stamped simply: 'Diary —1958.' He held it in his hand, looking at it for quite some time before he lifted his eyes to mine.

'Nineteen-fifty-eight?' he said, unsteadily.

'Yes,' I told him.

'I don't understand,' he said, almost like a child. 'My life! What has happened to my life?'

His face had a pathetic, crumpled look. I pushed the glass towards him, and he drank a little of the brandy. Opening the diary, he looked at the calendar inside.

'Oh, God!' he said. 'This is too real. What—what has happened to me?'

I said, sympathetically:

'A partial loss of memory isn't unusual after a shock, you know—in a little time it comes back quite all right as a rule. I suggest you look in there'—I pointed to the wallet—'very likely there will be something to remind you.'

He hesitated, but then felt in the right-hand side of it. The first thing he pulled out was a colour-print of a snapshot; obviously a family group. The central figure was himself, five or six years younger, in a tweed suit; another man, about forty-five, bore a family resemblance, and there were two slightly younger women, and two girls and two boys in their early teens. In the background part of an eighteenth-century house was visible across a well-kept lawn.

'I don't think you need to worry about your life,' I said. 'It would appear to have been very satisfactory.'

There followed three engraved cards, separated by tissues, which announced simply: 'Sir Andrew Vincell,' but gave no address. There was also an envelope addressed to Sir Andrew Vincell, O.B.E., British Vinvinyl Plastics, Ltd., somewhere in London E.C.1.

He shook his head, took another sip of the brandy, looked at the envelope again, and gave an unamused laugh. Then with a visible effort he took a grip on himself, and said, decisively:

'This is some silly kind of dream. How does one wake up?' He closed his eyes, and declared in a firm tone: 'I am Andrew Vincell. I am aged twenty-three. I live at Number Forty-Eight Hart Street. I am articled to Penberthy and Trull, chartered accountants, of one hundred and two, Bloomsbury Square. This is July the twelfth, nineteen hundred and six. This morning I was struck by a tram in Thanet Street. I must have been knocked silly, and have been suffering from hallucinations. Now!'

He re-opened his eyes, and looked genuinely surprised to find me still there. Then he glared at the envelope, and his expression grew peevish.

'*Sir* Andrew Vincell!' he exclaimed scornfully, 'and Vinvinyl Plastics, Limited! What the devil is that supposed to mean?'

'Don't you think,' I suggested, 'that we must assume that you are a member of the firm—I would say, from appearances, one of its directors?'

'But I told you——' He broke off. 'What *is* plastics?' he went on. 'It doesn't suggest anything but modelling clay to me. What on earth would I be doing with modelling clay?'

I hesitated. It looked as if the shock, whatever it was, had had the effect of cutting some fifty years out of his memory. Perhaps, I thought, if we were to talk of a matter which was obviously familiar and important to him it might stir his recollection. I tapped the table top.

'Well, this, for instance, is a plastic,' I told him.

He examined it, and clicked his finger-nails on it.

'I'd not call that plastic. It is very hard,' he observed.

I tried to explain:

'It was plastic before it hardened. There are lots of different kinds of plastics. This ashtray, the covering on your chair, this pen, my cheque-book cover, that woman's raincoat, her handbag, the handle of her umbrella, dozens of things all round you—even my shirt is a woven plastic.'

He did not reply immediately, but sat looking from one to another of these things with growing attention. At last he turned back to me again. This time his eyes gazed into mine with great intensity. His voice shook slightly as he said once more:

'This really *is* 1958?'

'Certainly it is,' I assured him. 'If you don't believe your own diary, there's a calendar hanging behind the bar.'

'No horses,' he murmured to himself, 'and the trees in the Square grown so tall . . . a dream is never consistent, not to that extent. . .' He paused, then, suddenly: 'My God' he exclaimed, 'my God, if it really *is*. . .' He turned to me again, with an eager gleam in his eyes. 'Tell me about these plastics,' he demanded urgently.

I am no chemist, and I know no more about them than the next man. However, he was obviously keen, and, as I have said, I thought that a familiar subject might help to revive his memory, so I decided to try. I pointed to the ashtray.

'Well, this is very likely Bakelite, I think. If so, it is one of the earliest of the thermosetting plastics. A man named Baekeland patented it, about 1909, I fancy. Something to go with phenol and formaldehyde.'

'Thermosetting? What's that?' he inquired.

I did my best with that, and then went on to explain what little I had picked up about molecular chains and arrangements, polymerisation and so on, and some of the characteristics and uses. He did not give me any feeling of trying to teach my grandmother, on the contrary, he listened with concentrated attention, occasionally repeating a word now and then as if to fix it in his mind. This hanging upon my words was quite flattering, but I could not delude myself that they were doing anything to revive his memory.

We must—at least, I must—have talked for nearly an hour, and all the time he sat earnest and tense, with his hands clenched tightly together. Then I noticed that the effect of the brandy had worn off, and he was again looking far from well.

'I really think I had better see you home,' I told him. 'Can you remember where you live?'

'Forty-eight Hart Street,' he said.

'No. I mean where you live now,' I insisted.

But he was not really listening. His face still had the expression of great concentration.

'If only I can remember—if only I can remember when I wake up,' he murmured desperately, to himself rather than to me. Then he turned to look at me again.

'What is your name?' he asked.

I told him.

'I'll remember that, too, if I can,' he assured me, very seriously.

I leaned over and lifted the cover of the diary. His name was on the fly-leaf, with an address in Upper Grosvenor Street. I folded the wallet and the

diary together, and put them into his hand. He stowed them away in his pocket automatically, and then sat gazing with complete detachment while the porter got us a taxi.

An elderly woman, a housekeeper, I imagine, opened the door of an impressive flat. I suggested that she should ring up Sir Andrew's doctor, and stayed long enough to explain the situation to him when he arrived.

The following evening I rang up to inquire how he was. A younger woman's voice answered. She told me that he had slept well after a sedative, woken somewhat tired, but quite himself, with no sign of any lapse of memory. The doctor saw no cause for alarm. She thanked me for taking care of him, and bringing him home, and that was that.

In fact, I had practically forgotten the whole incident until I saw the announcement of his death in the paper, in December.

* * *

Mr Fratton made no comment for some moments, then he drew at his cigar, sipped some coffee, and said, not very constructively:

'It's odd.'

'So I thought—think,' said Mr Aster.

'I mean,' went on Mr Fratton, 'I mean, you certainly did him a kindly service, but scarcely, if you will forgive me, a service that one would expect to find valued at six thousand one-pound shares—standing at eighty-three and sixpence, too.'

'Quite,' agreed Mr Aster.

'Odder still,' Mr Fratton went on, 'this meeting occurred last summer. But the will containing the bequest was drawn up and signed several years ago.' He again drew thoughtfully on his cigar. 'And I cannot see that I am breaking any confidence if I tell you that it superseded an earlier will drawn up twelve years before, and in that will also, the same clause occurred.' He meditated upon his companion.

'I have given it up,' said Mr Aster, 'but if you were collecting oddities, you might perhaps like to make a note of this one.' He produced a pocket book, and took from it a cutting. The strip of paper was headed: 'Obituary. Sir Andrew Vincell—A Pioneer in Plastics.' Mr Aster located a passage halfway down the column, and read out:

'"It is curious to note that in his youth Sir Andrew foreshadowed none of his later interests, and was indeed articled at one time to a firm of chartered accountants. At the age of twenty-three, however, in the summer

of 1906, he abruptly and quite unexpectedly broke his articles, and began to devote himself to chemistry. Within a few years he had made the first of the important discoveries upon which his great company was subsequently built." '

'H'm,' said Mr Fratton. He looked carefully at Mr Aster. 'He *was* knocked down by a tram in Thanet Street in 1906, you know.'

'Of course. He told me so,' said Mr Aster.

Mr Fratton shook his head.

'It's all very queer,' he observed.

'Very odd indeed,' agreed Mr Aster.

✻ How Do I Do? ✻

✻ Frances paused to look into the showcase that was fastened to the wall between the pastrycook's and the hairdresser's. It was not a novelty. Passing it a hundred times, she could not fail to be aware of it, or of the open door beside it, but until now it had not really impinged. There had been no reason for it to impinge. Hers was a future that seemed, in its main outlines at least, and in so far as any woman's is, pretty well charted.

Nor did the carefully worded leaflets behind the glass refer to the future directly. They offered Character Delineation, Scientific Palmistry, Psychological Prognosis, Semasiological Estimates, and other feats just beyond the scope of the Witchcraft Act or the practical interests of the police, but the idea of the future somehow showed through. And now, for the first time, Frances found herself interested—for it is not every day that one sends her ring back, and then looks out upon a suddenly futureless world.

All the same, and unlikely though it seemed at the moment, there must be a future of *some* kind lying ahead of her. . .

She read about Mastery of one's Fate, Development of one's Personality, Guidance of one's Potentialities, and through a number of testimonials from persons who had been greatly helped, valuably guided, spiritually strengthened, and generally rendered more capable of managing themselves by the sympathetic counsels of Señora Rosa.

It was the word 'guidance' occurring several times that set up the most responsive echo. Frances did not exactly imagine that she could go to this perfect stranger and extract a plan for living a neatly readjusted life, but the world, ever since she had handed that small, registered package across the post-office counter, had become a place for which she had no plans of her own, and she felt that an improved acquaintance with one's potentialities might give some kind of a lead. . .

She turned. She glanced along the street both ways, with an air of noticing and approving the freshness of the early-summer day. Then, having observed no one whom she knew, she edged into the doorway, and climbed the dusty stairs. . .

'Marriage, of course,' said Señora Rosa, with the slightest trace of a hiccup. 'Marriage! That's what they all want to know about. Want to know what he looks like—'sif that mattered. Don't want to know if he'll beat 'em, or leave 'em, or murder 'em. Jus' what he looks like—so they'll know where to throw the lash—the lasso.' She took a drink from the glass beside her, and went on: 'Same with babies. Not interested to know if they'll turn out to be gangsters or film-shtarsh. Jus' want to know how many. No 'riginality. No 'magination. Jus' like a lot of sheep—'cept, of course, they want to ram each.' She hiccupped discreetly again.

Frances started to get up. 'I think, perhaps——' she began.

'No. Sit down,' the Señora told her. Then, while Frances hesitated, she repeated not loudly, but quite firmly: '*Sit down!*'

Against her inclinations, and rather to the front of the chair, Frances sat down.

She regarded the Señora across the small table which held a crystal and a lamp, and knew that she had been a fool to come into the place at all. The Señora, with her swarthy skin, glittering dark eyes, and glaringly unnatural red hair, was difficult to visualize in the role of sympathetic counsellor at the best of times: slightly drunk, with the high comb which supported her mantilla listing to the right, an artificial rose sagging down over her left ear, and her heavy eyelids half-lowered against the trickle of her cigarette's smoke, she became more than displeasing. It was, in fact, absurd not to have turned back at the very first sight of her, but somehow Frances had lacked the resolution then, and not been able to gain it since.

'Fair return. That's my rule, an' no one's going to say I break it,' announced the Señora. 'Fee in advance, an' fair return. Mind you, there's nothing against a bit more for special satisfaction given, but fair return you *shall* have.'

She switched on a small, heavily pink-shaded lamp close to the crystal, crossed the room a trifle uncertainly to draw the window-curtains, and returned to her chair.

'Cosier,' she explained. ' 'S easier to conshentrate, too.'

She stubbed out her cigarette, drank off most of the remaining contents of her glass, gave her comb a push towards the vertical, and prepared to get to work.

' 'S *on* me today,' she observed. 'Some days it's *on* you; some days it's not—never can tell till you start. But I can feel it now. Tell you pretty near anything today, I could—wouldn't, of course; doesn't do, but could.

Something special you'd be wanting to know, beyond husband, babies, an' the usual?'

The low lighting worked quite a change in the Señora. It modified the redness of her hair, made the lines of her face more decisive; it glinted fascinatingly on her long brass earrings swinging like bell-clappers, and glistened even more brightly in her dark eyes.

'Er—no,' said Frances. 'As a matter of fact, I think I've changed my mind. So if you——'

'Nonsense,' the Señora told her, shortly. 'You'll only be back in a day or two if you do, and then it might not be on me the way it is today. We'll start on your future husband.'

'No. I'd really rather not——' began Frances.

'Nonsense,' said the Señora again. 'They all want that. Jus' you keep quiet now. Got to conshentrate.'

She leaned forward, shading the crystal with one hand from the direct light while she gazed into it. Frances watched uncomfortably. For a time nothing happened, except that the earrings swung slowly to a stop. Then:

'H'm,' said the Señora, with a suddenness that made Frances jump. 'Nice looking young fellow, too.'

Frances had a vague feeling that such pronouncements, whatever their worth, were usually made in a more impressive tone and form, but the Señora went on:

'Nice tie. Dark blue an' old gold, with a thin red stripe in the blue.'

Frances sat quite still. The Señora leaned closer to the crystal.

'Couple of inches taller than you, I'd say. 'Bout five-foot-ten. Smooth fair hair. Nice mouth. Good chin. Straight nose. Eyes sort of dark grey with a touch of blue. Got a small, crescent-shaped scar over his left eyebrow, an old one. He——'

'Stop it!' Frances snapped.

The Señora looked up at her for a moment, and then back to the crystal.

'Now, as to children—' she went on.

'Stop it, I tell you!' Frances told her again. 'I don't know how you found out about him, but you're *wrong*. Yesterday I'd have believed you, but now you're quite *wrong*!' The recollection of putting the ring with its five winking diamonds into its nest of cotton-wool, and closing the box on it became unbearably vivid. She was exasperatedly aware of tears starting to well up.

'There's often jus' a bit of a tiff—' began the Señora.

'How dare you! It's not just a tiff, at all. It's finished. I'm never going to see him again. So you might as well stop this farce now,' Frances said.

The Señora stared. 'Farce!' she exclaimed, incredulously. 'You call my work farce! Why, you—I'd have you know—'

Frances was angry enough for tears to wait.

'*Farce!*' she repeated. 'Farce, and cheating! I don't know how you find out about people, but this time it hasn't worked. Your information's out of date. You—you—you're just a drunken old cheat, taking advantage of people who are unhappy. That's what you are.'

She stood up to get herself out of the room before the tears should come.

The Señora glared back at her. She snatched across the table, and caught her wrist in a grip like a steel claw.

'Cheat!' she shouted. 'Cheat! Why, you—you silly ignorant little ninny! Sit down!'

'Let me go,' Frances told her. 'You're hurting my wrist.'

The Señora leaned closer. Her brows were lowered angrily over eyes that glittered more than ever. '*Sit down there!*' she ordered again.

Frances suddenly found herself more scared than angry. She stood for a moment, trying to outstare the Señora; then her eyes dropped. She sat down, partly because the grip on her wrist was urging her, but more from sheer nervousness.

Señora Rosa sat down again, too, but she continued to hold Frances' wrist across the table.

'Cheat!' she muttered. '*You* called *me* a cheat!'

Frances avoided meeting her gaze.

'Somebody must have told you about me and Edward,' she said, stubbornly.

'*That* told me,' said the Señora, pointing her free hand at the crystal. 'That, an' nothing else. Tells me a lot, that does. But you don't believe it, do you? Think I'm a liar as well as a cheat, don't you?'

'I didn't really mean—' Frances began.

'Don't give me that. 'Course you mean it. No respec'. No respec' at all. Ninnies like you need a lesson to teach 'em respec'. Sh'll I tell you when you're going to die, and how? Or when your Edward's going to die?'

'No—no, please!' said Frances.

'Ha! Don't believe me—but you're afraid to hear,' observed the Señora.

'I'm sorry, really I am. I was upset. Please let me—' Frances began, but the Señora was not to be easily mollified.

'Farce! Cheat!' she muttered again. '*Ninny!*' she added forcibly, and then fell silent.

The silence lengthened, but the grip on Frances' wrist did not relax. Presently, curiosity drove her to a swift upward glance. She had a glimpse of a quite different expression on the Señora's face—more alarming in some indefinite way, than her former anger. She appeared to have had some kind of inspiration. Her hand clutched Frances' wrist more tightly.

'*Show* you, that's what,' she said, decisively. 'Sick of ninnies. Jus' *show* you. Look in the crysh—crystal!'

Frances kept her eyes down. The hand on her wrist twisted painfully.

'*Look in the crystal!*' commanded the Señora.

Unwillingly Frances lifted her head a little, and looked at it. It was a quite uninteresting lump of glass, showing a number of complicated and distorted reflections.

'This is silly,' she said. 'I can't see anything there. You've no right to—'

'Be quiet! Jus' *look*!' snapped the Señora.

Frances went on looking, wondering at the same time how she was going to get herself out of this. Even if she were able to pull herself free, it was impossible in the small room for her to reach the door without coming within reach of the Señora's grasp again—and there'd be delay in getting the door open, too. If— Then her thoughts broke off as she noticed that the crystal was no longer clear. It seemed to have become fogged, rather as if it had been breathed upon. But the foggy look grew thicker as she watched until it was like smoke wreathing inside it. Queer! Some trick of the old woman's, of course. . . Some kind of hypnotic effect which made it seem to grow bigger and bigger. . . It appeared to widen out and out as she watched it until there was nothing at all anywhere but convolving whorls of fog. . .

Then, like a flash, it was gone, and she was sitting in her chair, looking at the clear crystal.

The grip on her arm was gone, too; and so, when she looked up, was the Señora. . .

Frances snatched up her bag, and made for the door. No sound came from the inner room as she tiptoed across. She opened the door carefully, closed it quietly behind her, and skipped swiftly away down the stairs.

A very unpleasant experience, Frances told herself, walking briskly away. In fact, being held there like that against her will was the sort of thing one ought to tell a policeman about; probably it ranked as assault, or something quite serious, really. . . Still not quite certain whether she was wanting to see a policeman or not, she emerged from her thoughts, and looked about her.

In the very first glance she made a discovery which drove such frivolous subjects as policemen right out of her mind. It was that everyone else in sight who had decided that the time for cotton had arrived was clad in a frock very much shorter and very much narrower than her own. She stared at them, bewildered. She must have had an inconceivable preoccupation with her own affairs not to have realized that there had been such a radical change of line. She paused for a moment in front of a shop window to observe the reflection of the blue-and-white striped cotton frock that she had thought good for another summer. It looked terrible; just as if she had been upholstered. Another glance from it to the other frocks made her go hot with embarrassment: they must all be thinking she had come out wrapped in a bedspread. . .

Clearly, there was one thing to be done about that, and done at once. . .

She started to walk hurriedly in the direction of Weilberg's Modes. . .

Frances re-emerged into the street half an hour later, feeling considerably soothed. The congenial occupation of shopping, and the complete clearing of mental decks required for concentration on the choice of a creation in an amusing pattern of palmtrees and pineapples, had helped to put Señora Rosa into proper perspective. Considered calmly, over an ice-cream-soda, the affair dwindled quite a lot—and her own part in it came to seem curiously spineless. Her intention of informing the police faded. If there were a charge, and she had to give evidence, she would scarcely be able to help exhibiting herself first as a fool for having gone into the place at all, and then as a nitwit for staying when she did not want to. Moreover, it would very likely be reported in the papers, and she would hate that—so would Edward. . .

Which brought one back to thinking of Edward. . . And to wondering whether one had perhaps behaved like a silly little fool there, too. After all, he had known Mildred for years and years—and just two or three dances. . . People said one ought to be careful about not feeling *too* possessive. . . All the same, just a few days after he had become engaged. . . No, it didn't do to

look cheap, or easygoing, either. . . And yet. . . Really, life could be very difficult. . .

Though Frances decided that she would walk home, she did not consciously choose her route. That is to say, she did not tell herself: 'I'll go by St. James's Avenue, past that house that we decided would just suit us.' It simply was that her feet happened to carry her that way.

Coming nearer to the house, she walked more slowly. There was a moment when she almost decided to turn back and go round by another way. But she squashed that. One could not go about for ever avoiding every reminder: a person had to get used to things, sooner or later. She walked resolutely on. Presently she was able to see the upper floor of the house above the hedge. A comfortable, sensible-looking, friendly house: not new, but modern, and without being moderne. It gave her a little knot high in her chest to see it again now. Then, as more of it came into view, the knot gave way to a feeling of dismay. There were curtains in the windows that had been blank, the hedges had been trimmed, the board which had announced 'For Sale' was gone.

She paused at the front gate. An astonishing amount had been done to the place in the few days since she had last seen it. It looked altogether fresher. The flower-beds in the front garden were bright with tulips, the fig-tree against the side wall had been cut and tied back, the windows shone. The doors of the garage were open, and a comfortable-looking car stood on the concrete apron in front. The lawn had been closely mown. On it, a little girl of four or so, dressed in a blue frock, was conducting a tea-party with earnest admonitions to the guests who consisted of three sizes of teddy-bear and a golliwog.

Frances was filled with a sharp indignation. The house had been almost hers: she had quite decided that it was the one that her father was going to give them for a wedding-present—and now it had been snatched away without a word of warning. It might not have been so bad if it had not somehow contrived already to look so aggressively *settled*. . . Not that it actually mattered, of course, now that she had finished with Edward. . . All the same, there was a feeling of having been cheated in some way that one did not quite understand. . .

The little girl on the lawn became aware of someone at the gate. She broke off scolding the golliwog to look up. She dropped the miniature cup and saucer that she was holding, and started to run towards Frances.

'Mummy!' she called.

Frances looked around and behind her. There was no one there. Then she bent down instinctively as the small figure hurtled itself toward her. The little girl flung her arms round her neck.

'Mummy,' she said, with breathy intensity. 'Mummy, you *must* come and tell Golly not to. He *will* talk with his mouth full.'

'Er—' said Frances, out of the sudden stranglehold. 'I—er—you—I mean—'

'Oh, *do* come along, Mummy,' she said. 'He's 'veloping bad habits.'

Dazedly, Frances allowed herself to be led across the lawn to the tea-party. The little girl improved the dissolute-looking golliwog by propping him into a sitting position.

'There,' she told him. 'Now Mummy's here you'll have to behave. Tell him, Mummy.' She looked at Frances expectantly.

'I—er—um—you—' Frances began, confusedly.

The child looked up at her, puzzled.

'What's the matter, Mummy?' she asked.

Frances stared back at her, recollecting photographs of herself at about the same age. A peculiar feeling began to come over her. The small earnest face seemed to swim slightly as she looked at it. Its expression grew concerned.

'Aren't you feeling well, Mummy?'

Frances pulled herself together.

'I'm—I'm all right—er—darling,' she said, unsteadily.

'Then *do* tell Golly he mustn't. It's awfly rude.'

Frances went down on her knees. She was glad to: the ground felt more solid that way. She leaned towards the offending golliwog who promptly fell flat on his face and was hastily propped up again by his mistress.

'Er—Golly,' Frances told him. 'Golly, I'm very shocked indeed to hear this about you. People who are invited to parties. . .'

So real. . . ! All of it. . . !

Now that the lump in her chest which wasn't quite panic or scare, but a bit like both, had subsided, Frances found herself able to regard the situation a little more calmly. The classic certificate was to be obtained by pinching oneself; she had done that, sharply, but without changing any of it a bit. She looked at her hand, flexed it; it was her perfectly familiar hand. She plucked a little grass from the lawn beside her; real grass, beyond doubt. She listened

to the sounds about her; they had an authentic quality difficult to deny. She picked up the nearest teddy-bear, and examined it; no dream ever finished anything with that amount of detail. She sat back on her heels, looking up at the house, noticing the striped chairs on the porch, the patterns of the curtains, the recent painting. . . One had always thought that hallucinations must be vague, misty experiences. . . All this had a solidity that was rather frightening. . .

'Mummy,' said the little girl, turning away from her tea-party, and standing up.

Frances' heart jumped slightly.

'Yes, dear?' she said.

' 'Mportant business. Will you see that Golly behaves himself?'

'I—I think he understands now, dear,' Frances told her.

The small face in its frame of fair hair looked doubtful.

'P'raps. He's rather wicked, though. Back soon. 'Mportant.'

Frances watched the blue frock vanish as the child scampered away round the corner of the house on her mysterious errand. She felt suddenly forlorn. For some moments she remained on her knees, returning the boot-button stare of the teddy-bear in her hands. Then the absurdity of the whole thing flooded over her. She dropped the bear, and got to her feet. At just that moment a man emerged from the front of the house on to the porch.

And he wasn't Edward. . . He wasn't a bit like him. . . He wasn't anybody she'd ever seen before in her life.

He was tall, rather thin, but broad in the shoulders. His dark hair curled a little, and there were slight flecks of grey over his ears. He had been making towards the car, but at the sight of her he stopped. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and seemed to light up.

'Back so early!' he said. 'New frock, too! And looking like a schoolgirl in it. How do you manage it?'

'Uh!' gasped Frances, caught in a strong, and entirely unexpected embrace.

'Look, darling,' he continued, without loosening his hold. 'I simply must tear off now and see old Fanshawe. I won't be more than an hour.'

His hug brought the rest of Frances' breath out in another involuntary 'Uh!' He kissed her soundly, slapped her behind affectionately, and dashed for the car. A moment later it carried him out of her sight.

Frances stood getting her breath back, and staring after him. She found that she was shaking, and filled with a most odd sensation of weakness,

particularly in the knees. She staggered over to one of the chairs on the porch, and subsided there. For a space she sat motionless, her eyes set glazedly on nothing. Then, not quite accountably, she burst into tears.

When emotion had declined to a sniff-and-dab stage, it was succeeded by misgivings about the orthodoxy of her situation. In whatever peculiar way it had come about, the fact remained that she had been 'Mummy' to someone else's child, warmly embraced by someone else's husband, and now was sitting snivelling on someone else's porch. A convincing explanation of all this to the someone else looked like being so difficult that the best way out would be to get clear as soon as possible, and avoid it.

Frances gave a final dab, and got up with decision. She retrieved her bag from the medley of teddy-bears and teacups, and glanced at the mirror in the flap. She frowned at it, and burrowed for her compact. In the act of a preparatory scrub on the sieve, the sound of a step caused her to look up. A woman was coming in through the gateway. A moderately tall, nicely-built woman, dressed in a light-green linen suit, and carrying it well; a woman who was a few years older than herself but still. . . At that moment the woman turned so that Frances could see her face, and all coherent thought expired. Frances' jaw sagged. She gaped. . .

The other woman noticed her. She looked hard at her, but showed no great surprise. She turned off the path and approached across the grass. There was nothing alarming about her; indeed, she was wearing the trace of a smile.

'Hullo!' she said. 'I was just thinking this morning that you must be due somewhere about now.'

Frances' bag slipped out of her fingers, and spilt at her feet, but her eyes never left the other's face.

The woman's eyes were a little deeper and wiser than those she was wont to see in the mirror. There were the very faintest touches of shadows at their corners, and at the corners of the mouth. The lips favoured a shade of colour just a trace darker. . . Something as indescribable as the touch of dew had been exchanged for a breath of sophistication. But otherwise . . . otherwise. . .

Frances tried to speak, but all that came was a croak, strangled in rising panic.

'It's all right,' said the other. 'Nothing to be scared about.' She linked her arm into Frances', and led her back to the porch. 'Now sit down there and

just relax. You don't need to worry a bit.'

Frances sank unresistingly into the chair, and stared dumbly at her. Presently, the other opened her bag.

'Cigarette?' she suggested. 'Oh, no. Of course. I didn't then.' She took one for herself, and lit it. For what seemed a long time they surveyed one another through the smoke. It was the other who broke the silence. She said:

'How pretty—and charming! If I had only understood more—still, I suppose one could scarcely have had innocence and experience.' She sighed, with a touch of wistfulness. Then she shook her head. 'But no. No. Being young is very exhausting and unsatisfactory, really—although it looks so nice.'

'Er—' said Frances. She swallowed with difficulty. 'Er—I think I must be going mad.'

The other shook her head. 'Oh, no you're not. Nothing like it. Just take it easy, and try to relax.'

'But this? I mean, you—me—as if—oh, I *am* going mad! I must be. It's—it's impossible!' Frances protested wildly. 'Nobody can possibly be in two places at once. I mean, nobody can be twice in the same place at once. I mean, one person can't be two people, not at the same—'

The other leaned across, and patted her hand.

'There, there now. Calm down. I know it's terribly bewildering at first, but it comes all right. I remember.'

'Y—you *remember*?' stammered Frances.

'Yes. From when it happened to me, of course. From when I was where you are now.'

Frances stared at her, with a sensation of slowly and helplessly drowning.

'Look,' said the other. 'I think I'd better get you a drink. Yes, I know you don't take it, but this *is* rather exceptional. I remember how much better I felt for it. Just a minute.' She got up, and went indoors.

Frances leaned back, holding hard to both arms of her chair for reassurance. She felt as if she were falling over and over, a long way down.

The other came back holding a glass, and gave it to her. She drank, spluttering a little over the strange taste of it. But the other had been right: she did immediately begin to feel somewhat better.

'Of course, it's a bit of a shock,' said the other. 'And I fancy you're right about one person not being in two places—up to a point. But the way I think it must happen is that you just *seem* to yourself to go on being the same

person. But you never can be, not really. I mean, as the cells that make you are always gradually being replaced, you can't really be *all* the same person at any two times, can you?'

Frances tried to follow that, without success, but:

'Well—well, I suppose not *quite*,' she conceded, doubtfully.

The other went on talking, giving her time to recover herself.

'Well, then when *all* the cells have been replaced by new ones, over seven years or so, then you can't *any* of you be the same person any longer, although you still think you are. So that means that the cells that make up you and me are two quite different sets of cells—so they aren't really having to be in two different places at once, although it does look like it, don't you see?'

'I—er—perhaps,' said Frances, on a slightly hysterical note.

'So that sets a sort of natural limit,' the other went on. 'There obviously has to be a kind of minimum gap of seven years or so in which it is quite impossible for this to happen at all—until all your present cells have been replaced by others, you see.'

'I—I suppose so,' said Frances, faintly.

'Just take another drink of that. It'll do you good,' the other advised.

Frances did, and leaned back again in the chair. She wished her head would stop whirling. She did not understand a word that the woman—her other self—whoever it was—had said. All she knew was that none of it could possibly make sense. She kept on hanging on to the arms of the chair until, presently, she began to feel herself growing a little calmer.

'Better? You've more colour now,' the other said.

Frances nodded. She could feel the tears of a reaction not far away. The other came over and put an arm round her.

'Poor dear! What a time you're having! All this confusion, and then falling in love on top of it—as if that weren't confusing enough by itself.'

'Falling in love?' said Frances.

'Why, yes. He kissed you, and patted your behind—and you fell in love. I remember so well.'

'Oh, dear—is it like that? I didn't—' Frances broke off. 'But how did you know about—? Oh, I see, of course—'

'And he's a dear. You'll adore him. And little Betty's a love, too, bless her,' the other told her. She paused, and added: 'I'm afraid you've rather a lot to go through first, but it's worth it. You'll remember it's worth it all?'

'Yes-s-s,' Frances told her vaguely.

She thought for a moment of the man who had come out of the house and gone off in the car. He would be—

'Yes,' she said, more stoutly. She pondered for some seconds and then turned to look at the other.

'I suppose one does have to grow old—er, older, I mean,' she amended. 'Somehow, I've never thought—'

The other laughed. 'Of course you haven't. But it's really very nice, I assure you. Such a much less anxious state than being young—though, naturally, you won't believe that.'

Frances let her eyes wander round the porch and across the garden. They came to rest on the teddy-bears and the delinquent golliwog. She smiled.

'I think I do,' she said.

The other smiled, too; her eyes a little shiny.

'I really was rather a sweet thing,' she said.

She got up abruptly.

'Time you were going, my dear. You've got to get back to that horrid old woman.'

Frances got up obediently, too. The other seemed to have an idea of what she was talking about, and what was necessary. Frances herself had little enough.

'Back to the Señora?' she asked.

The other nodded without speaking. She put her arms round Frances, and held her close to her. She kissed her gently. 'Oh, my dear!' she said, unsteadily, and turned her head away.

Frances walked down the short drive. At the gate she turned and looked back, taking it all in.

The other, on the porch, kissed her hand to her. Then she put it over her eyes, and ran into the house.

Frances turned to the right and walked back by the way she had come, towards the town, and the Señora. . .

The cloudiness cleared. The crystal became just a glass ball again. Beyond it sat Señora Rosa, with her comb awry. Her left hand held Frances' wrist. Frances stared at her for some moments, then:

'You *are* a cheat,' she burst out. '*And* you've been telling lies, too. You described Edward, but the man you showed me wasn't Edward—he wasn't even a bit like Edward.' She pulled her arm free with a sudden wrench.

'Cheat!' she repeated. 'You told me Edward, and you showed me somebody else. It's all cruel, silly lies and cheating. All of it.'

Her vehemence was enough to take the Señora a little aback.

'There *was* jus' a little mistake,' she admitted. 'By 'n'unfortunate—'

'Mistake!' shouted Frances. 'The mistake was my ever coming here at all. You've just made a fool of me, and I hate you! *I hate you!*'

The Señora recoiled, and then rallied slightly. With a touch of dignity, she said:

'Th'xplanation's really quite simple. It was—'

'No!' Frances shouted. 'I don't want to hear any more about it.'

She pushed the table with all her force. The far edge of it took the Señora in the middle. Her chair teetered backwards, then she, table, crystal, and lamp, went down all in a heap. Frances sprang for the door.

The Señora grunted, and rolled over. She struggled stertorously to her feet, leaving comb and mantilla in the debris. She made determinedly through the door in Frances' wake. On the landing, she leaned over the bannisters.

'You damned little duffer,' she shouted. 'That was your *shecond* marriage—an' I say the hell with *both* of 'em.'

But Frances was already out in the street, beyond earshot.

'A very unpleasant experience—humiliating, too,' thought Frances, as she pegged along, with the jolting step of the incensed. Humiliating because she had nearly—no, she'd be honest; for a time she *had* fallen for it. It had all seemed so convincingly, so really real. Even now she could scarcely believe that she hadn't walked up that drive, sat on that porch, talked to . . . but what a ridiculous thing to think. . . As if it could possibly be. . . !

All the same, to find oneself facing that horrible Señora again, and realize that it had all been some kind of trick. . . If she were not in the public street, she could have kicked herself, and wept with mortification. . .

Presently, however, as the first flush of her anger began to cool, she became more aware of her surroundings. It was borne in upon her attention that a number of the people she met were looking at her with curiosity—not quite the right kind of curiosity. . .

She glanced down at her frock, and stopped dead. Instead of her familiar blue-and-white striped cotton, she was wearing an affair covered with an absurd, niggly pattern of palmtrees and pineapples. She raised her eyes

again, and looked round. Every other cotton frock in sight was inches longer and far fuller than hers.

Frances blushed. She walked on, trying to look as if she were not blushing; trying, too, to pretend that the skimpy frock did not make her feel as if she had come out dressed in a rather inadequate bath-towel.

Clearly, there was one thing to be done about that; and done at once. . .

She made haste towards Weilberg's Modes. . .

✻ Stitch in Time ✻

✻ On the sheltered side of the house the sun was hot. Just inside the open French windows Mrs Dolderson moved her chair a few inches, so that her head would remain in the shade while the warmth could comfort the rest of her. Then she leant her head back on the cushion, looking out.

The scene was, for her, timeless.

Across the smooth lawn the cedar stood as it had always stood. Its flat spread boughs must, she supposed, reach a little further now than they had when she was a child, but it was hard to tell; the tree had seemed huge then, it seemed huge now. Further on, the boundary hedge was just as trim and neat as it had always been. The gate into the spinney was still flanked by the two unidentifiable topiary birds, Cocky and Olly—wonderful that they should still be there, even though Olly's tail feathers had become a bit twiggy with age.

The flower-bed on the left, in front of the shrubbery, was as full of colour as ever—well, perhaps a little brighter; one had a feeling that flowers had become a trifle more strident than they used to be, but delightful nevertheless. The spinney beyond the hedge, however, had changed a little; more young trees, some of the larger ones gone. Between the branches were glimpses of pink roof where there had been no neighbours in the old days. Except for that, one could almost, for a moment, forget a whole lifetime.

The afternoon drowsing while the birds rested, the bees humming, the leaves gently stirring, the bonk-bonk from the tennis court round the corner, with an occasional voice giving the score. It might have been any sunny afternoon out of fifty or sixty summers.

Mrs Dolderson smiled upon it, and loved it all; she had loved it when she was a girl, she loved it even more now.

In this house she had been born; she had grown up in it, married from it, come back to it after her father died, brought up her own two children in it, grown old in it. . . Some years after the second war she had come very near to losing it—but not quite; and here she still was. . .

It was Harold who had made it possible. A clever boy, and a wonderful son. . . When it had become quite clear that she could no longer afford to keep the house up, that it would have to be sold, it was Harold who had persuaded his firm to buy it. Their interest, he had told her, lay not in the house, but in the site—as would any buyer's. The house itself was almost without value now, but the position was convenient. As a condition of sale, four rooms on the south side had been converted into a flat which was to be hers for life. The rest of the house had become a hostel housing some twenty young people who worked in the laboratories and offices which now stood on the north side, on the site of the stables and part of the paddock. One day, she knew, the old house would come down, she had seen the plans, but for the present, for her time, both it and the garden to the south and west could remain unspoilt. Harold had assured her that they would not be required for fifteen or twenty years yet—much longer than she would know the need of them. . .

Nor, Mrs Dolderson thought calmly, would she be really sorry to go. One became useless, and, now that she must have a wheelchair, a burden to others. There was the feeling, too, that she no longer belonged—that she had become a stranger in another people's world. It had all altered so much; first changing into a place that it was difficult to understand, then growing so much more complex that one gave up trying to understand. No wonder, she thought, that the old become possessive about *things*; cling to objects which link them with the world that they could understand. . .

Harold was a dear boy, and for his sake she did her best not to appear too stupid—but, often, it was difficult. . . Today, at lunch, for instance, he had been so excited about some experiment that was to take place this afternoon. He had *had* to talk about it, even though he must know that practically nothing of what he said was comprehensible to her. Something about dimensions again—she had grasped that much, but she had only nodded, and not attempted to go further. Last time the subject had cropped up, she had observed that in her youth there had been only three, and she did not see how even all this progress in the world could have added more. This had set him off on a dissertation about the mathematician's view of the world through which it was, apparently, possible to perceive the existence of a series of dimensions. Even the moment of existence in relation to time was it, seemed some kind of dimension. Philosophically, Harold had begun to explain—but there, and at once, she had lost him. He led straight into confusion. She felt sure that when she was young philosophy, mathematics, and metaphysics had all been quite separate studies—nowadays they seemed to have quite incomprehensibly run together. So this time she had listened

quietly, making small, encouraging sounds now and then, until at the end he had smiled ruefully, and told her she was a dear to be so patient with him. Then he had come round the table and kissed her cheek gently as he put his hand over hers, and she had wished him the best of luck with the afternoon's mysterious experiment. Then Jenny had come in to clear the table, and wheel her closer to the window. . .

The warmth of the slumbrous afternoon carried her into a half-dream, took her back fifty years to just such an afternoon when she had sat here in this very window—though certainly with no thought of a wheelchair in those days—waiting for Arthur . . . wanting with an ache in her heart for Arthur . . . and Arthur had never come. . .

Strange, it was, the way things fell out. If Arthur had come that day she would almost certainly have married him. And then Harold and Cynthia would never have existed. She would have had children, of course, but they would not have been Harold and Cynthia. . . What a curious, haphazard thing one's existence was. . . Just by saying 'no' to one man, and 'yes' to another, a woman might bring into existence a potential archbishop, or a potential murderer. . . How foolish they all were nowadays—trying to tidy everything up, make life secure, while behind, back in everyone's past, stretched the chance-studded line of women who had said 'yes' or 'no,' as the fancy took them. . .

Curious that she should remember Arthur now. It must be years since she had thought of him. . .

She had been quite sure that he would propose that afternoon. It was before she had even heard of Colin Dolderson. And she would have agreed. Oh yes, she would have accepted him.

There had never been any explanation. She had never known *why* he had not come then—or any more. He had never written to her. Ten days, perhaps a fortnight later there had been a somewhat impersonal note from his mother telling her that he had been ill, and the doctor had advised sending him abroad. But after that, nothing at all—until the day she had seen his name in a newspaper, more than two years later. . .

She had been angry of course—a girl owed that to her pride—and hurt, too, for a time. . . Yet how could one know that it had not been for the best, in the end?—Would his children have been as dear to her, or as kind, and as clever as Harold and Cynthia. . . ?

Such an infinity of chances . . . all those genes and things they talked about nowadays. . .

The thump of tennis-balls had ceased, and the players had gone; back, presumably, to their recondite work. Bees continued to hum purposefully among the flowers; half a dozen butterflies were visiting there too, though in a dilettante, unairworthy-looking way. The further trees shimmered in the rising heat. The afternoon's drowsiness became irresistible. Mrs Dolderson did not oppose it. She leant her head back, half aware that somewhere another humming sound, higher in pitch than the bees', had started, but it was not loud enough to be disturbing. She let her eyelids drop. . .

Suddenly, only a few yards away, but out of sight as she sat, there were feet on the path. The sound of them began quite abruptly, as if someone had just stepped from the grass on to the path—only she would have seen anyone crossing the grass. . . Simultaneously there was the sound of a baritone voice, singing cheerfully, but not loudly to itself. It, too, began quite suddenly; in the middle of a word in fact:

'"—rybody's doin' it, doin' it, do——"'

The voice cut off suddenly. The footsteps, too, came to a dead stop.

Mrs Dolderson's eyes were open now—very wide open. Her thin hands gripped the arms of her chair. She recollected the tune: more than that, she was even certain of the voice—after all these years. . . A silly dream, she told herself. . . She had been remembering him only a few moments before she closed her eyes. . . How foolish. . . !

And yet it was curiously undreamlike. . . Everything was so sharp and clear, so familiarly reasonable. . . The arms of the chair quite solid under her fingers. . .

Another idea leapt into her mind. She had died. That was why it was not like an ordinary dream. Sitting here in the sun, she must have quietly died. The doctor had said it might happen quite unexpectedly. . . And now it had! She had a swift moment of relief—not that she had felt any great fear of death, but there had been that sense of ordeal ahead. Now it was over—and with no ordeal. As simple as falling asleep. She felt suddenly happy about it; quite exhilarated. . . Though it was odd that she still seemed to be tied to her chair. . .

The gravel crunched under shifting feet. A bewildered voice said:

'That's rum! Dashed queer! What the devil's happened?'

Mrs Dolderson sat motionless in her chair. There was no doubt whatever about the voice.

A pause. The feet shifted, as if uncertain. Then they came on, but slowly now, hesitantly. They brought a young man into her view.—Oh, such a very young man, he looked. She felt a little catch at her heart. . .

He was dressed in a striped club-blazer, and white flannel trousers. There was a silk scarf round his neck, and, tilted back off his forehead, a straw hat with a coloured band. His hands were in his trousers' pockets, and he carried a tennis-racket under his left arm.

She saw him first in profile, and not quite at his best, for his expression was bewildered, and his mouth slightly open as he stared towards the spinney at one of the pink roofs beyond.

'Arthur,' Mrs Dolderson said gently.

He was startled. The racket slipped, and clattered on the path. He attempted to pick it up, take off his hat, and recovered his composure all at the same time; not very successfully. When he straightened his face was pink, and its expression still confused.

He looked at the old lady in the chair, her knees hidden by a rug, her thin, delicate hands gripping the arms. His gaze went beyond her, into the room. His confusion increased, with a touch of alarm added. His eyes went back to the old lady. She was regarding him intently. He could not recall ever having seen her before, did not know who she could be—yet in her eyes there seemed to be something faintly, faintly not unfamiliar.

She dropped her gaze to her right hand. She studied it for a moment as though it puzzled her a little, then she raised her eyes again to his.

'You don't know me, Arthur?' she asked quietly.

There was a note of sadness in her voice that he took for disappointment, tinged with reproof. He did his best to pull himself together.

'I—I'm afraid not,' he confessed. 'You see I—er—you—er——' he stuck, and then went on desperately: 'You must be Thelma's—Miss Kilder's—aunt?'

She looked at him steadily for some moments. He did not understand her expression, but then she told him:

'No. I am not Thelma's aunt.'

Again his gaze went into the room behind her. This time he shook his head in bewilderment.

'It's all different—no, sort of half-different,' he said, in distress. 'I say, I can't have come to the wrong——?' He broke off, and turned to look at the garden again. 'No, it certainly isn't that,' he answered himself decisively. 'But what—what *has* happened?'

His amazement was no longer simple; he was looking badly shaken. His bewildered eyes came back to her again.

'Please—I don't understand—*how* did you know me?' he asked.

His increasing distress troubled her, and made her careful.

'I recognised you, Arthur. We have met before, you know.'

'Have we? I can't remember. . . I'm terribly sorry. . .'

'You're looking unwell, Arthur. Draw up that chair, and rest a little.'

'Thank you, Mrs—er—Mrs——?'

'Dolderson,' she told him.

'Thank you, Mrs Dolderson,' he said, frowning a little, trying to place the name.

She watched him pull the chair closer. Every movement, every line familiar, even to the lock of fair hair that always fell forward when he stooped. He sat down and remained silent for some moments, staring under a frown, across the garden.

Mrs Dolderson sat still, too. She was scarcely less bewildered than he, though she did not reveal it. Clearly the thought that she was dead had been quite silly. She was just as usual, still in her chair, still aware of the ache in her back, still able to grip the arms of the chair and feel them. Yet it was not a dream—everything was too textured, too solid, too real in a way that dream things never were. . . Too sensible, too—that was, it would have been had the young man been any other than Arthur. . .

Was it just a simple hallucination?—A trick of her mind imposing Arthur's face on an entirely different young man?

She glanced at him. No, that would not do—he had answered to Arthur's name. Indubitably he was Arthur—and wearing Arthur's blazer, too. . . They did not cut them that way nowadays, and it was years and years since she had seen a young man wearing a straw hat. . .

A kind of ghost. . . ? But no—he was quite solid; the chair had creaked as he sat down, his shoes had crunched on the gravel. . . Besides, whoever heard of a ghost in the form of a thoroughly bewildered young man, and one, moreover, who had recently nicked himself in shaving. . . ?

He cut her thoughts short by turning his head.

'I thought Thelma would be here,' he told her. 'She *said* she'd be here. Please tell me, where is she?'

Like a frightened little boy, she thought. She wanted to comfort him, not to frighten him more. But she could think of nothing to say beyond:

'Thelma isn't far away.'

‘I must find her. She’ll be able to tell me what’s happened.’ He made to get up.

She laid a hand on his arm, and pressed down gently.

‘Wait a minute,’ she told him. ‘What is it that seems to have happened? What is it that worries you so much?’

‘This,’ he said, waving a hand to include everything about them. ‘It’s all different—and yet the same—and yet not. . . I feel as if—as if I’d gone a little mad.’

She looked at him steadily, and then shook her head.

‘I don’t think you have. Tell me, what is it that’s wrong?’

‘I was coming here to play tennis—well, to see Thelma really,’ he amended. ‘Everything was all right then—just as usual. I rode up the drive and leant my bike against the big fir tree where the path begins. I started to come along the path, and then, just when I reached the corner of the house, everything went funny. . .’

‘Went funny?’ Mrs Dolderson inquired. ‘What—went funny?’

‘Well, nearly everything. The sun seemed to jerk in the sky. The trees suddenly looked bigger, and not quite the same. The flowers in the bed over there went quite a different colour. This creeper which was all over the wall was suddenly only halfway up—and it looks like a different *kind* of creeper. And there are houses over there. I never saw them before—it’s just an open field beyond the spinney. Even the gravel on the path looks more yellow than I thought. And this room. . . It is the same room. I know that desk, and the fireplace—and those two pictures. But the paper is quite different. I’ve never seen that before—but it isn’t new, either. . . Please tell me where Thelma is. . . I want her to explain it. . . I *must* have gone a bit mad. . .’

She put her hand on his, firmly.

‘No,’ she said decisively. ‘Whatever it is, I’m quite sure it’s not that.’

‘Then what——?’ He broke off abruptly, and listened, his head a little on one side. The sound grew. ‘What is it?’ he asked, anxiously.

Mrs Dolderson tightened her hand over his.

‘It’s all right,’ she said, as if to a child. ‘It’s all right, Arthur.’

She could feel him grow tenser as the sound increased. It passed right overhead at less than a thousand feet, jets shrieking, leaving the buffeted air behind it rumbling back and forth, shuddering gradually back to peace.

Arthur saw it. Watched it disappear. His face when he turned it back to her was white and frightened. In a queer voice he asked:

‘What—what was that?’

Quietly, as if to force calm upon him, she said:

'Just an aeroplane, Arthur. Such horrid, noisy things they are.'

He gazed where it had vanished, and shook his head.

'But I've *seen* an aeroplane, and *heard* it. It isn't like that. It makes a noise like a motor-bike, only louder. This was terrible! I don't understand—I don't understand what's happened. . .' His voice was pathetic.

Mrs Dolderson made as if to reply, and then checked at a thought, a sudden sharp recollection of Harold talking about dimensions, of shifting them into different planes, speaking of time as though it were simply another dimension. . . With a kind of shock of intuition she understood—no, understood was too firm a word—she perceived. But, perceiving, she found herself at a loss. She looked again at the young man. He was still tense, trembling slightly. He was wondering whether he was going out of his mind. She must stop that. There was no kind way—but how to be least unkind?

'Arthur,' she said, abruptly.

He turned a dazed look at her.

Deliberately she made her voice brisk.

'You'll find a bottle of brandy in that cupboard. Please fetch it—and two glasses,' she ordered.

With a kind of sleep-walking movement he obeyed. She filled a third of a tumbler with brandy for him, and poured a little for herself.

'Drink that,' she told him. He hesitated. 'Go on,' she commanded. 'You've had a shock. It will do you good. I want to talk to you, and I can't talk to you while you're knocked half-silly.'

He drank, coughed a little, and sat down again.

'Finish it,' she told him firmly. He finished it. Presently she inquired:

'Feeling better now?'

He nodded, but said nothing. She made up her mind, and drew breath carefully. Dropping the brisk tone altogether, she added:

'Arthur. Tell me, what day is it today?'

'Day?' he said, in surprise. 'Why, it's Friday. It's the—er—twenty-seventh of June.'

'But the year, Arthur. What year?'

He turned his face fully towards her.

'I'm not *really* mad, you know. I know who I am, and where I am—I think. . . It's *things* that have gone wrong, not me. I can tell you——'

‘What I want you to tell me, Arthur, is the year.’ The peremptory note was back in her voice again.

He kept his eyes steadily on hers as he spoke.

‘Nineteen-thirteen, of course,’ he said.

Mrs Dolderson’s gaze went back to the lawn and the flowers. She nodded gently. That was the year—and it had been a Friday; odd that she should remember that. It might well have been the twenty-seventh of June. . . But certainly a Friday in the summer of nineteen-thirteen was the day he had not come. . . All so long, long ago. . .

His voice recalled her. It was unsteady with anxiety.

‘Why—why do you ask me that—about the year, I mean?’

His brow was so creased, his eyes, so anxious. He was very young. Her heart ached for him. She put her thin fragile hand on his strong one again.

‘I—I think I know,’ he said shakily. ‘It’s—I don’t see how, but you wouldn’t have asked that unless. . . That’s the queer thing that’s happened, isn’t it? Somehow it isn’t nineteen-thirteen any longer—that’s what you mean? The way the trees grew . . . that aeroplane. . .’ He stopped, staring at her with wide eyes. ‘You must tell me. . . Please, please. . . What’s happened to me?—Where am I now?—Where is this. . . ?’

‘My poor boy. . .’ she murmured.

‘Oh, please. . .’

The Times, with the crossword partly done, was pushed down into the chair beside her. She pulled it out half-reluctantly. Then she folded it over and held it towards him. His hand shook as he took it.

‘London, Monday, the first of July,’ he read. And then, in an incredulous whisper: ‘*Nineteen-sixty-three!*’

He lowered the page, looked at her imploringly.

She nodded twice, slowly.

They sat staring at one another without a word. Gradually, his expression changed. His brows came together, as though with pain. He looked round jerkily, his eyes darting here and there as if for an escape. Then they came back to her. He screwed them shut for a moment. Then opened them again, full of hurt—and fear.

‘Oh, no—no. . . ! No. . . ! You’re not. . . You can’t be. . . You—you told me. . . You’re Mrs Dolderson, aren’t you. . . ? You said you were. . . You can’t—you can’t be—Thelma. . . ?’

Mrs Dolderson said nothing. They gazed at one another. His face creased up like a small child’s.

‘Oh, God! Oh—oh—oh. . . !’ he cried, and hid his face in his hands.

Mrs Dolderson’s eyes closed for a moment. When they opened she had control of herself again. Sadly she looked on the shaking shoulders. Her thin, blue-veined left hand reached out towards the bowed head, and stroked the fair hair, gently.

Her right hand found the bell-push on the table beside her. She pressed it, and kept her finger upon it. . .

* * *

At the sound of movement her eyes opened. The Venetian blind shaded the room but let in light enough for her to see Harold standing beside her bed.

‘I didn’t mean to wake you, Mother,’ he said.

‘You didn’t wake me, Harold. I was dreaming, but I was not asleep. Sit down, my dear. I want to talk to you.’

‘You mustn’t tire yourself, Mother. You’ve had a bit of a relapse, you know.’

‘I dare say, but I find it more tiring to wonder than to know. I shan’t keep you long.’

‘Very well, Mother.’ He pulled a chair close to the bedside and sat down, taking her hand in his. She looked at his face in the dimness.

‘It was you who did it, wasn’t it, Harold? It was that experiment of yours that brought poor Arthur here?’

‘It was an accident, Mother.’

‘Tell me.’

‘We were trying it out. Just a preliminary test. We knew it was theoretically possible. We had shown that if we could—oh, dear, it’s so difficult to explain in words—if we could, well, twist a dimension, kind of fold it back on itself, then two points that are normally apart must coincide. . . I’m afraid that’s not very clear. . .’

‘Never mind, dear. Go on.’

‘Well, when we had our field-distortion-generator fixed up we set it to bring together two points that are normally fifty years apart. Think of folding over a long strip of paper that has two marks on it, so that the marks are brought together.’

‘Yes?’

‘It was quite arbitrary. We might have chosen ten years, or a hundred, but we just picked on fifty. And we got astonishingly close, too, Mother, quite remarkably close. Only a four-day calendar error in fifty years. It’s staggered us. The thing we’ve got to do now is to find out that source of error, but if you’d asked any of us to bet——’

‘Yes, dear, I’m sure it was quite wonderful. But what *happened*?’

‘Oh, sorry. Well, as I said, it was an accident. We only had the thing switched on for three or four seconds—and he must have walked slap into the field of coincidence right then. An outside—a millions-to-one chance. I wish it had not happened, but we couldn’t possibly know. . .’

She turned her head on the pillow.

‘No. You couldn’t know,’ she agreed. ‘And then?’

‘Nothing, really. We didn’t know until Jenny answered your bell to find you in a faint, and this chap, Arthur, all gone to pieces, and sent for me.

‘One of the girls helped to get you to bed. Doctor Sole arrived, and took a look at you. Then he pumped some kind of tranquilliser into this Arthur. The poor fellow needed it, too—one hell of a thing to happen when all you were expecting was a game of tennis with your best girl.

‘When he’d quietened down a bit he told us who he was, and where he’d come from. Well, there was a thing for you! Accidental living proof at the first shot.

‘But all *he* wanted, poor devil, was to get back just as soon as he could. He was very distressed—quite a painful business. Doctor Sole wanted to put him right under to stop him cracking altogether. It looked that way, too—and it didn’t look as if he’d be any better when he came round again, either.

‘We didn’t know if we *could* send him back. Transference “forward,” to put it crudely, can be regarded as an infinite acceleration of a natural progression, but the idea of transference “back” is full of the most disconcerting implications once you start thinking about it. There was quite a bit of argument, but Doctor Sole clinched it. If there was a fair chance, he said, the chap had a right to try, and we had an obligation to try to undo what we’d done to him. Apart from that, if we did not try we should certainly have to explain to someone how we come to have a raving loony on our hands, and fifty years off course, so to speak.

‘We tried to make it clear to this Arthur that we couldn’t be sure that it would work in reverse—and that, anyway, there was this four-day calendar error, so at best it wouldn’t be exact. I don’t think he really grasped that. The poor fellow was in a wretched state; all he wanted was just a chance—any kind of chance—to get out of here. He was simply one-track.

'So we decided to take the risk—after all, if it turned out not to be possible he'd—well, he'd know nothing about it—or nothing would happen at all. . .

'The generator was still on the same setting. We put one fellow on to that, took this Arthur back to the path by your room, and got him lined up there.

'"Now walk forward," we told him. "Just as you were walking when it happened." And we gave the switch-on signal. What with the doctor's dope and one thing and another he was pretty groggy, but he did his best to pull himself together. He went forward at a kind of stagger. Literal-minded fellow; he was half-crying, but in a queer sort of voice he was trying to sing: "Everybody's doin' it, do——"

'And then he disappeared—just vanished completely.' He paused, and added regretfully: 'All the evidence we have now is not very convincing—one tennis-racket, practically new, but vintage, and one straw-hat, ditto.'

Mrs Dolderson lay without speaking. He said:

'We did our best, Mother. We could only try.'

'Of course you did, dear. And you succeeded. It wasn't your fault that you couldn't undo what you'd done. . . No, I was just wondering what would have happened if it had been a few minutes earlier—or later, and you had switched your machine on. But I don't suppose that *could* have happened. . . You wouldn't have been here at all if it had. . .'

He regarded her a little uneasily.

'What *do* you mean, Mother?'

'Never mind, dear. It was, as you said, an accident.—At least, I suppose it was—though so many important things seem to be accidents that one does sometimes wonder if they aren't really *written* somewhere. . .'

Harold looked at her, trying to make something of that, then decided to ask:

'But what makes you think that we did succeed in getting him back, Mother?'

'Oh, I *know* you did, dear. For one thing I can very clearly remember the day I read in the paper that Lieutenant Arthur Waring Batley had been awarded a D.S.O.—sometime in November nineteen-fifteen, I think it was.

'And, for another, I have just had a letter from your sister.'

'From Cynthia? How on earth does she come into it?'

'She wants to come and see us. She is thinking of getting married again, and she'd like to bring the young man—well, not such a very *young* man, I

suppose—down here to show him.'

'That's all right, but I don't see——'

'She thinks you might find him interesting. He's a physicist.'

'But——'

Mrs Dolderson took no notice of the interruption. She went on:

'Cynthia tells me his name is Batley—and he's the son of a Colonel Arthur Waring Batley, D.S.O., of Nairobi, Kenya.'

'You mean, he's the son of——?'

'So it would seem, dear. Strange, isn't it?' She reflected a moment, and added: 'I must say that if these things are written, they do sometimes seem to be written in a very queerly distorted way, don't you think. . . ?'

✻ Random Quest
✻

✻ The sound of a car coming to a stop on the gravel caused Dr Harshom to look at his watch. He closed the book in which he had been writing, put it away in one of his desk drawers, and waited. Presently Stephens opened the door to announce: 'Mr Trafford, sir.'

The doctor got up from his chair, and regarded the young man who entered, with some care. Mr Colin Trafford turned out to be presentable, just in his thirties, with brown hair curling slightly, clean-shaven, a suit of good tweed well cut, and shoes to accord. He looked pleasant enough though not distinguished. It would not be difficult to meet thirty or forty very similar young men in a day. But when he looked more closely, as the doctor now did, there were signs of fatigue to be seen, indications of anxiety in the expression and around the eyes, a strained doggedness in the set of the mouth.

They shook hands.

'You'll have had a long drive,' said the doctor. 'I expect you'd like a drink. Dinner won't be for half an hour yet.'

The younger man accepted, and sat down. Presently, he said:

'It was kind of you to invite me here, Dr Harshom.'

'Not really altruistic,' the doctor told him. 'It is more satisfactory to talk than to correspond by letter. Moreover, I am an inquisitive man recently retired from a very humdrum country practice, Mr Trafford, and on the rare occasions that I do catch the scent of a mystery my curiosity urges me to follow it up.' He, too, sat down.

'Mystery?' repeated the young man.

'Mystery,' said the doctor.

The young man took a sip of his whisky.

'My inquiry was such as one might receive from—well, from any solicitor', he said.

'But you are not a solicitor, Mr Trafford.'

'No,' Colin Trafford admitted, 'I am not.'

‘But you do have a very pressing reason for your inquiry. So there is the mystery. What pressing, or indeed leisurely, reason could you have for inquiries about a person of whose existence you yourself appear to be uncertain—and of whom Somerset House has no record?’

The young man regarded him more carefully, as he went on:

‘How do I know that? Because an inquiry there would be your natural first step. Had you found a birth-certificate, you would not have pursued the course you have. In fact, only a curiously determined person would have persisted in a quest for someone who had no official existence. So, I said to myself: When this persistence in the face of reason addresses itself to me I will try to resolve the mystery.’

The young man frowned.

‘You imply that you said that *before* you had my letter?’

‘My dear fellow, Harshom is not a common name—an unusual corruption of Harvesthome, if you are interested in such things—and, indeed, I never yet heard of a Harshom who was not traceably connected with the rest of us. And we do, to some extent, keep in touch. So, quite naturally, I think, the incursion of a young man entirely unknown to any of us, but persistently tackling us one after another with his inquiries regarding an unidentifiable Harshom, aroused our interest. Since it seemed that I myself came low on your priority list I decided to make a few inquiries of my own. I—’

‘But why should you judge yourself low on a list,’ Colin Trafford interrupted.

‘Because you are clearly a man of method. In this case, geographical method. You began your inquiries with Harshoms in the central London area, and worked outwards, until you are now in Herefordshire. There are only two further-flung Harshoms now on your list, Peter, down in the toe of Cornwall, and Harold, a few miles from Durham—am I right?’

Colin Trafford nodded, with a trace of reluctance.

‘You are,’ he admitted.

Dr Harshom smiled, a trifle smugly.

‘I thought so. There is—’ he began, but the young man interrupted him again.

‘When you answered my letter, you invited me here, but you evaded my question,’ he remarked.

‘That is true. But I have answered it now by insisting that the person you seek not only does not exist, but never did exist.’

'But if you're quite satisfied on that, why ask me here at all?'

'Because—' The doctor broke off at the sound of a gong. 'Dear me, Phillips allows one just ten minutes to wash. Let me show you your room, and we can continue over dinner.'

A little later when the soup was before them, he resumed:

'You were asking me why I invited you here. I think the answer is that since you feel entitled to be curious about a hypothetical relative of mine, I feel no less entitled to be curious about the motives that impel your curiosity. Fair enough?—as they say.'

'Dubious,' replied Mr Trafford after consideration. 'To inquire into my motives would, I admit, be not unreasonable if you knew this person to exist—but, since you assure me she does not exist, the question of my motives surely becomes academic.'

'My interest *is* academic, my dear fellow, but none the less real. Perhaps we might progress a little if I might put the problem as it appears from my point of view?'

Trafford nodded. The doctor went on:

'Well, now, this is the situation: Some seven or eight months ago a young man, unknown to any of us, begins a series of approaches to my relatives. His concern, he says, is to learn the whereabouts, or to gain any clues which may help him to trace the whereabouts of a lady called Ottilie Harshom. She was born, he believes, in 1928, though it could be a few years to either side of that—and she may, of course, have adopted another surname through marriage.

'In his earlier letters there is an air of confidence suggesting his feeling that the matter will easily be dealt with, but as one Harshom after another fails to identify the subject of his inquiries his tone becomes less confident though not less determined. In one or two directions he does learn of young Harshom ladies—none of them called Ottilie, by the way, but he nevertheless investigates them with care. Can it be, perhaps, that he is as uncertain about the first name as about everything else concerning her? But apparently none of these ladies fulfils his requirements, for he presses on. In the face of unqualified unsuccess, his persistence in leaving no Harshom stone unturned begins to verge upon the unreasonable. Is he an eccentric, with a curious obsession?

'Yet by all the evidence he was—until the spring of 1953, at any rate, a perfectly normal young man. His full name is Colin Wayland Trafford. He was born in 1921, in Solihull, the son of a solicitor. He went to Chartowe School 1934. Enlisted in the army 1939. Left it, with the rank of Captain

1945. Went up to Cambridge. Took a good degree in Physics 1949. Joined Electro-Physical Industries on the managerial side that same year. Married Delia Stevens 1950. Became a widower 1951. Received injuries in a laboratory demonstration accident early in 1953. Spent the following five weeks in St Merryn's Hospital. Began his first approaches to members of the Harshom family for information regarding Ottilie Harshom about a month after his discharge from hospital.'

Colin Trafford said coldly:

'You are very fully informed, Dr Harshom.'

The doctor shrugged slightly.

'Your own information about the Harshoms must by now be almost exhaustive. Why should you resent some of us knowing something of you?'

Colin did not reply to that. He dropped his gaze, and appeared to study the tablecloth. The doctor resumed:

'I said just now—has he an obsession? The answer has appeared to be yes—since sometime last March. Prior to that, there seems to have been no inquiry whatever regarding Miss Ottilie Harshom.

'Now when I had reached this point I began to feel that I was on the edge of a more curious mystery than I had expected.' He paused. 'I'd like to ask you, Mr Trafford, had you ever been aware of the name Ottilie Harshom before January last?'

The young man hesitated. Then he said, uneasily:

'How can one possibly answer that? One encounters a myriad names on all sides. Some are remembered, some seem to get filed in the subconscious, some apparently fail to register at all. It's unanswerable.'

'Perhaps, so. But we have the curious situation that before January Ottilie Harshom was apparently not on your mental map, but since March she has, without any objective existence, dominated it. So I ask myself, what happened between January and March. . . ?

'Well, I practise medicine. I have certain connections, I am able to learn the external facts. One day late in January you were invited, along with several other people, to witness a demonstration in one of your Company's laboratories. I was not told the details, I doubt if I would understand them if I were: the atmosphere around the higher flights of modern physics is so rarefied—but I gather that during this demonstration something went amiss. There was an explosion, or an implosion, or perhaps a matter of a few atoms driven berserk by provocation, in any case, the place was wrecked. One man was killed outright, another died later, several were injured. You yourself

were not badly hurt. You did get a few cuts, and bruises—nothing serious, but you were knocked out—right out. . .

'You were, indeed, so thoroughly knocked out that you lay unconscious for twenty-four days. . .

'And when at last you did come round you displayed symptoms of considerable confusion—more strongly, perhaps, than would be expected in a patient of your age and type, and you were given sedatives. The following night you slept restlessly, and showed signs of mental distress. In particular you called again and again for someone named Ottilie.

'The hospital made what inquiries they could, but none of your friends or relatives knew of anyone called Ottilie associated with you.

'You began to recover, but it was clear you had something heavily on your mind. You refused to reveal what it was, but you did ask one of the doctors whether he could have his secretary try to find the name Ottilie Harshom in any directory. When it could not be found, you became depressed. However, you did not raise the matter again—at least, I am told you did not—until after your discharge when you set out on this quest for Ottilie Harshom, in which, in spite of completely negative results, you continue.

'Now, what must one deduce from that?' He paused to look across the table at his guest, left eyebrow raised.

'That you are even better informed than I thought,' Colin said, without encouragement. 'If I were your patient your inquiries might be justified, but as I am not, and have not the least intention of consulting you professionally, I regard them as intrusive, and possibly unethical.'

If he had expected his host to be put out he was disappointed. The doctor continued to regard him with interested detachment.

'I'm not yet entirely convinced that you ought not to be someone's patient,' he remarked. 'However, let me tell you why it was I, rather than another Harshom, who was led to make these inquiries. Perhaps you may then think them less impertinent. But I am going to preface that with a warning against false hopes. You must understand that the Ottilie Harshom you are seeking *does not exist and has not existed*. That is quite definite.

'Nevertheless, there *is* one aspect of this matter which puzzled me greatly, and that I cannot bring myself to dismiss as coincidence. You see, the name Ottilie Harshom was not entirely unknown to me. No—' He raised his hand. '—I repeat, no false hopes. There *is no* Ottilie Harshom, but there has been—or, rather, there have in the past been, two Ottilie Harshoms.'

Colin Trafford's resentful manner had entirely dropped away. He sat, leaning a little forward, watching his host intently.

'But,' the doctor emphasised, 'it was all long ago. The first was my grandmother. She was born in 1832, married Grandfather Harshom in 1861, and died in 1866. The other was my sister: she, poor little thing, was born in 1884 and died in 1890. . .'

He paused again. Colin made no comment. He went on:

'I am the only survivor of this branch so it is not altogether surprising that the others have forgotten there was ever such a name in the family, but when I heard of your inquiries I said to myself: There is something out of order here. Ottilie is not the rarest of names, but on any scale of popularity it would come a very long way down indeed; and Harshom *is* a rare name. The odds against these two being coupled by mere chance must be some quite astronomical figure. Something so large that I can not believe it *is* chance. Somewhere there must be a link, some cause. . .

'So, I set out to discover if I could find out why this young man Trafford should have hit upon this improbable conjunction of names—and, seemingly, become obsessed by it.—You would not care to help me at this point?'

Colin continued to look at him, but said nothing.

'No? Very well. When I had all the available data assembled the conclusion I had to draw was this: that as a result of your accident you underwent some kind of traumatic experience, an experience of considerable intensity as well as unusual quality. Its intensity one deduces from your subsequent fixation of purpose; the unusual quality partly from the pronounced state of confusion in which you regained consciousness, and partly from the consistency with which you deny recollecting anything from the moment of the accident until you awoke.

'Now, if that were indeed a blank, why did you awake in such a confused condition? There must have been some recollection to cause it. And if there was something akin to ordinary dream images, why this refusal to speak of them? There must have been, therefore, some experience of great personal significance wherein the name Ottilie Harshom was a very potent element indeed.

'Well, Mr Trafford. Is the reasoning good, the conclusion valid? Let me suggest, as a physician, that such things are a burden that should be shared.'

Colin considered for some little time, but when he still did not speak the doctor added:

'You are almost at the end of the road, you know. Only two more Harshoms on the list, and I assure you they won't be able to help—so what then?' Colin said, in a flat voice:

'I expect you are right. You should know. All the same, I must see them. There might be something, some clue . . . I can't neglect the least possibility. . . I had just a little hope when you invited me here. I knew that you had a family. . .'

'I *had*,' the doctor said, quietly. 'My son Malcolm was killed racing at Brooklands in 1927. He was unmarried. My daughter married, but she had no children. She was killed in a raid on London in 1941. . . So there it ends. . .' He shook his head slowly.

'I am sorry,' said Colin. Then: 'Have you a picture of your daughter that I may see?'

'She wasn't of the generation you are looking for.'

'I realise that, but nevertheless. . .'

'Very well—when we return to the study. Meanwhile, you've not yet said what you think of my reasoning.'

'Oh, it was good.'

'But you are still disinclined to talk about it? Well, I am not. And I can still go a little further. Now, this experience of yours cannot have been of a kind to cause a feeling of shame or disgust, or you would be trying to sublimate it in some way, which manifestly you are not. Therefore it is highly probable that the cause of your silence is fear. Something makes you afraid to discuss the experience. You are not, I am satisfied, afraid of facing it; therefore your fear must be of the consequences of communicating it. Consequences possibly to someone else, but much more probably to yourself. . .'

Colin went on regarding him expressionlessly for a moment. Then he relaxed a little and leaned back in his chair. For the first time he smiled faintly.

'You do get there, in the end, don't you, Doctor? But do you mind if I say that you make quite germanically heavy-going of it? And the whole thing is so simple, really. It boils down to this. If a man, any man, claims to have had an experience which is outside all normal experience, it will be inferred, will it not, that he is in some way not quite a normal man? In that case, he cannot be entirely relied upon to react to a particular situation as a normal man should—and if his reactions may be non-normal, how can he be really dependable? He may be, of course—but would it not be sounder policy to put authority into the hands of a man about whom there is no

doubt? Better to be on the safe side. So he is passed over. His failure to make the expected step is not unnoticed. A small cloud, a mere wrack, of doubt and risk begins to gather above him. It is tenuous, too insubstantial for him to disperse, yet it casts a faint, persistent shadow.

'There is, I imagine, no such thing as a normal human being, but there is a widespread feeling that there ought to be. Any organisation has a conception of "the type of man we want here," which is regarded as the normal for its purposes. So every man there attempts more or less to accord to it—organisational man, in fact—and anyone who diverges more than slightly from the type in either his public, or in his private, life does so to the peril of his career. There is, as you said, fear of the results to my self: it is, as I said, so simple.'

'True enough,' the doctor agreed. 'But you have not taken any care to disguise the consequence of the experience—the hunt for Ottilie Harshom.'

'I don't need to. Could anything be more reassuringly normal than "man seeks girl?" I have invented a background which has quite satisfied any interested friends—and even several Harshoms.'

'I dare say.—None of them being aware of the "coincidence" in the conjunction of "Ottilie" with "Harshom." But I am.'

He waited for Colin Trafford to make some comment on that. When none came, he went on:

'Look, my boy. You have this business very heavily on your mind. There are only the two of us here. I have no links whatever with your firm. My profession should be enough safeguard for your confidence, but I will undertake a special guarantee if you like. It will do you good to unburden—and I should like to get to the bottom of this. . .'

But Colin shook his head.

'You won't, you know. Even if I were to tell you, you'd only be the more mystified—as I am.'

'Two heads are better than one. We could try,' said the doctor, and waited.

Colin considered again, for some moments. Then he lifted his gaze, and met the doctor's steadily.

'Very well then. I've tried. You shall try. But first I would like to see a picture of your daughter. Have you one taken when she was about twenty-five?'

They left the table and went back to the study. The doctor waved Colin to a chair, and crossed to a corner cupboard. He took out a small pile of cardboard mounts and looked through them. He selected three, gazed at

them thoughtfully for a few seconds, and then handed them over. While Colin studied them he busied himself with pouring brandy from a decanter.

Presently Colin looked up.

'No,' he said. 'And yet there is something. . .' He tried covering parts of the full-face portrait with his hand. 'Something about the setting and shape of the eyes—but not quite. The brow, perhaps, but it's difficult to tell with the hair done like that. . .' He pondered the photographs a little longer, and then handed them back. 'Thank you for letting me see them.'

The doctor picked up one of the others and passed it over.

'This was Malcolm, my son.'

It showed a laughing young man standing by the forepart of a car which bristled with exhaust manifold and had its bonnet held down by straps.

'He loved that car,' said the doctor, 'but it was too fast for the old track there. It went over the banking, and hit a tree.'

He took the picture back, and handed Colin a glass of brandy.

Colin swirled it. Neither of them spoke for some little time. Then he tasted the brandy, and, presently, lit a cigarette.

'Very well,' he said again. 'I'll try to tell you. But first I'll tell you what *happened*—whether it was subjective, or not, it happened for me. The implications and so on we can look at later—if you want to.'

'Good,' agreed the doctor. 'But tell me first, do we start from the moment of the accident—or was there anything at all relevant before that?'

'No,' Colin Trafford said, 'that's where it *does* start.'

* * *

It was just another day. Everything and everybody perfectly ordinary—except that this demonstration was something a bit special. What it concerned is not my secret, and not, as far as I know, relevant. We all gathered round the apparatus. Deakin who was in charge, pulled down a switch. Something began to hum, and then to whine, like a motor running faster and faster. The whine became a shriek as it went up the scale. There was a quite piercingly painful moment or two near the threshold of audibility, then a sense of relief because it was over and gone, with everything seeming quiet again. I was looking across at Deakin watching his dials, with his fingers held ready over the switches, and then, just as I was in the act of turning my head towards the demonstration again, there was a flash. . . I didn't hear anything, or feel anything: there was just this dazzling

white flash. . . Then nothing but black. . . I heard people crying out, and a woman's voice screaming . . . screaming . . . screaming. . .

I felt crushed by a great weight. I opened my eyes. A sharp pain jabbed through them into my head, but I struggled against the weight, and found it was due to two or three people being on top of me; so I managed to shove a couple of them off, and sit up. There were several other people lying about on the ground, and a few more picking themselves up. A couple of feet to my left was a large wheel. I looked further up and found that it was attached to a bus—a bus that from my position seemed to tower like a scarlet skyscraper, and appeared, moreover, to be tilted and about to fall on me. It caused me to get up very quickly, and as I did I grabbed a young woman who had been lying across my legs, and dragged her to a safer place. Her face was dead white, and she was unconscious.

I looked around. It wasn't difficult to see what had happened. The bus, which must have been travelling at a fair speed, had, for some reason got out of control, run across the crowded pavement, and through the plate-glass window of a shop. The forepart of the top deck had been telescoped against the front of the building, and it was up there that the screaming was going on. Several people were still lying on the ground, a woman moving feebly, a man groaning, two or three more quite still. Three streams of blood were meandering slowly across the pavement among the crystals of broken glass. All the traffic had stopped, and I could see a couple of policemen's helmets bobbing through the crowd towards us.

I moved my arms and legs experimentally. They worked perfectly well, and painlessly. But I felt dazed, and my head throbbed. I put my hand up to it and discovered a quite tender spot where I must have taken a blow on the left occiput.

The policemen got through. One of them started pushing back the gaping bystanders, the other took a look at the casualties on the ground. A third appeared and went up to the top deck of the bus to investigate the screaming there.

I tried to conquer my daze, and looked round further. The place was Regent Street, a little up from Piccadilly Circus; the wrecked window was one of Austin Reed's. I looked up again at the bus. It was certainly tilted, but not in danger of toppling, for it was firmly wedged into the window opening to within a yard of the word 'General,' gleaming in gold letters on its scarlet side.

At this point it occurred to me that I was super-numerary, and that if I were to hang around much longer I should find myself roped in as a witness —not, mind you, that I would grudge being a witness in the ordinary way, if

it would do anyone any good, but I was suddenly and acutely aware that this was not at all in the ordinary way. For one thing I had no knowledge of anything whatever but the aftermath—and, for another, what was I doing here anyway. . . ? One moment I had been watching a demonstration out at Watford; the next, there was this. How the devil did I come to be in Regent Street at all. . . ?

I quietly edged my way into the crowd, then out of it again, zigzagged across the road amid the held-up traffic, and headed for the Café Royal, a bit further down.

They seemed to have done things to the old place since I was there last, a couple of years before, but the important thing was to find the bar, and that I did, without difficulty.

'A double brandy, and some soda,' I told the barman.

He gave it me, and slid along the siphon. I pulled some money out of my pocket, coppers and a little small silver. So I made to reach for my notecase.

'Half a crown, sir,' the barman told me, as if fending off a note.

I blinked at him. Still, he said it. I slid over three shillings. He seemed gratified.

I added soda to the brandy, and took a welcome drink. It was as I was putting the glass down that I caught sight of myself in the mirror behind the bar. . .

I used to have a moustache. I came out of the army with it, but decided to jettison it when I went up to Cambridge. But there it was—a little less luxuriant, perhaps, but resurrected. I put up my hand and felt it. There was no illusion, and it was genuine, too. At almost the same moment I noticed my suit. Now, I used to have a suit pretty much like that, years ago. Not at all a bad suit either, but still, not quite the thing we organisation men wear in E.P.I.. . .

I had a swimming sensation, took another drink of the brandy, and felt, a little unsteadily, for a cigarette. The packet I pulled out of my pocket was unfamiliar—have you ever heard of Player's 'Mariner' cigarettes—No? Neither had I, but I got one out, and lit it with a very unsteady match. The dazed feeling was not subsiding; it was growing, rapidly. . .

I felt for my inside pocket. No wallet. It should have been there—perhaps some opportunist in the crowd round the bus had got it. . . I sought through the other pockets—a fountain-pen, a bunch of keys, a couple of cash receipts from Harrods, a cheque book—containing cheques addressed to the Knightsbridge branch of the Westminster Bank. Well, the bank was all right, but why Knightsbridge?—I live in Hampstead. . .

To try to get some kind of grip on things I began to recapitulate from the moment I had opened my eyes and found the bus towering over me. It was quite vivid. I had a sharp recollection of staring up at that scarlet menace, with the gilded word 'General' shining brightly . . . yes, in gleaming gold—only, as you know, the word 'General' hasn't been seen on London buses since it was replaced by 'London Transport' in 1933. . .

I was getting a little rattled by now, and looked round the bar for something to steady my wits. On one table I noticed a newspaper that someone had discarded. I went across to fetch it, and got carefully back on to my stool before I looked at it. Then I took a deep breath and regarded the front page. My first response was dismay for the whole thing was given up to a single display advertisement. Yet there was some reassurance, of a kind, at the top, for it read: '*Daily Mail*, London, Wednesday 27 January 1954.' So it was at least the right day—the one we had fixed for the demonstration at the labs.

I turned to the middle page, and read: 'Disorders in Delhi. One of the greatest exhibitions of Civil disobedience so far staged in India took place here today demanding the immediate release of Nehru from prison. For nearly all the hours of daylight the city has been at a standstill—' Then an item in an adjoining column caught my eye: 'In answer to a question from the Opposition front bench Mr Butler, the Prime Minister, assured the House that the Government was giving serious consideration——' In a dizzy way I glanced at the top of the page: the date there agreed with that on the front, 27 January 1954, but just below it there was a picture with the caption: 'A scene from last night's production of *The Lady Loves*, at the Laughton Theatre, in which Miss Amanda Coward plays the lead in the last of her father's many musical plays. *The Lady Loves* was completed only a few days before Noel Coward's death last August, and a moving tribute to his memory was paid at the end of the performance by Mr Ivor Novello who directed the production.'

I read that again, with care. Then I looked up and about, for reassurance, at my fellow drinkers, at the furniture, at the barman, at the bottles: it was all convincingly real.

I dropped the paper, and finished the rest of my brandy. I could have done with another, but it would have been awkward if, with my wallet gone, the barman should change his mind about his modest price. I glanced at my watch—and there was a thing, too! It was a very nice watch, gold, with a crocodile strap, and hands that stood at twelve-thirty, but I had never seen it before. I took it off and looked at the back. There was a pretty bit of engraving there; it said: 'C. for ever O. 10.X.50.' And it jolted me quite a

little, for 1950 was the year I was married—though not in October, and not to anyone called O. My wife's name was Della. Mechanically I restrapped the watch on my wrist, and left.

The interlude and the brandy had done me some good. When I stepped out of Regent Street again I was feeling less dazed (though, if it is not too fine a distinction, more bewildered) and my head had almost ceased to ache, so that I was able to pay more attention to the world about me.

At first sight Piccadilly Circus gave an impression of being much as usual, and yet a suggestion that there was something a bit wrong with it. After a few moments I perceived that it was the people and the cars. Surprising numbers of the men and women, too, wore clothing that looked shabby, and the flower-girls below Eros seemed like bundles of rags. The look of the women who were not shabby took me completely aback. Almost without exception their hats were twelve-inch platter-like things balanced on the top of their heads. The skirts were long, almost to their ankles, and, worn under fur coats, gave an impression that they were dressed for the evening, at midday. Their shoes were pointed, over-ornamented, pin-heeled and quite hideous. I suppose all high-fashion would look ludicrous if one were to come upon it unprepared, but then one never does—at least one never had until now. . . I might have felt like Rip van Winkle newly awakened, but for the date line on that newspaper . . . The cars were odd, too. They seemed curiously high-built, small, and lacking in the flashy effects one had grown accustomed to, and when I paid more attention I did not see one make I could readily identify—except a couple of unmistakable Rolls.

While I stood staring curiously a plate-hatted lady in a well-worn fur-coat posted herself beside me and addressed me as 'dearie' in a somewhat grim way. I decided to move on, and headed for Piccadilly. On the way, I looked across at St James's Church. The last time I had seen it it was clothed in scaffolding, with a hoarding in the garden to help to raise funds for the rebuilding—that would have been about a fortnight before—but now all that had gone, and it looked as if it had never been bombed at all. I crossed the road to inspect it more closely, and was still more impressed with the wonderful job they had made of the restoration.

Presently I found myself in front of Hatchard's window, and paused to examine their contents. Some of the books had authors whose names I knew; I saw works by Priestley, C. S. Lewis, Bertrand Russell, T. S. Eliot, and others, but scarcely a title that I recognised. And then, down in the front, my eye was caught by a book in a predominantly pink jacket: *Life's Young Day*, a novel by Colin Trafford.

I went on goggling at it, probably with my mouth open. I once had ambitions in that direction, you know. If it had not been for the war I'd probably have taken an Arts degree, and tried my hand at it, but as things happened I made a friend in the regiment who turned me to science, *and* could put me in the way of a job with E.P.I. later. Therefore it took me a minute or two to recover from the coincidence of seeing my name on the cover, and, when I did, my curiosity was still strong enough to take me into the shop.

There I discovered a pile of half a dozen copies lying on a table. I picked up the top one, and opened it. The name was plain enough on the title-page—and opposite was a list of seven other titles under 'author of.' I did not recognise the publisher's name, but overleaf there was the announcement: 'First published January 1954.'

I turned it over in my hand, and then all but dropped it. On the back was a picture of the author; undoubtedly me—and with the moustache. . . The floor seemed to tilt slightly beneath my feet.

Then, somewhere over my shoulder, there was a voice; one that I seemed to recognise. It said:

'Well met, Narcissus! Doing a bit of sales-promotion, eh? How's it going?'

'Martin!' I exclaimed. I had never been so glad to see anyone in all my life. 'Martin. Why we've not met since—when was it?'

'Oh, for at least three days, old boy,' he said, looking a little surprised.

Three days! I'd seen a lot of Martin Falls at Cambridge, but only run across him twice since we came down, and the last of those was two years ago. But he went on:

'What about a spot of lunch, if you're not booked?' he suggested.

And that wasn't quite right either. I'd not heard anyone speak of a *spot* of lunch for years. However, I did my best to feel as if things were becoming more normal.

'Fine,' I said, 'but you'll have to pay. I've had my wallet pinched.'

He clicked his tongue.

'Hope there wasn't much in it. Anyway, what about the club? They'll cash you a cheque there.'

I put the book I was still holding back on the pile, and we left.

'Funny thing,' Martin said. 'Just ran into Tommy—Tommy Westhouse. Sort of blowing sulphur—hopping mad with his American agent. You remember that godawful thing of Tommy's—*The Thornèd Rose*—kind of

Ben Hur meets Cleopatra, with the Marquis de Sade intervening? Well, it seems this agent—' He rambled on with a shoppy, anecdotal recital full of names that meant nothing to me, but lasted through several streets and brought us almost to Pall Mall. At the end of it he said: 'You didn't tell me how *Life's Young Day's* doing. Somebody said it was over-subscribed. Saw the Lit Sup wagged a bit of a finger at you. Not had time to read it myself yet. Too much on hand.'

I chose the easier—the non-committal way. It seemed easier than trying to understand, so I told him it was doing just about as expected.

The Club, when in due course we reached it, turned out to be the Savage. I am not a member, but the porter greeted me by name, as though I were in the habit of dropping in every day.

'Just a quick one,' Martin suggested. 'Then we'll look in and see George about your cheque.'

I had misgivings over that, but it went off all right, and during lunch I did my best to keep my end up. I had the same troubles that I have now—true it was from the other end, but the principle still holds: if things are too queer people will find it easier to think you are potty than to help you; so you keep up a front.

I am afraid I did not do very well. Several times I caught Martin glancing at me with a perplexed expression. Once he asked: 'Quite sure you're feeling all right, old man?'

But the climax did not come until, with cheese on his plate, he reached out his left hand for a stick of celery. And as he did so I noticed the gold signet ring on his little finger, and that jolted me right out of my caution—for, you see, Martin doesn't have a little finger on his left hand, or a third finger, either. He left both of them somewhere near the Rhine in 1945. . .

'Good God!' I exclaimed. For some reason that pierced me more sharply than anything yet. He turned his face towards me.

'What on earth's the matter, man? You're as white as a sheet.'

'Your hand—' I said.

He glanced at it curiously, and then back at me, even more curiously.

'Looks all right to me,' he said, eyes a little narrowed.

'But—but you lost the two last fingers—in the war,' I exclaimed. His eyebrows rose, and then came down in an anxious frown. He said, with kind intention:

'Got it a bit mixed, haven't you, old man? Why, the war was over before I was born.'

Well, it goes a bit hazy just after that, and when it got coherent again I was lying back in a big chair, with Martin sitting close beside, saying:

'So take my advice, old man. Just you trot along to the quack this afternoon. Must've taken a bit more of a knock than you thought, you know. Funny thing, the brain—can't be too careful. Well, I'll have to go now I'm afraid. Appointment. But don't you put it off. Risky. Let me know how it goes.' And then he was gone.

I lay back in the chair. Curiously enough I was feeling far more myself than I had since I came to on the pavement in Regent Street. It was as if the biggest jolt yet had shaken me out of the daze, and got the gears of my wits into mesh again. . . I was glad to be rid of Martin, and able to think. . .

I looked round the lounge. As I said, I am not a member, and did not know the place well enough to be sure of details, but I rather thought the arrangement was a little different, and the carpet, and some of the light fittings, from when I saw it last. . .

There were few people around. Two talking in a corner, three napping, two more reading papers; none taking any notice of me. I went over to the periodicals table, and brought back *The New Statesman*, dated 22 January 1954. The front page leader was advocating the nationalisation of transport as a first step towards putting the means of production into the hands of the people and so ending unemployment. There was a wave of nostalgia about that. I turned on, glancing at articles which baffled me for lack of context. I was glad to find Critic present, and I noticed that among the things that were currently causing him concern was some experimental work going on in Germany. His misgivings were, it seemed, shared by several eminent scientists, for, while there was little doubt now that nuclear fission was a theoretical possibility, the proposed methods of control were inadequate. There could well be a chain reaction resulting in a disaster of cosmic proportions. A consortium which included names famous in the Arts as well as many illustrious in the sciences was being formed to call upon the League of Nations to protest to the German government in the name of humanity against reckless research. . .

Well, well. . . !

With returning confidence in myself I sat and pondered.

Gradually, and faintly at first, something began to glimmer . . . Not anything about the how, or the why—I still have no useful theories about those—but about *what* could conceivably have happened.

It was vague—set off, perhaps, by the thought of that random neutron which I knew in one set of circumstances to have been captured by a

uranium atom, but which, in another set of circumstances, apparently had not. . .

And there, of course, one was brought up against Einstein and relativity which, as you know, denies the possibility of determining motion absolutely and consequently leads into the idea of the four-dimensional space-time continuum. Well, then, since you cannot determine the motions of the factors in the continuum, any pattern of motion must be illusory, and there cannot be any determinable consequences. Nevertheless, where the factors are closely similar—are composed of similar atoms in roughly the same relation to the continuum, so to speak—you *may* quite well get similar consequences. They can never be identical, of course, or determination of motion would be possible. But they could be very similar, and capable of consideration in terms of Einstein's Special Theory, and they *could* be determined further by a set of closely similar factors. In other words although the infinite point which we may call a moment in 1954 *must* occur throughout the continuum, it *exists* only in relation to each observer, and *appears* to have similar existence in relation to certain close groups of observers. However, since no two observers can be identical—that is, the same observer—each must perceive a different past, present, and future from that perceived by any other; consequently, what he perceives arises only from the factors of his relationship to the continuum, and exists only for him.

Therefore I began to understand that *what* had happened must be this: in some way—which I cannot begin to grasp—I had somehow been translated to the position of a different observer—one whose angle of view was in some respects very close to my own, and yet different enough to have relationships, and therefore realities, unperceived by me. In other words, he must have lived in a world real only to him, just as I had lived in a world real only to me—until this very peculiar transposition had occurred to put me in the position of observing *his* world, with, of course, its relevant past and future, instead of the one I was accustomed to.

Mind you, simple as it is when you consider it, I certainly did not grasp the form of it all at once, but I did argue my way close enough to the observer-existence relationship to decide that whatever might have gone amiss, my own mind was more or less all right. The trouble really seemed to be that it was in the wrong place, and getting messages not intended for me; a receiver somehow hooked into the wrong circuit.

Well, that's not good, in fact, it's bad; but it's still a lot better than a faulty receiver. And it braced me a bit to realise that.

I sat there quite a time trying to get it clear, and wondering what I should do, until I came to the end of my packet of 'Mariner' cigarettes. Then I went to the telephone.

First I dialed Electro-Physical Industries. Nothing happened. I looked them up in the book. It was quite a different number, on a different exchange. So I dialed that.

'Extension one three three,' I told the girl on the desk, and then, on second thoughts, named my own department.

'Oh. You want Extension five nine,' she told me.

Somebody answered. I said:

'I'd like to speak to Mr Colin Trafford.'

'I'm sorry,' said the girl. 'I can't find that name in this department,' the voice told me.

Back to the desk. Then a longish pause.

'I'm sorry,' said the girl. 'I can't find that name in our staff list.'

I hung up. So, evidently, I was not employed by E.P.I. I thought a moment, and then dialed my Hampstead number. It answered promptly. 'Transcendental Belts and Corsets,' it announced brightly. I put down the receiver.

It occurred to me to look myself up in the book. I was there, all right: 'Trafford, Colin W., 54 Hogarth Court, Duchess Gardens, S.W.7. SLOane 67021.' So I tried that. The phone at the other end rang . . . and went on ringing. . .

I came out of the box wondering what to do next. It was an extremely odd feeling to be bereft of orientation, rather as if one had been dropped abruptly into a foreign city without even a hotel room for a base—and somehow made worse by the city being foreign only in minor and personal details.

After further reflection I decided that the best protective coloration would come from doing what *this* Colin Trafford might reasonably be expected to do. If he had no work to do at E.P.I., he did at least have a home to go to. . .

A nice block of flats, Hogarth Court, springy carpet and illuminated floral arrangement in the hall, that sort of thing, but, at the moment no porter in view, so I went straight to the lift. The place did not look big enough to contain fifty-four flats, so I took a chance on the five meaning the fifth floor, and sure enough I stepped out to find 54 on the door facing me. I took out my bunch of keys, tried the most likely one, and it fitted.

Inside was a small hall. Nothing distinctive—white paint, lightly patterned paper, close maroon carpet, occasional table with telephone and a few flowers in a vase, with a nice gilt-framed mirror above, the hard occasional chair, a passage off, lots of doors. I paused.

'Hullo,' I said, experimentally. Then a little louder: 'Hullo! Anyone at home?'

Neither voice nor sound responded. I closed the door behind me. What now? Well—well, hang it, I was—am—Colin Trafford! I took off my overcoat. Nowhere to put it. Second try revealed the coat closet. . . Several other coats already in there. Male and female, a woman's overshoes, too. . . I added mine.

I decided to get the geography of the place, and see what home was really like. . .

Well, you won't want an inventory, but it was a nice flat. Larger than I had thought at first. Well furnished and arranged; not with extravagance, but not with stint, either. It showed taste too; though not my taste—but what is taste? Either feeling for period, or refined selection from a fashion. I could feel that this was the latter, but the fashion was strange to me, and therefore lacked attraction . . .

The kitchen was interesting. A fridge, no washer, single-sink, no plate racks, no laminated tops, old-fashioned looking electric cooker, packet of soap powder, no synthetic detergents, curious light panel about three feet square in the ceiling, no mixer. . .

The sitting-room was airy, chairs comfortable. Nothing spindly. A large radiogram, rather ornate, no F.M. on its scale. Lighting again by ceiling panels, and square things like glass cakeboxes on stands. No television.

I prowled round the whole place. Bedroom feminine, but not fussy. Twin beds. Bathroom tiled, white. Spare bedroom, small double bed. And so on. But it was a room at the end of the passage that interested me most. A sort of study. One wall all bookshelves, some of the books familiar—the older ones—others not. An easy-chair, a lighter chair. In front of the window a broad, leather-topped desk, with a view across the bare-branched trees in the Gardens, roofs beyond, plenty of sky. On the desk a covered typewriter, adjustable lamp, several folders with sheets of paper untidily projecting, cigarette box, metal ashtray, clean and empty, and a photograph in a leather frame.

I looked at the photograph carefully. A charming study. She'd be perhaps twenty-four—twenty-five? Intelligent, happy-looking, somebody one would like to know—but not anyone I did know. . .

There was a cupboard on the left of the desk, and, on it, a glass-fronted case with eight books on it; the rest was empty. The books were all in bright paper jackets, looking as new. The one on the right-hand end was the same that I had seen in Hatchard's that morning—*Life's Young Day*; all the rest, too, bore the name Colin Trafford. I sat down in the swivel-chair at the desk and pondered them for some moments. Then, with a curious, schizoid feeling I pulled out *Life's Young Day*, and opened it.

It was, perhaps, half an hour, or more, later that I caught the sound of a key in the outer door. I decided that, on the whole, it would be better to disclose myself than wait to be discovered. So I opened the door. Along at the end of the passage a figure in three-quarter length grey suède coat which showed a tweed skirt beneath was dumping parcels on to the hall table. At the sound of my door she turned her head. It was the original of the photograph, all right; but not in the mood of the photograph. As I approached, she looked at me with an expression of surprise, mixed with other feelings that I could not identify; but certainly it was not an adoring-wife-greets-husband look.

'Oh,' she said. 'You're in, what happened?'

'Happened?' I repeated, feeling for a lead.

'Well, I understood you had one of those so-important meetings with Dickie at the BBC fixed for this afternoon,' she said, a little curtly I thought.

'Oh. Oh, that, yes. Yes, he had to put it off,' I replied, clumsily.

She stopped still, and inspected me carefully. A little oddly, too, I thought. I stood looking at her, wondering what to do, and wishing I had had the sense to think up some kind of plan for this inevitable meeting instead of wasting my time over *Life's Young Day*. I hadn't even had the sense to find out her name. It was clear that I'd got away wrong somehow the moment I opened my mouth. Besides, there was a quality about her that upset my balance altogether. . . It hit me in a way I'd not known for years, and more shrewdly than it had then. . . Somehow, when you are thirty-three you don't expect these things to happen—well, not to happen quite like that, any more. . . Not with a great surge in your heart, and everything coming suddenly bright and alive as if she had just switched it all into existence. . .

So we stood looking at one another; she with a half-frown, I trying to cope with a turmoil of elation and confusion, unable to say a word.

She glanced down, and began to unbutton her coat. She, too, seemed uncertain.

'If——' she began. But at that moment the telephone rang.

With an air of welcoming the interruption, she picked up the receiver. In the quiet of the hall I could hear a woman's voice ask for Colin.

'Yes,' she said, 'he's here.' And she held the receiver out to me, with a very curious look.

'Hullo,' I said. 'Colin here.'

'Oh, indeed,' replied the voice, 'and why, may I ask?'

'Er—I don't quite——' I began, but she cut me short.

'Now, look here, Colin, I've already wasted an hour waiting for you, thinking that if you couldn't come you might at least have had the decency to ring me up and tell me. Now I find you're just sitting at home. Not quite good enough, Colin.'

'I—um—who is it? Who's speaking?' was the only temporising move I could think of. I was acutely conscious that the young woman beside me was frozen stock-still in the act of taking off her coat.

'Oh, for God's sake,' said the voice, exasperated. 'What silly game is this? Who do you *think* it is?'

'That's what I'm asking,' I said.

'Oh, don't be such a clown, Colin. If it's because Ottilie's still there—and I bet she is—you're just being stupid. She answered the phone herself, so she *knows* it's me.'

'Then perhaps I'd better ask her who you are,' I suggested.

'Oh—you must be tight as an owl. Go and sleep it off,' she snapped, and the phone went dead.

I put the receiver back in the rest. The young woman was looking at me with an expression of genuine bewilderment. In the quietness of the hall she must have been able to hear the other voice almost as clearly as I had. She turned away, and busied herself with taking her coat off and putting it on a hanger in the closet. When she'd carefully done that she turned back.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'You aren't tight, are you? What's it all about? What has dear Dickie done?'

'Dickie?' I inquired. The slight furrow between her brows deepened.

'Oh, really, Colin. If you think I don't know Dickie's voice on the telephone by this time. . .'

'Oh,' I said. A bloomer of a peculiarly cardinal kind, that. In fact, it is hard to think of a more unlikely mistake than that a man should confuse the gender of his friends. Unless I wanted to be thought quite potty, I must take steps to clarify the situation.

‘Look, can’t we go into the sitting-room. There’s something I want to tell you,’ I suggested.

She watched me thoughtfully.

‘I think perhaps I’d rather not hear it, Colin.’

‘Please,’ I said. ‘It’s important. It really is. . .’

She hesitated, and then consented, reluctantly.

‘Oh, very well, if you must. . .’

We went in. She switched on the heater, and sat down. ‘Well?’ she asked.

I took the chair opposite, and wondered how to begin. Even if I had been clear in my own mind about what had happened, it would have been difficult enough. But how to convey that though the physical form was Colin Trafford’s, and I myself was Colin Trafford, yet I was not *that* Colin Trafford; not the one who wrote books and was married to her, but a kind of alternative Colin Trafford astray from an alternative world? What seemed to be wanted was some kind of approach which would not immediately suggest a call for an alienist and it wasn’t easy to perceive.

‘Well?’ she repeated.

‘It’s difficult to explain,’ I temporised, but truthfully enough.

‘I’m sure it is,’ she replied, without encouragement, and added: ‘Would it perhaps be easier if you didn’t look at me like that? I’d prefer it, too.’

‘Something very odd has happened to me,’ I told her.

‘Oh, dear, again?’ she said. ‘Do you want my sympathy, or something?’

I was taken aback, and a little confused.

‘Do you mean it’s happened to him before?’ I asked.

She looked at me hard.

‘Him? Who’s him? I thought you were talking about you. And what I mean is last time it happened it was Dickie, and the time before that it was Frances, and before that it was Lucy. . . And now you’ve given Dickie a most peculiar kind of brushoff. . . Am I supposed to be surprised. . . ?’

I was learning about my *alter ego* quite fast, but we were off the track. I tried:

‘No, you don’t understand. This is something quite different.’

‘Of course not. Wives never do, do they? And it’s always different. Well, if that’s all that’s so important. . .’ She began to get up.

‘No, please. . .’ I said anxiously.

She checked herself, looking very carefully at me again. The half-frown came back.

'No,' she said. 'No, I don't think I do understand. At least, I—I hope not. . .' And she went on examining me, with something like growing uncertainty, I thought.

When you plead for understanding you can scarcely keep it on an impersonal basis, but when you don't know whether the best address would be 'my dear,' or 'darling,' or some more intimate variant, nor whether it should be prefaced by first name, nickname, or pet name, the way ahead becomes thorny indeed. Besides, there was this persistent misunderstanding on the wrong level.

'Ottilie, darling,' I tried—and that was clearly no usual form, for, momentarily, her eyes almost goggled, but I ploughed on: 'It isn't at all what you're thinking—nothing a bit like that. It's—well, it's that in a way I'm not the same person. . .'

She was back in charge of herself.

'Oddly enough, I've been aware of that for some time,' she said. '*And* I could remind you that you've said something like that before, more than once. All right then, let me go on for you; so you're not the same person I married, so you'd like a divorce—or is it that you're afraid Dickie's husband is going to cite you this time? Oh, God! How sick I am of all this. . .'

'No, no,' I protested desperately. 'It's not that sort of thing at all. Do please be patient. It's a thing that's terribly difficult to explain. . .' I paused, looking at her. That did not make it any easier. Indeed, it was far from helping the rational processes. She sat looking back at me, still with that half-frown, but now it was a little more uneasy than displeased.

'Something *has* happened to you. . .' she said.

'That's what I'm trying to tell you about,' I told her, but I doubt whether she heard it. Her eyes grew wider as she looked. Suddenly they avoided mine.

'No!' she said. 'Oh, *no*!' She looked as if she were about to cry, and wound her fingers tightly together in her lap. She half-whispered: 'Oh, no!. . . Oh, please God, no!. . . Not again. . . Haven't I been hurt enough?. . . I won't. . . I won't. . . !'

Then she jumped up, and, before I was halfway out of my chair, she was out of the room. . .

* * *

Colin Trafford paused to light a fresh cigarette, and took his time before going on. At length he pulled his thoughts back.

‘Well,’ he went on, ‘obviously you will have realised by now that *that* Mrs Trafford was born Ottilie Harshom. It happened in 1928, and she married *that* Colin Trafford in 1949. Her father was killed in a plane crash in 1938—I don’t remember her ever mentioning his first name. That’s unfortunate—there are a lot of things that are unfortunate: had I had any idea that I might be jerked back here I’d have taken more notice of a lot of things. But I hadn’t. . . Something exceedingly odd had happened, but that was no reason to suppose that an equally odd thing would happen, in reverse. . .

‘I did do my best, out of my own curiosity, to discover when the schism had taken place. There must, as I saw it, have been some point where, perhaps by chance, some pivotal thing had happened, or failed to happen, and finding it could bring one closer to knowing the moment, the atom of time, that had been split by some random neutron to give two atoms of time diverging into different futures. Once that had taken place, consequences gradually accumulating would make the conditions on one plane progressively different from those on the other.

‘Perhaps that is always happening. Perhaps chance is continually causing two different outcomes so that in a dimension we cannot perceive there are infinite numbers of planes, some so close to our own and so recently split off that they vary only in minor details, others vastly different. Planes on which some mis-adventure caused Alexander to be beaten by the Persians, Scipio to fall before Hannibal, Caesar to stay beyond the Rubicon; infinite, infinite planes of the random split and resplit by the random. Who can tell? But, now that we know the Universe for a random place, why not?

‘But I couldn’t come near fixing the moment. It was, I *think*, somewhere in late 1926, or early 1927. Further than that one seemed unable to go without the impossible data of quantities of records from both planes for comparison. Something happening, or not happening, about then had brought about results which prevented, among other things, the rise of Hitler, and thus the second world war—and consequently postponed the achievement of nuclear fission on this plane of our dichotomy—if that is a good word for it.

‘Anyway, it was for me, and as I said, simply a matter of incidental curiosity. My active concerns were more immediate. And the really important one was Ottilie. . .

‘I have, as you know, been married—and I was fond of my wife. It was, as people say, a successful marriage, and it never occurred to me to doubt that—until this thing happened to me. I don’t want to be disloyal to Della now, and I don’t think she was unhappy—but I am immensely thankful for

one thing: that this did not happen while she was alive; she never knew, because I didn't know then, that I had married the wrong woman—and I hope she never thought it. . .

'And Ottilie had married the wrong man. . . We found that out. Or perhaps one should put it that she had not married the man she thought she had. She had fallen in love with him; and, no doubt, he had loved her, to begin with—but in less than a year she became torn between the part she loved, and the side she detested. . .

'Her Colin Trafford looked like me—right down to the left thumb which had got mixed up in an electric fan and never quite matched the other side—indeed, up to a point, that point somewhere in 1926-27 he *was* me. We had, I gathered, some mannerisms in common, and voices that were similar—though we differed in our emphases, and in our vocabularies, as I learnt from a tape, and in details: the moustache, the way we wore our hair, the scar on the left side of the forehead which was exclusively his, yet, in a sense, I was him and he was me. We had the same parents, the same genes, the same beginning, and—if I was right about the time of the dichotomy—we must have had the same memory of our life, for the first five years or so.

But, later on, things on our different planes must have run differently for us. Environment, or experiences, had developed qualities in him which, I have to think, lie latent in me—and, I suppose, vice versa.

'I think that's a reasonable assumption, don't you? After all, one begins life with a kind of armature which has individual differences and tendencies, though a common general plan, but whatever is modelled on that armature later consists almost entirely of stuff from contacts and influences. What these had been for the other Colin Trafford I don't know, but I found the results somewhere painful—rather like continually glimpsing oneself in unexpected distorting mirrors.

'There were certain cautions, restraints, and expectations in Ottilie that taught me a number of things about him, too. Moreover, in the next day or two I read his novels attentively. The earliest was not displeasing, but as the dates grew later, and the touch surer I cared less and less for the flavour; no doubt the widening streaks of brutality showed the calculated development of a selling-point, but there was something a little more than that—besides, one has a choice of selling-points. . . With each book, I resented seeing my name on the title page a little more.

'I discovered the current "work in progress," too. With the help of his notes I could, I believe, have produced a passable forgery, but I knew I would not. If I had to continue his literary career, it would be with my kind of books, not his. But, in any case, I had no need to worry over making a

living: what with the war and one thing and another, physics on my own plane was a generation ahead of theirs. Even if they had got as far as radar it was still someone's military secret. I had enough knowledge to pass for a genius, and make my fortune if I cared to use it. . .'

He smiled, and shook his head. He went on:

'You see, once the first shock was over and I had begun to perceive what must have happened, there was no cause for alarm, and, once I had met Ottilie, none for regret. The only problem was adjustment. It helped in general, I found, to try to get back to as much as I could remember of the pre-war world. But details were not difficult: unrecognised friends, lapsed friends, all with unknown histories, some of them with wives, or husbands, I knew (though not necessarily the same ones); some with quite unexpected partners. There were queer moments, too—an encounter with a burly cheerful man in the bar of the Hyde Park Hotel. He didn't know me, but I knew him; the last time I had seen him he was lying by a road with a sniper's bullet through his head. I saw Della, my wife, leaving a restaurant looking happy, with her arm through that of a tall legal-looking type; it was uncanny to have her glance at me as at a complete stranger—I felt as if both of us were ghosts—but I was glad she had got past 1951 all right on that plane. The most awkward part was frequently running into people that it appeared I should know; the other Colin's acquaintanceship was evidently vast and curious. I began to favour the idea of proclaiming a breakdown from overwork, to tide me over for a bit.

'One thing that did not cross my mind was the possibility of what I took to be a unique shift of plane occurring again, this time in reverse. . .

'I am thankful it did not. It would have blighted the three most wonderful weeks in my life. I thought it was, as the engraving on the back of the watch said: 'C. forever O.'

'I made a tentative attempt to explain to her what I thought had happened, but it wasn't meaning anything to her, so I gave it up. I think she had it worked out for herself that somewhere about a year after we were married I had begun to suffer from overstrain, and that now I had got better and become again the kind of man she had thought I was . . . something like that . . . but theories about it did not interest her much—it was the consequence that mattered. . .

'And how right she was—for me too. After all, what else did matter? As far as I was concerned, nothing. I was in love. What did it matter *how* I had found the one unknown woman I had sought all my life. I was happy, as I had never expected to be. . . Oh, all the phrases are trite, but "on top of the world" was suddenly half ridiculously vivid. I was full of a confidence

rather like that of the slightly drunk. I could take anything on. With her beside me I could keep on top of that, or any, world. . . I think she felt like that, too. I'm sure she did. She'd wiped out the bad years. Her faith was re-growing, stronger every day. . . If I'd only known—but how could I know? What could I do. . . ?'

Again he stopped talking, and stared into the fire, this time for so long that at last the doctor fidgeted in his chair to recall him, and then added:

'What happened?'

Colin Trafford still had a faraway look.

'Happened?' he repeated. 'If I knew that I could perhaps—but I *don't* know. . . There's nothing *to* know. . . *It's* random, too. . . One night I went to sleep with Ottilie beside me—in the morning I woke up in a hospital bed—back here again. . . That's all there was to it. All there is. . . Just random. . .'

In the long interval that followed, Dr Harshom unhurriedly refilled his pipe, lit it with careful attention, assured himself it was burning evenly and drawing well, settled himself back comfortably, and then said, with intentional matter-of-factness:

'It's a pity you don't believe that. If you did, you'd never have begun this search; if you'd come to believe it, you'd have dropped the search before now. No, you believe that there is a pattern, or rather, that there were two patterns, closely similar to begin with, but gradually, perhaps logically, becoming more variant—and that you, your psyche, or whatever you like to call it, was the aberrant, the random factor.

'However, let's not go into the philosophical, or metaphysical consideration of what you call the dichotomy now—all that stuff will keep. Let us say that I accept the validity of your experience, for you, but reserve judgment on its nature. I accept it on account of several features—not the least being as I have said, the astronomical odds against the conjunction of names, Ottilie and Harshom, occurring fortuitously. Of course, you *could* have seen the name somewhere and lodged it in your subconscious, but that, too, I find so immensely improbable that I put it aside.

'Very well, then, let us go on from there. Now, you appear to me to have made a number of quite unwarrantable assumptions. You have assumed, for instance, that because an Ottilie Harshom exists on what you call *that* plane, she must have come into existence on this plane also. I cannot see that that is justified by anything you have told me. That she *might* have existed here, I admit, for the name Ottilie is in my branch of the family; but the chances of her having no existence at all are considerably greater—did not you yourself mention that you recognised friends who in different circumstances were

married to different wives—is it not, therefore, highly probable that the circumstances which produced an Ottilie Harshom there failed to occur here, with the result that she could not come into existence at all? And, indeed, that must be so.

'Believe me, I am not unsympathetic. I do understand what your feelings must be, but are you not, in effect, in the state we all have known—searching for an ideal young woman who has never been born? We must face the facts: if she exists, or did exist, I should have heard of her, Somerset House would have a record of her, your own extensive researches would have revealed *something* positive. I do urge you for your own good to accept it, my boy. With all this against you, you simply have no case.'

'Only my own positive conviction,' Colin put in. 'It's against reason, I know—but I still have it.'

'You must try to rid yourself of it. Don't you see there are layers of assumptions? If she did exist she might be already married.'

'But to the wrong man,' Colin said promptly.

'Even that does not follow. Your counterpart varied from you, you say. Well, her counterpart if she existed would have had an entirely different upbringing in different circumstances from the other; the probability is that there would only be the most superficial resemblance. You must see that the whole thing goes into holes wherever you touch it with reason.' He regarded Colin for a moment, and shook his head. 'Somewhere at the back of your mind you are giving houseroom to the proposition that unlike causes can produce like results. Throw it out.'

Colin smiled.

'How Newtonian, Doctor. No, a random factor is random. Chance therefore exists.'

'Young man, you're incorrigible,' the doctor told him. 'If there weren't little point in wishing success with the impossible I'd say your tenacity deserves it. As things are, I advise you to apply it to the almost attainable.'

His pipe had gone out, and he lit it again.

'That,' he went on, 'was a professional recommendation. But now, if it isn't too late for you, I'd like to hear more. I don't pretend to guess at the true nature of your experience, but the speculations your plane of might-have-been arouses are fascinating. Not unnaturally one feels a curiosity to know how one's own counterpart made out there—and failing that, how other people's did. Our present Prime Minister, for instance—did both of him get the job? And Sir Winston—or is he not *Sir* Winston over there?—how on earth did he get along with no Second World War to make his talents

burgeon? And what about the poor old Labour Party. . . ? The thing provokes endless questions. . .'

* * *

After a late breakfast the next morning Dr Harshom helped Colin into his coat in the hall, but held him there for a final word.

'I spent what was left of the night thinking about this,' he said, earnestly. 'Whatever the explanation may be, you must write it down, every detail you can remember. Do it anonymously if you like, but do it. It may not be unique, someday it may give valuable confirmation of someone else's experience, or become evidence in support of some theory. So put it on record—but then leave it at that. . . Do your best to forget the assumptions you jumped at—they're unwarranted in a dozen ways. *She does not exist*. The only Ottilie Harshoms there have been in this world died long ago. Let the mirage fade. But thank you for your confidence. Though I am inquisitive, I am discreet. If there should be any way I can help you. . .'

Presently he was watching the car down the drive. Colin waved a hand just before it disappeared round the corner. Dr Harshom shook his head. He knew he might as well have saved his breath, but he felt in duty bound to make one last appeal. Then he turned back into the house, frowning. Whether the obsession was a fantasy, or something more than a fantasy, was almost irrelevant to that fact that sooner or later the young man was going to drive himself into a breakdown. . .

* * *

During the next few weeks Dr Harshom learnt no more, except that Colin Trafford had not taken his advice, for word filtered through that both Peter Harshom in Cornwall and Harold in Durham had received requests for information regarding a Miss Ottilie Harshom who, as far as they knew, was nonexistent.

After that there was nothing more for some months. Then a picture-postcard from Canada. On one side was a picture of the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa. The message on the other was brief. It said simply:

'Found her. Congratulate me. C.T.'

Dr Harshom studied it for a moment, and then smiled slightly. He was pleased. He had thought Colin Trafford a likeable young man; too good to run himself to pieces over such a futile quest. One did not believe it for a moment, of course, but if some sensible young woman had managed to

convince him that she was the reincarnation, so to speak, of his beloved, good luck to her—and good luck for him. . . The obsession could now fade quietly away. He would have liked to respond with the requested congratulations, but the card bore no address.

Several weeks later there was another card, with a picture of St. Mark's Square, Venice. The message was again laconic, but headed this time by an hotel address. It read:

'Honeymoon. May I bring her to see you after?'

Dr Harshom hesitated. His professional inclination was against it; a feeling that anything likely to recall the young man to the mood in which he had last seen him was best avoided. On the other hand, a refusal would seem odd as well as rude. In the end he replied, on the back of a picture of Hereford Cathedral:

'Do. When?'

* * *

Half August had already gone before Colin Trafford did make his reappearance. He drove up looking sunburnt and in better shape all round than he had on his previous visit. Dr Harshom was glad to see it, but surprised to find that he was alone in the car.

'But I understand the whole intention was that I should meet the bride,' he protested.

'It was—it is,' Colin assured him. 'She's at the hotel. I—well, I'd like to have a few words with you first.'

The doctor's gaze became a little keener, his manner more thoughtful.

'Very well. Let's go indoors. If there's anything I'm not to mention, you could have warned me by letter, you know.'

'Oh, it's not that. She knows about that. Quite what she makes of it, I'm not sure, but she knows, and she's anxious to meet you. No, it's—well, it won't take more than ten minutes.'

The doctor led the way to his study. He waved Colin to an easy-chair, and himself took the swivel-chair at the desk.

'Unburden yourself,' he invited.

Colin sat forward, forearms on knees, hands dangling between them.

'The most important thing, Doctor, is for me to thank you. I can never be grateful enough to you—never. If you had not invited me here as you did, I think it is unlikely I ever would have found her.'

Dr Harshom frowned. He was not convinced that the thanks were justified. Clearly, whoever Colin had found was possessed of a strong therapeutic quality, nevertheless:

'As I recollect, all I did was listen, and offer you unwelcome advice for your own good—which you did not take,' he remarked.

'So it seemed to me at the time,' Colin agreed. 'It looked as if you had closed all the doors. But then, when I thought it over, I saw one, just one, that hadn't quite latched.'

'I don't recall giving you *any* encouragement,' Dr Harshom asserted.

'I am sure you don't, but you did. You indicated to me the last, faintly possible line—and I followed it up—No, you'll see what it was later, if you'll just bear with me a little.

'When I did see the possibility, I realised it meant a lot of ground-work that I couldn't cover on my own, so I had to call in the professionals. They were pretty good, I thought, and they certainly removed any doubt about the line being the right one, but what they could tell me ended on board a ship bound for Canada. So then I had to call in some inquiry agents over there. It's a large country. A lot of people go to it. There was a great deal of routine searching to do, and I began to get discouraged, but then they got a lead, and in another week they came across with the information that she was a secretary working in a lawyer's office in Ottawa.

'Then I put it to E.P.I. that I'd be more valuable after a bit of unpaid recuperative leave——'

'Just a minute,' put in the doctor. 'If you'd asked me I could have told you there are *no* Harshoms in Canada. I happen to know that because——'

'Oh, I'd given up expecting that. Her name wasn't Harshom—it was Gale,' Colin interrupted, with the air of one explaining.

'Indeed. And I suppose it wasn't Ottilie, either?' Dr Harshom said heavily.

'No. It was Belinda,' Colin told him.

The doctor blinked slightly, opened his mouth, and then thought better of it. Colin went on:

'So then I flew over, to make sure. It was the most agonising journey I'd ever made. But it was all right. Just one distant sight of her was enough. I couldn't have *mistaken* her for Ottilie, but she was so very, very nearly Ottilie that I would have known her among ten thousand. Perhaps if her hair and her dress had been——' He paused speculatively, unaware of the expression on the doctor's face. 'Anyway,' he went on. 'I *knew*. And it was

damned difficult to stop myself rushing up to her there and then, but I did just have enough sense to hold back.

'Then it was a matter of managing an introduction. After that it was as if there were—well, an inevitability, a sort of predestination about it.'

Curiosity impelled the doctor to say:

'Comprehensible, but sketchy. What, for instance, about her husband?'

'Husband?' Colin looked momentarily startled.

'Well, you did say her name was Gale,' the doctor pointed out.

'So it was, Miss Belinda Gale—I thought I said that. She was engaged once, but she didn't marry. I tell you there was a kind of—well, fate, in the Greek sense, about it.'

'But if—' Dr Harshom began, and then checked himself again. He endeavoured, too, to suppress any sign of scepticism.

'But it would have been just the same if she had had a husband,' Colin asserted, with ruthless conviction. 'He'd have been the wrong man.'

The doctor offered no comment, and he went on:

'There were no complications, or involvements—well, nothing serious. She was living in a flat with her mother, and getting quite a good salary. Her mother looked after the place, and had a widow's pension—her husband was in the R.C.A.F.; shot down over Berlin—so between them they managed to be reasonably comfortable.

'Well, you can imagine how it was. Considered as a phenomenon I wasn't any too welcome to her mother, but she's a fair-minded woman, and we found that, as persons, we liked one another quite well. So that part of it, too, went off more easily than it might have done.'

He paused here. Dr Harshom put in:

'I'm glad to hear it, of course. But I must confess I don't quite see what it has to do with your not bringing your wife along with you.'

Colin frowned.

'Well, I thought—I mean she thought—well, I haven't quite got to the point yet. It's rather delicate.'

'Take your time. After all, I've retired,' said the doctor, amiably.

Colin hesitated.

'All right. I think it'll be fairer to Mrs Gale if I tell it the way it fell out.

'You see, I didn't intend to say anything about what's at the back of all this—about Ottilie, I mean, and why I came to be over in Ottawa—not until later, anyway. You were the only one I had told, and it seemed better that

way. . . I didn't want them wondering if I was a bit off my rocker, naturally. But I went and slipped up.

'It was on the day before our wedding. Belinda was out getting some last-minute things, and I was at the flat doing my best to be reassuring to my future mother-in-law. As nearly as I can recall it, what I said was:

' "My job with E.P.I. is quite a good one, and the prospects are good, but they do have a Canadian end, too, and I dare say that if Ottilie finds she really doesn't like living in England——"

'And then I stopped because Mrs Gale had suddenly sat upright with a jerk, and was staring at me open-mouthed. Then in a shaky sort of voice she asked:

' "*What* did you say?"

'I'd noticed the slip myself, just too late to catch it. So I corrected: "I was just saying that if Belinda finds she doesn't like——"

'She cut in on that.

' "You didn't say Belinda. You said Ottilie."

' "Er—perhaps I did," I admitted, "but, as I say, if she doesn't——"

' "Why?" she demanded. "*Why* did you call her Ottilie?"

'She was intense about that. There was no way out of it.

' "It's, well, it's the way I think of her," I said.

' "But why? *Why* should you think of Belinda as Ottilie?" she insisted.

'I looked at her more carefully. She had gone quite pale, and the hand that was visible was trembling. She was afraid, as well as distressed. I was sorry about that, and I gave up bluffing.

' "I didn't mean this to happen," I told her.

'She looked at me steadily, a little calmer.

' "But now it has, you *must* tell me. What do you know about us?" she asked.

' "Simply that if things had been different she wouldn't be Belinda Gale. She would be Ottilie Harshom," I told her.

'She kept on watching my face, long and steadily, her own face still pale.

' "I don't understand," she said more than half to herself. "You *couldn't* know. Harshom—yes, you might have found that out somehow, or guessed it—or did she tell you?" I shook my head. "Never mind, you could find out," she went on. "But Ottilie. . . You *couldn't* know that—just that one name out of all the thousands of names in the world. . . *Nobody* knew that—nobody but me. . ." She shook her head.

‘“I didn’t even tell Reggie. . . When he asked me if we could call her Belinda, I said yes; he’d been so very good to me. . . He had no idea that I had meant to call her Ottilie—nobody had. I’ve never told anyone, before or since. . . So how *can* you know?”

‘I took her hand between mine, and pressed it, trying to comfort her and calm her.

‘“There’s nothing to be alarmed about,” I told her. “It was a—a dream, a kind of vision—I just knew. . .”

‘She shook her head. After a minute she said quietly:

‘“Nobody knew but me. . . It was in the summer, in 1927. We were on the river, in a punt, pulled under a willow. A white launch swished by us, we watched it go, and saw the name on its stern. Malcolm said”’—if Colin noticed Dr Harshom’s sudden start, his only acknowledgement of it was a repetition of the last two words—‘“Malcolm said: ‘Ottilie—pretty name, isn’t it? It’s in our family. My father had a sister Ottilie who died when she was a little girl. If ever I have a daughter I’d like to call her Ottilie.’”’

Colin Trafford broke off, and regarded the doctor for a moment. Then he went on:

‘After that she said nothing for a long time, until she added:

‘“He never knew, you know. Poor Malcolm, he was killed before even I knew she was coming. . . I did so want to call her Ottilie for him. . . He’d have liked that. . . I wish I had. . .” And then she began quietly crying. . .’

Dr Harshom had one elbow on his desk, one hand over his eyes. He did not move for some little time. At last he pulled out a handkerchief, and blew his nose decisively.

‘I did hear there was a girl,’ he said. ‘I even made inquiries, but they told me she had married soon afterwards. I thought she—But why didn’t she come to me? I would have looked after her.’

‘She couldn’t know that. She was fond of Reggie Gale. He was in love with her, and willing to give the baby his name,’ Colin said.

After a glance towards the desk, he got up and walked over to the window. He stood there for several minutes with his back to the room until he heard a movement behind him. Dr Harshom had got up and was crossing to the cupboard.

‘I could do with a drink,’ he said. ‘The toast will be the restoration of order, and the rout of the random element.’

‘I’ll support that,’ Colin told him, ‘but I’d like to couple it with the confirmation of your contention, Doctor—after all, you are right at last, you

know; Ottilie Harshom *does not exist*—not any more.—And then, I think, it will be high time you were introduced to your granddaughter, Mrs Colin Trafford.'

✻ Time Out

✻

✻ A person awaking should, in my opinion, glide smoothly back into co-ordination, otherwise he feels that there is some part of him that hasn't got back in time.

And if there's another thing I dislike, it's the sharp drive of a woman's elbow—well, come to that, anybody's elbow—among my ribs, more particularly if that woman happens to be my wife. After all, it's part of a wife's job to learn not to do these things.

In the circumstances my response came clear out of the subconscious.

'Well, really!' said Sylvia. 'I know I'm only your wife, George, but—well, really!'

My time lag caught up.

'Sorry,' I said. 'But, golly, what's the matter anyway?'

'I don't know,' Sylvia admitted. 'But I've got a feeling there's something wrong.'

'Oh gosh!' I said, and switched on the light.

Naturally, everything looked just as usual.

'Intuition?' I suggested.

'You needn't sneer at me, George. What about that Sunday I knew we were going to have an accident with the car?'

'Which Sunday? There were so many,' I said.

'Why, the Sunday we *did* have one, of course. I felt just the same way about it as I do now.'

I sat up in bed. The clock had been a wedding-present. After a while I calculated that it was trying to indicate 3:15 A.M. I listened. I couldn't hear anything anyplace. Still, you know what intuition is.

'I suppose I'd better have a look. Where did you think it was?' I asked her.

'What was?' she said.

'Whatever you heard.'

'But I didn't *hear* anything. I told you—it's just a feeling that something's wrong.'

I relaxed and leaned back on the pillow.

'Would I do something about that?' I asked.

'What can you do? It's just a feeling.'

'Then why on earth—?' I began.

At that moment the light went out.

'There!' said Sylvia triumphantly. 'I knew!'

'Good. Well, that's over then,' I said and pulled up the bedclothes.

'Aren't you going to look at it?' she inquired.

'A blown fuse can keep till morning—even if you'd not left my torch someplace,' I told her.

'But it may not be a fuse,' she said.

'To hell with it,' I muttered, getting comfortable again.

'I should have thought you would want to *know*,' she suggested.

'I don't. I just want to sleep,' I said.

When I woke again the morning was nice and bright. The sun was shining in and painting a part of the opposite wall with pale gold. I stretched a bit in warm comfort, and reached for a cigarette. As I lit it, I remembered the light. I pushed the switch on and off a few times without result. That cute electric clock still seemed to be saying 3:15. My watch said seven o'clock. I lay back, enjoying the first few puffs at the cigarette.

Sylvia slept on. I allowed the temptation to drive *my* elbow into *her* ribs for a change to pass. She manages such a decorative and confiding appearance when she sleeps. Just then she said: 'Ugh-h-h-h,' and pulled the sheets over her ear. She is not one who greets the dawn with a glad cry.

At about the same moment it occurred to me that there was something wrong with the day—a sort of public-holiday quality. As a rule one can hear a sort of background buzz of traffic from the main road, an occasional car in our own road, milk bottles clinking, and can feel a general sense of stir. This morning all that was missing—even the bird sounds. A disturbing air of peace lay over the neighborhood. The more I listened, the more unnatural it seemed. At length it drove me to get up and go to the window. Behind me Sylvia murmured and pulled the bedclothes more closely round her.

I think I must have stood looking out the window for several minutes before I turned back. Then I said:

‘Sylvia. Something funny’s been happening.’

‘Ugh,’ she remarked.

Dropping the understatement, I said: ‘Come and look. If you don’t see it, too, I must be going crazy.’

The tone of my voice got through to her. She opened her eyes.

‘What is it?’

‘Come and look,’ I repeated.

She yawned, pushed back the covers and maneuvered off the bed. She thrust her feet into a pair of mules decorated for some incomprehensible feminine reason with feathers, and pulled on a wrap as she staggered across.

‘What—?’ she began. Then she suddenly dried up, and stood staring.

We live in a suburb. It’s a nice suburb, nice sort of people. The houses are pretty much alike, all with their garages and gardens. Not large houses—not large gardens, either, though quite large enough for the husbands to look after. We stand on a slope, and from the bedroom window we look down upon the backs of a similar row of houses which front upon a road parallel with ours and have gardens running up toward us. The end of our garden is separated from the end of the one opposite by a high wooden fence which is continuous along all the properties. Across the roofs of the opposite houses we can see the huddle of more industrial parts beyond. On fine days we can see a considerable distance further, to low hills where houses similar to our own stand out among trees and gardens; but more often the two residential areas are hidden from one another by the haze thickened with smoke that rises between them. It is not, perhaps, an inspiring view across the tall chimneys, municipal towers, and the beetle backs of several movie houses, but it does give us a sense of space and a big stretch of sky. The trouble with it this morning was that it gave us little else.

Just beneath us lay our lawn and flower-beds. Then the hedge which cuts off the vegetable garden. There the rows of beans, peas, and cabbages should have run down past a pear tree on the left and a plum tree on the right until they reached the raspberry and currant department. But they didn’t. They began—but about halfway down their edge there was a brown, sandylooking soil in which a coarse grass grew in large or small patches and lonely tufts. It was a dune land, save that it lacked any noticeable hillocks, and it stretched on and on, undulating gently into the distance until it met brownish-green hills far away.

We stared out at it in silence for some little time. Then Sylvia said in a choked voice:

‘Is this some kind of joke, George?’

Sylvia has two reactions to any sort of unpleasant surprise. One is that if it utterly fails to amuse her it must be some form of joke. And the other, that whatever it concerns, I must somehow be responsible for it. I do not pretend to know what she thought I might have been doing in order to spirit away a whole landscape, but I was able to reply with truth that no one could be more surprised than I.

Whereupon she gave a kind of gulp, and ran out of the room.

I stood where I was, still looking out. On the left was the Saggitts' garden, running down alongside our own, and cut off in the same peculiar way. Beyond that was the Drurys'—at least there was part of theirs, for not only was it cut off on a line with ours, but there was no more than a six-foot-wide strip of it to be seen; beyond was the sandy soil.

Sylvia came back looking frightened.

'It's the same in front,' she said. 'The garden's there, and half the width of the sidewalk—then there's just that stuff. And half the garage has gone.'

I raised the window sash and looked out to the right. From that angle I could look down on the garage roof. It looked usual enough. Then I saw what she meant.

'It's half the Gunners' garage that's gone,' I said.

And it had. The roof of their garage climbed to within an inch or two of the ridge, and then stopped as if it had been sliced clean off. Where the rest of it should have been—and where the Gunners' house should have been—tussocks of grass waved in a light wind.

'Thank goodness,' said Sylvia. Not uncharitably, you understand, but after all, we had only our new convertible a couple of weeks.

'We must be dreaming,' I said, a little shakily.

'We can't both be,' she objected.

That, of course, was debatable, but this was scarcely the moment, so I said:

'Well, am I dreaming you, or are you dreaming me?'

I let her have it: I ought to have known better than to ask the question in the first place.

I hurried on some clothes and went outside to see what I could make of it. The front was just as Sylvia had said. I walked down the path, opened the gate, and stepped out onto the half-width of sidewalk. The edge where the sandy soil began looked just as if it had been trimmed off with a sharp knife. I bent over to look at it more closely—and caught myself a sharp crack on the head.

It was so unexpected that I recoiled slightly. Then I put up a hand to see what had done it. My fingers met a smooth surface which was neither hot nor cold and seemed as solid as rock. I raised the other hand, and felt across several square feet of it. It scared me a bit because, though it was unfamiliar, it was only a step on from the quite familiar. One just had to imagine plate glass with a perfectly nonreflecting surface. . .

I could not touch the sandy soil and the grass beyond. The transparent wall rose from the very line where normal things ended. As I stood there looking through it in bewilderment I noticed an odd thing: the grass beyond was waving, yet I could not feel even a stir in the air around me.

After a moment's thought I went to the garage. There I chose my heaviest hammer and found an old can half full of sludgy kerosene. Outside again, I threw the contents of the can at the transparent wall. It was queer the way the stuff splattered suddenly in mid-air and began to trickle down. Then I took a grip on the hammer, and hit hard. The thing rebounded, and the shaft stung my fingers so that I dropped it. There was no other perceptible result.

When I investigated at the back of the house I found that the same invisible barrier terminated what remained of the garden—and with increased bizarre effect, for there it appeared to bisect the plum tree so that, seen from as nearly to the side as I could get, the whole trunk and spread was flat-backed like a piece of a stage scenery. I wished I could crane around to see what the devil it looked like from the back, but the wall itself prevented that.

In a rough survey I estimated that the area of normalcy enclosed by these walls would be an approximate square of seventy yards. Beyond this in all directions stretched the featureless dunes—featureless, that is, save for the hills in the distance which occupied just the same position that hills usually occupied in our view. Not much wiser, I went back to the house.

Sylvia, who feels able to face most things better on a cup of coffee, was cursing the cooker for not heating.

'Oh, there you are. Can't you fix that fuse?' she demanded.

'Well—' I began doubtfully. Then I went and looked in the box. As I had expected, the fuses were okay. I said so.

'Nonsense,' said Sylvia. 'Nothing goes on.'

'On the contrary, quite a lot goes on,' I said. 'Though just what—. Anyway, the point is, where would the power come from?'

'How would I—?' she began. Then she got the idea. She opened her mouth again, failed to find anything to say, and stood looking at me.

I shook my head. 'I'll go and see the Saggitts,' I said.

It was not that I expected either Saggitt to be much help, but one began to have a feeling that some company would be acceptable. Still, I get along all right with Doug Saggitt although he's quite a bit older than I am—forty-seven, forty-eight, maybe. He's getting thin some places and gray in others, and though he's not fossilizing yet, it's hard to see why Rose married him, she being only twenty-one, and quite a whistle-rouser. It seems to me that some girls, maybe when they're half-awake one morning, get a kind of nudge from the life-force. 'Hey?' says the life-force. 'Time you were getting married.' 'What, me?' says the girl. 'Sure, you—and someone else, of course,' says the life-force. 'But I mean to have a lot of fun first,' says the girl. 'Maybe—but then maybe not,' says the l-f ominously. 'It could be you'll come out in spots tomorrow, or lose a leg in a car accident, or— And after it's gone on this way for a bit it has the girl so paralytic with fright she flies off wildly, and marries a Doug Saggitt. After a bit she finds that she doesn't have spots and does have two legs, that she doesn't have a lot of fun and does have Doug Saggitt, and she begins to wonder whether Doug Saggitt was just what the life-force had in mind, after all. Mind you, that's only a theory, but it does save me having to say 'I can't think why she married him,' the way the rest of the people in the road do every time they see her.

Anyway, I went over to their house, and pressed the bell. It looked as if, whatever it was, we and the Saggitts were in it together—and alone, for the transparent barrier on the side beyond them passed through the Drury's house, including in our area simply the side wall and a depth of perhaps six inches beyond it which looked extremely dangerous though it showed no sign of falling. Looking at it while I waited, I reckoned that it, like the plum tree and the other things the barrier cut across, must be clamped to the invisible surface by a kind of magnetism.

I gave a second long chime on the bell. Presently I heard feet on the stairs. The door opened. A hand thrust out some coins wrapped in a scrap of writing paper. It moved impatiently when I didn't accept the offer. The door opened a little more, and Rose's head appeared.

'Oh,' she said. 'I thought you were the milk. What's the—?' She cut off abruptly. Her eyes widened as she saw the view behind me.

'Wh-what's happened?' she stuttered.

'That's what I want to see Doug about,' I told her.

'He's still asleep,' she said vaguely, still staring where the other side of the road ought to be.

'Well—' I began. Then Sylvia came hurrying across.

'George,' she said, with a note of accusation. 'The gas doesn't work, either.'

'Is that surprising? Look where the gasworks was,' I said, and pointed away across the dunes.

'But how can I possibly cook breakfast?'

'You can't,' I admitted.

'But that's ridiculous. You'll have to do something about it, George.'

'Now what in heck do you suppose I can do?'

Sylvia regarded me, and then turned to Rose with an expression of sisterly suffering.

'Aren't men helpless?' she asked, in a voice needing no answer.

Rose was still looking round in resentful bewilderment.

'If you'll rout Doug out, we can at least hold a conference about this,' I said.

Sylvia and I waited in the lounge. It wasn't a comfortable wait. Sylvia was doing her hedgehog act—she kind of rolls into a ball of silence, with all the spines sticking out. I used to be the fool terrier in that game, but not now. I don't know which irritates her most.

Doug made his appearance in a dressing gown, with his chin bristling and his hair on end—what there was of it. Rose followed. For some reason she had chosen to put on a hostess gown.

'What the hell's supposed to be going on?' Doug demanded.

'Listen,' I said. 'Before we go any further, will everybody quit barking at me as though I'd done it. You can see what's happened, and you know about as much as I do.'

'There's no power and no gas,' muttered Sylvia, aggrievedly.

'And the milkman's late,' added Rose.

'"Late"!' I repeated helplessly, and sat down.

'Well, if you men won't do anything—' said Sylvia, and laid hold of the telephone.

I watched, fascinated. Have you ever seen a woman grossly insulted by a perfectly silent instrument? It's good. Her mouth clamped, and she marched out of the room with a kind of Amazonian determination to fight something. There was a pause while I looked at Doug and he looked at me. At last:

'What *is* going on?' he said bemusedly. He waved a hand at the window. 'What is this, George? Where's—'

Then he was interrupted by Sylvia's return. Her eyes were watering slightly, and she was holding a handkerchief to her nose. Her anger had given place to bewilderment. She was even a little scared.

'There's a wall there—only you can't see it,' she said.

'Wall? Rubbish,' said Doug.

'How dare you?' snapped Sylvia, recovering quickly.

Doug went outside to look for himself.

'Now,' I said when he came back, 'you know just as much as I do. What do we do next?'

There was a pause.

'I'm out of bread, and I suppose the baker won't be coming either,' Rose said miserably.

'I think we've got an extra loaf, dear,' Sylvia told her consolingly.

'That's sweet of you, Sylvia—but are you sure you'll be able to spare —?'

'For heaven's sake!' I said, loudly. 'Here we are with the most amazing, the most monstrous thing happening all around us, and all you two can do is to natter on about gas and bread.'

Sylvia's eyes narrowed a bit. Then she remembered that we weren't alone.

'There's no need to shout. What do you suggest we *do*?' she said, chillily.

'That's not the point—not yet,' I said. 'The first thing is to find out what has happened. Then maybe we can begin to do something about it. Now has anybody any ideas?'

Apparently nobody had. Doug wandered over to the window and stood there mutely uninspired by the empty miles of dunes. Sylvia and Rose sat registering womanly forbearance with the male.

'I have a theory,' I suggested.

'It'll have to be good,' said Doug gloomily. 'Still let's have it.'

'It seems to me that we may be the unwitting subjects of some test or experiment,' I offered.

Doug shook his head.

'If "unwitting" means what I think it does, it's the wrong word. I'm extremely aware of all this.'

'What I mean is that someone tried his experiment, and we just happened to be here when he tried it.'

'Experiment? You mean like letting off an atom bomb or something which just happened to finish everybody but us? Because—'

'I do not,' I said shortly. I went on to make my points. Though all trace of buildings had vanished, the configuration of the ground was roughly the same. We seemed to be in a kind of invisible glass box. Certainly there were walls all round, and probably, since the air was so still, there was a roof as well—we could test for that later. Everything within the enclosed area was unchanged—everything outside, except the general lay of the land was altered. Or it might be *vice versa*. Now the contents of the invisible box were quite alien to the surroundings; it followed that they must have been moved from somewhere to somewhere else. *But* the evidence was that they were still in the same place though it had an unfamiliar aspect. Therefore, as they had not been moved in space, the only other thing they could have been moved in was time.

This piece of calm and, I felt, logical reasoning was received with a silence which lasted for some moments. Then Doug said:

'If an atom bomb, or several atom bombs, were let off, and we happened to be protected by this glass case or whatever it is—'

'Then there certainly wouldn't be grass growing out there,' I finished for him. 'No. What must have happened is that in some way this enclosed area was twisted through another dimension to another section of time—probably what we would call forward, or to the future. I don't see that anything else could explain the situation.'

'H'm,' said Doug. 'And you think that *does* explain it, eh?'

There was a pause. Sylvia said conversationally to Rose: 'My husband reads the most captivating magazines, my dear. All about girls who go through deep space—whatever that is—just in bras and panties. And about good galaxies fighting perfectly horrid galaxies, and the cutest little things called mutants or robots or something, and such lovely men who go out on space-patrol for a few hundred light-years at a time. So intriguing. Such interesting titles they have, too. There's *Staggering Stories*, *Stunning Science Stories*, *Dumfounding Tales*, *Flabbergasting Fiction*, *Bewild—*'

'Listen,' I said coldly. 'Maybe you'd like to explain what's going on around here on the hints you've picked up from *Woman's Glamor*, *Clean Confessions*, *Gracious Loving*, *Wolf Tales* or *Heartbeat Magazine*?'

'At least they have stories in them about things that *could* happen,' said Sylvia, equally chilly.

'Euclid said all that was necessary about triangles in his first book—and he got someplace with them.'

'Well, what place do the stories in your magazines about things that *never could* happen get to?' Sylvia snapped.

'I wouldn't know. What I do know is that one of the "never coulds" is all around us right now. Look at it! And when I try to understand it, you just sneer.'

'Sneer!' said Sylvia. 'I like that. I was just explaining to Rose. Why, if anybody was sneering—'

'Yes,' agreed Rose, as if answering a question.

We withdrew to our corners for the moment. Doug broke in:

'You really think there must have been some fourth-dimensional twist?'

I nodded, glad to get back to the matter in hand.

'Well, some *other*-dimensional twist,' I agreed. 'It must have been that.'

'What is a fourth dimension?' asked Rose. I tried:

'It's—well, it's a kind of extension in a direction we can't perceive. Suppose you lived in a two-dimensional world, you'd only be aware of length and breadth. And suppose that in your flat country you found a square.'

'What of?'

'Nothing. Just a square.'

'Oh,' said Rose, with some reservation.

'Well, that square might really be the bottom surface of a cube—only you wouldn't be able to perceive the rest of the cube, of course. Now if somebody outside picked the cube up and put it down somewhere else it would, as far as you were concerned, vanish suddenly, and then reappear in a different place. You'd be quite at a loss to understand it.'

'Well, I certainly am. So what?' agreed Rose.

I wondered irritably why anybody marries them.

'Don't you see—?' I began patiently. But Sylvia cut in:

'We don't. What's more, I don't see that it would make any practical difference if we did.'

'Well, not practical, exactly,' I admitted.

'All right then.' She turned to Rose. 'Haven't you a kerosene stove, dear?' she inquired. Rose nodded, and they went out together.

I looked at Doug, and shook my head.

'The trouble with women—' I began.

'Yes, yes,' said Doug hastily. 'But this theory of yours—are you serious?'

‘Of course. What else can it possibly be? I reckon that this section with us in it has somehow been shifted—maybe to several thousand years in the future. It must be the future because it can never have looked like this hereabouts in the past.’

‘Hard to swallow,’ said Doug. ‘I mean it is a bit like one of those magazines Sylvia was talking about, isn’t it?’

‘It may be,’ I said irritably. ‘The thing is that some say, somewhere, someone is inevitably going to try to raise a bit of the past. I take it that one of the tryers has succeeded—and we happened to be just in the time and place he hit on.’

He muttered again about difficulty in swallowing, then he added:

‘Supposing you are right. What happens next?’

‘I imagine someone comes to see how the experiment went off. Quite likely we’ll not be able to learn much—they’ll be much more advanced. They’ll want to know all about us and our times, of course, but that may not be easy. I expect the language will have changed a lot.’

‘We’ll have to draw diagrams of the solar system, and all that?’

‘Why?’ I said, in some surprise.

‘Well, because—oh no, of course, that’s when you get to other planets, isn’t it?’

In a short time Sylvia and Rose returned, bearing coffee. The warmth and flavor increased amiability all round. Doug sipping his, said:

‘George thinks we’re likely to have visitors.’

‘Where from?’ asked Rose, interestedly.

That girl does have the damndest gift for fool questions.

‘How—?’ I began. Then I stopped. I happened to be sitting facing the window, and I caught sight of a movement way down in the shallow valley. I could not distinguish the cause, but it was clear that something was raising a moving cloud of dust.

‘It could be they’re on their way here now,’ I said.

We all crowded to the window to look. The thing, whatever it was, showed no great speed, but it was headed our way.

‘In George’s books they always have huge heads and no hair,’ said Sylvia, reflectively.

‘How perfectly horrid,’ Rose exclaimed, and I thought Doug looked a trifle hurt.

‘What sort of things will they want to know, I wonder?’ he said. ‘It’ll be a bit like an exam we’ve not prepared for.’

‘I’d better go and put on something more suitable,’ Sylvia said.

‘My goodness, so must I,’ agreed Rose. ‘And Doug, you must brush your hair, and you’ve not shaved yet.’

‘You’ve not shaved, either, George,’ Sylvia told me pointedly.

‘Look here,’ I said. ‘Here we are on the brink of one of the most amazing encounters in the whole of history, and what do you think of— Oh, all right then. . .’

The moving object was still several miles away when I had finished in the bathroom. But I could see it a lot more clearly now, a long, boxlike contraption with a transparent cover over all catching the light from time to time. It was not moving much above twenty miles an hour, I judged, but it traveled very smoothly over the rough ground. There was too much dust round the lower part for me to see how it was supported.

I joined Sylvia. She had changed into a blue dress of soft wool which became her well. Her expression of satisfaction over that was modified, however, at the sight of me.

‘Well, really, George! You can’t go around like that.’

‘What the hell do you use that blade in your razor for, anyway?’ I asked.

‘You used my—?’

‘What else? No power. So cold water, ordinary soap. Your idea, anyway.’

Sylvia drew breath, but at that moment Doug’s voice floated up from outside:

‘Hey! They’re just about here, George.’

I went down and joined him. We walked the length of what remained of my garden, with Sylvia and Rose following us. Where it ended we stood close against the invisible wall, watching the vehicle approach. It seemed to be traveling on some kind of millipede arrangement which compensated automatically for inequalities in the ground. It came to a stop about fifteen yards short of us. The whole side opened towards us on hinges at the base and came down to form a sort of ramp. Four men inside got up from their seats, walked down the ramp, and stood looking at us. I was aware of indrawn breaths beside me.

‘Gosh! What d’you know!’ murmured Sylvia’s voice.

‘Ooh-ooh!’ said Rose, as if someone had given her a very large box of candy.

For myself, I didn’t see—well, let’s be fair. The four men were magnificent physically, I’ll grant that. Tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, narrow-hipped, and all that—but then, so was Tarzan, and some others. There are other things required of a man beyond a handsome appearance. In fact, some of the best-looking men I have known—. Anyway, I didn’t much care for the way they were dressed, either.

They wore deep yellow tunics, patterned around the edges in brown, belted, and coming down just to knee-length. Their legs were in narrow trousers or gaiters of a brown material, and their thong-fastened shoes were yellow. They wore no hats, and their fair hair had a slightly bleached effect seen above their sunburned faces. Each stood something over six foot four. The whole effect struck me as slightly stagy.

It was at once clear from the way they looked at us that they were puzzled. They conferred, and then regarded us again. There was some laughter, which I considered ill-mannered in the circumstances. With the wall between us, we could not hear the slightest sound of their voices. Once more they debated. Then they came to some agreement. One went back into the vehicle and emerged with an instrument which looked something like a theodolite. He set it up on a tripod, sighted it, and then pressed a switch on it. Immediately the air around us began to stir as if the wind were blowing through a gap in the wall. Then, leaving the instrument where it was, all four began to walk toward us.

I held up my open hand to show that we had peaceful intentions. They looked puzzled. One said to another: ‘Funny thing, that. I thought Hitler died in 1945?’

I lowered my hand.

‘Oh! You speak English!’ I said.

‘Of course,’ said the nearest man. ‘Why not?’

‘Well—er—I thought—’ I began, and then gave it up. ‘My name is George Possing,’ I told him, introducing myself.

He frowned slightly. ‘It ought to be Julian Speckleton,’ he said.

I looked at him. ‘Really!’ I said coldly. ‘Well, it’s not—it’s George Possing.’

‘I don’t understand this,’ he murmured, reflectively.

‘It’s quite easy. I’m Possing—and I’ve never even heard of anyone called Speckleton,’ I told him.

'And you're not on the sub-atomic drive?'

I suppose I looked blank.

'The sub-atomic drive that Solarian Rockets are developing,' he said, with a touch of impatience.

'Never heard of it—or them,' I told him.

'H'm,' he remarked 'Something *has* gone wrong. Paladanov's going to be wild about this.'

It occurred to me that I ought to introduce the others. But when I looked, I found it was unnecessary. They were all talking together already. The man with me asked who Doug was. I told him. He asked:

'What's the date here?'

When he heard, he whistled.

'Thirty-five years out of register. Somebody's going to get a smack for this. Hey, fellers!'

They didn't notice him. One had taken Doug to the gap in the invisible wall, and was showing him something there. The other two were chatting with Sylvia and Rose. Very animatedly, too. Sylvia's eyes were shining brightly. They kept on flicking about the face of the man who was talking to her, not missing a movement of it. And she was blushing a little. I'd never seen her blush like that before—or look quite that way. I didn't care for it a lot.

'Hey!' said my man, more loudly. The others broke off, and came round him. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sylvia and Rose turn to one another. They giggled like a couple of schoolgirls, and then started whispering.

'Listen,' said the man beside me. 'Something's going haywire here. Neither of these guys is Speckleton.'

They all regarded us for a moment.

'Well, I don't know that I mind that a lot,' said one, turning to look at Rose, who blushed.

'Nor me,' agreed the other. 'Just my climate around here.' And Sylvia blushed even more than Rose had.

'Maybe,' said my man. But the point is there's no work for us to do here. No Speckleton—no drawings. These folks come from thirty-five years before.'

'I'm not worrying about that a bit,' one of the others assured him. 'Nice folks,' he added. And the girls giggled.

'All the same. It's a washout. So what do we do?'

'Wait for instructions,' one said promptly.

'That's so. Then we'll be right on hand when they correct the error,' added the other.

'Okay. Then I'll put a report through.' The man turned and walked back toward the vehicle. The man who had been talking to Doug went with him. Rose, still a little pink, and with a touch of that demureness which isn't meant to deceive anybody, said in a hostess way:

'I'm sure you must be terribly thirsty after all that dust. Won't you have some coffee?'

They had no hesitation at all about accepting the offer. Doug and I were left to watch them push their way through the hedge which separated our gardens, and stroll up, laughing, to his house. We looked at one another.

'Well—!' I said.

Maybe Doug's years had improved his philosophic outlook. He said, calmly:

'I'll have to hand it to you, George. Your deductions were dead right.'

'Huh,' I said, watching the others go into the house.

'Yes. There has been time transposition someway. And apparently some kind of hitch in it—so you were right, too, about it just being an accident for us that we're here.'

'Huh,' I said again. 'It might help if I could understand what the hell goes on when there isn't a hitch.'

'It's not so difficult. That fellow gave me the general idea. You see, in a few years' time the offices of the Solarian Rocket Corporation, Inc. will be standing on this site—with a man called Julian Speckleton in charge of the drawing department. Okay? Well, the guys who operate this time-lift dingum just whisk away a part of the block to—er—whatever time it is out there. Just the way we were whisked.'

'But what for?'

'Ah, that's where these chaps come in. They arrive and photograph all drawings and documents of interest.'

'I don't see what for. They must be centuries ahead of us, anyway.'

'Sure. But the way they work they've got a second time-lift in operation someplace. Now that brings along some guy called Paladanov. They give him the photographic copies. Then they reverse the time-lift, and put things back.'

I thought that over. 'I don't see—' I began.

‘There’s a subtlety there,’ said Doug. ‘The office block goes back to the split-second it left, so that nothing appears to have been touched. But this Paladanov and his place don’t—not quite. It has to be missing from its proper place for a few minutes—long enough for him to collect the photographs so that they are in the house when it goes back.’

‘This is horribly bewildering.’

Well, if the Paladanov guy went back to the same split-second in which he left, he’d not have the photographs—they weren’t in his house at that second, you see.’

‘I suppose not. But it’s so involved. Why don’t they just whisk up Paladanov here and tell him a few things that’ll put him years or generations ahead of his competitors, anyway? Surely that’d be easier?’

‘It would be. But would these guys get anything out of it? Somewhere in this there’s a racket. There always is. It could be that Paladanov’s employers put money on deposit, and leave it to accumulate, maybe? In that case the more slowly the information is dribbled out, the longer the racket would last. Or it could equally well be that they work the thing the other way round as well, and keep both sides plodding along neck and neck on one another’s secrets. That’d be very nice smooth work.’ He paused to contemplate the idea admiringly. ‘I know one thing,’ he added. ‘If and when we get back, the first thing I do is to buy my house and ground.’

‘But, look here,’ I said. ‘It’s crazy—and unpatriotic.’

‘How? I don’t see that an information office in time—if you can move about in time—is any more crazy than one in space. Properly operated, it could make big money. As for being unpatriotic, that depends on the distance, doesn’t it? The way I see it, to give the Germans radar around 1938 would be bad, but to let the Trojans in on the wooden horse gag wouldn’t matter a lot.’

‘There’s no difference in the morals,’ I said coldly.

‘Maybe they don’t have those, anyway,’ suggested Doug.

‘I’ve been wondering about just that,’ I admitted uneasily, looking up toward his house. I listened to the sounds coming from there. It seemed to me there was a pretty unnatural amount of high-pitched giggling going on.

‘Don’t you think we’d better—?’ I asked, jerking my head in that direction.

Doug listened, too, for a moment.

‘Maybe we had,’ he agreed. We turned, and walked up the garden. At the door he paused.

'Er—pretty big fellows, aren't they—strong-looking?' he suggested.

I had to agree with that.

I shall have, I am afraid, to draw a veil over most of the three following days. I never would have believed that two decently brought up girls . . . and respectably married, too. . .

Mind you, I didn't take it all lying down. I told Sylvia what I thought about it one time when I did manage to get her alone. Her response wasn't amiable:

'Will you please stop interfering in my affairs?' she demanded.

'But it's your affair that I'm complaining of,' I pointed out, reasonably.

'If you don't like Alaric being a friend of mine, you'd better go and tell him so—and see what he does,' she said.

Alaric was, I think, slightly the tallest of the four.

'I don't mind him being a friend of anybody's,' I said, 'what I mean is —'

'Well, what do you mean?' she asked, dangerously. 'Are you accusing him of anything? Because maybe he ought to hear it.'

'I'm not talking about him. I'm talking about you.'

'Well?'

'When a married woman throws herself at another man's head—' I began.

'I thought you said you weren't talking about him?'

'Hell, I'm not. I'm just pointing out—'

'Now look here,' she said. 'You're having all the fun of one of your damn silly magazine stories coming true. So what right have you to interfere in mine?'

'It isn't at all the same sort of thing,' I said shortly. 'Anyway, I didn't ask for this. It just happened.'

Sylvia softened unexpectedly.

'Yes,' she said. 'That's how love is for women—it just happens,' she added gently.

'That's all very well in those fool stories—' I began.

Her softness suddenly vanished.

'"Fool stories,"' she said. 'And from you, too!' She gave an exceedingly unnatural laugh.

'At least mine are harmless and clean,' I replied.

'Well, mine always end up most morally. They have to,' she countered.

'It's not so much the ending that I'm concerned about at the moment—' I was pointing out when she snapped:

'What are you going to do about it?'

She did not seem to understand somehow that the whole conversation *was* what I was doing about it.

Doug, I must admit, was more direct in his method of objection—though no more decisive. As I understand it, he had taken Rose over his knee to whang the daylights out of her with a slipper, and the whole thing was going pretty successfully when her friend Damon came in, attracted by her howls. He quietly picked Doug up by his collar and the slack of his pants, and dropped him out of the window. Then, of course, Rose needed consoling, so the affair really backfired quite a bit.

After that Doug devoted most of his attention to deciding just how much of the land about us would be (or had been, depending how you look at it) occupied by the Solarian Rocket concern, and considering methods of raising capital.

It was on the afternoon of the third day that the man who had spoken to me first strode up the garden from their vehicle with a satisfied expression on his face.

'They've traced the error,' he said. 'There was a sticky point in one of the computers which made it run wild now and again. It'll be all okay now.'

'I'm glad you think so,' I said. It didn't seem to me that a corrected computer was going to set my domestic life to rights again.

'Sure, it will,' he nodded. 'They'll flip you back to where you came from, and then pull in Speckleton in the Solarian offices. I gather Paladanov's been raising hell. As if it mattered. That poor goop will never get it straight that this is time out for him. However long he has to stay here he can still be returned to within a few minutes of his lift. You, of course, will be returned to the thousandth of a second—pretty close tolerance, that.'

'I suppose so,' I said, without zest. 'All the same, we've been here three days, and during that time my wife—'

'Oh, you'll just have to count that as time out,' he said easily.

'You think so,' I remarked. I felt maybe I had better leave that angle. I looked over the near-desert surrounding us. 'It'd be kind of nice to know where and when we spent this time out,' I suggested. 'How did the place get this way?'

'This?' he repeated, 'I can't say exactly. It sure caught something, didn't it? That'd likely be during the Second Atomic War, I guess. Well, I gotta tell the boys we're pulling out. Where are they?'

‘I wouldn’t know, but I could make a goodish guess,’ I said bitterly.

Doug and I stood on the narrow terrace path beside his house. The scene at the end of my lopped-off garden was not edifying. Beyond the invisible wall the four men were now climbing into their vehicle. This side of the wall Sylvia and Rose stood clinging together, apparently for mutual support. They had handkerchiefs in their hands. Sometimes they fluttered them at the vehicle, sometimes they dabbed them at their faces. We watched the performance gloomily and in silence. We had already repeated all our comments on the situation to one another a good many times.

‘Well, at least they’re going,’ said Doug, ‘I’d begun to wonder if they’d get carried along with us.’

‘How much longer have we got?’ I asked him.

He looked at his watch. ‘About five minutes,’ he said.

‘Ought we to be doing anything special?’

‘No. According to them it just happens.’

The vehicle was drawing away now. Sylvia and Rose went on waving, and the men inside waved back. Presently, a couple of hundred yards away, the thing stopped. Apparently that was a safe distance. We could see the four heads under the transparent top turned to watch us. The girls were still clinging together, and still waving.

‘Listen,’ I said to Doug, ‘I don’t quite get this. If everything does go back to a thousandth of a second from where we were, how are we going to remember that it ever—?’

My sentence was cut off and I had my answer in the same moment. I found myself sitting up in bed. The light was on, and the clock said three-fifteen. Beside my Sylvia was sobbing into her pillow.

I jumped out, and went over to the window. The night was still, and the moon nearly full. Layers of smoky air hung stratified over the valley. Here and there a few lights shone out. I had never before been so glad to see our not very picturesque landscape.

‘We’re back,’ I said.

Sylvia took no notice. She went on crying into her pillow as if she had not heard.

I decided to remove to the spare room for the rest of the night.

‘I shall go and see Groves this afternoon,’ I announced at breakfast.

Sylvia looked up. She was not at her best this morning. Very puffy round the eyes, and rather forlorn-looking—but I had made up my mind.

‘I shall be seeing him about divorce proceedings,’ I amplified.

She stared at me. She rallied, and came back absolutely true to form.

'Is this some kind of a joke?' she inquired.

'Joke! Is that what you call your behavior?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said.

I looked hard at her. She didn't even blink. 'Look here,' I said, 'you're not going to pretend to me that you don't remember your own disgraceful behavior?'

'Are you trying to insult me?' she asked, coldly.

'I've got witnesses, remember. The Saggitts will bear me out.'

'How interesting, George. About what—and where—and when?'

'Well, of all the barefaced—' I began.

Sylvia shook her head reprovingly. 'Perhaps I should be angry, but I'll forgive you, George.'

'*You'll* forgive *me*!'

'Well, it's hardly fair to hold a person responsible for what he dreams, is it? I expect it has something to do with all those absurd stories you read just before you go to sleep. Now if you were to try reading stories about things that could really happen, George—'

When I set out for the office everything appeared utterly normal. You'd never believe that anything in the least unusual had happened to the place. When I looked carefully at the sidewalk I fancied I could trace the hairline of a crack, but I couldn't be sure even of that.

Doug came out of his front door just as I was passing.

'Hullo, George.' He looked round at the familiar scene. 'It's Wednesday,' he remarked. 'I checked that on the phone—and yesterday was Tuesday. And yet we've had three days in between. Queer, isn't it?'

'I'm glad to hear you say it,' I told him. 'I was just beginning to wonder if I *am* crazy.'

He cocked an eye at me. 'So that's what she's been telling you. Funny, so has mine.'

We regarded one another.

'It's—it's collusion or conspiracy or something,' I said.

'Possibly,' Doug agreed. 'But I don't see what we can do about it. I recommend a good spanking—one wouldn't be interrupted this time.'

'Er—I don't think Sylvia—' I began.

'Worth trying. Works wonders,' Doug advised. In a different tone of voice, he went on: 'I'm just going to start up some tentative inquiries about

this property. Are you on?'

For me, the whole recollection was becoming more and more like the dream Sylvia said it was, but Doug evidently meant business.

'Give me a few days,' I suggested.

'Okay. No hurry,' he agreed as our ways parted.

I very nearly dropped out of it. There was such a solidarity of opinion between Sylvia and Rose—and the whole occurrence did seem increasingly fantastic in retrospect. . .

But, fortunately, an announcement in the local paper caught my eye a week or so later. It said:

To Emmeline, wife of Alfred Speckleton, a son, Julian.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed; otherwise alternative spellings have been retained.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

This ebook is taken from an original publication produced in the U.S. as a collection of stories produced in prior British publications. It retains British spelling and punctuation.

[The end of *The Infinite Moment*, by John Wyndham.]