

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the wrong track

by . . . *George Whitley*

It's unwise to board a train in a too fanciful mood. The *Drings* may be waiting for you—quite horribly on another time track!

MIND YOU, I don't claim to be equipped with a built-in magnetic compass or directional gyroscope, but I do have a good sense of direction. Most sailors have. It's a sixth sense of sorts, and a very useful one at that. It's the ability to steer a reasonably direct course back to ship after a night ashore in a strange port. A sort of homing instinct.

It is very rarely that mine lets me down. It did once, badly. Or did it? I'm still far from convinced. There's something odd about that stretch of line—so much so that if I ever use it again it will be after taking out a really heavy life insurance and after having filled my pockets with my Colt thirty-eight, my Mauser nine millimetre, and an ample supply of ammunition for each.

Meanwhile, Margaret and I return from Chancery Lane by Central Line, catching a Hounslow bound trolley at Shepherd's Bush . . .

The day it happened we had attended the Thursday night session at the White Horse, the

Both as a writer and a British seafaring man George Whitley has acquired a mellow liking for strange ports of call, and characters who never seem able to steer a straight course back to their ships. If their zigzagging takes them into other dimensions of space and time his delight knows no bounds, and his imagination soars—as it has in this memorable story.

London pub which is the regular meeting place for everybody in any way connected with fantasy or science fiction. We—Margaret and I, that is—didn't feel like drinking.

We had dinner with Arthur Clarke—and he's a teetotaller—in the small restaurant across the way from the White Horse and, after returning to the pub, refused to let ourselves become involved in a beer-and-bawdy-song session with Bertram Chandler and Peter Phillips.

We wanted to leave early as we wished to get up early the following morning. So, after having one glass of port each, we left the White Horse early and sober.

It was a fine night, crisp and with a touch of frost in the air. The full moon lent a spurious glamour to the ugly, red-brick offices of the Prudential Insurance Company, and my wife and I quite enjoyed the short walk from Fetter Lane to the Chancery Lane subway station. There we had only a minute to wait for a train.

We changed at Holborn, from the Central Line to the West-bound Piccadilly Line. When, after having negotiated the various escalators and tunnels, we walked on to the platform, I looked at the indicator board. The next train, I saw, was going to be Hounslow and not, as so often is the case, Uxbridge or Rayner's Lane.

"Not long to wait," I said. Then, seeing that Margaret was

wandering off to the right, I asked, "Where do you think you're going?"

"We want the *front* of the train," she explained patiently. "Saves a long walk at Hounslow Central."

"I know. But the way you're going you'll be right for the *rear* of the train."

"No. The front," she said firmly, "is *this* direction."

"The rear. *This* way for the front." I took her arm, pulled her toward the opposite direction along the platform. "You know, it always seems to me that the train comes into this station the wrong way—east-bound instead of west-bound. I have to force myself to go to the right end of the platform. But I didn't know that anybody else ever had the same feeling."

"I always have it," she said.

"I'm relieved to hear it. It was beginning to get me more than a little worried. Every time I come home this way the train, for me, seems headed in the wrong direction. Then, usually one or two stations either before or after Hammersmith, there's a sort of . . . well, shift . . . and everything's all right."

"It's the same with me," she admitted.

"Have you ever tried to force the change?" I asked.

"Yes. But it doesn't work. And then, suddenly, when I'm not thinking about it, I realize that

the train is traveling the right way."

"It could be," I said, "like that diagram that's used to show you if you're an introvert or an extravert. You know, the drawing of a skeleton cube which when you first look at it it seems to be a certain way, then there's a sudden shift of perspective and you're looking at it from an entirely different angle. For fun, to amuse ourselves on this trip, let's try to *will* the change, and see which one of us gets it first."

Before she could reply, there was a blast of air and the train came in to the station. The sliding doors opened. After disembarking passengers were out Margaret and I boarded the front coach, which was only half full, took our seats. The doors sighed shut, the lights flickered, the train got under way.

"It's *wrong*," said my wife softly. "I have the definite feeling we're headed in the wrong direction. Why does such a feeling persist?"

"Wish I knew. I've thought of Klein flasks and Moebius strips . . ."

"What *would* happen," she asked, if a Moebius strip got built into a railway?"

The train stopped.

"Covent Garden," she said. "And still the wrong way."

"It's much too early for the change-over," I said.

A few passengers drifted out,

a few drifted in. It was too early for the after-theatre traffic. The train started again.

"Are you concentrating?" asked Margaret.

"Yes. That Phillips' Rubber Soles ad always annoys me. That lush blonde is supposed to be tuning in a station on her TV, yet she's grinning into the camera or at the artist and she ought to be looking at the controls . . ."

"Never mind Rubber Soles and blondes. Concentrate!"

"All right. All right," I said.

"Leicester Square," she said.

The train stopped and, after the usual brief pause, started. We concentrated.

"Piccadilly Circus," said Margaret. "Still the wrong way. And you?"

"Still the wrong way."

Next time, I thought, I must bring a pocket compass. Would it work? Too much steel? All sorts of electro-magnetic fields? I tried to visualize the little instrument, the swinging, trembling needle. But I had already visualized the disadvantages attending its use all too well.

As, in my mind's eye, I tried to turn the case so that the North of the azimuth ring coincided with the North-seeking end of the needle, the needle pivoted too. It was like one of those nightmares in which you desperately strive to do something that stubbornly refuses to be done . . .

"Wake up," said Margaret.

"I *am* awake," I assured her.

"You had your eyes shut."

"So what? I was concentrating, and now you've broken the spell." The train stopped again. "Green Park."

"Any moment now," she said.

"I'm afraid I can't agree. Hammersmith at the earliest."

"No. Any time now."

Once again I shut my eyes and visualized a compass. Not a pocket compass this time, but a full-size master gyro-compass. The noise of the train's passage became the whine of the motor generator, the clicking hunt and the ticking of the follow-up system. I saw, as clearly as though I had the instrument before me, the polished metal of the card, the divisions that were degrees of arc, dull black casing and shining working parts.

I could smell hot oil and hot metal. I imagined that I opened the inspection doors, checked the oil level in the bearing casings, looked at the spirit level. I could almost feel the warm, knurled metal at my fingers as I started to make the necessary adjustments for speed and latitude.

And Margaret's hand, which was lying loosely in mine, clenched suddenly, her fingernails bruising my palm.

"The *right* way!" I heard her gasp. "We've turned to the right way!"

"The right way," I agreed. The lubber's line of my imaginary

compass stayed steady on 270°.

There had been, I was surprised to note, almost a shock, a feeling almost of nausea, when the change-over took place. It must have been our concentrating that did it, I told myself. It would be, I thought and said, a nice idea for a story. "What would you advise," I asked my wife, "Past, Future, or Parallel Time?"

"Knowing you," she said unkindly, "my guess is you'll work a switch to either the Martian Mail or the Lunar Ferry—unless you're in one of your bow and arrow moods, in which case you'll convert this carriage into a Viking long ship."

I laughed, feeling strangely exhilarated. "But here's an idea—suppose the Tories *had* got back in office in the first post-war election . . . The odds are that if that had happened we now would be living in a Communist state . . ."

"What's that got . . ."

"Yes, that's the way I'll do it . . . A Communist state, all very 1984. Now, concentrate again . . ."

A chill settled over the coach.

I knew vaguely that the seat on the other side of me from Margaret was now occupied. I glanced furtively at the little man who sat there—an inoffensive looking citizen he was, shabbily dressed and with his nose buried in a newspaper. I glanced at the paper as one does, saw that its title was *Der Anglischer Zeitung*. That in itself was not surprising; you can

buy all manner of foreign language papers in London.

I allowed my eyes to stray from the newspaper to the advertisements on the opposite side of the carriage. Phillip's stupid blonde was no longer there to annoy me, and the Mona Lisaish model employed by Kent Hair Brushes was not there, either. But there was one poster from which a once familiar face stared at me—black cow-lick and black toothbrush moustache. The face was surrounded by much heavy, Gothic printing, and many swastikas. I stared at it blankly, feeling vaguely surprised.

Then I began to look at the people around us. Sitting across the aisle was an officer wearing a smart, black uniform, buttoned high to the throat. His cap was the sort of cap worn by chauffeurs of the very rich, the sort of cap that the average junior officer in the average passenger liner tries to make for himself by binding and distortion of the regulation article.

He didn't like us, this officer. The frozen glare that he was directing at us through his monocle would have been lethal could he have made it so. A hot resentment flooded through me. What right had this dressed-up foreigner to frown so at an Englishman and his wife discussing politics aboard a train in their own city?

But was it our own city any longer? There was the foreign newspaper, and there were the

strange advertisements on the walls of the carriage . . .

"Dunkirk," I whispered. "Or the Battle of Britain . . . If we had lost there . . ."

Margaret clutched my hand painfully. "We have to get back!" she said urgently. "The children will be frantic."

I looked at her. Her hair and her lips were startlingly vivid against the pallor of her face.

The officer across the aisle barked something in an ugly, guttural voice. A man got up from his seat, made his way slowly towards us. He was undersized, ferretty, and his black leather jacket had been made for a bigger man. He held his left arm so that we could see the black swastika on the white brassard. His right hand was in his pocket.

He snarled, "Dirty Reds! Yer under arrest!"

"Do something!" whispered Margaret.

"Where's yer papers?" His right hand was out of his pocket now. It held an automatic pistol. He held it with the easy assurance of one to whom such weapons are mere working tools.

I shut my eyes, tried hard to visualize that gyro-compass again—the instrument that had got us into this trouble. Faintly, as from a great distance, I heard Margaret stalling, playing for time; heard her say in a placating voice, "We left them at home . . ."

The click that the pistol made

as it was cocked merged with the clicking hunt, the normal train noises merged, and once again the familiar machine was before me, almost tangible. Yes, it was easy to visualize the thing, but it wasn't easy to visualize it on the heading I wanted. *Let me get it back to 090°*, I prayed, *back to East, and we shall be back in our own world* . . . The lubber's line crept around the card, and steadied on 180° . . .

II

Once again came the change.

Once again came the twisting, the gut-wrenching sensation. Once again we opened our eyes and saw that we had a change of fellow passengers. And, although it took us some time to realize it, this time the change was evident to more senses than sight.

It took us, as I have said, some little time to make the discovery. At first we lay back in our seats, recovering from the fright we had suffered, blandly assuming that all was now well and that we were back in our own World, our present Time.

We opened our eyes sufficiently long to assure ourselves that neither the black-uniformed officer nor the man with the swastika brassard and the pistol were among those present. And, as far as I was concerned, the first attempt at rationalization of it all were already being made. I had slept. I had dreamed. And I had been the victim of a particularly

striking and plausible nightmare. And yet . . .

Get this straight, before I go any further. I like garlic. I like garlic used with discretion, and I like it when I'm eating it myself. But I don't like it when I haven't been eating it myself and everybody else has. Similarly, I don't mind Caporal cigarettes when I'm smoking them myself. But the smell in the carriage—composed, I should say, of one part Caporal cigarette smoke to two parts of garlic—was too much of a bad mixture. The motion of the coach was wrong, too. It was swaying more than it should have done. The rattle of steel wheels on steel seemed to come from overhead rather than from below.

I opened my eyes, looked cautiously around. As before—and it was not until later that we discovered what may be an explanation—nobody seemed to have noticed our arrival. They were a queer lot, our new fellow travellers, and . . . well, foreign. Not foreign as the Nazi officer had been, but with a foreignness that was, somehow, of Time as well as of Space, that called to mind old pictures of Leftish intellectuals and honest proletarians manning the barricades during the days of the Paris Commune.

Almost all of the men passengers were bearded, some with neat imperials, some with growths that were more luxuriant than tidy. Some wore black jackets and

checked trousers, some brown velveteen, some were in working rig of blue denim. The dress of the women was not so outlandish, would have drawn scarcely a second look in any big city. There was something of Second Empire about them, something of New Look, and it made Margaret's tailored tweed costume look harsh and ungraceful by comparison.

I turned to her and said, "We shall have to try again, my dear. Something's gone wrong."

"Wait a little," she said. "I can't stand another Time shift just now. There's no immediate danger here—wherever 'here' is."

We lit cigarettes, listened to the conversation around us. It was in French, but spoken far too fast for us to understand. We looked at the chart of stations, saw that it was almost the same as the one in the train in which we had started our journey. Almost the same, but now Acton Town was called Actonville, and the line made its way to Piccadilly by way of Charing Cross and Place de Trafalgar.

"And that's wrong," I said to Margaret. "Trafalgar Square. It can't be. We're not going in that direction . . ."

"It is," she said. "Look . . ."

The train had stopped. We saw, across the platform, another city-bound train. This was, as I had already suspected, a mono-rail system with the coaches suspended from the overhead track. I was

pointing this out to Margaret when a girl came in.

There was something familiar about her. She was small, dark, attractive. The feeling of recognition was like the haunting memory of a dream.

She looked at me, and her face lit up. She came straight to us, burst into a torrent of rapid French. All I could do was to shake my head and smile. Her face fell. She said in slow, precise English:

"I am sorry. I thought that you were a very dear friend of mine. But he is in Paris, on business." She sat beside me, carefully arranging her dress as she did so. She smiled again. "You are his double. He, like you, wears American clothes. You are American, of course."

I felt a spasm of foolish annoyance at having my Regent Street corduroys and tweed jacket described as American. Then saw the funny side of it. Besides, if Margaret and I could pass ourselves off as newly arrived tourists from across the Atlantic we should be able to learn a great deal more. But, first of all, there was an interesting point to be dealt with . . .

"This double of mine," I said to her. "We may run across him in Paris. What is his name?"

"Dunstan," she said. "Andre Dunstan. He has gone to attend the—the . . . how do you say it? . . . *Le Congress Astronautique Internationale*. You know, these

people who would fly us to the Moon in their foolish rockets. He is a friend of Monsieur Leclerc, President of the society that interests itself in these matters."

"Monsieur Leclerc," said Margaret slowly to me. And to the girl, "It is rather strange. We have a friend at home whose name is Clarke. And he, too, is a big noise in rocketry."

"I wonder if he, too, has a double," laughed the girl.

I thought it was time to change the subject and, at the same time, deal with another interesting point.

"We're strangers here," I said, "as you've already guessed. We're interested in your city. Tell me—what is there for tourists to see in Trafalgar Square?"

"You must see it!" she said. "The gardens, the fountains, the great statue of the Admiral with Neptune and the sea nymphs . . ."

"The Admiral?" I asked, looking as puzzled as I felt.

"Why, yes. The great Villeneuve."

"Somebody," I said to Margaret, "seems to have had his career ruined by redheads. Or, perhaps, one of his earlier wounds or illnesses was fatal . . ."

The girl said nothing, patiently waited until we had finished our private conversation. She was, I could see, a little hurt by our bad manners.

"Then," she went on, "you must visit the tomb of Robert Fulton . . ."

Fulton . . . The name had a familiar ring to it. Then I remembered that Robert Fulton was an American engineer in Napoleonic times, that his name was associated with early steamships and primitive submarines. And there was a story that I had heard or read somewhere, to the effect that he had offered his services to the Emperor but had met with a rebuff. Steamships and submarines at Trafalgar, and wearing the Tricolour . . . *That* would account for a lot of things.

Unconsciously I raised my hand—it is a characteristic gesture, they tell me—to stroke the beard that I no longer wear. The cuffs of shirt and jacket fell back from my wrists, revealing the dark birthmark with its unmistakable appearance, the similitude of a cat's head in profile.

The innocent, thoughtless action provoked a volley of rapid fire French from the little brunette. It was too fast for me to get it all, but I got enough to make me feel acutely uncomfortable. The gist of it was that I was her André, after all, that I had not gone to Paris to *le Congress Astronautique Internationale* but had remained in London to have an *affaire* with this lady dog of an American tourist woman.

"It is time," I said to Margaret, "that we weren't here."

I grabbed her hand tightly in mine, shut my eyes and thought hard, visualized the humming,

clicking compass, willed myself to see the lubber's line steady on 090°. I could see the machine plainly, in every detail, but the gyroscope was tilting, precessing, swinging wildly away from the true meridian. But the wrench came—the wrench, the feeling of nausea, of being turned inside out. I opened my eyes . . .

III

The French-speaking girl was gone. The car in which we rode was no longer the monorail coach, neither was it occupied either by Nazis or the men and women of our own World and Time. It ran, by the feel of it, on a double track, on wheels that were nearer square than round. The other people in the carriage—it was about half full—were all dressed alike, men and women, in drab, grey overalls. They stared at us, through us, with dull dead eyes.

The carriage was dirty and smelled of dry rot. The seats were hard wooden benches. Light was supplied by flickering oil lamps, the flames of which were dimly visible through sooted-over chimneys. The air was cold and damp.

"What have you done now?" demanded Margaret. "*What have you done?*"

I was asking myself the same question. I was telling myself that I had fled from what would have been no more than a temporary embarrassment, to a place of very real peril. I didn't know what

the peril was, but I could feel it.

I tried to get us out of this extremely unpleasant situation by visualizing, yet again, the gyro-compass. But my thoughts were like feeble fish swimming weakly in some thick, gelid fluid. I couldn't concentrate!

We looked out through the window. There were no street lights, no house lights of suburbia, no illuminated clock towers of the factories along the Great West Road. Instead we saw fires. We saw dark, hulking masses like truncated pyramids and, belching from the tops of them, ruddy flames and billowing, black smoke. We saw a column of fire springing, apparently, from ground level, that must have been all of a thousand feet high. We saw what could have been rivers of flowing flame, and low clouds that glowed crimson.

I tore my eyes from the lurid landscape outside, stared at the chart of stations on the wall of our car, tried to gain from it some idea of our whereabouts both in Space and in the alternative Time.

The chart was not helpful. It was no more than a black line with circles marking the stations. And the stations had no names, merely letters and numbers. As I looked, the train stopped at C14. A few of the grey people got up, moved like automatons to the door which, I noticed, they had to open themselves.

After they got out six men and

three women entered. They could have been twins of those who had gone. With a jerk the train started again.

Margaret grasped my hand tightly. I felt better then, and it wasn't entirely due to the very real comfort I drew from her company. It was as though some of the weight on my mind had been lifted, some alien element of compulsion partially removed.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"I don't know. But it's a dangerous place—more dangerous than the others. I can feel it. It's like a weight, pressing . . ."

"Can't you get us out? Try, my dear—try!"

I tried. It was useless.

"I'll ask somebody where we are," said my wife suddenly. "It will do no harm . . ." But her voice held undertones of doubt. She turned to the drab, grey man who sat, staring vacantly at nothing, two places away from me. "Excuse me," she said. "We're strangers here. How far does this train go?"

There was no reply. He continued to stare ahead of him.

With my free hand I reached out and shook the man. "Where are we?" I asked. "Where is this train going?"

I had to shake him again before I got a reply. And when he spoke his voice was as dreary and characterless as his appearance. He said, "They will not approve. They say that we are not to waste our

strength in foolish conversation."

"Who the hell are *they*?"

"They want to know who you are," he said, after a long pause.

"We're strangers here," I shouted. "From another Time."

"They will take the necessary action," he said.

It came to me, quite suddenly, that I didn't want to meet *them*!

I turned to stare out of the window, saw something large and lenticulate gleaming metallicly in the glare of the fires, pale lights showing from the ports along its rim, drifting slowly down from the overcast. The sight of it frightened me more than anything else had done, gave me some inkling as to who *they* might be. To hide my fear I said foolishly to the little grey man, "And you'd better tell *them* that they have saucers at the bottom of their garden."

He made no attempt to acknowledge the insanity. He said tonelessly, "They will be waiting for you at D3."

We looked at the chart. D3 was the end of the line. There were three more stops before we got there.

"Do try again!" Margaret was saying. "This is the worst of all! *They* aren't human! I know it! If they get us—there'll be no going back."

I looked at her. Even in her fear she was vivid and lovely. I thought of her looking like one of the drab, grey women in the coach, and I hated the thought. I caught

both her hands in mine, felt—of this I am sure—power flow from her to me. I concentrated hard on the mental technique that had been getting us into and out of trouble ever since we had left the White Horse pub. Or, to be more exact, I *tried* to concentrate. It was impossible. Compellingly, monotonously, the words—*We will meet you at D3*—kept running through my brain to the exclusion of all else.

"I can't!" I gasped. "Some sort of hypnotic control has a grip on my mind."

The train shuddered to a halt.

"Quick!" cried Margaret. "Out here!"

"But . . ."

"Do you want to meet *them*?"

"No . . ."

"Then out!"

"All right, darling."

Nobody tried to stop us. The grey people just sat there, staring listlessly at the dirty floor of the carriage.

The door was stiff. As I wrestled with it I felt a nightmare panic. It came open at last with a squeal of ungreased hinges. Margaret and I stumbled out on to the platform just in time. We didn't bother to shut the door after us. We saw the locomotive, before it pulled out of sight around the bend, saw that it was steam powered, an ugly little runt of a thing with an almost spherical boiler and a long, crazily tilted smokestack. The train left a wake

of ruddy sparks and sulphurous smoke, of gritty cinders.

IV

After it had gone we looked around us. We were standing on a wooden platform, the planks uneven and littered with dark mounds of rubbish. The only light was from glimmering, widely-spaced oil lamps. There was a persistent, bitter wind driving before it a persistent, cold rain. The glare of the fires reflected from the low clouds waxed and waned, alternated between a ruddy glow and an evil red-tinged darkness.

The voice in my mind reiterated the words: *We will meet you at D3*. But now it was just a faint murmur. I felt cold and frightened . . .

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"We take the next train back to town," she said. "Away from *them*. And we concentrate hard on returning to our own World, our own Time. And if we don't manage it—well, we stand a better chance of hiding out in a city than here."

"Hide out where?"

"There's bound to be an underground. The entire population of London can't be like those zombies on the train."

"How do we find the underground?"

"Dammit!" she exploded. "You *write* this kind of stuff! But you don't seem able to cope with it in real life!"

I managed a grin that probably looked as sickly as it felt.

"When I write it," I said, "I have complete control over the situation. Besides—when things get out of hand I can always kill off all the characters . . ."

I was sorry immediately that I'd said it. It wasn't very funny, now. I caught her to me and held her tightly. "All right," I said. "We'll manage. Somehow. After all—they can't shoot us."

"Can't they?" she asked.

I looked at her, saw in the dim flickering light that she was trying to grin. "Won't, then," I said. "Not if we can help it."

"That's better," she said.

We started to walk slowly along the platform, away from the lights, away from the little shed that might have been a booking office, that might have been, that might have housed—anything.

Suddenly, ahead of us I saw what at first I took for two glowing coals on the platform. We stopped abruptly. At that moment the reflected glare from the sky brightened suddenly and I saw that the two glowing coals were the eyes of some creature. It was black, shapeless, and seemed to have too many legs. There was a familiar animal there, too, a cat. The cat was dead. The alien thing was feeding noisily on the cat's body.

I like cats. It was a silly thing to do, I know, but I lifted my foot, brought it down hard on the elongated head of the strange

beast. I felt something give and crack. The screaming started then, a thin, high screech of pain and hate. The thing reared up until it stood all of five feet tall, and started for me. Ruddy light gleamed from its teeth and claws.

I didn't want to touch it with my bare hands even in self defense. I kicked out, desperately, frantically. My shoe grated on something hard, yet brittle. The screaming rose in intensity. I kicked again, this time with more judgment and less panic. The thing, for all its size, was amazingly light. It rose from the platform like a filthy rag blown by the wind, fell with a clatter of scales off the platform.

"Take this," Margaret was saying. "Take this."

She thrust a piece of wood into my hands—it had been pulled, she told me later, from the light, rickety fence at the end of the platform. I took it, jumped down onto the tracks. When I had finished using it the wood was splintered and dripping with a dark, sour-smelling fluid and the thin screaming sound had stopped.

"Is it—was it one of *them*?" asked Margaret.

"I don't think so. People who can build flying saucers aren't likely to be eating raw cats off dirty station platforms. One of *their* pets, perhaps."

"How do you know?"

"It was not a thing of this

world," I said slowly. "Of that I am certain."

"Here comes out train," she said, pointing to the locomotive slowly approaching under a cloud of steam and smoke and sparks. It rattled into the station slowly—too slowly, for I had seen movement under the dim light over the station entrance.

Then six men, walking in single file, trooped onto the platform. Only they weren't really men. Men don't normally walk with the jerkiness of a poorly manipulated marionette. Men don't have almost globular bodies, and they don't have more than four limbs. Men have necks, and these things had no necks. Their heads were hemispheres set on top of the spheres that were their bodies.

They did not seem to have seen us—yet. A cloud of smoke and steam from the ugly little engine blew across the platform and hid them from our view—and we from theirs.

We lost no time in climbing into the first carriage. It was empty. We sat on a hard, wooden bench near the door, ready for a fast getaway on the side away from the platform if necessary. But the train started after a succession of violent jerks that almost threw us to the floor of the coach.

We had the vehicle to ourselves, felt that it was safe to talk now.

"The other worlds made sense, of a sort," said Margaret, as soon as we were under way. "But this

one . . . How did it happen? How did it ever happen?"

"I can't do any better than guess," I said, "and my guess, for what it's worth, is this: Some time in the past—in Victorian days, perhaps—there was an invasion from Space. A successful one. In the other Worlds—in our World—it never happened. Some little thing intervened; we shall never know what it was. But it *might* have been something like this—just suppose that the crew of *Mary Celeste* were captured by a flying saucer. In *our* World one of them carried some sort of disease that wiped out the aliens or persuaded them that Earth was not a safe planet on which to make a landing . . .

"In *this* World that particular disease, or that particular carrier of the disease, was absent, and the aliens had all their specimens for leisurely study, for use as guinea pigs for testing weapons and techniques, before their invasion. They invaded. They conquered. And they have their supply as slave labor for whatever it is they are doing."

"But where are they from?"

"We shall find out," I said, "when we get to D3. We must get out at the next station. We must go back."

"Andrew!" she almost screamed. "What are you saying? What are you saying?"

I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts from it that were

drifting in from outside. Icy fear contracted the muscles of my stomach.

"It wasn't I who said that," I muttered. "It was *they*. They know that we've got away, that we're wandering around loose. And they are on the look-out for us now, and all the—the slaves . . . There's a mind back there, a big, powerful mind and—and stupid. As stupid as those beings we saw back on the station. But keep hold of me. You're immune, somehow. As long as we keep physical contact I share your immunity."

"How do you know all this? Are you making it up?"

"I wish I were. But when it almost had me just now—that mind, or *their* mind was in mine . . . I don't know how else to explain it . . ."

"I felt something too," she said slowly. "No, not this group mind that you sense. But something human. Somebody is looking for us. Somebody human wants us as badly as *they* do."

"Your underground movement, maybe?" I suggested.

Before she could reply the train stopped at a poorly lit station.

The door of our car opened suddenly, admitting three men and two women. They were pale and thin and the drab grey coveralls they wore were torn and patched. Each of them had red hair. And their eyes were alive. They were the first real humans we had seen in this world.

"Here they are!" said the leader, a tall man whose hair and beard were in startling contrast to the pallor of his face, whose long, sharp nose jutted out like the beak of a bird. "A male and a female in strange clothing. *She* could be one of us."

"The platform's clear," said one of the girls.

There was something about her voice that was familiar. I looked at her closely. She could have been Margaret's twin—a twin who had suffered from years of mal-nutrition and rough treatment.

"Good!" said the leader. "Gather around, hide them in case anybody comes along before we start."

"There's a couple of slaves coming," said the girl.

Knives flashed into sight. The tall leader drew a weapon that looked like one of the old muzzle-loading, single-shot pistols.

"They went into the next coach."

"Who are you?" I asked.

The leader grinned, showing uneven, discolored teeth.

"We could ask the same," he said. "When the time is more suitable we shall ask. But first of all, your clothes." Two of his followers produced grey bundles. "Get into these."

V

It was no time for either modesty or squeamishness. It was obvious that the coveralls—

skimpy, ill-made boiler suits they were—would not go on over our outer clothing and so, while the train rattled and groaned over the uneven track, we stripped to our underthings, paled on the dirty garments. The touch of them was harsh to the skin; harsh and greasy with the muck and perspiration of months of wear.

One of the red-haired strangers produced a sack made of the same coarse material as his clothing. Into it went my jacket, my trousers and Margaret's clothing. Reluctantly I removed my necktie, dropped it into the bag after the other clothes.

Margaret, flushed with embarrassment, was standing next to her "twin." Now that there was no great difference in dress, their resemblance was even more striking. One of the two women was better fed than the other, cleaner, and healthier. One wore rings on her reasonably well-kept hands. The hands of the other were dirty and scarred.

"Sit down," ordered the tall man. "We have time to talk—unless the slaves or members come in. Where are you from?"

"I thought Peter was to carry out the interrogation," said one of the others in a surly voice.

"That's as may be, but I'm in charge now . . . Where do you come from?" he said to me.

I hesitated. For all we knew to the contrary we might have escaped from the fryingpan only

to fall into the fire. And yet, these people, for all their rough appearance, seemed to be free men and women. Mentally free, at least. I decided to talk.

I said, "We come from a parallel Time track."

A claim to Alpha Centaurian citizenship would have been received with rather more credulity. There was a long silence, broken at last by one of the men, who growled, "I don't believe it. I say they're the result of some damned new experiment in breeding. We know that the Dring has taken thousands of men and women to its own cursed planet."

"Even so," said the tall man, "they're on the run. Our watchers have picked up the Dring orders; that's why we got here first. They're on the run, so they're not friends of the Dring."

"That's what the Dring *wants* us to think. It's a trap."

"No. I don't think so. The Dring is as stupid as any of its members. It uses force, but never guile."

"I've heard of traitors," said the shorter of the two women. "People like ourselves who aren't under Dring control. Yet who've sold out to the Dring for little extra comforts. There was Carter . . ."

"Ay," agreed the leader slowly, "there was Carter . . ."

"And Carter led a band of members and slaves to our dynamite factory . . ."

"And we caught Carter!" snarled one of the men. He had his knife out, was testing its edge on his thumb in a suggestive manner.

"Our orders," said the tall man, "are to take them to Peter. All the same, if there's any show of treachery . . ."

"But we *do* come from another World!" I said desperately. "Not another World exactly, but this World as it would have been—might have been—had there never been a Dring invasion. This is the third World we have visited tonight. In one of the others we heard of, but did not meet, my twin. No, not twin—myself."

"Where is your proof?" sneered the leader.

"Here. Look at the resemblance between my wife and—and . . ." I pointed to the woman who was my wife's double.

"Margaret," said the tall red-haired woman, "is my name."

"Yes, even the same name! And the surname is, unless you are married . . ."

"I *was* married," said the woman.

"The surname was Rutherford. Am I right? And one more thing—you have a mole on the inside of your left thigh."

"He's right!" said the woman, the Margaret of this World. "But where is *your* counterpart?"

"I don't know. But I can guess. Either he never existed or he's dead, or he's a slave. One thing

I've noticed since we got here—Margaret's immune to the long-range hypnosis of the Dring. I'm not, although the thing seems to have stopped trying to order me around now. Margaret has red hair. I haven't. She's immune. I'm not. Am I right in supposing that all red-haired people are immune to their remote control?"

"Some," said the leader. "Some, not all. Not enough of us to stage a full-scale revolt. But enough of us to cause the Dring some uneasiness. The Dring, in their ether-ships, rule the air. The Dring have numbers and weapons. We have neither—just the poor firearms with which our grandfathers fought, the even poorer ones that we have been able to make for ourselves . . ."

He pulled his muzzle loading pistol out of his pocket and looked at it ruefully. "This," he said, "against guns that shoot thunderbolts!"

"But what can you do?" asked Margaret.

"A little," said the tall man softly. "Only a little. Now that we have lost our dynamite factory there is not much that we can do. We find it hard enough even to make black powder. Our only hope is to strike at the Dring itself, at the *mind* of the hive. But how?"

"John!" warned the small woman sharply. "You are talking too much!"

"I don't think they're spies,

Elsa. I've been probing their minds, and I've had glimpses of the strange World they come from. They live in London, like we do, and their house is not a dirty burrow in the ruins but stands in the air and the sunlight . . . ”

“It will do her good,” snapped Margaret’s “twin,” “to live as we do.”

Margaret flushed angrily. But I felt sympathy for the other girl. Her bitterness was understandable. I pinched my wife’s arm before she could make a cutting reply.

“What do you want of us?” I asked.

“If you can give it to us—the secret of travel between these parallel Worlds, as you call them. Think of it, man—if we could make such a journey, come back here with men and weapons we could drive the Dring back to their own planet!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If I knew how, I’d tell you willingly. But we’ve been trying to get back, and we can’t.”

“What can you tell us of weapons?” demanded John.

“Too much—and too little. Enough to make you hate me for having raised your hopes. Not enough to give you the ghost of a clue to help you to make ‘em for yourselves. Could you build a jet engine? Could you find a deposit of pitchblende? Could you extract uranium? Could you differentiate between the isotope you wanted

and the ones you didn’t? Could you build a breeder pile and make plutonium?”

“You’re talking in riddles!”

“I’m not. But we’re specialized, John, highly specialized. Give me a ship to navigate, and a full set of charts and ephemeræ, and I’ll take her anywhere in the World. Give me a typewriter and a supply of paper and I’ll write you a story. Give me anything from a six-inch gun down to a point thirty stripped Lewis and I’ll show you how to use it. But somebody else has to make them for me.”

“All this risk,” said the woman, Elsa, “for nothing. For a pair of fat, pampered apostles of uselessness who couldn’t survive five minutes if left to themselves.”

“Peter’s the best judge of that,” said John. “But, I am disappointed . . . ”

“I wish they’d never come,” said the widow Margaret.

She took the sack from the man who was holding it, pulled out my wife’s costume, fingered the material with an expression of combined longing and envy that I found touching.

“Put that back!” snapped John.

The rest of the journey passed in a glum silence.

VI

We left the region of the great fires, drove through what, in the darkness, seemed to be wasteland broken only at sparse intervals by yellow, flickering lights.

We stopped briefly at station after station, all of them bare, dirty, wind-and-rain-swept platforms. Occasional parties of zombie-like slaves entered our compartment, travelling to unknown destinations. They never noticed us. They were looking—if they were looking for anything at all—for a man and a woman in strange, bright clothing.

Once we saw a dozen of the Dring marching in single file beneath the glimmering street lamps at one of the halts our train made. Their globular bodies were criss-crossed with a sort of harness, and from this hung metal tubes that could have been weapons.

At last, at a station that seemed no different from any of the others, John told us in a whisper that we were to get out. He led the way, letting his body fall into the shambling slouch that seemed characteristic of the slaves. The others of his party followed suit. Margaret and I did our best to imitate them.

He led us along the platform, past the dim light and the stairs. There was a loose slat in the fence at the end of the platform and this he pulled aside. He wriggled through the opening, vanished, and was followed by Elsa. One of the other men said that Margaret and I were to go next. On the other side of the fence we found a rough embankment, steep, overgrown with coarse weeds.

I heard John below me, the

scraping noise of his shoes, an occasional sharply drawn breath. I was surprised when at last I found myself standing on reasonably level ground. Seconds later Margaret almost fell into my arms.

After the dim lighting in the train it did not take long for our eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. What we saw was a little like the workers' residential quarters in Hamburg that were devastated by the R.A.F. during the war. Like those houses, the extent of the damage was great, but because time had softened harsh, jagged outlines and trees and bushes had made their own successful invasion of the city.

But we were given no time to admire the scenery. John grasped my Margaret's arm, and the other Margaret grasped mine, and we hurried along over a rough track. There was no street lighting here but the reflected glare from the great fires that we had seen earlier served to light our path, after a fashion. We followed the railway embankment, passed under another station.

Then John, who was in the lead, stopped suddenly. He whistled softly, a repetition of two notes, over and over. Finally there came a faint creaking and a door set in the embankment—its surface camouflaged with earth and grass—opened outwards.

"The word?" croaked a voice.
"Security," whispered John.
"Enter."

The old man who had opened the door whipped the cover off an oil lantern, held it high to examine us. Satisfied, he said, "Peter is waiting."

"Good. Follow me."

John lit another lantern from the first, led us along a maze of tunnels. The air was heavy with the smell of stale earth, of mildew, of the smoke of rancid, burning oil. There was another guard to pass, this one stationed outside a heavy, wooden door. He contented himself with a long and minute inspection of Margaret and myself, opened the door without a word. Through it and we found ourselves in a room about twenty feet square and ten high. There was a desk, a heavy Victorian piece of furniture, and behind it a matching chair.

An old man with white, yellow-stained hair and beard was sitting at the desk. He acknowledged John's military salute with a casual wave of his hand, motioned us all to the plain hard benches before him.

"Your names?" he asked as soon as we were seated.

"Andrew Dunstan," I said, "and Margaret Dunstan."

"Where do you come from?"

I told him. I told him the whole story. He did not seem too incredulous. After all, I reflected, the interplanetary invasion must have been a very recent memory when he was young. He must, through his parents, have felt, even

at second hand, something of the wonder as well as the terror of it all.

"I am an old man," he said when I was finished. "I am older, perhaps, than you think. I can remember the Dring ships in the sky, the fire that rained down upon London—that was all of a hundred years ago. I can remember being herded, with other children, into the Dring nurseries. Like ants they are, the Dring, and when they conquer they enslave . . . I knew from the first that I was not the same as most of the others—the Dring never got control of my mind. I was cunning enough to act as the other children did.

"For a while I worked in one of their factories. What was the work? I shoveled loose earth into a succession of little trucks, each of which was wheeled away after being filled. I never did anything else. None of the slaves—the real slaves—engaged in other work would, or could, tell me what they did.

"Then came the day—I was about fourteen—when I was turned out of the factory at the end of the day's work, pushed onto a train bound for the city. It is the policy of the Dring to let its workers house themselves among the ruins, scratch for their food in the scrubby little gardens—which is, of course, supplemented by a ration of synthetic food—and, of course, breed. But

they are under mental control the whole time, naturally.

"I knew what I was supposed to do, where I was supposed to go. But as I walked along the street from the station a woman suddenly rushed out from one of the ruined houses, clutched me to her. At first I didn't recognize her. Her hair—which had once been red when I had seen her last—was now grey. Her clothes were in rags. If it had not been for the telepathic faculty that all of us seem to have developed I would never have known her for my mother.

"But it was my mother. She and a dozen others who had escaped both massacre and slavery were living together in the ruins, plotting a hopeless vengeance. They never knew how hopeless it was. We know, but still we plot, too. The human race does not easily give way to despair.

"I had hoped," he said, "that you would be able to help us. We thought at first that you were voyagers from some other planet who had come in a ship like the Dring ether-ships, a ship with equipment and weapons that we could use. But . . ." He was silent for a while, his fingers thoughtfully combing his beard. "We may still be able to use you," he added finally.

"How?"

"From what you have told me, your world is not at peace. Your people have weapons, powerful

weapons. Could you remember how they are made?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "A very limited number of weapons I can handle. I could strip and reassemble any of the machine guns we used in the war. But make them? You haven't the tools, the technology."

"I was afraid of that . . . Now, here is another way. Not all the Humans are either slaves or rebels. There is another class—a pampered class—that rarely leaves the Dring hives. They are people like ourselves who are immune to mcsmerism. But they see nothing wrong with the present state of affairs; to them the Dring is father and mother, comfort and security. Now and again, as you know perhaps, one of our number has turned traitor, has deserted us for the easy living of the hive. We have often thought of sending in a pseudo-traitor—it has been tried. But minds in this world are read far too easily. Those whom we have sent have been returned, their tortured and mutilated bodies dumped in the street.

"Another technique we have attempted—prisoners whose capture has been a matter of intention on our part. But they, like the others, have never penetrated the outer guard of members and tame Hurians to the Dring itself. But the Dring will want to make a personal examination—if *it* can be called a person—of you and your

wife. If the Dring can be killed, then . . .”

“Killed? But how?”

“We have a limited supply of dynamite. A stick, hidden in the bag that your wife carries . . . But it will not be your wife, of course. It will be our Margaret, wearing her clothes. But *you* must go with her for we have no double that we can use in your place.”

“It’s not my world,” I began. I looked at Margaret, my Margaret. “It’s not *our* world,” I said slowly. “But these are our people. There’s a chance that we shall be able to help them, to destroy this Dring . . .”

“If you’re going,” she said, “I want to go, too.”

“I’m sorry,” said the old man, Peter. “It’s not possible. Have you ever thrown a bomb? Do you know how to handle one of our bombs?” There was a finality in his voice that inhibited any reply to his rhetorical questions. He said, then, “I am pleased that you replied as you did. I had one last argument that I was hoping I should not have to use. There has been no need for me to use it. But I shall tell you, just the same.

“We have reason to believe that the Dring ships have been able to cross the strange barrier between your world and this. Over three years ago one was observed by our people flying low over London, drifting down to the landing field. Hanging from its underside was a strange flying ship, a thing

with wings and a fish-like body. We have never seen such a machine in our sky. We did not know, until tonight where it could have come from. Now, having heard of your world, and the others, we can do more than guess. All right, John, the clothing . . .”

The tall man produced the bag, handed it to me silently. I took from it my jacket and trousers, my necktie. The woman, Margaret, took from it my wife’s tweed skirt and jacket, said, “It must be a complete change of dress. Otherwise I shall not feel the part . . .”

I looked at my wife, saw by her expression that she realized the reason for the request. Her double wanted to experience the feel of silk and nylon, to be dressed, for once in her life, as a woman should. She said, “All right. Is there a room?”

“There is,” said the other Margaret, and led the way out of the large apartment.

“While we’re waiting,” said old Peter, “I will show you the bomb. I do not expect that you will use it, that you will be in any state to use it. There is, however, just a chance that you might. When you feel the Dring taking hold of your mind again fill your thoughts with anything—multiplication tables, poetry—and you may keep it out. And keep hold of Margaret’s hand.

“And the bomb . . . It’s simple, isn’t it? This little tube contains the detonator, the spring that works the firing-pin and a strand

of wire. It contains, too, a very fragile phial of acid. When the phial is broken the acid eats through the wire, releasing the spring. For this bomb we have chosen an almost instantaneous fuse."

"So whoever uses the bomb . . ."

"Must throw it as soon as the phial is broken."

"I see." I knotted my tie, wishing there was a mirror.

The two Margarets came in. The one wearing the tweed costume picked the bomb off the desk, looked at it briefly, pushed it carelessly—too carelessly, I thought—into the handbag. She was wearing rings, I noticed, and the cat's eye and tortoiseshell bracelet I had brought home from Suva, and a wristwatch. As she fumbled with the handbag she sat on the edge of the desk, looked down with approval at her nylon-stockinged legs.

"It was necessary," said Peter, "that every detail should be correct. The slave to whom you talked in the train will have supplied the Dring with a detailed picture of both of you, and that picture will have been passed on to all other slaves and members. Now—are you ready?"

"Not quite," I said. I walked over to my Margaret and kissed her. She said, trying hard to grin, "Be careful." Her double got down from the desk, stood waiting.

It was John who led us from the underground headquarters,

took us out through a maze of tunnels that led eventually to a door not unlike the one by which we had entered. It was not the same door, though—opposite towered the ruins of a large church, black and ragged against the ruddy sky.

"We shall be following," he said. "Good luck."

VII

I wanted to keep to the edge of the road, but Margaret would have none of it. We were to be captured, she insisted, and the sooner this came about the better. So, incongruously, arm in arm, we walked through the ruined city with no attempt at concealment. And we talked.

"Your wife," said Margaret, "I was able to get inside her mind, and she in mine. If you and I are probed too closely I shall be able to deceive the Dring—for a while, at least . . ." Then after a silence, "Why don't you smoke?"

I pulled out my pipe, filled it carefully. The flare of the first match was startlingly bright. I used a second one, and just as I was getting the pipe to draw a bright, blue-white light flashed from the doorway of a dilapidated building, momentarily blinding us. There was an agitated chirping noise like nothing so much as a swarm of disturbed crickets, and a human voice crying, "There they are!"

My first impulse was to run.

My second to fight. But with Margaret's restraining hand on my arm I did neither. And then I started to worry about the fragile glass phial, and what it was part of, in her handbag. But I need not have done so. Our captors were surprisingly gentle. They contented themselves with leveling bright metal tubes at us, telling us to come with them. With the light no longer shining in our eyes I could see that six of them were human, six the almost globular Dring. The aliens, after their first agitated chirping, were silent; the humans said little.

After a short walk we came to what must once must have been a public garden. The dark, weed-grown area was almost filled with a hulking mass that gleamed metallically in the beam of the light carried by our captors. We climbed a short ladder to a dimly lighted, circular doorway, were pushed into a small, dark room. A metal door clanged shut, imprisoning us in total blackness.

There were no seats so we sat on the deck. It vibrated under us, seemed to lift and tilt. "One of their ether ships," whispered Margaret.

I got matches out of my pocket, struck one. The light showed nothing but four steel bulkheads, a steel deck, a steel deckhead. There were no ports. I dropped the match as it burnt my fingers.

"Can we talk?" I asked. "Is there danger of anybody overhear-

ing, or eavesdropping on our thoughts?"

"No," she said. "I should feel it if they were probing. I got the impression, when we were brought into the ship, that we were to be taken straight to the Dring, that there was to be on questioning of us by any lesser being."

The matter-of-factness of her voice shook me. Margaret's voice, Margaret's body—and the discussion of such matters as though they were no more fantastic than a comment on the butcher's bill or the evening's TV program . . .

The deck seemed to tilt more steeply, throwing us together. I became alarmed again about the lethal contents of the handbag. I said, "But the stupidity! You'd think they'd have searched us for weapons!"

"The Dring is stupid," she said. "Powerful and stupid. The Tamies are stupid; they have lived for too long like petted animals."

There was a sudden jar beneath us. The vibration of the deck ceased. The door suddenly opened.

Two of the humans came into the cramped cabin, pointed the metal tubes at us and told us to get up. We did so, followed a third human along the short alleyway, down the steps to the ground.

We found that we were standing at the base of one of the huge pyramids we had seen earlier. It towered all of a thousand feet into the sky. From the flat top of it billowed smoke and ruddy flame,

and some freak of down-draught brought with it heat and acrid fumes, a sulphurous fog that half obscured the hurrying figures of men and Dring, all of whom seemed to be moving with the frantic activity of a disturbed ant hill. There was the dull, rhythmic clangor of machinery.

We were led by our guards to a ramp, the angle of which was a little too steep for human feet and legs. It zig-zagged up the face of the pyramid, a slippery, precarious climb. The heat seared our lungs, the acrid smoke half-blinded us, made us choke and cough.

We passed numbers of downward bound Dring members and human slaves, all of whom stood to one side to allow us free passage. One of the slaves, I remember, lost his footing, fell from the ramp down the face of the pyramid. Not one human or alien raised a hand to try to save him. Not one seemed even to notice his going.

It was half way up the huge erection that we came to the door. It was the entrance to a tunnel of almost circular section, the walls of which glowed with a pale, cold luminosity. Once I put out a hand to steady myself, found that they were slimy to the touch, seemed to crawl beneath the pressure. It was at this time, too, that I felt the first attempted invasion of my mind since the escape from the train.

At once I began mentally to recite the Articles, the seaman's Rule of the Road, that long list of regulations that every officer commits to memory. Also I caught Margaret's hand, held it tightly in mine.

It helped, although it did not entirely dispel the mental intruder. It was like . . . It was like somebody fumbling in a darkened room, fumbling and stumbling and muttering to himself. It felt like spiders on the skin, like a spider web caught across the face when you are walking through a garden by night.

"Has it got you?" asked Margaret urgently.

"No," I managed to say.

We came at last to a room, a spherical chamber. Its interior surface glowed with the same cold light as had the walls of the tunnel. It must have been all of forty feet in diameter. Strands of silk, each no thicker than a lead pencil, converged to the centre of the sphere, merged to form a huge cocoon.

Around this, Dring and human guards supported themselves on the seemingly frail webbing. Of the thing inside the cocoon we could see nothing. There was a faint, dry whispering noise, a vaguely heard stridulation.

One of the guards—a big man, fat, the remnants of his red hair like a priestly tonsure—spoke.

"We know," he said, "where you come from. We know that

you are from the Third Level. How did you get here?"

I looked at the guards, the attendants, at the shining tubes that dangled at their belts. I weighed the possibility of a wild leap, of snatching one of the weapons, of fighting back to the clean outer air. And I saw that any leap would be frustrated by the tangled web.

And with the relaxation of mental vigilance the voice came back into my mind, the dry, rustling whisper of the Dring, the thing in the cocoon.

"You will serve the Dring," the voice said. "All beings serve the Dring. You will open your mind so the Dring may learn of the Third Level, of its power and its weaknesses. *Open your mind! Open your mind!*" The words began to beat against my consciousness . . .

"Andrew!" Margaret was shaking me. "Wake up! Wake up! Don't let it get you!"

Two of the almost globular Dring members started towards us, swinging through the web like enraged spiders. Margaret fumbled inside the handbag, brought out the bomb—threw it. Straight and true it skimmed through the air, not touching any of the strands of the web.

The Dring must have realized its danger for abruptly the probing, questioning mind was withdrawn from mine. *Almost instantaneous*, I thought, and let go of the silken strand that I was holding.

I pulled Margaret down to the curved floor with me, scrambled with her toward the mouth of the tunnel . . .

And we made it. The blast caught us, drove us like projectiles in the barrel of a gun. There was heat, pressure, and noise that was felt rather than heard.

Then there was blackness . . .

VIII

I cannot say how long I was unconscious. I was awakened, I think, by Margaret's moaning. I felt the weight of her across me, carefully and painfully wriggled out from under her. There was no light in the tunnel now, but a dull, ruddy glimmer marked the entrance through which we had come from outside.

"Margaret!" I said.

I got to my knees, bent over her. There was no blood that I could feel. Slowly, carefully, I lifted her to a sitting posture. She gasped, then retched painfully. I could feel the shaking of her thin body.

"You did it," I said. "You destroyed him."

She made no reply at first. She was conscious, her hands were working away feverishly at something. Then—"Take them," she said slowly. "Not mine. Wouldn't rob . . ."

I felt the thing she was pressing on me. There was my wife's watch, her bracelet.

"Tell her," she said, "thank

you. Tell her, thank you for me!"

"You must keep them," I urged, pressing them into her hand.

"No good to me . . . now. Finished. Broken . . . inside, somewhere . . ." Again she was shaken by the dreadful retching. "Should have liked . . . Too late . . ."

I held her tightly until she was still. Then I put the watch and bracelet back on to the dead wrist, got slowly to my feet. I didn't like to leave her there, but what else could I do? I staggered to the mouth of the tunnel.

There was fighting in the open space below the pyramid. Dark human figures milled around, the glare of the fires shone from the bright steel of knives and axes. Now and again there was the bright, intensely blue flare of the Dring weapons. Now and again the orange flash of a black powder-loaded pistol. The sound of yells and screams, of explosions, drifted up faintly.

Somebody, I saw, was climbing up the ramp, somebody who was running with a reckless disregard of the dangers of that unrailed-off causeway. I had no weapons, and not for all the wealth in the world would I have gone back into that spherical chamber in which the dynamite bomb had exploded. It was a friend, I told myself. It had to be a friend. If not, a swift kick would send whoever it was tumbling down the face of the pyramid

before he could come to grips with me . . .

It was Margaret.

"Andrew!" she cried, while she was yet all of twenty feet away. "You're safe!"

She stopped, gasping and coughing, feeling the effects both of her exertions and the acrid fumes that were still billowing down from the top of the pyramid.

I walked down to meet her.

"And the other?" she asked. "The other . . . me?"

"Dead," I said.

"I knew it, somehow. I felt it." She laughed hysterically. "Which of us was it? Which one? Which one?"

I got hold of her then, and I pulled her closely to be. "You're here," I said. "And that's all that matters."

After a while she murmured, "We must go. They are waiting for us."

"Who?"

"John and his people. They have a locomotive all ready. They want to take us back to the old man, Peter. They say that we, with our knowledge, are too precious to be risked in the fighting."

"Who is fighting?"

"The Tamies. They're shocked and disorganized, but they're fighting back. The Dring members are just wandering around like chickens with their heads cut off, but the Tamies are fighting. There's another Dring mind some-

where and they're trying to wake it so it can take over."

A voice called from below.
"Andrew! Margaret!"

"All right," I shouted back.
"We're coming!"

When we got down to ground level all seemed to be over but the mopping up. The fires were dying, and dawn was grey in the sky, and light rain was seeping down on the sprawled, untidy bodies. John received us—a John whose face was burned, whose left arm hung limply at his side, whose clothing was torn and blood-stained.

He said briefly, "So she's dead. I thought both of you would be. But Peter wants you."

He led the way over rough ground, over a maze of railroad tracks, over a flat, hard surface that could have been concrete. Then there were more tracks, and one of the little, ugly locomotives standing there, panting impatiently. There were two men in the cab, strangers to us. One of them helped Margaret to climb up to the footplate.

"Tell Peter," said John to me, "that we're still looking for the new brain. It's here, somewhere. It's not awake yet."

I climbed up into the cab.

One of the two men threw a shovel load of coal into the furnace, the other opened a valve. The engine snorted, its wheels screamed on the greasy tracks before they gained traction. Then,

with a jerk we were off, past the huge pyramids, past the columns of smoke, through the bare, sterile countryside. Through drab, comfortless stations we rattled, ignoring the hordes of grey-clad slaves who, dumb and uncomprehending, waited patiently for the trains that would never come again to bear them to their hovels in the ruined city.

Frankly, I was rather enjoying it. Most of us still possess the boyhood ambition to ride on the footplate of a railway engine, and it is an ambition that for most of us is never realized. I watched the driver. I kept a keen lookout on the track ahead. But it never occurred to me to look astern.

It was Margaret who said, almost screaming, "It's following us!"

The driver turned away from his gauges, looked in the direction of her outstretched arm. He cursed. Gaining on us rapidly, skimming over the tracks, was one of the smaller saucers. Its flight was unsteady, it wavered and dipped, but it was gaining . . .

"John!" I said, suddenly. "It must be John! He must have captured one of the things, found out how to fly it . . ." But I knew, even as I said it, that it wasn't so.

A crackling bolt flashed from the saucer rim, gouged a smoking trench in the ground twenty feet from the tracks.

The driver watched his controls intently. The fireman threw on

more coal, raked and sliced. He said curtly, "Weapons. Back of cab. Use 'em."

There were weapons there, half a dozen of the metal tubes that we had seen carried both by the Dring and the Tamies. I picked one up. It was light, too light, and had no comfortable grip for a human hand. Inadvertently I pressed a stud about half way up the tube. There was a blinding flash of light, the reek of ozone, and a gaping hole showed in the roof of the cab—a hole whose fused edges still glowed redly.

Ignoring the driver's curses I leaned far out of the side of the cab, tried to bring the weapon to bear on the flying ship. My first shot was yards to the right. My second in line, but under. And the answering fire from the saucer sent the rails up in an eruption of molten iron not two feet behind our rear wheels.

Margaret was firing, too, and her aim, if anything, was worse than mine. All that saved us, I am convinced, was the unskillful pilotage that made it impossible for our enemies to bring their own, heavier, weapon accurately to bear.

The saucer swished overhead, roaring like a hive of angry bees. It fled along the tracks ahead of us, diminishing rapidly as it increased the range. Then it stopped, hovering directly over the lines. It was as impossible to get a fair shot at it as it hung

there, even after I had battered out the dirty glass of the cab windows. From its underside lightning flared for long seconds, from the track sprayed a fountain of sparks and smoke.

The driver cursed, pulled back hard on the lever. The fireman wrenches a valve shut with frenzied hands. The locomotive rocked and shuddered—and still sped on locked, screaming wheels to the inevitable disaster.

"Jump!" Margaret was crying. "Jump!"

But nobody heeded her. Driver and fireman were still fighting to bring their engine under control, and I—or so I was told later—was shouting vile curses at the top of my lungs.

We were so close to the saucer now that I could fire over the boiler of the locomotive. The long, ugly smokestack went with the first shot. Then I scored a direct hit on the underbelly of the lenticulate ship. The firing stud hurt my thumb as it tried to jump back to the "off" position.

But I kept it pressed. The tube heated rapidly. The blue glare of the continuous discharge blinded me. Then the weapon went dead . . .

The saucer fell, sliding off away from us in a steep glide. We never saw it hit the ground. Directly ahead of us now, no more than a few feet, was the broken track, the tangle of fused, twisted metal.

"Jump!" the driver was shouting. "Jump!"

I grabbed Margaret's hand . . .

There was an infinitude of tracks before us, parallel rows of gleaming steel stretching away into a grey, formless distance, meeting each other at impossible angles. I caught Margaret to me, holding her tightly. We felt the locomotive dip and lurch, braced ourselves for the crash.

There was no crash. The train slowed gently, sighed to a halt. I looked out of the window of the coach.

"Hounslow Central," I said.

We got out at the next stop. We caught a 120 Bus, got off at The Duke of Wellington, walked home. It was raining, still, and there were few people abroad in the early morning streets. Those we did meet seemed not to notice Margaret's drab, grey overalls.

The house was empty. The children, luckily, were spending a week with their grandparents. We let ourselves in, went to the kitchen and, in silence, brewed ourselves a pot of tea. While we were drinking it there was a knock at the door. Margaret started

violently, knocking her cup over.

"I'll go," I said, sounding braver than I felt.

"It's only the morning paper," I said as I returned.

"Let me have it," she said. "I want to see it—Russians, Korea, atom bombs and all . . ."

She snatched it from me, handed it back almost at once, her thumb marking a paragraph on the front page. I read it in silence. It was about two strange people, a man and a woman, who had been seen in London the previous night. The man was dressed in a wartime Nazi officer's uniform. There had been a brush with the police, and a constable had been shot. The gunman and his woman were still at large . . .

"They'll never get them *now*," said Margaret.

She got up, started to unbutton the overalls she was still wearing. She fingered the cloth with distaste, whispered slowly, "I'm glad that I—that she, I mean—wore nice woman's things . . . before I died . . ."

I looked down at the mess on the kitchen floor where I had dropped my cup.

