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# SATELLITE

*science fiction*

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# THE SOLOMON PLAN

AN AMAZING  
SHORT NOVEL OF THE FUTURE

by

J. T. McIntosh

THE ENGINEER SIDLED apologetically into Harnell's tiny office. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "I won't be a minute. Just checking the office phones."

And he proceeded to do just that, though Harnell wasn't deceived. He knew that the routine check was only the excuse for the man's visit, not the real reason.

Most of Bynald's complex administration took place in this one large building. Grafted on to Administration House, which was square, was the very imposing Capitol, which was round. If there was any symbolism, hidden or overt, in the shape of the two sections, the significance of it wasn't generally known.

As a matter of fact, not only legislation, taxes, education, public works, galactic affairs, and surprising offshoots like the state opera were controlled from this vast building in Scio, Bynald's principal city, but also Bynald's formidable espionage and counter-espionage departments.

That knowledge wasn't public property, of course. Harnell was aware of it because he had once been in CE himself, and had been accustomed to watch the messengers of the period tensely, with rapidly beating heart, because the summons might be for him.

But that had been ten years ago and more. Now Harnell was forty-seven, and felt every year of it. CE had worn him out, he told himself resentfully. With a life expectation of well over a hundred years, a man of forty-seven ought to be merely in his prime. Harnell wasn't—and he knew it. He was a jumpy, touchy, worn-out, middle-aged, ex-

man of action. He only wanted to be left alone—not that he was in any doubt that he would be, now.

Any doubt he might have entertained had vanished when the engineer had said, "All right, sir," and had picked up his tools and left the office, closing the door quietly behind him.

On the desk before Harnell was a small sheet of paper.

He stared at it in disbelief and growing terror. A summons for him? After all this time? Yes, there could be no doubt about it. It read curtly: *See me at 11:30 . . . GS.*

Harnell forgot the rules he had once known so well. Communication in writing like this was considered less dangerous than communication by word of mouth, because tiny microphones could be more easily concealed than the smallest vision transmitter. He knew perfectly well that even here, in Bynald's CE HQ, he was supposed to read and dispose of such a card so casually that nobody watching through a peephole, real or televisual, would have his suspicions aroused.

But instead he stared at the paper. He picked it up and turned it over, he held it up to the light, he practically took it apart. Three things convinced him the message was genuine—the tiny, almost invisible black dot in the bottom left-hand corner, the fact that there was an aggressive, speared period after the initials GS, and the faint thumbnail mark near the margin.

It couldn't be for him. The messenger must have made a mistake. But even as he told himself this, Harnell knew he was trying to deceive himself, and

*Welkin was a brilliant antagonist in the deadly game of counter-espionage. But the world he had come to spy upon refused to abide by the rules. The dice were heavily loaded and every pitfall bore a warning sign: "You'll never live to guess our secret, Earthman!"*



failing. Mistakes like that just weren't made. Here he was, at forty-seven, being called back into CE service.

Belatedly he did what he should have done with the message straight off. He put a cigarette in his mouth, flicked the lighter two or three times, as it was nearly empty, and when the flame came, lit the slip of paper from it quickly, as though the lighter were on the point of flickering out. He then lit his cigarette and waved the burning slip carelessly in the air, letting it burn to ash before he dropped the embers in the disposal chute beside his desk.

It was more than ten years since he had done that.

His nerve was gone. There was no doubt about that, and he admitted it. "Just give me a chance to get out of it," he prayed silently as he sat at his desk, staring at nothing. "Anything, anything, so long as I don't have to—"

He wasn't praying to any god in particular, never having been a religious man. He just wanted out of it, at any price. He didn't care about pride or patriotism or money any more. So long as he was allowed to sit at his desk and grow old peacefully he was content to stay on the sidelines.

Veronica, that was it. He had to look after Veronica. He couldn't take on a dangerous job with a daughter of eighteen to look after. Who could blame him for that?

He was uneasily aware, however, that ten years ago, when his wife had been alive and Ronnie was only eight, self-justification would have been much easier. He could have made out a far stronger case for his right to feel the way he did.

At 11:22 he got up and walked out of the office. His legs weren't very steady. He tried to rally himself with a reassuring consideration which he knew to be true—that counter-espionage wasn't very dangerous, really, and that his chances of surviving whatever job GS had lined up for him were better than ninety percent. It was no good. He was too nervous to be rational.

He walked into a little nest of offices and got lost. Intentionally lost. He'd never found out whether the very miscellaneous men and women who had offices in that section of the building were really carefully selected, and were all in the secret, or if it was just fortuitous that there was always so much noise and bustle, so many different things happening all at once that people visiting GS were never missed.

GS was behind an empty desk, waiting for him. More years than it was pleasant to remember had gone by since Harnell had seen him as GS, but he'd met him socially as somebody else once or twice in the intervening period. He'd known, of course, that even counter-espionage chiefs had to have a social life.

GS looked very much younger than he was. But how GS looked was immaterial. If one face became an embarrassment to him, he replaced it with another. Faces were only skin deep.

"Sit down, Harnell," said GS. "I won't waste any time. It's not you I want. It's your daughter."

Harnell almost shouted for joy in his relief. In that instant of blessed reprieve it was woefully

clear that he was no great shakes as a father. But he didn't care. Let them do anything they liked with Ronnie, so long as they didn't call on him.

GS, who knew something about reading faces didn't miss Harnell's reaction. He, too, felt relieved. GS was hard and ruthless and dedicated to the Solomon Plan, but he was still a human being. GS knew it wasn't very likely that Veronica Harnell would be alive in a week's time, and he didn't care, because if she died it would be because she had proved herself a traitor. Harnell he had been sorry for. But if the man was glad it was Veronica and not himself who was being given a dangerous job it was no longer necessary to feel sorry for him.

"Has any approach been made to Ronnie?" Harnell asked, feeling called upon to say something.

"Not yet. I want you to tell her what to do. She has no idea that you ever worked in CE?"

"None at all," said Harnell. He was beginning to get nervous again. Apparently, he wasn't being relieved of all responsibility after all. He had to give Ronnie her instructions. If anything went wrong, they'd blame him . . .

"Then we won't tell her. I take it she has no knowledge whatever of the Solomon Plan?"

"None. I myself have never—I mean—"

"You aren't familiar with it either? So much the better. It's an embarrassing secret to know." He smiled slightly. "The death-rate among people who've even heard of it is alarmingly high."

Harnell, who knew that, changed the subject hurriedly. He could have briefed himself about the Solomon Plan, but he had thought the less he knew about it the better, and refused all knowledge of it. He'd never been sorry. What you didn't know, people could never accuse you of betraying.

"I'm surprised," he said rather wildly, saying the first thing that came into his head, "that CE should want Ronnie, of all people."

"Because she's unpatriotic, doesn't give a damn for Bynald, and has a schoolgirl crush on Earth and everything connected with Earth?" inquired GS. He didn't wait for Harnell's nervous rejoinder. "I should have thought it would be obvious that that's precisely why we want her. If she turns out to be a traitor, it will be to our advantage to know, so that we can take appropriate action."

He looked coolly at Harnell, who was shivering at the idea of his own daughter being disloyal, and what the consequences might be if some of it rubbed off on him.

"Never mind," said GS, not unkindly. "If she isn't a traitor, we'll find that out too. I'd better tell you what this is all about. A spy from Earth arrives here in Scio tomorrow. His name is Welkin—Adrian Welkin. He's been sent pretty openly. In fact Earth has requested in a semi-official way that we should look after him . . . Put another way, Earth has more or less warned us that if anything happens to Welkin, it'll be resented and Earth will make a considerable nuisance of herself. Is that clear?"

"Not entirely," said Harnell, who had himself seen two Earth spies shot with no great compunction. "Earth hasn't sent this man here as a spy and told us that, surely?"

"No, he's described as an historian. In fact he is an historian—we've checked on him, of course. He's supposed to be writing a book on Cedrica or something analogous in Bynald's history."

"I see. Has he written any books before?"

"Oh, yes. Earth's espionage department wouldn't fall down over a detail like that. The man really is an historian. Whether he stands any chance of discovering the Solomon Plan through study of our history I don't know. I doubt very much if it's possible. There aren't many history books, and the few we have have been carefully cleared of anything which would remotely—"

GS paused, observing with some amusement that Harnell was squirming in his chair, terrified lest he should be entrusted with the secret. He couldn't resist making the man still more uncomfortable.

"Actually the clues are all around us," he said. "So thick it's amazing that CE has been able to guard the secret for two and a half centuries. I'm surprised that you could actually have been working for CE and not know a great deal about it."

Harnell had to interrupt him, to keep from succumbing to utter panic. "Are you going to let this man study our history?" he asked unsteadily.

"We can hardly stop him. That's where Veronica comes in. We want to know what Welkin actually does learn. Now it happens that this Welkin is a keen amateur musician, and our agents suggest that the first thing he does when he has a spare moment here will be to seek out a music shop."

"He'll go to that little place where Ronnie works?"

"We must endeavour to see that he does, in such a way that he's unlikely to suspect he's been directed there."

WHEN HARNELL BRIEFED Ronnie she hailed the prospect with delight. "You mean he's a real spy—from Earth?" she asked excitedly.

"Yes."

"And I'm to be a sort of spy too, and spy on him?"

"Yes."

"What is he trying to find out?"

"I don't know. All they told me was to tell you—"

"Will I have to sleep with him?"

Harnell choked. "Hell, no!" he said violently, when he got his breath back.

"How old is he?"

Harnell had asked that too. "Forty-eight," he said slowly. In some ways that was the worst part of it. He himself was worn out at forty-seven. Apparently this Welkin was still going strong at forty-eight.

"Oh," Ronnie said disappointedly. You couldn't get romantic over someone who was forty-eight."

"Anything else you want to know?"

"Yes. Can I get Roy to help me?"

"No!" exclaimed Harnell again. "Nobody must know about this. Nobody, understand?"

Roy was Ronnie's current boy-friend. How serious it was Harnell didn't know. It was forced on him once again that he had never paid much attention to Ronnie, never taken a fatherly interest

in her problems or seriously tried to understand her. He pushed the thought aside.

"Ronnie," he said nervously.

She looked at him inquiringly.

He could warn her that this was a test of her loyalty. He could tell her that she was going to be watched as closely, if not more closely, than the man she was watching, that if she did or said or even thought anything disloyal, CE would know.

But if he warned her in any way, CE might find that out too, and he as well as Ronnie would suffer.

"Be careful, Ronnie," he said weakly at last. "It won't be an easy task."

Ronnie shrugged impatiently. Imagine telling a counter-spy to be *careful*. You had to be reckless and daring if you were a beautiful spy—she was beautiful, wasn't she? In her bedroom she looked at herself critically, and couldn't quite make up her mind. She wasn't old enough to have been told by many young men that she was beautiful.

Anyway, most of her boy-friends, even Roy, got red and looked at their boots and blurted things out and never got around to telling her anything about how she looked. So she couldn't be sure, though she thought she was rather pretty. Perhaps if you were someone romantic anyway, like a spy, it didn't matter so much, and you'd pass as a beauty more easily.

She was disappointed that she couldn't tell Roy about the adventure. Roy was always telling her that she ought to be more patriotic, and a lot prouder of her world, and it would have been good to tell Roy that she'd been given the job of watching a spy. But she brightened before the thought could really discourage her. She'd be able to tell Roy afterwards, when it was all over and she was a heroine and everyone was proud of her.

## II

ADRIAN WELKIN WAS OBVIOUSLY an experienced space traveller. His luggage consisted of only one small case, for he had learned what some people never learn, that is always much cheaper for a traveller to buy what he wants when he reaches his destination than it is to take it with him. Another noticeable thing was that he had outgrown the novelty of spaceships, spacefields, customs examinations and all the other things which were common to space travel everywhere, and was more concerned about the important thing—what was particularly characteristic of the world he was visiting, what was different, and individual, and important for a stranger to know.

Also it was clear from the way he walked that he had learned to adjust rapidly to the various approximations of IG which were native to the worlds colonized by human beings. Bynald's was 0.8.G. It might have been IG precisely, for all the trouble it gave Welkin.

The first, most obvious thing about Scio was that it was cold. Not keenly, bitterly cold, but never far from freezing-point. Snow lay everywhere, for it was still morning and the sun, which was quite warm, was only gradually melting the night's inches-deep hoarfrost and ice, and starting rivulets flowing off the roads and along the choked gutters.

Every now and then an avalanche of soft snow would crash down from a high building. Fortunately the overhang was constructed in such a way that these toppling banks landed in the street, missing the sidewalk by a wide margin. The people hurrying about didn't even look up.

The second obvious thing about Scio was that it was old-fashioned. It was like a twentieth-century Earth city transported many light-years and four centuries to Bynald. The buildings were heavy and solid, not built in the light, graceful architectural style of the twenty-fourth century. The vehicles were big and heavy and powerful, not the nimble fairy cars that flashed like tropical fish about the cities of Earth and most of the other colonized worlds.

The clothes the people in Scio's streets wore were heavy and dull, things like coats and pants and gloves and boots, not the colorful, dashing, infinitely varied garments of men and women who didn't have to wear clothes that would keep out the cold.

Welkin had got this far in his observations as he emerged from the spaceport and looked about him. Almost instantly a man came up to him, and tapped him lightly on the arm. "Mr. Adrian Welkin, from Earth?" the stranger asked.

Welkin studied him without seeming to do so. An old-young man, with the chubby cheeks and baby face of a youngster, but probably thirty or thirty-five. Enthusiastic, shy, intense. Determined to do his job well, whatever it was. A counter-espionage agent, naturally.

"Yes," Welkin said.

"I'm Dick German," said the old-young man, "I've been asked to look after you, and give you any help I can."

"That's very nice of you," said Welkin cordially. "Er—who asked you?"

"Government people," said German eagerly. "CE, I believe."

Welkin's opinion of Bynald's CE division went up sharply. He could admire a counter-espionage section which had the cool audacity to tell a spy it had its eye on him, and who one of their agents was.

The Bynald's CE division *must* be good. At least twenty different intelligence departments had tried to solve the Bynald enigma, and Welkin would have known if any one of them had succeeded.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. German," said Welkin, shaking hands. "Are you an historian?"

"No, you've got me there," said German frankly. "I can't help you on your research, or whatever it is, Mr. Welkin. But if you want to know anything about hotels, currency, libraries, stores, things like that. . . ."

"I do," said Welkin, promptly. "Hotels first. Where should I go?"

At the earliest opportunity he meant to find out how easy or how difficult it was to shake off German and wander about on his own. But there was no doubt about it—a CE man could be very useful in the first few hours of one's visit to a strange world, before one meant to do anything important anyway.

Welkin automatically discounted German's eagerness, awkwardness and deliberate lack of subtlety. German could be a very dangerous man, and it certainly wasn't safe to try to deceive him. With German Welkin proposed to tell nothing but the truth, to reveal no other aspect of himself. Honesty was always the best policy—if possible.

German hesitated. "They told me you'd probably want peace and quiet, and a room where you could work, where nobody would disturb you. Just simple service. Is that right?"

"Well, yes, I guess so."

"Then perhaps you'd rather not go to one of the luxury hotels, Mr. Welkin. If you'd like quiet lodgings instead, I know a place where—"

"Why, certainly," said Welkin, perfectly prepared to let CE put him where it liked. It would do that anyway.

Less than an hour later he was comfortably established in a small boarding-house off Commerce Street, the nerve centre of Scio. Moreover, German, far from being difficult to shake off, was looking at his watch and saying he'd have to go.

"You can phone me either at Administration House or at my home," he told Welkin, giving him two numbers. "And I'll look in from time to time to see if there's anything I can do. Okay?"

Welkin credited the Bynald CE department with more and more intelligence. Naturally if CE stuck a leech on him he'd have to make some attempt to get rid of it. But German gave promise of being a most useful, and gratifyingly unembarrassing warden.

"Just one thing before you go, Dick—may I call you Dick? Do you know where I can get my hands on a French horn?"

German stared at him. "A what?"

"French horn."

"One of those curled-up things they use in orchestras?"

"Exactly," said Welkin gravely.

German, who until now had been most useful and knowledgeable, was now clearly at a loss. "I could find out," he said hopefully.

Welkin grinned again. "Never mind, I'll manage by myself. What's the biggest music dealer in Scio?"

German brightened at that. "Keynote, just around the corner in Commerce Street," he said. "Maybe they could help you there."

"Just what I was thinking," said Welkin agreeably. "Thanks, Dick."

German colored. "It's nothing," he said uncomfortably. "I'll look in this evening and see how you're making out."

Welkin lunched at the boarding-house and had to admit that CE had done very well for him. He'd never have found lodgings so quiet, comfortable and convenient if he'd been left to himself. Mrs. Henbald was the perfect landlady—always there when you wanted her, never there when you didn't, and intelligently short with words. If "yes" or "no" was enough, Mrs. Henbald wasn't the one to add anything, and there were many occasions when she managed to get by without words at all.

Of course, if Bynald had nothing to hide, which was unlikely but not completely impossible, a Terran spy might be treated in precisely this way. An

intelligent counter-espionage department on a world which had no secrets would realize that the only way to convince the intelligence groups of other worlds of their complete sincerity in that respect would be to let them find it out for themselves. They would treat foreign agents very much as Welkin was being treated now, would place no curbs at all upon their freedom.

There was no one else at lunch, but just as he was thinking of leaving a woman came in, sat down at the table and called out in a sharp, impatient tone of voice for Mrs. Henbald.

If this woman was another CE agent, she was acting beautifully. She was a career woman in a hurry, probably an artist of some kind, and no more than mildly interested in Welkin's presence. It was only when she had started her lunch that she turned to speak to him.

"Staying here?" she inquired.

Welkin nodded.

The woman was about thirty-five or forty, handsome in a frank, powerful way. She reminded him more of a spirited Venus than a startled nymph. She had big, but well-shaped features, well-kept hair and hands, and a figure which health and strength had kept attractive despite the fact that she was past her first youth. Her waist wasn't slim in inches, but her otherwise Amazon-like proportions made it seem so.

"I'm Jane Bolt," she said. "You won't see much of me; I'm too busy."

"Adrian Welkin," he introduced himself.

She stopped her fork on its way to her mouth. "The historian?" she inquired, with some interest.

Welkin nodded, a little surprised. "I didn't think anyone would know about me here."

"I don't imagine anyone does," said Jane bluntly. "I read some of your books in *Heimat*. They think a lot of you there."

She spoke without a trace of adulation, flattery, or hero-worship.

"You're good in your job," her manner said in effect, "just as I am in mine." She had met other famous men—many of them a great deal more famous than he was.

"Yes, I did them a bit of good there," he admitted. "Often an historian can, poking around into pioneer periods where there was very little writing done, very few records kept."

"Then this place will suit you down to the ground," said Jane briskly. "There's no history to speak of. Nothing written down, I mean—plenty taking place."

"I shouldn't think," said Welkin shrewdly, "you'd have much time for reading, Miss Bolt."

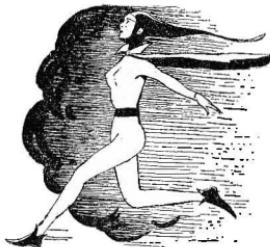
"Haven't," she said frankly. "None at all for novels. When I do read it's history—or biography."

"And you say there's hardly any written history here? What about biography?"

"Some," she said. "But take away the thirty or forty Lives of Cedrica, the half-dozen of George Solomon, and there's not much left."

Welkin nodded. "That's in accord with what I've heard."

"Why is there so little exchange of information between worlds?" Jane asked bluntly. "Do you know?"



Welkin shrugged. "Expense of transport," he said. "Say that a book is published on *Bynald*. If bound copies were to be taken to Earth they'd cost about seven hundred dollars apiece. All that ever goes is a microfilm copy of the most important books—and that is sent to the Library of Congress or the British Museum or some such place. Generally straight into the vaults at that, and the general public never sees it. Oh, occasionally some publisher gets hold of something from *Rigel II*, *Maverick*, *Cawn Persis*, *Heimat* or here, decides it's a good risk—usually it's a novel—and publishes it. But most worlds have too many books of their own to have much time for the literature of other worlds."

Jane reflected for a few moments, without pausing in her disposal of a substantial lunch.

"Interesting," she said. "Then there's no censorship or anything like that—just lack of interest?"

"I don't know that you can even call it that," said Welkin. "In the seventeenth century about five percent of the world's population could read. One man was capable of reading everything new under the sun, if he could get his hands on it. By the nineteenth century more than a hundred times as many people were reading and writing. When space travel started there were so many books that people were making digests of digests. And now in the twenty-fourth century there are so many books and journals and magazines and reference volumes that you could publish something important, something vital, and it might be a hundred years before anybody even noticed it."

"You're exaggerating," said Jane, buttering a large slice of bread.

"No, I'm not. All I did on *Heimat* was correlate three original observations which had been written down hundred and fifty, and a hundred and seventy years ago. For seventy years they'd been on record for anyone to find. The conclusions weren't difficult. They were so obvious, in fact, that anyone who had the three original references could draw them. But nobody had ever happened to read all three."

"How did you find them?"

"Well, anyone who dabbles in history gets to know where to look." He had been speaking easily, but with obvious interest in his subject.

"So you go around looking for what's been discovered, and what hasn't been discovered?"

"That's exactly right," said Welkin with a grin.

Jane had come to the end of her rapid meal. She had eaten twice as much as Welkin in half the time. She got up, wiping her mouth.

"That's very interesting, but now I've got to get back to rehearsal. Are you cultured, Adrian?" Welkin blinked at the sudden switch, but she didn't wait for an answer. "Get some culture if you're not. There's two tickets for the theatre. No, they don't cost you anything. I work in the state opera."

She was gone. Suddenly Welkin realized something he should have suspected at a glance. She was a singer. Her remarkable chest development, and powerful, well-controlled voice—it gave the impression, even when she talked quietly, that when she cut loose she could rattle the window-panes and make people in the street stop and stare over their shoulders—could hardly belong to anyone but an opera singer.

It was all very interesting. Could she really be a CE agent, an even shrewder one than Gernan? He'd been subconsciously assuming she was. He realized that now. He'd been setting the scene for what he was going to do in Scio—and the satisfying thing about it was that he didn't have to act, didn't have to be anyone but himself. He could speak the truth quite openly, without pretending to be concerned with more complex things.

Welkin would have been very happy with the whole situation had there not been a fly in the ointment—the fact that so many Terran agents had failed to return from Bynald. There was no doubt about it. Having a family and children made one very reluctant to put one's head in a noose. But for Viola, Danny, Anne and Freddy, he'd be enjoying himself hugely.

He liked the look of things, and he didn't have a doubt about his eventual success. However, this confidence extended only to his ability to discover Bynald's secret. To carry it off with a whole skin was another matter. He wasn't as young as he had been. Why hadn't he been satisfied with previous successes—or near successes?

No, he had to be the Master Spy. Which meant, very likely, that Viola would soon be a widow—and she so young.

Meantime, it was a pity he hadn't asked Jane about French horns. She would know.

### III

THE YOUNG LADY AT KEYNOTE, a typically old-fashioned music store, knew nothing about French horns or anything else to do with music. But she passed Welkin to a small, bald, knowledgeable looking man.

"Well, you see, sir," the balding clerk said, "Scio isn't the best place to buy musical instruments. There's nothing here but government offices and things like that. Bennis would be better. You might try Fernie's. It's a little place that deals chiefly in brass instruments."

Fortified by detailed directions, Welkin trudged through the snow along streets that became successively narrower and shorter until he wondered how anyone could be expected ever to find Fernie's. When he got there at last he discovered it was a tiny shop with a window of microscopic dimensions,

affording a mere glimpse of an astonishing number of cornets, trumpets, trombones, euphoniums, tubas and horns. He pushed the door open, having to stoop to enter, and blinked at the girl who looked up at him in surprise.

She was the last—positively the last thing he expected. She was very young, only seventeen or so, and very pretty. More than that, she was smart and intelligent-looking. He'd have expected a female assistant in such a place to sniff, peer at him myopically and wear woolen stockings. Instead she looked like the kind of young woman one would expect to find behind a perfume counter in a store back on Earth, except that she was so very girlish. She must, he told himself, be fresh out of school.

"Yes?" she said.

"I want a horn," he said simply.

"Yes, sir. Single or double?"

She knew something about instruments too, apparently. "Single, probably," he said. "Depends what you've got."

She smiled, and the illumination in the shop went up by about two hundred percent. "I've got everything," she said.

"So I see," said Welkin politely.

The girl smiled delightfully. "Let's stick to French horns," she suggested.

"If we must," Welkin retorted regretfully.

"We've got a good second-hand German horn, if that would suit you?"

"I'd rather have an ordinary French horn. But you're not busy, are you?"

"No."

"Then you can show me everything you've got in stock. Musical instruments, I mean," he added reassuringly. "I can decide better when I've checked on their tonal qualities."

She looked startled. She started to laugh, blushed, caught his eye, and they both laughed. Welkin, who had learned a thing or two in his forty-eight years, was making it clear that though making mild passes at her was no more than her due, he was perfectly harmless.

The girl, for her part, attended to her job conscientiously. Her attitude was frankly inviting, but equally frankly *so-far-and-no-further*.

It took a long time to satisfy him, and by the time he had decided on a horn, and paid for it, the girl had agreed to come to the theatre with him. He had a suspicion that the date agreement had been contrived rather easily, with little or no action on his part. But her frank admission that she was only stepping out with him because she had never known anybody from Earth and had a million questions to ask quickly offset any uneasiness he might have entertained.

"Shall I pick you up here?" he asked.

"Goodness, no!" she exclaimed. "Do you think I'd go to the theatre dressed like this?"

Welkin could hardly say that, since this was Bynald, he'd been thinking that there might be no need for her to change her attire.

"I'll meet you at the theatre," she said.

Welkin was on the point of insisting on picking her up at her home, but realized that since he didn't know the conventions of Bynald he'd better be guided by the girl.

At the door he paused. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Names. I'm Adrian Welkin."

She laughed. "And I'm Ronnie Harnell."

"Ronnie?"

"Veronica—but don't dare call me that."

"Does that mean I can call you Ronnie?"

She looked surprised. "What else *would* you call me?"

"I like both names," he said.

On the way back to his lodgings his mind dwelt thoughtfully on the three people he had met. It looked very much as if CE had nothing to hide, or, conversely, wanted him to come to that conclusion. German was a CE agent, undoubtedly; Jane Bolt was a CE agent, and it was just barely possible that Ronnie Harnell might be.

German had directed him to Mrs. Henbald's, so the boarding house was quite obviously where CE wanted him to be. Jane could very easily have been planted there. On the other hand, could CE know that he'd ask about French horns, and knowing that, tell German to direct him to Fernie's, and plant Ronnie there to meet him and induce him to date her?

It was perfectly possible, of course, but extremely unlikely. Bynald's espionage must be very good for them to have found out enough about him on Earth to know that he'd buy a French horn on Bynald almost immediately upon his arrival. No, they couldn't have meant him to meet Ronnie.

Back at his lodgings he warned Mrs. Henbald of what was going to happen, went up to his room, shut all the doors and windows, took out his horn and started to play.

Like most horn players in the last four hundred years, he tried the horn tune from *Till Eulenspiegel* to warm up, and again like most horn players in the last four hundred years, fluffed a couple of the notes. He played some more Richard Strauss horn tunes, then came back to *Till*. It came out right this time, even to the two low notes at the end. Played some of the Mozart fourth horn concerto.

Really, it was a very good horn. A very fair proportion of the notes came out as intended.

No, Ronnie Harnell was just what she seemed to be. He was glad of that. He didn't want that child to be a spy. Not that he intended to be any more than an elderly friend to her—he calculated that he was nearly three times her age—but he liked her. He liked her very much.

In the early evening, before he set out for the theatre, German called on him and was shown up to his room. German stared at the gleaming brass instrument.

"What do you want that for?" he asked, at a loss.

"To make music with, naturally," said Welkin amiably.

"But what for?"

Welkin shrugged, grinning. German was a serious, intense young man, and obviously had no time for music. It clearly was beyond him that a serious-minded visitor to a planet—particularly a spy—should buy a horn and sit in his room playing it. He could have done that on Earth, couldn't he?

German came back to things he could under-



stand. "Well . . . is there anything you want to know? I mean—where to go, what to see, or anything of that nature?"

"Yes," said Welkin. "Where can I take a girl, after the theatre?"

German looked at him as if he has never heard of anyone taking a girl to the theatre. Clearly German had no time for girls either.

At last he had it worked out, however. "I guess you could bring her back here," he said, with what seemed to be meant for a leer.

"I'm not going to make a pass at her," snapped Welkin, unaccountably annoyed. He nearly added "idiot!"

"I meant—when one takes a girl to a show in Scio, isn't there anywhere to go afterwards?"

"Only the park," said German.

"The park!" Welkin exclaimed. "To sit holding hands in the snow?"

German stared at him. "But I meant Solomon Park . . . oh, of course. You wouldn't know. It's a wonderful place—seventy degrees, covered in, and it stretches for miles."

Heated gardens on cold worlds were commonplace. Nevertheless, Welkin was rather surprised to hear that Scio boasted such a park. Gardens like that needed atomic power to run—everything else was far too expensive, on such a scale—and he hadn't seen any sign of atomics in Scio.

In any case, Dick German obviously wasn't the person to ask about entertaining a girl. "Thanks, Dick," Welkin said, "Maybe we'll take a look at Solomon Park. You've been a great help."

It was always a mistake to underestimate people. German colored and said bluntly, "You mean I haven't?" And it took Welkin some time to soothe his ruffled sensibilities.

RONNIE HARNELL ARRIVED AT THE theatre, breathless, only a few seconds after Welkin. "Am I late?" she gasped.

"You're the only girl I ever knew who wasn't," said Welkin, smiling.

She digested that, her expression thoughtful. "Oh, but I'm not sophisticated," she said frankly.

"I'm glad you told me," he replied gravely.

The theatre, like so much of Scio, had an air of twentieth-century Earth about it. It was shining with chromium and glass, and the carpets were soft and predominantly red and brown.

Inside it was more comfortable than Welkin had

expected it would be. The foyer was warm and scented, and the women standing about wore dresses much more in conformity with Welkin's preconceived notions about evening gowns than he had imagined would be possible—especially in chilly Scio.

"I didn't know that . . ." he began, turning to Ronnie, but she was gone. The cloakrooms, he soon discovered, were more elaborate than in Terrian theatres, because more of a transformation had to take place in them.

He came back to wait for Ronnie, looking about him curiously.

Ronnie came out at last, hesitantly, unsure of the impression she was going to make. She had reason to be doubtful, he saw at once. At first glance he guessed that her mother was dead and that she had no older sisters.

The gown she wore would have been fine for a dashing widow of thirty-five. On Ronnie it was a ghastly mistake. Bynald's fashions weren't those of Earth, of course, but certain general principles were common to both worlds and Ronnie's dress was obviously just as wrong in Scio as it would have been in London or Paris. It was a translucent red foam that was rather daring down to the waist and positively foolhardy below it. No wonder she looked anxious.

"You look lovely, Ronnie," said Welkin heroically. "Absolutely lovely."

She blushed, obviously pleased, and flattered by his compliment. He took her arm and led her inside, treating her like precious china. It was the only sensible way to treat her, he decided. He'd try to give her a good time but make it unmistakably clear as early as possible that he was married and had three children. You could never be sure what wild ideas romantic girls of eighteen might get into their heads.

The name of the piece was *Hail Bynald!* with an obligatory exclamation mark. Welkin didn't expect much of it, but from the moment the curtain went up he was astonished. The piece was part opera, part ballet, part play, and in every respect it was good. Supremely good, he thought for a while. In fact, he had never seen anything quite like it. When the surprisingly strong plot was being developed, the characters played it straight, in prose, and without exaggeration.

When the emotional stress became high, they burst into song, and it was grand opera until the stress was over. Then they were back to prose again. And when action or beauty or grace or emotion could best be expressed by the dance, the ballet began.

Jane Bolt, a contralto, had a part that rated about fourth in order of importance. She was very good but overshadowed, as she had to be, by the soprano who played Cedrica. Welkin had already seen in the playbill that Jane Bolt was not only one of the principals of the opera, but its librarian and an assistant stage manager.

At the first interval Welkin turned to Ronnie and found that she shared his enthusiasm.

"I never knew Bynald has such a high cultural level of its own," he said.

"Well, there aren't many operas like *Hail*

*Bynald!*" she said, glad to have found a topic of conversation she knew more about than he did.

"How long ago was it written?"

"Oh, two hundred—more than two hundred years ago."

Welkin wondered why the opera hadn't been taken up in other parts of the galaxy. As it proceeded, however, he began to see why.

It wasn't, after all, quite first rate. The patriotism was overdone. Instead of being noble and sincere the nationalism of the opera became at times fanatical. The motives of the main characters, too, were heavily overlaid with a too-strong love of Bynald, so that one was expected to find it right that the hero, who wasn't called Solomon but quite obviously was George Solomon, should sacrifice love of Cedrica to Bynald, and later Cedrica herself.

The Bynald bias was so strong that by the end, after nearly three hours of it Welkin found himself sickened by the propaganda, the false motives, the false values, the sheer, over-all unbalance of it, and a little angry that what could have been a great work had been spoiled by an inartistic obsession. The blemishes weren't essential to it. They seemed tacked on, like commercials written into a Shakespeare tragedy.

The opera was so long, and finished so late, that there was no question of going anywhere afterwards, though they did take time out for a cup of coffee at the theatre cafe before Welkin took Ronnie home.

She had forgotten all about her crimson dress by this time, but Welkin hadn't and as they went upstairs he intercepted a score of curious startled glances and wondered if he should drop a gentle hint about the gown. He decided he couldn't—there was no way of doing it without making her feel foolish and ashamed. He had seen a daughter safely through the stage. Ronnie was at now, and knew something about the problems of being eighteen, female and very pretty.

He was wondering whether Ronnie was going to be of any help to him or not, and whether he was justified in dating her. He didn't want her to get in trouble with her own people.

They sat down and ordered coffee, and Welkin was surprised to find that Ronnie agreed with him completely about *Hail Bynald!*

"I think dying for love is a beautiful idea," she confided. "But dying for a country is crazy, and sacrificing the girl you love for your world is even crazier. Whenever it comes to that bit I want to be sick."

"You've seen it often?"

"Not often. Four or five times. They told us at school we had to see it."

Welkin hadn't meant to do any investigating at all before he had worked out his plan of campaign, but here was a chance not to be missed.

"You don't sound very patriotic, Ronnie."

"I'm not," she said frankly. "Oh, if I had a chance to do something wonderful and exciting and romantic for Bynald I'd do it like a shot. But I could never go for this *My world right or wrong* stuff they drummed into us in school."

"And are you allowed to get away with that?" he asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"In some countries or worlds where extreme nationalism is cultivated—nobody's allowed to stay outside it. People who talk like you . . . disappear."

Ronnie laughed, at least she started to laugh. Then she looked at him, startled, doubtful. "Take me home," she said suddenly, breathlessly. "I . . . I have to start early tomorrow."

Welkin took her home. In the taxi he sat decorously in the corner opposite Ronnie, not even touching her, though he sensed that she expected *something* and was going to be a little disappointed when nothing happened at all. But for that last manifestation of hard-to-explain uneasiness on Ronnie's part he might have refrained from asking to see her again—for her own safety. However, he was certain now that she knew something, or guessed something, and he had to find out what it was.

"What's this Solomon Park I've been hearing about?" he asked idly.

She became enthusiastic at once. "It's a marvelous place," she said. "Do you want to see it? I've an afternoon off tomorrow. I'll show you around."

So that was that. Tomorrow afternoon he would find out why she had become uneasy when he'd mentioned people disappearing. He knew he had made a hit with Ronnie, for she made no attempt to hide the fact. He doubted very much if there was anything she'd refuse to tell him.

"Goodnight, Ronnie," he said at her front door. The taxi was waiting.

"Goodnight, Adrian," she said breathlessly, standing very still beside him. If she had asked him in words to kiss her, it couldn't have been any plainer.

He smiled down at her. "Goodnight, Ronnie," he said firmly, and went back to the taxi, his smile giving way to a frown.

Welkin went home and straight to bed. But Ronnie couldn't go to bed right away. Her father was waiting up for her. "Well?" he asked before she had her coat off.

She was suddenly angry, a rare emotion with her. It had been a lovely evening, and Adrian was a marvellous person. Of course, he was rather old, but there was something about him she had never encountered in a man before, something none of her teen-age boy-friends had ever had. She hated her father for reminding her that this was just business, that she was supposed to spy on Adrian and report everything, through him, to CE.

She forgot that only the day before she had been thrilled at the idea. It was still an exciting idea to cross swords with a spy, but . . . she didn't want to cross swords with Adrian. She liked Adrian. He was nice. She had wanted him to kiss her, had desperately wanted it, yet she admitted to herself that she liked him even more because he had not done so.

However, nothing had happened that would be of any interest to CE. So she reported the events of the evening as well as she could remember them,

and her father noted it all down. She looked at him thoughtfully, wondering if it were wrong not to love one's father.

Well, she did love him, in a way, but . . . He seemed a small man, somehow. A small, nervous, jumpy man, not at all like Adrian. No, nothing like Adrian.

"Goodnight, Daddy," she sighed.

She lay in bed for a long time, thinking. Adrian was trying to find out some secret of great importance concerning Bynald, evidently. He was handsome, kind, thoughtful . . . as she had always imagined Earthmen would be. What he was doing couldn't be *wrong*.

Why couldn't she . . . help Adrian? Between him and Bynald there was no question where her loyalties lay. There was no harm, surely, in working with him, helping him, at least until she knew what kind of information he was looking for?

Then . . . she would see.

#### IV

NEXT MORNING WELKIN GOT UP, had breakfast, and rapidly read two morning and two evening papers he found lying about. Then he went back to his room, put his feet up and thought.

The problem was simple. Bynald had been colonized three hundred years ago and had then been one of the best prospects in the galaxy. There was oil, coal, steel, uranium, diamonds, silver, platinum, rich agricultural land, everything a world could want. Within fifty years there had been a population of nearly a hundred million. So far so good.

Now, two hundred and fifty years later, the population was two hundred million and Bynald was about the most backward world in the galaxy, certainly the most backward of the twenty-three settlements of Bynald's age or more.

There was no obvious reason. Bynald still had all her mineral riches, emigration from Bynald was uncommon, and people appeared to live as long on Bynald as anywhere else. Men and women got married in their early twenties and had as a rule three or four children.

The population should at least have doubled itself every generation. *At least.* Bynald issued no statistics, and never had. But simply on the appearance of things, the population ought to rise by anything from a hundred to five hundred percent every thirty years.

And it just hadn't. Moreover, Bynald, which should have been rich, was a comparatively poor world, with a low standard of living, a technology that lagged behind that of any other world in the galaxy and only a trickle of exports in comparison with what Bynald might have been expected to produce.

This state of affairs had puzzled most of the occupied planets for some time. Bynald wasn't aggressive, nor particularly secretive—just stubbornly non-productive, non-fertile.

If there was a simple explanation—which seemed more than likely—Earth, Heimat and all the other worlds which had anything to do with Bynald wanted to know what it was.

The possibility of a Bynald *secret* had arisen be-

cause certain spies sent to find the explanation of the Bynald enigma had failed to return. Most did, of course, with little or nothing to report. But the disappearance of the others could only be satisfactorily explained by the theory that they had found out something of vital significance and hadn't been allowed to get away with it. Hence the appearance on the scene of Adrian Welkin, with one or two tricks up his sleeve.

When he had everything he knew or had guessed so far securely in place in his mind, he went to the Scio public library. It was the principal library on Bynald, presumably, yet it was no bigger than the public library in any city of a hundred thousand people on Earth.

More than that, Welkin soon discovered that the library contained only eight thousand original books. No more than that number had apparently been published in the whole of Bynald! Eight thousand in three hundred years! The rest were Bynald reprints of standard texts.

Of the eight thousand local books, four thousand were novels. Three thousand dealt with the natural lore of the planet—its geography, geology, botany, flora and fauna, exploration, et cetera. That left just one thousand miscellaneous books to include all the social history, biography, poetry, essays, drama, research, philosophy and psychology of a world three hundred years old.

Certainly it wasn't much.

Welkin learned all he could in the library, and it took him only an hour and a half. He didn't believe he had missed much of importance. Before lunch he had time for a visit to two second-hand bookshops, buying some three dozen old volumes not in the library catalogue. He took the most interesting of these with him and had the others sent to his lodgings.

By lunch time he was convinced that Bynald's secret would soon be no secret to him, and was chiefly concerned about what CE was going to do to stop him from getting away with it. That was the essential point, of course. Often it was easy enough to secure the required information, but virtually impossible to take it to Earth with a whole skin.

However, worrying about that now, he told himself, would be premature.

He saw Jane at lunch and complimented her on her performance. She accepted the praise as her due and asked what he thought of the opera as a whole.

He told her frankly. She raised her eyebrows. She must have been more interested than she had been the day before, because she actually stopped eating.

"I suppose we here in Bynald take our nationalism for granted," she said rather coldly. "I always thought the real beauty of *Hail Bynald!* was its moral."

"I thought the didactic implications were the only thing that spoiled it."

She was silent, resenting his criticism.

"Was the performance last night authentic?" Welkin asked.

"What do you mean, authentic?" She was still annoyed, though trying not to show it.

"Was it from the original score, the original libretto?"

She considered. "No. It's been modified from time to time."

Welkin was silent. "Well?" she said challengingly.

"I'd very much like to see it in the original version."

"Why? Changes are made only if they're improvements."

He shook his head, deliberately baiting her.

"Damn it," she said, almost openly angry. "I'm a stage manager and the librarian. I ought to know whether these changes are improvements or not."

"You ought to, but you don't. Some of the additions stand out like sore thumbs. Art and propaganda never did mix very well."

She was quietly furious. "If all you could see in *Hail Bynald!* was propaganda—"

"That's just the trouble. I could see a lot more, but it was difficult. Strip some of the sentimentality, fanaticism and propaganda off the top of it and the opera I saw last night would be a masterpiece. Not just here, but anywhere."

He was watching her closely now.

"Sentimentality, fanaticism . . ." she repeated. Then, suddenly, she burst out: "Oh, go to hell. You don't know what you're talking about."

Welkin said no more, but continued to watch her curiously. He was wondering even more than he had wondered the day before whether she was a CE agent or not. Probably, he decided, she was a CE contact only—they had asked her to report on him.

He picked Ronnie up at her home. From the moment he saw her he sensed there was something strange about her, some suppressed excitement. He was afraid for a moment that she'd really fallen in love with him, which would be awkward, but he soon decided it couldn't be that.

He knew her pretty well by this time. She was imaginative, romantic, ready to do a thing the adventurous way, though she'd never even consider doing it the ordinary way. She was with him partly because he was an Earthman and partly because he had made last night's outing very pleasant for her. He had learned a thing or two about women in his forty-eight years.

Welkin could have found out about the Park at the library, but he had had other things to do. He was rather surprised when they arrived at a vast dome, fully as large as the largest superficially similar structure on Mars. It was of plastiglass too, coated to reflect as little light as possible, and was quite invisible at a distance of more than a few feet.

He was even more impressed when they got inside. Ronnie lingered in the pavilion at the entrance, and that gave him a chance to look round.

Solomon Park would have been a showpiece on any world but Earth. He wondered why he'd never heard of it—probably because it was man-made. There were so many man-made wonders on the colonized worlds that generally the wonders which one heard about were the natural ones.

Just outside Scio, beside the cemetery, Solomon Park was a vast, well-planned, well-maintained garden, warm as June in the northern hemisphere of Earth, totally enclosed but with no sign of it, cooled and aired by soft, warm breezes. And this on a world the mean temperature of which was 40° Fahr-

enheit, in a city where it snowed all the year round.

It was quite untypical of Bynald.

Ronnie joined him and he saw the reason for the park. It had obviously been constructed so that Ronnie could wear her green playsuit, a neat little garment that fitted her much better than a glove. It more than made up for the unsuitability of her dress the night before. Ronnie could hardly have been shown to worse or better advantage than at the theatre and in the park.

You had to expect that of young girls—no one could look righter, or wronger.

"Aren't you going to change, too, Adrian?" she inquired.

"I'm not eighteen," he said. "You look wonderful Ronnie. I wish I were about twenty-one."

She said nothing, but that pleased her.

They strolled along the walks and lanes of the gardens. They must have been about a mile from the pavilion when Ronnie said: "Will you let me help you, Adrian?"

"In what way?" he asked.

"I know you're a spy," she said, her voice surprisingly level and firm.

It was a shock chiefly because he had been pretty certain she couldn't be in CE's employ. It wasn't much of a surprise that she'd told him the truth about herself so honestly and simply. Yet he recognized her candor immediately as an innocent, terrible mistake.

"Who told you?" he asked gently.

"My father. I'm supposed to report on you. I'll do that. I can't see that it will do any harm. Can you?"

"No." He wondered whether they should sit in some quiet spot, and decided it would be better to go on walking. The people they passed could hear only a word or two. "Just one thing, Ronnie. Were you told to bring me here?"

She looked up at him in surprise. "No. I've hardly been told anything. That's why I thought I'd help you, so that I'd find out . . . whatever it is you came here to do."

He knew already that one of his difficult jobs on Bynald, perhaps the most difficult job, was going to be getting Ronnie away safely. For he didn't want her to die, and it was pretty certain that she would not be spared unless he could save her.

"Do you fully understand the great danger you're in, Ronnie?" he asked.

"You mean—my own people might punish me for helping you?"

"What you're proposing could be called treason," he said gently. He knew he couldn't make her understand the deadly peril she was in, and there wasn't much point in trying too hard. He had some idea of the efficiency of CE. She probably had none.

She frowned. "You wouldn't do anything bad, would you, Adrian?"

"Not anything I thought bad. But in conflict you often have two sides both thinking honestly that they're right."

"I'd rather trust you than Bynald," said Ronnie.

"You don't like your own world—is that it?"

"I like it all right—except for all the effort they put into making you like it."

"Tell me about that, Ronnie." She had already said enough to get herself executed, if and when



CE found out about it. If she told him all she knew it wouldn't make much difference. Of course, the possibility that Bynald had no secret still remained—but by this time Welkin was regarding it as a very thin possibility indeed.

"There's not much to tell you. You saw the opera last night. Well, the school books are all like that. Our *wonderful Bynald*. You don't dare say a word against it. And I was thinking about what you said—about people disappearing. They do, you know."

Welkin stopped sharply and put his hands on her shoulders. "Are you telling the truth, Ronnie?" he asked. "Were you instructed to tell me this?"

She looked straight up into his eyes. If she was lying he'd never be able to trust his judgment of anybody again.

"I'm not lying," she said quietly. "I'm guessing—so of course I may be wrong. But I'm not lying, Adrian."

"What's this about people disappearing?" he asked.

"Well, it's just a rumor," she admitted. "I have heard about people disappearing, but I never could really prove . . . ."

"Did you believe the rumors?"

"Not until Ellen Marks left. She wasn't exactly a friend of mine. But I knew her, and once when I'd been away on vacation she made me promise to write. So when she went away—Adrian, I'm *sure* she'd have written!"

"And she never did?"

"No, she was supposed to have gone to Blueville, in the south. But when I tried to pin her friends down, they said they weren't sure it was Blueville. It might have been Walton City—"

"Who would know for certain?"

"Well . . . I don't know. There's her brother, but he wouldn't care much. And her folks went away too—"

"Could they have disappeared as well?"

Ronnie was startled. "Maybe—I don't know. I never thought of it."

"How many people know about these rumors?"

"It depends whether they take them seriously or not. Or even listen to them. Adrian, does this make any sense to you?"

"If Bynald makes sense at all," said Welkin grimly, "someone must disappear to somewhere."

"What do you mean?"

He explained briefly, studying her face closely as he talked.

Ronnie became excited. "Then that's the secret—where these people go?"

"Only part of it, the less important part. What we want to know is *why* they go. And who makes them go, who runs the whole business."

"Have you any ideas?" Ronnie asked.

"I will have when I've found out a little more. Ronnie, how much history do they teach at school?"

"Not much. Only dull things like the names of the presidents and so on."

"Anything about Cedrica?"

"Oh yes."

"Tell me about Cedrica."

"What we're told, or what I really think?"

"What you really think."

"Well, Cedrica was a girl who had beauty and

brains—and ambition, too, of course. I think she was very selfish. She never really cared for any of her lovers, only herself. It was said—"

"Ronnie," interrupted Welkin, amused, "you're giving me a very different picture from the one in the books."

"I've thought about Cedrica a lot," said Ronnie seriously. "She's in so many books, operas, plays, movies, songs, poems and so on that you get plenty of chance to make up your mind about what's true and what's false. She must have been selfish, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do. Go on."

"She lived at the time when this world was just settling down into something. George Solomon was the president of the Assembly at the time. She knew what she wanted—everything she could get. Solomon built his park for her. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," said Welkin interested.

"There's a plaque somewhere in it. He called it Cedrica Park, but after she left him he changed the name."

"I've always wondered why Cedrica took such a hold on the imagination of this world," Welkin mused.

Ronnie's brow furrowed. "They say she was a scientist too, but I've never seriously believed that," she said. "She must have got mixed up with someone else—probably another woman living at the same time. It isn't in character for her to be a scientist."

"Why not?"

"Research is solitary work, usually. And I can't imagine Cedrica ever being alone."

Welkin grinned. "You're going to be a wonderful woman yourself some day, Ronnie."

"We were talking about Cedrica," said Ronnie a little doubtfully, not quite sure what Welkin meant.

"So we were."

They talked for quite a while about Solomon, the first important president, Cedrica, the only woman of note in Bynald's history (she took the place of all the sirens in Earth's history and legends, Welkin reflected—Venus, Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Pompadour and Nell Gwynn rolled into one), Clecholme, the president after Solomon, and Jarvis the one after that.

Then without letting Ronnie know what he was doing Welkin led the subject away so that they couldn't get back to history and the question of disappearances, and then sat down with her on the warm grass close to some other couples to make quite sure that they didn't return to the earlier subjects.

Ronnie had said enough. In fact, Ronnie had said far too much for her own good, without helping Welkin very considerably.

## V

RONNIE WENT STRAIGHT up to her bedroom when she got home. There was a murmur of voices from the lounge. Her father had a visitor, and the tones of the visitor's voice weren't familiar.

She dropped her heavy coat on the bed and started to undress. She had made no definite date with Roy that evening, because she'd thought she might have to meet Welkin. But nothing had been

said about that, so she might as well call Roy. Roy might, understandably, have been awkward about this business. But he hadn't been, and as soon as he'd heard that Ronnie had to do a small job for the government—she'd given him no details—he'd agreed that she must do it, and hadn't pressed her to tell him more about it.

Suddenly Ronnie caught a phrase from the conversation below. The stranger, whoever he was, was saying: ". . . not sure we can trust her, Harnell."

Ronnie tensed. They must be talking about her.

She didn't waste time wondering whether she was justified in listening or not. She had to hear what they were saying. From her bedroom she couldn't hear more than a word here and there, but the box-room beside it was only partly floored and she was sure she'd be able to hear through the unfloored plasterboard.

Without more ado she hurried silently into the boxroom, shut the door quietly, squatted by the open rafters and listened.

Her father was saying something she couldn't hear.

"If we give her a shot of napoline or even sodium pentothal we can be sure it's the truth," said the other man. Ronnie started violently.

Another murmur from her father.

"All right, we'll wait till she's seen him again," said the stranger. "But then—we've got to know exactly what they were saying in the park this afternoon. We caught some of it, and though all we could get didn't help us much, it made us want to know exactly what they *did* say. Frankly, I haven't the least faith in your daughter telling just the truth about it. But we'll ask her anyway."

More mumbles. If the stranger hadn't had such a harsh, incisive voice she was quite sure she wouldn't have been able to hear him at all.

"Okay, I'll talk to her when she comes in," her father said. "She probably already has a date with Welkin again for tonight or tomorrow. And after that—the drugs. We'll know exactly what's going on."

Ronnie went back quietly to her bedroom. The overheard conversation changed things completely. She realized with shame and disillusionment that when she thought of helping Welkin, when she spoke to him openly as she had, she'd had no idea of the danger she was running. She'd had some vague idea that if she was questioned she'd brush off the questions cleverly and easily, and an even vaguer idea of third degree men torturing her in a not too unbearable way and herself insisting bravely that she'd told the truth.

She hadn't seen them drugging her to take her will away from her and make her talk. There was nothing romantic about that. It was an outrage you couldn't fight . . .

She put her coat on again, went very quietly downstairs again, opened the front door and slammed it as if she'd just come in.

IN THE BOOKS HE HAD bought that morning Welkin found two small but interesting items.

One was George Solomon's view of foreign policy and what ought to be Bynald's future policy. Solomon believed passionately that if Bynald were fully

developed it would inevitably be ruined by the predators who would be drawn to a rich successful world. He believed that if Bynald were to grow up strong and free and healthy, it *must grow up poor*. He thought that Bynald must put five hundred years of patient toil behind it before it took advantage of its resources and decided to be rich.

Whether the theory was sound or not, Solomon had believed in it, and his advice and convictions had been taken seriously. Welkin could find this attitude set down in only one volume, but it rang true. Solomon had been a fanatical patriot, even a crazy patriot, and somehow he had set the Bynald scene as he wanted it and kept it that way centuries after his death. That little piece of lore made sense because it was true, not because it was sensible.

The other item that interested Welkin was Cedrica's insistence that she died a virgin. Perhaps it was neither true nor important, but Welkin found he couldn't dismiss it easily. If Bynald's greatest courtesan, the woman who epitomized sex to her age and to the next two centuries, had died a virgin—if there was even a possibility that she had—she was completely misunderstood and anyone who wanted to understand the part she had played in history would have to make some new and drastically different guesses about her.

Welkin found himself following out the hypothesis that Cedrica's claim *was* true and that Ronnie's picture of her was completely false. That *Hail Bynald!* was even more wrong about her. That she had been a scientist, after all. That her plan for the future, and Solomon's, and perhaps Cleeholme's had mingled and gained strength and subtlety from each other, the strength from Solomon and the subtlety from Cedrica. That the state of Bynald now had been settled in the first century of the colony's existence, when Solomon and Cedrica and Cleeholme were making plans, not just slavishly carrying them out and 'improving' them, as Jane Bolt and others like her had 'improved' *Hail, Bynald!*

He was just finishing his solitary evening meal—there was no sign of Jane Bolt—when Dick German called, again asking if there was anything he could do.

Welkin decided to find out if he was going to be allowed to get rid of German.

"No, thanks, Dick," he said. "In fact, I can manage by myself now. Thanks for your help earlier. I appreciated it. But I think I'm settled in now, and I needn't trouble you again."

German looked awkward and at a loss. "Okay," he said huskily. "I guess you don't want me hanging about any more, is that it? If you do need me, you know how to get in touch with me. So long."

It seemed to be as easy as that.

Welkin was on the point of retiring to his room to play his horn when something much more interesting presented itself.

Jane Bolt came in, obviously in a hurry, and placed a large volume in front of him. "You can keep that," she said gruffly. "It's a copy of the original *Hail Bynald!*"

Welkin was touched, and let her see it. "Thanks, Jane," he said. "You make me feel a heel, after all I said."

"You said this was good," she said, indicating the

book. "Maybe you're right. Look and see. Now I've got to run."

Welkin took the book up to his room. It was unlikely that it would help him in his main job on Bynald, otherwise CE would have seen to it that it never came into his hands. But life wasn't all work, particularly Welkin's life, and he looked forward to an evening studying the book.

He found it was a complete copy of the work, copied by a photographic process on very thin paper. It had complete stage direction, dialogue, vocal and orchestral score, and notes on the choreography. He was interested to see that in the original cast Cedrica had sung the soprano part (did the woman do everything?) and that the part itself was *Erica*, not Cedrica. That was no surprise. Cedrica was such a figure in Bynaldian tradition that it was all of a piece that she should give her name to a theatrical character she had created.

A quick glance through the dialogue showed that he had been right—this was very much better than the version he'd seen the night before. He forgot all about Bynald's secret. He was back to his first love, discovery of the jewels of the past.

He was quite annoyed when Mrs. Henbald interrupted him to tell him there was a young lady downstairs to see him.

He pulled himself together. It must be Ronnie. He got up at once. It was a mistake for Ronnie to come here, where everything he did must be under observation and probably all the walls had ears. He'd have to act as if he had been expecting her, and hope she'd have the good sense to wait until they were safely outside before she said anything of importance.

He hadn't underestimated her good sense, at least. She hadn't taken off her coat, and was waiting as if they had arranged to go out together. He thought there was something a little tense about her smile, but decided not to press her for an explanation.

Ronnie waited until they were well away from the boardinghouse, walking along Commerce Street, before she told him rapidly what had happened. It was getting dark, and a soft, fine snow was falling.

"I never thought of them suspecting me, using drugs to make me talk," she said, bitterly. "Naturally I had to tell them at least a part of the truth."

Welkin stared at her in consternation. "What did you tell this man?"

"I told him as close to the truth as I could—nearly everything we said, hoping they'd have caught some of it and think I was telling the whole truth. Oh, Adrian, I didn't think it was going to be like this!"

She didn't have to tell him that. The main difference about romantic adventure and real adventure was that in romance the hero and heroine always stood firm. In real life, you came through if you could, but it was never so certain, and you couldn't take the risks that romantic characters took—you didn't dare.

"Don't you realize, Ronnie," he said gently, "that you were meant to hear exactly what you did hear? They expected you to do exactly what you've done—come running to me in a panic."

She drew herself up sharply. "I'm not in a panic!" she protested.

"You should be. I would be, if I were you."

"Why—what do you mean?"

"I've got some protection," Adrian said. "I haven't broken any international or local law."

"But you're a spy!"

"Don't shout it in the middle of the street, Ronnie. In a sense I am, but I never had to get outside of the law to do what I want to do. I'm quite sure that CE will try to put me out of the way if they decide it's got to be done. But they know Earth will get very nasty if they kill me and perhaps take the opportunity of clamping down on Bynald and ordering a full-scale investigation. And in the course of that investigation they'll have an excellent chance of finding out what I was sent here to discover. CE knows that. But you—"

"What about me?" she asked half-defiantly.

He didn't particularly want to tell her, but he knew that no useful purpose would be served by letting her deceive herself about her own position.

"Well, you see, Ronnie," he said kindly, "only Bynald has any responsibility for you. If they decide, without trial or any public mention of your case, that you're a traitor—and they'll be sure of it when they get you under drugs—there's nothing whatever to stop them."

She stared at him in horror. "You mean I'm going to be executed—and there's nothing you can do?"

He pulled her down on a bench at a street corner. It wasn't a comfortable place to sit, with the snow sifting down, but they were much safer out in the open than in any place where they might be overheard.

"I don't want to be unkind, Ronnie" he said, "but you've landed yourself in this mess all by yourself. You're in a much worse mess than I am. Now let's see how we can get you out of it."

He considered for a moment. Ronnie didn't speak; she was trying hard not to cry.

"Whom can you trust?" Welkin said at last.

"Really trust—literally with your life? Not your father, I'm afraid. He's in this too deep."

"I know," she said, with a sudden flash of anger. "I hope I never see him again!"

She never did.

Welkin was still waiting. "Roy," said Ronnie in a small voice. "Just Roy."

"Who's Roy?"

"My . . . my boy-friend."

"Are you sure you can really trust him?"

"I . . . I think so. If I can't trust him I can't trust anybody. Certainly not my father. How could he have allowed them to make a tool of me? Doesn't my happiness—my very life—mean anything to him?"

"Let's go and see Roy," said Welkin.

"But—are you sure nobody's following us?"

"I'm sure somebody is. We'll see what we can do about that first."

Stage-managed by Welkin, they gave the man or men tailing them a very bad time of it. They got on and off buses, into buildings one way and out another way, hurried through crowds and fastened themselves on to large groups. They even elbowed their way between cinema celebrities and waited for their pursuers to overtake them, taking full advantage of Welkin's experience and Ronnie's knowl-

edge of the city. Fortunately Ronnie's coat was grey, a common color for women's coats, and Welkin's attire was dark and inconspicuous.

Presently he declared himself satisfied. "It's always easy to drop a tail," he said. "I know because I've often got lost when I was doing the tailing. The trick is not to get flustered, and not to be afraid to stand still for a considerable time. The man behind you is after someone who's moving, not someone leaning against a wall, quietly observing the pedestrians, and apparently waiting to keep a date."

They called at Roy's lodgings. Welkin was fully aware that they might pick up their tail again by calling at the young man's apartment, but didn't consider it necessary to tell Ronnie so. She had enough to worry about as it was. He'd stressed the danger of her position solely to make it clear to her that her only chance was to do as he said.

"Why, hallo, Miss Veronica," said the landlady, with a faint note of surprise in her voice. "Didn't Roy call on you before he left?"

"Before he left for where?" asked Ronnie, with foreboding.

"Letterston, I think he said. But he must be meaning to write. I tell you what, Miss Veronica—there'll be a letter from him tomorrow. I'm sure of it."

Ronnie was about to protest, but with Welkin's hand gripping her elbow like a vise she merely thanked the landlady and returned with him in silence to the street.

"Where's Letterston?" asked Welkin, disappointment and concern in his voice.

"On the other side of the planet. He couldn't have—"

"Don't talk too much," Welkin warned. "Keep your voice at a low pitch."

They went through another tail-dodging operation. When they decided it was safe they sat on another bench, huddled together so that anyone who saw them would take them for lovers.

"That's another way of vanishing from sight," said Welkin grimly.

"But what are we to do?" Ronnie demanded, her voice ragged with strain. "We can't escape, can we? I mean—hope to outwit them permanently?"

"Oh, quite possibly," said Welkin cheerfully. "But you see—I can't go yet. If I were to go now, my entire mission would be a failure."

"But now they suspect you. You're in great danger."

"They suspected me long before I came. As for you—you'll have to come to Earth with me Ronnie. I can see no other way."

"She gave a little cry of delight. "Can I? You mean—right now?"

"I imagine if I took you away with me now there wouldn't be too much trouble. But, as I was just saying, my immediate departure would be an admission of failure. I haven't got what I came for. I have one or two interesting clues, and the germ of an idea. Nothing more."

"You could save me, and you won't? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Welkin smiled at her rather sadly.

"I'm afraid you're finding out where romantic ideas break down, Ronnie," he said. "I can't take you back to Earth and tell my superiors, 'No, I failed

disastrously at the task you assigned me, but I saved a Bynald girl's life. I'm sorry you lost seven hundred million dollars for nothing."

"Then I've no chance? I just disappear, like Ellen Marks and . . . and Roy?"

The way she talked about Roy, Welkin decided, showed she'd never really been in love with the youth.

"We'll see," he said. He might have told her that he hadn't asked her to declare herself for him the way she had, and that, in sober fact, his own position would have been much better if she'd refrained from indulging her passion for the romantic. But he decided that nothing would be gained by shattering all of her illusions and making her hate him.

"We can't stay here, anyway," he said. "Where can we go? It's a serious problem."

"Some other town?"

"No, a close check will be made at all travel depots."

"An hotel?"

"Even worse. I'll settle for some place where we can be comfortable and work out what must be done."

"The park?"

"They know us there, too. But if it comes to that, we can't go anywhere where people aren't checked over in some way. It might as well be the park, I suppose—if it's still open."

"It's always open. And we can go in by another entrance."

In deciding on the park Welkin knew perfectly well that CE would be able to find them there if it wished to do so. But again he didn't force the knowledge on Ronnie. Ronnie wasn't a fool. But she was very young and very romantic, and just didn't realize that as far as governments and espionage departments were concerned one young girl was quite as expendable as a sheet of government notepaper.

"There's a precaution we'd better decide on right now," he said. "They may catch up with us at any time, possibly within the next hour or so. We'll need a code."

"A code!" she exclaimed excitedly. He was rather glad that she was too buoyant to be kept depressed by her desperate situation. Apparently any mention of anything exciting or interesting was enough to make her forget her danger for the moment.

"Just a simple one," he said. "If I think we're being overheard, and I want you to follow my lead, I'll say something complimentary about—well, I'll say you're lovely."

"If you want me to say nothing you'll say—I'm lovely?"

"No. If I want you to say *nothing*, I'll call you Veronica. Once I've said the word Veronica, say nothing that matters. Is that clear? As for the other comment, about your loveliness—often it's very valuable to be able to talk, overheard, without the listeners suspecting you know you're under close observation. If I tell you you're beautiful, follow my lead—say what I seem to want you to say, even if you fear it might be dangerous. Is that clear also?"

"I think so. And if I notice anything I think you should know, what am I to say?"

He had no idea how well she could act. He preferred not to let her say anything as a signal, for

fear that she would display such obvious nervousness that the game would be up.

"Don't say anything," he told her. "Do something. Do something to your coat."

"I won't have my coat on. I'll take my jacket off. All right?"

"Yes. Only remember not to take it off if you don't see anything."

They made their way to the park in much better spirits, Ronnie cheered up by the business of the code and Welkin by the quite strong possibility that he would get a chance to get in some double-talk. If he did, it was bound to be useful.

## VI

**SOLOMON PARK BY NIGHT** was an enchanted place, especially to people coming straight in out of the snow.

It wasn't brilliantly lit. It was lit just enough not to be menacing, or garish. There was no sign of the illumination's source. Probably the light was electrostatic, Welkin decided, synchronized with some reflecting index of the plastic dome which did not interfere with the passage of sunlight in the opposite direction.

Whatever its source, all near objects were bathed in a steady, well-modulated glow while more distant objects disappeared into shadow. Considering how cold the rest of Scio was and how warm, friendly and intimate the park seemed, it could easily lay claim to being the lovers' lane *par excellence* of the entire galaxy. The number of couples they saw, or whose presence they sensed without quite seeing them, indicated that love-making was the parks' principal nocturnal function.

"How are morals on Bynald, Ronnic?" he asked idly.

She looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"You don't have shocked and protesting letters in the papers about what goes on here after dark, do you?"

She laughed. "Love-making is what the park's for, silly."

"Have you been here often with Roy?"

"Of course." But definitely she couldn't have been in love with him, or some shadow would have fallen over her at the mention of his name. Did she realize the boy was probably dead?

"And . . . with anyone else?"

She laughed again. "Well, I'm here with you," she said ingenuously. "Isn't there supposed to be a wrong time for asking questions?"

She was at the selfish period of adolescence, Welkin reflected, a little sadly. All that really mattered to her was whether others found her attractive or not.

But then to his surprise, as if she had sensed what he was thinking, she suddenly asked: "Adrian, do you think Roy's all right?"

He was startled and relieved by the anxiety in her tone. He liked Ronnie, and wanted to think well of her.

"Perhaps," he said. "Does the lad mean a lot to you, Ronnie?"

"I don't know," she said. Then her face darkened. "No, he doesn't. He can't. He's gone and I may

never see him again. And I feel nothing. Unless maybe . . . maybe I'm even glad."

"C�ad he's gone?"

"He said he loved me. And I couldn't see any reason why I shouldn't love him in return. But now that he's gone I don't feel so guilty about the fact that I had to pretend."

That was better. She was sounding more like a girl with a heart—a heart that had still to be touched and made aware of love's meaning.

They had left their coats at the pavilion. They looked, in the semi-darkness like most of the other couples around them. Welkin could have been quite a few years younger and Ronnie a woman of twenty-five.

Welkin pointed and they sat in an intimate corner several feet from the main path, and enclosed on three sides by shrubs.

"Do you mind?" Welkin asked, taking Ronnie in his arms.

"Of course not!" She smiled up at him, nestling closer, her lips parted.

"Well, remember it doesn't mean anything," he said bluntly. "Now that we've been granted a little time to work things out, let's do it. Point one—CE can place us under arrest whenever they decide to double or triple the men on our trail. I've a healthy respect for CE. Point two—at the moment I'm on the threshold of Bynald's secret, but not over it yet. In another two or three days I should be able to crack it. Point three—when we leave here we've got to go somewhere and I'm not sure where that 'somewhere' should be."

"Together?" asked Ronnie.

"We'll have to stay together," he said grimly. "I've a strong suspicion that if I once let you out of my sight I'd never see you again."

She shuddered.

"Had enough of adventure?" he asked sardonically.

"I'd be enjoying this tremendously," she said with startling candor, "if I could be sure everything would come out all right."

"That's just it," he agreed. "And I've got a wife and three children to worry about."

Ronnie moved a little restlessly in his arms, and he decided he'd dropped the reminder not an instant too soon. She was a young, vital creature, hungry for love, and he found himself reflecting that the youth who had vanished couldn't have been much of a fellow, or he would have awakened in Ronnie what Welkin, at his age, could hardly help awakening.

"You said you were on the threshold of . . . Bynald's secret," said Ronnie. "Tell me about it."

"Two and a half centuries ago," said Welkin reflectively, "Bynald was pretty much as it is now. George Solomon was president. Cedrica was . . . Cedrica. Cleeholme was Solomon's deputy. Solomon loved Bynald more than his own life. Everything he did was for Bynald's future. Even when he was under Cedrica's spell he had one eye on Bynald. His fear was that if Bynald developed its vast mineral wealth, there would be wars, legal battles, commercial strife, and Bynald would be torn to pieces again and again . . . and I'm not going to say that he was wrong. He believed that the only way for Byn-

ald to stay safe was to stay poor, and never allow outsiders to settle here and expand the economy in any way, never sell a square inch of Bynald's soil." "Where did you learn all this?" demanded Ronnie wonderingly.

"From many sources. From you, from that opera, from books, and from the way Bynald is now. I'm a historian, Ronnie. A good one. Give me an inch of fact, and I'll spin a mile of theory—reasonably sound theory. Well, to go on . . . Solomon founded the sort of government that kept and would continue to keep things as they were. His aim was to stop development, make moderate but never spectacular progress, and build up an enduring tradition. The head of CE, whatever his real name is, is always referred to as GS—one of our unsuccessful spies told us that. GS for what? George Solomon, of course.

"Solomon built to last. He passed his beliefs on to others, and by the time they retired from office, the machine was running smoothly. Dead slow, but smoothly. Except for espionage and counter-espionage activities, of course.

"Now Cedrica. I think you and everybody else are wrong about Cedrica. I think she was a psychologist rather than a power-mad siren. And I think she and Solomon worked together far more closely and rationally than the legends would have us believe. They laid the ground plan—the master design—for Bynald's secret, whatever it is. I'm certain of that. Solomon and Cedrica cooked it up two hundred years ago, and it's been running smoothly ever since."

Ronnie was staring up at him fascinated, like a child being told an enthralling story. Of course, this was new light on people she'd been hearing about—vaguely, in legend—all her life.

Welkin wondered if she'd forgotten she was in a man's arms. No—no woman could ever quite forget that.

"What I can't fit into the picture is this question of disappearances," he said, frowning. "We can guess that if the plan is to work a large number of people *must* disappear. I'm sure of it. There are no figures, but you have only to take a bird's-eye view. Every two people produce at least three more, and those three produce perhaps four or five. The four or five produce a larger number, all before the first two are dead—that's a two in a sixteen or eighteen or twenty ratio equation in less than a hundred years—"

"But they've all got to marry other people. I mean—"

"I know what you mean, and I'm allowing for that. Even so, population should be multiplying itself by at least six every century."

"You mean—that many people are dying?" Ronnie exclaimed.

"I don't know whether they're dying or not. They may be going some place else."

"Where?"

"How should I know? But there's plenty of room in the galaxy."

He paused, his lips tightening. "There's one ugly possibility that *would* make some sort of sense—Solomon sense. Suppose everybody who didn't think Bynald wonderful was killed—removed, anyway. Suppose for generations this ruthless extermination



process went on, so that every child was brought up in an atmosphere of fanatic nationalism. Gradually that kind of nationalism would be almost inbred in the population. A Darwinian Natural Selection by Unnatural Means. Nationalist strains survive, non-nationalist die out. In the end you might have—"

"Well, I can't believe it's that," said Ronnie. "But you've thought about it and I haven't. Didn't I tell you about Ellen Marks? That's what I didn't like about her—she never talked about anything but Bynald. She was crazy about Bynald, just like Solomon must have been, if what you say is true. And Roy's the same way. That's one of the reasons why I never really fell for him. He always cared more about Bynald than he did about me."

"Ronnie," said Welkin urgently. "Think of all the people you've ever known—the people who *might* have disappeared."

"But I only know about Ellen and Roy. In fact, I can't even be sure about them—"

"I understand that. But see if you can get your mind to cover all the people you've known and don't know now—people you've lost sight of, people who have moved to other cities, people you've just forgotten. Can you do that?"

"I . . . I think so."

"Well, generally, are these people old or young. I mean, were they old or young when they disappeared?"

"Young, mostly. Nearly all young."

"Men or women?"

"Both."

"Were they patriotic or indifferent?"

"Patriotic," she said, quite definitely.

"And can you ever remember anyone like yourself, anyone who didn't give a damn for Bynald—can you remember anyone like that disappearing?"

She hesitated for a long time, while Welkin waited tensely.

"No," she said at last.

Welkin was silent for a long time. He still had to speculate on a ground that wasn't too firm, but he had something to go on now. Solomon, Cedrica, Solomon's policy—and what Ronnie had just told him.

"Ronnie," he said, "you've really helped me. Perhaps now—"

"Just a minute, Adrian," she said quietly, and sat up, pushing his arms aside. He stared at her in wonder, his mind wholly occupied with something else.

It was only when she dropped the little jacket

which had covered her shoulders to the ground that he remembered the sign language they had agreed upon.

He took her in his arms again. He was careful not to look about him. "I'd take you back, Ronnie," he said gently, "if I had the whole problem worked out. But there would be no point in our going now. I'd only have to come back."

He let his eyes wander slightly, but he could see nothing in the shadows.

Apparently Ronnie's eyes were much sharper than his.

Abruptly he realized she couldn't say anything yet because he hadn't given her her cue.

"You're really very lovely," he said kissing first her cheek, and then her lips.

In the bushes, something was dropped. It wasn't much of a noise, and for a second Welkin debated the advisability of pretending he hadn't heard it. But he knew the pretense wouldn't ring true. They would expect more of an experienced espionage agent.

"Who's there?" he inquired in a conversational tone. "Ychudi?"

Three men stood up. Welkin and Ronnie stood up too. Welkin was surprised to see that one of the men, evidently the leader, was Dick German.

"Come on," said German briefly. "It will be simpler and easier for all of us if you come quietly. You can talk later, but not here."

There was nothing Welkin and Ronnie could do but go with them. Ronnie bent to pick up her jacket, but one of the men stopped her.

"It doesn't matter, Veronica," said Welkin, nudging her gently on her arm.

She took the hint. She said hardly another word, leaving it all to Welkin. At the gate, German refused to allow either of them to take their coats, probably suspecting there might be something about Welkin's coat especially that could be dangerous to a CE man—a concealed weapon in one of the pockets perhaps.

"You're not going to make Ronnie go out into the snow dressed like that?" Welkin protested.

"There's a car just outside the door," German said reassuringly.

Ronnie shivered violently as the snowflakes settled on her bare shoulders. But then they were in the car, on the way to be questioned by CE men, and she had more to worry about than the cold.

## VII

THEY WERE TAKEN TO A ROOM in the Administration Building—a small blank-walled room containing no furniture except a table and three chairs. With German were the two men who had been with him in the park—two nondescript men, not in uniform.

"We won't do any pretending, shall we?" asked German.

"Not if you'd rather not," said Welkin, looking him steadily in the eye.

"Frankly," said German, "I'd rather you simply decided to go away, Welkin. It would be better for you—and better for us."

"Taking Ronnie with me?"

"You can't do that. No—it's out of the question. She stays here, whatever happens."

The cold tone of his voice made the statement sound like a calmly pronounced death sentence. Ronnie went pale.

"She never took to Bynald's nationalism," said Welkin easily. "I took great pains to verify that. I think you'd better let her come to Earth with me."

German shook his head, refusing to argue.

"How did you come to pick a girl like Ronnie, anyway?" Welkin asked.

German shrugged. "We thought you'd talk more readily to a girl like her."

"Well—you were right. You're sending me away, then?"

"Probably—after you've both been questioned under drugs."

"I see." Welkin looked at German. He had no doubt at all that the man was speaking the truth. He wasn't bluffing and never had been.

"In that case," said Welkin, "I might as well talk now and save us all time. Am I addressing GS in person?"

German nodded, undisturbed. Welkin managed to catch Ronnie's eye, and tried to tell her in one glance to keep out of this—not to draw attention to herself by as much as a start or a quickly indrawn breath. She seemed to catch the message. She sat down quietly out of the way, so that German couldn't even watch her and Welkin at the same time.

"What I have to say is highly confidential," said Welkin. "Do you want these two to hear it?"

Without hesitation German nodded to the two guards and they went outside. That, at least, was interesting. Welkin knew that the guards would remain outside the door, and that his chances of escaping remained nil. But the fact that German had sent them away at all meant that they weren't in on the secret. Probably few people were.

"I've found out quite a lot about the Solomon plan," said Welkin. The reaction was very slight, but there definitely was a reaction. Welkin was pleased. If German was going to let him guess and see whether he had guessed right or not, he would have gained a definite advantage. Already he had established that there was something called the Solomon Plan.

Welkin didn't know the whole story, but neither did a fortune-teller when a client entered. Yet she was trained to make an initial good guess and go on guessing, shrewdly abandoning a false trial and following up anything which got a reaction, until she succeeded in convincing her client that she really had a clairvoyant source of information. Welkin was surprised that German let him get away with it. But then, German thought he had all the cards.

"Perhaps I should say the Solomon-Cedrica-Cleeholme plan," Welkin went on. "It's been operating for two hundred and fifty years, and I should say at a guess that it's got at least another two-fifty years to go." No reaction this time, yet even the absence of an emotional response was significant.

"It's a crazy plan, and it's not going to work," said Welkin. It was time to take the first plunge. "We guessed about the disappearances," he said slowly, "but we never knew about the army. We

thought people were simply eliminated, not saved up, put in the bank, so to speak."

Again no reaction. Nevertheless, Welkin could sense a hidden tension in the other and knew he'd guessed right—or nearly right.

"It was just the kind of thing Solomon would think of," Welkin said, hoping German couldn't see the sweat on his forehead and realize how hazy he really was about all this. "Anything to put Bynald on top—anything. I don't know what's been done all these years with the patriots, but I know they've been collected, banded together. What precisely *has* been done with them, GS?"

German returned Welkin's stare quite blankly, not even acknowledging that a question had been asked. But he was still listening.

And Welkin knew that if he didn't have everything, he had enough. He went on in a surge of confidence: "Is it some sort of suspended animation?" he asked. "Yes I'm sure it is . . . Cedrica's contribution, no doubt. George Solomon wanted Bynald to stay apparently poor, but actually get stronger year by year. So he formed the plan of stashing away about half of each generation, I don't pretend to know exactly how. Some of them are volunteers, I suppose, but if they're not volunteers they've got to go anyway, once they've been asked. These are the people, the chosen people who think as Solomon thought about Bynald—as you think, GS."

Ronnie was staring at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. But now GS had apparently forgotten about her completely. His face was very pale.

"The end of the plan, I guess, must be something like this," said Welkin. "In about two hundred and fifty years from now Bynald will wake up from its five-century long lethargy. Exports will rise, assets will be converted into cash and machinery. Thousands of young people will be sent to Earth and the other planets to attend colleges. They'll come back as trained, up-to-the-minute technicians, and they'll set about the business of turning Bynald into a slick, high-powered, efficient world. There'll probably be some law, or some excuse to keep foreigners out for a year or two. No such prohibition would hold up for long, but for a year or two . . .

"Then—" Welkin's voice had an edge of steel to it now. "You awaken, train and equip your army. Let's see—it could be anything from four billion strong to, say, ten billion. An army of ten billion. That could only be meant to take over the whole galaxy, eh, GS?"

German said nothing, but there was no longer a trace of color in his face.

"Obviously Solomon was a megalomaniac," Welkin said. "I don't know what measures he took to make sure that only other megalomaniacs should be chosen to play their part in this plot through the centuries. But obviously he managed it."

German's gun came up. It was all too apparent that he had no intention of arguing the matter. Welkin and Ronnie were marked for death unless—

"I wouldn't do it if I were you," said Welkin, without a tremor in his voice. "Suppose you listen to what I have to say first."



"Well?" said GS, his gun pointed straight at Welkin's heart.

"You've let yourself get behind technologically here in Bynald," said Welkin steadily. "So far behind that it probably never even occurred to you that everything that was said in this room was being picked up and recorded for delivery to Earth?"

GS tightened his lips. If Welkin was bluffing, he would merely be postponing his death by a few minutes. If he wasn't, neither GS nor Welkin himself mattered much any more.

"See these," said Welkin, fingering the buttons on his shirt. "I expect you had these buttons examined pretty closely. I noticed how thorough the customs inspection was. True, they're simple, ordinary plastic buttons, and if you cut them in half you'd still find nothing strange about them. But actually they resonate with sound vibrations, as almost everything does to some extent. This resonance is picked up by two short-wave beams that don't need wires to operate any more than a carrier beam does. At the other end of the beams, in two Terran Navy ships hovering just clear of Bynald's atmosphere, the resonance is recreated and blown up by the most powerful amplifier I ever saw. Every word I've spoken since I landed on this planet, every word spoken to me, has been noted and recorded."

"How do I know you aren't bluffing?" GS demanded sharply.

"Would you like some colored streamers in the sky? A bomb dropped on Solomon Park? Would it not be far better to make it a tender for Ronnie and me, landing in front of the Capitol in . . . say two hours' time?"

GS was staring at him.

"If I'm bluffing, I gain an hour or two—no more," said Welkin. "But you know I'm not bluffing, don't you, GS?"

Apparently German did. "Get out of those clothes," he said grimly. He turned to Ronnie, "You too. I'm taking no chances."

Welkin laughed. "Shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted only prevents him from getting back in," he observed.

"Quickly!" said German sharply. "Or I'll shoot you both here and now. Then there won't be anything else for those ships to overhear."

Trying hard to control her trembling Ronnie stood up straight, took a deep breath and started to unfasten her playsuit.

Welkin said: "Hold it, Ronnie. GS, show some

sense. If I'm lying, there's no point in destroying my clothes, as you seem determined to do. And if I'm not, it's too late. I've said enough already, and anything else that's said now will hardly be worth recording."

German made no reply. He simply swung about on his heels and passed from the room. The door slammed violently behind him.

Naturally Welkin tried the door, and naturally it was locked.

He looked back at Ronnie, who was slowly fastening her playsuit again, and realized that she'd *had* wanted to be searched, as most beautiful spies were at some time or other during their adventures.

But now she was staring at him in shuddering disbelief. "You mean all these people who ever disappeared are alive, and can be brought back!"

"It's the only explanation that makes sense. I wonder where they are? I suspect Solomon Park. I wondered when I saw it—why should George Solomon, of all people, build such a place? It had to be a cover for something else. If this other thing needs a lot of power, as it probably does, the drain from the atomic plant running the park could easily be camouflaged."

Ronnie moistened her lips. "Do you think GS will let us go?"

"I don't know," Welkin said. "We'll have to wait and see."

## VIII

THEY WAITED, BUT THERE wasn't much to see. Not until nearly two hours later, when GS came back.

"A small ship just landed in front of the Capitol," he said.

"So?"

"So you'd better get on it."

"And what are you going to do?"

GS hesitated. "You can tell Earth, Welkin," he said, "that it can't do a thing to us. The Solomon Plan is reversed, as of now. We've more than ten billion workers, you know—and that's a formidable *peacetime* army of industrial builders and planners. Would Earth want them to adopt a passive resistance attitude? Could Earth afford that?"

Welkin said, "So that's the way of it? That's your business, so long as the original Solomon Plan is buried. Earth will meet new problems as they arise. Come on, Ronnie."

"Ronnie isn't going," said GS softly.

"Then neither am I," said Welkin just as quietly.

"Don't be a fool, Welkin," said GS harshly. "She's our business. You know that."

"I can make things awkward for you—or easy. Which is it to be?"

GS hesitated again. "I haven't the power to let her go," he said.

"But you want me to go, isn't that so? So I'm staying."

Welkin let the deadlock hang for a few moments. He himself was in a strong enough position. He was pretty sure now that GS had been told, or rather, *instructed* to let him go.

"I have a suggestion to make," said Welkin at last. "Let us get to the tender. Then fire a shot at

Ronnie and miss. That should clear you personally."

GS remained silent, but his expression was revealing.

"Another thing. There's a book at my lodgings I'd like to take back with me."

"All your things are at the tender already. Including your French horn."

The last was said with a touch of viciousness, the only time German had allowed the slightest hint of his own feelings toward Welkin to escape him.

"Thanks, GS," said Welkin cordially. "That's very kind of you. Let's go."

They walked through the Administration Building, which was silent and empty, but with most of its lights blazing.

They marched out at the front of the Capitol. Again Ronnie shivered as she stepped out into the below-freezing chill of Scio at night. The tender was about two hundred yards away, a miniature spaceship, sleek, gleaming and terribly efficient-looking.

Welkin wondered if the Bynald Navy had any ideas about following the tender and trying to destroy the two ships in the hope that that would prevent the secret of Bynald reaching Earth. If that was so, they'd be wasting their time. For one thing, even this tender, let alone the parent ship, could laugh at anything the Bynald Navy could bring up. For another, one of the two ships must be billions of miles on its way to Earth already.

As they approached the tender Welkin saw his things being handed to a naval officer who looked very doubtful about whether he should accept them or not. However, when he looked up and actually saw Welkin coming his face cleared and he took them.

Welkin hung back to let Ronnie go first. They were almost at the ship. Ronnie could have stretched out her arms and touched the hull.

Unfortunately it was GS whom Welkin was watching principally. GS did nothing. It was one of the guards—Welkin never learned whether he was acting under orders or not—who raised his gun suddenly and took careful, deliberate aim.

The instant before the shot rang out, Welkin dragged on Ronnie's arm as if he were trying to wrench it off, and she lurched toward him. Nevertheless, the shot didn't miss her. She dropped in the snow with a small red hole in her back.

Welkin didn't stop to argue. He swept her up in his arms and got her inside the lock, remembering that there was always a doctor on a tender by regulation.

"Get off, quick," he shouted, and looked for the tender's doctor, still holding Ronnie tightly in his arms. She stirred and moaned a little, then went completely limp.

A tall, grave bearded man came forward and led the way to a tiny cabin. Welkin eased Ronnie gently to the bunk, and stood for a moment staring down at her, too shaken to speak.

Welkin saw that the bullet hole was just below the tip of the right shoulder-blade. Through the lung certainly, if not through the heart—it depended on the angle.

"You'd better leave us now," said the doctor.

A moment later Lester was shaking his hand. "Well, you made it, Adrian. Did ever you hear anything so crazy? *Would* they have got away with it?"

"They might have," said Welkin. "It would have depended on our espionage department two hundred and fifty years from now. It *should* have been able to find out in time."

He found talking difficult, wanted to tell Lester to go to hell.

"I must say," said Lester, half protestingly, "that you took rather a lot on yourself when you insisted on that girl's coming with you. You'd better play that down a bit in your report, Adrian. After all—"

His face sobered, became completely earnest. "You did it anyway, Adrian. You'll get a citation. Queer lot, these Bynaldians. Is that GS character crazy?"

"Only in one way," said Welkin. He was managing not to look at the door of the tiny cabin he had left. But he couldn't keep from listening for the slightest sound in the stillness.

"Funny business altogether," said Lester, who was a good naval officer but not gifted with much imagination. "Hard to believe some of it. In fact I'm not sure I believe it even now."

"We'll leave that to Security," said Welkin. It was just as well, he thought, that people like Lester weren't given the task of deciding whether to take notice of things or not. The only menace Lester would recognize was a visible, three-dimensional, present-time one.

The tender shot faster and faster toward its parent ship. It hadn't needed anything like two hours to reach the Bynald Capitol. Welkin had given GS that much warning notice solely to enable him to get in touch with his superiors. Twenty minutes would have been enough.

The tender was swallowed neatly by the battleship it had come from, and immediately thereafter

the battleship was piling on acceleration for Earth. Still the door of the little cabin in the scout hadn't opened, though presumably the doctor knew they were aboard the naval ship.

Welkin had to make his report to Fenworth as soon as possible, and change his clothes before he could go back to the tender, resting in the middle of the large, otherwise empty hold.

At last the doctor emerged.

"Will she live?" Welkin asked anxiously.

"Oh, I shouldn't be surprised," said the doctor, brushing lint from his sleeve. "It would have saved me a lot of trouble, though, if you'd managed to stop them firing that shot. I've had the devil of a job."

"Can I see her?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

Welkin went into the cabin quietly. Ronnie looked ghastly. If Welkin had seen her looking like that a few moments earlier, he'd have been sure she was dying. But he knew the doctor's "shouldn't be surprised" meant that he'd be very surprised indeed if Ronnie did die.

"Next stop Earth," he said gently.

She looked up at him, her lips moving soundlessly. Finally she managed to say: "What's it like, Adrian? What's going to happen to me there? What will they—"

"Don't talk," he said, smoothing her hair, "or you won't get there at all. And don't worry. We'll find something for you on Earth. As a matter of fact, I can promise you a good job right now. An interesting, exciting, romantic job."

For a moment Ronnie's eyes brightened. She seemed almost to smile. "What is it? Tell me."

"I can get you a job as a spy," Welkin said.

Her expression showed what she thought of the idea. "No, thanks," she said and her voice, despite its tremulousness, seemed somehow very firm.