

STARTLING STORIES

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

FEATURING

The **PORTAL
IN THE
PICTURE**
A Complete Novel
By **HENRY
KUTTNER**



**THE
HOTHOUSE
PLANET**

A Hall of Fame Classic by **ARTHUR K. BARNES**

The Portal in the Picture

Henry Kuttner

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Prologue

She called herself Malesca. Her agent called her the "Loveliest Girl in the World" and I suppose he wasn't far wrong, at that. If I'd known she was playing the Windsor Roof that night I'd have gone somewhere else.

But by the time I was at the table, having a sandwich and a highball, it was too late. The lights dimmed, the spot went on and there stood Malesca, bowing to the storm of applause. I wasn't going to let her spoil my drink. I could always look somewhere else while she was on. I ate white meat of chicken, drank my highball and thought about other things--until the famous velvet voice began to sing.

I listened to her sing. A chair creaked. In the dimness someone sat down beside me. I peered through the gloom, recognizing the man, a top figure in show business.

"Hello, Burton," he said.

"Hello."

"Mind if I join you?"

I waved my hand and he gave his order to the waiter who slid up noiselessly. Malesca was still singing.

The man beside me watched her, as rapt and intent as everybody else in the club except me.

Two encores later, when the lights went up, I realized that he was staring at me curiously. My disinterest in the singer must have been pretty obvious.

"No like?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

Even before Korzybski that particular question would have been meaningless. I couldn't answer him and I knew it. So I didn't bother. I just didn't say anything. I could see Malesca from the corner of my eye, hear the rustle of her stiff skirts as she came through the tables toward me. I sighed.

She was wearing some light flowery scent I knew she hadn't picked out for herself. She put her hand on the table edge and leaned toward me.

"Eddie," she said.

"Well?"

"Eddie, I haven't seen you for ages."

"That's right."

"Listen, why don't you wait around? Take me somewhere after my last show. We could have a drink or something. How about it, Eddie?"

Her voice was pure magic. It had been magic on radio and records and video. It would soon be magic in the movies. I didn't say a word.

"Eddie--please."

I picked up my glass, emptied it, brushed crumbs off my coat, laid the napkin beside the plate.

"Thanks," I said. "Wish I could."

She stared at me, the familiar, searching stare full of

incomprehension. I could hear the applause still echoing.

"Eddie--"

"You heard me," I said. "Take a walk. Take an encore. Go on, beat it."

Without a word she turned away and went back to the floor, her skirts frothing and hissing as she squeezed between the tables. The man beside me said: "Eddie, are you crazy?"

"Probably," I said. I wasn't going to explain to him.

"All right, Eddie. You know the answers, I suppose. But something must be wrong. The most beautiful woman in the world throwing herself at your feet--and you won't even look at her. That just isn't sensible."

"I'm not a very sensible guy," I told him. It was a lie, of course. I'm the most sensible guy in the world--in any world.

"Don't give me clichés," he said. "That's no answer."

"Cliches!" I said and choked in my glass. "Okay, okay, never mind. Nothing wrong with clichés, you know. They're just truths that happen so often they're trite. It doesn't make them any less true, does it?" I looked at Malesca squaring off at the mike, getting ready to sing again.

"I knew a man once who tried to discredit clichés," I went on thoughtfully, knowing I was probably saying too much. "He failed. He had quite a time, that guy."

"What happened?"

"Oh, he found a fabulous land and rescued a beautiful goddess and overthrew a wicked high priest and--forget it. Maybe it was a book I read."

"What fabulous land was that?" my friend inquired idly.

"Malesco."

He lifted an eyebrow at me and glanced across the room at the Most Beautiful Girl in the World.

"Malesco? Where's that?"

"Right behind you," I said.

Then I picked up my fresh highball and buried my nose in it. I had nothing more to say--to him. But a chord in the music just then woke a thin shivering wire of sound at the back of my brain, and for an instant the barrier between this world and the worlds outside was as thin as air.

Malesco, I thought. I shut my eyes and tried to make the domes and towers of that rose-red city take shape in the darkness while the chord still sounded in my ears. But I couldn't do it. Malesco had gone back into the fable again and the gates were shut forever.

And yet, when I think about it now even the sense of wonder and disbelief is suspended and I have no feeling at all that it was in some dream I walked those streets. They were real. I've got the most convincing kind of proof that they were real.

It all happened quite a while ago....

Chapter I

Remember the story of the blind men and the elephant? Not one of them ever found out it was an elephant. That's the way it was with me. A new world was opening right in front of me and I put it down to eyestrain.

I sat there in my apartment with a bottle and watched the air flicker.

I told myself to get up and switch off the lights because Lorna had got in the habit of dropping by if I didn't show up at the ginmill where she worked, and I didn't want to talk to her. Lorna Maxwell was a leech. She had attached herself to me with all the simple relentlessness of her one-track mind and short of killing her I knew no way to pry her loose.

It all seemed so easy to Lorna. Here I was, rising young actor Eddie Burton with a record of three straight Broadway hits and a good part in something new that all the critics liked. Fine.

Here she was, that third-rate young ginmill singer Lorna Maxwell with no record at all that she admitted to. Don't ask me how we met or how she got her hooks into me. I'm a born easy mark. Children, animals and people like Lorna can spot people like me a mile away.

She'd got it into her addled little head somehow that all I had to do was say the word and she'd be right up there beside me, a success, the darling of the columnists. Only selfishness kept me from saying the magic word to somebody in authority and turning her into Cinderella. Arguments wouldn't move her. It seemed simpler to turn off the lights when I was at home alone and not answer the door.

The air flickered again. I squinted and shook my head. This was

getting a little alarming. It couldn't be the Scotch. It never happened outside the apartment. It never happened unless I was looking at that particular wall.

There was a Rousseau picture on it, Sleeping Gypsy, something Uncle Jim had left me along with the apartment. I made a great effort to focus on the blue-green sky, the lion's blowing mane, the striped robe of the black man on the sand.

But all I got was a blur. And then I knew I must be drunk because a sound seemed to go with the blur, a roaring that might have been the lion except that the lion had entirely vanished and I seemed to be seeing a dome of shining rosy-red light that moved like water.

I squeezed my eyes shut. This was crazy.

Uncle Jim had left me the apartment in his will. It was one of those deals where you pay a fabulous sum down and a high rental for life and call the apartment yours. I wouldn't have got into it myself, but Uncle Jim did and it was nice to have a place the landlord couldn't throw me out of when somebody offered him a higher bribe.

This is probably the place for a word about Uncle Jim Burton. He was a Character. He had red hair, freckles and a way of losing himself in foreign parts for months at a stretch. Sometimes for years.

He used to visit us between trips when I was a kid, and of all the people I knew in those days he was my favorite because he took me in on a secret.

It started out as bedtime stories. All about a marvelous land called Malesco that followed the pattern for all marvelous lands. There was a beautiful princess and a wicked high priest and a dashing young hero whose adventures kept me awake for all of fifteen minutes

sometimes after the lights were put out.

Those were the pre-Superman days, so I didn't picture myself soaring through Malesco in a red union suit. But sometimes I wore a lion skin like Tarzan and sometimes the harness of an intrepid Martian warrior who looked like John Carter.

I even learned to speak Malescan. Uncle Jim made it up, of course. He had a restless mind, and he was recovering from some sort of illness during those months he stayed with us when the Malesco stories began. He made up a vocabulary of the language. We worked out a sort of primer together and jabbered away to each other in Malescan with a good deal of fluency before the episode came to an end and he went away again.

I sat there, watching the wall flicker, looking at the blurred rose-red globe on the wall and something like roofs beyond it, lit with a brilliant sunset. I knew I was imagining most of it. What I saw was the red blur you get when you rub your eyes hard and my imagination was making it into something very much like the tales of Malesco Uncle Jim used to tell.

The whole thing had sunk far back into my mind in the many years since. But when I groped I seemed to dredge up a memory of a city lit with crimson sunsets. In the center of the city was a great dome from which reflected the light from a surface of--had it been water? Had it been--

The doorbell rang.

"Eddie!" Lorna's voice called loudly. "Eddie, let me in a minute."

I knew if I didn't she'd rouse the neighbors with her knocking and shouting. I heaved myself out of the chair and sidled cautiously

around that blur which was pure imagination between me and the wall where the Rousseau hung. It was odd, I thought, that the hall wasn't blurred, or the front door, or even Lorna's pretty, cheap little face when I let her in.

"I waited for you, Eddie," she said reproachfully, slipping in fast before I could change my mind. "What kept you? Eddie, I had to see you. I've got a new idea. Look, how would it be if I could dance a little too? Would that help? I've worked out a sort of routine I wish you'd--"

"Have a drink," I said wearily. "Let's not talk about it now, Lorna. My head aches. I think I've got eye trouble. Things keep blurring."

"--look while I just run through it," she went right on as soon as I finished speaking. It was one of her less endearing tricks.

I shut my ears and followed her back into the living room, hoping she'd go away soon. The Rousseau Gypsy had come back anyhow. That was a comfort. The red blur which my imagination made into a vision of Malesco was entirely gone. I sat down in the same chair, sipped my Scotch and looked morosely at Lorna.

It doesn't matter what she was saying. I heard about every tenth word. She fixed herself a drink and perched girlishly on the arm of a chair, making graceful gestures with her glass, telling me all about how I was going to help her become a great dancer if I'd only say the right word to the right man.

I'd heard it all before. I yawned, looked crosseyed at the ice in my glass, drained the last of the Scotch and glanced up at the opposite wall.

This time it was pure hallucination. Instead of the Rousseau it was another kind of picture on the wall and it moved as though I were

looking at a pull-down movie screen, stereoscopic, technicolored.

There it all was, clear and perfect. No imagination about it this time. Malesco--exactly as Uncle Jim had told me. A black line that looked like an iron bar ran across one corner of the picture. Beyond it, small and far away, was the city lit with sunset.

Domes, soaring columns, a shining globe that moved like water in one enormous sphere, surrounded by curved arches that seemed to support it though they too had a flowing upward motion. And all the intricate pattern of arches and bubbles was on fire with reflected light.

A rose-red city, half as old as time.

"Eddie, look at me!"

I didn't stir. This was like hypnosis. I couldn't turn my eyes away from that incredible hallucination. I knew Lorna hadn't seen it, for the pitch of her voice didn't change.

Maybe she couldn't see it. Maybe I was crazy. Or maybe she just hadn't glanced that way.

She was babbling something about taking her shoes off so she could show me the dance and I realized vaguely that she was thumping heavily about the floor. I knew I ought to rub my eyes and try to make that vision go away.

"Eddie, look at me!" she insisted.

"All right, all right," I said, not looking. "It's fine."

I rubbed my eyes.

Then Lorna screamed.

My head jerked up. I remember the coldness of ice spilling across my hand, I stared at the spot where she should have been and all I could see across the room was that picture: the sunset city with its globe of burning water and the black bar across the foreground. The whole city quivered.

I heard her scream fade. It diminished and grew thin and ceased so gradually it still seemed to ring in my ears long after I thought it had stopped. Then the air's flickering steadied. The rose-red city blurred again and in the next moment the lion crouched above the sleeping gypsy and the Rousseau painting was unchanged there on the solid wall.

"Lorna," I said. No answer. I stood up, dropping the glass. I took a step forward and stumbled over her shoes. I ran across to the door and jerked it open. The corridor was empty outside. No footsteps sounded.

I came back and tried the kitchen, the bedroom. No Lorna.

An hour later I was down at police headquarters, trying to tell the cops I hadn't murdered her. An hour after that I was in jail.

Chapter II

I'd rather deal with a crook than a fanatic any day. The Assistant d.a. was a fanatic about his own theories, and I found myself in a difficult spot in less than no time. This isn't the story of how circumstantial evidence can make mistakes and I won't go into detail. It was just that Lorna had left a friend waiting in the lobby, the neighbors heard Lorna call and heard me let her in--and where was she?

I didn't try to tell the truth. I said she'd gone out. I was too rattled to remember the shoes and that was a strong point against me. The Assistant d.a. was bucking for his boss' job, and he got himself so thoroughly convinced of my guilt that toward the end I think he'd have been willing to stretch a point or two, legally speaking, if he could bring a murderer to justice--me.

Maybe you remember the newspaper stories about it. I lost my part in the hit play. I got a lawyer who didn't believe me because I couldn't tell him the truth. Time went by and all that saved me was the fact that Lorna's body never did show up. Eventually they let me go.

What would you have done in my spot? In the movies I'd instantly have gone to see Einstein, and he'd have figured it all out and whipped up a super-machine that would bring Lorna back or send me into a world like King Kong's.

Or in another kind of movie there'd have been gangsters hammering at the door while I climbed down the fire escape, looking like Dick Powell. Or there'd have been sliding panels or something to explain things at the end of the movie. But Lorna had vanished into a picture on the wall, and I was beginning to worry about my own sanity.

The only hope was that the shimmer in the air might come again and

I could somehow lean through and haul Lorna back. I'd come to accept that hope definitely by the time a few months had gone by. I'd thought it all over and been to an optometrist and a psychiatrist and found out all the things it couldn't have been. Not hallucination. Not visual disturbance. Not madness.

No, it had simply been--Malesco.

I went through Uncle Jim's books and papers after that. I found a lot of notes in a shorthand I never was able to read, then or later. I found quite a lot of stuff on alchemy, of all odd things. And I found the old Malescan primer and vocabulary. This was the one thing I really got some good out of--but not then.

That came much later when everything broke at once. It was night again. I was sitting at home drinking Scotch again. And again a bell rang, but this time it was the phone. It was my attorney. He talked fast and carefully.

"Listen,Burton," he said. "A body's been picked up in the Sound. A floater. Your friend Thompson's got the lab working on it. He thinks it's the Maxwell woman."

"Lorna's not dead," I said stupidly. "At least not--"

"All right. Take it easy. It's just that I'm a little worried. This is what Thompson's been waiting for, you know."

"They can't possibly identify--"

"After this long it's mostly guesswork anyhow. But Thompson's got the experts working for him, and juries have a way of believing experts. They might--just might--make it stick, Burton."

So that was that--crisis. And what could I do? If I ran they'd pick me

up. If I stayed, they'd probably convict me. I hung up the phone and went back to my chair, pausing on the way to tap with insane hopefulness at the Rousseau. If I tore my way through that wall would I come out on the other side into Malesco? Would Lorna be there or was she that floater after all?

"Lorna?" I said inquiringly into the empty air. "Lorna?"

I waited. No answer. And yet there was something more than silence. My voice had a curious echoing quality as if I'd spoken in a tunnel. Malesco, of course, didn't exist. It was a fairy-tale land like Oz and Wonderland out of a childhood story. But I had a sudden, compelling certainty that my voice echoed when I called to Lorna and echoed in Malesco.

"Lorna!" I said it louder. "Lorna!" This time it was a shout. But it was a hollow and ghostly shout, echoing and reechoing down a long invisible tunnel, dying away at the far end--in Malesco.

"Lorna!"

The shrill hum of the doorbell cut through the echoing of my voice. The police? I spun around. But as I moved, the walls tilted sickeningly. Either I couldn't stop turning or the room was falling sidewise--no, collapsing in a direction I didn't understand.

The doorbell sang its thin, shrill summons, over and over, farther and farther away.... For I was falling.

I saw a man's face whirl by in darkness. He wore a queer headdress and his mouth was wide open with a look of surprise and terror. He was pointing a weapon at me.

He slid sidewise and vanished. I slipped down a wire of singing sound, clinging to it as to a lifeline, pausing, falling, sliding into an

abyss. Then the ringing wire of sound grew thinner. It began to fade. It no longer supported me.

I was falling.

A black horizontal line whipped up, vertical bars appeared. And I saw suddenly that my hands were gripping them, sliding down slowly. Instinct had sent its red warning flashing through my body: "Grab! Hang on! Hang on!"

This was real. There was no singing void around me any more. But there was a very real void under me and a terribly real pavement a million feet straight down. I was clutching the outside of a balcony rail with both hands and dangling over a drop I couldn't let myself think about.

Was this, I wondered frantically, the usual method of entering Malesco? If it was the way Lorna came then I was wasting my time. Lorna would be a long time dead by now, down there on that horribly distant, horribly hard-looking pavement, in the pink sunset light.

I couldn't see anything except the bars I clung to, the wall in front of me and a sickening angle of vertical building ending in pavement far down. I didn't see the city. The only important things were very near ones--real, vital, beautiful things like a ledge in the wall or a cornice I could brace my foot against.

If I'd been sent back to New York right then I'd have had exactly this to say about Malesco: one, railings are made of some hard slick metal too thin and slippery to hold on long. Two, building walls are stone or plastic or metal or something, maybe pre-fab, and there aren't any joints or cracks and it's a very poor way to build a wall.

I simply didn't have the strength to get over that balcony rail. But I got

over it. My simian progenitors sent me a cable along the instinct channel, my feet became prehensile in spite of my shoes. And the ancient basic terror of the long drop spurred me on. I don't like to think about it even now. I don't know how I did it.

But eventually I levered myself over and felt the balcony floor under my feet. The simian strength went back where it came from, millions of years in my biological past. My remote ancestor, Bandar-Log Burton, returned to hunting his antediluvian fleas and a still older ancestor, a mere blob of protoplasm, became dominant.

I felt like jelly. My protoplasm carried me with reeling rapidity across the balcony and through an open window. I found myself in a medium-sized room with the guy who had tried to shoot me.

Chapter III

The room was empty except for my new acquaintance. I mean empty. There wasn't a thing in it except that in the four upper corners were good-sized cups of corroded steel or iron. The walls were blue-green, and the floor was darker green and gave slightly underfoot. The pink light of sunset cast my shadow ahead of me across the walls.

There were two doors. At one of them was my friend with the odd headdress, which was perched at a drunken angle so that one flap hung over his eye and the other at the back of his head. He had his ear against the door panel, listening, paying no attention to me.

I got an impression of a thin middle-aged face alert with apprehension, a shirt with what looked like a coffee stain on it and long red-flannel drawers. I had just time to realize that it was the sunset light which made them look so crimson. Then the man heard my footstep, twisted around, saw me and fell into a fit of violent indecision.

He tried to do several things at once. He seemed to want to open the door and run. He wanted to yell for help. He wanted to pull out his equivalent of a Police Positive and kill me.

What he did was run at me, grip me around the waist and shove me back on the balcony. Before I knew what was happening, the guy had stuffed me halfway over the rail again. Don't think I wasn't resisting. I was. But what can an amoeba do?

A couple of times he could simply have let go and I'd have fallen. But he didn't let go. To him, it seemed, I was a square peg and he was frantically trying to find a square hole in space to fit me. He was trying

to hit the lucky number on a punch-board and using me to do it.

All the while he was looking around in a worried fashion, glancing down, trying to prevent my falling, looking over his shoulder, up at the sky and shaking at the flap of his headdress, which had twisted around even farther so that he could scarcely see at all.

As for me, I was in a nightmare. There was a ridiculous temptation to stay passive and wait till I'd been stuffed into that square hole in space. Maybe he could find it, I thought. I never had exactly in thirty-odd years. All I'd found were round holes.

On that philosophical point I got a grip on myself. I grabbed my friend around the neck and hauled myself back to safety. Neither of us was in a state suitable for a ten-round scrap. I hit him somewhere. He snatched at his belt and brought up a weapon that looked like a little dumbbell and I hit him again.

He gripped the ends of the dumbbell in each hand and pulled it apart. A silent flash of blue light streamed between his clenched fists. He looked at me. I could see only half his face because of that striped flap, but in his one visible eye there was desperation. Then it looked past me. A shadow fell on us. The man hesitated.

I knocked the weapon out of his hand. As the two globes fell they snapped together and the blue light was gone. My opponent must have gone crazy, because he stooped to pick up his gadget and I gave him a fast rabbit punch. I had just enough strength left me to make it effective. He kept on stooping until he lay flat on his face, motionless.

I looked around and saw some kind of aircraft moving between me and what was left of the sun. It was a good distance away and for an instant it reminded me of a galleon. It had a cobwebby filigree

appearance as it slid across the red bisected sphere.

Beneath it lay the city with its domes and swooping roads and spires. And there was the fiery ball of moving light or water, supported by its shifting arches. So this was Malesco.

I knew Malesco. Uncle Jim had told me about it too often for me not to know the place when I saw it.

I was just glancing shudderingly down at a formal garden below, in a sort of clear, shadowy well of air lit by sunset, when a deep sigh from my fallen enemy made me turn abruptly.

He hadn't moved. But I went rapidly back into the room and stood listening. Once I thought I heard footsteps outside, but they ceased and there was only silence except for an occasional muffled distant murmur of voices. I opened the door, the one my murderous friend had been listening at, and peered out through a narrow crack. I saw a hall well lighted.

I closed that door and tried the other one across the room. Beyond was another chamber of the same size with the same rusty cups in the upper corners. The wall opposite the door was a machine. At any rate it was solid with dials and panels and levers and things. It had a round flat face about as tall as I was. I looked at it. It looked at me. Nothing happened.

For the rest of the room, there was a curtain across one corner that screened a sort of clothes closet. In the middle of the floor was a small table. On the table was the remnant of a meal. There was a crust of bread, the green dregs of liquid in a cup and a fruit or vegetable the size of a radish with a wormhole in its pink skin.

On the floor by the table, lying as if someone had dropped it, was a

crumpled black robe. Beside the bread crust lay a tablet with circles drawn on it, most of them connected by straight lines, and the whole thing irritably crossed out with a few heavy strokes. I don't know why I thought of tic-tac-toe.

I walked back and forth, studying the machine hopefully from several angles. It made not the slightest sense to me.

However, it would have made just as much sense if it had been a Ford motor or a vacuum cleaner, so I let it go and went back to see if my victim had awakened.

He hadn't. I rolled him over and investigated. He wore a light tunic, heavy brown sandals, tight ankle-length trousers, pure white except for the dirt, and the striped headdress.

Oh, yes--he wore a bracelet and a ring on his left wrist and middle finger, and they were connected by a flexible band of the same metal--bluish-green. There was a pouch in his belt and, as I touched it--just before I touched it--the thing made a noise at me, like a rattlesnake giving warning.

Then it said something in a language I automatically translated and understood before I realized what that language was.

"Temple Headquarters," it remarked. "From the Priest of the Night. Falvi!"

Two thoughts collided inside my head. One of them brought my gaze down to my victim's striped headdress and the other made my lips move silently as I repeated the words I had just heard spoken. One and one are two. One and one are--

Malesco.

All of a sudden, I was remembering Uncle Jim's bedtime stories and how striped headaddresses had occasionally figured in those tales. Those who wore them bore the rank of--what had it been? Priest. And that meant--

My mind clamped down and rejected such an impossibility. I stood up, took a deep breath and wished I hadn't.

For this was the moment I'd been avoiding--the moment when I couldn't keep moving and would have to start thinking and realizing. I was in another world. (What world? Oh, no! I wasn't quite ready to believe that yet.)

The only other explanation was that I'd gone crazy and was really in a bed in Bellevue with doctors looking at me thoughtfully and remarking, "Obviously a hopeless case. Shall we try shock treatment, or should we experiment with that new method, the one that killed all the Rhesus monkeys?"

Meanwhile at my feet was an unconscious priest and beyond the railing lay the city, no longer rose-red, but darkening into evening. The sun had gone. Night came quickly here. I looked out over the eerily familiar view I'd dreamed of so often as a child.

The sense of wonder hadn't hit me yet. I wasn't even incredulous--yet. Anybody pitched headforemost into Oz or Graustark or any other familiar unreal world and finding it a real place after all would expect to be half-stunned by disbelief. I wasn't. There was no use disbelieving in Malesco--here it was. After a while, I told myself, I'll start being surprised. Then, there wasn't time.

The thing that I wanted to think about most when I got a moment was Uncle Jim. It had been no series of bedtime tales he'd told me then, he knew Malesco. All right--had he been here in person?

Had he just found some way to open the door between the worlds and look through, maybe listen, since he'd learned the language? I wanted time to think about it, but I hadn't any to spare right now. Too much was going on.

One thing was certain: the Malesco that Uncle Jim described to me had been the description of an eyewitness. There was the great flowing dome with its spires of bright water. He hadn't mentioned the patterns of lights visible all over the city after dark, though. Some of them were colored, some of them formed words. I could read Malescan. I knew advertising when I saw it.

This isn't happening, this isn't real, this is a dream I'm having and I'm ten years old again and Uncle Jim made the whole thing up.

The pouch at the priest's belt buzzed. Then it said something in a thin, inquiring voice.

"Falvi! Responde!"

Responde was pronounced the way it was written. I knew what it meant. Falvi I didn't know. It might be a proper noun. It might be the name of my priest. If so, Falvi wasn't going to responde and I guessed what would probably happen.

I thought I might be safer, somehow, out there in the city. Since there were lights, there would be darkness, too.

Chapter IV

Because I was in a hurry, I probably wasn't too logical. I'd wasted time. Since the priest had tried to kill me at sight--or at least to stuff me back where I came from through a hole in space and had not seemed to care much whether I fell to the pavement below in the process--I could probably expect similar treatment from other priests. At any rate it was hardly safe to assume I wouldn't get similar treatment.

I went into the room where the machine was, gazed up stupidly at its enigmatic round flat face and turned away, looking for that black cloak. I shook it out, snapped it around my throat, and discovered there were little magnetic clasps all along the front of it, so that when I pulled it down it fell neatly shut.

Then sudden panic seized me. What was I doing here anyway? What were my chances of finding Lorna in a bedtime-story world which I was probably dreaming up as I went along? The place for me was back in New York, where I came from. I turned rapidly and trotted back to the balcony, the cloak flapping at my heels.

I leaned out over the rail and the emptiness and began to grope in the air. But I didn't feel New York. What a hole in space would feel like was uncertain, of course. Rather like the hole in a doughnut, maybe. I had no real hope that I could get hold of something in my own apartment that was solidly anchored and haul myself home that way. It was too much like trying to lift myself by my bootstraps.

And yet I found myself violently reluctant to leave that balcony and go out in a world I didn't know at all. In a curious sort of way I'd been born into Malesco at this spot and I was too young in Malescan experience to like the prospect of seeking fame and fortune in a

world I never made.

I was a stranger and afraid—in a world I never made....

I had made Earth, you know. Everyone shapes a little part of his environment, and his parents and ancestors shaped other parts. Maybe that's why it will take a long time for people to get used to living on Venus or Mars. Anyhow, there was a queer sort of silver-cord feeling that held me to the balcony.

Suddenly I thought with some bitterness of the tales written about just such miracles as the one I was undergoing. Burroughs, in particular, and Haggard. But I wasn't on Barsoom now and I wasn't John Carter. He was made of the stuff of mythical heroes. He was indestructible.

I didn't feel specially heroic, but of course one never knows. And the heroism of one society is the rank cowardice of another. Malescan ethics might differ considerably from terrestrial ones. I didn't really think they would, but you never know.

My trouble was that I could be killed.

I hadn't thought much about such things back home. You don't lean too far out of high windows, you don't step in front of speeding cars and you don't touch hot wires because you've heard of electricity. Okay. In Malesco there was gravity and it seemed the usual kind. I could allow for that. But what about the unknown forces like electricity?

A Malescan in a subway in New York might very well sit on the third rail because it looked innocuous. In Malesco, I might sit on an atomic power plant without recognizing it. The priest's dumbbell-shaped weapons seemed to indicate some non-electrical force activating it, and the machine in the other room might operate on some power I'd

never heard of. Luckily I could read Malescan. I decided to keep my eyes open for signs reading cave! No, that was Latin--Malescan would be caveo.

I wasn't getting very far, leaning over this rail searching the air. The priest might wake up at any moment, and I would have to make up my mind whether to run, hide or throw myself on his mercy, such as it was.

I went back thoughtfully into the room and looked down at him. He was starting to twitch a little. Even in repose his face looked irritable and impulsive. It had better be either run or hide, I told myself. Preferably hide--but where?

There was the alcove with a rack of cloaks and robes behind a curtain. There wasn't any other cover I could think of, and I didn't dare go out into the hall and take a chance on other priests coming at me with dumbbells flashing blue fire.

This was the point at which the heroes of the conventional tales perform some miracle of physical or mental prowess and get the upper hand with the ease of long practice. But it was all new to me. I didn't feel heroic and I had no resources whatever.

In the room where the priest lay I heard a thin voice call, "Falvi!" again. A groan answered it. The prostrate priest moved his hand. I was as good as caught and I knew it. This was the spot where John Carter would have sprung easily to the top of a ten-foot wall that providentially didn't quite reach the ceiling, there to lie hidden while his enemies searched in vain.

In the tales the enemies never looked up, of course. But all the walls here reached to the ceiling, and even if they hadn't I gravely doubted my ability to dart up them like a startled cat. I wasn't as resourceful as

Carter. The best thing that occurred to me was to dive into that clothes closet and burrow my way among the robes into the corner. If I squatted down, the black cloak I was wearing would hide my feet.

It wasn't very good. Fortunately for me it didn't have to be. If I wasn't a resourceful hero, neither was my adversary a very resourceful villain. He was just an ordinary guy who'd been knocked out and felt rattled and confused when he finally came to.

Between two garments and the edge of the curtain I saw him sit up, groan and put his head in his hands. The voice at his waist said irritably, "Falvi! Responde!"

He shook his head a couple of times, looked dizzily around, and then suddenly muttered something and scrambled to his feet. His face was frightened. It was worse than frightened. For some reason he was on a spot so bad that things couldn't possibly get worse and somehow or other I was responsible.

I knew that. I knew by the way he looked around the room, obviously searching for me. I was very glad I wasn't in plain sight. My refuge seemed pitifully inadequate now, but it was too late to change it. Luckily the priest seemed to be an amateur too at this sort of thing.

He scuttled out on the balcony, and I watched his back as he bent over the edge and peered hopefully downward. Since I wasn't visible, either climbing down the wall or spread out on the pavement below, he came back again and this time his eye caught the half-open door to the hall.

It was sheer luck that I had left it open. He must have jumped to the conclusion that I had fled. Of course he had no way of knowing how long he'd been unconscious. It might have been hours and I might have got clear away a long time ago.

He hurried to the door and I heard him take a few uncertain steps outside. But he came back in a moment and shut the door firmly. By the look on his face I was sure he had ulcers. He was the kind of guy who always does have ulcers.

The little voice at his belt called again and this time he took a thing like a white waffle out of his pouch and did something very odd. He yawned into it. That is, he made the noises a man makes when he's slowly waking out of deep sleep.

I was surprised, but not entirely, by the yawn. A light had gone on beyond his shoulder, out there in the slowly lighting city. Sheer astonishment made me blank to everything but the thing I saw spread across the whole side of a building about a block away. It was a picture of Lorna's face.

It must have been huge, though from where I crouched I could see it all and it looked small in perspective. The picture was illuminated and was on something like stained glass, though not formalized the way stained glass pictures usually are. I knew it was Lorna's face, but for a long moment I just didn't believe it.

It was Lorna's face, all right, but glamorized as though Arden had collaborated with Rubinstein and then turned it over to a Romney who's become a religious idealist. Just as Romney had on canvas given Lady Hamilton qualities that essentially bird-brained woman never possessed, so this super-electric sign changed Lorna Maxwell into a very beautiful woman with a strangely etherealized appearance.

Over the portrait head was a huge golden a--a rather mystifying letter which I noticed standing alone in gold lights elsewhere here and there through the city. It seemed to mean something. Under Lorna's portrait was the word or name clia.

"Falvi!"

I'd almost got used to that thin urgent voice. It was the answering voice that brought my attention back--a drowsy startled murmur, then the falsely brisk tone of a man suddenly awakened.

"In the name of the Phoenix. Falvi to the Hierarch. There is peace in the Earth-Gates watchroom."

"Were you asleep?"

"I--ah--I was contemplating the mysteries."

"You'll have a chance to contemplate the mysteries in solitude when I report this to the Hierarch." There was a pause. Then: "Falvi, if you're sleepy I'll put someone else on. But I'm supposed to be responsible tonight. If there's trouble the Hierarch will devour my--" There followed a word I didn't understand.

"Sorry," Falvi said. "Could you get some other priest to take over? I--I think I'm sick."

"Right away," the thin voice agreed and there was silence, in which I could hear Falvi's hard breathing.

I stood perfectly motionless, waiting. Curiously, though Falvi and his communicant sounded nothing at all like Uncle Jim, I'd had a ghostly feeling that it was Uncle Jim who spoke. For their language was Malescan and it was only in his voice that I had ever heard that tongue spoken before.

Of course I hadn't understood every nuance of meaning. But obvious shades of inflection in the voices made the sense unmistakable. Malescan is a simple language, though until now I had never realized

just how simple it really was. I'd never questioned it any more than you question pig-Latin or any childhood memory of a code.

Malescan is pronounced the way it's spelled, or at least the way Uncle Jim spelled it in his notes. And the illuminated signs I'd seen confirmed most of his spelling. Then too it seemed based on Latin and anybody who remembers his high-school Latin can make a good guess at the meanings of any language that stems from it.

Falvi came to the doorway and looked out across the city. He said a low word under his breath. Then I realized that Malescan stems partly from Anglo-Saxon, too!

"Obscenity New York!" Falvi said furiously, and before I could realize the full implications of that reference, he turned back into the room and disappeared. New York—he had said New York.

I gazed across the city at the beautiful transfigured face of Lorna Maxwell and longed for the safe familiar environment of Barsoom.

Falvi was speaking again.

"Coriole," he said quietly. "Dom Coriole!"

There was a wild buzzing which ended in a squeaky voice that said "--wanted me to make the robe for her and I'm just too good-natured to say no, but where I'll get time to--"

"Private beam!" Falvi snapped—or perhaps it was "line" or "circuit." I couldn't translate literally. But I got the sense of the words and heard them as colloquial rather than formalized because I was used to thinking colloquially myself.

There was a pause during which Falvi's gaze moved uneasily about the room. I shrank back shyly among the cloaks. Then an oily giggle

sounded.

"I am in spasms," said a thin voice. "Yes, positively in spasms. Purdelor has told me the funniest quip I've heard in years. I nearly split myself laughing. I laughed till I cried. Do you remember Dom Pheres? He always insisted--"

"Coriole, listen! This is Falvi. Somebody else has come through."

"--insisted that his name ought to be pronounced Peres--don't interrupt, I must tell you this."

Falvi was trying to mention somebody named or called the Hierarch.

"Be quiet," Coriole said with thin cheerfulness. "Insisted that his name ought to be pronounced Peres--you have that? So Morander, one evening over dinner, said, 'If you please, Dom Peres, will you hand me the paselae?' Paselae! Oh, ha, ha, ha, ha!" There were wild giggles.

"Damnatio!" Falvi said, presumably seeing no more point to the joke than I did. I felt a twinge of sympathy for the harassed priest. What Coriole needed was an appreciative studio audience, I thought. But I was underestimating the man.

Falvi said with furious patience, "I was guarding the Earth-Gates tonight and another one came through--a man, this time--and he knocked me out and got away. Ha, ha."

Coriole's chuckles died.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you were playing with the Earth-Gates--"

"I never touched them."

"Lie to the Hierarch if you like but don't try it with me, Falvi. What was the man like, eh?"

It was a curious sensation to me, cowering in the clothes closet, hearing myself accurately described. I had a momentary sense of having been discovered, as though the shadows had been driven away by a bright light. I stared at Lorna's face beyond Falvi and the balcony. That steadied me.

Very often in Malesco I needed that steadiness. I kept finding myself inclined to slip over into an odd state in which everything seemed quite unreal and it was difficult for me to move or even think.

A touch of that helpless passivity gripped me now, and for a second Falvi seemed unimportant and unreal. The fact that he was announcing his decision to find and kill me had an abstruse interest, no more than that.

"If you harm him I'll break your neck," Coriole said. "You hear me?"

"All right, I won't touch him," Falvi said in an unconvincing tone. "If any of the other priests have found him he may be dead already. I don't know."

"He sounds like the man you say Clia described. Well, meet me at the Baths immediately."

"But this is the night the--"

"Bless me, this is the night I thought I was on horseback," Coriole said and chuckled again. A humorist, part of my mind said. The other part was considering Lorna's face a block away and the name clia under it. So I sounded like the man Clia described, did I? That meant Clia was Lorna, a deduction which required little brilliance on my part.

"It's nothing to joke about," Falvi said. "The Hierarch won't believe I didn't touch the Earth-Gates."

"Naturally he won't," Coriole said. "He knows you're a liar. Meet me at the Baths immediately. Hurry along. This man who came through may be exactly what we need. If you harm him I'll be inclined to wash my hands of you."

"Listen, if he's wandering through the Temple in the clothes he had on he'll be stopped before--"

"There's been no alarm yet, has there? Come along. Leave the thinking to me. I'm qualified for it. And don't try to act on your own. You're not indispensable."

"Perhaps you're not either."

At this Coriole burst into wild thin giggles, sounding rather like a disembodied goblin, and gasped, "Saturn mend you, indeed! It would be less trouble to make a new one. Oh, hurry along. When I explain you'll see why we need this man alive. Less trouble to make--" The giggling died.

"Damned comedian," Falvi said under his breath, then, louder, "Your jokes smell. You're a fool, Coriole. Nobody thinks you're funny. And if I find that man I'll kill him so fast he won't even notice. Maybe it doesn't matter to you whether or not I get in trouble but--"

His words became mutters. I gathered that the "walkie-talkie" had been turned off before Falvi began his diatribe. This seemed to indicate that Falvi was both sensible and cautious.

Then a door slammed and it was time for me to decide what to do next.

Chapter V

That was not difficult to figure out but the trouble was to put any sort of plan into action. Any move I made might reveal my identity to enemies. And I had excellent reason to suspect that this temple, or palace, or skyscraper was full of potential enemies--all quite willing to kill me on sight once they discovered I was no Malescan.

So I had to find Lorna. I was completely blindfolded. What I needed most of all was information. What I most wanted was information about how to get home. Meanwhile I badly needed to be briefed. Lorna--going under the name of Clia, I gathered--had found a safe spot in Malesco. I couldn't tell how she'd done it nor, naturally, did I know exactly how safe that spot might be. But if some sesame existed I wanted to know it.

It was quite simple: I was in a dark labyrinth, full of pitfalls and traps, and there was a gleam of light in the distance. So I had to reach that light, which meant information and perhaps help. My immediate goal was Lorna, and I didn't dare think beyond that. While I hated the idea of leaving the room which connected, somehow, with my New York apartment, finding Lorna would mean a very real contact with my own world.

It took me no time at all to make sure the room was empty, cautiously emerge from the closet and, on second thought, dive back into it and search till I located a headdress with flaps such as Falvi wore. It had blue stripes and shadowed my face effectively when I donned it. Then I went to the outside door and peeped out in time to see Falvi walk through a doorway down the hall and disappear.

That left the hall quite empty. I stepped boldly out and hurried after Falvi, passing a few closed doors. Along the ceiling there were more

of the metal cups, pouring out light, a milky flowing glow that dissolved in the air and gave a gentle daylight illumination.

Several I passed were burned out and another one was flickering wanly. On the doors themselves I noticed symbols engraved: a formalized bird and a trident on each one and Roman numerals, xvi, xvii, and so forth.

Where Falvi had vanished was an opening in the wall, as large as a doorway. It seemed to be a small elevator shaft, lighted from within. A foreshortened Falvi was twenty feet below, floating down very gently.

I supposed it was Falvi, but all I could see were the headdress and his feet. He resembled a squashed dwarf. He didn't look up and I laid one hand on the wall to brace myself and stared down at him.

There seemed to be no cables nor other mechanical elevator devices, though of course Falvi might be standing on a perfectly transparent floor that was slowly sinking beneath him. I noticed his shadow appear on the wall behind him and vanish as he went on down.

When I looked up I saw part of my own shadow--the deformed head startled me till I remembered the flaps of my headdress--across the shaft, so I understood that Falvi was dropping past similar openings on other floors.

I leaned farther out and counted the brighter patches of illumination. Falvi went down seven levels before he stepped out. Then the shaft was empty and it seemed to go on down for quite a distance.

I was considering the possibility of tossing something into the shaft as a test to see if it would float or plunge when my shadow on the

opposite wall blurred slightly and became suddenly double. My state of mind by now was such that I found myself seriously considering whether I could possibly have two heads. In the same instant I turned to see what had cast the second shadow.

I found myself looking into a pair of very bright expectant eyes on a level with mine. Another priest had come up behind me without a sound and was watching me with a look that reminded me uncomfortably of a cat watching a mouse.

There were extraordinary alertness and anticipation in the face between the flaps of the priestly headdress. He was young and there was a faintly dissipated air about him as though he'd had a big night recently. He wore his robes with a certain negligent elegance that was far from ecclesiastic.

I went into a state of concealed shock. How long had he been following me? From Falvi's door? And why? That expectancy on his face was frightening. He was so clearly waiting for me to do something. But what? From the penetrating interest of his eyes I was ready to believe that he was reading my innermost thoughts and finding them, on the whole, rather amusing.

I had no idea what one priest did when he met another. Before I could come to any decision about how to save my hide, though, he saved it for me by murmuring, "Pardae-se," in a polite voice and squeezing past me into the shaft, still not taking that ironic gaze from mine.

I had a strong impression that he knew exactly what had been happening and was simply waiting for me to give myself away. He lifted one eyebrow at me as he slowly sank, a quizzical look that seemed to ask what I was waiting for.

That decided me. After all, what would John Carter have done? The priest was about ten feet down, his head still tilted back to watch me and a grin was beginning to broaden upon his face. I took a deep breath and stepped out into emptiness, confidently expecting a sort of antigravity skyhook to grip me and lower me gently down the shaft.

This did not happen. I dropped like a bullet, head over basket, with the full velocity and acceleration of a freefalling body. I had a glimpse of the priest floating down calmly beneath me--he seemed to be standing still--and then I hit him and we were in a wild Laocoon group, with me playing the python.

He grabbed me, not that it was necessary, because I was hanging on to him like a frantic cat. There was a brief, mad scuffle, which subsided gradually. Clinging together, we drifted slowly downward.

Our faces were quite close now, naturally enough, and the priest's was full of triumphant excitement. I had an idea that I had given myself hopelessly away and that this was just what he'd expected. The look on his face said he knew I was from New York, knew I'd come through Falvi's forbidden Earth-Gates, whatever they were, and the next stop would be the ecclesiastical firing squad.

Just to clinch the matter he spoke to me. It was, of course, Malescan and it meant nothing at all. My ears were ringing anyhow and I was shaking all over with shock and sheer un-heroic fright. The shaft below us looked bottomless. I breathed hard and stared into the bright triumphant eyes about six inches from mine.

He repeated himself more slowly and this time I understood.

"You're lucky I caught you," he said. "You might get reported."

I had heard enough of the spoken Malescan tongue to catch the right

emphasis and accent. But I still wasn't sure I could speak it naturally. I had to try though. My words came out in a series of gasps--an excellent way of disguising unfamiliarity with a language, by the way.

"I was thinking of something else," I said.

The effect on him was tremendous. I think if I hadn't been clutching him so tightly he might have let me drop in his surprise. For a moment I wondered if I'd made some astounding error in speech. Then I realized that the fact I'd spoken at all--in Malescan--was what startled him so much. He hadn't expected it. His face went perfectly blank for a moment.

When expression came back to it he allowed only the slightest glimmer of what must have been great disappointment to show through before he pulled himself together and spoke again. This time the malicious expectancy and the penetrating intentness of his look had vanished.

"What did you say?" he asked politely.

"I said I was thinking of something else."

A flicker of the keen suspicion came back into the quick gaze he turned on me. I realized then that I simply didn't know Malescan well enough to pass as a native.

"Well, you'd better think of the Hierarch next time," the priest said, his eyes never swerving from mine. "What are you talking like that for?"

"I bit my tongue," I said hastily.

"Bit your nose?" he asked. "How could you do that? Oh, your tongue."

I met his bright stare briefly and then glanced aside at the walls, slipping up slowly around us. Was he simply amusing himself with me? I wasn't sure and I didn't think he was either. Certainly he was suspicious, but he had nothing definite to go on. The fact that I could speak Malescan even passably seemed to knock the bottom out of whatever theory he had formulated about me. Still....

"Where do you want out?" he asked, still politely, his tone making a rather insolent contrast to the look on his face.

"I'm going to the Baths," I hazarded.

"Oh, are you? I'll let you off at the main floor, then. I don't know you, do I? You must be fresh from the Crucible."

I nodded.

"No?" the priest said. "But--"

"I mean yes," I corrected, making a mental note on the permutations of symbolic gestures in various cultures. "I'm still fresh from the Crucible."

"A little too fresh," he told me. "You must be from Ferae. Nothing personal but the Feraen dialect is suitable only for talking to dogs. I'm Dio and I know the best" --he used a word I didn't catch--"in the city if you need advice."

"Thanks," I said, wondering if I should tell him my name and finding my mind totally blank when it came to choosing a Malescan nom-de-guerre. I didn't know enough about proper nouns. I might ignorantly call myself the equivalent of Santa Claus or Little Bo Peep.

I grimaced and said my tongue hurt.

He seemed to be thinking. "Did I bite your nose?" he asked suddenly. "I don't remember doing it. But when you fell on me that way--"

"It's all right," I said.

"Where's your pouch?"

"I forgot it."

"Don't they teach you anything at the Ferae Crucible?" He glanced up the shaft. "Here we are." He lunged forward, carrying me, and we found ourselves standing in a room the size of Grand Central, quite as noisy and crowded and busy. To the left was a great open archway with darkness beyond. The fresh wind blowing in told me it was the open air.

"No use going back for your pouch now," the priest Dio said, reaching toward his belt. "I'll lend you some grain." He put a few coins into my hand. "Don't forget to pay it back. I'm Dio, remember, on the twenty-third Goose of Hermogenes at the fifth Cherub."

"Well--thanks," I said. He looked at me blandly. His dissipated young face had lost its brilliant intentness now and was a little sleepy, as if with satisfaction. Sometime during our brief conversation he had come to a decision about me.

I couldn't understand him at all. If Falvi's prognosis were right any priest who recognized me for a newcomer from Earth was pretty certain to shoot first and ask questions later. Why, I didn't know yet.

Dio's behavior was simply confusing the issue still further. If he knew me for a stranger, he ought to report me. If he didn't, why was he looking so complacent now? He was the cat that had swallowed the canary, and found it more than satisfying.

"I hope they taught you honesty at the Ferae Crucible," he said.

Was he really going to let me go? I could hardly believe it. There might even be time to catch up with Falvi, given a little luck.

"I'll pay you back," I said. "Don't worry."

He shrugged and I started to turn away, hardly believing my own good fortune. Either Falvi had exaggerated the danger that waited me from the priests or--

"Just a minute, you," Dio's voice hailed me over the half-dozen steps that parted us. I knew by the tone of it, even before I turned, that he was grinning. The bright malice was on his face again as our eyes met.

"I think there's something you ought to know," he said. "There haven't been any Crucibles in Ferae for thirty years."

He beamed at me. "Well, good night," he said and stood there, smiling.

I felt exactly as if he'd kicked me in the stomach. There was danger. If I'd ever seen danger in my life I saw it in his face. He knew all about me or enough about me to get me killed. And yet he was still standing there, still smiling, waiting for me to go.

I took a tentative backward step as soon as I could 'breathe again. He was perfectly capable of letting me get to the very door before he raised a shout and set the pack on me. It was open season for Earthmen, all right, and Dio liked the idea.

I thought, "He'll give me sixty seconds, then he'll yell," and I turned and walked toward the door with long, firm steps. The best I could

hope for was to get out into the dark before he started the alarm. It wasn't much, but it offered a better chance than this crowded hall.

I glanced around nervously at the thronging priests. They were all dressed alike here except that some didn't wear the outer robes and others were bareheaded. Even in my alarm I noticed the surprisingly atypical haircuts of Malesco.

One priest had a ruff of red hair rising up like a rooster's comb, another had the front of his head shaved and long ringlets hanging down the back. A third had a shaved parting down the center, more than an inch wide. They looked funny to me then, but if Dio raised the alarm before I got to the door they'd probably cease to look funny and become wholly frightening.

I was six steps from the door. I was one step from the door. I stepped out under it onto the lighted steps. I couldn't help glancing back as I hurried down into the darkness. Dio's glance had flicked away from me as he lifted a hand and nodded casually to a passing priest. As I turned I saw his eyes come back to me, and he stroked his jaw in an affectionate way.

I kept going, heading toward the open archway ahead. I was feeling foolish again in the uncertain letdown. Was there any danger, after all? Had Falvi known what he was talking about? Certainly Coriole, whoever he was, seemed to take my danger seriously. If I could find Falvi and follow him to Coriole, maybe I could find out the truth.

Beyond the arch was a formal garden, stretched out into a park that ended at a high wall. But from the threshold itself a paved road ran straight to another gate in the wall, and a line had formed there. I hurried in that direction, trying to accustom my eyes to the night.

Just at the gate was a splash of light from one of the overhead metal

cups. I saw a priest standing casually behind a tall crystal vase as high as his waist. As the line moved forward and each priest came abreast of the vase he tossed a coin into it. The cashier seemed too bored to pay much attention to his job though he kept one steady eye on the vase.

I joined the line, looking back. Through the open arch leading into the great hall I could see the moving throngs, but I couldn't see Dio now. That didn't mean anything. I felt very very anxious to get on the other side of the temple wall. What I would do there I didn't know yet but....

There were a dozen priests ahead of me, moving forward slowly. I heard the clink of coins. How much should I contribute? Why had Dio given me the--grain? Most of all, who was he? How much did he know and what was his game?

Someone pushed me roughly from behind. I started to swing around and one of the flaps of my headdress swung across my face so that I was momentarily blinded. In that second of darkness. I heard Falvi's familiar voice say, "Keep moving, will you?"

I turned my head back again toward the front, faster than I'd turned it toward Falvi. He was standing right behind me. I hurriedly moved forward, closing the gap between me and the next priest. I heard Falvi's feet scuffle behind me.

Fine--wonderful! Of course it was a lucky break that I hadn't lost Falvi after all, that I could still depend on him to lead me to Lorna. But my back felt singularly unprotected. I could feel rings being drawn concentrically on the back of my robe, with a bull's-eye just in the center, where a knife would be most effective. Inevitably I was moving closer to the splash of light by the cashier.

There were six priests ahead of me... five... four. I looked rigidly

ahead, the coins clutched in my hot little palm. Automatically, I noted the size and shape of the "grain" being tossed into the vase. Automatically, I opened my hand and selected a coin that seemed identical. Then there were two men ahead of me... one... nobody at all.

I bent my head forward, so that the flaps fell forward too, and hoped my profile wouldn't be visible to Falvi. I dropped a coin in the vase. The cashier glanced at me sharply, ran his eyes down toward my legs--my shoes and trousers!

"Wait a bit!" he said, meeting my eyes again. "You're out of uniform." That wasn't his exact phrase, but the meaning was identical.

And then Falvi yelled in my ear,

"Blast it, Vesto, keep your nose clean! I'm in a hurry! Step it up, step it up."

He shoved me through the gate and as I hastily moved to one side, I heard a violent altercation begin between Vesto and Falvi. It ended in a perfect scream of rage from Falvi, and the next thing I knew he was through the gate too and hurrying into the shadows.

Vesto appeared briefly and swore after him. I moved away in the opposite direction. When Vesto retreated I circled and began to trail Falvi, being doubly careful till we were both past the huge brightly lit open square that faced the temple.

Chapter VI

It's no more difficult than a Chicago man suddenly finding himself in Bombay, or Lhasa, or Moscow, dressed in the appropriate local costume. But the boy from State Street has seen newsreels of those places, he's read about them and he knows there are French and English in Bombay. And, anyway, there's not much basic difference between a rickshaw and a Dynaflo.

All the same he'll get a queer picture of Bombay, just as I did of this Malescan city. One reason was that I was afraid to try anything new that might unmask me by revealing my ignorance. A Martian might follow the crowds down a b.m.t. subway entrance and he'd get along fine till he ran up against the coin-operated turnstile. Then he'd start frantically wondering what peculiar ritual was required.

He might figure out how the change booths worked; but unless he had some u.s. currency, he'd be sunk. Even if he spoke English there'd still be trouble, since nobody in one of those New York subway change booths has ever been known to speak in human tongues,

I certainly couldn't make much of the coins Dio had loaned me. I took them out and examined them as I went along. They all bore Roman numerals--i, ii, v, xx--as well as puzzling symbols like those I had seen on the doors in the Temple. But none was of a recent enough mintage for me to make out details. They all had ornamental curlicues on the edges, like our own milled edges, so I guessed that Malesco had its coin shavers too.

Malesco--oh, it was a rose-red city, all right. But some of the walls had graffiti scrawled on them--words my uncle hadn't listed in his vocabulary, though it was easy to figure some of them out--and the

streets weren't especially clean. The city wasn't crowded, though. I didn't see any throngs except once. A gang of people had got a man in gray coveralls backed up against a building and were yelling at him. That should have been my cue to spring to the victim's aid. He could have been the prince of some neighboring country and have been suitably grateful for my help.

But when an air-car swooped down and grounded gently not far away, I hastily joined the crowd and yelled with them. Men in uniform were getting out of the air-car, which was built like a chariot, ornately decorated with scrolls and gilded curlicues.

The police dragged their victim away and, from what I overheard, I decided the "prince" was a pickpocket who'd been caught. So that was all right.

Falvi seemed to know where he was going. I never lost sight of that hurrying figure with its flapping headdress. I had a sense of immediate urgency for I remembered Dio very clearly. He knew who I was. Or did he?

I didn't form a complete picture of the city as I trailed Falvi. All I got were flashes, like the way a moving light slipped along one of the overhead causeways, the luminous jewelry some of the people wore, men and women both, and a flutter of confetti that blew past me down the street. One coil wrapped itself around my neck and as I pulled it free I saw lettering on the paper. Come to the Bath of the Divine Water, it said in Malescan.

Well, that was what I meant to do if I could find the place.

A few aspects of the city stood out even above my preoccupation: one was the curious attitude of the populace toward the priests. The first time a man stepped off the sidewalk into the gutter and bowed

to me, with a touch of masochistic abasement in the gesture, I almost stopped in my tracks.

My first thought was that he'd seen through my disguise and was staging some elaborate joke before he hit me over the head and dragged me back to my doom. Then I saw he meant it. But what was expected of me in response I had no idea.

I looked ahead at Falvi. All I could see was the top of his head bobbing along in a straight hasty course. If this were happening to me, maybe it was happening to him too and he seemed to pay no attention. I took a chance and stalked haughtily by the bowing man. I didn't dare look back to see what his reaction was. Nothing happened, so that was all right too. And luckily not every person I passed felt quite that pious.

But they did get out of my way with respectful glances. I began after a while to check on the expression they turned on me, trying to figure out what was going on. Most of them looked just respectful--stupid and awed. Some glowered but stood aside. Some gave me looks of sheer hatred.

Now and then somebody would all but throw himself at my feet in the same abject deference the first man had shown. Maybe it was consciousness of sin. Maybe these men had some guilt on their minds they thought I could read in their faces and were showing penitence by groveling in the gutter when I passed.

I didn't like it, and I didn't like the idea of a priesthood that would encourage such an attitude, but, after all, Malesco wasn't my responsibility. All I wanted was to get out of it, and take Lorna with me if I could find her.

I can't begin to tell you all the mystifying things I saw in that quick walk

through the streets of Malesco. It wasn't like our cities. If it wasn't a place out of the Arabian Nights, neither was it the equivalent of New York and Chicago. There were shops, but their displays were mostly hidden and what I could see was arranged in ways that didn't make sense to me.

There were vehicles in the streets, but they didn't make much sense either beyond the fact that they moved, carried passengers and seemed to obey traffic laws of a sort. Once in a while I saw moving lights in the sky and remembered the aircraft I'd already encountered.

There were no newspapers. You'd be surprised how you can miss commonplace things like that. Until you do miss them you don't realize what a big part newspapers play in normal city life. There was no litter of torn printed pages in the gutter, no noisy newsboys yelling on corners, no stands of magazines and dailies, nobody with a folded paper under his arm.

But what I did see every few blocks, which as I later learned was the equivalent, was a long rack against buildings which held on slanting shelves rows of big looseleaf paper volumes about the size of the average tabloid. Each rack had several people reading with their elbows on the shelf, turning the pages.

You paid a penny and read your daily news right out in public. I wished for time to stop and see what was new in Malesco myself, but Falvi was moving fast ahead of me. There was no time to do more than steal a glance as I passed the stands, earning a look of resentment from the penny collector when I did so.

If I had known my rights as a priest I could simply have put one of the volumes under my arm and walked off and nobody would have dared to complain. But I didn't know that and I hadn't time then anyhow.

I went on after Falvi.

Strange things continued to happen all around me. I was getting used to the looks of awe, hatred or abject deference on the faces I passed. But I had a lot of other things to get used to, too. For instance, a voice suddenly and urgently whispered in my ear, "Listen!"

I halted where I was. I looked around over my shoulder, but there was no one near me. The only suspicious sight was a man in the priestly robe and headdress across the street, hurrying in the same direction that I was. But he was too far away to be the--

"Listen!" the whisper came again. "It's important! Your life may depend on it!"

For a second I dithered like a skeleton hung on wires. There just wasn't anyone near enough to me to whisper in my ear. And the whisper had a strange fading quality like a voice on the radio when you play with the dial.

"This is the secret," said the voice, brightening. "Drink Elixir, the refreshing tonic that makes you live longer." Then it broke into song. "Elixir, Elixir, Mother Ceres' fixer," it caroled and changed to a conspiratorial whisper again. "Listen! Listen! It's important--"

I cursed quietly and took up the trail again. Falvi was just turning a corner. I walked faster, occasionally running into a gust of auditory advertising that seemed to blow invisibly past me like confetti streamers. My first glimpse of Malesco, with the glamorous rose-red city gleaming in the sunset, hadn't prepared me for the uses of publicity as practiced there.

I rounded the corner and there was Falvi, safely ahead. He hadn't

once looked back. He was hurrying along the curving street, moving from dimness to brightness as light from shop windows irregularly shone on him.

I remembered what I'd seen when I'd looked around a moment ago. I'd seen a priest on the opposite side of the street. It meant nothing, of course, but I couldn't help glancing around again. And there, turning the corner, was Dio.

He was dodging a group of adolescents walking arm in arm across half the sidewalk and he didn't seem to see me looking back at him. He didn't seem to see the adolescents either except as objects to be avoided. I had a clear view of his face through the pedestrians, and I saw with unpleasant clarity the fierce anticipatory joy he was not even trying to conceal.

I spun back again, remembering Falvi, wondering how much of that anticipating triumph applied to Falvi and how much to me. The thin priest was just vanishing around a corner ahead and I hurried after him, feeling those concentric rings making a target of my back again. I knew Dio was behind me and I knew he meant me anything but good.

Yet what could I do about it? I couldn't lose him without losing Falvi and my only hope of reaching a potential friend. And yet I was leading Dio straight to Coriole. I couldn't get to Coriole at all unless I led Dio, too.

And from what I'd overheard I suspected Coriole's safety depended on secrecy. Coriole discovered might be Coriole liquidated for all I knew. What good would he be to me liquidated? There didn't seem any way out of the noose I was running my neck into.

So we all trudged on through the rose-red city in our little game of

follow-the-leader. Meanwhile, I was busily turning over schemes for thwarting Dio, by-passing Falvi and joining forces with Coriole.

The smart thing would have been to warn Falvi about our mutual follower. No doubt he would have some resource at his fingertips for dealing with spies. I could catch up with him easily. I could tap him on the shoulder and say:

"Listen! It's important! Drink Elix--" No, that was something else entirely. I felt a little drunk. I was not made of the indestructible stuff of heroes. Already I was getting tired, my head ached and I was wondering where my next meal would come from. If I warned Falvi of our mutual follower, he could fix Dio easily enough. But first he'd fix me. So the two of us diligently led Dio directly toward Coriole.

After about three turns, Falvi hit a broad thoroughfare that led straight to a familiar sight. Now I could see a sign glowing in colored lights ahead of us that said Bath of the Divine Waters, in crawling Malescan letters and I knew I couldn't miss the place. You could see the Divine Water for miles. It was that huge globe of fiery liquid movement I had first glimpsed from my apartment--the rose-red globe that had formed a background for Lorna's fall into another world.

Lorna, I thought, Lorna Maxwell. It had to be Lorna I had got myself into Malesco to find--not a beautiful princess dripping with jewels. Not a lovely heiress from an old titled family whose life hung on my dashing accomplishments with sword and pistol. No, I was here to find Lorna Maxwell. It confirmed still further my uneasy suspicion that I was not the hero of this drama.

We were halfway down the thoroughfare to the Baths when a minor miracle happened. A chord of music sounded from nowhere, almost inaudible at first and then swelling upon the air until every other

sound of the city was temporarily drowned out. Everybody stopped dead still in the streets. Everybody looked up.

I looked up, too, in time to see an expanding circle of light dawn like a ghostly sun upon a cloud straight overhead. It was full dark by now and there was no moon. But the sky was full of stars, though I could see only the brightest of them because the city's illumination drowned out all the rest.

I was a little startled to see the Dipper, practically the only constellation I know. Things hadn't changed as much as I'd thought if the stars were still in their familiar places over Malesco.

Then a face began to take shape in the luminous sun that glowed upon the cloud. An enormous sigh breathed up from the city, almost inaudible, a breath from every man and woman of all these thousands around me in the streets. The face grew clearer. It took on familiar features.

Another few seconds and Lorna Maxwell was smiling down at me from the clouds, a vast luminous Lorna idealized like the poster I'd seen on the side of a building. She looked lovely. She looked tender and sweet. Her smile was exquisite. She just couldn't be Lorna Maxwell.

The smile faded slowly. This was no poster, it was a reflection on the cloud of the woman herself, whoever she was. The vast, shining blue eyes, each as large as a good-sized swimming pool, beamed softly down upon Malesco. The music fell silent and the lovely lips on the cloud parted. Lorna's voice spoke to the breathless city.

It was Lorna, all right. The voice, like the face, was idealized almost out of all recognition—but not quite. Just enough of the old Lorna's inflection and tonal qualities remained to make me sure I knew her.

Down from the sky the gentle music of the voice floated softly.

"It is the hour for my withdrawal now," Lorna informed the city. "Now I go to my meditation and all of you, my faithful friends, go out to your evening's pastimes. Go with my blessing, Malescans. Remember your priests and their teachings.

"Drop your tithe without fail into the Temple box when you pay your entrance fees tonight. Be virtuous, be happy. Ensure your reincarnation into higher calling by your conduct tonight and every night. I will await you in Paradise, my friends. I will await you in the sacred pathways of New York."

I heard a tremendous breath of murmured response all around me as the image began to fade. I couldn't believe what the words were that every man and woman within hearing said as Lorna grew dimmer upon the cloud. And yet I couldn't mistake it. What everyone in the city was murmuring in hushed devout accents was an echo of Lorna's last words.

"New York! New York!" all Malesco whispered, and the light faded from overhead.

Chapter VII

Falvi hurried up the broad steps under the dome of the Baths. The colored lights that said Bath of the Divine Waters cast changing reflections on the street and shimmered in the glass of the change-maker's booth beside the entrance. I saw Falvi drop a coin in the glass bowl on the side of the booth and the man at the door clicked a turnstile and let him in.

In a daze I followed him up the steps, fumbling for the "grain" Dio had lent me. I felt both bewildered and heartened by what I had seen in the sky. It still made no sense, but I felt much more important than I had fifteen minutes earlier.

It didn't add up, of course. One person fell through into Malesco from Earth and was given some sort of super-beauty treatment and enthroned as a goddess mouthing what I couldn't help regarding as rather chauvinistic gibberish from the clouds. Another person fell through--me--and was instantly set upon by priests and hounded like a criminal through the streets.

The New York angle of this very materialistic religion in Malesco I wouldn't let myself think about. It was too entirely impossible. Later, maybe someone would explain it to me. Until then I couldn't allow myself to speculate. I would pretend it never happened. The sacred pathways of New York!

The effect of that vision on the clouds had been enormous. When it faded the city had buzzed with awed murmurings, and even now the normal noises of crowds and traffic were not yet back to their previous volume. I overheard enough on the streets to realize that Lorna's visitation was accepted as something like a miracle. Nobody understood or attempted to understand how such a thing could be

achieved mechanically.

This confused me still more. A city of the technological level that Malesco seemed to enjoy ought not to be rendered speechless with awe at the projection of a television image or the broadcasting of a human voice.

Naturally I didn't know how the priests had done the job.

Maybe by drawing a pentagram and working black magic. But I knew how it could be done, so the only awe I felt was amazement at the change in Lorna.

Falvi vanished under the great arched entrance above me. He was certainly an inefficient conspirator. It seemed to me anybody who glanced at him would know without looking twice that here was a spy on the way to plot with a mastermind ringleader for the overthrow of the government.

The way he kept looking nervously over his shoulder was in itself a complete giveaway. He glanced again without seeing me--even that showed what a failure he was as a secret agent--and then disappeared into the building.

I wasn't any too sure of myself. My trouser cuffs and shoes showing under the priestly robes made me nervous. If they'd been lit up with neons I couldn't have felt any more conspicuous. I was afraid of losing Falvi, but I just didn't dare walk up to that booth and try to bluff my way in.

So I waited until a group of five or six men came along, just cheerful enough to be careless, and fell in behind them as they climbed the steps. One of the men threw several coins in the glass bowl beside the booth.

They started to file in through the turnstile and the man in the booth called something after them that I didn't hear very clearly. But the head man looked back, grinned sheepishly, then threw another coin into a box on the wall.

The Temple box, I thought--the priestly jackpot that Lorna had plugged in her commercial from the clouds. I wondered wildly how much was due bowl and box. Then I remembered that Falvi hadn't contributed to the box. The flapping of my headdress against my cheek reminded me why. I was a priest too. We didn't have to contribute to our own support.

I tossed a coin at random into the glass bowl and shoved through the turnstile after the party ahead. Nobody stopped me. Nobody paid me any attention. I couldn't help looking back as I passed the turnstile and, sure enough, Dio was just starting up the steps from the street.

When I got into the vast rotunda inside, Falvi was nowhere in sight. I had lost him.

It seemed unnecessarily ironic. I had managed to keep him in sight from the moment of my entrance into Malesco, only to lose him about five minutes short of Coriole. The big hall was full of people, all of them in the brightly colored tunics and short cloaks which the well-dressed man was wearing in Malesco that night. If there were women here they must have had a separate entrance. This crowd was exclusively male.

Because I had no alternative I let myself drift with them. The newcomers seemed to be heading in a steady stream for a row of arches on the far side of the room. Hoping Falvi had gone that way too, I drifted with them. Under easier circumstances I'd have enjoyed the experience.

The big room was cool and pleasant. Music was floating through the air from some Malescan version of Muzak; colored lights made layers of rose and green and violet above us, sinking on what looked like drifts of fog in the air overhead. Row upon row of balconies climbed the high dome of the rotunda, and laughter and music and the clink of dishes and glasses drifted down from above. Now and then a slow shower of the advertising confetti sprinkled down through the air or streamers of coiling serpentine spiraled gently downward among the colored mists.

I wondered why my uncle had never told me about the Baths of the Divine Water. The outer shell of it I remembered from his bedtime tales. Maybe he had never been here. Maybe the Baths were new since his time, though the outer globe of shining fire was not.

Again I wondered, with consuming curiosity, just what had been his part in Malescan history, whether he'd really entered the place. It was rather like walking through Wonderland and looking for a handkerchief Alice had dropped seventy years ago or the print of her foot on the path through the woods where the Cheshire Cat sat waiting in a tree.

The Baths were enormous. I knew it was going to be hopeless to run across Falvi by accident or to find Coriole without being actually led up to him and introduced. All I could do was stroll with the crowd and try to ignore the occasional curious glance cast my way.

A streamer of purple paper wound round my face and commanded me to Call for Aliette in the Crystal Grotto. I wondered if Aliette were a girl, a drink, a song or something completely Malescan and strange to me.

Beyond the arches was a long narrow hall which looked glamorous for a moment and then on second glance turned into a fairly

commonplace locker room. The lockers were a wall of shining green stone checkered with white squares, and instead of benches there were rows of individual padded stools. As I stood hesitating, the crowd parted for a moment and there, halfway down the room, I saw a familiar flapped headdress and Falvi's anxious thin nose in profile.

It seemed too good to be true for a moment. Then common sense took over and I realized that if everyone who entered came first to the locker room it was no miracle that I had found Falvi.

I edged down the room toward him. He was sitting on a padded stool, one ankle crossed over his knee, working on the lacings of a calf-high boot, and he was talking earnestly to the man on the next stool. The man wore nothing but an orange towel knotted around his waist.

But he was clothed permanently in a head-to-foot garment of freckles that patterned every inch of his skin as if he had been tattooed with them. He had characteristic stiff reddish hair, cut in a sort of brush on top of his head, and the orange towel looked hideous on him.

The freckled man laughed, a thin giggle that struck a responsive chord in my mind. Coriole! But I couldn't get near enough to eavesdrop without some better disguise than a priest's robe and headdress. Falvi would know me.

What better disguise, I realized suddenly, than nothing at all? Clothes make the Malescan, but nakedness in a public bath ought to break down all barriers of fashion. Without my clothing I would be as good a Malescan as anybody so long as I kept my mouth shut.

I watched what the others were doing, found out and walked along till I located an empty locker. There was a three-inch square of white on the front of it, a blank square. I pushed my thumb against it and the

locker slid open. When I took my thumb away, there was a black indentation of whorls and lines left on the white square.

I stripped in a hurry, having a little difficulty because I wanted to keep my robe on till last. If anyone noticed my garments weren't Malescan, I suppose my entirely fallacious m of self-assurance got me over that hump. Stripped, I stopped feeling conspicuous.

There was a large sheet of toweling hanging in the locker and, following the precedent I saw around me, I draped myself in the thing before I pushed the locker door shut and heard it click briskly into place. I realized that only my thumb, pressed into the indented print, would unlock it again. My towel was blue, a more fortunate color than Coriole had drawn.

When I looked again for Falvi I saw him just putting his headdress into the locker. There was a purple towel around his thin shoulders and his thin shanks were meager beneath its lower edge. He was alone.

In momentary panic I looked around the room, finally spotting an orange towel and a freckled back receding down the hall toward an archway at the end through which steam drifted fragrantly now and then. My job, I realized, was to get to Coriole now and introduce myself before Falvi could intervene.

If he recognized me, Falvi was perfectly capable of doing something disastrous to us both out of sheer nervous inefficiency. For all I knew he had some deadly weapon hidden in his locker or carried in a fold of the purple towel. Why he was so anxious to kill me I wasn't quite sure, but the fact that he was seemed evident. It was not mine just then to question why.

I was about to follow Coriole and trust to luck when from the corner of

my eye I caught a flash of striped and flapping headaddress near the entrance by which I had come. Dio stood there, boldly surveying the hall. I turned my back hastily, thanking heaven for my protective coloration in this hall of nakedness and colored towels.

Dio would not, I thought, know me unless I were careless. But I was fairly sure he would know Falvi. And then a flash of brilliant wisdom shot through my head and I conceived the perfect scheme for getting rid of both Dio and Falvi.

Barefooted, I pattered down the warm tiled floor after Falvi, who was now making for the far archway. I caught up with him about where I'd intended, beyond that misty threshold. The room beyond might have been any size, for it was filled with a dry tingling kind of steam or smoke, hot and perhaps electrically charged. My hair stirred a little and a vibration ran along my skin.

Shapes moved dimly in that curtained dimness. Falvi had blurred to a skinny shadow and I walked faster, timing myself carefully. I had to say something to him, but I didn't want to give him time enough to recognize my face.

Just behind him, I hissed in his ear, "Listen! It's important! Your life may depend on it!"

He kept right on walking. As I'd hoped he was thoroughly conditioned to Malescan commercials.

I spotted a group of shadows near me and just before I drifted toward them I whispered, "Dio's following you, Falvi!"

He did a double-take. It wasn't what he'd been expecting to hear. Probably his mind assumed for a second or two that he was being ordered to drink Elixir. Then he snapped to a halt and turned round

wildly.

But by then I was safely concealed among that shadowy group of Malescans. I could see Falvi, though not clearly. But he couldn't see me because he didn't know where to look. In that dim room one figure was exactly like another.

I saw the vague shape that was Falvi hesitate, take a few steps in one direction, pause again. Then the priest made an indistinct gesture with his arms and plunged away, back toward the locker room. I drifted in that direction, but I didn't leave the concealment of the dry steam. There was no sign of Dio, but Falvi was getting dressed again with furious haste.

I retreated into the mist. I started looking for Coriole. There are few red-haired, freckled men in any single social group. At least, I found only one in the series of interlocking steam rooms here--and that one, of course, was Coriole.

I located him after a rather nightmarish sequence in which I floated in ghostly fashion through what gradually became an Elysian Fields, peopled with apparitions. I was considering following Ulysses' example and opening a vein in my arm to attract the ghosts when I unexpectedly saw a pair of freckled legs. They were covered with red hair, floating in the fog, the soles of two feet staring up at me with an odd air of black expectancy.

Luckily the air was thicker than ever here. All I could see was Coriole's legs, but the rest of him was presumably reclining on a couch. I clutched the towel around me and dithered slightly for a bit. Now that I'd found the man, I didn't know what came next.

I was going on a very tenuous assumption after all. Maybe it would be better to feel him out a little before I gave myself tway. I saw the

dim outlines of an empty couch beside Coriole's and I sat down on it tentatively. It had a firmly yielding surface, slick and warm. I sat staring at Coriole's dim outlines, revolving opening lines in my mind and discarding them. There was a long pause. Then Coriole stirred.

"Falvi?" he asked. "Is that you?"

It was all the cue I needed. I tried to remember what little I heard of Falvi's intonation. I pitched my voice to the front of my mouth, spoke thinly and a little through my nose like Falvi and ventured one brief word.

"Yes."

Then I held my breath. Apparently it worked for Coriole rolled over to face me and said, "Lie down then. Relax and tell me what happened."

Willingly I lay down because it hid my face better. However, my scheme was not to do the talking but to get Coriole started. I said experimentally, "Well--"

Somebody blundered past us in the steam. Coriole laughed the already familiar thin chuckle and said loudly:

"Did you hear the story about Blandus? He was complimented on his stable and he said it was because his horses ate such fine pargani. Even the Hierarch didn't get anything better. The joke was of course, that it's exactly what did happen on Tuesdays!"

I forced a polite laugh. The blunderer stubbed his toe, swore and receded. Coriole, an orange-shrouded ghost in the steam, got up and nudged me.

"There's an empty clear-room at the end of the row," he said. "This is

too public. Come on."

I made a great effort to put myself in Falvi's mental shoes and said in Falvi's voice, as we stumbled through the dimness:

"Coriole, what am I going to do?" I put some of Falvi's panic into the query.

"Do what Dom Corbi did," Coriole said with dreadful joviality. "Call it a *nolli secundo* and the second race won't be run today."

I was silent, wondering just how well I really understood Malescan.

"The first thing I want you to do," my guide said in a lower voice, "is to find that man from New York. The second thing is to stop playing with fire. You had no business fiddling with the Earth-Gates and you ought to know it by now. For a man as timid as you, Falvi, you do run the most terrible risks."

"I meant to kill him," I said, remembering Falvi's defense on the communicating waffle I had watched him use.

"I know you did. I'm inclined to have you killed if you do. Fortunately for me he did get away. The next thing's to find him."

"Why?" I asked.

"He needs me and I need him," Coriole said illuminatingly, taking me by the arm. He paused for a moment. Then he said, "Here's the passage. Look out!" He stumbled heavily and fell against me, gasping an apology as we both reeled.

"Sorry," I said mechanically as I regained my balance.

Coriole stood perfectly still in the mist. He did not speak and he did

not move. I couldn't even hear him breathing. There was something terrifying about that sudden immobility. I didn't understand it for a long moment. Then it came to me. I heard the echo of my own apology still hanging in the air, and it was not in Malescan I had spoken.

I had spoken English.

Coriole laughed very softly. My mind went blank with dismay. Why had I done it? The answer was slow in coming, but when I realized what it was I felt my jaw drop and I gaped stupidly at the dim outlines of my companion. I'd had a good reason for speaking in English, after all. Coriole had spoken in English too. When he said "Look out!" he'd said exactly that, no "Se-garde," which is the Malescan equivalent.

Coriole was still laughing, still almost silently. Now he said, "Name of Burton, by any chance?" and this time he spoke Malescan again.

There wasn't any use in trying to keep up the game any longer. I said, "That's good. How did you know?"

"Falvi talked to Clia. And not all the priests idolize Hierarch."

"Do I know Clia?"

"You knew her as Lorna Maxwell."

"Oh," I said. "Did--who taught you English? Falvi?"

"No, my father taught me that. I don't know much of it--he went away when I was only ten. Here, come on in where we can look at each other."

He groped forward, guiding me by the arm.

"My Falvi wasn't so good, eh?" I inquired, rather hurt, as I followed him.

"On the contrary, my friend. You took me in until I touched your arm." He slapped me gently on the shoulder. "If you'd ever taken Falvi by the arm you'd know the difference. Falvi worries too much. Your arm would make two of his. I didn't know you weren't a spy from the Hierarch, of course, but I had a strong conviction and it's proved itself. Here we are. Come along."

The room was small. Coriole shut the door behind us and locked it while I glanced at the furnishings of the place. There was no fog here though the air tingled as it had done outside. There were two low couches with the same slick warmish padding on them.

There was a table between them. Above it on the wall was a large blank screen with dials set in a row across the bottom, each stamped in gilt with Roman numerals. I think I realized then for the first time that I hadn't seen Arabic numbers anywhere in Malesco, only the angular and, to me, confusing Roman numerals.

Then I turned around and saw Coriole's face. For a second or so the bottom dropped out of my stomach and I could only stare. After a while I heard myself murmuring tentatively, "Uncle Jim? Uncle Jim?"

Coriole grinned blankly at me. He didn't understand. And of course he wasn't really Uncle Jim. But the likeness was so strong it couldn't be coincidence. Most red-headed men with freckles look alike--it's a familiar mold of countenance that seldom varies much. But this was a closer likeness than you could explain that way.

Coriole had the same long-jawed, raw-boned face, the same heavy freckling, the same pale blue eyes, the same bristle of red hair growing to the same line on the forehead. He was younger than I by a

few years, I thought. I counted back rapidly and the idea that struck me then has probably been obvious for some time now in this narrative. But at the moment it rocked me back on my heels.

"What was your father's name?" I demanded.

"Jimmerton," he said promptly. "He came from Paradise."

I sat down heavily on the nearer couch. "His name," I said, "was Jim Burton, and he came from New York."

"I said he came from Paradise," Coriole nodded agreeably. "Jim Burton? Burton? But you--"

"That's right," I said numbly. "He was my uncle."

Coriole sat down heavily too and we stared at each other in silence. After a while he shook his head dubiously. He had more reason than I for doubts. After all, I had the likeness to go on and Uncle Jim's tales. Coriole had nothing but my word. I offered what facts I could.

"Jim Burton looked just like you. He disappeared about thirty years ago and was gone for ten years. When he came back he lived with us for a while, quite a few years, in fact. He taught me Malescan, when I was a kid. How else could I be speaking it?

"He never had much to say about where he'd been, but he was ill for a long time and I think he'd had a lot of trouble during the time he'd been away. He died three years ago. He left me his apartment. That was how--"

"Of course!" Coriole said suddenly. "Jimmerton came through the Earth-Gates from his own library in New York. I remember that much. It was how you came too and Clia. What a fool I am! I never connected her with Jimmerton at all. She didn't know the name and I

supposed the entry between the worlds--the nexus--had shifted since my father's day. But it didn't! And you--we're cousins, aren't we?"

"I guess so," I agreed, looking at him in a dazed way. Malesco was real, of course. I couldn't doubt that any more. But somehow this finding of relatives in the place brought it a lot closer than I'd been able to realize before. It was like finding cousins in Graustark or through the looking glass. Coriole was staring at me with the same dazed wonder.

"Think of that!" he murmured, scanning my face. "Think of it! A cousin from Paradise!"

"Look," I said firmly, "let's get this straight right now. What makes you people think New York is Paradise? Believe me, I know better!"

Coriole grinned crookedly. He glanced at the locked door.

"Yes, I know better too. But if anybody else hears you saying so you'll find your head off your shoulders before you finish speaking. The Hierarch doesn't encourage heresy, you know."

I leaned back on the couch, settled the blue towel comfortably around me, and crossed my legs. "I don't know anything," I said. "You've got a long session of explaining before you. But first--I'm hungry. Have I got enough money here to buy myself a meal?"

I held out the handful of coins Dio had given me. Coriole smiled and punched a button in the wall without rising.

"Refreshments go with the admission fee," he said. "I want to know a few things, too, such as where you got that grain and how you found your way here to start with. I ought to warn you--" He gave me a pale blue stare, quite coldly.

"I'm not taking you entirely at your word. I think you're telling me the truth, but if you are you can't prove it. You fooled me back there in the steam-hall into saying enough to hang me if you're a spy, so I've got to go on the assumption you aren't. We'll pretend we believe each other, shall we?"

"Play it from there," I said. "Maybe something will come out that will convince you. I can't blame you for suspecting the worst, I suppose. My speaking the language ought to be the best convincer I can offer."

"It is. I'll admit that had me puzzled for a moment. But--"

A tap at the door interrupted him. He gave me a wary glance.

"You answer it," he said.

"I can't work the lock."

He reached out to slip the handle of the door sideways, then sank back. I opened the door. Fog drifted in. There was a man in pink shorts outside, pushing a three-tiered cart that jingled.

"Refreshments, sir," he said. "You rang?"

"Oh yes," I said and accepted the tray he handed me. Coriole silently shut and locked the door as I set down the tray.

There was a basket of rolls that looked very much like the bread I was accustomed to. There was a dish of boiled eggs differing from Earthly eggs only in the bluish pattern on the shells. There was a pot of cheese and a pot of something steaming that smelled like tea and a big bowl of some chopped-up stuff that smelled pungent.

There was a tray of apples, peaches, some bunches of bright red grapes and two other fruits I didn't recognize. It was not what I'd have

ordered, but it looked good and I was hungry. We helped ourselves, munching away from opposite couches, glancing warily at each other from time to time, talking as we ate.

And I found out at last under what circumstances New York could be Paradise.

Chapter VIII

Before the wall opened to pitch me through into another world, Malesco had in my mind been one with Graustark, Ruritania, Oz, Islandia, Gormenghast, Erewhon, the Utopias of Plato, Aristotle and Sir Thomas More, all the other imaginary worlds I had assumed existed only in human minds. Now—I wonder.

It may be that every one of them is as real as Malesco or only a little less real, in the plane of what Coriole called the *mundi mutabili*. He also referred to the same theory under the name of *orbis inconstans* and *probabilitas-universitas-rerum*. But with Malescans it was no theory—it was fact.

I'd read enough about the alternative futures theory to understand him without much trouble, though he took it for granted I knew somewhat more than I did. I had to pull him up now and then and get a fuller explanation. But briefly, this is what happened at the point of split-off between Earth and Malesco, away back in the Claudian times of first-century Rome.

Up to the end of the reign of Caligula there was no Malesco. As a world it had never existed, never even been thought of. Our past and its were identical. But when Caligula died something definitive happened and there was a split between Malesco and Earth. Instead of Claudius a man named Rufus Agricola mounted the Roman throne. After that men with unfamiliar names ruled Rome until it fell to the barbarian invaders and its own inept policies.

In our world a religion which Caligula had persecuted spread until it controlled all of Europe. In Malesco a religion Caligula had encouraged spread instead like wildfire until it submerged every other faith. It was an extremely practical religion, originating in Egypt,

and it had ruled all Malesco ever since until the present day.

Its name was Alchemy.

Alchemy had made a Utopia of Malesco and there is nothing worse than a Utopia, though very few people seem to realize it. Only in Butler's Erewhon and Huxley's Brave New World is it suggested that the standard Utopia can be a version of hell itself.

For in most Utopias it's taken as a matter of course that the stability of the community is the goal of mankind. Private happiness is unimportant, rigid caste systems are enforced and total paralysis of society is the prime condition without which the Utopia wouldn't last half an hour.

Maybe Alchemy's coming out of Egypt had some connection with what happened to Malesco because Egypt for two thousand years was the most rigid "utopia" in history. Like Egypt, Malesco reached a peak of growth early in its career. And like Egypt its priesthood got so firm a hold upon the government that though all growth ceased long before, the society continued in a sort of deathless rigor mortis far beyond the normal life-span of a civilization.

Malesco for the past five hundred years had stood dead still, a society frozen into stasis and operated solely for the benefit of the priesthood and that of whatever conqueror briefly seized control. The priests let the tides of rebellion wash over the country, carry a conqueror to a throne and maintain him there until somebody else pushed him off--but it was the priests who manipulated all the wires and collected all the benefits.

There was conflict between church and state, of course. But in Malesco the powers of science were with the church, for Alchemy was based on practical science. In Malesco, Galileo would have

been a priest, not a heretic. Gunpowder once conquered vast countries. In Malesco, only priests of Alchemy could possibly have discovered the uses of gunpowder; the only textbooks on chemistry were in the temples.

As in Egypt, for a long, long time there was no promise of relief even in the hereafter for the hoi polloi. Only the priests and the kings could expect to survive and enjoy the benefits of heaven.

About three hundred years ago, while in our world America was being colonized and Shakespeare was getting drunk at the Mermaid Tavern and Eastern Europe was falling piece by piece into the hands of the Turks, Malesco had a worldwide revolution. The priests for the first time found themselves face to face with a real problem.

Malesco is a smaller world than ours. A lot of it is ocean and a lot more unexplored wilderness. But on every inhabited continent there were tremendous waves of terrorism as the common man got mad enough to let himself go. They weren't very wise or intelligent men because they'd never been allowed to be.

They had no more knowledge of self-control than so many angry children because they'd never been trusted with self-control. When they ran wild they instituted a reign of terror all over Malesco, taking out their anger and frustration on each other when no priests were handy.

It was just what you'd expect--look at the French Revolution--and it made a very ugly blot in Malescan history. The blame was all the priests' and they easily managed to shift it right back on the revolutionists.

And the priests, as usual, found a clever way to pacify the people and still get their own way. The same thing happened in Egypt. A

profound social revolution was neatly transferred to the plane of religion and solved there without making a ripple in the course of real human living. If it hadn't actually happened in Egypt, you'd find it hard to believe it could happen anywhere outside the pages of romance.

The priests simply promised the people that if they would be good and go home they could look forward to seeing Paradise, too, some day after they were dead. It worked. The Egyptians accepted the Osiris cult without a murmur and went on building pyramids. The Malescans went right on under the heavy yoke of the Alchemic priesthood and accepted the promise of New York as their future Paradise.

At that point in the story I choked over my supper and Coriole had to pound me on the back. He also showed symptoms of telling me another joke which my contretemps reminded him of, but I shut him off quickly.

"Go on," I urged. "I want to hear more about Paradise."

Coriole went back to the egg he'd been eating. The blue patterns on the shell gave it a festive Easter-egg look and apparently the shell was edible too. He was crunching it between his teeth in a way that gave me gooseflesh.

"You're sure," he inquired, crunching, "that nobody in your world knows about Malesco? Because from the very first we've known about Earth. The Split wasn't very sharp at first. The priests, the clairvoyants and oracles and people like that made contact very easily.

"We figured out about what happened long ago. From then on the priests kept telling us that Earth had taken the right path and we'd taken the wrong one and were going to be punished for our sins."

He dipped the egg in sugar and tossed what remained of it in his mouth with a flourish.

"The letter a," he said, "is the symbol of the mundi mutabili, the variable worlds. You've noticed it in the city, I expect. The priests make an a with their fingers and thumbs when they talk about New York. The apex of the letter represents the point where Malesco and Earth divided.

"The two shanks are the separate, diverging paths as the worlds draw apart. The crossbar, of course, represents the bridge by which the virtuous go to their reward in Paradise. It's also the bridge by which you and Clia and Jimmerton came to Malesco."

He grinned at me suddenly. "Would you like to see Paradise?" he asked.

"I would."

Coriole got up, shaking crumbs from his orange towel and fiddled with one of the gilt-numbered dials under the screen.

A large glowing a dawned slowly on the wall. Then it faded, music swelled impressively in the little room and a priest's voice began to chant some solemn words I couldn't understand very well. I imagine it was archaic Malescan, but I caught the name of New York repeated several times. j

Then the clouds which had been rolling luminously over the screen cleared and a shining city took place. I leaned forward. We were looking down at an angle from several thousand feet up and, sure enough, we were looking at New York.

I could see the Battery and the fringe of wharves lying out in the rivers

all around the lower edges of the city. I could see Central Park making a flat rectangle of green in the distance and the tall midtown buildings stuck up like monoliths above the patterned streets.

I could even see the angle Broadway makes out of the welter of the Village, and down at the tip of the island a magnificent cluster of dazzling white skyscrapers shot out continuous streamers of gold light.

It seemed a little odd that the Eiffel Tower should be standing in the vicinity of Chatham Square and something like the Pyramid of Cheops cast a huge triangular shadow across the approaches to the Brooklyn Bridge. But otherwise the city was unmistakable.

"I don't seem to remember," I told my cousin dubiously, "that the City Hall has a halo like that. And the Empire State isn't really gold-plated, you know. And--"

"I believe you," Coriole said. "This isn't a real reflection of New York. It's something the priests worked up for public release."

"But how did the Eiffel Tower get there?" I asked. "That's in Paris."

"Don't quibble. It's sacrilege to question the Alchemic version of Paradise."

"As a matter of fact," I said, eying the streets of Paradise with fascinated attention, "I've been wondering why they picked New York at all. It's such a young city, historically speaking. Why, three hundred years ago when you had your uprising it wasn't even called New York."

"Oh, Paradise used to be London," Coriole explained. "Then there was a shake-up in the priesthood and after that all the best people went to New York when they died. Only the priests are reincarnated

in Paradise, you know. Did I tell you that?

"Reincarnation is the keystone of the religion. You've got to work your way up by virtuous living until you get reborn a priest. When a priest dies--flash!--he finds himself driving up Fifth Avenue in a golden chariot drawn by dragons. It's a fact!"

I looked at him narrowly, wondering if this were another of his terrible jokes.

"You'd like to see it?" he asked, leaning toward the screen.

"No, no, I don't think I could stand that," I told him hastily.

"All right," Coriole said. He paused and his grin faded. "It's funny when you look at it objectively like this," he went on, "but it's tragic when you consider how many generations have lived and died in what amounts to slavery, with no more reward than the prospect of an impossible after-life like that to keep them quiet. In one way maybe the Alchemists are right, though. Earth can't have gone any farther astray than we. Perhaps theirs was the better course after all."

"I doubt it," I said; "The Industrial Age was bad enough but the Atomic Age looks pretty grim too, from where I sit." It reminded me of something. "What about industrialism in Malesco?" I asked. "You've got a mechanistic civilization, but the people seem to take some perfectly obvious gimmicks awfully seriously. That projection of Lorna on the clouds, for instance--"

"You know how it was done?" Coriole leaned forward suddenly, his pale blue eyes shining. "Do you know?"

"I know one way. There may be others."

"Then it was no miracle?"

I snorted. Coriole's freckled face wreathed itself in smiles.

"We need you, cousin," he said. "The priesthood has controlled all the devices for what you call 'mechanistic society' ever since they began to appear. These things are officially known as miracles. Everything a man can't do with his own bare hands or tools he can make himself out of raw materials is classed as a miracle.

"If you punch a button and a hidden bell rings--that's a miracle. This screen that brings pictures out of the air is a miracle. Nobody but an Alchemist is allowed to question how they work. You see?"

I sat back and tried to picture life in New York operating by miraculous subway, miraculous taxis, miraculous electric power. I couldn't do it.

"And the people put up with that?" I asked incredulously.

Coriole shrugged.

"People put up with a lot," he said. "Now and then they stage a revolution and thrones change hands, but it never shakes the hold the priests have. That revolt three hundred years ago came nearest to it, and you know what happened then.

"The people have been trained to be fools for too long to outwit the priesthood. About a generation ago, though, something did happen that had the Hierarch worried for a while." He paused and looked at me quizzically.

"What happened?"

"My father came to Malesco," Coriole said. "He must have been a great man, Jimmerton. I wish I'd known him better."

I looked at him in silence, thinking of the red-headed boy who had been growing up in Malesco all the while I was growing up in Colorado, each of us learning the language and customs of Malesco and cherishing the memories we had of Jim Burton, who had vanished out of both our lives.

"Go on," I said. "What happened?"

"He came through from Earth during one of the Equinoctial Ceremonies. Stepped right through the Earth-Gates into the Temple while the Hierarch was chanting about New York. The people were all worked up to a great pitch of emotion and they were ready to accept Jimmerton as a god from another world.

"If the Hierarch had had any sense he'd have let them do it. But he began yelling about red-haired devils and the priests dragged Jimmerton off to jail."

Coriole looked wistful. "Those were the days," he said. "I wish I'd been alive then. I wish somebody'd been ready to grab the opportunity when it came. The people of Malesco were wild. They'd have risen against the Alchemists in one mass if they'd had any leadership at all. But they didn't.

"There were people among the jailors who weren't afraid of the consequences, though. My grandfather was one of them. So was my mother. They smuggled Jimmerton out and took him to one of the East Bay villages and people made pilgrimages to see him. Oh, those were great days!

"The priests couldn't keep the news quiet. And they couldn't catch Jimmerton, either. They tried hard. They tried for ten years. Jimmerton lived in the mountains and organized his followers for an

all-out attack on the Alchemists. They say he never slept twice in the same place for months at a time.

"My mother traveled with him and helped with the organization and training. I was born in a fishing boat on the Gonwy within sight of the Alchemists' campfires at the height of a campaign against the revolutionaries."

He paused again, his face darkening with introspection in the way I'd seen Uncle Jim's face darken so many times when he sat silent, thinking about things I couldn't imagine. Now I knew. And this time I realized that all my wild fancies about the hero from Earth battling against fearful odds were not so wild and fanciful after all.

I'd just got at them from the wrong end. Things like that do happen, in just the way Coriole was recounting. You don't often find the dashing hero with the muscles of a giant, swinging a six-foot sword against overwhelming odds while the heroine quails lushly in the background, inspiring him to superhuman efforts. That much was phony.

But entirely unromantic-looking men like Jim Burton actually do find themselves in desperate situations sometimes and engage in pure melodrama to escape. I was glad the heroine had been a brave and intelligent woman who didn't waste her time quailing in corners. I didn't think Uncle Jim had indulged in any fake heroics, either.

Our own segment of current history is full of tales like his, men who lead guerrilla warfare against intolerable situations and strike no dramatic poses while they're doing it. I couldn't imagine Uncle Jim striking poses.

"What happened then?" I asked again.

"Oh, Jimmerton was defeated, of course," Coriole said, and sighed.

"What did you suppose? They caught up with him finally. I was just old enough to remember him afterward. He and my mother were resting in a mountain village after a long campaign. I was having a nap that afternoon under a tree by a spring behind the house. I remember it very well, really."

He sighed again.

"There was a miracle," he said bitterly. "The whole village--well, no use going into all that. The real miracle was that both Jimmerton and I did escape. But he never knew about me. I was badly burned and buried under a sort of avalanche the explosion started.

"An old shepherd dug me out and brought me back to life three days after I was buried. When I could ask questions again I learned Jimmerton had gone back to Paradise. What really happened, do you know?"

I shook my head. "He never talked about it. He taught me Malescan and told me a little about the city, how it looked, what the people were like--not much. He was ill for a long time, you know. Maybe he was injured in the--miracle."

"I suppose he was. My mother was killed and of course he thought I was dead, too. He must have given up after that. If he'd come back--" Coriole was silent a while.

Then he said heavily, "Well, maybe I'll finish the job he started. Maybe you and I together can do it. What do you say, Burton?"

I blinked at him stupidly. "How do you mean?"

He made an impatient gesture. His pale eyes were cold and eager.

"You know the things we need to know. You're from Paradise too, but

you're not a puppet like Clia. You could teach us--"

"I'm an actor, Coriole," I said firmly. "That's all--just an actor. I don't know how to whip up an atom-smasher out of an old washtub and a jury-rigged cigarette lighter. There's nothing I could teach you."

"You can count, can't you?" he demanded in a sort of desperation. "You know the Arabic numerals through zero, don't you?"

I nodded mutely, staring at him.

"I don't," he said. "I can't. We aren't allowed to use Arabic numerals. It's a treasonable offense to learn them. All we have are Roman numerals and you can't work out anything but the simplest types of problems with that clumsy system. Do you have any idea what that means?"

I did, dimly. I nodded again, remembering what I'd read about the invention of zero and all the mathematical intricacies it had led to. With the old numerals multiplication and division themselves had been tremendous undertakings. With Arabic numerals the man in the street could learn arithmetical tricks only Roman scholars could perform--and that laboriously.

"I see what you mean," I said. "I don't know much about modern technology, but I do know how closely the development of physics, for instance, ties in with mathematics. I can see your problem. Those Alchemists are pretty smart boys."

"I've got a good organization now," Coriole said, still with the strange cold eagerness that rather repelled me. "Here's the setup. I won't go into details but I got in touch with a lot of Jimmerton's old lieutenants and we learned by his mistakes.

"We've got to strike at the heart of the Alchemists--at the Hierarch

himself. We can't win by nagging at the outskirts, the way Jimmerton had to. I've got men in key positions everywhere. Like Falvi, you know. He's one of the top men in Alchemy."

I nodded dubiously. For my money Falvi was a broken reed so far as conspiracy went. But it wasn't for me to say so.

"The people are with us," Coriole went on, his cold violence making every word crackle. "Clia's coming was a setback. For a while we hoped we could use her, but the priests got there first. They're terribly cunning. They never miss a bet. And they'd learned their lesson when Jimmerton came through."

"What happened?" I asked yet again. "With Lorna--Clia?"

"I'll show you," Coriole said, reaching for another gilt dial below the screen.

Chapter IX

Again the golden A began to glow slowly before us. The voice chanted again in the same archaic Malescan I couldn't follow. After a moment or two fog began to roll across the screen and music swelled majestically.

The music sank and an echoing hum and buzz of voices replaced it. We were looking down a long room, enormous, crowded with men and women, at a high dais at the far end. It was the voices of the people that hummed above the music.

"That's the Alchemic Temple," Coriole said.

It was a vast room and, curiously, you could see very little of it. The upper walls and all the ceiling were hidden by rolling fog, no doubt accepted by the congregation as a minor miracle though it was obvious that concealed pipes must be puffing it out at intervals. You could even see the disturbances in the clouds now and then where fresh fog came in.

It gave an air of tremendous mystery to the Temple. Through the shifting veils of it you could once in a while catch a glimpse of the walls and you could then see the great colored and gilded images on them. There were stylized animals, lions in red, green and yellow. There were black eagles, red eagles, salamanders in gold, all the planets labeled in luminous characters.

I had a vague memory of the alchemic symbolisms and knew that these figures represented chemical terms. But to the people they obviously represented only mysterious secrets of the priesthood. The people were watching the dais.

On the wall at its back there was a vast round window looking out over the city. I saw the great globe of water with the fiery fountains playing around it, the roofs and streets beyond. It was the same view of Malesco I had first glimpsed through the shimmering air in my apartment. I watched with great interest.

"This is part of the usual Equinoctial Ceremony," Coriole said, reaching for another egg. "They give us a glimpse of Paradise and a lecture about how to get mere. Only this time, something went wrong. Watch."

On the dais a great deal of ceremonial arm-waving was going on. Enormous coiled horns were being blown with solemn hootings, priests in brilliant robes did some kind of a trudging little dance before the window and the glass in it began to cloud. Then right down the middle the cloud quivered and opened like a cat's pupil dilating--and there was New York.

The horns blatted triumph. The people gave one enormous emotional sigh. The priests sang out all together on a single sustained note and then let it quaver down the scale to silence. We all looked at Paradise.

This was the real thing. There was no Eiffel Tower or Great Pyramid in this New York. The camera appeared to be moving rapidly up Fifth Avenue from a considerable height. It was a foggy evening in Manhattan and the lights of the city shimmered and twinkled spectacularly.

On the far side of the Park the diamond-studded apartment house peaks floated on a sea of mist with black treetops silhouetted against its base. I felt impressed and strangely homesick. I could see what a conviction of Paradise a sight like that might give people who didn't know New York.

The vision floated swiftly away beneath us. Traffic made streaks of bright gold through the fog--sainted priests no doubt, driving fiery dragons along Fifth Avenue. I could see what they meant.

"This is only visual, you know," Coriole was explaining at my elbow, crunching blue eggshell between his teeth as he talked. "They thought it was perfectly safe. They didn't know about the flaw Jimmerton came through. Look now--they're going to strike it in a minute. There! You see?"

New York reeled dizzily sidewise in the temple screen. It was an immensely unsettling feeling. The whole congregation screamed and appeared to stagger. The horns gave a series of disorganized hoots.

Fifth Avenue soared straight up the sky and turned upside down and the priests in Paradise could be seen calmly driving their dragons across the firmament. Then the whole city blurred like rain on a window and there was an uncanny moment when I could hear Lorna's voice, very thin and small.

"Eddie, look at me! Eddie!"

Then far away I heard my own voice, growling at her. It was a shocking moment of *deja vu*. Shadows whirled in the screen. It must have been a quick glimpse straight into my apartment and my own past, but it happened too fast to mean anything from this angle.

A scream welled out of the spinning shadows, a scream that began thin and distant and swelled like a siren wailing. It was the same scream I had heard diminishing into nothing from the other side as Lorna fell through the gap between worlds and vanished from Earth.

The shadows seethed. Then very clearly I saw Lorna's face, distorted

with terror, spin quite slowly and vanish behind a screen of her swirling hair. There was a high vibrant note like music that made the eardrums ache. Lorna tumbled out of the chaos on the screen and sprawled on the dais face down, her hair fanning across the gilded floor.

"Look!" Coriole said quickly. "Watch--everything will flicker for a second. There--see that? It's where the priests cut out a bit from the records. You know why? Can you guess? Because every man and woman in the congregation breathed one word when they saw the figure come through. Jimmerton!" He sighed.

"I wish they'd tried to arrest her and get rid of her. Things would have been easy for us then. But the Hierarch was too smart for us. That's the Hierarch, in the gold robes--the fat man. Watch."

A broad, squat figure, built like Friar Tuck or Santa Claus without the beard, trundled importantly forward and bent above Lorna. Then he turned and raised both arms toward the people. The rising murmur of the congregation had a note of menace in it, I thought, but they quieted to hear what he would say.

"An angel has come down to us from Paradise," the Hierarch announced importantly in a voice so amplified that I felt sure he had a mike somehow concealed in his golden bib.

Lorna lay quiet on the dais. I could see now that she must have struck her head against something when she fell. It wasn't like Lorna to stay quiet more than fifteen seconds at a time, especially when she had the chance of a lifetime to attract attention from a crowd. "The shock of emerging in our troubled and sinful world," the Hierarch went on with unction, "has proved too great for the delicate nerves of this heavenly being. We must pray that she survives the grossness of our sphere--"

The picture flickered again. Coriole crunched eggshell and said, "A little more came out there. That was when the congregation began to roar. They remembered what happened to Jimmerton. Probably the Hierarch did have some such thing in mind, but he knuckled under fast enough when he heard the people protest. He didn't dare risk another uprising. Now watch."

Without an apparent break, the Hierarch steadied after his flicker.

"By the Alembic of the Great Alchemist," he said solemnly, "I swear to you that this angel will be given every care. Look, she begins to stir--" He stood back and Lorna was seen twitching slightly.

"We will prepare her for her sojourn in this humble sphere of ours and obey her orders in all things," he went on. "You will be summoned again when she is ready to receive you. And now, my faithful people, let us chant a song of thanks-giving for this visitation from Paradise."

Dubiously the people began to sing as the horns started up again.

"That's enough of that," Coriole said, dusting his fingers and flicking off the screen. "Now I'll show you something really interesting. Watch this."

He got up and knelt before the screen, feeling under the ledge that held the dials. His eyes went slightly crossed with concentration. I heard metal squeak faintly on metal.

Then Coriole said, "Ah!" and lifted the whole panel of dials neatly off. Wires strung from its inner face into the intricacies of the mechanisms within. He laid the panel down on the table, keeping the connections taut, and began to fiddle delicately with bare copper wires inside. I cringed a little.

"This has to be done carefully," Coriole announced with some importance. "Invisible fires can melt your bones if you touch the wrong plates here. But Falvi showed me how to do it and it isn't hard. Now I've got to twist these threads here to those over there--like this, and the thing's done. Excellent. Now you'll see something."

Without replacing the panel, he twitched a dial again, and this time the screen lit up abruptly without the golden a, the music and the chanting. There was something very businesslike about it now.

"This," Coriole told me, "is a secret known only to the priesthood. The usual talking screens show only a selected few pictures the priests prepare. But if you know the secret you can use the same screens to look almost anywhere you like and eavesdrop on anything that happens in the Temple.

"It's a miracle," he added wryly, glancing at me. "What would you like to see now?"

"That machine," I said promptly. "The thing that opens the gate between the worlds." I expected to return by it at some very early date if possible, though there seemed no point in discussing that just now. Still, it would be useful to know a little more about this vital link in my plans.

"How does the thing really work, anyhow?" I inquired.

Coriole gave me one of his pale, oblique glances.

"I don't even know how they make the lights go on at night," he said morosely.

"Well, let's have a look at the machine anyhow. Can you show it to me in operation? From behind the scenes, I mean."

"Yes, I think so. It's on record. For some reason they put a sequence on file not long ago. I ran across it just the other day, eavesdropping. A friend of yours is in it, incidentally."

He grinned at me and worked diligently at the dials.

Without fanfare a familiar room began to take shape on the screen. The lines for a moment were fuzzy and out of focus, then they steadied and I was looking at a strictly unrehearsed scene in a room I had left a very short while ago.

There was the wall of instruments that meant nothing to me. There was the curtained corner where I'd hidden from Falvi. The round, blank face of the machine looked emptily into the screen. But this time it was partially obscured.

The little room was full of people. The illusion was so perfect that Coriole and I seemed to be peering secretly down out of some window in the wall which had escaped my notice when I had been in the room.

Gazing down on the blue-striped heads and robed shoulders of the men around the machine, I said, "Just how does this work? I mean--"

"It's a spy system. The upper priesthood uses it to check on the junior members and the attendants. You can look into almost any room in the Temple except the Hierarch's private chambers and the secret rooms. Now and then they make recordings of something they want to study--like this. Watch."

He leaned forward a little as a stir of the crowd around the machine heralded something new. Then the heads and shoulders moved aside, leaving a lane, and apparently from directly under us a veiled figure moved. Evidently the hidden lens of the camera was located

just over the door.

Coriole leaned still further forward as if he were trying to see around corners in the reflection itself. I saw the men's faces turn to the newcomer, anticipation and excitement showing under every striped headdress.

The veiled woman lifted her arms and put the silvery gauze back from her face. It was a familiar gesture. I knew the way her arms moved and the way her head and neck rose from her shoulders.... But now there was something different. For there was a studied grace in every line of this figure, a certain theatrical self-assurance that had never existed in the original I remembered so well.

"Clia," Coriole said in a flat voice. "I think you know her?"

I craned as he had. I wanted very much to see more of this foreshortened and half-averted face. But all I could glimpse was a flicker of much longer lashes than the original Lorna ever had, a flash of beautiful nose and much improved mouth as for an instant she glanced up at the machine.

It was Lorna, all right--but not the Lorna I knew. This was the Clia of the cloud picture, with eyes like blue swimming pools.

"What makes you think I know her?" I demanded.

"Clia got a thorough questioning as soon as the priests could give it to her," Coriole assured me, still trying to catch sight of the averted, foreshortened face. He did not take his eyes from the screen, but he went on.

"They had some trouble but eventually they managed to make her understand the language. Falvi told me how. Something about abstracting the words she seemed to grasp and working out a sort of

basic Malescan for her. They wanted to know how she'd happened to fall through and whether anybody else was likely to come too. That's when we got a description of you. Wait--"

He held up one hand for silence. I leaned forward again. The reflected synthetic Lorna in her upward glance had finally realized what this machine was. I think the intoxication of all those admiring glances had probably slowed down even farther her naturally slow reactions. But once she grasped what this wall full of gadgets really was she shrank back a little and said distinctly,

"Oh, no! Let me out of here!"

"What did she say?" Coriole demanded with interest.

I told him. He nodded, still watching. He had not taken his eyes from the screen since the graceful figure veiled in silvery gauze appeared on it. Now there was a small turmoil around Lorna, many voices murmured reassurance and they coaxed her forward a little farther.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

"Wait," was all Coriole would say. So I waited. We watched the rest of the little recorded scene play itself out. There wasn't much. Lorna was objecting violently to the machine and I caught a distinct echo in her new melodious voice of the old raucousness as her temper mounted.

The priests soothed her in vain. The picture ran on for a minute or two and then Lorna whirled with a wide outswing of her veils and stalked from the room, passing directly under our observation post so that we had one brief glimpse of her transfigured face.

She had turned into the Beautiful Princess, all right, I thought

morosely. Every detail was there as nearly as I could tell from glimpses. The limpid eyes, the lovely features, the melodious voice only a little marred by the old harsh tinny quality when she was angry.

So, in spite of myself I was acquiring the attributes of the hero of romance. Here I was in search of the lovely heroine. I couldn't go back without her. And the organization of rebels was ready and waiting for me to join them so I could overthrow the government, release the princess and return home in triumph.

It made me feel very uneasy.

Coriole sighed as Lorna flounced off the screen and the picture faded.

"Exactly what was happening there?" I demanded. "Why were they trying to--"

"Suppose you answer a few questions for a change," my cousin interrupted. "What do you know about Clia? What are your relations with her? She seems to have come through the Earth-Gates from your living quarters. Is she your wife by any chance?"

"God forbid," I said.

He grinned a little, not much. "Good. I see what you mean. She's a fool, of course. Nobody could mistake that. But they've made the most of her. Falvi tells me she was a very ordinary-looking woman when she came through. They gave her some of their miraculous treatments and made a beauty of her and they did a fine job.

"You saw how those priests reacted? Falvi says they studied the problem very carefully and chose exactly the features and attitudes that would be most appealing to the average man. A sort of visual semantics, Falvi says. And they called her Clia because--" He

paused and chuckled.

"This shows you how clever they were. They went through the records of recent deaths in the country and located a deceased woman who'd had a facial likeness to the new angel. Then they idealized and beautified her into the sort of being you'd expect from Paradise.

"And they spread the word that the deceased Clia had led a life of such extreme virtue she'd gone straight into Paradise, bypassing various incarnations and the final incarnation of priesthood on the way. They announced that Paradise had arranged for the transfigured Clia to come back and tell her story as an inspiration to the rest of humanity."

He was smiling but it seemed to me that his gaze still lingered on the blank screen as if it searched in retrospect for the beautiful face which the priesthood's "visual semantics" had assembled so deftly. Apparently their cleverness had paid off all too well.

I had an idea that a good many Malescans were about half in love with their angelic Clia or the idealization that had been handed to them under that name. I grinned to myself. They ought to know the real Lorna. That would cure anybody of romantic ideas about Clia.

Coriole twisted a dial idly and a pale uncertain image of a hospital ward flickered before us. He twisted again and the ward dissolved into a room seething with dim translucent children, whose voices came to us in a sort of shrill whispering yammer turned down almost to silence.

It occurred to me that if the priesthood maintained hospitals and kindergartens it might not be wholly without regard for the welfare of the people, selfish though the regard probably was.

I thought in a vague way that before I threw in with Coriole's side the least I could do was try to get some unbiased slant on the opposition, too. Naturally Coriole was painting his side white and the other side black. If I'd met the priesthood first no doubt I'd have heard an entirely different story with all the values reversed.

Then I remembered it was the priesthood I'd met first with lamentable results. Falvi's desire to wipe me out had been purely personal, of course, to cover his own illegal tampering with the machine. Dio, on the other hand, had seemed rather interesting.

"Do you know a priest named Dio?" I asked.

"I do." Coriole sounded grim. "Why?"

Then I told him my little story about the procession through the streets. He looked thoughtful at the end of it, but he shrugged.

"Well, I hope Falvi can handle him. Dio's unpredictable. We've tried to sound him out for joining us, but what he wants is a sure thing. He never takes chances unless he's sure they'll pay off. And he isn't quite sure about us.

"Still, I think he has an idea we might just possibly get somewhere, some day. Dio's for Dio first and the winning side next. I suppose he'll keep his mouth shut, but it was clever of you to sidetrack him like that. You're just the man we need, cousin. I'm glad you're going to join us."

"Am I? You seem to have it all worked out. Just what plans have you got for me, Coriole?"

"That depends on whether you join us willingly or not." He gave me a very chilly glance. Then I saw an unexpected grin flicker across his face and the Coriole I had first met showed through for an instant--

Coriole in his civilian guise, so to speak.

"As the lamb said to the curran," he added, " 'How's that for High?' "

"Very funny," I told him unsympathetically. "Suppose I don't join you?"

"Then I'll turn you over to Falvi," my cousin said, reverting to his military guise with no perceptible effort. "I'm supposing you do join. Then we'll take you to the mountains and give you a course in politics and strategy. You're much too valuable to lose, my dear cousin. For instance--"

Someone rapped sharply on the door.

Coriole and I looked at each other. Neither of us moved. The knocking came again, very loud in this small room. Coriole switched off the screen. Then he got up cautiously and crossed toward the door. On the way his bare foot came down on a broken eggshell and he swore in a whisper, hopped a time or two and limped the rest of the way.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"It's me--Falvi," an excited whisper declared through the panels. "Let me in. They're after me!"

I could see Coriole's grimace. That was Falvi, all right. Let him in so he could lead the police right to the vital spot! Coriole, standing on one foot and brushing at the injured sole, spoke softly.

"What's the matter?"

"I think I've killed Dio!"

Coriole sighed and unlocked the door, opening it just a crack. I saw

Falvi's thin nose thrust eagerly through.

"Let me in, Coriole!"

"Now wait a minute," Coriole said in a patient voice. "I'm busy here. What makes you think you've killed Dio? Did you shoot him?"

"No, I hit him over the head. I tell you they're after me! Let me--"

"What did you hit him with?"

"My sandal. Coriole, will you let me--"

"Then I doubt if he's dead, you fool. You aren't that powerful. Calm down a minute will you? Who's after you?"

"Well, the guards, I think." Falvi's excitement was beginning to subside.

"You're as safe there as you'd be here," Coriole told him unsympathetically. "Wait--I'll be with you in a second."

He shut and locked the door and turned back to me. Then his eye fell on the dismantled screen and he limped forward and began to work rapidly with the copper wiring he had just readjusted.

"I've got to calm him down," he said. "I'll give you fifteen minutes by yourself to think things over. How about it?"

"Have I got anything to say?"

"No." My cousin gave me his ready grin. "Not a word. You sit tight and don't make any fuss. When I get back we'll start in planning. I'll lock you in so you won't be bothered."

He finished the rewiring, snapped the panel into place and straightened, wrapping himself afresh in the orange towel. "Don't try to get out," he warned. "Remember, Falvi's right outside."

"Have it your own way," I said, watching him unlock the door. A drift of the fragrant fog seeped in through the opening as he looked cautiously out. He spoke to me casually over his freckled shoulder.

"Clia's our real key," he said. "You sit here and think of some way you could talk her into joining our side. We'll have to work fast, you know. Angels from Paradise can get to be a drug on the market if they hang around too long. The Hierarch's planning to send her back to New York any day now." He slipped out into the swirling fog.

"See you later," he said and shut the door. I heard the lock click.

Chapter X

I heard my brain click, too. So Lorna was going back to New York any day now. Well, well, I thought, in a rather dazed fashion, staring at the blank screen. And I'd had my trouble for nothing, had I? Obviously, that was what the scene with Lorna at the machine had meant. I thought back, trying to remember exactly what had been said. Lorna was objecting and the priests were coaxing her. Why?

I could understand her aversion toward the machine, once she recognized it. That transition between worlds was a very disagreeable experience. For some reason it seemed necessary to persuade her to go willingly. Probably they were planning a big public ceremony when the angel returned to Paradise. It would spoil the show if she didn't seem to want to go back.

But she was going back. Well, then, what was I sitting here waiting for? All I had to do was get to the Hierarch and persuade him to send me with her, and everything would be fine again. Or was it that easy?

I scratched my ear and tried to think. There was something wrong here. If this were the familiar melodrama I was reliving, I'd have dived head first into the excitement my cousin was offering. It seemed to promise unlimited chances to swing swords, gallop on fiery steeds and lead lost causes at the top of my voice. But I felt strongly that I was never cut out to be a hero.

For one thing, the hero never pauses to consider what's in it for him before he plunges into combat to overthrow the government. And how did I know the majority of the Malescans wanted their government overthrown? I had only Coriole's word for it.

Assuming that everything he'd said was perfectly accurate, even then

I knew I was lacking in the stuff of heroes. It's true that when he was telling me Uncle Jim's story he seemed to be speaking to a quality in my mind that responded. I knew then what real heroes are like--and I knew I wasn't one of them.

It takes conviction, for one thing. Maybe it takes a man who's a misfit in ordinary life and I wasn't a misfit. I was an up-and-coming young actor with a future in show business. I had everything in the world to go back to if I could take Lorna with me and clear myself.

I thought of that pickpocket on the street. The average hero would have bounded to his defense without waiting to get the facts straight. Before I meddled with Malescan affairs it seemed to me I had better find out exactly what I was doing.

I told myself flatly, "Eddie, let's not get romantic about this. Uncle Jim's case was entirely different. For one thing he was a born adventurer. For another he had a wife and son in Malesco to fight for.

"No," I went on, "not me. It's not my battle."

Then I poured myself a cup of the cold stuff that had once been hot tea. It had dregs in it. I sat there looking at the patterns they made in the cup, stirring them around and trying to keep my own future from taking permanent shape just yet.

The door clicked. Coriole stuck his head in, wreathed in floating fog. He looked worried.

"I've got to go and check up on this Dio business," he said. "Maybe the fool did kill him. You'll be all right for half an hour." It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"Think so?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. I've got a man watching this door. I really have as a matter of fact. I know it sounds like a bluff, but it isn't."

"Just what do you think I can do for you as long as you keep a rope around my neck, Coriole?" I demanded.

"Oh, I have lots of plans," he assured me cheerfully. "You're going to help me get rid of the Hierarch."

"Sure, sure," I said. "That ought to be easy."

"As a matter of fact," he repeated, "it won't be too hard the way I've got it figured. Our boys couldn't do it, but you're from Paradise. You could get to him. We've got his successor all picked out too—one of us. A lot of the priests are with us, you know. Once the Hierarch's out of the way we'd have a good chance if we worked fast. Oh, you'll help us all right."

"I think you're crazy," I said. "No."

"Of course you will. Cheer up, it won't be as hard as you think. The people are with us. You just sit tight here and watch the pretty pictures. I'll be back for you in half an hour. Remember, there's a man with a gun outside, so do as you're told." The word he used for "gun" was a Malescan word naturally and it didn't mean revolver. But the intent was obvious.

"Good-by," I said, and turned my back to him. He chuckled and the door clicked. I sat there and stared at the blank screen.

After a while I got up and squatted in front of the panel, feeling around under it the way Coriole had done. There were smooth pegs underneath, fastening it to the wall. One of them was loose. I worked at it and in a minute it fell off into my hand.

I could get the tips of my fingers under the panel and I gave it a tentative pull. It came soundlessly away from the wall and I had to grab to keep it from falling. I laid it on the table as Coriole had done and squatted there, peering into the thing's innards, wondering just why I was doing this.

"Maybe there's something to be said for the priesthood," I thought. "I'd sort of like to hear their side before I take any permanent steps either way. There's never been an argument yet where all the right was on one side. It seems to me I've been brought up on the theory that when a people has an oppressive government it's the government they really want after all.

"By and large, they keep it because they want it." I thought that over and added, "The majority anyhow." Then I said to myself, "Cut out the hedging, Burton, and see what you can make of this gadget."

Actually, it wasn't so hard, even without the secret knowledge Falvi had imparted to his boss conspirator. But being familiar with the "miracle" of electricity, I handled the Malescan version of a television set with due caution.

I'm no expert, but I've had to pick up the rudiments of hook-ups at one-night stands backstage in the days when I was working with semi-amateur groups. And I know a little about video, Earth version. Malescan-style video might be different, but I soon realized it wasn't too different to understand.

Pretty soon I discovered that Coriole hadn't known what he was doing. Obviously he'd gone through his routine by rote, without knowing the reasons. Television occupies a channel 6,000 kilocycles wide against radio's 10 kilocycles and there's just so much space on the normal band. Back in New York--Paradise, that is--I knew we were getting around this by shifting video to a higher band in the

spectrum, and doing it with adapters.

This set had such an adapter. It was what Coriole had rewired, and I went through the same motions more cautiously, automatically changing the frequencies on which the set would receive. I went farther than Coriole. His method had missed a whole band of upper frequencies.

It seemed almost too easy, but when I thought about it I saw it wasn't, given the Malescan mentality. Malesco was a religious society--Earth's is a mechanistic society. Malescans were conditioned to skip a link in process because they didn't know it was an important link. They believed in the priesthood as we believe in machines.

I'd be the last man to contend that we don't miss a few important links in our own thinking, of course. How many people on Earth have a real sense of process? How many can visualize and evaluate the process that goes into the making of a loaf of bread, for example? Or know the use of the iconoscope with its mosaic light cells, the real miracle of video?

I switched the screen on again and as before that businesslike fast light-up occurred, with no rigmarole of Alchemic a's or background music. I had no idea how to get what I wanted on the thing or even a very clear notion of what it was I wanted.

But I twirled a dial experimentally at random and found myself apparently sailing over a range of mountains studded here and there with shimmers of lights that were probably villages. It was night. I could see the stars in their familiar patterns and, far off at the edge of the sky, a glow that looked like a city. The one I was in? Probably--maybe there was only one city in this world. Was Malesco the city, the country, the world? One or all? I never knew.

I turned the dial again and the picture snapped off like a light and instantly flickered into a focus on a mountain village. I seemed to be looking down the main street of the little town, lighted by overhead incandescents that filtered through the trees lining the street.

It looked like a pleasant small-town street back home except that the parked cars were missing, and the adolescents strolling two by two wore strange garments and clustered around a corner building that was not a drugstore but--perhaps--a temple. I couldn't see clearly, but I thought I caught a glimpse through the shadows of the leaves that looked like red and yellow lions and shining salamanders painted on the walls.

I tried the dial again and was at some club meeting of middle-aged Malescan women who seemed to be reading poetry to each other. I visited a theatre where a version of Medea was being staged and it startled me very much until I realized that Euripides belonged to a period of the past which we and the Malescans held in common.

It wasn't until much later that Rufus Agricola edged out Claudius and the two worlds split apart. I wondered briefly what had really happened at that point of cleavage. In Caligula's time there were portents in the sky, weren't there? It must have released quite a lot of energy, that cosmic schism in space-time.

There seemed to be practically nowhere in Malesco--city, state or world--which this video screen couldn't picture with the right dialing. I sat there, feeling like a spider at the center of an endless web reaching out over a world--by coaxial cable or relay towers or some version of miracle we don't use ourselves--and spying on every dweller here.

The priests were missing no bets. The wonder was that they hadn't caught Coriole already--unless they hadn't cared to. Could that be it?

Was he not as important as he thought, not as dangerous? Or were the Alchemists wise enough to permit latitude for the blowing off of steam?

For ten minutes or so I swooped and soared over Malesco, my vision riding the air-waves of an alien world, moving in vast curves above the heads of unsuspecting people whom I would never see or know. I tuned in briefly on a vision of New York, and had again that disorienting feeling of being in two places at once, the surge of homesickness as I sat in an alien room on an alien world and looked right down on the familiar streets of my own neighborhood.

It was when I was trying to find in my fumbling way what kind of screen the New York scene was projected on that I ran into my fatal error.

New York without warning went suddenly blank in a blinding dazzle of blue-white light. The brilliance centered in the lower right-hand quarter of the screen and seemed to spread from a minor sun which had come into unexpected being about two feet from my face.

The light was so strong I couldn't look at it, so curiously compelling that I couldn't look away. I sat there paralyzed for a moment, feeling jagged lightning flashes of pain zigzag through my head, helpless to turn my eyes away.

Then the sun blinked out and I slapped both hands to my eyes and squeezed my forehead to keep it from splitting in two. Bright orange after-images swam like amoebas inside my lids. When the pain subsided a little I began to be able to hear again and I realized that somebody had been asking me the same question over and over, with increasingly angry intonations.

"What are you doing here?" a man was demanding. "Give me the

code word before I--"

I blinked tearfully at the screen. Through streaming eyes I saw a somewhat unshaven face between the flaps of the priestly headdress, small squinting eyes boring into mine and, chest-high between us, gripped in a hairy fist, a glass cylinder about the size of a pint milk bottle, glowing and fading rather angrily like a large irritated firefly.

I started to say, "Don't shoot!" and something told me my voice would quaver when I did it, for I was scared and I didn't even feel called upon to hide it, in that first moment. However impossible it may seem that a man at the other end of a video hookup could shoot and kill me through the relay system, I'd just had convincing proof that he could certainly do me grave harm. Maybe that thing would kill, at that.

I wiped my eyes on a corner of the blue towel and put on as haughty a look as I could manage with the tears still streaming from my stinging lids. I didn't know what I was going to say but I knew I'd better say it fast. The priest had caught me at something I had no business to meddle with, and he'd probably feel perfectly justified in using the fullest power of his milk bottle to punish me unless I spoke first--and fast.

It was time for Allan Quatermain or possibly John Carter to take over. I drew a deep breath and told myself I was a hero. In a hero's loud decisive bullying voice I said sharply, "Drop that, you fool!"

The priest's bristly jaw fell slightly. There is this to say about wearing nothing but a towel: manners make the man when his clothes are missing. If I'd been wearing a peasant's outfit or a clerk's apron I wouldn't have got away with this.

But for all the priest knew I might be a visiting High Priest from the other side of the world. Certainly the fact that he'd caught me monkeying with the top-secret video band, known only to the inner circles of the priesthood, would indicate that I might be important.

He didn't drop his pint bottle, but he lowered it a little and blinked at me in a puzzled way.

"Let's have that code word," he said, somewhat more politely. "You've got no business on this band."

A rapid summary of thoughts scampered through my head. I knew now why I had been dabbling at random in the private television relay of Malesco's rulers. In a half-aware sort of way I'd been hunting an excuse for the priesthood, so I could let myself confide in them. Naturally Coriole would paint them dead black to me. He wanted my help.

I could join Coriole, overthrow the Hierarch if we were lucky, risk my neck a hundred times over and finally win the right to take Lorna back to Earth and resume my job in peace. Or I could quietly walk back to the Temple I'd recently left, report to the Hierarch and the chances were he'd be only too glad to get rid of me by sending me back where I came from, along with Lorna.

Since he'd probably not read Burroughs or Haggard he wouldn't realize that all High Priests are supposed to be wicked from preference and spend all their time persecuting the hero and heroine. Primarily the Hierarch was simply a businessman, an executive administering a very complex organization. It would be a waste motion, really, to do anything to me but send me back, especially since--unless Coriole lied--he meant to send Lorna back anyhow.

And yet there was a nagging indecision in my mind, like a mouse chewing at the foundation of all this logical construction I'd reared. Was it a moral conditioning I'd got from reading too many melodramas? Or did I really owe Coriole and the people of Malesco something?

The priest with the pint bottle settled the whole question for me.

"There's a squad on the way to pick you up," he said briskly, evidently having reached a decision while I was arguing with myself. "Be there in ten minutes. Don't try to get away or I'll burn you to a crisp."

My first feeling was relief. That was that, then. The decision had been made for me. But a few seconds of further thought told me I couldn't take this quietly. I'd got the upper hand over the priest simply by bullying, but it was a precarious hold, I'd lose it if I allowed the police to drag me off to a precinct station and work me over trying to find out my secret.

I gave the screen a brisk tap that made the priest blur.

"Fool!" I said in my best bullying manner. "I'm from New York!" I gave him the a-sign with fingers and thumbs and grinned arrogantly, trying to show I didn't believe in the sanctity of Paradise.

"Switch me to the Hierarch," I commanded while he was still staggering from the impact of my wisdom and cynicism. It had a real effect, too. His jaw dropped again and he did three double-takes in a row. He was obviously not certain whether to blast me where I stood for sacrilege or kowtow to a visitant from Hierarchical circles if not from Paradise itself.

I got away with it. This priest wasn't sure enough of himself to switch

me straight to the top, but he'd had enough trying to deal with me on his own and he put me through to five or six successively higher officials, each of whom wavered between bewilderment and rage at my attitude.

Finally, unlikely as it seems, an obsequious face took shape in the screen, murmured a few warning platitudes about the great audience I was about to be vouchsafed and, with a good deal of throat-clearing and harrumphing, the Hierarch himself looked me in the eye.

Seen this closely he looked less like Santa Claus and more like a juggernaut than I'd expected from my long-view glimpse. It shows how far astray you can go when you try to judge a new world by old-world analogies. I was still a little dazed by my success in putting across such a colossal bluff on such feeble evidence. The only explanation must be the very low level of Malescan self-confidence in sub-ecclesiastical circles. The common man, in other words, must be something of a worm. Back home I'd never have got away with it. Here nobody seriously doubted that I could back up my grandiose claims.

So, looking this fat man firmly in the eye, I told him the simple truth. And I wasn't obsequious about it. I know that in conversation with the mighty you're supposed to let them speak first and introduce all the topics, but it didn't seem to me that this man would be made easier to deal with by polite methods.

"You're the Hierarch, are you?" I said in my loud bullying voice. "I hope nobody's listening--this is private." But I didn't wait for him to cover his connections. That was his lookout, not mine. I went right on.

"I'm from New York," I said. "The girl Clia came through as Lorna Maxwell. She came from my chambers in Manhattan. I've got something important to tell you about your organization, but I'll save it

until I'm with you. I understand there's a squad on the way to pick me up here now. If you're wise you'll see they act as my escort, not my captors. That's all. What do you say?"

The Hierarch was a clever man. He didn't gape or blink like the others. Neither did he puff up with outrage. He just stood there, looking at me reflectively out of his small eyes rimmed with fat. Then he blew out his cheeks and spoke in a rich rather thick voice.

"Very interesting. Very interesting, indeed. I'll give the proper orders."

Then he sank his chin into three sub-chins and looked at me stolidly. I had no idea what he was thinking. He was a remarkable character, this man. Fat, yes, but not obese--obesity changes when it's dynamic, and he was dynamic in exactly the same degree a bulldozer is.

He had the same absolute confidence. I had the impression that, like a bulldozer, if he actually found himself facing an obstacle, he'd pause, back off and roll ponderously forward again and again, until the barrier was smashed and ground under.

He wasn't going to be easy to fool. I couldn't even tell if I'd impressed him. Those small thoughtful eyes might be looking right through mine into the chaotic indecision of my brain. I wondered if they were. I wondered so much that for an instant I felt my own confidence oozing away, which showed me how dangerous the Hierarch was. I took a deep breath, reminded myself of John Carter and Allan Quatermain again and began thinking rapidly.

"Look here," I said, keeping my voice at its loud confident level, "I've got my reasons for wanting to reach you quietly. I want to walk out of here without being noticed. Tell your men to knock quietly and then

step back and let me come out without attracting attention. It's foggy here. They can do it without starting a commotion. Have you got that?"

The Hierarch nodded silently, his eyes still regarding me without expression.

"Good. I'll go to the locker and dress and then walk back to the Temple. Your men can follow me, but I want them to keep their distance. I've got good reasons for all this, but I'd rather tell you privately what they are."

The Hierarch cleared his throat carefully.

"Very well," he said. "Your orders have gone out. They'll be obeyed."

But the way he looked at me was frightening. And for the first time since I'd fallen through into Malesco, I had the sudden conviction that this was after all no game. It wasn't a melodrama whose script I was running through with wisecracking asides whenever I came across a stereotyped characterization. The Hierarch fitted no classification I knew. It wasn't a game with him. He had more confidence than I did, and he frightened me.

It was as if I'd been playing soldiers with a bunch of four-year-olds, and suddenly looked up to find myself face to face with a guy in battle dress, scowling at me and setting up a bazooka. When the Hierarch came in, abruptly it wasn't a game any more. I couldn't fool the Hierarch long. Maybe I hadn't fooled him at all.

Chapter XI

But he gave me all the rope I needed. My orders were carried out to the letter. I put the video screen back in its original condition, ate a few red grapes and much sooner than I expected I heard a quick soft knock on the door.

"Who's there?" I demanded quietly through the panels.

"At your orders, sir," a voice murmured.

"Open the door then," I said. "I'm locked in."

I thought, "If it's Coriole he won't do it." But I heard a scraping and clicking outside and then the door swung inward, letting in a few wreaths of pungent fog.

"Waiting your commands, sir," the voice said softly.

"All right. Listen." I put my face into the crack and whispered to the dim unfamiliar face that looked respectfully into mine. "I think somebody may be waiting in the fog to shoot me. I've been held prisoner here. Get your men together around the door to hide me when I come out.

"Once I'm in the fog nobody will recognize me. Keep close but act as if you weren't following me and make sure nobody else does. I don't want anybody hurt, you understand--just let me get out of here without any trouble. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," the face assured me.

And that's the way I got out of the Divine Baths.

Don't ask me why I did it that way. I didn't know myself. I could have had Coriole and his whole gang rounded up and carried away in chains. But all I wanted right then was to get out without causing any trouble.

I guess I was afraid that Coriole, if he saw me being openly arrested, might try to rescue me, and I had decided I didn't want to be rescued. I doubted if he could do it anyhow, but he might try. And dubious though I felt about my cousin, I didn't want him killed or captured just then. I wanted everything to stay nice and smooth and quiet until I could get my brain started again.

And everything did--for about twenty minutes.

It took me that long to find the locker room, dress, struggle into my priestly robes and headdress and start my casual stroll back the way I had come--toward the Temple.

I felt like a very different man as I crossed the enormous rotunda of the Baths toward the front entry. The air still swam with music, voices, confetti, advertising streamers and drifts of mist. The crowd had not altered except to increase a little.

Malesco seemed to be moving toward the peak of its evening entertainment and much of it seemed to be available right under this spectacular dome. I fought my way through snowfalls of streamers that wound enticingly around my neck as they insinuated that I'd enjoy Crescence or a Nip at the Nip Bar.

I knew where I was going this time. I strode like a hero across the rotunda and out under the arch of the front door. People were streaming both ways on the broad steps. I went down without looking back. I felt confident that I was being escorted though I hadn't spotted my faithful followers in any of several backward glances. Not even

Coriole was to be seen anywhere, and Falvi and Dio--if Dio were still alive--were luckily missing, too.

I turned right at the foot of the steps and retraced my path toward the Temple, which I could see towering above the roofs, a vast white building with a frieze of the usual colored symbols around its height.

I had, naturally, no idea that halfway between here and there I was going to become a hero in sober fact. I was about to perform a deed which would go ringing down the corridors of Malescan history and alter the course of empire. But I didn't know it then, nor at the time I did it, nor for some time after.

I wish I could tell you it was a real deed of heroism. I wish--now--that I could have been immortalized doing something really dramatic--fighting off fifty men with great sweeps of my trusty sword, or beheading a dragon at the corner of the Highroad of the Hierarch and Goldsmith Lane, which is where the thing happened. But it wasn't anything glorious I did.

I simply lit my cigarette lighter.

Anybody could do it. Most people do daily without going down in the annals of a world-nation as a deliverer of the highest quality. I did it absentmindedly, quite without thinking, or I wouldn't have done it at all.

I was halfway to the Temple. The streets were crowded and nobody seemed to be paying me the slightest attention. I knew if I made any false moves things would start happening fast, but I didn't mean to make any. All I wanted was to get peaceably to the Hierarch and after that back to New York as quickly and simply as possible.

The one trouble in my mind was that I'd have to work up some tale for

the Hierarch when I saw him, something worthy of the build-up I'd given over the video connection. What that would be I had no idea. I'd definitely decided not to give Coriole away if I could help it.

Of course if they started limbering up the thumbscrews I'd probably talk. Coriole had shown no signs of tender feeling for me and I wasn't obligated to undergo any third degrees for him. He had meant to use me for what I was worth to him. Since I was, in the abstract, sympathetic toward his cause, I'd protect him if I could but not at the cost of my own skin.

I was racking my brain for a plausible lie to tell the Hierarch, and realizing with a cold sensation along my backbone how hard it would be to put any lies across, when a small baldheaded man came hurrying toward me through the crowd. His bare crown was lowered as he bowed along busily, not looking up.

I stepped a little aside to let him pass. He wore, I noticed without interest, a blue cloak with a flat collar of polished metal made in links. It was so shiny I could see his lowered face reflected on his chest in a rather disorienting way as if he had two heads, one of them upside down and chin to chin.

The odd thing was that he glanced up suddenly as he neared me. He kept his head down but looked up from under his brows so that I unexpectedly met two pairs of his eyes, one in the normal place and one looking up horribly from the middle of his chest, upside down. I shuddered slightly and made way for him.

He jostled me a little with his shoulder, reached out to steady me and smacked something hard, smooth and flat squarely into my palm as he did so. It was pure stupidity that saved me from lifting it openly to stare at it in the light shining down from the building along the street.

I was so startled it didn't cross my mind for a moment that this was standard melodrama straight out of Fu Manchu. I suppose I didn't think of it because the little man was so completely lacking in romance, with his bald head and his four eyes. A veiled lady would have found me with all the proper responses on tap but not a stooped little baldhead with his eyes in the middle of his chest.

He hurried on past me and melted into the crowd before I had time for any mental processes to take place. I just kept stupidly on my way, clutching the flat thing and wondering what had happened. Luckily this was exactly what I'd have done if my mind had been clicking like a Geiger counter all along, so that was okay. The trouble started when I tried to look at the thing.

Automatically, when I realized what I'd got, I thrust the hand that held it into my pocket through a convenient side opening in the robe I wore. All I could think of was to hide it until I could inspect the thing in private.

My fingers told me nothing. It was smooth, square, about the size of a soda cracker. It could be anything. (It occurs to me at this point that most of my similes in Malesco seemed to turn around eatables and drinkables, probably an unconscious reference to the fact that I was undernourished all during my stay.)

These streets were all too well-lighted. You think of lights as a sign of civilized progress. But as a matter of fact I suppose they're really a sign of incipient lawlessness kept firmly in check. Just as broad straight avenues when first introduced into city planning were chiefly useful to fire volleys of musketry and cannon down, a thing you couldn't do in crooked streets.

Malescan lighting consisted of looped and scrolled tubing that glowed like neon and ran along both sides of the buildings. The only

break was at crossings.

It was just the opposite to our systems, in which the streets furnish the channels of illumination late at night and the buildings are dark. I suppose this was because Malescan vehicular traffic was quite light. Malesco is a world of pedestrians--or was then.

I had some vague plan of trying to get a glimpse of my mysterious object while crossing the street. With this in mind I palmed the thing and drew it out of my pocket, as I stepped off the low curved curbing into the lanes of lazy traffic. People were all around me, but nobody paid me much heed except to get respectfully out of my way when they realized what robes I wore.

I got the thing out of my pocket. I got it up within sight in the dim reflection from the neons. I saw only that it was white and had several rows of gilt script on it which I couldn't read very well. Then some clumsy fool behind me pushed past and knocked it out of my hand.

My mind scattered its thoughts broadcast. I hadn't an idea in my head. I just dived after the thing as it went spinning among the feet of the passers-by, interested only in getting it back before anybody noticed I had it. Which hope in itself shows the low state of my mentality just then.

The white square skittered across the pavement and vanished under the curve of the curbing on the opposite side. I wasn't thinking at all. I just groped in my pocket out of pure habit and found my cigarette lighter in its usual place down at the bottom under everything else. I pulled it out. My thumb automatically touched the wheel and spun it. Flame leaped up in my fist and I stooped above the dark overhang of the curb.

There it was, my little white and gilt enigma, twinkling in the light. I

reached for it--and fumbled. My finger gave it a flick and away it sailed into some dark opening under the sidewalk. I heard a distant splash. The plastic soda cracker had vanished down a sewer grating, gone on its long voyage home in the mysterious underground of Malesco.

And that, again, was that.

You may as well know now that the thing had been a message from Coriole. That fancy gilt writing on white squares is the Malescan equivalent of a scratch pad and you can use it over and over indefinitely. But just then it seemed to me that the secret of the ages had been in my hand and I'd lost it.

I squatted beside the curb, heedless of the crowd, cursing quietly and holding in my fist the newly ignited flame which, they assure me, will never go out as long as written history survives in Malesco. The first person to notice it was a middle-aged man with a stupid face. He tapped me respectfully on the shoulder and I looked up blankly.

It was then, with the sudden motion, that I felt a draft around my ears and realized I had somehow lost my headdress in my wild scramble across the street. In the same moment I realized that my hair was cut in a very unecclesiastical fashion and that, as I squatted there, my priestly robe had come apart to reveal very exotic--for Malesco--trousers and shoes and Argyle socks. I saw the man take all this in.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you a priest?"

"No," I told him. "Why?"

Note that I'd have said I was if there seemed any chance to get away with the masquerade. But my other-worldly garments were a bad giveaway and I didn't want to get into any arguments. I wondered

briefly where my escort was and if they felt this was all part of my mysterious plan. I hoped so.

"Because," the middle-aged man said, "I thought I saw you just make a fire. With a machine! Is that little thing a machine? Will you show me how it works?"

Without considering the consequences I obliged him by blowing out the flame and igniting it again with a spin of the wheel that threw out brief sparks. The man leaned closer and sniffed excitedly at the reek of lighter fluid.

"Miracle-juice!" he said. "I knew it! I've smelled the same holy smell in the air around the pumping stations. How does it work? Would you explain to me how it works?"

"The flint strikes a spark--" I began cautiously and then paused. A second man was peering over the first man's shoulder and two more had paused on both sides, looking down with incongruous excitement at the lighter as I extinguished and kindled the flame anew to illustrate my simple lecture.

That was all it took.

Nobody could have imagined the hunger for process which must have been consuming these people, unsuspected for an unguessably long time. It was function and the process of function that entranced them.

In New York a man casually working a miracle on a street corner wouldn't attract any more of a crowd than I attracted at the corner of Hierarch Highway and Goldsmith Lane in Malesco by operating a simple mechanism in sight of the public. Miracles they were used to. Machines were the real miracle to them.

"Show me how it works!" a shrill voice demanded excitedly at my elbow. "The little wheel turns--why? What happens then? What makes it turn?"

"Let me see!" another voice broke in. "Look out, I want to--"

"The little wheel turns," somebody was explaining importantly back in the crowd. "Then it makes sparks. Then the miracle-juice catches fire and the man makes a real flame jump up right out of his hand!"

"It's a machine!" I heard voices declaring several heads away in the rapidly gathering crowd. "A machine! The man knows how to make it work! Look here, it's like this, the little wheel turns and--"

"Sacrilege!" somebody whispered. "Treason! Let me out of here!"

But the angry mutters which greeted this reaction must have made the prudent speaker shut up, for no more was heard from him though it did seem to me that I caught murmurs of fear now and then as an undertone to the general rising babble. Most of it had to do with the little wheel turning and the miracle-juice, and everyone seemed to be explaining to everyone else exactly how the machine worked.

I stood up and flipped the lighter shut. I dropped it into my pocket.

"All right, that's enough," I said in my loud bullying hero's voice. "Stand back there and let me by. That's enough, I said!"

Rather timidly the crowd parted. These people had been conditioned to obedience for countless generations and the voice of authority made their reflexes work. But the light of excitement on their faces was not so easily quenched. I looked nervously around, trying to spot my escort. They were still obeying orders and I saw no one I knew.

Chapter XII

There seemed nothing to do but go on. I ordered the submissive crowd out of my way again and strode forward, the robe swirling irritatingly away from my trousered legs. The colors in my Argyle socks seemed to fascinate every eye. I was as exotically garbed as if I wore velvet and brocade on a New York street.

The crowd seemed helpless before the double charm of my socks and my astounding knowledge of mechanics. I heard awed murmurs about the little wheel sparking as I pushed through the fringe of my admirers and went hastily on toward the Temple.

It should have ended there. Probably it would have, nine times out of ten. But this was the tenth time. I went about fifteen feet, then glanced uneasily back--and they were following me. Timidly, respectfully, but determined as so many pet dogs that have no intention whatever of going home, no matter how often you shout at them.

For a moment or two I did shout. I waved them back and told them sternly to leave me alone, to go back about their business. They looked at me, scared but stubborn. What had become of my escort I had no idea. Maybe they, too, were among this irresistibly fascinated throng. Maybe they were watching from the sidelines. Anyhow, they did nothing to help.

I kept at it until I began to feel too much like a man trying to send his dog home. I had difficulty keeping my face straight. There was nothing to do but turn away and ignore them, which I did. Like a piper in Argyle socks I stalked down the Malescan street, hearing the rising murmur behind me as more and more curious bystanders joined my following throng. The saga of the little wheel was on every tongue. The sparks it shot out acquired fresh fame with every step I

took.

Then it got worse. I heard someone say distinctly, "He's leading us to the Temple. He's going to teach us all how to make fire jump out of the little wheel."

I whirled angrily. Whoever had spoken was silent now. The eyes of my followers met mine eagerly. And what could I do? Shouts hadn't moved them. Denials wouldn't either. This was sheer determined wishful thinking. It was already bigger than I was and growing every minute. The starvation of the human mind, denied process, was a thing I couldn't cope with.

Suddenly I felt sorry for them. And I was aware of a quick, increasing respect. For all they knew the squads of the Temple guard might swoop down at any moment and arrest them all. And yet they followed, hypnotized by the glimpse they'd had of a machine openly used in the street, where every eye could see and every mind understand how it worked.

So I went on. The rumors spread. They caught up with me and began to run ahead and they were fantastic. I was going to teach all Malesco how every miracle in the city was performed. I was going to overthrow the Hierarch and administer the Alchemic Mysteries myself.

No, I was hand in glove with the Hierarch and leading them all to their doom. This latter rumor had no effect whatever. Curiosity was stronger now than fear and anyhow this crowd was getting too big to punish. Each man took courage from the number of his neighbors.

By the time I reached the great square in front of the Temple the murmuring of my followers had swelled into a low insistent roar. Nobody was shouting. Nobody was really talking loudly.

But the combined voices had their own volume, and there was irresistible excitement in it.

I saw the astonished faces of priests looking out of the gate and peering over the painted walls. There were faces at every window on this side of the Temple, and in the houses we passed women and children peered out with timid exultation, and men came from every doorway to join our throng.

I crossed the big flood-lighted square slowly, in spite of myself feeling very important. Common sense told me that I had done nothing very superlative after all but the awed admiration of the crowd was insidious. It came to me irresistibly how much more I knew than they did, how deeply they admired me for my wisdom--also, perhaps, for my socks.

I expect I strutted a little. It isn't every man who inspires thousands of people to follow him, helpless to resist as the children who followed the pied piper, hypnotized by his ability to spin a small wheel and strike sparks with it. It isn't every man who--

Suddenly it came to me what I was doing. I stopped dead still for a second. I was a hero! I was indubitably leading a vast crowd of inspired followers, obedient to my every whim. I was advancing on the stronghold of the wicked High Priest who held the beautiful heroine captive in his toils.

I was on my way to rescue Lorna and force the Hierarch to send us back to Earth and it was my own skill and knowledge that had made this possible, my own prowess with a flint and steel. Good heavens, it had happened after all!

"Quatermain, move over!" I murmured to myself and crossed the rest of the square at a rapid stride. I felt imposingly tall. I thrust my elbows

out to make my cloak billow in the wind. It was a perfect setup. All I lacked was the long, glittering sword.

True, the cigarette lighter had proved more potent as a weapon, but it lacked a certain something so far as dash went. Still, you can't have everything. What I did have was far more than I had ever expected, even in my wildest dreams.

I came to the flight of steps leading up to the entrance gate. As I set my foot on the lowest step, a man in a gray tunic and cloak emerged from the crowd just behind me. Another man in the same uniform appeared suddenly on my other side. Two more followed them and two after that. Five in all—one squad, Malescan version. Why they deemed it wise at this particular point to take off their cloaks of invisibility I didn't know.

"Where were you?" I demanded of the nearest, remembering his face in the fog at my door, back there in the Divine Baths. "What happened?"

"Nothing, sir. We followed our orders. We escorted you here."

I looked at him in silence. No reasoning processes naturally. He might well explain in effect, "I seen my duty and I done it," and that was that. If he'd dispersed the crowd as any rational policeman should have done when it first showed signs of getting out of control....

But by now I was very glad he hadn't. He might have explanations to make to the Hierarch, but I was well satisfied. I knew what I was going to say to the Hierarch. Now I had force behind my arguments. I was going back to Earth in style with a send-off suitable to heroes.

Unfortunately for my self-esteem, I paused at the top of the steps to

look back and bid farewell to my faithful followers.

There they seethed in their thousands. It's hard to estimate numbers at night in such volume. They filled most of the square in front of the Temple.

They stood solidly together, not wavering, not melting away in the back even though the priests were eyeing them sternly from every window. I had one final moment of egocentric pride in which I must have looked rather like Mussolini making chests from his balcony.

Then I caught a familiar eye in the front ranks of the crowd. Coriole was grinning up at me cheerfully. Beside him was the bald head of the man who had slipped the message to me and started this whole mass movement. And then my ego deflated suddenly and I realized what was behind this demonstration.

It hadn't been wholly spontaneous, I felt perfectly sure. It wasn't wholly for the inspiration of my wisdom that they'd gathered to follow me. Coriole's hand showed plainly in this--Coriole, who had certainly had training in the handling of mobs.

It seemed to me now that, as I glanced around the upturned faces, I could spot here and there the sober eyes of the men and women who had helped fan the flame I lighted. Most of the people were still drunk with the unwonted excitement of the mob, but there were quiet faces too and I assigned them, rightly or wrongly, to Coriole's people.

So he had outwitted me. He'd used me as a tool to rouse the rabble, taking advantage of as small an incident as the cigarette-lighter flurry to call half the city, apparently, to a mustering before the Temple. And what happened now was up to him.

Or was it up to me?

He was searching my face with sober interest, the smile gone. I met his gaze without expression. How could I tell what I was going to do? I gave him a nod and turned away. The squad of my guards closed in around me. The gate opened. I could see priests milling excitedly inside as I stepped forward.

Coriole's voice stopped me. Thin and small in the unechoing vastness of the square it soared above the low rumble of the crowd. He was shouting a single word, but it was a rabble-rouser. It was the most dangerous word a man could shout in Malescan streets.

"Jimmerton!" Coriole yelled. "Jimmerton!"

The sound rolled back like an echo through the crowd. You could hear it rising and taking shape on every tongue, so that at first it was a soft, dangerous babble of mingling syllables, then a coherent mutter, finally a roar.

"Jimmerton, Jimmerton, Jimmerton!"

The sound filled the square and echoed from the Temple walls. The crowd rocked with it. Someone had given them a voice at last, an articulate word to speak that would express all they needed to express in a single name. They put all they had into it.

"Jimmerton, Jimmerton!"

I saw Coriole nudge the bald man, who jumped out briskly and ran up the steps a little way, then turned and waved his arms at the swaying crowd. Everybody within hearing must have known exactly what that shouted name meant, every connotation of it. But the bald man put it into explicit words.

"Don't let it happen again, men!" he cried in a shrill voice to the

through. "Remember Jimmerton! If the Hierarch gets this man too we'll never see him again!" His voice was thin and it broke on the higher notes. It didn't carry, though I could see the cords stand out on his neck as he tried. But he didn't need any mechanical amplifier to project his words.

The front ranks of the crowd caught them up and tossed them back and out until every listener in the square must have heard what he said. With embellishments and additions, if I knew that crowd--though perhaps it was done mainly by Coriole's men, who had spread some of the wilder rumors about me.

"Don't let it happen again!" my would-be benefactor shouted squeakily but valiantly. "Don't let them do it! Remember Jimmerton! Remember--"

The responding roar drowned him out. They were frighteningly agreed on the single subject of my future. The Hierarch was not to have me.

It didn't suit me at all. I was touched and impressed by this display of courage in the very face of the Temple, though I had acquired enough sense in the past few minutes to realize it was no personal tribute they were paying me. I was a symbol, not a man. I was Function. I was Process. I was all the maturity and adulthood they had been denied for nearly two thousand years.

They thought I was, that is.

But it was more of a burden than I could carry for them. This rousing moment in the night was all very well, but what could it lead to? How could I help them? I couldn't. If Coriole thought he was rescuing me from my enemies he would have to think again.

I lifted both arms dramatically at the top of the steps. The crowd milled with excitement and silence fell across it section by section, the farthest growing quiet last of all. The bald-headed man turned to look up at me, his mouth a little open in anticipation. I cleared my throat. My voice usually carries well enough in a theatre, but it sounded thin and flat in the tremendous roofless space of the square.

"Let me go in," I shouted. "I must talk to the Hierarch. I must follow my own plans. Let me go--but wait."

Coriole, who had been watching me too, with the most painful attention, suddenly jumped to the lowest step and shouted as loudly as he could, "Yes, let him go--and wait! He knows his duty. He speaks for us all. But remember Jimmerton! Be sure he comes out again! Wait until he comes! All of you! Remember Jimmerton--and wait!"

"Wait!" the crowd roared, with a volume that made the steps tremble under us. "Wait! Remember Jimmerton!"

I raised my arms again. "Give me an hour," I said. "I'll come back to you in an hour. Will you wait?"

The responding thunder of their voices had the volume of a summer storm. They would wait. They remembered Jimmerton once more, in a tremendous reverberant shout, and settled down into noisy milling quiet to keep their promise.

Chapter XIII

The priests were scared. I went in through the gate with my escort, receiving awed and angry stares from every eye, hearing the sibilance of the whispers that ran before and after me all the way. Everyone was bewildered. Nobody seemed to understand exactly what had happened.

There must have been rumors about my unorthodox tampering with the top-secret video band. I'd talked to too many people on my way to contact with the Hierarch to keep that experience quiet. And then the utterly unexpected, apparently spontaneous springing up of the crowd—it looked like military genius on my part.

I wondered what would happen to the crowd. I wondered even more poignantly what would happen to me. I had a powerful weapon now, but I could so easily fumble it. I didn't know how the Hierarch usually dealt with crowds. Judging by what I'd seen and heard it should be easy for him to work a miracle and wipe out the entire mob down there in the square. I wasn't sure why he hadn't.

We crossed the big hall swarming with gaping priests, all of them looking at me but obviously stretching an ear apiece toward the dull noises of the waiting crowd. We came to the shaft down which I had so nearly dashed myself to pieces.

We stepped into empty air--the shaft stretched down indefinitely to gloomy depths underground--and rose like cherubs up the shaft. I may as well say now that I never did learn how that levitation trick worked.

None of us spoke a word. We soared the full height of the shaft and stepped neatly out in unison on a platform on the top floor. There was

a broad hall before us painted in gold with salamanders. At the end of it was a purple curtain looped back over double doors. A little mob of priests, their head-flaps agitated, hung around these doors, talking in whispers and rolling their eyes unhappily as they saw us come.

The double doors swung open. We marched in under the sweep of curtain. And just as we passed the agitated little group I caught a glimpse of a calm dissipated-looking face among them regarding me with a rather smug grin. It was Dio.

I would have said there wasn't a square inch of my brain just then that wasn't packed with worried thoughts, but a small pinwheel of fresh alarm went off in an unused corner and began shooting out sparks.

How much did he know about my interview with Coriole? Did his presence here mean Falvi's arrest for attempted murder? Obviously Dio wasn't dead, after all. But it occurred to me that I might be if he shot off his mouth at the wrong time and place.

He looked overwhelmingly complacent, like a man who has used great forethought, picked the winning side and settled comfortably back to watch the losers put up their vain but gallant fight.

I didn't feel gallant. I was going to pick the winning side, too. Coriole had been just a mite too clever, I thought, in maneuvering me into a spot where I practically had to promise the crowd to fight for them. But he'd forgotten one minor matter--maybe I wouldn't hang around here to see the crowd demonstrate.

I had every intention of grabbing Lorna and making the plunge back through the wall-between-worlds as fast as was humanly possible. After that--well, let the two factions fight it out between them. It wasn't my battle.

Inside the double doors was a waiting room lined with nervous priests. Never losing a beat we marched on through. The nearer we got to the Hierarch the higher the tension mounted in everyone concerned.

The priests downstairs had been nervous enough. Those in the hall had been practically biting their nails. These in the anteroom almost twanged with tense nerves. I wasn't feeling any too relaxed myself. The Hierarch had frightened me even on a video screen.

My guards flung open an inner door and stood back, deserting me. I went through alone.

The Hierarch sat at a big desk made out of solid gold. It was hideous. You couldn't have crowded one more scrolled dragon or curly lion onto its carving if your life depended on it. Queen Victoria would have loved that desk.

The Hierarch stood up. His eyes met mine. And suddenly all confidence I had been able to retain so far vanished out of me between one breath and the next. I lost all desire to make smart-aleck cracks about Malesco. I was nothing but a second-string actor from a minor Broadway play, astray in the wrong world and deserted by the phenomenal luck that had brought me this far. The Hierarch was no joking matter.

He wasn't very tall. But he was broad and solid and his purple and gold robes didn't add a thing to the immense dignity and confidence of the man. He'd have looked the same in sackcloth. His little expressionless eyes regarded me with cold dispassion from under the fat lids.

There were three jittery priests in the room with us. One of them jumped to pull the Hierarch's chair back as he rose. He rolled

forward with that bulldozer gait toward me. There was a chair in the way. He didn't even glance at it. One of the priests almost dislocated an arm snatching it out of the way in time and the Hierarch surged on.

I think he would have trampled it under rather than move around the obstacle. I was reminded again of Queen Victoria, and the legend that she never looked back at her chair before she sat down. She just sat, confident that someone would shove a chair under her in time. She had been born a queen, you see.

The Hierarch paused six feet away and breathed through his nose, loudly. His voice was thick and rich. He wasted few words on me.

"Talk," he said.

I looked him in the eye. I thought of Dio hovering outside the door, undoubtedly waiting the right moment to do or say whatever would be best for Dio. I thought of the crowd seething around the Temple wall, waiting for me, and a little confidence flowed back into my mind. Not much. About a teaspoonful, perhaps. But it was more than welcome there. "You," I said in my best hero's voice, "are going to send me back to New York with Clia. Now."

We important people don't waste our words. I snapped my jaw shut and glared at him with a great show of confidence.

The Hierarch's little eyes never swerved from mine, but he made a soft snapping noise with one hand. A priest hurried up beside him and lifted a familiar weapon chest-high, facing me. It was another of those glowing milk bottles and as I looked a warning flash blazed out of it, obliterating the whole room for a second.

I didn't dare hesitate. Taking careful aim, I squinted my eyes nearly

shut, stepped forward a pace and with one deft smack knocked the bottle out of the priest's hands. It bounced softly in the carpet, its glow dying.

"That's enough of that," I told the Hierarch in a firm voice. "I'm no hired thug. I came here unarmed. You needn't be afraid of me if you do as you're told. But if I don't walk out of here unharmed within an hour--well, have you looked out the window lately?"

The Hierarch pulled in his topmost chin over a descending series of subsidiaries and regarded me from under his brows. He had a thin mouth set between the flat slabs of his cheeks and now the mouth curved up slightly in a grim smile. "So that's what you meant," he said. "You said you'd explain when you saw me."

I blinked stupidly at him. Then I got it. I'd promised to explain in person--and in person I'd led a mob to his door. Oh, I'd been a smart operator, all right. The world lost a military genius when I took up show business.

"Right," I said crisply. "Now let's not waste any more time. Suppose you send for Clia and start things moving. I want the two of us back in New York by the time that hour's up."

"And your--followers?" the Hierarch inquired. I hesitated briefly. I could say I'd disperse them but would they disperse? They wanted me as a leader or at least a figurehead, not as a vanishing image on a screen that showed me heading back for Manhattan.

"I'll manage them," I told the Hierarch. "Send for Clia."

He regarded me with his usual lack of expression for a painful thirty seconds. Then he snapped his fat fingers again. The priest responsible for finger-snaps hesitated uncertainly, not sure what the

boss meant.

"Clia!" the Hierarch said venomously over his golden shoulder. The priest cringed and scuttled for the nearest door.

I let out a long breath unobtrusively, hoping nobody would notice. It didn't seem possible that I was going to win. I had only been certain that when you deal with a human juggernaut like this one you've got to bully louder and faster than he does or you'll be trampled under. It appeared to be working, but I didn't dare relax for a second and I had one insoluble problem still before me.

Suppose everything went fine up to the very point of my exit through the screen. The Hierarch was no fool. He would not allow himself to be left holding a bag containing a crowd that numbered some thousands. How could he explain my absence when they began to tear down the Temple wall to get at me? Did he simply mean to blast them out of existence with a miracle? If so, why wait? Why not do it now and then dispose of me by the same easy method?

If he had really given in to me, then it had to mean he was afraid of the crowd. Coriole had told me about the priesthood's very real fear of the people when they were roused. Lorna wouldn't have been allowed to survive if the voice of the people hadn't demanded her, remembering Jimmerton. Now they demanded me and I thought the Hierarch didn't dare refuse them or attack them. He could wipe out this mob, certainly, but Malesco was a big place and short of depopulating the planet it would seem he couldn't control the people when they got their temper up.

It also occurred to me as a sort of paradox, that a miracle exercised now to disperse the crowd might have exactly the opposite effect. The survivors, in their present mood of intellectual curiosity, might become violently active to find out what made the miracle work. I

pictured something like a large cannon pouring out miraculous death-rays, while indefatigably curious men and women swarmed all over it poking, prying, peering into the muzzle, turning any available wheels and chattering excitedly about miracle-juice and the result of sparks.

It was at this point I experienced my first real twinge about the people of Malesco. Up to now they had been people in the abstract, a generalization that meant nothing. If Coriole told the truth, they were a downtrodden populace who had allowed a series of tyrants to dominate them for a long, long time.

I was facing the latest of the tyrants now, and I began to realize what it would be like to live as one of the common herd under a Hierarch. Maybe they did need help, at that. But, I told myself firmly, not from me. It wasn't my problem. I was no Malescan.

I had troubles enough of my own. It was true, of course, that I'd inadvertently led them into something that might turn out dangerously for everybody concerned. That depended on how the Hierarch handled things.

Chapter XIV

I had used a simple machine and produced a miracle on the street corner. But if the Hierarch tried to produce a miracle to disperse the crowd, I thought he would find he had presented them with a mechanism instead. And they'd want to examine the thing and see how it worked.

I didn't think he was a fool. It was hard to tell what he was.

At this stage I began to be aware that there was a distant, disagreeable noise coming rapidly closer, audible through one closed door and maybe two. By the look of wincing anticipation on the Hierarch's face I knew he felt about the way I did. You could always hear Lorna Maxwell a good deal further than you could see her.

"What's the idea?" her remote voice was demanding. "Stop shoving, will you? Stand aside, you--let an angel pass. Who do you mink you are, anyhow? Oh, stop shoving. I'm coming. I'm coming. Just let me alone."

All this was in mingled English and bad Malescan and was as much a part of Lorna as her own skin. She didn't mean most of it. She could contrive to get shoved in the politest company and the monologue of protest was simply her artless way of being sure people were looking at her when she went by.

The door behind me opened. The Hierarch sighed audibly and Lorna Maxwell swept in, heavily disguised as Clia, the transfigured Malescan.

While she kept her mouth shut, she was a dazzling spectacle. She

wore a sort of cloth-of-silver robe, heavily encrusted with the images of lions, eagles and salamanders in jewels which I had no reason to think weren't real. They had improved her figure somewhat--it hadn't needed much. Seeing her clearly for the first time now, I realized how tremendously they had improved her face. She was unmistakably still Lorna but a glorified Lorna, not the commonplace cheaply-pretty little creature I had last seen on Earth. Her face was almost funny it was so beautiful. They'd made her into a collection of clichés.

Her eyes were luminously blue, slickly soulful. Her nose was a delicate masterpiece of modeling. Her mouth--if I had a copy of Harriett's Quotations handy I could tell you all about her mouth--shut. Open, it still looked and sounded just like Lorna's.

She paused at the door, looking at me sharply. It took her a few seconds to identify me. It took a few more seconds for her to get her ideas about me sorted out. What was in this for Lorna Maxwell?

You could see her doing simple sums inside her head, very fast. Then she made up her mind. She flung both arms wide, the silver sleeves flailing. She tipped her lovely head back, gave a panting breath and cried out in a truly silvery lilt, "Eddie! Eddie, darling!" And with a rush of glittering robes and a sweep of shining perfumed hair she was all over me.

There was a confused moment after that. Lorna is heavier than she looks and she literally flung herself into my arms. It would have been more romantic if we'd rehearsed it better.

I tripped over the silver robe trying to get my balance and we almost sprawled at the Hierarch's feet. Lorna had a tight grip around my neck and was sobbing in my ear some lines from a play I dimly remembered, something about love and reunion and bitter heartbreak.

When I got her at arms' length so I could see her face I noticed she was keeping an eye on the Hierarch as she went through her act, just to make sure all this was being appreciated. Lorna is, of course, one of those persons who never really enjoy an emotion that isn't fully public.

"All right, Clia," the Hierarch rumbled patiently, after a moment. "I take it you know this man. He tells me he's come to take you back to New York."

Lorna eyed me without turning her head. I realized she had her better profile turned toward the Hierarch and didn't want to spoil the pose, though for all the good it did her she needn't have bothered. The Hierarch at least was not entrapped by the fatal charms his priesthood had bestowed on the visitors from Paradise.

After a certain amount of thought had passed rapidly through her mind Lorna gave a sudden squeal and swung around to give me personally the benefit of a really dazzling three-quarter view. It was wasted on me too, but I could see what an effect she might have on those who didn't know her.

"Eddie, you didn't!" she cried. "Really, did you come all this way just to take me home? Oh, Eddie, I've missed you terribly. I—"

I gave her a shake.

"This is Eddie Burton, remember?" I said. "I'm not a Hollywood scout. I'm just good old Eddie. Do you really want to go back?" I spoke in English and the Hierarch scowled at us.

"I certainly do," Lorna assured me, smiling a glistening smile that revealed every tooth in her head. It was clear that they'd cured her of her phobia about the machine, at any rate.

"Tired of being an angel?" I inquired curiously.

"Bored to death. Oh, it's been fun, but they never let me out of the Temple. I want to go back and show myself off. Oh, Eddie, didn't they make me beautiful?"

"They certainly did. You ought to get a Hollywood contract out of this, once you're back. How does it feel to be beautiful?"

She smiled at me with sudden unexpected humility, a sudden look of clumsiness and uncertainty, like a girl dressed up in finery she knows isn't her own. Dimly Lorna knew this face was too good for her, and she felt self-conscious about it.

Unexpectedly, I was sorry for her, seeing the old Lorna under this lovely facade, uncertain, noisy, burning with ambition, terrified of failure and starving for success. Well, this time she ought to get it.

"We're on our way back right now," I told her rather grandly, and in Malescan for the Hierarch's benefit. I hoped it was the truth. It worried me that I seemed to be getting away so easily with my bluff, but I didn't dare relax for an instant.

It was ominous in a way that no questions had been asked about how I got through into Malesco, what I'd been doing in that room at the Baths, how it happened that I spoke Malescan intelligibly if not perfectly, above all how I'd managed to call up that crowd--and why.

The Hierarch stood there, looking at me, with Lorna striking attitudes in my arms. He puffed out his slablike cheeks a couple of times, sighed and said, "You think so, do you?"

There was the soft sound of finger-snapping and right then I stopped worrying about one thing: getting away with my bluff so easily.

I stopped worrying because there was a sudden downward blur past my eyes and a tight, silky noose closed violently around my chest and arms. I felt the slam against my spine of a fist tightening the knot at my back.

At the same moment something equally tight around my ankles almost threw me off my balance. My worry about getting away with anything ceased abruptly. I wasn't getting away with a thing--not any more.

Lorna's great luminous blue eyes grew very wide. I could see the whites all round them for a moment as she stared over my shoulder. I turned my head and found myself looking upward into a face about a foot above my own. An enormous priest was holding the rope around my arms.

Slightly behind him stood another giant with a rope-end in his hands. The other end trailed downward to my ankles. A slight pull would throw me flat. I didn't see the least point in putting up a struggle. Either of these Goliaths could have pulled my head off with a flick of the wrist.

I couldn't do a thing except keep my face immobile and try not to irritate these giants into going any farther. I could only maintain dignity by being strong and silent. So I dropped my arms straight from the elbow, where the rope held them to my sides. I motioned the gaping Lorna away and regarded the Hierarch with a calm, heroic gaze.

He was permitting himself a slight smug twitch of the lips as he looked at me. "Search him," he said briefly.

A swarm of priests descended on me from some region I could not see because my back was toward the door. I felt hands slapping

cautiously all over me, searching for the unfamiliar pockets of my exotic tweeds. They were thorough.

On the hideous golden desk beside the Hierarch a little heap of my belongings grew like magic. Every item was regarded with deep suspicion and handled with extreme care, particularly the cigarette lighter with which I had kindled that Promethean fire on the street corner.

Finally I stood there with all my pockets hanging wrong-side-out and no further possessions on my person anywhere. I saw the Hierarch regarding Lorna with quiet satisfaction. Suddenly, I realized why he'd waited until she came before he cracked down on me. He wanted her to observe his power. Nobody was going to bluff the Hierarch, not even a visitant from Paradise, and he wanted the other visitant to know it.

"Now," the Hierarch said comfortably, "we can talk." He moved with ponderous deliberation around the desk and sat down, stirring the pile of small change from my pocket with a forefinger. He looked at me with his impassive all-knowing stare.

"You have come here," he said to me coldly, "without invitation. You cause a great deal of trouble out of motives I'm not really interested in. I know as much about you as I need to know. Things in Malesco were going along very smoothly until you came, and I intend you to leave them just as smooth before you go."

I looked at him hopefully. So I was to go, was I? Where? I didn't ask.

"I know the method of your coming," he went on complacently. "Falvi will be properly disciplined for tampering with the Earth-Gates and for failing to report your arrival. It was Falvi, wasn't it?"

I maintained my look of impassive heroic calm.

"All right," the Hierarch said. "You were seen to emerge from a room you could not have entered except by the Earth-Gates a moment after Falvi had left it. You were assisted down a shaft which was obviously unfamiliar to you.

"You followed Falvi to the Baths. There you spent some while in conference with a notorious rabble-rouser. When detected tampering with a Holy Screen you were able to impress certain of my people with your threats and I allowed you a certain latitude just to see what your plans were."

He interlaced his thick fingers and looked at them with modest pride. "The wisdom of my policy," he went on in a fat voice, "is now clear."

I doubted that. He was probably saying it to impress his audience, but there was still a crowd outside waiting for me and he couldn't argue it away. I believed I'd really succeeded in the major part of my bluff. He'd let me get away with so much because he was really baffled.

I knew more than I ought to know and he couldn't be sure where my knowledge stopped. Certainly it had been a mistake to let the crowd move on the Temple. He'd have dispersed them long ago if he dared. I was arguing myself into fresh confidence. I thought I'd better speak before it could wane again.

"The wisdom of your policy," I said with heavy irony, "will tell you to send Lorna and me back to New York before that hour the crowd gave you is over. They won't want to see any ropes on me either. An hour isn't very long for everything that's got to be done, is it? Time's getting short."

He frowned plumply at me. He hated to make any concessions. It occurred to me then that he was suffering from a form of hubris, something I dimly remembered defined in Plato's *Laws*. The sin against proportion had been committed here and the Hierarchs of Malesco wielded powers too big for their souls.

So they suffered congenitally, I suspected, from hubris, which is misbehavior through pride. This man before me would, of course, have been somewhat more than human if he hadn't developed a certain amount of that sin, since he ruled a world. The office he occupied was two thousand years old and creaking with an overload of accumulated grandeur.

Undoubtedly he was making the other classic mistake of confusing himself with his office. He arrogated to himself personally all the glory that belonged to the office of Hierarch. He was, in a word, vainglorious. Orgulous is the expressive medieval word for it.

He scowled at me blackly. It went hard with him to have to back down even by implication. But there was that crowd outside which he hadn't dealt with yet. I could almost see him remembering it. So he snipped his fingers again reluctantly.

I felt the pressure of my ropes slacken. They fell in two loose loops to my feet and I stepped out of them without even looking down.

"You'll do as you're told," he said, just to make clear he wasn't conceding anything. "It isn't that easy. You're right to rely on your mob--but don't rely too much. I can always disperse them if they push me too far. I'd prefer not to, but it's within my power to do so. I'll refrain only so long as it's more convenient to refrain. Do you understand that?"

"I see what you mean," I said.

"Very well. You and Clia will return to Paradise. A public ceremony is being organized now for that purpose. You may go on one condition." He exhaled loudly through his nose.

"On one condition," he repeated. "That is that you address the crowd before you go. A short speech is being prepared for you. The people must be instructed to disperse quietly. They must be told they have sinned in allowing the fatal treason of curiosity to overcome them. The great Alchemist is displeased with them all.

"That must be made clear. A few moral truths about obeying the priesthood and doubling their contributions to the Temple as a sign of true repentance will be incorporated in your speech. After that I believe they'll go quietly."

I looked at him thoughtfully. Maybe they would. I couldn't be sure, but I rather felt they would. It was clever of the Hierarch. Certainly it put Coriole right back in his place. He had tried to crowd me into a position of public savior which I wasn't at all ready to assume. This was the only way I could think of that would get me out of it.

But it made me feel very uncomfortable. Nobody could say I'd encouraged all those people to stick their necks out by following me to the Temple. I'd done everything I could to get rid of them. True, now that they were here they were very useful, but I hadn't asked them to follow me.

I didn't owe them anything. I'd been deftly maneuvered into this spot and, if I could be maneuvered out again, that was a matter between Coriole and the Hierarch. I was a tool and it suited me fine.

Then I remembered Uncle Jim and my discomfort deepened.

When you came right down to it this is what Uncle Jim had done, too.

Pitched into Malesco unintentionally, he had accumulated a band of followers, taken on hostages to fortune--at least I'd managed to avoid that--and eventually deserted when things became more rugged than he could take. Now the pattern was repeating itself.

"You have no choice, of course," the Hierarch put in neatly at this point. "Your refusal would simply mean the deaths of the people. I'd rather not wipe out your misguided followers, but if I must I can. Remember, this is my world, not yours. I rule Malesco."

He pulled in his chins and gave me an orgulous look. I shrugged. He was perfectly right. It was his world. I didn't want Malesco. All I wanted was to get back to New York with Lorna. And this was the easiest way to do it.

"It's the people's problem," I assured myself. "They haven't any right to expect some magic deliverer from another world to turn up and solve everything for them. If I lay an easy solution in their laps they won't value it. You've got to work out your own problems before you get any good from them. That's one of the first lessons in life."

"If you have any notions," the Hierarch said at this point, "that you can burst into inspired speech at the last moment, please forget them."

I blinked at him. That hadn't occurred to me. He was overestimating my concern for the people of Malesco.

"Remember I control all the mechanistic resources of this world," he reminded me. "The people can't possibly overthrow me. It's no kindness to encourage them to try. Surely you can see that."

I did, all right. I glanced at Lorna, who had been unexpectedly silent. She wasn't following the conversation at all. From the moment she saw a pack of cigarettes emerge from my pocket it was clear that

one devouring desire had taken control of her. But she seemed to be too afraid of the Hierarch to say anything. There was no help to be gained from her. She didn't even know what we were saying.

I sighed uncomfortably. "All right," I said. "Let's get started. I'll make your speech for you." And I began stuffing my empty pockets back into place to give myself something to do.

Chapter XV

I stood on the stage of the biggest theatre I'd ever played in and got ready for the largest audience. The average legitimate theatre in New York is a tiny place and it holds comparatively few people at a time.

But this vast, long chamber with the painted walls would more than contain the crowd I had left in the square before the Temple. I shuffled my feet on the golden stage and wished the ordeal were over.

Lorna was beside me, making nervous adjustments of her robes. The Hierarch sat on a hideous gold throne, even more encrusted with ornament than his desk upstairs. There were priests and priests and more priests everywhere I looked, but the people hadn't come in yet. The doors were closed.

This was the dais below the great circular screen that opened upon Earth. It was just a window now. Through it I could see over the rooftops the great watery dome of the Baths with the fountains of fire playing over it, and Lorna's pictured face painted in colored lights on the side of the building.

It was the same view I'd had from far above when I first emerged into Malesco. I never understood clearly how they switched the opening between the worlds from upstairs to the ground floor for ceremonies--but that was the way it was.

Upstairs it was privately operated and constantly attended by people like Falvi. Down here it worked only on great occasions--like this one. Of course no great mystery was involved. We use remote control and coaxial cables and such gimmicks ourselves, and in the

face of such a miracle as the Earth-Gates merely technical angles were trivial enough.

I'd spent the last half hour or so cramming, studying my part with the aid of two priests who acted as prompters. It wasn't a difficult role to learn. In fact, I'd had time to ask a few tentative questions about the Earth-Gates, for I had a pardonable curiosity as to the nature of the springboard that was going to hurl me into a pretty frightening abyss.

To my surprise the priests had answered my questions--not as clearly as I could have wished but I managed to piece out some interesting details. I began to understand why it was that Malesco had discovered the Earth-Gates whereas our own scientists have merely theorized about such matters.

The reason was simply that alchemy accepts the idea of transmutation in a semi-mystical way which is nevertheless founded on solid physical science. Belief precedes practical application in spite of Newton and the apple.

Before Newton men knew enough to get out from under, but the theory of gravitation enabled men to go on from there and create rather than merely to use what was already at hand. However, not until certain alloys, methods and isotopes were discovered was Malesco able to build the Earth-Gates.

We use energy to move ourselves from place to place. With kinetic energy we travel far and fast. But there is another method--potential energy. We use that when we build a bridge. The bridge must be constructed in a special way so it won't fall down. It must be made of special material strong enough to endure the stresses and strains. The Romans used stone. They couldn't have bridged San Francisco Bay. We use metal alloys so we can do that.

Now sometimes kinetic and potential energy are joined in one bridge--a drawbridge.

The Malescan apparatus to bridge the gap between two worlds was similar. Cathode and anode may be solid metal; but what jumps between is pure energy, electronic in nature. So the Earth-Gates were part kinetic and part potential.

When you get into the theory of probability you start working with its breakdown within the atom. So far our own science has been puzzled by this, rather as the experts of Galileo's time were baffled when two balls, one of wood and one of iron, were dropped from the top of a tower and behaved irrationally in the light of the known science of that period.

Anyhow, Malescan alchemic scientists had also noticed a breakdown of probabilities within their atoms. Remember, they knew all about Earth, and the space-time cleavage back in Roman days. They thought this might be the key. Somewhere within the atom was the missing link. Somewhere, solidly in Malesco--somewhere, solidly on Earth, were cathode and anode.,

The trick was to find a form of energy that would bridge the widening gap.

Well, they did it. It took a long time, but they did it. They discovered atomic energy eventually and then managed to find the right type of energy to bridge the gap. Oddly enough, that wasn't the hardest part.

The really tricky work--my priests explained--came, first in building up enough sufficient potential to cross the gulf, secondly in controlling and guiding that enormous power. (Remember the atomic bomb? We invented it all right but as for controlling it--)

Moreover the powers involved were so enormous that sometimes the Earth-Gates got slightly out of control. The spark would jump the gap of its own volition and the two worlds would meet briefly--for a second or two--with only a few square feet of space involved. The gaps always closed again.

Still, this is what must have happened when I entered Malesco. There must have been a brief bridging of the gap, so that when I called Lorna's name Falvi heard a voice from the air and, sensibly connecting that phenomenon with the Earth-Gates, let his fatal curiosity get the better of him. Perhaps that explains Joan of Arc's voices too.

Legend had it that such phenomena had happened even before the Earth-Gates were built. Perhaps the two worlds were closer together then, so the gulf could be bridged more easily. A visitant from an unknown place had appeared once in Malesco--his name was something very much like Peter Rugg.

And there was the tale of the Malescan who had disappeared without trace from the middle of an open field. (Would it surprise you to know that I finally worked it out that his name, spoken phonetically, resembled Kaspar Hauser?)

I wish now I had asked more questions. I wish the priests had been clearer. For the Earth-Gates were among the great miracles of science, and I couldn't concentrate on them at all because I had stage fright.

I stood waiting, facing the far end of the enormous room, wondering where the exit door was, running over my opening lines, wishing again and again that the next half hour were over, that Lorna and I were back home again. Then the air suddenly shuddered with the hollow hooting of trumpets and the whole far end of the room

shimmered before me.

I thought it was my eyes blurring. Then I saw that the entire end wall had grown translucent with a pouring flood of pale light. A vast a began to burn upon the surface of the wall, and I realized that it was no wall but a great curtain.

It shivered and began to rise. The trumpets tooted their hollow notes again and a second curtain rose, lead-gray, to reveal a third and then a fourth beyond, successively thinner and more golden. Now I could see a dim outline of the square in which I had left my faithful followers.

But the curtains distorted things. It looked as if the whole square, which had been half empty when I left, was full now of restless motion. I had thought the crowd would, if anything, thin out a little while it waited. I had even braced myself to find it entirely dispersed by the time I got to relying really heavily on the people. But Coriole had been smarter than I expected.

The last curtain rolled upward, pure golden yellow, and from the dais where I stood I could see that the entire square was one solid, seething mass of heads and faces turned toward me. And that wasn't all.

As far as the eye could reach down the streets leading into the square there were more heads, more faces, more restless pushing and surging. It looked as if all of Malesco had gathered here to send me off with appropriate ceremony. You couldn't see the pavement anywhere the crowd was packed so tight.

When the curtain rose the foremost ranks rolled forward in one solid mass and the noise of it surged into the Temple and reverberated from the walls. The people weren't shouting. They didn't make any

particular noises when they saw me.

I'd rather expected some sort of demonstration, but I didn't get it. The volume of their voices rose a little, but each individual man and woman was talking in low, controlled tones and there was no shouting. It seemed to me that this crowd meant business.

It scared me. Could I handle it? Could the Hierarch? I didn't know what weapons he had, but it looked to me that nothing short of an atom blast could wipe out this entire mob at one blow. He could, at worst, destroy the foremost of the crowd.

It seemed to me those endless ranks of people disappearing down the streets far away could and would surge forward and find out and destroy the sources of the destruction before the last man was anywhere near extinction. I didn't look around at the Hierarch, but I felt a little cool breath of... dismay?... move over the dais as the priesthood prepared to greet its audience.

In less time than I'd have believed, the hall was packed tight and solid with men and women shoulder to shoulder, staring up at the dais and at me. And with them came a curious atmosphere of tension and expectation, so that the enclosing walls seemed to pack the feeling down tight under the high roof and we all felt it pressing around us.

Down there in the front ranks I saw one familiar face-- Coriole's.

He was only about twenty feet away from me and he was watching me like a cat, his pale blue eyes never swerving from mine. It made me uncomfortable. I looked away--and found I was staring at another familiar face, this time in the wings and even closer than Coriole. This time it was Dio.

He still looked sleepy. He still had the air of a man who's had a hard night and not enough rest. But there was a lot more in his expression now. Sullenness, I thought, for one thing. I had a series of quick consecutive thoughts about Dio.

There just hadn't been time until now to wonder where the Hierarch got his detailed information about my activities since my arrival here, but it was obvious when I thought back. Dio, of course—he had probably been hanging around Falvi's door hoping for a break and had got one.

Maybe he'd suspected Falvi's connection with the underground for some while and finally had caught him at it with me. That would explain his air of avid anticipation when he carried me down the shaft and set me adrift in the city, hoping I'd lead him to something worthwhile.

That was Dio's policy, of course. Coriole had confirmed it if I'd needed confirmation. Dio was on Dio's side and nobody else's. And now he was sullen. Why? Well, he'd given the Hierarch some valuable information, certainly. But what reward had he got? Not enough, to judge by his expression.

He hadn't even been inside the Hierarch's door when I went to pay my formal call. He'd been hanging around in the hall, hoping for crumbs. It wasn't enough for Dio—not nearly enough. I wondered about promotion in the priesthood. Maybe it went by seniority. Dio was young. He wouldn't be content to wait another fifty years for recognition. He'd want it now.

Since his scheme to inform the Hierarch on Coriole had failed he'd certainly be watching for something even bigger. I didn't like having him so close to me. I meant to play right along with the Hierarch, of course—I hadn't any choice now—but if I should see any loopholes I

didn't want Dio watching me with that expectant stare, waiting to jump the moment my back was turned.

There was a low rumbling along the walls. I looked up. So did everybody else. And this time a single deep breath of protest seemed to sweep the whole hall, from side to packed side. For above us, between the painted animals on the walls, were regularly spaced golden a's. There was an ominous glow dawning behind them.

I recognized it with a shudder. It was the same glow I had last seen in the bottle-shaped weapons of the priests. My eyes ached in quick retrospect as I thought of the blinding sunburst of heat and brilliance those weapons could emit.

But those had been of milk-bottle size. These were six feet across. The golden a's were simply ornamental scrollwork across the mouths of so many cannon embedded in the wall. The Hierarch was taking no chances with this dangerous crowd. One simultaneous glare from those glowing mouths above us would crisp every human in the hall to cinders. -

I hoped--not at all like a hero--that the priests had some way to shut off the dais from those blasts if and when the time came to unleash them.

Still there was no demonstration from the crowd. They weren't intimidated. They weren't even angry on the surface. But they were waiting. The thousands of lifted faces I could see had a grim set look, and I could feel in the air that indefinable tension of determination and hard, controlled patience. Every eye was on me.

My speech was short. I'd learned it easily enough. The notes were on a little glass and gold table before me. I went over the opening lines

in a quick mental gabble, waiting for my cue.

People of Malesco... gabble-gabble... great Alchemist in Paradise is impatient with your sinful curiosity... gabble-gabble... sent me to warn you... gabble-gabble... at punishment for your wilful misconduct... gabble-gabble... returning to Paradise and taking Clia back with me out of the contaminating... gabble-gabble....

There it was, the deep hooting of those great curled horns. A breathless hush fell upon the crowd. I knew I'd never have such an audience again. They were with me to a man. They loved me in Malesco. Well, it ought to be over in ten minutes. "It's not your battle, Eddie," I assured myself, waiting for the horns to stop echoing. "You're just an actor. You've played villains before. This is a quick walk-on and then curtain. In ten minutes you'll be home in New York and these people can fight it out among themselves."

The echoes stopped. I took a deep breath and started talking. My voice was a little shaky at first, but I got it under control after the first words. The public address system here was working fine. They could hear me, I saw, even in the back rows. I got past "Great Alchemist in Paradise" and swung into it, putting paternal reproof into the lines, trying to sink myself in the character I was playing so I wouldn't have to think. I hadn't written this play. It wasn't my battle... it wasn't my battle... it wasn't-- It wasn't going over.

There was no doubt about that. The muttering from the back of the house began to rise before I'd got more than two lines into my speech. I spread my arms and put more volume into my voice, ad-libbing a little to make time for the mutter to subside.

It worked--for a moment--and I went on with increasingly cold feet. I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. I didn't like my lines or the part I was playing, and it seemed to me the Hierarch had made a terrible

mistake in his handling of the crowd.

It's simple psychology. You can't take something away from people when they prize it very highly and not give them anything in return. These men and women had come here charged with a tremendous potential for action and it wasn't going to work if we just said, "Run along home now like good children." I had misjudged the Hierarch. He knew what he was doing. The second time the muttering from below rose to a roar that threatened to drown out my speech, I felt a stirring at my elbow. I stepped back a pace, drawing out a syllable long enough to give me time to glance back.

Chapter XVI

It was Lorna. She came forward with a graceful, gliding step she certainly hadn't known in New York. She spread her arms and the silver sleeves caught the light and glowed like fire. She spoke in a cooing, emotional croon that filled the hall without effort.

"You are angry," she cooed at them, in the purest Malescan. "You have reason to be angry. Someone has cheated you of your rights!" Silvery indignation sounded in her voice now. I was baffled for an instant at the command she had over the language and her lines. Lorna wasn't up to ad-libbing.

Then I realized the Hierarch had been preparing for this all along. I hadn't been the only one who spent the last half hour studying my lines. Lorna had been coached too, for just this occasion.

The crowd was dead silent, waiting, puzzled. I was puzzled, too. But in the instant before Lorna went on I saw understanding light up one face below me in the crowd. Coriole's eyes met mine in a sudden blaze of anger and hatred. He knew what was coming. And then, of course, I did too.

It had been the Hierarch's plan from the start. But he hadn't told me. He must have known how far he could push me along the way he meant me to go. I'd agreed to make this fairly harmless little speech. But he suspected I wouldn't do what Lorna was now doing for me.

"A man who deserves your righteous anger!" Lorna cried throatily. "He and his men have worked like serpents underground to make trouble between you and your loving priesthood. He is jealous of your destiny. You will go on through virtuous lives to reincarnation in Paradise.

"But he will never reach New York and now he tries to trick you too out of your birthright: Paradise! People of Malesco, I give you that man, to punish as you choose!" The silver-draped arm swung dramatically and pointed straight down before her.

"Coriole!" she shrilled. "Coriole!"

Instantly from picked spots in the crowd a well-disciplined claque took up the shout. The Hierarch hadn't forgotten a thing. His stooges were planted all through the room and they had strong voices.

"Coriole!" they yelled with well-assumed rage. "Coriole tricked us! Grab him! Grab Coriole! Don't let him get away!"

The crowd boiled furiously, wild with indecision. Above them the golden a's glowed more and more ominously as the power stepped up behind them, waiting to be released.

"Get Coriole!" some feeble voices began to cry tentatively, as suggestibles in the crowd swung toward the people who made the most noise. "Get him--get Coriole!"

The thing hung in a perfect balance for one of those timeless moments. It needed a push one way or the other and for that instant nobody seemed capable of pushing. Time was on the side of the Hierarch.

When you have an organized group acting under strict orders it's simply a matter of time until they swing the crowd their way by pure volume of noise. And Coriole for some reason was caught flatfooted.

Either he'd relied too heavily on me or the unexpected size of the crowd had given him false confidence. But it was partly the size of the crowd that trapped him now. He was hemmed in so tightly he

couldn't run even if he wanted to. I saw his mouth open and shut and the veins in his neck swell as he shouted something--perhaps the names of his friends--but the noise was too loud and nobody could hear him.

There's always a large percentage of mindless fools in any mob, ready to yell whatever the next guy is yelling. The Hierarch's boys were making headway. Probably a good many of these people had never heard of Coriole, but that didn't stop them from yapping for his blood

I stood there on the dais and dithered like my cousin in the crowd. "It isn't your fight, it isn't your fight," I kept telling myself futilely. "This is the people against their government and there isn't a thing you can do about it. Don't meddle. Keep your mouth shut and you'll come out on top. Keep your mouth shut!"

Here on the dais a separate crisis seemed in progress. The roaring mob was below us, the jammed square was in front of us--the shouting and yelling sweeping infectiously back out of the Temple and along the packed streets. But it might have been happening on the other side of the world so far as it outwardly seemed to affect the priests.

The Hierarch sat motionless on his gold-crusted throne. Lorna, having spoken her piece, had sidled up to me and was whispering urgently, "Did you keep any cigarettes, Eddie?"

I didn't answer her. I was watching the priests. They weren't as good at hiding their emotions as the Hierarch was. A lot of ambivalence seemed to be in progress in the massed priesthood in the wings. The men wound up in the curled horns each had a deep breath drawn, ready to blast away at a word from the Hierarch.

They never took their eyes from his face. I knew there were hidden priests at the controls of the sunburst weapons glowing ready in the walls, and they must be watching the boss too, each with a finger posed above the switch of whatever activated those heat-rays.

It seemed to me the priests were alarmed somewhat out of proportion to reason. I saw they were winning. All they had to do was wait. Already the roar of "Get Coriole!" could be heard clearly from several sides and it was gaining with every second.

Then I caught Dio's eye and for an instant everything else went blank and silent around me, so urgent was the look on his face. But I didn't know what the look meant. He seemed to be hanging eagerly on my next motion, my next word. He seemed to attach tremendous importance to what I did next.

There was the same avid anticipation on his face which I'd seen in our first meeting when he waited joyfully for me to give myself away. Was that what he expected now? Was he afraid I'd try to swerve the anger of the mob from Coriole to the priests? Did he think I could do it? If he did, maybe he was right. Maybe, if I could just think of the right word, Coriole might still have a chance.

But did I want to meddle that much? I'd gone through a lot to get right where I was now, on the threshold of return to New York. In a few moments Coriole would be submerged by the angry mob, all its energy diverted against the man who'd roused it. And the ceremony would go on as planned.

Dio was reaching into his robe. I saw him fumble for something, never taking his eyes from my face. Then he had it. He pulled it out, keeping his hands closed over something small.

He was smiling rather wolfishly now, the bright avid intentness

stronger than ever on his face. He reminded me irresistibly of those weapons glowing in the walls. There was the same leashed blaze, the same meance held barely in check.

Still nailing me with that brilliant unswerving stare, he drew his arm back a little and snapped something shiny through the air straight at me.

It seemed to me it hung there between us for years and years. My mind ran in little circles, yelping hysterically. "Is it a bomb?" my mind demanded. "Shall I catch it? Shall I dodge it? What is it? What's eating him? What shall I do?"

But my body acted with calm independence of the frantic mind. Automatically both of my hands reached out and the object smacked neatly into them.

It was a small, flat square. The feel of it made a picture take shape in my mind before I even looked. Another of those white wafers with gold writing on it. A message from Dio?

I opened my hands slightly and looked down. It wasn't a wafer. There was no writing on it. Dio had tossed me my cigarette lighter.

You wouldn't believe what a short time all this really took. Coriole was still looking around wildly for his men. The mob was still milling indecisively. The leather-lunged stooges in the congregation were still bellowing incendiary phrases at the tops of their voices. But the tide was already on the turn.

The priests, I thought, had won. Not tangibly yet but definitely. This was one of those important moments in Malescan history when a touch would swing the balance one way or the other and the touch had been applied. It was swinging ponderously toward the Hierarch's

side.

And the moment was perhaps as great a point of division as that earlier moment in Roman history when the two worlds had split apart in probability. Everything hung in the balance.

I held the cigarette lighter stupidly in my hands, blinking at it. What did Dio mean? Was he on the side of the priests or the side of the rebels?

"Neither," I told myself rapidly. "Dio's on Dio's side and nobody else's. He's for the winners."

But he'd given me the means to swing the course of history away from his own men. What did it mean? Obviously, only one thing.

Dio thought the rebels were the likelier winners. He wanted in on the stronger side. And that meant the priests were a lot weaker than they looked. Somehow, somewhere, they were covering up with a colossal bluff. Dio knew. And he expected me to—to what?

My mind was still telling me, "Don't meddle! It isn't your battle!" but again my body calmly went its own way. Without the slightest mental processes to guide me I kicked over the gold and glass table beside me on the dais and swung both arms up over my head at full length.

The pages of my speech fluttered unnoticed from the table to the floor. But the noise of the overturned table was a quicker and higher sound than the bellowing of the mob. It caught eyes in the front ranks.

I flicked the lighter with one thumb, praying fervently that it wouldn't choose this moment to balk.

There was a strange breathless pause in the shouting down below. Then I heard the sigh that swept like a soft breeze through the room

and I knew the flame had caught.

Miraculously, little by little, but marvelously fast, the uproar died away. Out in the square the crowd was still yelling, but there was a hush in the painted room. I could hear silence sweeping backward through the streets as the noise had swept a minute or two before.

I stood there like Liberty holding the torch of freedom aloft, and I didn't feel as silly as I might have. I was Liberty in that moment and it was the torch of freedom--if things went right.

I held the dramatic pose until I was sure every eye had focused on that one small flame, that one-candle-power torch that contained more power than all the Hierarch's weapons. I knew that while I held it the priests wouldn't dare touch me. But what was I going to do next? I couldn't stand forever in this melodramatic attitude.

It was my hour. I couldn't do the wrong thing. I snapped the lighter shut, swung my lifted arm back, and hurled the glittering square of metal out over the heads of the crowd.

It turned twice in the air, catching light on its shining sides, and then dropped gently out of sight among the craning heads. There was silence for a moment. Then the crowd seethed around the spot where it had fallen and a shrill voice cried, "I got it. I got it!"

Everybody looked. Even the Hierarch leaned forward on his throne. We all saw the meager little half-bald man in the mob who had caught the torch I threw.

He looked like a middle-aged clerk. He wore a shabby tunic and his hair needed cutting, what there was of it. But he held the lighter up in his cupped palms like a holy relic and his insignificant little face was transfigured with rapture.

That was the point at which the Hierarch lost his head. He was a clever man but he didn't know everything. And one of the things he didn't know was how to deal with a problem like this, with people getting so riotously out of hand so fast, with everything depending on his decisions from minute to minute, and no past experience to guide him.

This had never happened before. All he had to go by was a time when something a little like it had happened--Jimmerton's coming. The priesthood had triumphed over Jimmerton by fast direct high-pressure methods. The Hierarch tried that now. It would never do to let that dangerous cigarette lighter float about the city, passing from hand to hand and igniting rebellion in all who saw it.

"Bring me the sacred relic," he shouted, making majestic gestures. "That is a relic from Paradise--too holy for human hands! Bring it to me!"

I caught a venomous glance from his small enigmatic eyes, but he had no time to waste on me just now. He was rising with great pomp, surging forward across the platform. His outspread arms brushed Lorna and me aside.

"Bring me the relic!" he shouted, making his voice so rich and deep that even above the clamor of the crowd people heard it and heads turned.

Especially his clique planted among the audience heard it. When the command made itself understood I could instantly spot the undercover agents down below. Little eddies of the throng seethed around each as they began to surge toward the spot where the man with the lighter stood.

But they weren't the only ones who heard the orders. All within

earshot caught the words, and the deep spontaneous growl of anger that rose in the wake of the command must have told the Hierarch instantly he'd made a mistake. He'd started something he couldn't finish without bringing up some heavy artillery--very heavy. Maybe nothing he had was strong enough to silence that angry growling as it grew and spread and strengthened.

The mob was like a single organism now. A word dropped into it spread in eddying rings out and out until it was lost among the vanishing throngs in the streets. An idea, a promise of success or a threat of defeat, seemed to spread in the same way. A few words spoken from the dais ran like magic through the listening crowds and eddied out there among the packed avenues almost quicker than the eye could follow the spreading tumult it made.

One or two of the Hierarch's strong-arm squad had reached the little man with the lighter by now. The others were floundering closer but against increasing opposition. The people around each of them were resisting. Knots of angry men and women came into being all about every one of the forward-surging stooges.

The mob was turning into a single organism and the organism encysted these germs of disease in its midst, isolated them, built up the anger and the strength necessary to control them exactly as a living body surrounds and overwhelms dangerous intruders within itself.

Something that was new and powerful had been born in Malesco--this crowd--this single close-knit unit of all the thousands functioning as one. It was stronger than the Hierarch, stronger than the priesthood.

It was a new being. And I had created it. It was my responsibility now. So it was my fight after all.

Dio was watching me with fierce expectancy. Coriole, wedged tightly in the mob twenty feet away, was watching too, his pale eyes unswervingly on mine. I felt a third intentness and glanced sidewise to find the Hierarch regarding me with that inscrutable fat stare of his. These three knew: The next move was probably mine, and they realized it. These three-- no, it was four....

For Lorna's newly -- eyes suddenly intercepted mine. She edged toward me across the platform and I felt her cold fingers clasp my hand. With unerring instinct Lorna Maxwell had spotted the man temporarily in a key position. Whatever there was in it for her she meant to get. She moved toward me with all the mindless assurance of a plant turning toward the sun.

I had no idea what to do next.

Chapter XVII

About thirty seconds had elapsed since I threw the lighter, and already a major battle was starting in the crowd around the little man who had caught it.

"Little Man," I thought bitterly. Not a single cliché was being spared me. Even that nauseating phrase to denote the masses had come into actual being right under my nose. The representative Little Man himself was squealing and struggling feebly for the priceless boon of a cigarette lighter, and I couldn't do a thing to help him. I couldn't....

The sudden tremendous blare of the curled horns stunned me into blankness. Some hidden amplifier must have been turned on, for the whole hall shook with that deep-toned, vibrant blast. The Hierarch had moved while I stood there hesitating.

Down in the crowd all motion ceased for a few seconds as every brain in the mob vibrated painfully to that fearful noise. One vast collective headache must have throbbed through the whole organism which was the Malescan crowd.

The Hierarch's voice amplified to godlike volume, though I could see no mechanism to carry it, rolled majestically down the hall as the horn blast faded. He wasted no words. He didn't even command them to stop fighting, since obviously they had already stopped for the moment, stunned by the noise of the horns. He went right to the heart of his problem, which was me.

"Paradise," he roared sonorously, "awaits its children. Silence! Let the Earth-Gates open!"

For a second I think nobody quite knew what he meant. We were all

too involved in our immediate problems. But then I saw a change come over the faces just below, looking up at us. Their gaze shifted to something behind me. I was aware of a slowly dawning new light on the dais and I saw my own shadow take dim shape and stretch out at my feet across the golden floor.

I turned. The great circular window that normally looked out over the city had clouded with shining opalescence. You couldn't see Malesco through it any more. But a shape was growing there. A vast luminous a, the symbol for divided worlds bridged by a crossbar between Paradise and Malesco, gleamed through the clouds.

Very rapidly the a faded, and Paradise itself replaced Malesco beyond the window. New York at night, its streets streaming with lights, appeared to lie some hundreds of feet down just beyond the great circle in the wall.

"Paradise awaits!" the Hierarch's rich bellow announced, still amplified to superhuman volume. "The two who came to us must now return to the glorious rewards of New York. Clia! Burton! The Earth-Gates open!"

Behind me in the hall a wave of silence was moving outward through the crowd, though in the distance I could still hear shouting. Now a new wave began just below me, almost at my heels. I knew it would move as the shouting and the silence had moved, out and out until it reached the limits of the streets. But the new sound was very quiet. It was a sigh, a murmur. There was nothing they could do. They waited.

Was I going to leave them to the mercies of the priesthood as Jimmerton had done? I wished I knew.

The vision of New York rocked before me like a ship and seemed to shoot upward with sickening speed as if all of us who watched were

dropping toward the street. And as we dropped the clarity of the view clouded. I could see why.

If this were a real opening between the worlds, not a dressed-up version, it would never do to let the Malescans see too clearly what the real streets were like. Through a golden cloud I saw the blur of passing traffic, their lights making rainbows in the mist. We were looking at street-level straight into the City of Paradise.

"Come," the Hierarch said. "Paradise awaits. The Gates are open. Clia, Burton--farewell!"

All we had to do was step through. It was what I'd been struggling for during all this endless eternity in Malesco. Lorna's hand was still clasping mine. I'd got what I came for. What was in it for me if I hesitated any longer? Nothing.

"Go on," the Hierarch said urgently, in his normal voice, not using the amplifier that would let the people hear. "Step through. You're all right now. Just get out of here and don't make any more trouble."

Still I hesitated. His little eyes between their rims of fat were almost closed as he looked at me. He had never seemed more of a juggernaut than now. I had a curious feeling that this wasn't all, that there was something further on his mind as he waited so impatiently for my next step. But that could all be imagination.

"Go on," he whispered again. "Get out! Or do you want some help?"

I heard the soft snapping of his fingers and a couple of burly priests put their hands together in hieratically pious gestures and came forward on each side of us. I could see perfectly well that we were going to be shoved through the Gates in a minute or two if we didn't go of our own accord.

The crowd was completely silent now. It didn't seem possible that so many people could stand so still, hardly breathing, waiting to be abandoned to the just punishment of the priesthood. Jimmerton had deserted them too, long ago.

Now I was going, and the Hierarch could hardly wait to get me out of Malesco, so he could arrest Coriole and that ridiculous Little Man and put my cigarette lighter with the other relics of Paradise. Then it would be treason again for anyone to think about how the little wheel went around and the sparks flew out.

And, I thought suddenly, maybe someday another man from New York would stumble through the Earth-Gates. Maybe somebody not yet born. What story would he hear from the descendants of these people, about how a man named Jimmerton and a man named Burton had led them into revolt and left them when the going got tough?

Don't make any mistakes about Eddie Burton. That's sentimental talk. My own skin is the most important thing in the world to me. But if I could save Lorna and myself and still have some little dividend of glory left over, that wouldn't be too bad, either.

"Farewell!" the Hierarch suddenly thundered with' full volume turned on. "Farewell!"

I heard his fingers snap again and the two bulky priests ceased making hieratic gestures long enough to take each of us by an arm and move us at a sort of stately trot toward the Gates.

At that moment, almost too late, I knew what I could do to collect on that dividend of glory.

"Wait!" I said. "Just a second--I forgot something."

The priests paused slightly to see what the Hierarch would say to this. He looked at me very sharply and I saw no relenting on his face. He knew when he was well off. He wasn't going to give me a chance to get him into any more trouble.

And besides, there was something curious about his face and his eyes—a sort of gleam as if this weren't quite all, as if he waited for something yet to come. Coriole's arrest? Dio's punishment? Exterminating the crowd? All of those and maybe something more. I hadn't time to think about it.

"Lorna," I said rapidly and softly in English. "Have you got your amplifier turned on? I want you to say something to the crowd. Quick!"

She said in a sort of musical whine, "Oh, Eddie, I don't want to! Let's go! I—"

There was no time to waste persuading her. I got a good grip on her hand and bent her little finger painfully outward. I'd rather have twisted her arm, but that would have showed too clearly.

"Does that hurt?" I demanded in a rapid mutter. "I'll dislocate it if you don't repeat what I say after me at full volume. Understand?"

All I got in reply was a squeal of pain and anger. I paid no attention. She was trying to squirm free, but the priest on her far side had a firm hold on her and didn't understand why she was struggling so suddenly. Between us we had her where she couldn't get away.

"Say People of Malescco," I commanded, giving her the Malescan for it. "Go on, before I pull your finger off. People of Malesco!"

"People of Malesco!" she cried furiously, and the volume of the

sound roaring from her throat so near me was almost deafening. I wondered where the amplifier was--in a tooth somewhere? "People of Malesco!"

The priests jumped slightly at the roar. The screen before us vibrated a little and the sound woke echoes in the vault of the roof over the dais. Lorna's back was to the crowd but they must have heard her speak clear out in the streets.

The Hierarch gave us both a look of pure venom. But he had to give in. He made a gesture and the grip on my arm slackened. Still holding Lorna's hand in my compelling clutch, I swung her around to face the crowd.

"I have one last message for you," I dictated. Lorna swore at me in a whisper and then rolled the Malescan words out in the rich, sonorously sweet voice they'd given her along with the lovely face.

"Your Hierarch is a great man," I said, releasing her finger slightly. She put such emotion in the transcript when she repeated it that a very convincing half-sob broke up the words a little. It was a sound of rage and pain, but it gave the speech a touching quality.

"He has done so much for Malesco," I dictated.

"Let me go!" Lorna whispered. "He has done so much for Malesco--"

"That Paradise has decreed him a reward."

"Eddie, I'll kill you! Let go. Let go! That Paradise has decreed him a reward--"

"Listen while I tell you," I whispered. "Listen well, for this is the greatest reward a living man ever knew. Do you hear me, people of Malesco?"

Between the snarls of rage she got the words out. I made her pause then and in the interval the people gave us one unified roar of answer. They were with us. They knew something was up, and I thought they were ready to back almost anything I said. What did they have to lose now?

"I was a mortal among you," I dictated, ignoring her snarls.

"I lived a good life and went straight to New York when I died. But your Hierarch has lived a life so good that the Great Alchemist sent me here to claim him for Paradise--now!"

Halfway through that speech Lorna stopped struggling. Evidently she had picked up enough Malescan to realize what she was saying. She rolled her eyes at me. "I hope you know what you're doing," she whispered in the pause that followed this speech.

"Shut up," I said. "Wait a second. Let them yell. See how they like it?" I was looking straight down at Coriole as I spoke and I saw the sudden blaze of excitement on his face as he realized what I was attempting.

"Your Hierarch returns to Paradise with me--now!" Lorna parroted after me. And then, in a whisper, "Oh, Eddie, do you think he'll go? You must be crazy. What'll we do with him in New York?"

"Shut up," I said again. "Go on--make a gesture toward him. Invite him to Paradise. Go on or I'll break your arm!"

With incomparable grace she held out her hand toward the Hierarch, her silver sleeve flowing and flashing with jewels. There was a good deal of ham in her acting, but the audience wasn't critical.

The Hierarch stood there stunned at the foot of his golden throne.

The entire priesthood stood stunned around him. Nobody had expected this. For an instant stillness and silence held everyone on the dais motionless.

"Say, Come, Paradise awaits us," I hissed.

"Come, Paradise awaits us," Lorna cooed and the volume of her coo filled the entire hall and echoed through the city outside.

The Hierarch's eyes met mine. He shook his fat shoulders a little and said in a low growl several phrases of Malescan that Uncle Jim had never taught me. But he came. He had no choice. He couldn't repudiate Lorna before everybody. Slowly he lumbered toward us, juggernaut to the last.

The overturned table was in the way, and he rolled forward, ignoring it, knowing somebody would snatch it out of his path. Somebody did. He didn't glance down. You could see the furious thoughts racing through his mind behind his frozen face, but it was quite clear that he didn't know what to do next.

I did. It seemed perfectly simple to me. I was giving Coriole the chance he'd begged for. Coriole had friends among the priesthood and those friends were organized. I thought that if the Hierarch were suddenly snatched away Coriole would have a good chance of seizing control and putting one of his boys on that hideous golden throne. It was all I could do for him. I thought it was pretty good myself.

Chapter XVIII

We made a little tableau before the glowing Earth-Gates. Lorna and I, with our priest escort on each side, ready to seize us again at a word from the Hierarch--and the Hierarch in all his pomp and power, entirely helpless to save himself. It was a fine moment. I felt very proud of my own cleverness.

The Hierarch shook himself again, growled deep in his throat, and spoke at about half volume, so that the crowd heard him clearly but not deafeningly.

"I am not worthy of this honor." It must have gone hard with him to say such a thing, but it was the best he could think of just now.

"Paradise thinks you more than worthy," I dictated firmly and Lorna rolled it out over the crowd.

He ground his teeth. I really heard them grind. He let his little eyes shoot angry but hopeful glances around the dais. Nobody moved. Evidently nobody could think any faster than he could. Then I saw a sudden faint hope dawn on his face.

"Come, then," he said clearly. "We will go together." And he bowed us forward toward the Gates. I didn't get it for an instant. Then I saw he meant us to go first. He was being very, very polite and urging us ahead of him through the screen. Then, no doubt, he wouldn't follow.

"Oh no!" I said. "Lorna, tell them this. Paradise decrees your Hierarch the honor of stepping first through the Earth-Gates."

She giggled a little and told them.

And at that a sudden, unexpected tension settled down over the dais. A murmur ran through the priesthood. They stared in new consternation at the Hierarch.

He himself froze to new rigidity. Something had happened and I didn't know what it was. But he did. All the priests did. I sought Dio's eye but he only nodded. It was okay. I waited.

It was shocking to see how the color drained slowly out of the Hierarch's ruddy face as he looked at the Earth-Gates. I couldn't understand it. Naturally he didn't want to leave Malesco, but this reaction was all out of proportion to what he was called upon to do.

I thought, "He can just face around toward the crowd and refuse to go, can't he?" and I tried to brace myself to combat that, racking my brain for something to say when he did. I was sure it was what he'd do. I think he was sure too—for a moment or two. I saw him waver just a little as if he were nerving himself to turn.

Then the crowd seemed to sense the same thing. It was still a single organism and the tremor of refusal that had started close up under the platform when the nearest people saw the Hierarch waver spread rapidly backward through the hall.

They didn't want him to stay. They weren't going to let him stay.

"Farewell!" some raucous voice bellowed just below the dais. "Farewell!" Other voices took it up. In a backward wave it rolled through the hall until the ceiling rocked with the efforts of the people to speed their parting leader.

He shook his thick shoulders under the golden robe. There was something bull-like about the way he swung his head around and ran a desperate glance along the ranks of the watching priests.

"Fix it!" he said inexplicably through his teeth, hardly moving his lips. "One of you fix it! Flammand, help me! Hyperion, do something! Hyperion, I'll have you burned!"

Nobody moved.

There was dense silence on the dais while the roars of determined farewell gained volume in the hall below. No one on the platform would meet the Hierarch's eye. "Flammand!" he commanded in a frighteningly fierce whisper. "Flammand!"

There was an almost imperceptible motion in the priestly throng near Dio. Someone took an indecisive step forward--probably Flammand. Dio, his teeth showing in a grin, stepped forward at the same instant and shouldered the volunteer. The fellow could have got past him, but he didn't try. After a second of agonizing hesitation he fell back and was lost in the ranks.

"Hyperion!" The Hierarch's whisper was almost a scream now. And the silence on the platform had taken on a quality of relentlessness that seemed inflexibly cruel even though I had as yet no idea what it was about.

There was a small seething among the priests to the left. If Hyperion were trying to respond, there seemed plenty to prevent him. Hyperion, like Flammand, subsided. And the priesthood, like the people, in that moment firmly and finally rejected their Hierarch.

He stood there, swaying, his head down, shooting glances of rage and helpless hatred at the ranks of the priesthood which had been his to command until a moment ago, which by some mysterious alchemy of their own had simultaneously decided to defy him.

It was very curious, that moment. Before it the Hierarch had ruled a

world. After it, all in one instant, something inexplicable had happened and he was helpless.

He rolled his small, agonized eyes from face to face. He lowered his head between the heavy golden shoulders and it seemed to me he was about to lumber forward with his bulldozer gait to crush down opposition and force obedience again. But the opposition was too intangible for crushing. He couldn't crush a world. There was only one thing left which he could trample under, if he hoped to save his face--

Looking back now, I can see that he had no real choice. It wasn't only that the world he had ruled without question all his life suddenly presented an unbroken front of flat rebellion to him. There's just the barest possibility that if he'd attacked the rebellion openly he might have breached it and lived. I don't think he could have succeeded, but he might have.

There was much more to his surrender than that. Because to overcome the opposition he'd have had to expose his own trickery. He'd have had to stand self-confessed before the people and the priests as a murderer, a liar and a blasphemer against Alchemy. And that he couldn't do. Hubris can be a force for good as well as for evil in such a case as his. Unwittingly, I'd given him a choice between death and glory, or life and disgrace, and once he realized what the choice was he never faltered.

For what he did then I had to concede him respect. He straightened, throwing his fat shoulders back so that the golden robes swung magnificently. There was a definite note of baiting in the farewells that roared from the crowd below now. But as he lifted his head they slackened a little to see what he would do.

He made them all a stiff, proud bow.

The little byplay on the platform had been lost upon the throng, who could neither hear nor see it. But something in the attitude of the Hierarch and the priests seemed to convey to them at least that something was about to happen which they didn't expect.

The baiting note faded from their yells, but the volume of the noise did not slacken. They meant him to go. There was a dogged quality in their voices that would not cease while he stood here in their world. He would not again hear any sound in Malesco except the roaring of the people urging him toward Paradise.

There was nothing left for him to do but accept the honor and the glory that was being thrust upon him. He turned with a regal sweep of his robes and with sudden firmness strode unhesitatingly toward the Earth-Gates. He knew what he was doing. He knew better than any of us just then. But he never faltered.

He moved like a juggernaut to the last. He'd always crushed opposition. Now, when it was his own life that stood in the way of the prestige he'd built up and lived by for so long, his hubris sustained him and he crushed that, too. He rolled forward with grim pride, refusing to depart from Malesco in anything less than the full dignity of his office. In his own way he was magnificent.

With majestic stride he stepped up on the brink of the Earth-Gates. The blurred sounds of New York traffic and the blurred motions of the lights flickered in his very face as he stood there. He did not hesitate or look back. He raised one arm in a gesture of farewell to the watchers and stepped forward over the threshold.

The last sound he heard must have been the roar of his people driving him out of Malesco and into Paradise.

The people couldn't see what we saw, on the dais. He'd planned it

that way naturally. He hadn't wanted anybody but the priests to see the trap he'd set for Lorna and me.

He'd had no intention of letting living people return to New York and open the way for more angels from Paradise. He'd had trouble enough as it was. So the Earth-Gates were set to insure that no living person could pass between the worlds.

There was a flare of bright gold when he touched the surface of the screen. The flare was blinding. From below, in the hall, all anybody could see was the upper area of the flash. But from where I stood I saw the figure in the gleaming robes pause for an instant between two worlds, in that singing void I remembered so well myself. He was balanced on the crossbar of the Alchemic a, in effect, the bridge narrow under his feet.

Then fire sprang out all around him.

I saw the golden robes catch and go up in colored flames. I saw his hair catch and burn like a crown. But when the fire took hold on the man himself its brilliance increased suddenly a hundredfold, and the Hierarch vanished in a furnace glare which no one who watched could endure to gaze at.

I shut my eyes. Inside the lids for a moment or two the outlines of the burning man were etched clearly, an after-image incised by the brilliance of the flame that destroyed him. He stood in full outline upon my inner lids for longer than the man himself stood in his own body. I think he was consumed and destroyed before his image faded against my closed eyes.

And that's how it happened that Lorna Maxwell and I stepped through onto the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street at three in the morning, dressed in fantastic garments. The lumbering buses

and the stone lions were a lot less real to us than the world we'd just left.

When you think about it you have to realize that a lot of clichés are self-fulfilling by definition. Given a particular setup plus a particular stimulus, the chances are strong that a particular result will follow, trite because it's more or less inevitable. It wasn't yet dawn in Malesco when we fulfilled our own cliché and rounded out the ceremony by departing with full grandeur through the Earth-Gates, back to Paradise.

Of course I could have made a speech before I left. I could have said, "There's no point in making a ceremony of this because your whole religion is based on a fraud. New York's no more a Paradise than Malesco. The theory of reincarnation is stultifying and alchemy as a religion isn't going to get you anywhere no matter how hard you try."

They would probably have mobbed me if I'd said it. You can't change the thinking patterns of a world overnight by administering a few home truths. It will be a long slow subtle process if it takes place at all. That's Coriole's problem, to be tackled sometime in the future. His immediate problem that night was to get rid of Lorna and me quickly.

I had played Prometheus and my part was over. Lorna had been too much the tool of the Hierarch to be welcome in Malesco. The sooner we were shunted back to Paradise and the Earth-Gates firmly closed behind us, the better.

So we left Malesco. And the gates were closed. I doubt if they will open again in our lifetime. The things that are going on behind them now are probably very interesting and exciting--for Malescans--but they're no business of ours. Coriole knows what he wants and traffic with Earth isn't on the list.

We left the rose-red city in the throes of its own revolution and came home to Paradise.

Epilogue

She calls herself Malesca now. You can see why.

And she's beautiful, all right. Probably her press agent's telling the truth when he says she's the most beautiful girl in the world—if you like that kind of beauty. It's saccharine. I know I couldn't live with it myself.

Still, the Malescan priesthood knew what it was doing. They were clever psychologists. They worked out all the features that would appeal most strongly to Malescans—who are extremely human.

Pygmalion fell in love with Galatea, didn't he? Even though he knew she was nothing but a chunk of stone. But the beauty that shaped the stone was irresistible.

Lorna says she loves me. That began a long time ago, before the episode in Malesco. She says she hadn't changed. But she has, of course. Malesco changed her quite a lot.

She had nothing I wanted before the change and the essential Lorna, the woman behind all that beauty, is exactly the same. I know it. I wish I could forget it. The forces that drive a man or a nation or a world are inarguable. I can't fight them, myself. I wish I could.

Because blast all clichés—I love her. In my own way. After a fashion. I couldn't live with her. You know what she's like. And that's why I'd never have gone to the place that night if I'd known she was singing there.

But I sat clinking ice in my glass, listening to Malesca sing. They

gave her a beautiful voice. I kept repeating axioms to myself to drown out the sweetness of the song that was hypnotizing everyone else in the room. "Beauty is only skin deep," I thought. "Handsome is as handsome does. A bird in the hand--"

Applause in a sudden storm interrupted me. I looked up to see Malesca bowing, making every motion a symphony of grace. Her luminous blue eyes were searching the dimness for me, bewildered and determined as they always were whenever she looked at me.

She wasn't going to accept refusal. She was going to come to me again as soon as the applause stopped. She was going to sit down beside me and plead again in that lovely throaty voice, soft as velvet and sweet as honey.

I finished my drink in one quick gulp, jumped up and started toward the exit. Behind me the applause died and I heard Malesca's voice calling, "Eddie, Eddie!"

When I reached the door I was almost running.