

THE NIGHT-FLAME

By Colin Kapp

With the publication of his first S-F story in 1958, Colin Kapp quickly showed that he was a bright new star in the British firmament, culminating with his first novel, The Dark Mind (Corgi Books), a most unusual and complex story of the future. His latest story herewith is still in the tradition he has set.

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Somewhere in the valley a wakened bird voiced its plaintive, monotonous dissent. Its unaltering cry was only one of the blind night-noises raised in protest. Balchic sweated as he moved on his stomach through the long, dark grass. The frogs were awake, and the crickets, and all the lost nocturnal noises which the night had taken for its own.

Balchic was no stranger to the noises of the field. With country-bred perception he could place each tick and whisper and minute rustle. He knew the sound of vole and mouse and adder and the thousand things that lived and moved and breathed beneath the grasses. And he too was afraid. The microcosm which was the valley sloped around him, was a cauldron and a turmoil of complaint. Nothing which should have slept was sleeping, and even the heavy drone of wakened bees laboured the tense air.

Something was terribly wrong. Like an unseen vapour, fear was draining through the valley; a taut fear that preyed in the darkness under the eyeless sky. It was not the circumstantial terror which grips the minds of men, but a more basic dread, which sifted through the grasses like a tide, affecting every living thing therein. Balchic swore, his imagination strained against his iron will. Two things only, fire and flood, could cause such universal apprehension—and there was neither of them here.

He had passed this way in the morning, looking for signs of the night-flame's passage. Nothing was burnt or scorched or showed a sign—yet on the previous evening he had seen it through his glasses, shining in the valley; not fire, yet bright, not tangible, yet visible. And the creatures who lived in the valley had known it too, and been afraid.

Tonight Balchic had wanted a closer look at the phenomenon. The anxiety had gripped him as he entered the high pasture like a poacher: a

nagging apprehension, an instinct to beware, an unspelt, abstract warning. As the slope steepened so the feeling grew, chill upon his spine, moist upon his brow. It was irrational because there was nothing in the valley of which to be afraid—nothing except that yesterday the night-flame had danced in the darkness and left no sign of its passing.

Balchic chose his ground and settled down to wait, glancing at his watch. The luminescent figures, glowing with unaccustomed brightness, puzzled him, and he shielded the glow lest it betray his presence to whatever troubled the valley. The unconscious reaction caused him to smile at himself. For two years he had dwelt at the cottage on the ridge. He knew every line of slope and every rock and every tree. Cold reason chided him, told him there could be nothing to fear in such a place as this—yet here he was on his stomach sweating in the darkness, quaking like any nervy child at imagined bogeys in some moon-hazed churchyard. But the angry buzz of the creatures in the brush cautioned him that this was no ordinary night.

The night-flame. For a fleeting instant he thought he saw it, shadowy lilac against the night, like the phantom horizon of nowhere superimposed against the further hill. Then it was gone, extinguished before his eyes could focus. Somewhere the long-drawn whistle of a train reached out and touched him with a welcome sense of reality. Outside these tense fields the world moved on as it had always done, and nobody much cared about this patch of wasteland and its inbuilt apprehension. If he so wished he could go back up the slopes and over the twisted wire and away from the taut fear and the burrowing anxiety; he could forget—pretend he had not come. No, not forget...

Then the night-flame burned, daubs of lilac fire painted on dark canvas, intangible pearls strung out on a nonexistent string. It traced a line from the valley's head down through the pass and on towards the darkness of the sea, enigmatic, unexplained.

Fear engulfed Balchic like a wave and momentarily he choked, fighting intellect against blinding panic. He had no idea what the night-flame was, and he had no logical reason to view it with such intense alarm—yet there was something unnatural about the quality and tone of the emotion which he felt, something out of place. In his own country Balchic had known enough of fear to be familiar with the cold clamp of its fingers, to know that it always had an object even if only of the mind's own devising. And it was specific. A fugitive may be hunted by his persecutors in a field, but the ant does not worry and the grasshopper does not care. Here the insects in the grasses mirrored his own fright and confusion with equal irrationality—yet how many of them could appreciate potential danger in a line of dotted

fluorescence drawn down the valley ?

Curiosity won. Balchic moved closer to the balls of fluorescence, trying to gauge their size and distance against a background which afforded no points of reference. Then he stopped. The balls were growing larger or nearer, and as they did so he felt the fear increasing. Fingers of ice were stalking up his backbone and the hair on his neck was rising sensibly. But that which gave him most cause for alarm was the glimpse of his watch dial in his sleeve emitting such a light that his hand was clearly illuminated by reflection.

Radiation! Data fell into place. This was no natural phenomenon. It took power to punch out radiation of such intensity over such distances. Just how much power it needed was known only to God and its designers—but Balchic was almost in the beam path! Its nature and its source were suddenly of secondary consideration. Now his fear had a tangible object and he was swift to react. The vicinity of a beam that could ionise air at atmospheric pressure was not a fit place, for human flesh to be. He back-tracked in haste, wondering if he had already been exposed to sufficient radiation to do him some permanent harm.

Fortunately as he ran he glanced back over his shoulder and dropped to the ground instantly, seeing the beam was moving in his direction. He desperately hugged the ground, partly crying to himself, partly praying, as the beam swung nearer. Then it was overhead, perhaps ten feet away, no more, the luminescent dots as large as footballs with an equal space between. Moths and motes and tiny flying insects, caught in the beam path, dropped all around him, minute splints of flame; the beam traversing slowly onwards as though tracking some slight target unseen and very far away.

It formed a barrier now between him and the road, skirting so close to the contours of the hill that no space was left through which a man might pass. Balchic paused, uncertain whether to follow or to retreat down into the valley and up the farther slopes. But suddenly the fire was gone—a brief collapse, and the spectral balls of light went out as a flame goes out on a candle in a draught. The tension in the angry air died too, and all the creatures in the dark grass sensed its going and settled thankfully to rest, save for those of them more naturally nocturnal.

Balchic stood a long time in the dark field attempting to resolve the problem in his mind, pondering upon the implications. He was certain that what he had witnessed was a deliberate and man-made phenomenon. He was equally certain that it was dangerous. That raised the question of who had both the facilities and the need to generate a beam of such intense and

lethal radiation, and why must it be beamed so low across the valley. He shrugged resignedly in the darkness. Whatever the nature of the answer it would have to wait until the morning.

As he broke out of the long field and turned under the trees to where the path began he paused for a moment, hearing in the distance the first of the dark trucks starting the long climb up the hill. The passing of the trucks was now an almost nightly occurrence and one to which he had not formerly attached any particular significance. Now suddenly he thought he knew where the great vehicles went, *saris* lights and *sans* identification, *sans* everything but the heavy rumble of their dark passage.

The light in the cottage window was burning when he arrived. His wife was still up, working in the kitchen. She came towards him, her face anxious.

“Karel, you’re late. I thought something had happened to you.”

Balchic scowled and looked at the tight lines of anxiety across her forehead and the tension around her eyes. Something nibbled inside him. He knew that look of old.

“Rest, Marie,” he said gently. “I told you I would be late.”

“I know, Karel, but...”

“Something is worrying you. I told you there is nothing over which to worry.”

She looked up tearfully, grateful for his strength. “The army major was here again today.”

“Again? I told him not to come. I told him this was my house and that I fought for it. I do not intend to move.”

“He asked that you phone him when you returned. When I said that you would be late he said that you should phone anyway. I wrote the number on the pad. They can’t make us leave here, can they, Karel ?”

“No, Marie, they cannot do that. I have taken legal advice. There is nothing they can do. These soldiers are not like—the others.”

In the hall the telephone was half hidden under the coats on the rack. He mis-dialled once and cursed the dim lamp, although he knew this was

only an excuse for his own nervousness. Wherever the phone that he was calling, it took a long time to be answered.

“Command Control. Major Saunders speaking.”

“My name is Balchic. You wanted to speak to me.”

The major swore under his breath but the message carried audibly.

“Yes, Mr. Balchic. I wanted to speak to you urgently. Can I call on you first thing in the morning?”

“Can’t we talk on the phone ?”

“I’d prefer not to. I have a few things to say which were better not said over the telephone.”

“If it’s about my cottage then I think you will waste your time. I have seen my solicitor and he says...”

“I know damn well what your solicitor says. He happens to be correct, but there’s more to this than the legal aspect. I have to talk to you alone.”

“I don’t care to listen to things which can’t be said over the telephone,” said Balchic.

The major swore again and the line went dead. Balchic looked at the phone speculatively for a moment or two, then called the operator and asked to send a telegram. This done, he went back to his wife.

“I think we must make allowances for the major. He gives the impression of a man who is living on borrowed time. I expect he will come here in the morning. Now we must go to bed, or we will not be fit to receive him.”

His wife went first to bed. As was his custom Balchic tarried with the family bible, then followed after. Marie was in bed but not yet sleeping. The light from one small lamp between the beds illuminated the newspaper dropped tiredly on the coverlet. She caught at his fingers in quiet recognition, the old frown returning.

“Karel, I hear the trucks again.”

“I know,” said Balchic, “I can hear them too.” At the window he drew

back the curtain, but looked only at his wife's reflection in the dark glass, shadow against shadows.

"There are a lot of them tonight I think."

At the end of the track lay the road which wound up from the flats and passed on between the white chalk cliffs to the moorlands above. Past the trees at the end of the spinney the road was by day visible from the cottage for several hundred yards until a sharp bend shut it off behind the rising banks. It was on this road that the giant trucks came, after midnight always, churning their way up the hill to some obscure rendezvous.

His wife joined him in the window alcove and shivered slightly. With no moon it was impossible to see the trucks, but each made its presence felt by the noise and the vibration which rattled the window sash. One ... two...

"Why do they have no lights, Karel?"

"I don't know," Balchic said, "but they surely have their reasons. If they wished us to know they would no doubt say."

"But what do they carry and where to?"

"I don't know, Marie, nor would they thank me for asking."

She stood for a long time staring at the road, mentally following each unseen giant as it ground its gears at the corner and turned up the slope.

"I'm frightened, Karel. Do you think it's the army preparing for another war?"

"There's not going to be a war," said Balchic. "Perhaps it's an exercise."

"Every night for months? Oh, God! I couldn't stand another war."

"There's not going to be another war. No fear of that."

"Then why do they drive their trucks in the dark? What are they carrying, night after night?"

"It's no concern of ours," said Balchic.

She rounded on him bitterly. "The trucks that ran to Auschwitz and to

Belsen were no concern of some,” she said. “The walls of hell are dressed with eyes all turned the other way.”

“There is no concentration camp upon the moors. We’re in England now, remember.”

“No, not that, but there is something up there. I can feel it. Sometimes in the night I feel its breath. If there is not going to be a war then what are they trying to hide up there? Why does that major come and try to get us to leave this cottage? Why is he always so tired and so afraid?”

“Questions!” said Balchic. “Always questions! You are tired, Marie, and the trucks have finished passing. Now I think we had better go to sleep.”

But Balchic could not sleep. Shortly he turned the small lamp on again and picked up the newspaper and read of crisis and the rumours of war. His wife stirred, fretful in her sleep, and finally woke, seeking his reassuring hand in the shadows.

“God! I dreamt the war had started. It has not started, has it, Karel?”

“There’s not going to be any war,” said Balchic, but his words belied his feelings. He dropped the paper and lay back on the bed and thought of the dark trucks passing in the night, and of the night-flame and of the holocaust which was not going to come—and what it might be like to have to die.

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The rain cast transparent wriggling worms down the window-pane. Balchic opened the window and breathed the soft air and listened to the raindrops thudding into the thorn hedge. He watched the water glistening on the brown stones of the path, and heard the shrill conversation of the birds in the broad oak beyond. In his own land he could remember mornings which began like that.

The jar of a jeep entering the rutted track ended his reverie and sent him searching for a shirt. Marie was still sleeping and he was careful not to waken her. The jeep was screeching to a halt at the gate as Balchic reached the step.

“Why do you never sleep?” asked Balchic directly. “Is it your conscience?”

The major combed his damp hair back with impatient fingers and smiled a wan smile. "It's not through choice, believe me." His tie was awry and his face unshaven. He waved the jeep's driver away with a gesture.

"How will you get back?" asked Balchic.

"Walk," said the major tiredly. "If I don't damn-well fall down first."

"What kind of army are you in?"

"If only you knew," said the major. "If only you ruddy well knew!"

He followed Balchic into the hall and on into the trim kitchen bright with coloured chintz and the homely flame of polished copper bowls.

"If it's about the cottage," said Balchic, "you have already heard all I have to say."

"Not only that. Early this morning you sent a telegram to Professor Niemann asking for an urgent appointment."

"You know even that? Well, what of it? Niemann is a friend of mine."

"He is also a haematologist. What do you want from him?"

"I want him to do a blood-count on me."

"Why do you want that?"

"I don't have to answer that—not to you."

The major gestured impatiently and loosened his tie further. "Please, Mr. Balchic. I don't have much time for games. Why do you want a blood-count so urgently?"

"I thought I might have been exposed to some—radiation. I wanted to make sure."

"Radiation? In these parts?" The major was still tiredly composed, but Balchic sensed the sudden tension. "Where did you think you found this radiation?"

"Out in the valley. I went to see the night-flame. It affected the figures

on my watch.”

The major was perfectly motionless now, a haggard tailor’s dummy displaying a crumpled military uniform.

“Do you know what you’re saying?” he asked at last.

“Yes,” said Balchic. “I saw it and I felt it. It was some kind of tight-beamed radiation, but I don’t know what or how it came to be there.”

“Did you tell this to your wife or anyone ?”

“No. I needed to think about it first. Does this have to do with our leaving the cottage?”

“It does, but I wish you wouldn’t ask. I don’t mind admitting you’ve placed yourself and us in a very difficult position. We ourselves are partly to blame for not clearing you from the district before we started. Frankly, Mr. Balchic, you’re sitting on one of the hottest secrets of the century.”

Balchic shrugged. “I am used to secrets. I once carried a secret through the hell-chambers of the secret police in my own land. For nine months I used the strength that secret gave me instead of a sufficiency of food and minimal human comfort. I do not part easily with the wrong words.”

“I know,” said the major, “else you’d not be receiving such consideration. Tell me what you know about the war?”

“There is not going to be any war,” Balchic said. “We have agreed inspection teams, controlled disarmament, the United Nations guarantee, and a new charter of human rights. Civilisation has become sane.”

“Christ! And you believe that ?”

“No,” said Balchic, “but that is what I am told. I have natural reservations about the words of politicians.” He glanced at his hands awkwardly. “You don’t have to tell me any more if you don’t wish.”

“I do wish,” said the major, “for several reasons. In your own country you were the victim of power-politics yet you fought back as an individual. Thank God for individuals! I don’t know if I’ve got the guts to stand up to what you went through. I don’t think I have, so at least do not let me treat you like a child. If you want to know why we want you out of the cottage I will tell you.”

“It’s because of the night-flame, isn’t it?”

The major nodded. “It’s as good a name for it as any. We produce it at a station on the moors.”

“Is that where the dark trucks go each night?”

“Yes, that’s where they go. Each night a convoy brings new equipment. Each night they take away the debris of the old. The night-flame, as you call it, is purchased at no small expense in terms of apparatus and men.”

“Is the battle that desperate ?” asked Balchic quietly.

“A shrewd question, my friend. It is indeed that desperate.”

“Then we’re at war?”

“Yes, we’re at war. We have been for many months. We’re encircled by a ring of artificial satellites which contain weapons more grisly and horrifying than anything known at Hiroshima: It’s a war we’re sadly in danger of losing. We keep these things from being used by means of devices scared from the brains of a few geniuses and which as a nation we are properly equipped neither to make nor use.”

Balchic turned away and drew back the curtains a little further so that he could clearly see the dovecote across the fresh and rain-soaked lawn.

“What do you want of me?” he asked at last.

“Your cottage is in the path where we need to re-direct our beam. Previously the satellites have always used the same orbit and we could pick them up as they rose above the horizon. Now new launching sites are being used and because of the angle of approach we can only make contact with them for a very short period. One day soon that is not going to be sufficient. If we have to choose between missing a satellite and lowering our beam and frying you and your wife in bed—then I’m sorry, but I don’t have any option. We had hoped to get you to move without having to reveal even a hint of the stakes involved. Above all things we must avoid public panic.”

“Don’t you think people have a right to know they’re at war?” asked Balchic.

“Look,” said the major, “they aren’t just threatening us with those things up there—they’re trying to use them. By the grace of God and some breadboard electronics we’re managing to avert catastrophe—just. Now I’m not very strong on rights . . . but do you seriously contend that a man is better off for knowing that all that stands between him and total extinction is a prayer and a bloody white-hot magnetron that’s being over-run to destruction? Remember that no retaliation on the aggressors, however violent and destructive, could ever hope to save us from the things already up there.”

The phone in the hall rang shrilly. Balchic went to answer it.

“It’s for you, Major.”

The major picked up the handset and listened. As he did so an explosion like a dark thunderclap sounded long over the headland.

“Christ!” He shook the handset and jabbed at the button, trying to re-establish contact. “There’s been a blowup at the station,” he said finally. His hand was shaking as if with the palsy, and the handset chattered violently as he set it down. “I must get back at once.”

“My car,” said Balchic. “I’ll drive you.”

The major frowned at some unspoken thought, then followed Balchic to the garage. Inside he found some rope and an axe and threw them into the back of the car without pausing to ask permission. Balchic noticed but made no comment and concentrated on coaxing his ancient car into unwilling service. He knew too well the acts of a man living on time no longer his own.

For once the car behaved itself, as though the sense of importance and urgency had infiltrated the metal itself. It took the steep hill between the white chalk cliffs with scarcely a splutter and settled into a jogging rhythm as it drew out on to the moorlands and the slight incline southwards along the gorse-banked road. Had the car faltered Balchic had a feeling that the major’s own imperative determination would have seized them and carried them along by sheer strength of will. Unconsciously the major’s hands pressed forward on the wooden dashboard as though to encourage its progress, while his haunted eyes never left the slight column of black smoke which rose from the hollow at the top end of the valley.

“What is it they have up there,” asked Balchic, “which makes all this so desperately important?”

“You know about lasers?” asked the major, without turning.

“Yes, I know about lasers.”

“If you had one big enough and you could find a source of sufficient power to pump it you could burn a hole in the earth to a depth of fifty feet and thirty miles wide—in less than a second . . . or scorch a town out of existence in a few microseconds.”

“From up there?”

“Especially from up there.”

“Even allowing for the inverse square law of propagation?”

“It’s a cohesive beam,” said the major. “But allow any attenuation you like. Christ! When you can afford to use collected solar energy itself to pump a laser you don’t measure the output at a few scant megawatts. They can do all that and more. One big gas-laser satellite could burn the life from the face of Europe in a single orbit, yet stop selectively at certain national boundaries. And remember, no radio-activity, no dangerous fallout, nothing to occupy but a nicely sterilised charnel-house. Genocide? Hell, we need a few new words in the dictionary of humanity!”

They lapsed into silence, and Balchic concentrated on the road again. Finally: “You have children?” he asked.

“Two—a boy and a girl. I even manage to see them for an hour or two sometimes.”

“We had children. Two girls.”

“Had?” For the first time the major turned and looked into Balchic’s face.

“Had,” said Balchic. “I wish that God in His mercy could have taken them in some fiery microsecond instead of—the other way.”

The major bit his lip. “How can you still believe after all that?”

“It is only after such atrocities that one learns what belief really means.”

"I hope I shall never achieve your equanimity," said the major. "It is purchased at a greater price than I would be prepared to pay."

The smoke column had thickened and darkened to a rising pillar of black smoke shot with small charred papery cinders which fell under the slight wind and drifted across the road like snowflakes from Hell. The heated air rising beyond the bank shivered the further trees at the valley's head into indistinctness, and as the car rounded the bank the full extent of the disaster was laid before them.

There had been four huge domelike structures clustered together at the rim of the hill to house the great projectors. Two of these were now reduced to heaps of burning slag, a third was damaged but not yet burning, while the fourth was yet untouched. On the moorland's edge the supporting buildings had also suffered in the holocaust, and soldiers were busy attempting to divide the living from the dead.

The great gates were open and unguarded, so Balchic drove straight in, looking to the major for directions. They passed the buildings black with death and sped on towards the domes, where the fierce heat of destruction could be plainly felt a hundred yards away. The major wanted to reach the damaged dome and was either praying or crying or something half-way in between the two. At the nearest point of approach he left the car while it was still moving and ran into the blockhouse underneath the dome. For want of any alternative, Balchic braked the car and followed.

The air in the blockhouse was unbreathably hot and sharp with the rapid snick-snick of vacuum pumps. The stench of heated metals made Balchic retch in the doorway. Beside the major there were two others in the room, dirty and tired and seeming like curious anachronisms against the background of electronic apparatus. Centrally in the room a gaunt cage cradled a giant device whose output was fed into a waveguide large enough to admit the body of a man. The whole structure of the projector was hot, the immense copper barrel of the anode block glowing a dull cherry red which betokened the imminent collapse of the seals and all the ultra-high-powered catastrophe which such a failure would invoke.

"When ?" the major was asking.

"Soon after you'd left. The radar chain reported a new pattern on 060 orbit presumed from the Novaya Zemlya pads. GenCom came in with an immediate instruction-imperative to inactivate the satellite regardless of cost. We don't have anything capable of matching that range, but we tried. One and Two projectors broke up under the strain, taking the modulators

and crews with them.”

“What’s the state of number Four?”

“Filament’s gone. They’re breaking the seals down now, but we aren’t equipped....”

“I-know we aren’t equipped. We aren’t equipped for a bloody thing except to die. How long can this one last out?”

The technician shook his head. “We’re already running on prayers.”

“And the satellite’s still active?”

“She’s still transmitting to base, which is the best indication.”

The major wrenched off his collar and then his shirt savagely.

“I’m going to give her every erg we’ve got. We daren’t let that bastard remain active.”

One of the technicians shrugged. “You can’t increase the power. We’ve ninety per cent overload already. The damn projector will come unstuck right round the seams.”

“I don’t care. If that satellite makes one orbit intact you know what’ll happen on the next.” He thrust his way to the controls and examined the meters. “Hell, I don’t see what’s holding the projector together now!”

“Prayers, I said before. They’ve shielded that one in some way. We don’t have power enough to penetrate it. It was only a matter of time before they found out what we were using.”

“Better get out,” said the major. “No sense in us all taking the risk. I’m going to deliberately take the projector through to destruction. We can’t have many seconds left.”

Nobody moved. The major balanced-out some controls and then brought up the energy with a deliberate controlled movement. Fear dripped along with the perspiration.

“How long before she drops behind the horizon?” he asked.

“Less than a minute to lowest beam tolerance.”

The major increased the energy again. Somewhere an insulator began to smoulder, still further defiling the air with burning phenolics. The projector body glowed more brightly red.

“Forty-seven seconds and we’ve lost her,” somebody said.

Again the major turned the energy up until the control stopped short against the stop. He wrenched it savagely as if to force metal into metal past all practical limits.

“Thirty seconds and she’s still transmitting.”

“She’s got to be stopped! Lord in Heaven—she’s got to be stopped!”

“Seventeen seconds to tolerance.”

“Damn the tolerance,” said the major. “Get on the safety trip and hold it in.”

“But it’ll burn....”

The sentence was uncompleted. The implications were too vast to be explored in the available instant of time. The projector’s beam was even now skirting the grass in the valley and tracking down the false horizon of the nearer outline of the hill.

The major suddenly became aware of Baldrick and their eyes met.

“You know what I have to do? Those extra seconds ...”

“My wife . . .” said Balchic. Then he reached across and replaced the technician who had grasped the safety control which prevented the beam sweeping too low across the land. “It is better that I do this.”

The major spat and the safety trip attempted to fulfil its function of halting the progress of the projector’s beam down on to the hill. Strong, nerveless fingers held it in while the solenoids rebelled.

The beam dropped lower until the hill gave up a trace of smoke which spoke of the impending complete attenuation of the beam by the land-mass. Somewhere on the skyline lay—had lain—Balchic’s house and his wife. . . . The smoke trail stood up broadly now.

“Shutoff!” The technician called the final count of tracking. The satellite was now below their false horizon and out of range of the beam with which they had sought to de-activate it.

The major reached reluctantly for the shutoff button, but as he did so a vacuum seal cracked on the projector with a sharp snick, a sound infinitely small yet something to which their ears had been so trained to detect through the ambient noise that the major and the two technicians reacted instantaneously and without the luxury of thought. They ran and the catastrophe followed within a short half second. The major was sure that his back had been scorched by the leaping sheets of electrical energy which speared like crazy, living lace from the projector out to the instrument racks. Blindly he cut on, knowing that only God and the transience of an ionized air gap at such energies would determine whether he lived or died.

As he reached the door a brief explosion, violent enough in such a confined area, knocked him down in the entrance and stunned him momentarily. Two hands grasped his wrists and dragged him back to life and forced him to run, forced him to put as much distance as possible between himself and the dome before the inevitable blowup.

The final explosion flung him down again, left him clutching irrationally at handfuls of grass as if they had the power to prevent the awful pressure from tearing him from contact with the earth, while burning and red-hot detritus belaboured the ground on all sides. The heat and light which accompanied the blast flooded the whole area with such intensity that when it subsided a bleak chill encompassed his body and even the sun seemed pale and wan.

Painfully the major rose, not wholly thankful to find that he was still alive. One of the technicians had not been so lucky, having been trapped beneath part of the splitting red-hot dome. The other had struggled to his feet, staunching blood from superficial wounds and talking wildly yet without hysteria.

The major grasped his arm. “What did you say ?”

“I said we got the satellite. Just before the blowup she stopped transmitting. Lord! So even that one wasn’t invulnerable!”

“No,” said the major. “And neither are we. I’d better phone. GenCom and let them know this place is a write-off. I only hope the American sea-chain is ready for an emergency take-over. God! How I hate this filthy war! Have you ever thought how those poor devils in the satellites must feel

when our beam locks on them? Both sides exploiting fundamental weaknesses in the other's physiology: they know that flesh must burn, and we, that sphingomyelin and similar lipoids in the nervous system must react when stimulated by certain types of r.f. radiation. They try to burn us from the face of the earth and we leave their satellites populated with madmen just to prove it can't be done."

But the technician wasn't listening. His attention was transfixed by the hellish red cauldron which had been the dome, now an incandescent slag pool from which irrationally protruded some of the more obstinate portions of the framework, like broken fishbones half-submerged in porridge—the filthy slop-pail of some wanton diety.

"That curious old boy you brought with you to the blockhouse—was he mad?"

The major started violently. He looked around uncertainly, aware for the first time that Balchic was missing.

"No, not mad," he said. "Quite the reverse. Why?"

"Well, he could have got out first, but he didn't. He just stood there with his finger on that damn button and there was crap flying all around him. I tried to grab him. . . ." The technician turned his face away as though trying to turn from images which were already inside his head. "I got the impression that he wanted to die. No, not wanted— that's not the right word. What sort of look does a martyr have in his eyes in those last seconds? Does fulfilment make sense?"

"It doesn't have to make sense," said the major, and turned aside his head for fear of weeping.