

Eldritch Science

November 2020



Ride the Magic Carpet
José K. Sanchez

Editorial

We still have the content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale.

As a Reader reward, your Editor has published a series of SF novels, most recently Airy Castles All Ablaze, Eclipse—The Girl Who Saved the World, Against Three Lands, Minutegirls, Mistress of the Waves, and The One World. If any of you would like a free review copy of any or all of these, you have but to ask.

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Charlie's Ride

By J. C. Murray

Charlie North, pilot of the Foundation of the ISS Martian Logistics Fleet, knew that his wife and two children could not see him live on video, but he smiled and blew them kisses anyway.

"Goodnight, sweethearts. Dad loves you."

They would have recorded their video an hour ago. With current technology, the lengthy delay still amazed Charlie. The time the signal traveled from Earth to his shuttle was short enough - he estimated fifteen minutes at this distance. The challenge was downloading the heavy file from the diffuse signal, which took much longer.

Charlie felt a pull in his lower back as he reached to terminate the recording. The interface blinked.

His heart felt like a stone, as it always did after a message from home. He twisted his thermos without drinking. Six months since he saw his family, and if everything went smoothly, it would be another ten before he saw them again. Charlie stared out a portal at the stars, chewing his lip absentmindedly. He recycled the unending debate. The year off between trips was nice, and the pay was generous. The day he graduated from the Mar-

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tian Colony Shuttle Program was the second time in his life he cried joyously. The day Amanda agreed to marry him was the first. The kids were growing up, though. If he flew another round, he would miss Luke's graduation. He sighed.

Charlie sipped from his thermos and double-checked his instruments. Auto-pilot on course. Life support active. Down the list, he verified, as he did thrice daily, that all was well. He precisely documented every reading. Charlie was almost certain that other pilots cut corners. Not him. Computers handled so much these days. It was nice to feel useful. If he was a glorified babysitter, as some suits at Cape Canaveral slandered, he was determined to be thorough. He preferred the slur "bus driver." At least it was descriptive.

Satisfied, Charlie moved into cargo. He tsked as he caught himself. Technically, it was the passenger area, but it was easy to forget that his silent companions were alive. He tabbed over on the pad and monitored each hibernating companions' vitals. Blinking instruments and a polymer shield covered the sleepers. He brought his pad near to each readout and synced the latest content. Physically visiting each sleeper was not necessary, but Charlie enjoyed the ritual.

Erhart Weingand, the German mechanic. He told the papers that getting the call was like winning the lottery.

Luis Logan, the engineer. Must be an athlete. His vitals were optimal.

Odessa Gamble, the engineer's apprentice.

Dr. Peeyush Navathe, MD, the new doctor.

Diego and Sonja Manuela, the teachers. The colonial children were old enough to start school. The Manuelas brought their own child, Xavier. Passing their chambers made him smile.

Quadell Sutton, the electrician.

Dr. Liao Qiang, the geologist.

Vivian Dotson, the artist. Possibly the first superfluous passenger Charlie conveyed on his four trips. Her girls Sadie and Lucy were along as well.

Amy Goring, the 'teamwork, morale, and efficiency manager.' Her title smelled suspiciously fluffy, but it was not his colony.

The vitals for all thirteen passengers were acceptable. Charlie verified that each space suit was operational. Finally, he allowed himself to relax.

As he ate a dehydrated 'Italian meatloaf' in the kitchen, he daydreamed of home.

An insistent buzz and a flashing red light on his pad interrupted Charlie's reverie. He checked the codes: a voltage inverter problem. He woke up a wall terminal to get the details. Cell seven suffered a thermal runaway event, which was what Florida called an explosion. Charlie shook his head and chuckled. Engineering thoroughly screened each unit. The chance of something like this happening was one in a million. It was almost funny. Fusible links between each inverter contained the damage to just one unit, and ventilation channels prevented the fire from spreading. The remaining cells would see many more trips to Mars than their pilot.

Charlie rolled up his sleeves and drew his data pad. He ran diagnostics twice. There was a short near the explosion. It was small, but caused a worrying power drain. Shuttles like the Foundation did not keep their solar panels after leaving orbit. Too heavy. The closest set of panels waited around Mars. Charlie checked their energy consumption. He furrowed his brow at the unfriendly numbers. He closed and reopened diagnostics before running it all again. He left the terminal and half-jogged to his room. He dug out a calculator, sat on his bunk, and crunched the numbers twice more for himself.

With the current loss rate, the Foundation would lose power days shy of the colony. The unfeeling numbers were undeniable. Charlie straightened his back and steeled his nerve. He would have to take a walk.

Charlie hated spacewalking. The prospect of floating into the empty void forever terrified him. Still, he was shepherd to thirteen sleeping souls. He geared up and headed for the airlock. His finger trembled as he hovered over the door's control panel.

Tethered to the shuttle, he pulled himself hand-over-hand purposefully to the offending panel. He removed it and anchored it magnetically. The work was unnervingly silent.

The safety measures performed admirably. Among the inverters, the damage was contained to the smoldering ruin of cell seven. He shone his light and exhaled heavily, fogging his visor. The short was deep under the electrical array. It would

be a stretch. Charlie's elbow pain flared as he probed the Foundation's guts.

"Sorry old girl. It'll be over soon."

He strained until his shoulder nearly pulled out of joint, but could not reach the short. He searched for anything he might temporarily uninstall to clear the path. His heart quickened. The only candidate was an essential fuel line. Even if he wanted to, his belt tool could not remove it. That detail was probably intentional. Charlie pounded the ship and crawled back to the airlock, defeated.

He dropped his suit just outside the airlock. He wiped beads of sweat as he radioed Florida an update. They would know, of course. They were probably huddled in a war room, crunching the same numbers.

Charlie's stomach somersaulted and he paced, waiting for a response. The horrible delay dragged on before Florida spoke. They said many words, but their message was simple:

Reduce power consumption.

Charlie thought unkind thoughts, thanking Florida for their unassailable wisdom.

The data pad heated up with stress as he ran yet more simulations. Working in darkness the rest of the journey would only earn a few hours. Not enough. Navigation, engines, life support – everything was essential. Martian shuttles were maximally efficient. Weight reduction was king. Every pound meant more fuel and bigger engines, which cost money. Even the controversial decision to hibernate the passengers served weight. The mass of their chambers was far less than food and living space for thirteen people.

Charlie stormed about, furiously pounding the interface on his pad and on the scattered fuselage terminals. When exhaustion overwhelmed him, he collapsed in a heap on his bunk and tried, unsuccessfully, to sleep.

The next morning, Charlie remained in his room. Re-simulating or checking messages would only betray him. He dragged himself to the kitchen to rehydrate a single meal, but he could not finish it.

The second day after the incident, he forced himself to rise and clean himself up. After a brisk breakfast, Charlie attacked a terminal. Every con-

sole blinked with messages from Florida. After exhaustive debate, they were ready with a more specific recommendation. Charlie fired one up, but quickly lost patience with their bureaucratic jargon and skipped ahead to the conclusion. A nervous suit delivered the verdict:

Disable one Hx-95 unit.

Charlie stared at the screen, dumbfounded. This was their only answer? It was unacceptable. Unthinkable. He turned off the monitor, muted the channel, and resolved to find another way.

The Hx-95 hibernation chambers greedily consumed energy. Turning off even one allowed a complete journey. For a wishful moment, Charlie daydreamed about having a companion. He tweaked the simulation. The results of starving an early-awakened sleeper to Mars on half-rations? 86% chance of death. He remembered the passengers' newly-wakened state - the medical attention and increased calories they required. A specialist from the colony oversaw the ordeal. Waking them without the proper equipment and expertise was tantamount to pulling the plug.

Every dataset has outliers. Was any passenger more likely to endure the challenge of waking early? He accessed a terminal and dove into the medical stats, striving, and failing, to overlook the name tied to each set of readings. Luis Logan, the engineer. No surprise there, the guy's bio called him a one-time college athlete. He shook the pad. 73% chance of failure. The healthiest passenger was still unacceptably likely to die.

Charlie mentally pivoted. He ran simulations on the effects of reduced oxygen. Earth's atmosphere was only 20.9% O₂. If he could survive on less for a time, perhaps he could save power. His shoulders slumped as he read the results. Minimum safe concentration was 11%. It would be a miserable two months of nausea and disorientation, but he could stomach that. Charlie swore. Infuriatingly, reducing oxygen concentration made almost no impact on the power budget. Once most atmospheric controls reached equilibrium, maintaining 11% was no different than 20. All the other life-support functions still stressed the system. He threw the data pad as hard as he could, disappointed when it floated gently to the opposite wall.

He re-ran the simulation. Time was short. Academically, Charlie weighed his options.

The three children were ineligible. He would not consider that route for a moment.

Sentimentally, it made sense to let the oldest passenger go. Most of the colonists had many fulfilling years left. It seemed the only fair solution-hypothetically, of course - was to sacrifice the fewest years. Dr. Navathe clocked in at 63. He sighed. That was no good. The colony absolutely needed their doctor.

Charlie appalled himself. At some point his hypothetical became real. One of these human beings would die to save the rest. He more than considered it. He planned on it. He blinked rapidly to force down his threatening tears. He banished thoughts of Amanda, the kids, and the passenger's unknown families.

The only way forward was to harden his heart and make a practical choice about who brought the least value to the colony. Amy Goring, the efficiency manager, first sprang to mind. Reviewing her credentials, it seemed a nebulous role with little practical responsibility. Surely folks could do their jobs without constant supervision? Charlie loomed over her hibernation chamber and stared. His face hardened. He shook his head.

He considered the challenges of the tiny colony in the inhospitable wasteland. His own terrible dilemma highlighted the value of small efficiencies and the importance of details. No, the manager was important after all.

That left Vivian Dotson. The artist wouldn't fix anything, wouldn't provide food or medicine. She was the practical choice. The calculating choice. Charlie imagined a world without art. It wasn't a pretty sight, but the deprivation would not last forever. Other shuttles will launch. The colonists did without for this long, they could wait longer. He shifted towards her hibernation chamber. His shaking hand hovered over the control panel. Charlie glanced one last time at her statistics and wept.

###

Control says the Foundation has been unre-

sponsive for nearly two months. No telling what we'll find when we get there."

Captain Raul Rojas piloted the Skelkie, the Martian Colony's best and only surface-to-orbit transport, away from the looming red planet. To him, the blackness of space seemed almost three-dimensional in a way the planet-bound could never fully understand. The white speck of the Foundation floated gently through that darkness, a child's toy at the bottom of a dry well. Behind Rojas, crewmembers Jakes and Boipelo rode in tense silence.

"Scan?" asked Rojas.

Kogolo Boipelo reported. "She's not dead in the water, but it's not good, captain. I'll know more once we board."

Rojas nodded grimly. "Prep the bags, Jakes, just in case."

Sara Jakes unhooked and floated towards the cargo lockers.

Rojas docked smoothly with the Foundation's airlock. The three colonial astronauts geared up and boarded the ghostly shuttle. It was as silent as a church on Tuesday. The emptiness pressed on them. Their head's-up displays beeped urgently. Boipelo woke a console and furiously typed commands.

"Atmospheric monitoring, pressure maintenance, thermal control... it's all off, if possible, or dialed way down, but... there! The E.C.L.S.S. isn't broken, captain. We'll have full life support back in a few minutes."

Rojas trudged towards the cockpit while Jakes made a beeline for the hibernation chambers. On the foremost instrument panel, a single red light blinked. A message. Rojas was about to play the recording, when Jakes shouted over comms, causing his radio to pop. He hurried back midship, nearly bowling over Boipelo. Jakes stood by a hibernation bed, indicating the biometric monitor.

"Look," she said. Her smile shone through her visor.

Boipelo whispered reverently in Bantu.

"How much time do we have? Will they make it to the surface?" Rojas's instincts kicked in as he weighed a dozen potential evacuation plans. If the

hibernation stations were as compromised as the rest of the ship, every minute counted.

“It’s not like that, cap. They’re completely fine. I have plenty of time to bring them up slowly.”

Rojas exhaled and relaxed. Jakes retrieved her mobile med station from the Skelkie and busied herself waking the sleepers.

Two hours later, the bewildered passengers listened to their new neighbors’ account, sucking oxygen from small tanks and chewing tasteless protein bars. They were lethargic, but they shouted a thousand questions over one another once the tale ended.

Captain Rojas raised his hands. “I don’t have all the answers, but I think I know who does.”

Rojas lead the eclectic crew to the cockpit. Colonists old and new gathered around the central monitor. The captain invited young Sadie Dotson to open the recording. A middle-aged man’s kind yet weary face smiled at the camera.

“Hello. My name is Charlie North. I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet you ...”

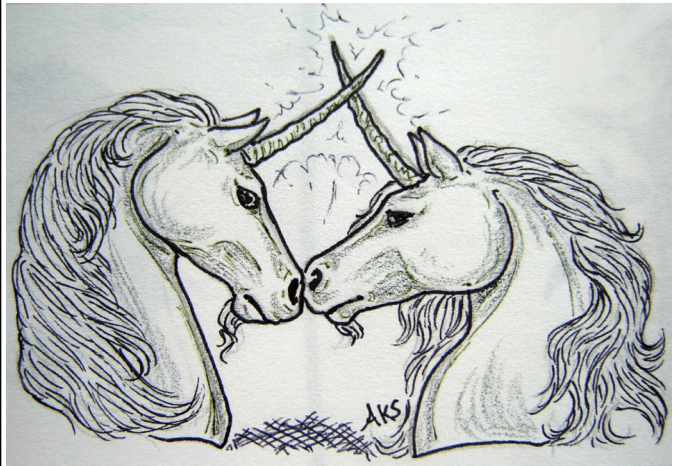
Friends from the Day After Tomorrow by Andrew Darlington

I hate them
hate their swollen big-brain heads
their single long push-button finger
their fused lack of toes,
they arrived in their time-ships
seeking asylum from century 32,
they show the holo of their melting world
with the bloated sun across
the scorched horizon,
and yes, I know they cure cancer and HIV
and gave us the contra-grav
to reach Saturn in six hours,
but I hate their smug superiority
and their scheming little eyes...

so anti-Futures underground
contrive and lay our plans
to hijack their timeships
escape into the past,

and begin again...

they hate us,
these Australopithecine,
they hate our erect hairlessness,
yes, we gave them fire,
the wheel, the bow and arrow,
but they hate our superiority,
and now they whisper
their plots against us...



Magic United by Angela K. Scott

Instar by David Kopaska-Merkel

Billie Jo split,
Right there on the library steps.
Mayor Robbins screamed,
Several kids threw up,
She split open down the back,
Tearing her dress clean apart,
A gooey liquid spilled out,
Pooling around her feet,
She was fresh, glistening,
Pulled out first her right leg,
Balancing on the left,
Then the other.
She shone, naked and hairless,
Stood on her crumpled former skin,
Took the deepest breath you ever saw,
And grew,
Then, another, and she shrieked,

Loud as the siren on the firehouse roof,
 A pair of wings peeled loose from her back.
 Many colored, Iridescent, like a pool of oil,
 They reached from ankle to far above her head,
 As they dried and stiffened their colors bright-
 ened,
 Their spots and bars brilliant reds, yellows, and
 greens,
 The wings beat once,
 again,
 then with furious speed,
 She leaped, sailed above the courthouse roof,
 was gone.

Seen her once since,
 High above, in the light,
 Always thought she was a regular girl.
 Now, I dunno.
 And the men,
 Black suits and sunglasses,
 Looking everywhere for her,
 Looking at us all,
 Wondering who will be next.

end of poem

Martian Dew

(from Bonnie Dobson & Tim Rose)

By Andrew Darlington

walk me out in the Martian dew, my love,
 I thought I heard the sound of rain on leaves
 I thought I heard the sound of waves on the
 shore,
 I thought I heard the murmur of cities and
 the skeletons of owls in the maps of trees,
 you didn't see no Martian dew, my love
 you heard just the ghost of rain on leaves
 you heard nothing but the memory of waves on
 pebbles
 you heard only the phantoms of dead cities
 where ants draw equations in footprints of ice,
 we walk hand-in-hand through the Martian
 dew,
 pace the silt of cathedrals, trilobites and poetry
 feel the soft breath of sunlight on bare skin

beneath moons that race the space between
 stars
 as we pursue each other through our dreams
 walk me out in the Martian dew, my love
 where we can feel alien moistness on our toes
 and reach out to trace the
 sad trajectory of antique worlds...



Masquerade by Angela K. Scott

Wythindweller

by Andrew Darlington

'I hate flatness' said Nadia. 'Norfolk goes on
 forever.'

The Toyota 4x4 noses between the security
 gates, and out into the flatness she hates. A few of
 the protesters glance up as we pass. From the tent
 village of squalor, tepees, yurts, campfires, flags
 with smiley solar suns, long sad pennants that
 droop and trail hunting a friendly breeze, dread-
 lock men and crophead women with attitude, man-
 gy dogs, snotty-nose bratty kids. No-one actually
 reacts. No sign of Leofric The Deacon. They just
 watch us cruise by.

'What about them?'

She shrugs. 'It's natural to agree with them, up
 to a point. They're just about a thousand years af-
 ter the event. That's the truth. They want a return
 to the natural world. There is no natural world.
 There's nothing here that's not been shaped by hu-
 man hand.'

‘Me, it spooks me, just a little. When we’re inside it doesn’t bother me. We are untouched by it all. I understand the science of what we’re doing. Out here, it’s different.’

We drive in silence for a while. She turns off the spur onto the main village road, splashing through rainwater pools. There are deep dykes on either side. Remnants of the centuries-old land reclamation that rescued the county from fenland mire into arable land. Although a spate of recent ‘extreme weather events’, the tail-end of hurricanes Sebastian or somesuch had left fields flooded into vast still inland seas where gulls circle stranded trees and fence-posts extend out, pacing across inundated lakes. Ahead of us, the spire of the church is upthrust from the wash of trees, marking our destination. A small cluster of shops wind down the high street, a café with slickly-glistening parasol tables out front, a craft shop hung with floral stars and spirals, and a duck-pond beside the ‘Hereward The Wake’ pub. I get a mental image of the whole place slowly subsiding back into quagmire. A JG Ballard vision of the flooded world crumbling into watery decay, as rising ocean levels devour all flimsy human pretensions. The wind gusts fitfully, as if sensing my unease and playing it back.

I know what Nadia Faulkner thinks. It’s difficult not to know her opinions. She expresses them all so forcefully and articulately. There’s a moratorium on GM products. But because other nations are continuing research, it’s unreasonable not to expect us to do the same. We need this data. There are pandemics lurking out there ready to jump species, bioagents, bioweaponry hatched by basket-case rogue-states. We must remain competitive. From stem-cell into the real Jurassic Park zone. I know this.

And if there’s a degree of moral ambiguity involved, just look at the atrocity we’ve inflicted on our fellow creatures across the last two-thousand years simply through selective breeding. What horrors humans have perpetrated against dogs, cows and pigs, without even resorting to gene-modification! Among those species that we haven’t already eaten into extinction. There’s a story, it might be by Brian Aldiss, about how humans eat

their way across the solar system, from munching the sentient balloon-things of Venus served fricasseed in a white sauce, the perambulating Martian moss ideal for tortellini with ricotta, through the strange quasifish in Europa’s oceans, in tikka on a bed of basmati rice, or for chorizo risotto. Until finally, with no edible life-forms left to devour, the restless earthlings turn their ravenous appetites towards exoplanets of other stars. I’m incapable of balancing ethical equations. Sometimes I’m ashamed of being homo sapien. As far as continuity is concerned, the reset button is about to be pressed.

Nadia ignores the evenly spaced traffic-calming humps, jerking over them with complete disregard, and hangs a left through the narrow gravel-way of ivy-hung walls into the car-park behind the pub. Despite myself, it feels good to be out here in the clean air. In a brief space between storms. It’s somehow bright, in spite of the heavy cloud-layers darkening the sky. We stroll in an unhurried way. What must seem an incongruous couple. Not a couple. Not in that sense. Colleagues, with a strong working relationship, although I sometimes feel I don’t really know here at all. She’s my superior, a decade or so ahead of me. Maybe pushing late-forties? Although there’s more than just age difference separating us. So smart she’s intimidating.

The Community Centre is a new-build afterthought, in through automatic glass doors, where the curator smiles and gets up to welcome us. There’s a tourist information desk with leaflets describing local greenway walks and cycle-paths, guides to some rundown castles and stately homes within drivable distance, and wildlife check-pages showing herons, dragonflies and grey seals. Through an arch there’s the library, the walls vivid with schoolchildren paintings of square houses below huge yellow suns.

‘Ms Faulkner, Mr Nuestro? I’m so pleased you could make it.’

‘Nadia and Kieran, please’ Nadia says with unconvincing warmth. She’s not good at doing human.

Serafina Wells reappears with steaming cups of milky Tassimo coffee. I relax back into the con-

venient sofa, my fingers laced around the cup, enjoying the warmth. Nadia is noticeably impatient. She's not here for polite conversation.

'Is this where it came from?' she opens.

Serafina smiles. 'Yes. But it has a long history. It was discovered buried in the mud of the Wash, by fishermen. This is way back in the 1880s. They didn't know what to do with it, so they took it to the church. Vicar Nevin was something of an antiquarian, he recognized it as a kind of fossil but was unable to identify the species. He used it as a paperweight. Then donated it to a cabinet of local curios in the original Village Hall, alongside an old brass belt-buckle, some flint arrowheads, medieval farming and carpentry implements. It remained there, gathering dust, until its contents were transferred to this new Community Centre. I was cataloguing for our local history display. I came across it, and was puzzled. I thought it worth getting a proper identification made.'

'You did right. That was the correct thing to do.'

'So it's a kind of fossil. Of a previously unknown species?'

Nadia is guarded. Nadia is always guarded. 'We're not yet certain. We are still carrying out tests. But we are fully equipped to carry out those tests.' I know the extent of those tests, and what they involve. As well as their possible consequences. 'You did the right thing bringing it to us. Thank you, Ms. Wells. I wanted to get a feel of the place it came from. It's provenance, if you like'

'Serafina, please. This is a small village. Shall I show you around?' We accept her invitation, although there's not a lot to see. A pleasant stroll through the trees behind the overgrown churchyard where ancient headstones bear indecipherable inscriptions in a moist earthworm smell. Across a creaking rustic bridge. There's a traffic cone in the weeds and brambles shelving down towards the water, a sodden punctured mattress... and what looks to be a Standing Stone – the last remnant of a pagan megalith site that the church had been purposefully constructed on to obliterate and consecrate. Deleting older beliefs. Then we follow the course of the small swollen stream that bring us back to the duck-pond, its mossy shingle white

with caked droppings. I indicate the 'Hereward The Wake', and we step inside its welcoming oak-timbered gloom, wiping a sheen of rain-droplets from my glasses in the flickering shadows of a fire roaring behind a black-lead grate. A couple of local drinkers glance up as we enter, but return to their pints.

I order drinks at the bar. 'You're from the Foundation?' he says, as he pulls pumps marked with the name of a craft microbrewery.

'Is that a problem?' I'm a little wary, there are rumors of local hostility. 'I'm not here to cause trouble.'

He shrugs expansively. 'No problem so far as I'm concerned, pal. Some say it cuts both ways, if you see what I mean. The Foundation brings in revenue for local businesses. But sometimes it brings the wrong kind too. Personally, I've got no grudge against the protesters, so long as they pay their bar tab, but some folk resent the great unwashed littering the place up by coming around.'

I laugh dutifully. An older man sitting on a worn wooden bar-stool leans across. 'You're here about the bone. I know all there is to know about the bone. No need for you Foundation people to be picking around puzzling your brains about it.' He's a slouched ruddy-faced man who looks as though he's spent his life plowing fields and fixing fence-posts.

'You do? I'd be intrigued to know' I say, with every pretense of interest. Word gets around. No secrets in the village. Everyone with a heartbeat knows.

'There are stories about the bone that go way-back, hundreds of years, passed down by word of mouth. Maybe a little exaggeration here, a little romancing there, but at its very core, there is truth.' His regional accent is made more indistinct by a slight speech impediment, indicated by a compulsive tick-movement of his head.

'Truth is such a strange word. I'm not sure how relevant it is here.'

He laughs, and takes a deep gulp from his tankard. 'It fell from the night sky. A kind of fire-ball. So long ago there are no accurate records, only words. Before the Normans came. Before the Romans were here.' He speaks as though such in-

vasions are a recent grudge, still raw with resentment. ‘There were fenmen called the Gyrwas, and a tribe hereabouts called the Iceni. It was their story, from their distant past. They hauled fragments of the fireball up from the Wash.’ There’s the stale aroma of old beer about him that makes my hackles rise. Forcing unpleasant memories into my head. That same fetid stench I remember from when my stepfather came home nasty-drunk. Bringing the threat of unpredictable beating or an explosion of violence. I glance around. Others are watching us, checking our reactions. I’ve seen the movie ‘Deliverance’, I know all about the menace of rural hayseeds.

‘I don’t understand what you’re saying. You’re saying it’s extraterrestrial?’

‘I’m not telling you anything for sure. It’s sorcery. It’s supernatural. Who knows? I don’t. There are stories of a plague of demon-frogs as big as dogs, led by giant frogs as big as goblins. The Iceni hunt them down one by one.’

‘That’s just a spin on Beowulf and Grendel.’

‘As you like. Except that these beasts can’t be killed. They have this useful gimmick that means when you kill them they simply jump inside your head. Their soul, their spirit, lodges inside you as a parasite does. So that it gets strung out from life to life, from one body to the next.’

‘Time eats us all’ cuts in Nadia sharply. As though she wants to extricate us from this stupid conversation. ‘We eat, we shit and we die like everyone else.’ I don’t believe that anything as trivial as human relationships has ever bothered Nadia. Her work is world enough.

I thank the old guy with every pretence of sincerity, and take our drinks across to a corner alcove table. Serafina runs her fingers through her hair, an expression that says she’s more than a little embarrassed by the performance of local eccentricity to which we’ve been subjected. ‘It’s true that there are myths and oral traditions similar to his story’ she explains defensively. ‘We have a small privately-printed booklet back in the local history section about it, called the ‘Wythin-dweller’. It gathers variations of the legend from clear across the coastal areas of the county.’

Nadia leans over in a conspiratorial way. ‘Yet the bone he was talking about, the one we’ve had back at the Foundation for three months, has a suggestive strangeness not inconsistent with his folk-tale. The mitochondria does not slot in where it should.’

‘You mean that it is extraterrestrial?’

‘I’m afraid it’s not that simple’ she snaps back. ‘I didn’t say that.’

‘I had a suspicion you might say that.’ Serafina smiles.

‘It is not the correct assumption to make, but it’s not exactly wrong either. There are other possible explanations. Some have theorized about parallel evolutions here on Earth.’ She nods, as though she’s scored some profound game-changing point.

Nadia is not an easy person to like, although I’ve grown to accept her abruptness. I swallow hard and scrub my eyes with the back of my hands. The alcohol and the snapping crackle of the fire were making me both drowsy and uncomfortably warm. Feeling ill at ease. What had at first promised to be a welcoming hostelry was assuming an air of menace. They’re watching us now, in a way I recognize. That predatory threat that bullies use to unsettle potential victims. I down the last dregs of ale and shove the chair back as a signal.

As we leave it’s starting to rain again, and I pull my hood in tight around my head. Serafina says goodbye and heads back towards the Community Centre as water dances across the glistening pavement, then it’s become a soothing monotony that patters on the Toyota roof as we climb inside. Maybe a new storm moving in, a slow doom flowing from the swollen clouds that clog the heavy gut of the sky. England slowly submerging beneath a relentless torrent that never ends, sinking into an oblivion of forgetting. The radio forecast the rain would ease off by noon. The radio lied. You can’t trust the radio these days. Truth is such a strange word. A flexible concept. Condensation edges across sidewindows where the aircon can’t reach.

A felled tree-trunk blocks the road just outside the village limits, its exposed roots wrenched from a quagmire of sodden clay that resembles torn flesh, running with a black sludge of rainwater, and ringed with shelves of putrid white fungus. If

we back up and circle around it makes for a long rambling detour. But Nadia is a problem solver, and freaking out doesn't solve problems. She inches forward, slews across the camber onto the opposite side, ploughs up onto the sodden raised verge. Over the downslope edge there's a slippery slither into the swollen drainage ditch. The 4x4 rocks. The trees overhead lash. Fallen branches bend and scrape, rasping along the bodywork as we teeter forward. I'm gripping the seat so hard it hurts. She revs the pedal until the wheels whine and spin. We're going over, I'm sure of it. Our corpses will be found hours or maybe even days later trapped in the wreckage below the still surface of the flooded dyke. Can you still say 'dyke'? My gut churns. It feels as though I'm about to throw up. She rams forward, past the point of maximum restriction, and surges on, back through the tide rippling across the open road beyond.

'You look like shit' she laughs across at me.

'I feel like shit' smirking back at her, scratching my skinny arms. 'I hadn't eaten. It's not good to drink on an empty stomach.' A half-truth to divert her. 'At a push I'd always buy a book over a meal. It's just the way I am. The way I've always been.' I was normally only ever afraid of other people.

'We left the pub quite abruptly. It spooked you there?'

I let it go with a simple 'I guess.' It's difficult to phrase a better response, because a lot of it is intuitive. To do with memories and old fears. When he was beating me, and afterwards, there was a clear rationalization going on. For him, for my stepfather, this exercise of power is as good as it gets. This is his peak life-moment, whupping down on a child trapped in his supposed care. For me, it will be different. I'll go out above and beyond this. And I did. That's the way it worked out. I studied hard. Fought with my brain, not my fists. But those ghosts are still there. A presence in my head.

The world is a stupid unpredictable place, crawling with irrational menace. The Foundation, by contrast, operates through knowable systems of logic. There's a safe security behind its high laser-wire double-fence perimeter. We turn off onto the

spur, late afternoon sun glinting on the bright silence of puddles. I can see it from a distance, see the drones circling over a new demonstration at the gates. Then the prowler-car lights pulsing outside. The county cops restrain the mob of dreadlock men and crophead women with attitude, mangy dogs and snotty-nose bratty kids, long enough to allow us to pass through the gates. There's a hail of slogans and abuse, some missiles that sprang off the windshield as she drives, cans and bricks. Security see us coming and neglect normal procedures by letting us through into the compound beyond, slamming the gates secure behind us.

The Foundation has an impressive frontage. It had belonged to Duke somebody or the Lord of somewhere, I was told, but forget. Which means there's a wide gravel curve that leads to the stately entrance foyer. A mildewed ornamental pool, drained, but pooled with rainwater. When the consortium made the purchase, with lucrative government research and development contracts, they cleared the rear gardens and greenhouses to add the secure bunkers out back.

'There's a situation here' yells Gupta, breathless over the background yelling. 'Ms Faulkner, Mr Nuestro, it's good to have you back.'

'Nothing you can't handle?' says Nadia. 'We've been here before.'

'No. This time it's different.' He shakes his head violently. 'They started the demo out front, but it was a deliberate diversionary tactic. While Security was concentrated around the main gates a couple of them were hacking in through the wire out back and made entry through there and into the main block. We think one of them is the radical they call Leofric The Deacon.'

I glance across. All the lights have gone down. Gupta tracks us across, talking excuses and disclaimers all the way. He has the camera feeds routed through his mobile and he's swiping through each one. As head of security, this is a personal affront to his efficiency. We use zipcards to enter. The general alert has cleared most of the staff. Security has detained two protesters who squat on the carpeted floor, hands on their heads. They've aerosolled anti-GM slogans across the flock-wallpaper, paint dripping in sad melting tears. Their last few

messages remain uncompleted, stopped when their subversion was brought to a halt. The back-up generators kick in and lights flare up. The few staff that remain indicate back towards the laboratories, the research centre. I don't like this. The Foundation is my island of sanity, my refuge from the world's craziness. Now that madness has broken in and sullied it all. Prodding fears that lurk in the back of my head.

'This was targeted' says Gupta. 'They know what they're here for.'

We exchange puzzled expressions. What is the agenda here? Of course they know vaguely what we're about. That's the whole point of the protest camp. But they don't know specifics. Unless they do know? After all, word gets around. No secrets in the village. Everyone with a heartbeat knows. It's a bush telegraph. Our zipcards take us through the first level.

That's where we find the body. A tall man with a wild spray of dreadlocks, in a mess of blood hunched up against the wall. Gupta crouches down. 'This is him. Leofric The Deacon. He's been shot to death. I don't understand. Must have been security that stopped him. But someone's gone on through.'

The inner section has better quarantine-security than most Cold War Minuteman silos. We badge in, peeling up a bleary eyelid to allow retinal scan to get a good gawp at my bloodshot eyeball. Cross-referencing it as the door-pad maps and sizes up my palm geometry. The recognition software only allows those authorized through. Yet someone preceded us. There's a sharp temperature drop. These are clean rooms with microparticulate air-filters. The samples and cultures are safe in their cages. Yet it's not a large enclosure.

'Kandinski? What are you doing here?' yells Gupta.

A tall man in security uniform blue is standing beside the 'Kermit' unit. He's gazing at a frog as big as a dog inside, which is returning his unblinking gaze. Its pale fungus-white skin glistens in the artificial light, the nurturing wash of soft radiations. It's the first and most advanced gene-spliced product we grew from the bone-DNA.

'I had to see it' says the figure he'd called Kandinski, turning towards us slowly. 'I had to

find out if there was any kind of connection, any sympathetic reaction that remains across the centuries. But there's none.' There was a deep resonating sadness in his voice. 'Time to end it all.'

A few paces takes him across to the Biohazard Purge control. There are passcodes to open the key. He knows them.

'Stop. What the hell do you think you're doing?' yells Gupta, startling forward, brandishing the retrieved rifle.

'Whoever, or whatever that is, it's no longer Kandinski' breathes Nadia.

Gupta fires. A moment too late. Kandinski's already turned the self-destruct key, even as the bullet takes him. Simultaneously the auto-alert howls, drenching the unit it pulsing countdown red light. As Gupta screams, clutching the sides of his head, falling like an animal onto all fours, his face contorted into an expression of absolute horror.

'Get out before lockdown' yells Nadia. We grab Gupta, one at each side and haul him backward towards the exit. He's heavy, his limbs sprawl and writhe as if he's in the grip of convulsive nerve-spasms. We're through the airlock even as the final decontamination warnings sound, and lurching down the egress corridor back into the main block. There's a high-pitched scream that splits my head open, a vivid detonation like the opening gates of hell as the laboratory is purged in sterilizing flame that nothing can survive.

There are three of us breathing in long gasps of snatched air, collapsed on the floor. I make a move to help Nadia, which she irritably shakes off with her usual fierce independence.

'I'm not sure exactly what happened' I stammer, every sense in my body still tingling, 'but I'm sure glad it's over.'

'It will never be over.' What had been Gupta has turned around to face me. Momentarily, in his deep brown eyes, I see the shade of Kandinski, and I see the ghost of Leofric The Deacon, and I see a procession of previous hosts stretching back in time to fenmen called the Gyrwas, and a tribe called the Icenii at the time of melting glaciers. The effect is fleeting. A sensory impression that's gone just as quickly. So that I'm left questioning if it was ever really there, or simply heightened imagination provoked by shock.

'Months of work' rages Nadia. 'Blown to hell.' As she watches Gupta stand on shaky feet. Brush his security blue uniform down with his hand, and the Wythindweller strides out towards the drowning world beyond...

The Clocks of Limbo

by Andrew J. Darling

I see it stream across my screen
murder draws the crowd, police slow to a stop
the perp slouches, hands cuffed behind his
back

led away between two big cops who ease him
firmly down, backseat of the squad car,
I taste numb sweat on my lip as they
accelerate away into downtown traffic,
news-crew pulls witness soundburst to camera,
a distressed woman in mauve headscarf,
'yes, I saw it all, never thought I'd live
to see this on my own high street',
I smell the strapline scrolling
I rewind it back, replay it again
over and over, freeze in those glimpses
it's me, I'm looking into my own face
to learn if this new turn of events, this
blood on my hands is real or imagined,
check the time-code running beneath,
it's tomorrow...

Fire in the Morning

by George Phillis

The Crimson Queen rode at her moorings,
bobbing slightly in the waves. Pamela Morgan
leaned over the rail, sniffing the distant scent of
the Great Naseby Swamp. Her tall, athletic frame,
brown hair, and blue eyes had already attracted the
attention of a few of her fellow passengers. She
relaxed, listening to the soft burble of relaxed
thoughts from the people around her.

Her mother would be along soon enough, and
would want Pam to move their baggage. Mother
was a Confederation Senator, away from home for
months at a time. Pam wished that Mother would
someday learn to travel light.

Pam caught the trace of another mind filtering
the area. It was a familiar mind: Smythe! Smythe
was a Senior Operative of the Temporal Physics
Center, the Confederation Agency which covertly
hid governmental mentalists and psionic engineers.
He spent most of his time protecting Confederation
officials from spying telepaths. Smythe would
doubtless be less than delighted to learn that Pam
was accompanying her mother, ostensibly to write
a term paper on the Swamp. Of course, Pam re-
membered, Mother wasn't entirely delighted with
the situation, either. Mother had already planned
Pam's future career for her, and dabbling in sci-
ence rather than studying law was not Mon's idea
of the right direction.

Smythe was an egotist, convinced that only the
TPC gave proper psi training. He had to be cir-
cumspect. Government agents who harassed
daughters of legislators risked misfortune. Once,
he had told Pam that he would show her the bene-
fits of TPC training, as long as she promised there
would be no hard feelings afterwards. He knew
her well enough to be sure that she would keep the
promise. She knocked him cold with a single psi-
blast. He had probed her screens, and then been
too slow to meet her counter.

Pam saw Mother on the dock, alighting from a
spaceport air-taxi. Mon had company, too. Were
those important leaders, Pam wondered? Mike
and Trish Sparrow were fellow psi talents, apt to be
fond on the shady side of any deal. Their crony
was Humbert Mumford, a man of similar ethics
and a taste for attractive women.

Pam sent out a tendril of thought to draw
Smythe's attention. Pam felt his gorge rise as he
recognized her. (I suppose), came Smythe's
thoughts, (since your mother is here, I must endure
your presence.)

(Now), she answered, mind-to-mind, (I prom-
ise to be on my best behavior.

Honest! Besides, the trio down there has a
worse record than I do. Or don't you know them?)

(Miss Morgan, you may rest assured that I am
acquainted with Lord Protector Sparrow, who is a
valuable friend of the Confederation, and with
whom you are most decidedly not to tamper.)

(Him? Lord Protector! Of what? The greater Thieves' and Pirates' Guild? Well, I promise to be the perfectly well-behaved younger daughter. Just so long as Mumford keeps hands off Mom. And maybe even two seconds longer.) She grinned.

(Don't worry, Smythe. I'll Protect Mom for you.) His response came as the scent of ozone and burning rubber. Pam skipped down the gangplank and let Mother introduce her to the Sparrons.

They dutifully made small talk, pretending they had never met before. Mumford made a show of kissing Pam's hand. She caught from him the veiled thought of an obedient soldier kissing a serpent. Then Lady Morgan and the Sparrons drifted up the gangplank, leaving behind Pam, Mumford, and an implausibly large number of suitcases.

"Are there porters?" he asked. She nodded and held up two fingers.

(Lord?) she asked. (Lord Protector? What are you guys up to this time?) She had clear memories of their last meeting. She had found herself on the planet Coronado, which the Sparrons, Mumford, and friends were preparing to take over, through somewhat legal means. Pam hadn't stopped them, only urged them in the wrong direction. Of course, she recalled, she also hadn't bundled them all up afterwards and handed them over to the TPC for reprogramming. She had definite doubts about the TPC's methods for rehabilitating criminals.

(We turned legit. Honest, Pam. Well, sort of legit. Nemon is outside the Confederation. No one can annex us without starting a major war. We protect the locals from psis of criminalistic tendencies, and get paid for it. People even like me.)

(I see. No hard feelings about last time?) She asked. (Hard feelings? We could have got rehabbed, and you didn't squeal on us, just -- what you did. Miks even likes you again, sort of.)

(I meant more the other last time,) she corrected. Some of the Sparrow's friends on Coronado had argued that Pam should have been forced to support them, using telehypnosis backed by drugs. Mik's answer had been "This is a bomb. If you hit her hard enough, she will take you with her." Mumford had then searched Pam out to settle one-on-one who was the master of offensive psionics.

He was eventually found in a shallow decorative pond, convinced that he was actually a bullfrog.

(Okay, I learned a lesson. I confess I wasn't happy to see you again, but I don't hold stupid grudges. Now, you called porters, didn't you? The boss is something of a clothes horse.)

"A porter, he, is here." she said. "She scooped up the first set of mother's suitcases and followed the porter up the gangplank, leaving behind Mumford and a mass of luggage.

As she walked away, Pam traced Mumford hauling his own suitcases across the deck. Surprisingly, Smythe had joined him. She had no trouble listening to their conversation without being noticed.

(I see,) went Mumford, (that you've met her, too.)

(Oh, merciful heavens, not her again!) answered Smythe.

(Those were my thoughts, too, though she is a lady, not like some people you meet in this business. I'd still rather find a Goan winged constrictor in my bed than her in the next cabin.)

(It seems,) answered Smythe, (that we have certain tastes in common. At least, a certain distaste in common.)

(You can say that again. I think she likes to trample people, just for fun.)

(You also suffered at her hands, I take it? After we get these bags moved, perhaps we can discuss this in more relaxed circumstances.)

(Now that I can agree to. Though don't get me wrong, I'd rather trust her with...) His thoughts trailed off as the two men moved inside a psi-block.

Smythe and Mumford sat nursing their drinks, listening to the rhythmic throb of the ship's engines as they watched the marsh drift by. (Now, commented Mumford, (Lady Morgan, the older, she's a class looking broad -- and don't go lecturing me about what I/we do on our own time. You know perfectly well I can't get through whatever blocks you guys give her, no matter what her mind is on.) After his thoughts trailed Mumford's images of Lady Morgan's gentle curves.

(I believe,) answered Smythe, not entirely primly in tone, (that unlike some of my other

charges Lady Morgan is not prone to extramarital dalliances.)

(Now, look, I'm supposed to escort her at the Captain's party tomorrow, and if everything goes well afterwards...)

(If anything goes wrong, the younger Miss Morgan promised me she'd be on her best behavior only until you laid hands on her mother. She did not seem to shrink from anticipating what might ensue. For a young lady, she is somewhat -- bloodthirsty.)

(You, of course, don't view protecting visiting dignitaries of great importance to the Confederation from the depredations of private citizens as a part of your duties?)

(If you commit suicide, Mumford, I have one less problem in an overcrowded life.)

(Okay, Smythe, a hint like that I can take.) The two men leaned further back in their deck chairs, watching a pair of brightly colored bats chasing insects in the afternoon sun. (But, Smythe,) returned Mumford persistently, (what if her Mom wants to? It's not exactly unknown, after all. Or does Pam know when to stay away?)

(Mumford, I am not in the habit of prying into my clients' private, ummh, affairs. Miss Morgan is assuredly that discrete. She'd better be. She knows more Confederation secrets than half the Rectors. But I am absolutely certain that she never reads her mother's mind.)

(What? The lady isn't resistant to probes, not without your help. And you can't stop Pam any more than I can. You've got something psionic that stops Pam-baby? I don't believe it.)

(Mumford, the younger Miss Morgan is not arbitrarily powerful. A good mechanical or chemical shield -- not commercial stuff -- will stop her in her tracks. I think. Her mother is protected from her in her tracks. I think. Her mother is protected from her by something far more powerful: the Aybite of Inwit.) Smythe indulged himself with a pause. (The pangs of conscience. Pam doesn't think it would be right to read her parent's minds, so she doesn't.)

(Her? That little -- well, not so little anymore -- demon? She has a conscience? Since when? No, you're right. I was with her once, never you

mind when, and there was this guy about her age who she seemed to like. A lot. He didn't notice her. But he didn't have any shielding. She could have fixed him so he would have come running every time she even considered snapping her fingers. She didn't. And she would've been furious if I'd taken care of it for her.)

Late afternoon. The sun had slipped behind the tree branches, sending speckles of light across the Crimson Queen. Pam lay in a deck chair, looking into the undergrowth. The first parties to explore Naseby had noted native creatures with empathic talents. None were terribly dangerous. The most common, a gregarious fruit bat, chased predators away from its rookeries by giving them bad dreams. For no apparent reason, the empathic creatures had slowly dwindled in number, and were not believed to be extinct.

Were they? Or had they just moved to stay away from human minds? Naseby was very lightly settled, and the Great Naseby Swamp was the wildest terrain on the planet. If the creatures weren't extinct, this was the place to look. Pam was nominally making a tour of planetary museums. But if she found something interesting, it would be child's play to convince a museum curator to make a field trip.

The ship's paddle wheels threw up a slight mist, setting a rainbow around the sinking sun. One of the ship's junior officers had lectured her on how the wheels -- eccentrically mounted with curved, sharpened steel blades -- were the best engineering response to heavy weed in deep water. She suspected he could talk about them for days.

She had spent the afternoon pretending to read, while putting probes out over the swamp. Once she thought she had found something: strong signals distant from any human habitation. They disappeared before her like fog under a hot sun, never giving a sharp indication of direction or range. Then there had been a unique psi signal, not on any band that the local animals seemed to emit. A tracery of red and violet had swept over the ship, caressed her shields, and vanished. When it came,

she had been searching very far out over the water, and barely noticed the effect before it was over. The hardest driven sweep she could muster didn't reveal any hint of what it had been.

The sun touched the horizon. She stood to watch the ship's bow plow through shallow waves. The deck was nearly deserted. She heard steps behind her. The absence of thoughts told her it was a robot. Immediate she corrected herself; Naseby didn't allow robots. As she turned to look over her shoulder, a short, lightly built man tackled her.

"Let go!" Pam shouted. She stepped back into the rail, expecting him to hang on to her. He pushed her back over the edge. She tried to hang on, but her balance was gone. His mind was protected by blocks -- planted, not natural -- which turned a hastily charged psi-bolt. As she fell towards the water, she managed a single shriek. Her mind's eye fixed on an image of the paddle wheels -- tons of polished steel -- threshing their way towards her. She straightened out into a clean dive, hit the waves, and stroked hard away from the ship, deeper and deeper beneath the lake. The native might also have a handgun, but few light weapons were effective through a couple of yards of water. She heard a rumble and swish to her side, coming closer and closer. The wash from the paddle wheel spun her around and pushed her towards the lake bottom. Suddenly she was too deep to see any light through the mucky water. Safe from the ship's engines, she clawed for the surface again, swimming towards the thoughts she could hear above her. She broke through the waves, blinked, and found the ship had passed her by.

A column of spray marked the paddle wheels being thrown to full stop. Pam was pulled from the water by a very concerned Officer of the Watch. With only a little telepathic prodding, the ship's physician announced that Pam needed a shower, change of clothes, and a hot dinner. Pam made sure that Mother would be told that she had fallen, not that she had been pushed. Meanwhile, Smythe had taken her assailant into custody.

For once she was grateful for Mumford's company at dinner. She was still shaken. Whoever had attacked her had been prepared for psionic

countermoves, and most people emphatically did not know that she had mental powers. Her opponent's blocks were implants, suggesting that he was part of a larger group. Mumford gracefully waited until she brought up what had happened, then listened patiently.

"Smythe," whispered Mumford, "says the man is a native, too heavily shielded for him to read, even after Smythe gave him a sedative. The fellow's name is Kronor; apparently he's a regular passenger. Smythe's private sources say Kronor is well off financially, but no known source of income. It seems that this is common on Naseby, though the planet is not a center for smuggling, piracy, or anything else. It just has a lot of people with no apparent way of earning a living. In any event, Smythe could use help, though he won't admit it."

"Well, why not? I can always add to the list of favors the TPC owes me, not that I have any hope of collecting." She stood and followed Mumford.

Smythe was expecting them. Mumford let Pam into the cabin and closed the door, leaving her and Smythe with Kronor.

"You're sure," asked Smythe, "that you're ready to go ahead with this? It's not likely you'll get anyplace. His blocks stopped you last time, after all."

"I got a surprise swim. I didn't get hurt. I just don't want Mom to have to worry." Pam sat down across the room from Kronor.

The native tossed and turned against his bonds, talking as Smith's sedative had its effect.

"Angara," Kronor mumbled. "Angara. Angara waits."

Smythe prodded at him. "Angara commands. She must be excised. Gone from the sight of Angara."

"The sedative I gave him," remarked Smythe, "seems to have made him talkative."

Pam traced the outlines of Kronor's shields. He had an installed mind-block: heavy, crude, and, given a little time in which to work, not at all immune to penetration. Had Smythe carelessly missed the weaknesses in Kronor's shields? Or did he suspect that Kronor might be dangerous, so someone else might better act as cannon fodder?

Ever so slowly, she infiltrated past the blocks into Kronor's mind. A mesh-like psi-structure had been implanted in his brain. Structures were not something she naturally worked with, but she had seen enough that she could work out what this one did. When triggered, it blanked out Kronor's consciousness, leaving him literally unable to think, and took control of his body. The weave of the structure was not what one would expect from a human psi. Its colors were those of the mysterious emanation she had felt that afternoon. She thought something was familiar about them, but couldn't remember what.

The rest of Kronor's mind was free of alien influence. She couldn't erase the blocks, at least not easily, but with a little work she rendered the psi structure harmless. Now, who or what was 'Angara'? That seemed to be Kronor's name for his boss. And why the block? Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to give him a heavy mind-shield, and then left very little inside to protect. For a one-shot assassin, there were simpler protections.

She snatched at bits and pieces of memory, of deep jungle clearings in which birds called and insects darted. All she could find were disconnected fragments; the cues which unified them into coherent thoughts were lacking.

(Smythe?) she asked. (Are you following all this?) She could feel him tapping her probes, but hadn't checked what he could see.

(Clear so far,) came his answer.

Perhaps, she considered, 'Angara' was not the phrase which would link the memories together. Perhaps the jungle, the unseen watchers beyond the clearings, were more important. What unseen watchers? That hadn't been a conscious element in the images. It was something which just fell into place, organized out of the shadows of what she found. She isolated a memory, let it take her ahead. She passed from one clearing to another in a remembered sequence. Finally she came to a temple, a great structure overgrown by the jungle but still in use. Within it lay a massive slab of stone illumined by a huge rent in the ceiling. The holy of holies was a potted plant.

A plant? A potted plant? A Nuzeem! Kronor hadn't recognized it, but Pam did. The Nuzeem were still a Confederation secret. She felt goosebumps rise on her arms. Unbidden, her own shields and probes and offensive methods came to maximum alert. Smythe caught a hint of her fear, but didn't see the cause.

(What?) he asked mockingly. (Not a human sacrifice in sight. Afraid of the bogeyman, are you?)

"Smythe! Shut! Up!" she whispered angrily. Nuzeem doted on lethal traps. Kronor probably was one. (In fact, Smythe, why don't you go hide behind your shields? These guys aren't a bunch of lightweights. Unlike you.) Smythe's thoughts vanished behind a now tautly-held screen. If the cannon fodder urged the elect to hang back, Smythe was happy to hang back.

Patterns of light and dark, scent of musk and cardamom and shadow. Pam filtered Kronor's memories. No, she concluded, she wasn't transferring a set of compulsions onto her own mind; she had only found events in the native's memory. She let those memories unfold. The synaesthesia ended. Kronor walked out of the temple, oblivious to his surroundings. The Gods had called. Soon he would see the Gods. He came to the top of a shallow cliff. Before him stretched an open forest of green, sprinkled with rose and saffron flowers. He knew he was to return soon, bringing the Gods...

Pam felt sick to her stomach. Kronor had seen a Nuzeem grove about to go to seed. If they weren't, they would overrun Naseby in a few weeks, killing everything intelligent that they could find. That explained the decline in the empathic native species; the psionically active Nuzeem disliked competition.

The Nuzeem had an obscure form of space travel. They must have come to Naseby untold millenia ago and established themselves, living without increasing their numbers very much. Now they had begun to spawn. Such things had happened before elsewhere with extremely unpleasant consequences.

Pam saw what the Nuzeem had done. Sometimes they made genetic adjustments in other species to render them harmless. Here, they had tak-

en men as their servants. Her subconscious drew her back and froze Kronor's recollections. Something was happening to Kronor's mind-blocks. A block was just an inert slab of psi-energy, placed around the mind like the armor of some giant reptile. Kronor's blocks were fragmenting, little sparks of light appearing on their surfaces. Something must be inside them -- a Nuzeem trap.

She had never seen a trap hidden in a mind-block before. Desperately, she searched Kronor's mind for the location of the Nuzeem grove. Nothing! That fact was only to be found at the conclusion of his present line of thought. To trace out that line would set off whatever was inside his psi-blocks. Her shields hardened, armoring the probe she had placed on his most hidden memories. She completed his words for him "...new Acolytes, loyal to Angara." Then she snatched at the ideas which she had evoked.

Psi-blasts lanced out from the blocks, raking Kronor's brain. His mind burned. He screamed, snapped his bonds, and jumped for Pam's throat. Psi-bolts streaked out from him all focussed at her. Her own shields tingled as she deflected his assault. She knew his mind couldn't supply the power levels he had reached; somehow, he had been turned into a psychic minefield. She jumped back. Her own psi efforts concentrated on immobilizing him. He wasn't that heavy. She was almost certainly in better physical condition than he.

She still didn't want to find out if he knew anything about hand-to-hand combat. She certainly didn't.

Kronor fell to the floor. Within him, organized thought was ending. The flotsam and jetsam of old dreams echoed against the Nuzeem influence and the remnants of his own conscious will, swirling like an eddy in the Crimson Queen's wake which gradually faded out as it receded in the distance.

She closed her eyes, squeezing down in the instinctive reaction to bedazzlement. Her probes had held in place while Kronor's mind tore itself apart. In some instants, she found facts: in others, she found herself staring into the core of a star.

(Smythe?) she called. "Smythe?" she repeated in voice. He lay unmoving on the floor. Mum-

ford, two security guards, and another TPC agent - someone she didn't know -- crashed through the door with guns drawn.

"Pam? Are you all right?" asked Mumford.

"Yes. No serious damage. Kronor was booby-trapped to dispose of prying minds. He went off, too late to do his masters any good."

"We heard him go. At least, Cameron and I did."

"Through the..." Pam stopped talking in mid-sentence. (ship's psi-barriers?) she continued telepathically in slight disbelief. (Was he that high-charged? I thought he was pretty heavy, but I was too busy at the time to calibrate. I assume [she added and image] that you're Cameron?)

(Of course,) he answered. His thoughts were cold, nearly hostile. "Might we hear your version of what happened, from the beginning?"

"Smythe couldn't probe Kronor, so I volunteered to help." She recounted what followed, leaving out the Nuzeem. They were a Confederation secret, sufficiently sensitive that they were better left unmentioned. Pam could taste Cameron's rage. He must have wanted Kronor for himself. Cameron scanned Smythe, briefly, finding only that Smythe was unconscious. Then he tried to get through her personal shields. She kept talking, pretending not to notice what Cameron was doing. He was skillful -- clearly one of the stronger human psis she had ever met -- but he wasn't so good that she had to take active measures to stop him. She could always close him out by hardening her own shields, but that was a two-edged sword. If she shielded herself so nothing could get in at her, she couldn't drive a probe out, either.

"So," she concluded, "the traps were hidden inside Kronor's blocks. They went off when I traced the key memory."

(Oh, please!) interrupted Cameron. (Structures inside a block? That's impossible.) "Miss Morgan, you've made quite enough trouble for me. I suppose you also claim that the native, who had no psi talent of his own, knocked out Smythe while his shields were up. Only you could have done that. Not Kronor! You! You! I don't know what your game is, but I'll find out. Now, go away! I have enough headaches already!")

(Cameron!) Pam held her contact with him tightly focussed, keeping Mumford unaware of her message. (I found out what planted the blocks. Nuzeem! There's a Nuzeem grove on Naseby, in seed phase. Its position...)

(Spare me!) he answered. (Even most children half your age have more sense that to try to cover an exposed lie with another one. Just go away, little girl. Go away!)

Startled by Cameron's hostility, Pam backed through the doorway. She had quarreled with the TPC before, but Cameron was thinking of her as a dangerous criminal, if not an enemy of the Confederation. He hadn't even listened when she mentioned the Nuzeem. That was a real crisis to which his mind was closed.

She would have to deal with the Nuzeem by herself, assuming that she could. The last time she had encountered one, it had nearly killed her. Of course, she told herself, she had been much younger then. Her shields hadn't really been proof against the more lethal psi wavelengths in the Nuzeem attacks. Still, a Nuzeem was not something she wanted to tackle by herself. What other choices did she have? The Nasebonian Heirarchate denied the existence of psionics. If she did nothing, the native population would be slaughtered. She had spent the past few years minding her own business, choosing not to use psi to help others, but that couldn't go on forever.

* * * * *

Late night. The starfire of the cluster dominated the northern sky. On the bow promenade deck, Pam settled back in a couch. She had found a place sheltered from the thoughts of the other passengers, so she could concentrate without anyone disturbing her concentration.

Mother was still awake, hammering out details of diplomatic negotiations. Pam had announced where she was going. Mother nodded, exactly as though her well-brought-up nine-year-old daughter were still with her. Pam had a portable law library under one arm. If Mother thought that Pam spent the wee hours reading something desirable, rather

than theoretical physics, that was Mother's problem.

Nuzeem and human minds could communicate on a limited range of topics. Mutual incomprehension was more normal. Pam reached out, calling, projecting the Nuzeem neutral sign of greetings. Psi didn't depend on range, not in any ordinary way, but for the Nuzeem to find her, she had to be conspicuous. She knew where they were, but didn't want them to know that she knew. So they had to find her. The Nuzeem symbolism was a tag, something they couldn't overlook. She waited, staring up into the cloudless sky.

(Who?) came an answer. "Who? Who? Whowhohooo?) The alien voices grated and rumbled, obscuring all sense of their direction.

(Friend. Peace-friend. End-of-time-friend,) she answered. She had used those symbols elsewhere, to persuade other Nuzeem that she was not their enemy, that their millenia-old war with the Others had ended. She told them of the Confederation, of Nuzeem groves elsewhere. The constellations made their slow wheel through the heavens.

Later, much later, she ended her story. She stood and touched her toes.

(So you are not the Others.) came the toneless answer. Grove-thoughts flitted about her, out of synchrony with a human sense of time. Gingerly, she opened some of her private memories to them. This was a risky step. If they disbelieved her, they might attack while her shields were weakened.

(A human does not have Masters.) they commented. (No Masters? The who is he who waits and watches in secret silent deep?) They followed with a sense of position and duration. Someone had been spying on her, someone who knew she was so involved that his presence could pass unnoticed.

"Cameron?" she called.

(Master?) came alien questioning. (Your Master?)

(No!) she answered. "Cameron, I don't have time for games. It's hard enough to negotiate -- it's hard enough to keep in phase with Nuzeem minds -- without your making trouble".

(Oh, please, little girl,) he answered mentally, clearly audible to the listening Nuzeem. (You

killed a prisoner. You knocked out one of my best operatives. And now you pretend to negotiate with a restricted species which actually isn't found within thirty parsecs of here. Over the years, you've done quite enough harm. This is the last straw. If you won't grow up, we'll just change you, you little monster. I've read your files. I know all about you.)

"Cameron, show some slight sense," she whispered. "You know perfectly well what else is listening to us."

"Nothing." (How naive do you think I am, anyway?) He pulled a stungun from his jacket pocket. She dove for the cover of a bulkhead. What a trap, she thought. If she used psi against him, the Nuzeem would type her as a violent warrior, one of the Others. If she didn't, she would soon be Cameron's prisoner.

(Monster, he said!) chanted the unseen watchers. (Monster! Monster! An Other Monster, as we were warned! Kill the Other Monsters! Kill! Kill! Killillill!)

Cameron's first burst took her in the chest: a second caught her legs. Her internal pain blocks flared. She collapsed to the deck. Her head and shoulders had reached the wall just before he fired. She barely clung to consciousness, then let her shields relax, allowing the slightest trickle of confused thought to escape. With some luck, Cameron wouldn't suspect she was awake. She could hear the Nuzeem reaction. They were working themselves into a frenzy. (No!) she told them, fiercely. (We are not the Others!) Cameron's mindprobes draped over her like a wet blanket, searching for gaps in her screens, forcing her to break contact with the Nuzeem.

There were footsteps on the deck around her. Several pairs of hands lifted her into a pallet. It wobbled and floated upwards. Someone thoughtfully wedged her law library under her feet. The very-tight, very potent, inwards-facing psi barriers of the stretcher flickered into place. She couldn't, she found, push a thought through them at least without being conspicuous. She couldn't move, and didn't dare open her eyes.

Pam heard the voice of one of Cameron's guards. "Optical deflectors engaged, Sir! Lifting

away. We broke the rail, arranged for witnesses to their unfortunate demise, and weren't observed, Sir."

"Orders, Sir?" Another male voice, one Pam didn't recognize. Where was she? Optical deflectors? Lifting? Their -- my tragic end? -- she asked herself. What was going on? The sounds and the bright lights beyond her eyelids didn't make sense.

"She's been electrostunned." Cameron spoke again. "She'll pull out in two hours. When she does, sedate her -- Quilnosom will do. She's too valuable to risk taking through the subspace barrier while she's in stasis. She can stay out until we reach Choculac. Her mother gets moved out tonight--we don't want someone pushing really hard for a thorough search--it's a shame she'll come down with the usual medical condition just before her daughter died, and had to be rushed express to Parkinson's World for treatment."

"Yes, Sir! Should I initiate recovery before landing?"

"Ideally, she wakes up inside an Androw Cell, just as we hit her with deep rehabilitation. She's stood up against our conventional equipment, but we'll hit her with things even her shields can't stop. Meanwhile, once she wakes up she'll be extremely dangerous. Put her into isolation, and when you go in to sedate her, use triple isolation procedures. And leave someone outside the door, even now while she's unconscious, just as a safety precaution."

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, get her into isolation."

Pam felt her litter drift ahead. The conversation had clarified matters. Cameron had kidnapped her onto a TPC starship and arranged for people to believe that she was dead, so no one would complain or look for her. He wouldn't be the first to discover that she was tougher than expected. He still sounded unpleasantly confident about what an Androw Cell -- whatever that was -- could do. A planet full of TPC agents was probably enough to dispose of her.

This was not the first time that death had stalked her. She was scared stiff. The heroines of historical romance novels claimed that facing death became easier with practice. She suspected

that their authors lacked personal experience on the question. Rehabilitation -- brain bending -- was more terrifying than dying. After rehabilitation, you were alive, with your own body as the most subtle of prisons. You felt what your jailors wanted you to feel, desired what your jailors wanted you to desire, and after a while thought only what they wanted you to think.

On Choculac, she thought, there would be batteries of psi machines, hordes of trained telepaths, and an arsenal of robotic weapons. If she waited until she got there, she would be shot down and drugged, or her screens would be swamped by sheer weight of numbers. She had to get out now, which probably meant doing something unpleasant.

A door slammed shut. The litter settled to the floor. Its psi screens flickered out. Delicately, she scanned the space around her. The walls and floor held mechanical psi barriers. A careful search found no flaw, no gap she could get through quickly. The barriers turned the sharpest probes she could muster. That was hardly surprising. Her radical, unreliable, and personally dangerous alternatives to a probe would be her last resort.

For a moment, she panicked. In the end... in the end, if she couldn't escape, she would have to choose between being brainwashed and killing herself.

If she stopped her heart, they could restart it. She couldn't imagine, though, how they could keep her from projecting herself out-of-body, meanwhile doing enough damage that Pam-body would never support Pam-mind, or much of anything else, again.

She shrank from that line of thought. It was too dark and twisted for her. She had a few other choices. She could try to overpower whoever came to sedate her. That didn't sound promising. A mental attack against someone with good screens, in the few moments she's have, was risky at best. She could sometimes get around mechanical screens, but internal biological protections were often more effective. Given surprise, she had a nominal chance of jumping whoever came in. That would leave armed guards outside waiting for her. Breaking out of a prison cell before they came for her sounded preferable.

Well before Cameron's two hours were up, the numbness faded from her arms and legs. He had assumed that his weapon had reached her brain; the motor nerves recovered rather more quickly. Cautiously, she opened her eyes. The ceiling was a pale shade of apricot; various pieces of scientific equipment lined the walls. She shifted from side to side, ever so slowly, identifying bits and pieces of machinery. This wasn't a jail cell. It was just a private room in the ship's infirmary. There seemed to be no special precautions. After all, they knew that she was unconscious. She slipped off her sandals, stood, and silently searched the room.

She found nothing especially useful. Tools were in very short supply. The ventilator ducts were too narrow for her shoulders. A closet yielded a leaded canister: not quite a club, but it was heavy enough to surprise someone. She could wire the doorknob to the ship power mains, but the knob was almost certainly a non-conducting composite, not real brass. The hinges were on the wrong side of the door; she couldn't even pry them out. What was her next step?

Pam finally remembered the obvious. In a prison ward all the equipment wouldn't have been left lying around where someone could reach it. One can almost never lock a patient into a conventional hospital room. She leaned on the lockless door, pushed it ajar by a hair's breadth, listened, and opened it far enough for her to get out. A guard sat at a night table, eyes glued to a television screen. The audio suggested a lurid entertainment tape. He was facing away from her, and didn't look up while she elbowed the door shut. The guard was wearing a mechanical static generator, strong enough to protect him from rapid telehypnosis. If she tried to break the barrier, she would set up enough of a commotion to alert every telepath on the ship. She edged across the room, bare feet padding noiselessly over cold tile floors. Two swift final steps brought her to his back.

Unconscious, without the static generator, the guard's mind was an open book. In a few moments she had acquired a complete description of the ship and its crew. To her surprise, Cameron was the only telepath on board. Quickly, she learned from the guard the trained reflexive use of his hand weapon and -- to her surprise -- the loca-

tion of the other prisoner. They had taken Mumford, too. Psi-learned skills tended to face quickly, but they would last long enough to dispose of her present enemies.

She adjusted her psi-bubble around her, making it look as much as possible like a stray bit of static. Releasing Mumford took a few moments. For a pair of armed telepaths to hunt down an unwarned, nontelepathic crew took little longer. The crew members they left in the ship's stasis shells, shut off from the flow of time until someone released them.

(Cameron,) she told Mumford, (is on the bridge. I think he's noticed us by now, but he can't strike back unless he comes after us.)

They stopped a few compartments away from the bridge. (Cameron?) she called. (We have something to settle, you and I.)

(Miss Morgan? I see you've escaped.) answered Cameron. (I suppose I should wonder how. And my crew seems to be missing -- put them into stasis, did you? It doesn't matter. I can fly my yacht solo.)

"I suppose", Cameron's voice continued from the intercom, "you'll be stubborn about going to your cell. Stubborn, but not stubborn enough. Go quietly, or I'll be obliged to use force."

(You? Force me?) she sneered. (You and which army?) She projected a protective bubble round Mumford, her own psi screens blending smoothly into his.

(Just keep quiet,) she told Mumford. (He can't reach you unless he beats me.)

She probed Cameron's defenses. There was a psi structure, massively charged, around his head. It felt mechanical in nature.

(As you see,) he said, (I had a psi amplifier implanted in my scalp. It leaves me with all the flexibility of my own mind, and enormously more power. Indeed, I am stronger than any unaided human psi, and I never tire.)

(Is that all?) She sniffed. (My more serious opponents thought humans with the talent were all fragile wallflowers.

(And they were right, at least about you, little girl.) He followed with a vicious series of probes and blasts, trying to drive a wedge into her shields.

She countered hard. They found themselves on the same channel, locked face to face. Pam drove in against him, finding it like climbing uphill into a fierce gale. She could barely push ahead against his resistance. She could beat him this way, she concluded, but doing it would leave her rather thoroughly drained.

She dropped back and let him work over her screens. The demand on her strength wasn't all that impressive. The difficulty was that his gadget might let him keep his attacks up indefinitely, while her own strength was very definitely finite. It was time for her more radical measures. His screens did have flaws, if largely on bands that she didn't want to use. Those approaches did avoid having to take him on directly. She picked the least noxious band and attacked. Her own psi-bolts struck home, followed by bursts of color. Cameron drew on chaos for his defense. She pushed through it. There were a few moments of confusion inside Cameron's mind. Then she leaned back and took a deep breath.

"So much for him," she said to Mumford. "He talked a good line, but his toy didn't help him much."

"Right," he answered. "You don't look so well off yourself."

"Me? I'm fine." Then she noticed she was bathed in sweat, and was shaking as though she had downed a whole pot of her father's Turkish coffee in a single gulp. To use the more exotic psi bands, she paid a price. "But I wouldn't complain if you could dig up some lemonade -- and maybe a towel."

* * * * *

Mumford returned to find her on the yacht's bridge. Cameron was handcuffed to an acceleration couch. To Mumford's surprise, he was awake and arguing with Pamela.

"Cameron," she snapped, "if I were as nasty as you, I'd throw you out the airlock. Without a pressure suit. If you break the holds I put on you, so we have to go one-on-one again, I may do it anyway."

"Pam?" asked Mumford. "I thought he was knocked out."

"I blocked his gadget -- and tied him up. It's easier to work on his memories while he's conscious. Note I said easier, not easy." (His shields are full of holes. I don't want him to know that I can get through them.)

(Is it that hard to fly his ship?)

(The controls come with built-in combination locks on them. Start talking. He'll hear me working, and I don't want him to know what I'm doing. Make small talk, and prompt me with answers -- I'll be too busy to notice what we're saying. Oh, and Mumford, I don't want to notice that I just agreed to one of your more exotic romantic propositions.) She followed with the feel of a grin.

(Your technical level of chastity,) he answered, (for whatever that means to a good telepath, shall remain unblemished. But aren't those the weapons banks?)

(First things first. As I may be about to get killed, I've opened up an escape pod for you. I suggest not landing on Naseby if I don't make it.)

(Get killed? Cameron's a master pilot. With about his memories, how can we crash land?)

(We aren't landing. The other side shoots back. Hard.)

(Pam, not that I don't trust you, but what is going on? What other side? Why not just dump it in the lap of the Naseby government. That's why people have governments, after all. I'm part of one now. I found out. They exist so people whose parents happen to stick them with more courage and honesty than is good for health and long live don't have to play vigilante.)

"Mumford," she asked, "do you know what a Nuzeem is?"

"A what?"

"An exceedingly nasty, intelligent, psi-using plant."

"A telepathic tomato? No, never."

"Miss Morgan," intruded Cameron, "they are a state secret. Besides, we convinced them that their war is over."

"Cameron, no one bothered to tell the grove on Naseby. No one knew there was a grove on Naseby. They think that we are the Others. They are

about to seed, which will doom Naseby. I might have persuaded them to stop if you hadn't stunned me."

"Of course I stunned you," he murmured.

"You've made quite enough trouble. And why should you get credit for contacting the Nuzeem here? I'd done it first, anyway. Besides, any good deeds that you did might make it harder for me to get approval from your rehabilitation."

"What the Nuzeem told you can't be trusted. Your attack on me probably convinced them that we are their enemy." Her anger showed in her voice. "If I move quickly, we can still stop them."

"Pam, old girl," asked Mumford, "why not just have the Naseby Space Navy spray them with weed killer until they learn respect?"

"Because," answered Cameron, "if they're hostile, which they're not, and if the NSN attacks them, which it won't, the NSN will lose. Even a few Nuzeem can swamp the psi screens on a normal warship."

"Besides, the Nuzeem probably control Naseby." Pam said. "They're strong enough. And it would explain Kronor's finances. Now, Hush. The Nuzeem are rational beings. I can't just kill them without trying to reason with them."

Pam bent her head and pressed her fingertips against a control console. Mumford felt no hint of psionic activity. Then she began to talk under her breath. Her face shifted from a tired smile to a look of horror. "No!" she whispered, "No!" She couldn't reach the planet, he thought, not through the ship's screens. He could feel the strain on her, but felt no sign of what she was straining against. She snapped back from the console. Mumford was convinced that she had just broken a link to another mind, but there hadn't been one.

"Cameron," her voice froze the air, "while you had me tied down, they went to seed. They bounced my message back in my face."

"Mumford," begged Cameron, "Can't you see she's lying? We're on a TPC cruiser, behind the toughest psi screens in the Confederation. How could she have gotten down to the surface?"

"You call that junk a screen generator?" she snapped.

(Because,) Pam told Mumford, (One of my less human friends taught me how to use psi bands the TPC doesn't know about. Here, I'll lead you to one.) She did. Mumford turned pale.

(That stuff, Not again, please. It can't be good for old men like me.)

(It's just as bad for growing young girls,) she countered. (But sometimes you don't get nice choices.)

(Now, Cameron," Pam said, "I need your thumb and right eye." He lurched to his feet, every move driven by a compulsion mesh. His face contorted. He faced the weapons banks. "I've keyed everything in," she continued. "All I need is your body scan to arm the warheads."

"How?" he asked.

(I used your mind. Or did you think you have working screens, you creep? Her words were singed with hatred.

His hands touched the controls. Status markers began their count-downs. The displays showed the ship's missile batteries, all targeted on Naseby. "You'll kill millions", he whispered, "You'll never get away with this, even if you flee beyond the edge of time.

(I? Kill? No,) she answered. (When the Nuzeem spawn, they cleanse the ground where the seed will fall. Those people are dead already.) For an instant he felt her shake with tears for the departed. "I was with each of them," she choked, "as they died. That was the Nuzeem answer, you see." Cameron knew she was very close to tearing him apart.

"We have a few moments before we fire," she went on. "You'll be in stasis, Cameron, where you can't make trouble." She tapped a button. "I have no choice," she told Mumford. "They've killed everyone on the North Polar Cap, and are seeding it. Their next step will be the rest of the planet. The only way to keep them from killing everyone on Naseby is to use force, killing them and their seedlings. Fortunately the ship has enough torpedoes and disruption bombs to do that. This, Mumford, is the real difficulty." She waved a small box at him. The Nuzeem will be dead in twenty minutes, but there's in between to worry about first. When they see the missiles launch, they'll come after us, looking for this box. The ship has

psionic control circuits, and this is the master control unit. If the Nuzeem reach this unit, they'll just abort the attack."

"A good sledge hammer?" suggested Mumford.

"It's got backups, also psionic, and equally vulnerable to Nuzeem control. They're scattered the length of the ship. Some are armored. We can't smash all of them and I can't possibly protect a whole ship from a Nuzeem forest. I'm not sure I can protect anything from even one Nuzeem. Putting the control unit into stasis won't work either -- the backups will turn on."

"How do the Nuzeem know what to do? I didn't know the TPC has psionic control circuits for their spaceships, and that's part of my job."

"Cameron," she said, "They dominated him. Enough that they are sure to know how his ship works."

"So, how do we keep them from grabbing it? Cameron said they could get through a ship's screens."

"I protect it. You'll be in stasis, and I will be behind the toughest shields I can drive."

"Pam! I saw what Cameron thinks of the Nuzeem. They can turn mechanical screens into cole slaw. You can't -- not even you -- can hold up against that."

(Now, don't you worry about me. I don't chop up all that easily. Besides, Nuzeem are a whole lot better against machines than against people. Anyway, I have some advantages. This ship has good mechanical screens. We are a long way from Naseby. Now, no more talk.) She touched another button. As temporal precession carried Mumford into stasis, his last words came as

'...one classy body...'. She snorted gently.

Now she only had to face her own thoughts. She was frightened. When the Nuzeem knew that their death was inevitable, they would try for revenge. On her, if they could reach her, and on humanity if she hid away. Even if the ship had no psionic control unit, she told herself, she couldn't have hidden in stasis. She had to stay where she was, and give them a target, or she would be responsible for more mass murder below. Her mother's murder, in particular; the Nuzeem hadn't

swept that part of the planet yet. For now, her conscience would be her only company. Mumford's cynical comments about governments brought tears to her eyes.

She sat down, folded her knees against her chest, and waited. The control unit was cradled in her arms. A flurry of indicator lights marked missile firings. The tactical display showed scarlet sparks edging their way towards Naseby. She fingered the sides of the box and waited.

(Cameron,) came a pale voice. (CAMERON. OTHER VERMIN. TRAITOR!) it shouted. The Nuzeem had saturated the ship's psi-barriers. The air around her flickered slightly. The Nuzeem knew the ship, and were looking for the way to stop the attack. All they found was inert metal.

(YOU,) came the shout. (You have the control. We can see it. Give it to us. We are the Nuzeem and we are strong. We are the Nuzeem and you must obey. Obey, or die.)

She sealed her mind against their ravings, then shivered slightly at the thought of their strength. She had gone around the ship's screens; they were coming straight through them. They said they could see the controls. If they could actually see the master control unit by scanning through her personal shields, without her even being aware of it, her resistance was going to be very short. She hoped that they were only tapping a psionic link in the ship's security system.

The Nuzeem attack came as a wave of pressure, the tolling of a great bell lost in ocean's deep, the fire of the newly risen sun. Pam hardened her bubble around herself. For a moment, the more jarring sensations faded.

Already, the pressure was sapping her strength. Three years ago, a single Nuzeem had come close to killing her. Now she faced a forest of them. She told herself that her age would make a difference. Her previous foe had attacked her in ways she couldn't really block at the time. She hoped she was right. So far, they had used only familiar methods: a lot of energy, concentrated on a few bands, without anything beyond brute force. If they tried some of the more exotic psi effects, she could still be in trouble. She could block an attack on any band she had ever encountered, but the side

effects from some blocks were almost as bad as the attacks they countered.

The pressure rose more swiftly. She had stood off the great psionic machines of the TPC, but never anything like this. Her screens glowed blue, gently at first, then as brilliantly as if she stood within an enormous uncut sapphire. So far her shields were solid. She began to tremble...

Lines of light, each as bright as an electric arc, burned their way across her inner vision. Her body screens were saturating. The Nuzeem couldn't put coherent commands through at her yet, but that moment was approaching. Pam closed her eyes, wishing she could shut out the light. From someplace she found further reserves of strength. Then she fell into a maelstrom of fire.

She found herself back in her parents' garden, holding hands with a boyfriend. "Pam", he said, "Pam, don't hide from me." He took her by the waist. "You're beautiful. All of you. Join with me." He moved to kiss her.

She felt his mind press against her shields, waiting expectantly for her to lower them so they could share the moment completely. Share the moment. All she had to do was lower her screens and..."

"No!" She managed to pull back. A trap! The few fellows she had dated were all non-telepaths. She had never really cared enough for any of them to share minds with them, not when she would have had to do all the work.

The illusion shimmered and faded.

There was a laugh. It was Michelson, a perhaps-likeable rogue who occasionally worked for the TPC. She cursed under her breath. She could feel her internal screens protect her will, but the Nuzeem could affect her memories, at least enough to draw illusions from them. It was a very low-power trick, not enough to hurt her, not enough power to affect the control unit in her lap, but enough to confuse her. The Michelson-ghost laughed again. (You see), came his thoughts, (I and my friends can deduce your fate. With your mind, your talents, you will never love, never marry, never have children. Your family line will end with you. You're a freak, a monster. You are doomed. We can give you peace instead. All you

have to do is open your mind to us. Open your mind to the peace and solace of the grove. Open! Open!)

(We have your memories.) This was another voice, very different from the others. Was she at last hearing the Nuzeem? She had no further sources of strength to draw on. Either she was strong enough to hold them off, or she was not. (We'll tell all: You're abnormal, weird, an alien monster.) She could feel her mother's thoughts, burning with shame and embarrassment at her freak daughter. Her career was in ruins, her family name was besmirched. What could she do? What could she ever do?

No, Pam told herself. No! If the Nuzeem actually had her memories, they had far more potent ways to threaten her. They were getting through to her just on the level needed to excite nightmares. They were getting through to her, but the threats were all from her own imagination. Very deliberately, she separated herself from her unconscious mind. Her screens burned. The fire, she thought, the fire outshines the sun. She rolled on her side, aware of nothing except her shallow breathing and the Nuzeem battering at her screens.

She was lying on the floor, still clutching the override controls. Her head throbbed. Dazed, she forced herself to sit. She was so stiff. Her shields? They were locked as tight as they could be, though there didn't seem to be any pressure on them.

What had happened, she asked? Fainting was not good form. How much longer did she have to hang on against the Nuzeem? Her throat was bone dry.

She stared at the tactical display. The missiles had reached their destinations. And not recently, either; from the clock, she must have spent the better part of a day collapsed on her back.

She could remember being trapped in an endless column of flame, which burned without touching her. Then there came darkness. That must have been the end of the Nuzeem. At the time, the dark seemed to be an adequate excuse to take a nap. She didn't seem to be hurt, though she must have come very close. Wita forced, conscious effort, she edged her screens down enough that she could work beyond them. The shields kept want-

ing to go back to maximum density. It was an interesting side effect, which she knew would go away with time.

* * * * *

Later, her hands and Cameron's memories piloted them back towards Naseby. Mumford watched over her like a solicitous mother hen.

"Pam," he said, "you won again, old girl. If your parents hadn't made you so honest, you could be just as successful in more profitable work."

"You call this success?" she asked. "I lived through it, barely, but plenty of people didn't. I ran up another list of TPC people with private grudges against me. All I proved is that you can't break a good screen with brute force, crudely applied."

"But the force! They rolled over the ship's screens."

"No skill of application. They had about two methods for breaking screens, and didn't change when they failed. I could crack my own screens if I could handle a tiny fraction of the power they did. Well, most of Naseby is alive, you concocted an innocuous cover story for us, and Cameron's compulsion mesh won't let go of him until he returns to Choculac and confesses. I've told him who he's going to confess to. I don't think she'll be too pleased with him, either, though I'll be blamed for anything the TPC doesn't want responsibility on." She stretched and yawned.

"You...you just roll over everything in your way. Nothing even slows you down..." said Mumford.

"Me? I've been lucky. Very lucky. If I'd run into -- some of the things I ran into a few years ago, before I started keeping my head down -- in a different order, I'd have been stepped on. Actually, I was stepped on, more than once. I'm not all that powerful, or all that good, no matter what I did to you, the last time we met. I've just managed to be good enough, when I had to be. Of course, a sixteen-year-old with a more-than-adequate ego can believe that absolutely nothing can really stop her, even after it happens. I finally decided to let the TPC earn its pay. I just wanted to grow up.

And now this. The Nuzeem here weren't wicked, just isolated, old, and afraid. The Nuzeem image of the Others matched the Naseby Heirarchy's image of the Confederation, so I couldn't possibly prove that we are friendly. They already knew the answer. Even so, killing the Nuzeem will make me a lot of enemies. Maybe even more than if I had let the Nuzeem kill the people of Naseby. The Confederation sometimes gets very nasty with people they don't agree with, and they're a lot more dangerous than the Nuzeem were. And I know they have people who are better telepaths than I am."

"If things get too hot for you, Nemon's security forces can always replace a few dozen good men with one good woman," said Mumford. Pam's smile widened. Cameron was a fluke, not an uglier face for the Confederation.

Wasn't he?

Gravity Wave

by David C. Kopaska-Merkel

A billion light years away,
a billion years ago,
the corpses of two stars collided.
Emigrés from cinder worlds,
ram-scooping to beat the wave front,
hurry towards blue-shifted Sol;
time-dilated witnesses to the cataclysm
will soon (their time) pass us by;
by then, we'll all be dead,
but the Queendom of the Ants
will take note.

Who Wants a Green Bottle?

by Todd Robbins

from *Silent, White, and Beautiful, and other stories* originally published 1912

A no-longer-in-copyright tale found for us by
Bob Jennings

SUDDENLY there came a flash of lightning,
so brilliant, so dazzling, that all the wild country

side was lit up for an instant as though by an immense conflagration. Then, far off, from the other side of those threatening, hump-backed mountains, I heard a low, rumbling sound as night once more closed and barred her ebony doors. But in that brief moment I had caught a glimpse of what I sought.

There, not a hundred yards away, on a rise of ground overlooking the road and the valley, was the long, low building which a second before the lightning had traced on a madly galloping background of clouds. Now, although my eyes were still straining in that direction, I saw nothing. Not a light beckoned.

The house, the hill, the sky, had been blotted out. Nevertheless I had the general direction. Backing the car into a nest of bushes beside the road, I took out my small electric flashlight and began to ascend the slope. It was a stiff climb for a corpulent man well over fifty; soon I was breathing like one of my asthmatic patients.

What little breath I had left was swept away by a gust of wind which struck me full in the face, just as I breasted the slope. It took me quite by surprise for down below I could have held a lighted match till it burned my fingers and snatched off my soft hat, spinning it away somewhere into space. My legs were not too steady under me when I reached the house. For a space I leaned against one of the large, white pillars on the veranda to regain my breath and my dignity.

As I waited, another gust, straight from the lake, went howling by, stirring the tall pine-trees about the house into a muttering, mutinous revolt and causing a loose shutter somewhere in the upper blackness to beat out a devil's tattoo against the ivy-covered wall. Then suddenly all became silence again—a brilliant silence lit up by a flash of lightning which showed me the rounded bowl of the valley and the white stretch of road. And on its heels there followed such a crash of thunder that the whole landscape seemed to turn sick and dizzy.

"This is no night to be out," I thought, and, wasting no more time, rapped sharply on the door.

Scarcely had the echo of my knocking died away when the windows on the lower floor winked out at me; and, before I could so much as brush the wind-tossed hair out of my eyes, the door swung

open and I came face to face with the Laird of Lockleaven.

After the blackness which had followed the flash of lightning, that hallway seemed blazing. And there he stood, as long and lean as a fishing-pole, looking out at me with the great terror-stricken eyes of a startled deer. He wore some kind of fuzzy bathrobe which made him seem even taller; and he had a mad tuft of grey hair on his chin which twitched oddly—or maybe it was the wind stroking it. That was all I caught at a glance.

"Come in, Dr. O'Brien," he said with a bow like a dancing-master. "You're late."

Now what from the battering of the wind, the loss of my best hat, and perhaps a glass too many at the Claymore, I was too fuddled already to marvel much at his words. Not a thought did I give to how he knew my name or why he expected me at all, till after the door had closed on the night.

"You'll pardon my intrusion, sir," I said as soon as I got my breath. "The fact is that I was motoring home, and a half mile up the road my headlights flickered out. Now, if there had been a moon, or—"

But he cut me short with a wave of his hand. "Nonsense, Dr. O'Brien!" he said as sharp as the crack of a whip. "I was expecting you; and this lady and gentleman—they were expecting you, too." He jerked his thumb toward the wall.

Wheeling about in some confusion at that, I came face to face with a hard-featured old chap in a periwig glaring down at me from a mildewed picture frame. To his right was the portrait of a very determined old lady with a pointed chin that curled up like the toe of an old slipper. She had a fan in her hand, but she held it as I have seen boys grip their shillalaha on the way to the county-fair.

"Ancestors?" I asked with a half-hearted chuckle, for the stony eyes of the painted lady had somehow or other gotten under my skin.

"My great grandfather and grandmother, Sir Robert Lockleaven and his lady," he says rather proud. "Now step this way, Dr. O'Brien. There's a fire in the library and a bottle of good old port uncorked. And I'm thinking you'll be needing both before the dawn breaks."

With that he ushered me into as cherry a room

as I ever want to see. In the days when this house had been built, they knew the meaning of fireplaces. It did my heart good to see the great log flaring up on the hearth, a log the size of a well-grown tree trunk; in front of it, a semicircle of easy-chairs that tired men could sleep in; and, last of all, the mahogany table with two glasses and a decanter of wine which glowed ruby red where the light touched it. And even the glimpse I caught of other sour-faced portraits on the wall failed to overshadow my good spirits.

He motioned me into one of the easy-chairs and, pouring out two glasses of port, handed me one and raised the other aloft. "Here's success to you, Dr. O'Brien!" he cried, while his frightened eyes flashed and once again the mad wisp of hair on his chin twitched oddly.

"And here's success to you," said I, draining my glass at a swallow, for the dust of the road had got into my throat.

"That goes without saying," said he. "If *you* win, *I* win. Do you happen to have a green glass bottle in your pocket, Dr. O'Brien?"

"A green glass bottle?" I said dumfounded. "Whatever would I be doing with a green glass bottle, Mr. —"

"Lockleaven's the name," he muttered, seating himself and adjusting the folds of his bathrobe as I have seen old ladies do with their skirts after getting into a bus. "I was christened Robert Lockleaven after my great grandfather." He bent his head and began to pick nervously at a loose strand of worsted. "I'm pretty well known in the village," he finished with a haughty tilt to his chin.

At that I started so that I nearly dropped the glass. I was new to that country, but already the name was familiar enough. Indeed it had more than once figured in Scottish history. But gradually that fiery stream had slackened; and now, if report could be believed, the last of the line was a man weakened in both body and mind. In the village he was known as "The daft Laird of Lockleaven;" and scandalous stories were still told of his escapades before old age had taken the marrow out of his bones.

Now, as he refilled my glass, I studied the man. He had the high, broad forehead of a thinker,

the deep-set, fiery eyes of a dreamer, the firmly arched nose and expanding nostrils of a warrior. But the lower half of his face was deplorable. Here all the weaknesses of his soul were laid bare. The pitiable indecision of that twitching chin, the animal pout of the thickish red lips, the long, yellow tooth poking out at each side of his mouth—all these were enough to give a Christian the shivers.

"How did you know that I was coming to-night, Mr. Lockleaven?" I asked.

"Know it!" he cried with an unpleasant snicker. "Why, I know everything." He paused, and a look of caution creased his jowls. "Besides, didn't I send Meg for you?" he finished.

"I've been away for the week, and.."

But again he cut me short with a quick motion of his hand. "Never puzzle your head over that, man," he cried peevishly. "There's more pressing matters afoot. What's crystal-gazing and such bairns' play when it comes to the saving of a live, human soul?"

"Is there some one sick here?" I asked. "So there is," he said soberly; "so there is unco sick. But sh! What's that?"

Usually I am as steady as the next man. But there was something in the Laird of Lockleaven's eyes, some thing in the Laird of Lockleaven's voice, which grated on my nervous system like sand-paper. I felt gooseflesh rippling up my back.

For several moments we both sat silent, listening to the reverberating thunder which still echoed faintly far off in the hills, to the crackling of the fire, to the scampering of the mice behind the wainscoting in the wall.

"Do you hear them?" he asked.

"I hear nothing," I answered sharply enough; "Nothing but the thunder and the fire and the mice in the wall."

"The mice!" cried the Laird of Lockleaven with a quick, low laugh. "Did you ever hear tell of mice that could sing and talk and cry? Put your ear to the wall and listen."

To humor him I did as he told me. At first I could hear nothing; but soon a low, suppressed note, very much like a muffled sob, made my eardrum tingle.

"Poor Aunt Mary!" said the Laird of Lock-

leaven solemnly. "She wouldn't stop mourning in life and now she cannot. Night and day I hear her, night and day."

With a mighty effort I shook off the strange, numbing fear which was creeping over me like a coverlot of snow. "Mr. Lockleaven," I cried with a forced laugh, "you are to be congratulated—you have singing mice in your wall! They're not too common, but there are such things. Look, there goes one now!"

I pointed to a little, brown speck which scurried across the room and vanished somewhere in the shadows. The Laird of Lockleaven raised his head. "My grandfather has just let his cattle out to graze," he murmured.

"What did you say?" I asked, making no sense out of his words.

For a moment he was silent, and then he cried out in a loud, authoritative voice: "Will you listen to me, Dr. O'Brien, or will I just have to be trusting my soul to Meg's withered hands and dim eyes? Will you listen to the tale I've got to tell, Dr. O'Brien?"

I took a long pull at the port before I spoke. My nerves were trembling like fiddle-strings. I had an odd fancy that the portraits on the wall—all those hardfeatured, sour-faced Lockleavens had poked their heads out of their frames to lend an ear to our talk.

"I am awaiting your pleasure, sir," I said very slowly.

II

"The Lockleavens are an ill-starred race," my host began. "The balance of sanity is not in them. Each one of my house must either ride or be ridden. They saddle and bridle a hobby, then spur it till both horse and man are foundered. Whether it be generosity or greed, swashbuckling or psalm-singing, drunkenness or sobriety, each of us travels too far on that road.

"My uncle, the tenth Laird of Lockleaven, like others of our blood, spurred his hobby a wee bit too far. As a young man he had the name in the countryside of being a canny laddie; at middle age, when I first remember him, he was as withered as a dead branch, with a pinched, frost-bitten face and

bitter blue eyes. He had begun by being careful with the small fortune his gambling father had left him; he ended by nearly starving his household to death to fill the great money chest at the head of his bed.

"One by one he got rid of the extra mouths to feed, till at last there was only Meg and me to minister to him. What a spider of a man he was--going about the house, soft-footed, in his list slippers and cocking his eye at us if we so much as blinked at his iron-bound chest. I can see him now with his sidelong gait, his long thin fingers stroking his beard like bent twigs in a hedge, and his silly, solitary smile wrinkling the loose skin of his jowls.

"When he came to die there was little mourning in Lockleaven Hall. I was a lean lad of eighteen on the night when the great sickness gripped him. Meg set me to watch at his bedside, while she scuttled off to the village for Dr. McLean. Before she left she lighted the old-fashioned tapers above his bed; and I sat all hunched up in one corner, watching the light flickering over the sick man's face and the heaving of the bedclothes at each long breath.

"How long I sat there, to this day I don't know; it might have been an hour or more—but after a time I grew drowsy and closed my eyes for a bit. When I opened them again, there had come a change. The laird had been lying flat on his back, his eyes on the ceiling; but now he lay on one side, his face to the wall. The frayed fringe of his whiskers trembled slightly, but his loud breathing had ceased.

"I rose and approached my uncle with a feeling of awe that death should have hovered so near while I slept; and then, as I put my hand on the footboard of his bed and looked down, horror gripped me by the hair. Horror did I say? It was more than that. It was just as though my brain had been turned into soft, quivering jelly.

"My eyes had wandered to my uncle's grey beard. There, through the tangled meshes on the pillow, I saw a tiny crouching form and a pair of flaming pinpoint eyes. For an instant it glared up at me like a cornered rat under a wisp of hay; and then, with a shrill squeak, away it swished under the rumpled bedclothes and was gone."

The Laird of Lockleaven paused to wipe gleaming drops of perspiration from his forehead. Through the silence which followed his words, I heard a great commotion behind the wainscoting—a galloping as of a troop of horse, a shrill piteous squeaking, and then a sound which might have been a distant bugle-call.

"You hear them?" he said with a haggard smile. "That's Mad Anthony and his hounds. They've sighted a buck, or I'm much mistaken."

"There's an army of rats and mice in your walls," I broke in with an involuntary shudder, for the knowing, listening tilt of his head was an unhealthy thing to see.

"Rats and mice there *are* for those who hunt and ride," he said. "But it's not these I have in mind, nor one of them I saw that night through the tangle of my dead uncle's beard."

"What was it then?" I asked, taking another long drink of port to steady me.

"I'm coming to that," said he. "After my uncle's death, the chest of money was mine. You can readily surmise that I lost no time in opening it. Having no taste of pleasure up to this for the most part going about in rags with a belly as empty as a toy balloon---it was no wonder that I played pitch and toss with the ten commandments.

"I can give you my word that I lived the devil of a life for a round dozen years, with never a breathing spell on the Sabbath, till my uncle's old chest sounded as hollow as a drum when I gave it a tap with the toe of my boot. And Meg grew soft and yellow as a tub of butter from good living and gin; and tales were told in the village of how she was seen taking a glass with the devil on Black Friar's Heath.

"Well, time went on with a jig-step till one All-Soul's Eve--twenty years ago to-night. I had had a few gentlemen playing cards with me up at the Hall, but they had ridden off before midnight in a black rage with some cock-and-bull story of how I had slipped a card up my sleeve.

"I was sitting in this very chair, nodding a bit, an empty glass in my hand, when what should I see but a gold piece lying on the carpet at my feet. I was about to reach down for it---for I was always a careful man even in drink---when out of the corner of my eye I spied something which made the

hair on my head ruffle up.

“You can believe it or not—but there, creeping out from the wall, was a wee man no bigger than my thumb; a wee man in a yellow gown and nightcap, with a few threads of beard hanging from his chin. On all fours he was creeping toward me, wagging his head as he came.

“A fairy! I said to myself, remembering what Meg had told me of the tiny folk who dance in the moonlight. ‘If I can catch him, he’ll give me a wish.’ So I waited as patient as Job with my eyelashes lowered, snoring a bit just to put heart in him, till up he came and laid hold of the gold piece. Then you should have seen the sweating time he had over it! First he’d bend his crooked old back and hoist and hoist till he had lifted it up a pin’s breadth on one side; and then, just as he thought he had it fairly started, down it would come on his knuckle-bones and he’d let out a shrill squeak like a mouse. It was all I could do to watch him and not roar with laughter.

“So!” I thought to myself. “After all the good things I’ve heard tell of you from Meg, you’re nothing but a pack of thieves when it comes to that! Break into my house and steal my gold, will you?” As quick as a flash, I leaned down and clapped my glass over him—and he with his back still bent over the coin.

“But he wasn’t quiet long. No sooner did he have the bottom of the tumbler as a roof for his head, than up he jumped as spry as you please. And what a commotion there was! First he leaped straight up like a startled buck, and the top of his head clinked against the glass; next he whirled about with outstretched arms, making a noise all the time like a beetle caught between two window-panes; and then, when there came no hope from Heaven or Hell, down he flopped on his knees and whimpered and whined till all the tumbler was tinkling with it.

“By this time, as you may guess, I was near dead from laughing so. But soon I remembered that it was All-Soul’s Eve and that, if Meg did not lie, a wish might be had for the asking. So I got down on all fours and squinted through the tumbler. Then, of a sudden, I knew the wee man and I clapped my hand to my mouth to keep back a

yell.”

III

The Laird of Lockleven paused. All his face was twitching till it seemed to me that he hadn’t one face but a dozen. But his eyes were still; they looked like two frozen lakes in the moonlight.

“And who was the little man?” I asked.

“There was only one mortal man could cock his eye like a Kelpie,” he answered solemnly. “Twas none other than my dead and buried uncle—.

“Yes, there he sat in his old yellow robe and slippers, his nightcap clapped on his head all awry, his bitter blue eyes eating holes in my self-esteem. It was a sight to make your blood run cold. And he was champing his lean old jaws at me like one who has the taste of bitter words on his tongue.

“Well, Uncle Peter,’ said I, “though my teeth were .clicking together from fright, ‘it’s a pleasure to welcome you home to the Hall. And to see you so spry for a man of your years,’ I added, for he had made a spring against the glass like a spider at a fly.

“Robbie Lockleven,’ my uncle cried, “I’ll have the hide off you for this!”

“You will not, Uncle Peter,’ said I. ‘You’ll stay right where you are as a disgusting example of an old man in his cups!’

“At that his eyes glowed like two fireflies and his beard curled up, till I would have taken to my heels had it not been for the good liquor in me. As small as he was, I couldn’t forget the fear I had of him.

“Robbie Lockleven,’ he cried again in a voice like a pin scratching against the window-pane, ‘you’re a spendthrift and worse! You’re building up a mountain of trouble in the life to come. But just, lift up the tumbler, laddie, and I’ll let bygones be bygones. Ye’ll no be adding disrespect to your ither sins? You’ll no be sic a fule, Robbie ?

“Now as his speech began to soften into the dialect of the countryside, I saw plain enough that I had the upper hand. Besides, when it came to that, how could a mite of a man do me bodily harm? Thinking in this wise, I spoke up bravely

enough.

"I'll lift up the glass under one condition, Uncle Peter," I said. "It's All Soul's Eve; it's only fair that a body should wish a wish. Grant me a wish, and I'll let you go free."

"Well, he grinned a bit in an uncommonly nasty way, he stroked his beard a bit, and then he lifted his voice in a whine. 'Hae ye no had my bonny treasure mei box?' he squalled. 'Hae ye no scattered my siller to the four winds like chaff? Hae ye no made me come oot o' the wall to lift precious guineas till my back is no more than a broken reed?"

"Now I knew that I had won the victory, and I laughed aloud. "You old foxy-eyed thief!" I cried. 'I've caught you fair; and a wish I will have. You can't go prowling about Lockleaven Hall when you should be six feet deep in the kirk-yard, stealing my money and playing pranks altogether unseemly for a man of your years, without just paying the piper. A wish I will have.'

"Weel then, have your wish and be damned! Uncle Peter cried in a rage. "Wish quick now, for the fumes of vile liquor in this glass are making my auld head spin around like a whirligig."

"Well, I thought for a while before I spoke. Finally I said: "There's only one thing worth knowing to a worldly wise man like me. I'm going to ask you for that which has no weight in the hand, but is more precious than jewels. I'm just seeking knowledge of Heaven and Hell. What's the human soul like, Uncle Peter; and what follows life for the good and the bad?"

"Now the old man again cocked his eye at me and stroked his beard like I'd often seen him do while driving home a good bargain. 'So that's your wish, Robbie? he says, smooth as syrup.

"By the tone of his voice, the manner he had of stroking his beard, and most of all by the glint in his eye, I knew well enough that trouble was brewing. But I couldn't retract, having once stated my wish in the Kings' English. So I answered, "Just that," and held my breath like a man under water.

"Weel then, to begin," said Uncle Peter with a twitch of a smile, 'the human soul is just a wee mite o' a man like me. I am the human soul of Peter Lockleaven, deceased.

"Did you take shape after death?! I asked. " 'Na, na,' says he. 'I was always in the man like the core in an apple. You have one as weel, Robbie Lockleaven--a canny wee man, hidin' within, as like to yoursel as two peas. Hae ye no felt him tinkerin' awa at your brain?"

"Nonsense!" said I. Such a theory is contrary to science.

"Is it so?" he cried. "To modern science, ye mean. There were wise men of old who knew well enough that the human soul had a body to it. Did they no debate lang syne on the matter-growin' red in the face ower the question of how many souls could be dancin' a Hieland fling on the point of a needle? Robbie, will ye be denyin' that the human body weighs a wee mite less when the soul has sped?"

"So I have heard," I answered with a flicker of fear. 'Yet surely it can be accounted for by—'

But Uncle Peter brushed my words aside as though they had been so many dead leaves. 'Na, na,' he piped. 'It canna be accounted for except yo believe lees. There's nae doot about it—a human soul there is, with a body to it and all.'

"Then, Uncle Peter," I said, 'will you explain to me how it is that doctors don't see it when they operate; or why we don't get a glimpse of it when we see a man die?"

"I will that," said Uncle Peter with a smile and a sneer. "We souls are no ower anxious to be poked at and handled. When a doctorin' man cuts into our hame, we just scuttle awa to anither room till he's done with his work. Say he's tinkerin' at the brain; weel, we take to our heels and hide in the belly.' "And when a man dies?" I broke in.

"When a man dies, we just bide our time till naebody's heedin'; and then awa we go to Heaven or Hell. It's simple enough, laddie, when they're bendin' ower the deceased, half-blinded by tears—or maybe the fule doctor's feelin' for heart-beats and not carin' owermuch what the soul may be at—to scuttle awa to the foot of the bed, to slip to the floor and go tiptoin' off in the dark. But, mind ye, I'm no sayin' that we hae no been seen one time or anither. There was yoursel, Robbie, poppin' your een at me when I was bidin' my time in the dead Laird of Lockleaven's beard?"

"In spite of myself my knees began to shake from fright. Uncle Peter had begun to chuckle; his merriment came through the tumbler like the chirping of a sick canary.

"And where does your soul go to when it leaves the body? I asked.

"'Heaven or Hell lies in the walls of ilka hame,' said he. 'Lockleaven Hall is well stocked with souls, Robbie. Dinna ye hear 'em scramblin' about in the wainscotin', chatterin' and whimperin', blowin' on horns and pipin' on bagpipes? Rats and mice? Na, na. Though some of 'em we hae for Mad Anthony, who is never content till he's thrown his leg ower the back of a nag and is awa to the huntin'. Twascore Lockleavens hae died in this house —twascore souls are in yonder wall. You'll be joinin' us soon, Robbie, I'm thinkin'.'

"But still I wasn't convinced that Uncle Peter was telling the truth. 'If I let you out of the tumbler,' I said, 'you'll just have to show me Heaven and Hell.'

'I canna do that, Robbie,' he whined. 'Heaven is no for me. They wouldna hae us prowlin' about through that blessed wall. Now will a visit to Hell content ye?

"Well, I thought so hard for a minute that my head ached; and then, all of a sudden, I made up my mind like a man jumping off a high cliff. "I'll just have to be contented with Hell, Uncle Peter," I said, 'seeing that you're not over-anxious to take me to Heaven.'

"Dinna think that!" he cried with a shake of his head. "The will is there, but the godliness is missin'. Now just lift up the tumbler, Robbie, and we'll be startin' in twa shakes.'

"And you will not take to your heels?" I asked.

'Na, na,' he muttered. I couldna do that on All Souls' Eve.

"And you'll bring me back safe out of Hell, Uncle Peter?" I said, not liking the grin that twitched his flea-bitten beard.

"That I will, laddie," he says very solemn.

"Well, Dr. O'Brien, I took a long drink out of a bottle of Scotch which stood on the table and then I bent down and lifted the tumbler. And my dead uncle sat still as a toad the while, and never so much as blinked an eye.

"Now sit ye doun beside me, Robbie," he said. And when I had done as he wished, he began to sing a snatch of a song which ran something like this:

"Dinna ye hear the pipes of Locklear
Aweepin' and whimperin' oot there in the
night?

Dinna ye greet for souls that maun keep
A watchin' and waitin' for threads o' the light?
Come oot o' the body Wee souls while ye can,
There's buckets o' toddy
For ilka wee man.'

"Hardly had his voice died away, when everything seemed to vanish into space. I felt that I was enclosed in some kind of shadowy dungeon—or rather at the bottom of some pit down which a faint light sifted. And with this feeling, there came a wild desire to escape. I climbed up and up and soon came to the mouth of the tunnel. Squeezing between two jagged lines of ivory pillars which blocked my path, I leaped out into the open.

"At the next moment, I was rolling down a steep declivity with the speed of lightning. Soon I collided violently with Uncle Peter at the bottom— an Uncle Peter who had suddenly regained his full stature and who was regarding me sourly.

"Ye daft fule!" he cried, rubbing his back. 'Is that ony way to be runnin' against a man? Ye should look afore ye leap oot o' sic a tall hame.'

IV

"Well, Dr. O'Brien, I looked up and saw that I was standing in the shadow of a gigantic statue—a statue which I thought must be at least two hundred feet tall. It sat cross-legged with bowed head and its huge tunnelloke mouth was open.

"What's that, Uncle Peter?" I asked.

"That's naething more nor less than your ain body, Robbie Lockleaven," he said very solemn. 'I've charmed your soul oot o' it.'

"I see you've grown to full size!" I cried. "Na, na," said he. 'It's you that's grown small as a match. But we'd best be on our way, Robbie, for it's a lang walk to the wall of Hell and I'm no so spry as I was.'

"Well, as you may guess, my head was spin-

ning around from all I'd heard; so I thought it best to say no more, but to follow his lead. When he started ambling off with a jerk of his head at me, I put my best foot forward and was at his heels in no time.

"First we skirted a small tower of glass, which Uncle Peter said was the tumbler-not that I believed him or could--and off we started across a level 'space where long red grass sprouted up above my slippers.

"Ye should tear up this carpet, Robbie,' Uncle Peter called back over his shoulder. 'It's most unco wearisome when a body's leg-weary.

"But I made him no answer, for I was looking about and wondering at all I saw. I seemed to be on a kind of desert. As far as the eye could reach, the landscape was level, except for the statue and several weird wooden structures which rose up on each side of it. The sky was a threatening grey. Not a star glimmered. But somewhere in the remote distance, I saw a gigantic sun which lighted the whole landscape with blazing effrontery.

"So this is Hell! I murmured.

"'Na, na,' said Uncle Peter, uneasily. We hae no reached it yet. This is naething more than the library of Lockleaven Hall.

"What's Hell like, Uncle Peter?' I asked, coming up alongside of him

"'Hell?' he cried with a start. Why, Hell is just Hell! Ye can be takin' notes soon enow, Robbie. It's an unco wearisome place.'

"Then why were you so anxious to go back to it? I couldn't help asking, for the drink and curiosity were still strong in me.

"Anxious to gang back! cried Uncle Peter. Are ye daft, Robbie? If ye had a wee mite of sense, ye'd have just kept me in that bonnie glass till Judgment-day. And I'd have thanked ye for it on my bended knoos, Robbie; though I'm a temperate man with a distaste for the smell o' strong drink.'

"You were clammering loud enough to get out of it,' said I.

"Nae doot,' he muttered. "But ye shouldna hae given me heed. 'Twas not me that was clamorin', Robbie, but the spirit of Hell which gives me no rest. After we leave our mortal bodies behind us, we can no longer do just as we please. We've just

got to scuttle awa on the devil's errands, and pay with sweat for our sins'

"And how do you pay, Uncle Peter?' I asked.

"Why, just by livin' under the same roof with a fule like you, ' he says very sharp. "Do ye no think I sweat tears o' blood when I see ye throwin' my gude siller awa like it was chaff? Twascore times hae I seen my bright gold pieces lyin' on the carpet; twascore times hae I bent my auld back to 'em-just to find them ower heavy to lift. Me, who they say was a wee bit too canny, to see sic wastefulness in Lockleaven Hall!

"Uncle Peter had worked himself up into such a fury that I thought it best to say no more for the present; so once again I glanced about me.

"We had been walking at a brisk pace for upward of a half-hour, yet, on looking over my shoulder, I could still see that gigantic seated colossus which my uncle assured me was my own body. Indeed, from this distance, I noted a certain resemblance to myself. Of course, when I had been standing directly under it, it had seemed all out of human proportion; but now, from a mile or so away, I noted with an odd sensation of fear that it had something strangely familiar about it. Perhaps it was the incongruity of a statue wearing dressing-gown and slippers which caused great beads of perspiration to spring out on my brow.

"As I continued to stare back, I suddenly heard a threatening roar above my head and, looking up, saw a flock of strange birds flying swiftly past. Larger than eagles and inky black, they emitted a thundering sound like a thousand steam-engines going at once. Soon they became black specks in the distance, specks which hovered over the statue. Finally I saw one of them descend on its nose.

"'Never fash your head ower them, Robbie,' said Uncle Peter. 'They're naething more nor less than house-flies taking a wee flight. Come awa, laddie.'

"I turned about. As I did so, I saw, very dim and hazy in the distance, a black, towering cliff which seemed to rise straight up into the somber sky."

'Tis the wall of Hell,' said Uncle Peter sadly and started off at a brisk pace.

"Now, as I followed him, pushing through the

tangle of red grass, I fell to wondering what the old gentleman meant when he said that he'd have been happy to live out his days in my whisky glass. Perhaps, if I found Hell to be such an unpleasant place as he hinted, I could cheat it in time, had I once the secret.

"Were you safe from Hell in that glass, Uncle Peter?" I asked.

"Not altogether," he said kind of careless over his shoulder. "They couldna hae got me out, but they would hae tormented me sore. Had it been a green glass bottle, Robbie as green as the sea-why, I'd hae been as safe as a bug in a rug.

"At that I burst out into a laugh. "Thank you kindly, Uncle Peter!" I cried. 'So a green glass bottle is the refuge from Hell? I'll be minding that when my time comes to die.'

"And then, as I saw plainly, the old gentleman could have snapped his own nose off in rage. But all he said was: 'Ah weel, Robbie, there's mony a slip twixt the cup and the lip. Ye canna hide awa in green glass bottles when Hell is beckonin!'

"But now we were in the shadow of the cliff. And well might Uncle Peter call it a wall, for it shot straight up with no foothold for man or beast. And away to the left, a great cave had been scooped out of it; and in this cave, roaring and thundering, was a many headed sheet of flame fully a hundred feet high..

"'Is that Hell?' I asked. "Na, na,' said Uncle Peter with a snort of contempt.

"That's naething but your ain fireplace and a wee birch log sputterin' a bit. Come this way, Robbie, if ye are seekin' Hell.'

"At that, Uncle Peter took my hand as though I were a bairn and led me right up to the face of the cliff. Then I saw that it was no cliff at all, rightly speaking; but just a great wall of dark-colored wood which ran up and up till it lost itself in the sky. And down at my feet was a round hole in this wall, just large enough for a man to put his head and shoulders through.

"I'll gang first, whispered Uncle Peter. And he got down on his knees and popped into that hole as smooth as a rat.

"Before I followed, I turned and took a last look at the world I was leaving.

"There, that strange desert stretched away as flat as the palm of your hand; and there, like a giant brooding over the universe, sat that great statue of me in its gown and slippers, its jaw dropped low on its chest. How I pitied it then, Dr. O'Brien-yet, for the life of me, I couldn't tell why. There it sat, staring out over that crimson grass with its sightless eyes. You are leaving me forever, it seemed to be saying, me who has carried you in sickness and health.

"Now that ye are at Hell's gate, do ye fear to enter?" said Uncle Peter, popping his head out of the hole and sneering at me. 'I misdoot ye have heart for the venture. '

"For answer, I flopped down on my hands and knees and, after a tight squeeze of it, crawled after him through the gates of Hell."

V

Again the Laird of Lockleaven paused to wipe glistening drops of moisture from his forehead; while I took advantage of his silence to stir the fire a bit. Indeed, I was needing the warmth and cheer of it. What from my host's wild words, the distant rumble of thunder and all, I was never before so much in want of creature comforts. I have seen mad men enough in my day, but never one with such a plausible way of telling a tale as this same old chap in his gown and felt slippers.

And to make matters worse, as the saying is, the rats and mice in the wall were never still for a minute. I could hear them tripping and trapesing about as though they were dancing; and, every now and then, a thin, quavering squeak which sounded uncommonly like a poorly played fiddle.

"It's the Highland fling they're dancing," said the Laird of Lockleaven with a ghastly grin. "Do you get the lilt of it, Dr. O'Brien?" And he began to sway his head from side to side and tap out the tune with the toe of his slipper.

"You were about to tell me of Hell," I said, thinking the man was better talking.

"To be sure," said he with a start. "I had just entered the jaws of Hell, had I not?"

"You had," I answered, wishing with all my heart that he had stayed there.

"Well, Dr. O'Brien, it was a tight squeeze at first; and so black that you couldn't see hand before face. But after a few minutes of crawling, we got through the neck and into the belly of Hell, so to speak. The tunnel grew bigger and bigger till a man could stand on his feet. And then a strange, green, quivering light came creeping along the black roof like a snake.

"Where does this unwholesome light come from?' I asked in a voice which I intended to make low, but which echoed through the vault like the boom of a cannon.

"Uncle Peter chuckled at that, and it made a most horrid din. "'Tis naething more nor less,' said he, 'than the sulfur ta'en from matches. Hae ye no heard Meg complainin' about findin' wee broken bits of 'em lyin' on the carpet? Weel, for all her witchcraft, she had no suspicion 'twas her auld master had a hand in it.'

"He turned and started on again, still cackling to himself over his thieving, while I followed uneasily beneath the band of quivering light. At first the passage was so straight that you might have shot an arrow down it, but soon it began to twist a bit from side to side like the trail of a man coming home from the alehouse. And then, on a sudden, a wind arose, hot as the breath of a furnace a strange wind made up of a multitude of voices, indistinct, mufled, vaguely reproachful and filled with a great longing to be heard. But there were so many of them and so intermingled that they were like drops of water in a swiftly moving stream.

"Where does this wind come from, Uncle Peter?' I asked.

"'Death-bed repentences, Robbie,' he answered. "Breath wasted lang syne by puir fules who knew no better. They thought nae doot that God would be lendin' an ear to their skirlin'. Dead men's lees, laddie, choaked in dust.'

"For some time we plodded on in silence, while that melancholy wind swept past us like a perpetual lament. A cold sweat broke out on me from the heat of it, and all the time I was shaken by fear. And then, on a sudden, Uncle Peter spun around on his heel and pushed me up against the wall.

"'Hush, laddie!' he whispered hot in my ear.

"The hunt's on, or I'm much mistaken. Mad Anthony is ridin' hard to-night; he's no the man to turn aside for anither soul. Flatten yoursel to the wall, Robbie! Dinna ye hear the thunderin' and screechin'? All Hell's let loose when Mad Anthony rides!

"And now, Dr. O'Brien, I heard a great hubbub. First, there came to my ears the clear note of a hunting horn; next, a shrill scream and a thundering as of horses' hoofs; and then, as I peered fearfully into the gloom, I saw the huge figure of a man astride some strange round-eared beast.'

Down this wild rider swept on me like the wind, with never a look to right or left, leaning low on the neck of his steed like a man winning a race. And not four jumps behind, were a dozen grey monsters with long dragging tails.

"But before I had time to draw breath, before I could so much as let out a groan, they were past me and vanishing in the shadows. And now I heard Uncle Peter's unpleasant snicker.

"'Ha, ha, Robbie,' he says, nudging me with the point of his elbow, "ye're no owerpleased with Hell, I'm thinkin'. But never ye fash yoursel about Mad Anthony. He, who was for always huntin' the puir beasties, must now be hunted by 'em. There's a kind o justice in Hell, Robbie. 'Tis only with me they've been owersevere.'

"'What's he being hunted by? I asked with a shudder.

"'Just a half dozen o'rats, Robbie,' said Uncle Peter. 'And Mad Anthony's ridin' a wee gray mousie. But step along, laddie; we hae muckle to see ere the dawn breaks.

"Uncle Peter started off again at a kind of ambling trot. Although I was trembling in every limb, I followed close at his heels. We went on down the passage for a hundred yards or so and then took a sudden turn to the right which brought us up sharp in a large chamber which had no less than four phosphorescent ribbons of light on the ceiling. There were a score of dark figures in the center of this chamber; and a monotonous stream of talk rose from them, as though the floodgates of reason had been swept away.

"What manner of place is this ' I asked."

"'Tis just the council - room of those puir souls that went about the world tryin' to make ithers understand them,' said Uncle Peter very solemnly. --- '

Step up, Robbie, and lend an ear to their talk. '

"I strode up to the group. Although I was nearly deafened by their uproar, I managed to overhear a few words of a man and a woman who stood on the outskirts. Looking up into his face piteously, she was saying, 'Hector Lockleaven, canna ye no understand me? My soul is--- And he was saying at the same time, giving no heed to her, 'Anna, my dear, canna ye no understand me? When I do this it is not because--- And then both his words and hers were swept away in a furious torrent of words from the others — words which battered against the ceiling and fell back again, hollow and dead. I heard a loud buzzing about me of 'Won't you listen? 'Can't you understand? I've got something to tell you', till I couldn't bear it any longer and, shoving my thumbs in my ears, hurried back to my uncle.

"Not one of them hears what the other is saying!' I cried. They're all talking at once, Uncle Peter! What's the' meaning of it?"

He grinned at me in his queer way and turned to go. "All those souls,' he mumbled over his shoulder, 'hae pestered the lives oot o' ithers by bein' ower communicative. Tak warnin', Robbie. If ye want to be understood in the world, say naething about your sel.'

"Uncle Peter led the way out of that chamber and into another, several hundred yards further down the passage. This was larger than the first, and even more noisy. Before we reached it, my ears were deafened by a thundering sound as though a thousand hammers were beating on iron, intermingled with loud shouts and deep groans.

"Here ye will find the chieftains of Lockleaven who were overfond of blood and rapine,' said Uncle Peter. 'These gentry were quick to draw steel.'

"I saw a dozen figures in armor, slashing at each other as though their blood were up. The clashing of their claymores, the clanking of their shields, their shouts and groans, made the hollow chamber echo like a drum.

"I watched them for several moments with a beating heart. 'No one falls, Uncle Peter!' I cried at last.

"'Quite right,' said he with a bitter smile. "We

hae no victors and no vanquished here—and no rest. They must just keep at it, with aching backs and wheezing lungs, till the end of time. This is Hell, Robbie.

"I think I'll be stepping back into the library, Uncle Peter,' I said. "You've shown me more than I wanted to see'

"Ye'll no be ganging hame till ye've had a peep at your ain chamber?' murmured Uncle Peter in his most persuasive tone. 'I'll no rest content till I've given ye a glimpse at Pleasure Hall.'"

"Pleasure Hall? said I.

"Pleasure Hall,' said he. "Tis the room we hae gi'en to those jolly souls who hae frisked about. Yo'll find gude company there, Robbie.'

"Now by this time I had had a belly-full of Hell. But I could not offend Uncle Peter on his own hearthstone, so to speak; so I just followed where he led. Well, we may have walked for a dozen score yards or more, when suddenly I heard such a howling and screaming and sobbing that it was enough to make your blood run cold. I can hear that hubbub yet in my dreams. And pretty soon we came to a bright light, and then---

"The Laird of Lockleaven broke down and clasped his hands over his eyes. And then he began to tremble in his armchair like a leaf in a gale. For my part, I finished the wine in my glass and stirred the fire and wished for the dawn to break. If the rats and mice had only kept still, I could have stood the shadows in Lockleaven Hall. How they did creep out at me from the corners! And the portraits seemed to be nodding and winking on the walls.

At last my host dropped his hands from his face. "I cannot tell you of Pleasure Hall," he said very solemn. "What I saw there is locked in my breast for all time. But this I will say: No man could have seen what I saw and gone about thereafter like other men. It left a red mark on my brain like the touch of a bloody hand."

"There's no doubt about that," I thought to myself. But aloud I said: "Did your uncle guide you safely back out of Hell, Mr. Lockleaven?"

"Yes, he did that. But he kept chuckling all the way like a man who is well pleased with a stroke of business. I didn't pay him much heed, for my

mind was on other matters. We got out of Hell, some way or other, and waded back across the miles of red grass till we came to the big statue of me which sat with its chin on its breast. Now he chanted some devil's rhyme and up I popped into the statue's mouth and squeezed through the ivory pillars. Then, before a man could call for hot Scotch, I blinked my eyes open and saw Uncle Peter scuttling away, turned into a wee man not as big as a pencil."

"And you let him go back to Hell?" I asked.

"I did so," said the Laird of Lockleaven with a weary gesture. "After the unpleasant time he'd given me, I wouldn't have saved Uncle Peter had I been able. Besides, there was no green-glass bottle handy."

VI

After the Laird of Lockleaven had told his tale, he closed his eyes like a man who is tired. The lamp on the table was going out in a fretful, flickering way; and had it not been for the lusty log in the fireplace, the room would have been as black as a cellar.

"I'm afraid I'm keeping you out of bed, Mr. Lockleaven," I said at last. "There's the dampness of morning in the air. Why not turn in and leave me here? I'll be off when the light is strong enough to see the road by."

But he wouldn't listen to that. "No, no," he said, sitting up with a start. "There are many matters we've got to face ere daybreak."

"Matters to face, Mr. Lockleaven? What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I'm saying!" he cried, wiggling his beard at me in an excited way. "First we'll drink a toast to the confusion of Hell; then we'll prepare out plans."

He rose to his feet and poured out two glasses of wine. Then he handed me one with a courtly bow, but he hid the other for an instant in the folds of his gown ere he lifted it on high.

"Here's confusion to Hell!" he shouted, and drained the glass without once taking his lips from the brim.

"With all my heart, Mr. Lockleaven," said I,

following suit. "From what you've told me this night, 'tis not a country I'd like to be traveling in."

"Then get yourself a green glass bottle when your time comes to die," he muttered. "That's what I'm doing this night."

"But, Mr. Lockleaven," I put in, persuasive enough, "your time's not come yet. There's a round score of years to run before you'll be tipping your hat to the devil."

At that, he laughed as wild as a loon on the lake. "So you think so, Dr. O'Brien?" he cried. "And do you suppose that I'd be willing to live those years with the devils of doubt gnawing away inside, not knowing at what moment my soul might pop out and be off to the wall of Hell? No, no, I've had enough of this life; now I'm just longing to rest in a green glass bottle."

"Don't tell me," said I, "that you've "

"Just that," said he, very calm. "I've taken a wee nip of poison. It was in that glass of port. No, don't trouble me, man"---for I had leaped to my feet---"just give heed to my words."

"If you've taken poison, I'll have it out of you!" I cried.

"You'll not," said he, "for it's... " And he mentioned the name of the deadliest drug known to man. "But there are matters of more importance on hand. Come close, for already I'm feeling its grip on me."

As I bent over the dying Laird of Lockleaven, he raised his voice to a shrill halloo. "Meg!" he cried, "Meg! You bag of old bones, where are you?"

Now hardly had the echo of his voice died away, when I saw the library door swing open. And there, on the threshold, curtsying and grinning, was a scrawny old woman with the long white whiskers of a cat. In one hand she held something which flashed green where the light touched it.

"Have you got the bottle, Meg?" cried the Laird of Lockleaven.

"Aye, that I have, Robbie," she cackled, stepping up to him like a walking broomstick. "Tis the bonnie one oot o' the cellar with the wee angels stamped all ower it. Yo can rest quiet betimes, Robbie."

The Laird of Lockleaven heaved a deep sigh of relief and the twitching of his beard ceased as though by magic. "Well done, tried and trusted servant," he muttered, and his chin sank down on his breast.

But soon he bethought himself of something and raised his great eyes to my face. "Tis your duty as a medical-man, Dr. O'Brien," he said with a catch in his breath which I knew meant the beginning of the end, "to tell Meg the exact moment when the spark of life flickers out; and then to help her find my soul and pop it into the bottle."

"Whar think ye it'll be hidin' when it's weel out o' your body?" piped Meg, champing her nutcracker jaws. "I dinna ken rightly whar to be searchin'."

"Just search my body from top to toe!" cried the Laird of Lockleaven in a breaking voice. "And Dr. O'Brien, here, will be lending you a helping hand. Oh, but the pain grips me!" And his face seemed to writhe up into ridges and knots, while the knuckles of his hands stood out white from the grip he had on the arms of the chair.

Now, being a doctor of long experience, I had seen many men die in my time, some with a smile and a sigh like tired children going off to sleep, some fighting hard for their breath with the black dread of Hell deep down in their eyes, some making a great hubbub for fear St. Peter was taking a nap and wouldn't open the gate to their rapping—but never one of them all had played such a tune on the strings of my heart as this long, lean Laird of Lockleaven.

We carried him over to the couch by the window where the light from the fire could scarce reach us. And we propped a pillow under his head, then sat ourselves down and waited for death and the morning. But how long the man took to die! A dozen times I thought his soul had sped; but when I'd bent down, I'd see the mournful gleam of his eyes and the twitch of his beard which meant that life was still in him. Once he murmured low: "Have you the green glass bottle handy?"

And Meg, who held it tight to her breast, piped up: "I hae it, Robbie."

Well, the gray of morning was sifting through the blind like the mildewed shreds of a rotting pall, when the Laird of Lockleaven sat up on a sudden

as quick as the blade of a jack-knife. "I'm a dead man!" he cried in a voice which seemed to come from far down underground. "I'm a dead man! Take heed, for my soul is ganging awa!" And at that he fell back with a gasp and a sigh.

But before I could so much as reach out to feel for his heart beats, Meg, that withered old witch, had sprung on him like a cat on a mouse. "I'll find your bonnie soul, Robbie!" she mumbled. And she began to paw him in a manner I thought unseemly.

"Away with you, old she cat!" I cried, for it made my blood run cold to see her antics. "Have you no respect for the dead?"

But she paid me no heed—just began to cackle away like a dozen hens disturbed in the night.

"Get out of this!" I shouted. "Get down from that perch, or I'll give you the back of my hand!"

Now she let out a squeal like a Banshee; and I saw both her withered old hands slip under his robe and grip hold of something. Then she turned her head over her shoulder; and, though the light was still dim enough, I could see that her eyes were as bright as a toad's and that the long grey hairs on her chin were trembling.

"I hae it fast!" she cried. "The soul of Robbie Lockleaven will no sup in Hell this day! Will ye just hand me the bottle, Dr. O'Brien?"

"I will not, Meg," I said, for the light of dawn was giving me commonsense. "All night I've been lending an ear to the most scandalous lies that ever were told. You're mad, like your master before you; and I'm through with dancing attendance on goblins and fairies."

"Mon, mon," cried Meg in a voice shrill with alarm, "don't be standin' there blaspheming! If ye winna bring me the bottle, just grip Robbie's wee soul tight---it's overstrong for these auld fingers!"

Well, as you've found out by this for yourselves, I am an accommodating, easy-going man. In an instant I realized that the only way to get Meg off her master's chest was by humoring her a bit. Madness is kindlier disposed when you pat it on the back. So I nodded my head, without any more to say on the matter, and leaned down and put my hands where she showed me.

"Do ye feel the wee body o' it?" she mumbled, cocking her eye at me.

"Yes," said I—for at the moment I had felt some thing through his robe which might have been a chamois-bag where he kept a charm against evil.

"Weel, hold tight to it," she said, "while I'm gettin' the bottle. A human soul is an unco canny beastie when it's fairly oot o' the body."

"Never you fear for that," said I. "I'll never let go of it this side of Hell."

I've often noticed that when a man throws big brave words up into the air they're as like as not to come down on his head. So it happened to me. No sooner had I said my say, thinking that I had a bag of beads in my fist and nothing more, no sooner had Meg come down from her perch and hobbled off for the bottle, than I let out a yell and loosened my grip. And well might I stagger back from the fright of it, for the bag had come alive in my hand.

Alive did I say? Yes, and more than that. It had kicked out like a beast caught in a net; it had wriggled and turned; and, last of all, it had set its teeth in my thumb. And I have the scar to this day to prove that my story is true.

"Mother of God! What's that?" I cried as soon as I could speak at all.

Then Meg spun around on her heel. "Ye fule!" she cried. "Ye have let Robbie's soul slip frae your fingers!" And then, as I stood silent with a great fear at my heart, she scuttled back to the Laird of Lockleaven.

"Quick!" she cried. "Dinna be gapin' and gabblin' there! On your knees, mon, and be searchin' the floor; while I give a look to the couch."

Well, I did as she told me—for, somehow or other, I believed all she said. But it was a black business crawling over the carpet, with not light enough yet to make out what lurked in the corners. Once I caught sight of something near the fireplace which scampered away into the wall when I reached out a hand. Whatever it was, it was too quick to be caught by a portly old chap on all fours. At last, winded and dusty, I climbed to my feet.

Meg, too, had given up the search. She now sat beside her dead master, rocking back and forth, her face in her hands. Never will I forget that scene if I live to be a hundred—the pallid light of dawn rest-

ing on both the quick and the dead; the Laird of Lockleaven rumped and shaken like a pillow in the search for his soul; and that old hag, crouched down beside him, swinging back and forth like a gate in the wind.

"The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!", she moaned.

"Nonsense, woman!" I cried sharply enough. "Twas nothing more nor less than a mouse in his gown. Now I'm off to the village for help. He's in no fit state to go into his grave."

But Meg never so much as lifted her face from her hands. Bending backward and forward, giving no heed to my words, she mournfully chanted that dismal refrain: "The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa! the Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!"

And to my overstrained nerves it seemed, that behind the wainscoting in the wall, I heard an echo of her lament rising and falling with the melancholy cadence of the wind: "The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!—The Laird of Lockleaven is ganging awa!"

You have heard my story. Now, what do you think? Was it a mouse I held in the fold of his gown, or was it--- But why should I put such thoughts in your head? They've worried me now for ten long years worried me so that each night I put my ear to the wall, listening and wondering, till I seem to hear voices and music and the treading of feet.

Perhaps it was a mouse after all. Don't let such thoughts work into your mind. If they once get in, they'll rattle about like dice in a cup. And they'll make you do very strange things—things which you wouldn't confide to your neighbors.

What sort of things? Why, soon you'll be collecting bottles of every shape and size known to man—little ones and big ones, thin ones and fat ones, round ones and square ones. And here's a queer thing! They may be all shapes, and they may be all sizes; but there's only one color you'll want. And that color will be green—pale green like the sea. Isn't that strange, now?