TIME PIPER

DELIA HUDDY

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She was strange, remote,

and beautiful, and she called herself "Hare." But was that reason enough for her to be distrusted by the villagers and disliked by her peers, with the exception of Luke? And why did she secretly follow Luke to London when he went to work with Tom Humboldt, the brilliant inventor of a revolutionary time machine? A fascinating scientific experiment, a twelfth century legend, and a touching love story form the basis of this unusual and intriguing novel.

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A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye,
Or if he pleaseth through it pass
And then the heaven espy.

GEORGE HERBERT

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

T. S. ELIOT, *Burnt Norton*

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PART ONE

WYNDSHAM

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The day's end was hot as its beginning. It would have been hot even for June; and it was only the end of March. For twelve hours the West Country had sweltered in unseasonable heat.

The sun had risen red from behind a great bank of dull pink cloud and the cloud had stayed there, strangely immobile all day, while the sun traversed a sky of savage cobalt blue. Now it dropped swiftly through the evening toward another cloudbank on the western horizon; but the heat remained torrid and unbearable.

Luke sat on the winter-thin grass on one of the highest points of the ridge. Below him the land fell away in a green and brown mosaic of fields toward the main road that ran east-west in the distance. He had thought it would be fresher on the wind-beaten hilltop but today there was no breath of wind; the air was solid. The clumps of trees that strode up the shoulders of the hill seemed to wilt and lag; and the heat that had blanketed the track like a fog on the way up still pressed down on him, making him sweat. He wiped his dripping forehead on his sleeve.

The silence was as solid as the heat. He had not seen a

single bird that afternoon—there were usually wheatears pairing up over the hill at this time of the year and you might hear a partridge calling toward sunset. But the sky and grass were empty of birds. The only sound all afternoon had been the staccato stutter of a distant tractor and that had long since died away.

Even the dog had disappeared. Momentarily unnerved by his complete solitude, Luke whistled piercingly. She leaped up in the distance from where she had been investigating a rabbit hole and pelted back toward him, her floppy spaniel ears catching at the yellow rye grass. She hurled her warm wet body against him and licked his face frantically, relishing the salt of his sweat.

"Enough!" he said ungraciously, not wanting her so effusive now he had got her, and pushed her off.

He must be getting back. His mother would no doubt be expecting him for supper and Rosie would be moaning for his help with her homework. The high water mark of his academic activities these days, he thought wryly—doing Rosie's homework for her. He pushed his father's binoculars into their case and put the strap round his neck.

He stood up to go. The seat of his jeans was wet with mud. It took more than one day of heat, even excessive heat, to dry out the winter-waterlogged turf of the hill.

He took one last look westward where the ridge ran into the setting sun—a long golden ray was already fingering the edge of the waiting cloud, tingeing it with color. Then he turned to go downhill. As he did so, he thought he saw a movement in the distance in the field bordering the road. He stood for a moment to look again but the countryside was graveyard-still as it had been all the afternoon.

But with the corner of his eye he caught the movement again.

This time a solitary figure—ant-like at this distance—emerged from behind a clump of hedge. There must have been a mile between Luke and whoever it was and although at first it seemed the figure was slow-moving, Luke soon realized that it was, in fact, running hard, covering ground at some speed.

It was a full minute later that he saw more figures. They were in a bunch and were following the same route as the one in front. A cross-country run from a local school perhaps. Then he looked at his watch. It was six o'clock. Surprising to be running now at a time when school had finished a good two hours before. He took the binoculars out of the case again and stood and watched their progress, his curiosity aroused. The compulsion must be great for anyone to run in this heat.

The figure in front was maintaining its lead. It swung round now away from the road and made for the hill. It was someone in an orange shirt. He ran diagonally across a field of open grazing and disappeared again, this time into the corner by the hedge. As far as Luke could make out he appeared to be thrusting his way through.

"You won't do it," Luke said. "Not through hawthorn."

But the runner seemed determined, for he did do it, miraculously, and emerged on the near side to run again, on up the climbing edge of some winter wheat.

"Leather skin or plated armor," Luke said to the dog. "Which?" He was holding her collar as well as the binoculars, which wasn't easy. She too had seen the running figures and was whining deep in her throat. She was an unpredictable dog, scatty sometimes, and he thought it

wiser to keep a restraining hand on her neck.

When the knot of followers came to the same corner in the hedge, they checked and scattered sideways trying to find a gap. There was not one and they came together again in some confusion, no longer ants but—nearer—wasps now on a rotten apple, working furiously. Luke thinking of the malicious dagger-thrust of bare hawthorn could understand their reluctance to push through. Then someone plunged and the rest followed. They must have made a substantial hole.

The delay had gained precious yards for the leader and Luke, not knowing whom he was supporting or why, said, "Come on!" to the orange shirt. He had been following the run with his naked eye because of holding on to the dog; but now he clamped the spaniel firmly between his legs, growled at her to stay put and raised the binoculars again. He lost the runners momentarily but swept the glasses across the fields and found them. Instantly they leaped near to him as if the field were at his feet. They had grown now from their insect state and become people—boys—largish ones. The one in the front of the group had a kind of familiarity which puzzled Luke. He was thickset, bespectacled and he carried a stick. Luke said, "Ah!" He was the boy on the petrol pumps at the garage on the main road. Not an endearing character as he remembered. There were four or five others behind him. Luke swung the glasses farther up to catch Orange Shirt in the lens.

Orange Shirt was that much nearer than the rest and he had to refocus the binoculars in order to clear the blur. He had difficulty in adjusting them. When at last he got a clear view, he was so surprised at what he saw that he dropped the glasses altogether and they fell to the end of

the strap, thudding against his chest and hurting him.

It was not a man but a girl leading the field.

The light was beginning to fail at last but there was no mistaking her features. Long straight hair clumped on her back, nearly to her waist, as she ran. She was no longer running easily. Every so often she stumbled and he could sense rather than see from her open mouth that she was gasping for breath.

Suddenly the evening was full of menace. This was no cross-country run. Was he witnessing a witch hunt? The sticks brandished by the boys suggested nasty intentions. A stab of unease screwed Luke in the pit of his stomach. The oppressive heat which had seemed merely a curiosity out of season assumed a sinister significance.

As if to increase his unease, he heard a cry; it had a horrible kind of fierceness about it. It was taken up by others in the group until the whole pack was giving tongue like hounds in sight of their quarry. He swung the binoculars back to the girl and feverishly adjusted the focus, which had fogged once more. As he caught her in view, she stumbled again and this time fell. For a moment he thought she would stay down. But she staggered to her feet, took a look behind her, for she was losing her valuable lead, and seeing the gap closing, veered off to her right over a fence. She seemed now to be making for some trees about a hundred yards to the west and farther up the hill.

In turning west she was nearer to Luke. The trees were almost directly below him. He hesitated only a moment. He didn't stop to consider how he would take on half-a-dozen boys in a hound pack but it was unthinkable that the girl should face them alone. He leaped down the hill, the dog racing at his side.

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Half the ball of the sun had been eaten by the waiting cloud; now the cloud swallowed the rest smoothly as if at a gulp. The fields and woods lost their identity and dusk came to the countryside as swiftly as to an African veld. The orange shirt of the girl, however, had a lucidity that showed up in the half-light and Luke, leaping recklessly over the tussocked grass, could follow her progress toward the trees. She ran down into a saucer of turf which afforded her temporary cover from her pursuers, although Luke could still see her from above. The pack, however, had realized that she was making for the trees, for they turned right at a point earlier than she had done and by doing so cut off a corner of ground. Their hunting cries were less frequent now as the heat and the hill took toll of their energy but when one did let out a howl it had lost none of its fury.

Luke reached the trees before the girl—it wasn't a wood but a small copse of which there were many along the slopes of the ridge. He pulled up abruptly for the dusk had soaked up all color, and foliage and trunks alike were a pale uniform gray, making it difficult to see one's way ahead. It was at last cool here among the trees; it felt strange because he had got accustomed to the heat on the hillside and he had thought there wasn't coolness to be found anywhere that night. The dusk had come just in time for the girl; she could melt into the grayness and with any luck go safely to ground in the undergrowth. He stood like a statue with his hand gripping the spaniel's nose. Maybe he had better hold on; he didn't want to ruin her chance of escape by springing to her rescue too fast.

He guessed, but could not for the moment see, where she came into the trees. Then he caught sight of the shirt

which even now held out as a pale blur when everything else merged. He could hear her gasping for breath, forcing the air into her overworked lungs. But the pack had grown noisier as they approached and Luke, hearing them stumbling across the darkening field, shouting and swearing as they tripped up, thought there was no danger if only she hid her shirt; she could find fox-cover in here and the hounds would never sniff her out.

For a moment he was puzzled why she wasted precious time standing still close to the edge of the trees, but then he heard a small splash as she moved forward and realized that between him and her there was a stream. There were several of these about; it would have its source in a spring somewhere up on the ridge above. It was more of a deep ditch than a stream but it was over-full of water, being fed during the past few weeks with plenty of rain. She must have got her feet wet but no more. Then totally unaware of Luke's presence among the shadows, she dragged herself into a formless mass of bramble only ten yards from where he was standing. The telltale shirt was swallowed up at last.

The biggest threat to her safety now became the spaniel who was whining and straining to get away from Luke's clamplike grip. "Blast you," he said between his teeth and all at once realized that his own heart was thudding in his chest.

He began to regret his dash down the hillside like a knight in shining armor. His chivalry might prove misplaced with this fool dog. And with a stab of fear he realized his own position might not be so comfortable if he was discovered. He thought, they are not chasing me. I'm just taking the dog for a walk on the hill and have seen noth-

ing. But he failed to convince himself for, listening to their cries, now only a matter of yards away, they sounded sufficiently hot-blooded to turn to something else, once robbed of their original prey. He would do nicely for their victim. His mind dwelt on the pudgy fingers and broken nails of Pebble-Specs on the pumps; he saw them slippery with sweat, gripping a cudgel . . . Luke wondered what they would do to that girl if they caught her. They must be out of their minds. Fear became a physical lump in his stomach and his grip on the muzzle of the dog was so fierce that she whimpered with pain and tried frantically to wriggle away. Luke was more frightened than he had ever been in his life before; a pure animal fright of self-preservation. The overwhelming desire to escape being beaten up excluded all other feelings.

When they reached the trees, Pebble-Specs let fly a string of oaths. A good mouthful for someone of his age; his voice was throaty and grating like a man's. He thrashed around angrily with his stick. "We'd have had her if the bleeding dark had held off."

"Should have got her in t'other field," said one, hard on his leader's heels.

"Why didn't cher then . . ."

They had all arrived now, panting and sweating and thrashing with their sticks. There were plenty of suggestions as to what they should do, all shouted at once. Luke reckoned that he was comparatively fresh and could run for it if need be. He could feel his heartbeat in his throat now.

"Circle the wood. 'Tisn't a big 'un."

"She'll be out other side by now."

"Garn. She'll still be in there, sure as eggs . . ."

"Well, you'll not find her if she is. Black as flaming pitch under those trees . . ."

"Christ! I'm sweating."

As the fruitlessness of their long run became apparent, their anger turned on one another. They began to quarrel. Pebble-Specs came in for special recriminations. As the heat of the chase died in their blood, one or two of them came to their senses and began to wonder why they had ever embarked on such an enterprise. Only Pebble-Specs and one other boy seemed inclined to continue the search for the girl among the trees.

It was too dark now to see the ditch. Pebble-Specs took an unguarded step sideways—a boot on a slippery clump of grass, a hasty hand grasping empty air, and he was flat on his back, soaked to the skin and groveling in the water for his glasses.

That brought jeers and loud laughter and Luke allowed himself to release his pent-up breath in a hiss of relief. Surely that would discourage them from further searching.

It did. There was more argument, ribaldry, swearing, and then one of them said he'd had enough of this foolery and was going home. He set off down the hill. Grumbling and shouting, they all began to trail slowly away from the trees. Their noise hung on the hot night air long after they reached the bottom of the hill.

When at last they had gone, Luke felt ashamed of his fear. One always assumed that one would be brave in the face of physical danger. Now he had been put to the test, he realized that he was not brave at all. Every one of those boys was probably younger than his own eighteen years. Yet his legs felt like water and even now when a catcall came back through the evening his heart raced. He let go

of the dog and flexed his arm, which was stiff with the strain of holding her.

If *he* had been afraid, what of the girl? He didn't know what to do now. Should he go over to where she had gone to earth and help her out? Would she die of fright to see him rise out of the dark when she thought she was alone? She might even be unconscious there under the bush; there was no sign of any movement.

The dog solved his problem. Delighted to be allowed her freedom, she made one cursory search of the ground in a circle round Luke and then, nose down hard, she went round the trees and into the undergrowth.

"Wheet," Luke whistled softly. "Come here!"

There was a hasty scramble of twigs and the dark shadow of the bush parted. The girl came out of her hiding place in a hurry. She might have turned and made off again, not knowing whether she faced friend or foe, but one of her legs seized up with cramp and she fell, buckled up. The dog leaped round her barking.

"Shut up!" Luke shouted furiously. All his pent-up emotion released itself in anger against the dog. "You all right?" he asked her.

She didn't answer him, just bent over rubbing her cramped leg and then started to hobble out of the trees to where the dusk glimmered less densely on the hill. Luke was nonplussed. Was she suffering from shock? Did she think he was one of the mob? He followed her and said from behind, "They seemed a savage lot. I was keeping out of their way too." That at least put her in no doubt as to whose side he was on.

She met her waterloo again in trying to jump the ditch. Her cramped leg gave way as she landed.

"For heaven's sake," said Luke, "let me give you a hand."

She looked up at him as she crouched on the ground like an animal. He could only see the blur of her face, not her features; it was now too dark for that.

He put out his hand and felt rather than saw her shrink back. "You'll have to let me help you," he said, stating a fact, "whether you want to or not."

She could hardly walk because of the cramp and she was shivering violently despite the heat which still clung to the hill and which they felt again like a warm wall immediately they came out of the trees. "Here, put my jacket round you."

She still made no comment either yes or no, but she didn't pull away again so he put his jacket round her and held her firmly under one arm. In this way they went across the field and back to the track that Luke had climbed up earlier that afternoon.

It was slow going that first part but as her cramp eased, the girl leaned less and less heavily on Luke's arm. It was impossible to tell her age in the dusk but Luke got the impression that she was about fourteen or fifteen, younger than Rosie and totally unlike his sister in every way. Rosie was robust and talkative; this one was slight and silent to the point of strangeness. When Luke asked her if she came from the village, she didn't reply and he didn't repeat his question. He himself was not overcommunicative by nature and they reached the point where the path began to run between hedges without speaking. What a bizarre kind of a day, Luke thought, as he became conscious of his left boot beginning to pinch. The heat had not lessened with the setting sun. Was it responsible for the ferocious be-

havior of the boys? He couldn't recall any previous violence of this kind around the village. He didn't like to ask the girl why they were chasing her. In all probability she wouldn't reply.

Suddenly she pulled her arm away from Luke. She was by now walking almost normally and her shivering had stopped. She turned her face up to the sky and looked at the first stars that were beginning to hang with unusual brilliance. She seemed to study them—for all the world, Luke thought, as if she were out for an evening stroll and had never heard of a mob of boys with sticks, or fleeing for her life.

He stood still and looked too. "Venus," he said, pointing low on the horizon. "About to set already." They moved on.

"What's your name?" he said, not thinking she would answer.

But she said, "Hare," so softly that he thought he had misheard.

"Hair?"

"The hares they chase."

"Oh!"

What an extraordinary name. Luke had a twinge of doubt; had she made it up on the spur of the moment? But he couldn't see her face clearly so he was none the wiser. Far more fitting than *fox* if you thought about it. It had been no fox hunt after all; she had none of the guile or bravado of a fox. *Hare* suited her beautifully.

"I'm Luke Crantock." His own name sounded pretty peculiar.

But if he had been hopeful of a conversation, it didn't

materialize. The girl relapsed into her former silence and after one or two futile attempts to get her to say something, Luke gave up. There was no point at all in holding a conversation with himself.

By the time they reached the road, she had run out of her temporary burst of energy and there was a great weariness in her step, which was hardly surprising when one considered the ground she had covered that evening. Luke still didn't know whether she lived locally but when he turned right along the road toward the village she made no protest. They had only another half mile to go before they reached the first houses.

The dog, whose energy was inexhaustible, dashed back across the road and was gone through the hedge again after some exciting night scent.

Luke said, "Hang on a minute. She'll be back at the top of the hill if she gets going. Come *here!*" he shouted roughly because if you talked to her nicely when she was on to a scent, she took no notice at all. "Here. Heel!"

For once she came straightaway with her usual bustle, all eager affection. I wish I had the same blind faith that everyone's pleased to see me when I turn up, Luke once said. Ill-founded in your case, his brother, Neil, had assured him. Neil, on the whole, preferred the dog to Luke.

Luke gripped the dog by the loose skin on her neck and pushed her back across the road.

"Heh?" he said in surprise. "Where are you?"

He couldn't see the girl.

He looked back down the road, the way they had come, and there was now enough light from a thin sickle moon to show it was empty. In front, it curved round a bend.

But she had had neither the time, nor had she the energy to run out of sight ahead. There was absolutely no sign of her.

"For God's sake!" he said aloud. He went through a variety of emotions. Was it all a huge con trick? Was he being made to look a fool? Had those boys been in league with her—not after her blood at all? No. He was pretty sure their ferocity was genuine. Was the day more strange than he realized? Was he going fey—he looked at the moon. Had she changed back to her animal shape and leaped aside, as hares do, to put him off the scent?

He didn't entertain this last thought seriously, being of a rational frame of mind. Even the absolute quietness of the moonlit lane failed to convince him of a spirit world abroad.

In the end his prevailing mood was one of intense irritation. There was one explanation—she didn't want his company. The fence by the side of the road was easy enough to climb and there was a ragged bit of hedge which would afford some cover for her. He wasn't going to seek her out. Any sympathy that remained for her in her fatigued, footsore condition fast ebbed away. He was pretty weary himself, dying for a bath and ravenously hungry. She could get herself home to wherever she lived as best she could.

"Oh, go to hell," he said sourly into the night which was settling on the fields like a comfortable sleeper. He hoped she heard him. Very apt, he told himself mockingly, if she were some changeling.

It was only as he reached home and turned in at his own gate that he realized the girl had gone off with his jacket.

2

"D'you know what she said," said Luke, "old bag that she is?"

"Luke, must you . . ."

"She can't possibly *hear*—not with that racket going on."

"It's only her manner. She's a heart of gold really . . ."

"She said, 'What you need is a bit of gumption!' How's that for cheek?"

"Oh really, Luke! She was talking about cleaning the bath, not about your character." Mrs. Crantock couldn't suppress a smile. He looked so put out. "Could you possibly go away and take your feet with you? I must get on with rolling out this pastry."

"Anyway," Luke said complacently, "she's going to blow up in a minute." He removed his heels from the edge of the table and his chair fell back from two legs onto four.

"Blow up! What do you mean?"

"The Hoover. It's about to explode. That's how it sounded last time before it went off. Crescendoing to an earsplitting whine, I think you might call it."

"Go and tell her to turn it off then, Luke! You can't

play about with electricity. We'll have some nasty tragedy on our hands."

"Headline in local paper," said Luke. *"Mother and son sit chatting while faithful daily is blown sky high."*

"Oh honestly . . . look. I'll have to go then and I'm up to my eyes in flour . . ."

"Literally," said Luke. Little particles of flour clung to his mother's eyebrows where she had brushed her hand across her forehead. "All right," he said hastily. He thought perhaps he had gone far enough in baiting her.

He went out into the hall. "Dobbie!" he shouted. "Switch off. SWITCH OFF!" But she couldn't hear because the whine had now risen a semitone and reached a veritable shriek. She must have eardrums of fiberglass.

He leaped for the bedrooms at the far end of the house. Grimms, built only a few years before, was all on one level, sprawling over the hillside like a recumbent cat.

She was in Rosie's room, skimming the Hoover round the dressing table. She used it like a ballet dancer. Although she was a big woman, she was surprisingly light on her feet. There was a terrible smell of burning rubber.

Luke sprang at the plug and switched off.

"What the . . . I haven't finished Hoovering!"

Luke said, "You have a choice. Either you finish the bedroom and the Hoover very likely finishes you. Or you abandon this brave but foolhardy course . . ."

"I did think it were a bit noisy," said Mrs. Dobwalls. She gave him a look. She was never sure about Luke, whether he was making fun of her. She liked him the least of the Crantock children. The other two were much more straightforward.

"Luke!"

"I'm indispensable this morning it seems," he said and went back to the kitchen.

"You called?" he asked with mock politeness.

"Coffee—tell Dobbie too."

His mother's busyness had intensified. "Would you go up to the village for me, Luke, when you've drunk that? We need several things."

"Must I?"

"Well . . ." He knew she was irritated with him and trying not to show it. Irritated that he had only got out of bed half-an-hour before and declined a proper breakfast when he needed a body-building eight o'clock bacon and eggs. Irritated that he should lounge about reading the paper—or trying to, he hadn't got past the front page —in the middle of the morning when the rest of the world was hard at it, bustling.

"All right."

His mother gave a little sigh of relief that she had not had to press too hard. She didn't want to appear to be always nagging. "Sardines," she said, "for Rosie's supper. They are her slimming things at the moment. And what shall we have for lunch? Chops?"

"Whatever you like."

"It's not what *I* like, dear."

"I'm easy . . . anything. A pound of Keats . . . grilled."

"Keats?"

"Forget it," Luke said hastily.

"There must be something you fancy. Steak? Shall we have a bit of a treat?"

"I'm quite happy with a chop." It was an awful nuisance to her, he realized, having to think about lunch. She had got out of the habit of it with Rosie at school

and Neil at the farm and Dad in Bristol. She and Dobbie had a cup of coffee and cheese and biscuits and listened to the *World at One* while they ate it. Then Dobbie went home. But it was no good saying he was happy with a bit of cheese, too. His mother looked upon it as failing to do her duty if she didn't stoke him up with a steaming hot plateful of lunch.

"I'll leave it to you then. And get veg. Oh, and your father wants some shaving soap."

"You'd better write it all down," said Luke.

"Take the dog, will you?"

"She's a nuisance in shops."

"She'll stay outside if you tell her firmly."

"She may with you . . ."

"Remember you're bringing the lunch back," said his mother, "so don't go off like you did yesterday and not appear again until after dark."

"That were a funny day," said Mrs. Dobwalls. "I'll leave the Hoover here to remind you it needs attention. I'll finish off with the sweeper. It were too hot to move, let alone do any work."

"It was hot," said Luke's mother. "But it's back to regular March weather today." She looked at the dripping garden through the steamed-up window. It had just stopped raining.

"My Maisie's boy were out last evening. I don't know what these lads get up to. He came home in a rare pickle; filthy dirty and his clothes torn. It's a real sweat to keep him looking half decent. Bin up on the ridge or something he said . . ."

Luke was standing up drinking his coffee. He drained his mug.

". . . he were fair wore out. What did he and his friends want with climbing the hill in all that heat, I said to Maisie."

"He was chasing a girl," said Luke slowly.

"Chasing a girl!" said Mrs. Dobwalls incredulously. She put down her coffee and stared at Luke. A slow flush spread over her face.

"Luke, is this one of your jokes?" Mrs. Crantock spoke sharply.

"I've never been more serious," said Luke. "I was up on that hill too. I had a firsthand view. There were about six of these boys and they had sticks."

"Well!" said Mrs. Dobwalls and Luke couldn't suppress a slight feeling of triumph over her discomfiture—her grandson was the apple of her eye. "Well, I never!" For once she didn't know what to say.

Mrs. Crantock was cutting the pastry carefully round the edge of the pie dish, balancing the pie dish up in the air on one hand and holding the knife at eye level. The pie looked humpy and delicious. The excess pastry fell onto the table with a little thump and she lowered the dish. "Chasing a girl—with sticks!"

"That's right."

"What on earth would they be doing that for?"

"I don't know," said Luke. "Luckily she got to a clump of trees near the top and they lost her in the dark. She was pretty well exhausted."

His mother said, "Why on earth didn't you tell us all this last night, Luke? You're so secretive. Who was she? Did you help her . . ."

As always under similar circumstances, Luke began to regret that he had let himself in for this conversation. It

wasn't that he was intentionally secretive; it was just that it seemed to him that people in their household always wanted to know what you were doing and why, at every given moment of the day. On the other hand, he told himself, someone responsible ought to know what those boys were up to yesterday on the hill; one day this sort of thing might lead to goodness knows what.

Oh well. Brace yourself for the cross-examination.

"Did you go to her help?" his mother asked again.

Luke wasn't too keen on dwelling on his hiding in the trees. "I walked home with her. But she wasn't very responsive and I didn't find out who she was. And then she just . . . well . . . went off before we reached the village."

"But how odd." Mrs. Crantock was sticking a diamond shape in the center of the pie for decoration. She dipped her pastry brush in a cup of water and wet the back of the diamond to make it stick. "Didn't you ask her her name? And did the boys see *you* . . . why, Luke, you might have been beaten up! It all sounds horrible."

"It was getting dark, they didn't see me."

"Thank goodness for that!"

But he couldn't kid himself—although he might kid his mother—he had hidden not out of prudence but out of fear. Neil, he felt sure, would have rushed out and put the lot of them to flight.

"Did you say you did ask her her name?" his mother persisted.

"No." Luke lied, unable to avoid giving a direct answer. All of a sudden he didn't want to tell them about "Hare." It had seemed strange enough last evening out on the hot

hillside in the dark. In the witness box of the kitchen, it would sound positively ludicrous.

"It was the fellow from the garage on the Bristol Road who was the leader," he said. "You know the one on the pumps with the thick specs." It seemed better to lead the conversation away from the quarry and concentrate on the hunters.

"Him!" cried Mrs. Dobwalls. "He's a real nasty piece of work. He's just started earning wages at that garage and he thinks he knows it all. The lads still at school, they follow him, silly young cuckoos. Well, I'll tell my son-in-law to have a word with our William." She looked a little less pink and discomfited now she could lay some of the blame elsewhere.

"I think you should," said Mrs. Crantock seriously. "But what did the girl look like, Luke? We ought to find out . . . someone being victimized."

"It was dark."

"It couldn't have been dark all the time," his mother said perceptively, "or you wouldn't have seen them chasing her in the first place."

She would make a good detective, Luke thought drily. "I should think she was a bit younger than Rosie . . . and she had long hair. Very long. And fair, I think."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Dobwalls and then no more. But she said "oh" in such a way that it meant several things. It meant that Mrs. Dobwalls immediately knew who the girl was and that for some reason now felt there was an excuse for William's behavior. She shut up like a clam but stirred her coffee with a great deal of clatter.

"You know who it might be, Dobbie?"

"We . . . ll, Mrs. Crantock, it sounds to me like the child of the new chemist in Barton. *You* know . . ."

"Yes," said Mrs. Crantock slowly. "I know who you mean. But they wouldn't *chase* her surely."

"You know what boys are," said Mrs. Dobwalls and she was now quite perky again. "When you get several of them together. They egg each other on and do all sorts of daft things. And . . ." she nodded her head, ". . . they might be said to have a reason for it."

"What new chemist?" Luke asked.

"Someone called Mr. Bingley. He's taken over the chemist's shop in Barton. You know old Mr. Sturton got knocked down by a motorbike last summer. He never really got over it and he decided to give up the shop—oh a couple of months ago. These new people from the Midlands took it over. I'm surprised you haven't been in there and seen them."

"If I have, I didn't notice," he said.

"They seem a nice enough family. They have this daughter and a little boy—much younger, about two or three."

"She's an odd one, that girl," said Mrs. Dobwalls shortly and pursed up her mouth in an ugly fashion. She went over to the cupboard under the sink and got out the Silvo with an unnecessary amount of noise.

"What do you mean 'odd'?" asked Luke.

Mrs. Dobwalls shrugged her big shoulders. "What you usually mean, I suppose."

"I don't usually call people 'odd,' " said Luke coldly, quite forgetting that he had applied this word to Hare in his thoughts only minutes before.

"Oh, Luke . . . you know just what Mrs. Dobwalls

means—don't be awkward. She means that people think she is strange. We used to call it 'dippy' but now say 'mentally unstable.' Actually she must be intelligent enough, she goes to the school in Barton."

"Well she shouldn't go to the school in Barton," Mrs. Dobwalls snapped. "I don't know nothing about her intelligence but you never know with these funny types. They let far too many of 'em roam around these days, pretending they're normal. Bit of psychiatry, they say, that's all they need. And then they go and do something nasty and someone else suffers for it. They need watching."

Luke said, "It might seem that your William needs watching . . ."

"That was boyish high spirits," Mrs. Crantock said quickly, tactfully, in case Luke was upsetting Mrs. Dobwalls further.

Luke wouldn't recognize William if he saw him in daylight let alone in the dusk, but he thought of the swearing and the howls on the hill and it still made his nails curl up. He said, "You must be mad to think that . . . they were no better than a pack of animals."

"I'm not condoning it, Luke, I'm trying to understand it. The girl doesn't conform and so she gets labeled and . . . teased, I suppose. People can be very cruel without thinking, especially young people, if someone is different."

"Who is to say who is different?" Luke said and he felt anger rising up inside him like sap in a tree. "It makes me sick the prejudice people show and the way they take the law into their hands, resort to violence . . ." He was surprised at his own vehemence.

"I can see you'll be championing all sorts of causes

when you get to college." With an effort his mother spoke lightly, trying to toss off the awkwardness of the moment.

"Ay . . . there are some as are too clever for their own good," said Mrs. Dobwalls tartly, concentrating hard on the silver. "Too clever by far . . ."

"And what are you inferring by that, Mrs. Dobwalls?" Luke knew perfectly well what she was inferring. He had recently won a university scholarship.

"I'm inferring what you like," she said nastily. "But clever is as clever does and if I'm not welcome here with my thoughts, I'll take them elsewhere."

"Now, now, Luke," said Mrs. Crantock giving him what she meant to be a warning look and which Luke chose to ignore. "You'd better be off and doing the shopping and leave Mrs. Dobwalls in peace."

Luke turned on his heel and went to the pantry to get a basket without saying any more. He could have said a great deal, launched into a grand row with Mrs. Dobwalls, whose proverbial heart of gold was a myth in Luke's eyes. She was a born troublemaker. What had started off merely as a desire on his part to score off her had turned into something bitter. But he didn't want to be responsible for her giving in her notice. He would never hear the end of it. Not that she hadn't given in her notice in the past—and then come back. But the interim was always full of recriminations.

He whistled up the dog and debated whether to go on Neil's bike or not. It would be quicker than walking. The chain came off as he started out and his foot crashed round, scraping the skin off his ankle. He swore under his breath. He might have known Neil's bike would be a

wreck. Where on earth had he been on it; you could hardly see it for mud. Perhaps he would give it an overhaul this afternoon—Luke liked to see machines shipshape. But Neil wouldn't thank him for it even if he noticed. He spat on his finger and tried to rub his broken shin but the saliva was lost somewhere in his sock. He gave up and wobbled off, holding the basket in one hand because at some point Neil had turned the handlebars upside down and a basket would no longer hang on them.

He rode in a leisurely fashion along the lane out of their own village of Wyndsham toward Barton, which was about two miles away. Barton considered itself superior to Wyndsham—which had only houses and a church and one village shop (no one was impressed that it *called* itself a supermarket) besides the pub. Barton had a whole row of shops in the High Street—shoe shops and ironmongers and even a boutique, besides a real chain store and the usual smattering of butchers and dairies and greengrocers.

The dog lolloped ahead. Why had Mrs. Dobwalls made him more angry than usual? Was it her attitude toward Hare—which would be pretty general among the villagers; they were a dyed-in-the-wool, bigoted lot. Or was he being a complete hypocrite; his own attitude to the girl last night could hardly be called charitable. And it sounded as if she could do with a bit of charity.

The chemist's was one of the first shops you came to in Barton. It was full of people waiting for prescriptions. As Luke opened the door, he heard Mrs. Bennett. There was no mistaking her fruity tones. He took a step backward, thinking he would go to the butcher's first and

avoid meeting her. But he stepped back onto the dog who yelped, and everyone in the chemist's looked round so that it was too late to retreat.

"Luke! How nice to see you. Of course, no more school now. *How marvelous.*" Mrs. Bennett flashed teeth at him, long teeth like a horse. "Your mother told me at Christmas that you'd done brilliantly." Luke made a noise of dissent; he could hardly believe his mother had said anything of the sort. She was always modest about the family's achievements. "Exhibition, is it? Or an Open Schol? Your father must be *delighted.*"

You could see the italics in her conversation. The whole shop was looking at him askance as if he were some sort of prize potted plant.

"And now just relaxation until the autumn when you go up." She must have risen at the crack of dawn to put on all that makeup. "Your mother will *love* having you around at home for a while."

Feet in the way of the pastry and unmade beds and upsetting Mrs. Dobwalls. "Will she?" said Luke.

The Bennetts lived in Wyndsham too—luckily on the far side from the Crantocks. "We must keep in with the Bennetts," Mrs. Crantock had been saying ever since they had built Grimms. "If the Council ever gives planning permission for that field next to the house, it's absolutely the end of our view." Mr. Bennett was one of the most influential men on the Council. Luke was of the opinion that it was better to lose the view than toady to the Bennetts. But then, as Rosie said, he *would* think so; he never looked out of the window.

They seemed to be in with the Bennetts at the moment anyway—with the exception of Neil who had thrown a

firework across Mrs. B's drawing room two years ago and had never been invited to the house again.

"We must fix something up," she said gaily to Luke. "Now you're *so* available. What about a skating party? Janey's frightfully keen, you know, and really not too bad at it. We could take the Harrisons along and I could drive you all over to the rink if we made a day of it . . . or I suppose you're driving yourself these days."

"I can't skate," Luke said. "Why don't you ask Neil, he's keen on things like that?" He was challenging her.

"Perhaps not skating then," said Mrs. Bennett. "But we'll think of something . . ."

"Your prescription's ready." Luke indicated the chemist. He wondered how rude you had to be before Mrs. Bennett noticed.

"Oh! Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Bingley. Just collecting a bottle of poison. We've all had *stomachs* this week. Jolly unpleasant while it lasts."

"Perhaps you ought to be in bed."

"Well, my husband *is* but *I* have to keep going. One of us, you know . . ." She rolled her eyes. She handed the chemist a ten-pound note, apologizing for having nothing smaller. "Your family settling down now?" she said to him. "Your daughter liking the school? Such an upheaval coming to a new place. Bound to take a little time for children to adjust . . . I'm a school manager there, you know, and I take a great interest in *all* of them."

Luke pricked up his ears. An enquiry after Hare? Was it his imagination or was Mrs. Bennett's kindly enquiry loaded? He looked at the chemist—Hare's father—with curiosity. He remembered now that he had seen him be-

fore in the shop. He was a tall man but had a stoop and an anxious expression which made him seem more elderly than he probably was. One would hardly think of him as the father of a three-year-old. He looked a kindly man. Would Hare have told him what happened up on the hill last night?

"She's settling well enough," the chemist said to Mrs. Bennett and Luke felt there was an edge to his voice. How can one person manage to get so many people's backs up, he thought, watching Mrs. Bennett groveling around in a capacious bag for her car keys.

"Good-bye then, Luke. I shall ring your mother and fix something. There's no escaping," she said coyly.

"No?" said Luke but Mrs. Bennett was colliding with the toothbrush stand and didn't hear him. He felt his whole life story had been laid bare before the shop as he said apologetically, "Er . . . shaving soap?"

"What make?"

"Oh anything . . . just . . . to fit a bowl, I think. You know the sort . . . round . . . shallow." He had no idea there was such a choice in shaving soap; he always bought the same stick for himself—a handful at a time and they lasted forever.

"It sounds as if you want a Yardleys."

He slid thankfully out of the shop, the purchase made. The dog leaped up in anticipation of a titbit. "Wrong shop for that," Luke told her. "C'mon, we'll see what the butcher can produce."

The lunch purchased, he took a back lane and thought he would go a long way round to let the dog run. She was already racing ahead. At last he had the morning to himself—temporarily, he realized, as he looked at the chops

in the basket. How his mother forced one's life to be governed by food.

He tried to shake off the feeling of depression which persisted in weighing him down. Why couldn't he give himself up to the purely physical pleasure of cycling along a country lane with no demands on his time save the safe delivery of the lunch? The rain of the early morning had brought out a good earthy smell of green vegetation. What a contrast to yesterday's dry heat. There were celandines and marsh marigolds flowering in the damp of the hedge and ground ivy made a purple skein of color up the bank.

It was not working, Luke realized. This staying at home, *relaxing* as Mrs. Bennett ineptly put it. He couldn't fit in with day-to-day domesticity; with village life that embraced Mrs. Dobwalls and Janey Bennett.

The Crantocks had lived in Bristol before Grimms was built and after they had moved to Wyndsham (when Luke was ten) they had still traveled daily into Bristol for their schooling. Luke had enjoyed school and it had absorbed all his attention so that there was little time over for taking part in local affairs. He had never felt that he fitted in particularly well with the village. But after he got his University Entrance at Christmas—as a climax to all his hard work—it was pointless to stop on at school. Everyone left in his group in the Sixth.

What do you want to do, his father had said. Nine whole months before going to college in the autumn. Luke couldn't think what to do with nine months of his life. He might never have another time like this without responsibilities, no obligatory work. He felt no compulsion to go on an overland jeep trip to Baghdad like his

friend, Tony. No desire to do social work. He would be hopeless at teaching.

"Stay at home," his mother said, "there's no need to rush into anything. It will be the first time you've had a chance to really spend some time around here. I shall see something of you on your own at last."

She had made it all sound rather cozy and Luke had shelved the issue and slipped into home life. Or tried to.

It would have worked with Neil, he thought. Neil had hated school and, although a year younger than Luke, had left at the earliest possible opportunity and gone in for farming. He was always busy—rushing—doing things. He was never at a loss for company and seemed to fit in with each of the various groups that comprised the village community.

Be fair, Luke argued with himself, you wouldn't want your life planned out ahead in the way that Neil's life is obviously planned. It would frighten you.

But he had to face up to the present. Face up to the fact that his mother—in theory—might like having him at home but that Luke at a loose end was driving her up the wall. Should he do a job? How and where did one start looking for one? Should he do something locally? He knew very well that he only had to go down the road to Grimms Farm and Mr. Kendall would be delighted to employ him. They could always do with an extra hand in the fields; help with the sheep. Or he could go with Neil into Cirencester every day where he was doing his practical work on a dairy farm. It had its charm, manual work out in the open air. Back to nature. But Luke couldn't see himself rising at six every day for the next six months; slogging with freezing hands in the rain; hobnobbing with

local farmers at the sheep market. One had to be aware of one's limitations.

I'll turn over a new leaf, he thought with sudden decision. Make a move to do something concrete. Get away from the exposure of home. And he dragged his foot in the mud-clogged rut at the side of the road and balanced himself and the basket precariously while he leaned over to the hedge to pick a new elder leaf from a tuft just sprouting. He turned it over with elaborate ceremony and stuck it in the toggle of his duffle coat.

He felt better already. He would look in the paper when he got back and see if there was anything going. And he wouldn't be hopelessly choosy either. He gave a whoop and set his foot on the pedal; then he rushed the dog the rest of the way home, she barking madly and snapping at his whirling feet as she ran.

3

Luke still had to get his coat back from Hare. He asked his mother if she knew where the chemist lived. She looked at him quickly and suspiciously and said, "Why? What do you want to know for?"

Luke resisted the temptation to say, "Well, actually I'm going to ask his daughter to go to the cinema . . ." and said, "I lent the girl my jacket last night because I thought she was cold and she went off with it."

"They live between Barton and Wyndsham on that new estate on the right-hand side of the Barton road," said Mrs. Crantock. She went on, "Don't get involved, will you, Luke? I mean with any sort of feud in the village . . ." She added quickly, seeing Luke's face, "Don't misunderstand me, I feel very sorry for the girl but . . . you know what people are . . . what they think."

"I understand perfectly," said Luke. "I might be tarred with the same brush if I'm seen talking to her. Whatever brush they think she's tarred with."

He went off whistling deliberately.

Margaret Crantock sighed. She had always prided herself on managing her children rather well; there had been —up to now—no obvious "generation gap" problems that

some families had to contend with. But Luke did seem to be most awfully touchy these days. Of the three, he had been the least forthcoming as a child; now he was either flippant or aggressive.

Luke went round to the Bingleys' at half past four because he thought Hare would be home from school by then. He did wonder if she might return the coat herself, but it seemed unlikely under the circumstances and even if she remembered his name, she wouldn't know where he lived.

He borrowed Neil's bike again. The Bingleys' house, as his mother said, was between Barton and Wyndsham. The houses were new, built in the last year, and Hare's was at the far end of the cul-de-sac. He got this information from a man who was gardening in the first house. There was a small boy playing in the front garden of the Bingleys'—if it could be called a garden; it was as yet unplanted, merely a piece of plowed land with a concrete run leading to the garage and front door.

Luke had no experience of small children—this must be little Bingley—and he looked at the snotty nose and filthy wellington boots with slight distaste. He leaned Neil's bike against the wire mesh fence and pushed open the gate.

"Is your sister at home?"

Little Bingley stared at him unwinkingly but made no reply.

"Mother in?"

It was the most silent family Luke had ever encountered. He advanced down the path to the front door, stepping round a tricycle. Young Bingley turned and followed him with his eyes. Before he had a chance to knock,

the front door opened and a young woman stepped outside. She was heavily pregnant. This threw Luke for a moment because he had expected Mrs. Bingley to be rather older. She certainly didn't look old enough to have a daughter of Hare's age. Perhaps she was someone else.

"Er . . . is Mrs. Bingley in, please?"

She was as surprised to see Luke as he was by her. "I am Mrs. Bingley."

"Oh! Is Hare in then?"

"Who?"

"Er . . . Hare?" Luke felt himself going red with embarrassment. The name sounded utterly implausible. The girl must have been having him on.

"I think you've come to the wrong house."

"Well, you're Mrs. Bingley . . ."

"That's right. I said I was."

"I'd like to see your daughter then."

"Oh—you must mean Griselda."

"She told me her name was Hare."

Mrs. Bingley made no comment at this, nor looked surprised. She said to the small boy. "Have you seen Grissel, Paul?"

Paul shook his head slowly. Then he nodded violently. "Upstairs."

"Go and tell her that someone wants to see her, there's a good boy. And then you can come on your tricycle with me to collect some eggs from the farm."

"Don't want to," Paul said truculently.

"Go on," she said sharply. Luke could see that she did not want to be disobeyed so flagrantly in front of a stranger.

"Not going to get Grissel."

Mrs. Bingley gave an exclamation of annoyance but did not make an issue of it. She turned back and called Griselda herself.

Why on earth had she said that her name was Hare? Was there, after all, some foundation for Mrs. Dobwalls' opinion that she was screwy?

They waited for what seemed hours. Mrs. Bingley called "Griselda" again more loudly and stood tapping her foot.

"It's a nice house you have," Luke said awkwardly because the silence went on and on.

"There's a pile of work to be done to get things straight," was her only comment. "You coming, Griselda?"

Suddenly Griselda was on the doorstep. One moment she had not been there and the next moment she was. She was so slight that she seemed to materialize out of thin air.

Luke stood and stared. How on earth could such a tiny wisp of a creature raise such animosity among the people of Wyndsham? Seen properly for the first time, he found her even smaller than she had seemed in the dark. Her hair, which was ash blond, reached almost to her waist. She had an air of questioning bewilderment, a kind of elusiveness that made Luke feel she had not taken in his presence at all. She certainly gave no sign of recognition.

"You borrowed my jacket last night," he said. "I wondered . . . could I have it back?"

She had one or two long scratches on her face which must have been the hawthorn hedge. She was very beautiful.

She looked at him quite blankly and slowly shook her head.

"I haven't got your jacket," she said softly.

Mrs. Bingley turned to Luke. "You must have made a mistake. It must have been someone else who took it." She said this as if dismissing him—she wanted to get off for the eggs before the evening closed in.

But Luke stood his ground. "No," he said, "it was Griselda."

"But you thought it was someone else when you asked for her—Hare or something . . ."

"That's what she told me her name was." He looked accusingly at Hare but she was just standing there in the doorway and her face was as blank as a postage stamp.

He realized it must all sound very odd to her mother. "She was up on the hill . . . and I thought she might be cold coming back so I gave her my jacket to put round her shoulders."

"Do you know anything about it, Grissel?"

Hare shook her head.

"Well—there you are—sorry. We don't seem able to help you. You'll probably find you've left it somewhere." The dismissal was final this time, rather curt. Luke felt thoroughly put out. Not only because he had lost his coat—it was only an old one but he liked it because it was comfortable—but one way and another Hare had made him look thoroughly silly.

He shrugged. "If you find a jacket lying around anywhere that doesn't belong to your family, perhaps you could let me have it back. My name's Crantock."

"Oh yes . . . you live in Wyndsham."

"At Grimms—just down the road from the farm."

"It doesn't sound likely that we'll find it. Paul! Come on. Turn your tricycle round."

"Staying with Grissel."

Hare was still standing on the front door step. She said, "You like getting the eggs, Paul."

He looked at her and his face grew less truculent. He was just about to turn his tricycle round and follow his mother when Mrs. Bingley said waspishly, "You're coming with me whether you like it or not." It was only too obviously the end of a long day of struggling with Paul.

Paul immediately reacted away from her. She wrenched his tricycle round so that it pointed at the gate. She pushed him out.

Luke picked up Neil's bike and walked down the road behind her. She didn't look as if she wanted to be accompanied. She hurried as fast as she could, pushing Paul in the small of his back so that he had to pedal furiously. He howled at the top of his voice.

Luke looked back at Hare. She was standing in the doorway watching them go. Somehow she looked very vulnerable. When Luke thought of Hare on later occasions, it was of her standing there framed by that raw new house. The day had improved as it went on and in the last hour the sun had come through. One of the low bronze rays of the evening caught Hare in the doorway and lit her up, giving a red-gold tinge to her hair. Even standing in her own home, she seemed poised for flight like some shy wild animal. Luke thought, I shall never think of her as Griselda. Hare is too apt a name. Why had she not admitted to knowing him? Could she really not remember? He found that impossible to believe.

He threw his leg over the saddle of the bike and caught up with Mrs. Bingley, dragging one foot to keep balanced. Neil's saddle was too high for him.

"Do you know what happened last night?"

"Did anything happen?" She said it as if she didn't want to know.

"I think you ought to know."

"If you've lost your coat, you heard what Griselda said. She knew nothing about it. People are always saying things about her and half the time it's their own invention."

"I'm inventing nothing nor blaming anything on . . . Griselda. In fact quite the opposite. *She* was victimized."

"What do you mean?"

"She was set on by some boys, mostly boys from the school, I think. They didn't actually catch her but they chased her right up to the ridge. I don't know whether they intended to do her harm but they had sticks and they were very excited."

Mrs. Bingley didn't say anything, just went on pushing Paul who was now so out of breath that he could no longer scream. She said, "What do you expect me to do?"

Luke looked at the woman with dislike. How could she be so utterly uninterested in the fate of her daughter? Had she stood on the hill and seen Hare forcing her way through the hedge, panting up the side of the field, gasping for breath, would she feel differently? Luke was not sure that she would. He sensed in her a complete unwillingness to be involved. She couldn't be asking him more plainly to go away and mind his own business if she had spelled it out in so many words. Luke was fast discovering that it wasn't always easy to offer help to people if they didn't want to be helped. Perhaps she thought her problem would go away if she refused to

acknowledge its existence. Or at least she wasn't going to admit it was there to a stranger.

He said, "I thought you might be concerned. You must have wondered where she got those scratches on her face. She had to force her way through a hawthorn hedge. Didn't she say anything about it?"

"No, she didn't," said Mrs. Bingley and might have added, "And I wish you wouldn't either," but she just settled her face into a blank mask and never slowed her pace.

"But surely you can't let this kind of bullying go on without anyone doing anything about it."

Luke thought, how ludicrous. Am I the only person worried about protecting a girl I didn't even know twenty-four hours ago? What with Mrs. Dobwalls and Mrs. Bingley . . .

"Perhaps she ought not to be at that school," he struggled on—and realized his mistake as soon as he made the remark. Mrs. Bingley interpreted it the wrong way. Whereas he meant to imply that the school was out of step with Hare, she took it that he was casting aspersions on Hare's normality. It touched her on a raw spot.

"She's quite able to cope with that school, thank you," she snapped. "She's intelligent enough. Just well . . . a bit vague sometimes."

"I'm sure she's intelligent," Luke said hastily. "But perhaps that particular school is too rough. There aren't people there that she can make friends with." He sounded like a social worker; he was amazed at himself. "Perhaps she could be transferred . . ."

"Where else could she go?" Mrs. Bingley flung back at

him. "She's always been a loner and she's quite happy that way. If she was seriously upset by anything that happened last night, she would have told me, wouldn't she?"

Would she, wondered Luke. Would *he* in Hare's place? You had your pride. You didn't seek sympathy where sympathy was not forthcoming.

"Well, sorry, if you think I'm interfering . . . but I just thought . . . well, she is your daughter . . ."

"I do wish you wouldn't keep calling her my daughter. She isn't. She's a step."

"Oh!" said Luke. What an idiot he was. Of course, that explained the age discrepancy.

"Her mother died . . . oh, six or seven years ago."

Was this the cause of Hare's maladjustment? Did losing your mother at seven or eight have such a devastating effect that you became withdrawn and unable to mix socially with people of your own age?"

"I'm not a cruel stepmother if that's what you're thinking." It was the first remark of any warmth that Mrs. Bingley had made to Luke. "I'm very fond of Griselda. But she's a problem, I'll admit it and it doesn't seem to help if people are concerned about her. She prefers to make her own way so I try not to interfere."

You have problems of your own, Luke thought, eyeing the recalcitrant Paul and the burden of her pregnancy. And you're not all that much older than Hare yourself. A second young wife. All very well not interfering but what if Hare got beaten up? How would you feel then? However, he said no more—just thank you (although he didn't know what he was thanking her for, she'd hardly

been helpful) and rode away feeling an intense relief that the interview was over.

He rode Neil's bike to where they had walked along the lane the night before. He located the spot where the dog had run off toward the hill and examined the fence on the far side of the road. He looked in the hedge. His jacket was there, lying in the field. It was wet through but otherwise none the worse for being out all night.

So Hare had hidden from him. This, at least, he supposed, tied up with her refusing to recognize him this evening. If anything about Hare tied up at all. The best thing was to forget about her. After all, as Mrs. Bingley had implied, she was none of his business.

He put the jacket over the handlebars of the bike and the thought of Hare out of his head; the first more successfully than the second.

4

"Luke!" shouted Rosie. "Luke . . . Luke!" She had to shout to make herself heard above the pounding of her transistor.

Luke, lodged on the freezer, reading the paper, didn't answer.

Rosie clicked the knob to OFF.

"You must have heard."

"I did," said Luke

"Well . . . couldn't you possibly say 'yes' just to show . . . so I don't keep wasting my breath?"

"No," said Luke. "The answer is 'Do it yourself and don't keep asking me.' "

"That's no answer," said Rosie. "I should get C minus for that. It doesn't seem to bear much relevance to the sum."

"I don't bear any relevance to the sum at all," said Luke.

"You are in a mood," said Rosie. "What's happened to upset you?"

Luke said, "You."

"You're very selfish. God gave you more than your fair share of brains in this family and you just hog them all to yourself."

"Life *is* unfair," said Luke. "Who am I to tinker with creation? Anyway you don't hand your beauty round. You've got a far better bargain there than I have."

"Have a nose any time," said Rosie, "or a pair of ruby lips." She tipped her chair back onto two legs and surveyed him on the freezer; she chewed her pen so that her ruby lips were no longer ruby but black. "It doesn't matter men being ugly," she said. "And you're not all that bad. A bit pointed perhaps."

"Thanks!"

"In fact you could be a lot worse. Janey Bennett's quite interested, you know. She was asking a lot of surreptitious questions about you on the train. Mind you, I think she has an ulterior motive . . . taking the long view . . . May Balls and all that."

Luke didn't answer. Janey Bennett's long view was of no interest to him.

Rosie, irritated beyond measure by his absorption, cried, "What are you reading?"

She hit the back of the paper with her ruler.

"Stop it!" He glared at her over the top. "If you want to know, I'm looking for a job."

"A job!"

"What's so strange about that?"

"Not strange," she said. "Lovely, lovely mon. Could you lend me some—it would mean I could buy that record player if you could advance me, say five pounds. I'll pay you back at my birthday . . . I've been saving for so long, I'm getting thoroughly fed up and they'll sell out of them before I have the money at this rate anyway. They're only on offer for a few weeks."

"I'm not a hire purchase setup," Luke said. "Or if I

considered it, my rates of interest would be exorbitant. And I haven't even *got* a job yet. There seems to be a conspicuous lack of any advertised here."

"What are you looking in? Oh heavens, not the dreary old *West Country Express.* They won't have anything. . . . Where's Top-People-Read-the-Times? Look! Over there on the table. Give it to me. Look in the Personal Column."

"For goodness sake, stop organizing me, will you!"

"They might want someone to smuggle opium out of Tibet," she said, running her finger busily down the paper. "Or to row the Atlantic. I say, *I* could come if you left it until the summer holidays. You would find a woman frightfully useful for your creature comforts . . ."

"Not your sort of woman."

"No one seems to want rowers," she said disappointedly, "and you've got such nice long arms. In fact there just seems to be people *wanting* jobs . . . 'Young man of good appearance, will go anywhere . . .' "

"I won't go anywhere," said Luke. "I'm not the shining courage type." He thought of the evening on the hill with Hare and fiercely pushed it out of his mind.

Suddenly the kitchen was invaded from all sides. Mrs. Crantock came in from the hall and Neil from outside.

"Have you finished your homework, Rosie? It's supper time. Oh really, what have you been doing, then? No, I can't put it off for another half hour. Your father will be home. Go into the playroom and finish. *And don't put the television on.* Luke dear, could you move? I want to get some peas out. Neil! Are you in for supper?"

"Can I have something straightaway? I've got to be at

The Apprentice in half an hour."

"You're never in long enough to eat a proper meal these days . . ."

"Luke's looking for a job." Rosie poked her head back round the door from the playroom—still so called from their childhood days. It now housed the television.

"Looking for a job?" said Neil. "He's got a hope. Unemployable, I'd say."

"Are you really, Luke?" His mother paused in her bustle and looked at him. She didn't know whether to feel relieved or sorry.

"Why don't you come with me to Brigstocks'? There's always masses to do on the farm. Old man Brigstock would employ even you, I should think."

"Come home smelling like you," said Luke. "No thanks."

"Neil, you do smell rather strong! You must go and change before you go out again."

"Cow smell," shouted Rosie. "It's seeping in here. Yuk!"

"I haven't been near a cow all day," said Neil. "You're so fussy, all of you. What's wrong with the smell of good earth?"

"Bad earth," Luke said. "That's what's wrong. No one would complain about good earth."

"Oh all right," said Neil, disgruntled. "So long as the food's ready by the time I've changed." He went out of the kitchen and they could hear him sluicing and bubbling in the cloakroom. He was never disgruntled for long. He came back pulling off his pullover, threw it into the laundry room and dashed off to his bedroom. When he came back, five minutes later, he was resplendent in pinstripe trousers and a purple polo-necked sweater. Round

his forehead he had knotted a yellow tie.

"Which apostle are you?" Luke asked. "Andrew, brother of James? Or John the Baptist?"

"Why don't you come too?" Neil said. "It'll be quite a good evening."

"No thanks," said Luke.

"Why don't you, Luke?" his mother said. "It would be a change. It isn't as if your own friends live round here."

"I don't want Neil's friends."

Neil shrugged amiably. "Suit yourself." He sat down and waded into an enormous pile of spaghetti. He was six foot three and his appetite was enormous.

"Couldn't you be more . . . tender with him, Luke?" Mrs. Crantock said after Neil had gone, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "He does try."

"*Tender* . . . with Neil," said Luke and looked at her as if she had gone mad. "What a strange word to choose. Has he ever been tender with me?"

"Well, you know, you do rather flatten him."

"You can't flatten Neil," Luke said emphatically. "And anyway I don't want to get involved with his friends. I haven't a thing in common with them—so what's the point in pretending I have?"

"Oh well . . . but I think you're silly, mooning around by yourself."

"I don't moon . . ."

"Here's your father," she said hastily, hearing the tires on the gravel, "and the table not even laid . . ."

Rosie shrieked, "Eminent lawyer approaches . . ." and hurled the cutlery through the hatch into the dining room with great accuracy. Laying the supper table was one of her tasks.

47 : WYNDSHAM

Things were on the whole more orderly when Graham Crantock was around. He himself had the calm, detached air of his profession, which took the panic out of many a tense family situation. He was a tall, spare man, handsome in his time but with a slightly prominent nose that was now accentuated by the fact that he was losing his hair (much to his chagrin). He was very much bound up in his work and happy to be so. He let the ebb and flow of household affairs wash over him with very little interference on his part unless the occasion proved critical.

When, twenty minutes later, he sat down at the supper table, he gave a sigh of content. He drained his sherry glass, letting the wine roll lingeringly round his tongue.

"No Neil then? I don't seem to have seen him for some time. Doesn't he ever eat?"

"Wallowed in cow muck all day and now gone to drown his sorrows at The Apprentice."

"You've not gone with him then, Luke? What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Mooning around as usual according to Mum."

Margaret Crantock said, "Rosie!" her voice sharp with annoyance.

"Sorry I'm such a burden." Luke shrugged his shoulders.

Graham Crantock, looking at his wife saw a little spot of red appearing on each cheek. He said, "These potatoes are excellent, Margaret. Are they the ones you planted in September?"

She was a keen gardener.

"I've got something for you, Luke. Cut it out of one of the dailies at the office. I thought it might interest you."

"Oh, What's that?"

"An article on a Time Machine that some young professor in London is building. You may have seen a report on it in *The Times*."

"He hasn't got past *Sits Vac*," Rosie said meaningly. "What sort of a Time Machine? Can you turn back to last week? What a great idea! You could have the Williams' dance all over again, or my birthday . . . or that gorgeous lemon soufflé. Will you invest in one, Dad?"

"Not got to the stage of being a commercial proposition yet, I don't think." Graham Crantock smiled. "But it might have its uses . . ."

Luke said, "Who's building it?"

"Chap who has just won some prize for physics. Humboldt, his name. He must be the son of *the* von Humboldt. You probably haven't heard of Albert von Humboldt; he came over from Germany in the thirties to get away from the Nazi regime. He was a brilliant man and a great asset to us in the war. He worked on the atomic bomb."

"Wait a minute—I think I have heard something about these experiments. It came up at school last term. Clarkson was full of it. Did it mention tachyons in the articles?"

"The cutting is in my briefcase in the hall. Go and fetch it, would you, Rosie, if you don't mind?"

"I do mind but note I'm going," said Rosie. "Halo. Halo. Why can't Luke run his own errands?" Her complaint floated back through the door. She found the case and plonked it down by her father's chair.

"What public spirit," said Luke with heavy admiration.

"Thank you, Rosie," Graham Crantock calmly dipped in and shuffled through some papers. "Ah. Here we are. I think it came out of the *Express*." He handed the article

to Luke, who propped it against the water jug in front of him.

"Read it out," said his mother, "if it's not too scientific to understand . . ." She had swallowed her annoyance and was trying hard—Luke realized and was correspondingly irritated—to show interest in something that interested him.

"I think even Rosie will understand this, it's pretty popular press."

"Thanks," said Rosie primly.

He read out:

TIME BARRIER

AMAZING FRANCO-BRITISH BREAKTHROUGH

by Brogan Cathcart

Franco-British scientists have established an outstanding lead in unraveling the amazing secrets of the Alice in Wonderland world of time physics. Professor Thomas Humboldt, a boyish 26-year-old and winner of the coveted Goldberg prize for Physics, told me today that the revolutionary theory of Time on which he has been working for the last six years is to be tested in the experimental Time Machine now nearing completion at the London center for I.P.P.E. (Institut pour la Promotion en Physique Européen).

Professor Humboldt's theory, which has shaken the established scientific thought of centuries, is founded on the particles called *tachyons*, only discovered in the early 1970's. "It appears," says Professor Humboldt, "that these particles have a negative time field associated with them."

We live in positive time which runs forward; tachyons, like Alice, come from a world where time runs backward.

Humboldt's laboratory at I.P.P.E. hardly looks the sort of place where world-shattering discoveries are made. The Time Machine itself is amazingly simple when one considers the claims Humboldt is making for it. It is a rectangular metal frame facing a large box which resembles a television set and which is the Tachyon Generator.

Humboldt's breakthrough came three years ago when he realized that if an electric field of sufficient power were applied over a small area like the frame, he would be able to dam the flow of the tachyons' negative time poles, making them pile up in a thick slab. When the slab is thick enough, Humboldt believes that the backward time field of the tachyons will be so great that a time reversal will actually be visible. Time will run backward within the frame—it will be a window from our world into the wonderland of the tachyons.

Humboldt admits that he is not really sure what is going to happen when the time reversal takes place, but the team he has assembled here to carry through the greatest combination of theoretical and applied physical principles ever yet attempted is sure of one thing—that the world will be entering a new age when the Humboldt time experiment goes critical in the early hours of one morning in the summer.

"Hmm . . ." said Graham Crantock. "Well there you are, Rosie. I shouldn't think we could set that up in the corner of the drawing room. Sounds like it might blow

the fuses for a start if it takes that much power to get going . . ."

Luke shook his head slowly, still concentrating on the newspaper cutting in front of him. "What a fantastic thing . . ."

"It doesn't sound all that fantastic," Rosie said, "just slowing up a few old—what are they called—tachyons."

"It's fantastic even to have discovered their existence," Luke answered her cuttingly. "They only exist at speeds *greater* than the speed of light—all other known particles exist at *less* than the speed of light . . ."

"That certainly makes them sound pretty revolutionary." Graham Crantock leaned forward to reach for the salt.

"Makes them sound double dutch to me," Rosie murmured, refusing to be impressed.

"There's someone in America on to them too. It's all coming back to me now, what Clarkson said—chap called Harding, I think, or a name like it. *He* thinks tachyons are something new, that they come from some other universe—from a Black Hole perhaps . . ."

"Of Calcutta, me ole pal . . . ?" Rosie asked flippantly.

"Even I've heard of Black Holes," said her mother.

Luke ignored them both. He was warming to his subject. "But Humboldt thinks tachyons are just a normal part of the structure of nature. You know—everything has an opposite . . . night and day, male and female, life and death . . ."

"Jack Sprat could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean," sang Rosie helpfully.

". . . so it stands to reason you get positive time and negative time."

"These tachyons," said Margaret Crantock, "what do they look like?"

"You can't *see* them for heaven's sake . . ."

"Proton and neutron kind of things . . . ?" ventured his father.

"Superficially, yes." Luke waved his fork. "Look, don't worry what the tachyons are like. What's important for you to understand is that if Humboldt can build up a sufficient intensity of their negative time polarity, why then, time running backward as opposed to our time running forward will take over in that area. That's what he's doing with his Time Machine. Strewth, I'd give anything to be there when they turn the thing on." Luke spoke longingly.

His father said, "Why don't you write and see if they want an extra lab assistant for a few months over the summer? You never know. They might take you on. It would give you an insight into a new side of physics."

"But you can't just write like that, can you?"

"You can always try."

"I've no experience or anything . . ."

"You've got a bit of gray matter," Graham Crantock said. "That's always useful. Tell them you've got a maths schol—they don't grow on trees, you know—and that you're waiting to go up to Cambridge. You have to sell yourself these days, if you want to get anywhere, disagreeable though it may be to you . . ."

"I don't know the address," said Luke. He began to feel interested. He even felt a small prick of enthusiasm quite different from the dreary feeling he experienced when he scanned the *Jobs* in the paper.

"You can soon *find* the address, if you want to," said his mother, gathering the plates together.

"It said some Institute or other, didn't it? Not actually London University, I don't think. Let me see." Mr. Crantock put on his glasses and reached for the cutting. "Sounds like a sort of Common Market setup. You might meet all sorts of interesting people."

"I shouldn't think they would consider me . . ."

"You won't know unless you write, will you?" his father said logically. "But it's up to you. What's for pudding, Margaret?"

5

Luke wrote to the Institute. He found the letter extremely difficult to write. Sell yourself, his father had said. It wasn't in Luke's nature to sell anything. In desperation he took a random effort from the discarded pile round his feet, and posted it.

He heard nothing for two weeks and gave up hope. He sank into a disgruntled state of permanent gloom.

"You're in such a *mood*," Rosie cried. "Snap out of it, can't you? It gets so deadly boring." But somehow he couldn't.

His mother began to wish they had never seen the article about the Time Machine.

Then a reply came.

It asked Luke to go up to London for an interview in three days' time. He studied an old A to Z of London and found that the Institute in Kent Street was on the Embankment, very close to the Law Courts. His father knew the area well.

Kent Street, when he found it, funneled its narrow way down through tall buildings which stood between the Strand and the river. The Institute, on the right hand side near the bottom, looked like a rather seedy Victorian

hotel, with a façade of red brick and steps leading up to a pillared doorway. Luke, who had been expecting something akin to the United Nations building in New York, was nonplussed.

There was, however, a plate by the side of the door bearing the message, *L'Institut pour la Promotion en Physique Européen*—the plate could do with a clean—so he went up the steps and nervously looked for a bell. He pressed it when he found it, but heard no ring and concluded it was broken. After waiting a few moments, he found the door was open and went in.

There was an elderly gentleman in the hall who seemed to be a kind of porter. He interpreted the signature on Luke's letter with a fair amount of shortsighted sniffing and Luke was further taken aback to learn that he was to be interviewed by a Frenchman—a Monsieur Blériot; the porter pronounced his name with a surprisingly professional rolling of the "r." What if Monsieur Blériot spoke only French? Luke did not have much time to dwell on this awful possibility, as he was directed to squeeze into a small cramped lift which held only two people and which had great difficulty in making the last few feet to the third floor, where it stopped. The porter asked him to wait in what appeared to be a kind of common room.

Luke sat down gingerly in a dilapidated armchair, one of any number that littered the room in untidy groups. The atmosphere was stale and smoky. He was just about to pick up a newspaper and make a pretense of reading it when an internal phone rang shrilly in the corner of the room.

He ignored it. It was, after all, none of his business.

When it rang again and then a third time with a cer-

tain ferocious persistence, he felt obliged to answer it. He lifted the receiver reluctantly and said hullo.

A voice said, "I've left my electronics manual on the window ledge, could you possibly bring it down? I'm tied to the panel." The receiver clicked at the other end before Luke could draw breath to reply.

What should he do? He went over to the window. Sure enough, there was the book on one of the wide ledges. Electronic tables. He opened it to see if it had a name in it but there was none.

He took it to the door. Perhaps the porter was about. But there wasn't a sound. The whole building might have been deserted. Then he heard faint laughter coming from somewhere down the corridor. He didn't, however, feel like confronting a whole roomful of people. He shrugged and went back into the common room, putting the manual on the window ledge where he had found it. Whoever it was would have to come and get it himself.

Two minutes later the phone rang again.

"Fetch your own manual," said Luke.

It went on and on. Someone was sitting with his finger pressed on the button. The bell tore at Luke's jittery nerves.

Defeated, he answered it again.

"Have you found it?" It was the same quickspoken voice.

"Yes but where . . ."

"I'm down in the lab. Could you be quick?"

The phone went dead again.

Down, the voice had said. Not up or along. The lab must be somewhere at the bottom of this queer setup. He

would go and give the book to the porter in the hall, and he could sort it out. He pressed the bell for the lift and when it came, got in and lurched downward.

But the porter was no longer there. A girl propped up against a notice board was reading a letter.

"Excuse me, someone in the lab wants this book."

She looked up. "D'you mean Tom's lab?"

"I suppose so. I don't know."

"Tom's lab is in the basement. Go down those stairs. It's the door at the bottom." She went back to her letter. She didn't offer to take the book or make any other suggestion.

Luke hesitated a moment. He hoped M. Blériot wasn't looking for him in the Common Room upstairs, but having come this far he might as well deliver the book. At last he would get a look into one of the laboratories. He went down the stairs at the back of the hallway indicated by the girl, and found himself in a dimly lit corridor. There was a door opposite.

He shook back his long forelock of hair and knocked. A voice said, "Come in."

When he opened the door, Luke's first thought was that he had come to the wrong room. It didn't look like a laboratory in the conventional sense. He had been expecting something large and airy and highly polished—although why, when the rest of the building looked so battered, he didn't know.

The room was of medium size and had a high ceiling. A long control console curved down one side from corner to corner and the wall above it was taken up with line after line of electronic panels. At a chair in the center of the

console sat a lone figure, writing feverishly. Luke assumed it was the man who had telephoned. There was an internal phone just by his elbow.

A low-pitched, monotonous humming noise was the only thing that broke the silence.

The man didn't look round. He said, "You've brought the book, Simon? Thanks a lot. I'm just doing these control panel figures for Kelly."

Luke wondered whether to say he wasn't Simon or just put the book down and go.

He laid the book on the console and turned away; if he had been feeling his normal self he would have been peeved that his effort should go unacknowledged and unthanked. As it was, he was anxious to get back to the Common Room.

But the lack of response on the part of who he thought was Simon made the man pause in his writing and look up.

"I say . . . I thought you were Simon. It was Simon who answered the phone, wasn't it?"

"No. It was me." Luke's hand was on the knob of the door.

"Well, thank you for bringing it down. Good of you." He looked at Luke slightly puzzled. "I don't think I know you, do I? Who are you working for?"

"I'm not working for anyone. I've come for an interview. I was the only person in the room upstairs when you telephoned so I brought the book . . ."

"Oh I see!" The man laughed. "How obliging. What job have you applied for? I wasn't aware we were offering any."

Luke turned the doorknob. He simply must get back upstairs. What if he missed his chance of an interview with

M. Blériot? "It's . . . well, nothing in particular. I saw an article in the paper on the work being done here and I was interested. I wondered if any extra bottle washers were needed so I wrote in . . ."

"Not that dreadful article in the *Express*, I hope! About Alice in Wonderland. Made us all sound like a sort of pantomime. I wouldn't have given the man an interview if I had known he was going to write that sort of stuff."

Slowly and belatedly it dawned upon Luke that he might be talking to Professor Humboldt himself.

With this realization, he felt the hair prickle on the back of his neck and the color rise in his cheeks. He had nearly made the most awful boob.

But the man he was talking to was scarcely older than himself. He had a shock of dark hair over a high forehead and a bony ascetic face. His eyes were very candid and direct, giving the impression of great liveliness and boundless energy. Professors, in Luke's limited experience, were middle-aged and slightly pompous.

Then he remembered the newspaper description of Humboldt as a "boyish 26"; the girl upstairs had said Tom's lab. Did she mean Thomas Humboldt?

Luke was at a loss to know how to react. He could hardly ask the man who he was. He felt thoroughly flustered.

"Bottle washing isn't very ambitious." The direct eyes were friendly. "What are your qualifications?"

"I haven't got any. I'm waiting to go up to University. I want a job over the summer." Luke recalled his father's remark about selling himself and thought he could not have done worse if he tried. He sounded as dull and dim as it was possible to sound. Shouldn't he be pouring out a lifetime's enthusiasm for tachyons?

Humboldt turned back to the console. "Alas, rather a lot of you want summer jobs . . . I wish we had more room. What university are you going to?"

"Cambridge. Caius." Luke's heart sank into his boots; there was obviously no hope of employment if the Institute was inundated with student requests.

But Humboldt looked round again and there was renewed interest in his face. "Really! You going up to read physics?"

"Maths actually."

"Under Grainger?"

"Yes. I had an interview with Professor Grainger."

"Really!" Humboldt said again, this time with great enthusiasm. "I worked with him on a lot of preliminary stuff for this." He waved his arm round the lab. "My goodness what a brain! You'll certainly flourish under him. The whole family is excessively bright. His father was a Nobel prize winner. He's just endowed the college with a scholarship in his memory."

"I've won the scholarship," said Luke.

"Good God!" Humboldt's eyebrows shot up in a comical fashion and Luke wanted to laugh. "Why didn't you say so?" He seemed to have forgotten his panel figures.

"Well . . ." said Luke and stopped because he couldn't think of a reason other than that he hadn't been asked.

Humboldt said, "Well indeed! It's refreshing to find the Grainger scholar standing in front of me wanting to wash bottles. I'm mostly accosted by people who think they are better qualified for my job than I am! Look . . ." He dived into a drawer and started to search for something in a pile of paper. "I'm sure we can find you something . . ."

At that moment, the door opened without a preliminary knock and the elderly porter put his head inside.

"Oh there you are! I bin looking all over for you," he said, much disgruntled. "I thought it was M. Blériot you wanted to see, not the Professor."

"Well . . . I did have a letter from M. Blériot . . ."

"My fault!" Humboldt said. "He came down with a book from the Common Room. Are you supposed to be seeing Alan? In that case, you'd better go up with Mr. Mutton and see him."

Luke could cheerfully have murdered Mr. Mutton for appearing at that moment, just when things seemed to be getting along rather well. M. Blériot, whoever he was, might not take to him at all, or might merely give the standard reply that they had no opportunity for students over the summer. What had seemed like a real chance to work here might yet slip through his fingers.

However, there was nothing for it but to follow the porter. He turned to say good-bye. Humboldt was scribbling something on a piece of paper. He folded it over. "Here, give this to Alan, will you?"

Luke went over and took the note.

"Nice to meet you," Humboldt said with warmth, getting up. "Best of luck."

Luke didn't know how to interpret this. He said, "Thanks." Did it mean that they would meet again or that they wouldn't? Was the good luck just general well-wishing?

He was going out of the door when Humboldt called, "I say, can you bully people?"

Luke, thoroughly taken aback, just stared.

"You don't look the bullying type," Humboldt said

regretfully. "I desperately need someone to chase after the Electricity Generating Board and really knock them off their backsides. Simon is supposed to do it, but he's much too polite. I want power from six stations at least, turned on full blast all for this lab. They're so stupid and bound up in red tape . . ." He screwed up a piece of paper with venom and threw it at the wastepaper basket. It missed. "Hell, it would." He bent over to pick it up ". . . or your father. Not a cabinet minister?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Too much to hope for, I suppose. I'm not above badgering the government for what I want, as you see." He shook his head as he turned back to his electronic manual and Luke got out of the door, this time without being called back.

The porter didn't get out of the lift when they came to the third floor. He said, "Room 5. D'you think you can find it?" He said it as if he meant Do you think you can stay there without getting lost again? "They was having a meeting but they'll have finished by now. Close the outside gate hard, will you, or she won't tek me down?"

Luke gave the decrepit female lift an extra thrust on the door and the porter's head sank somewhere below his feet. He took a deep breath and walked along the corridor to Room 5.

When he knocked, several voices called out in a variety of languages. Taking them to mean "Come in" he pushed open the door. There were about six people in a circle round a desk, two of them with their feet on it. Luke had imagined M. Blériot as a sort of College Secretary in a collar and tie or perhaps a white coat. But as he had been wrong all the way along the line with the Institute,

so he was wrong again. Only one of these people wore a white coat and that was filthy dirty and had a torn top pocket. The rest, most of whose hair reached their shoulders, wore a variety of colorful garments—one fair giant of a man he noticed in particular in a striped blue-and-orange football shirt. The air was heavy with turkish cigarette smoke. Six faces looked at him with friendly curiosity and said, "Hi!" or "Hullo" in a mildly enquiring fashion.

"I've come . . . er . . . to find M. Blériot . . ." Luke's French was not his strong point at school. He found it embarrassing to have to pronounce a French name in front of all these people

"Alan!" said a girl who looked Scandinavian. She pointed to someone behind the desk. Alan Blériot had a smooth handsome olive face. He was the least covered by hair of all the men.

"You want me?" He sounded surprised, but at least he spoke English.

"I had a letter from you. I wrote about a job as a lab technician . . ."

"Oh! Yes! I remember. Good lord, is it Thursday already? I did ask you to come on Thursday, didn't I? Right, everybody. Meeting is over. I think we've smoothed out that problem. Now I have to interview this gentleman."

"Why don't we all interview him?" suggested someone and for a horrible moment Luke thought the suggestion was going to be taken up.

They gathered themselves unhurriedly and departed making friendly noises.

When they had finally gone, Alan Blériot told Luke to sit down.

"Now!" he said and drummed his fingers on the desk. "You wrote and it was passed on to me because just at that moment someone thought we needed another pair of hands in our section. Where did I put your letter?" He moved piles of papers without finding it and then started raking about in one of the drawers. "You must excuse me. I'm not used to interviewing people for jobs. It's something new for me." His English was excellent, if slightly formal. He grinned and went on searching. "Success!" he said suddenly and waved Luke's letter in front or him, rather the worse for wear.

"The trouble is—as always—funds. We're desperately short of money like everyone else these days and we're not supposed to take on extra . . ." He frowned.

"I've got this for you." Luke suddenly realized that he was still clutching the note given to him by Professor Humboldt. He thrust it across the desk.

Alan Blériot opened the paper. His eyes widened. He said, "So! Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"You read this note?"

"Of course not," Luke said, indignant at the suggestion.

"It says, 'This is the first Grainger scholar. Employ him.' "

Luke stared at the floor. All his blood seemed to be draining through him to his feet; the suspense was awful. Did Alan Blériot have to take up Humboldt's suggestions?

"When can you start then?" said Alan.

"Is that all right?"

"Is what all right?" Graham Crantock was comfortably ensconced in an easy chair with his pipe and the paper.

"Why, Luke got that job in London that you put him up to." Margaret Crantock sat down on the opposite side of the fire. She threw another log into the large open grate and there was an indignant billow of smoke before a spurt of flame greedily licked round the wood.

"Oh. Good for him. I didn't know."

"Hasn't he even told you?" she said with great annoyance.

"I haven't seen him since I came in. He's probably not got around to telling me."

"When does he get round to anything these days . . ."

"He got round to getting that job. He needs to get away."

"From me . . . ?"

"From all of us . . . but I think you're hard on him, Margaret."

"You never know where you are with Luke. He's not open like Neil."

"Being clever doesn't necessarily make for an easy life, you know," Graham Crantock said. "It doesn't make friends for you . . . Neil will have a far easier time than Luke in that respect."

"He just sits around . . ."

"He's not used to having nothing to do. He's been a hard worker at school all his life. He feels utterly at sea."

"If only he'd make the effort to be sociable," his mother complained.

"He'll get over that, like—I hope—Neil will get over wearing those ridiculous clothes (which, by the way, would have driven you berserk if Luke had worn them first). Wait until he gets a girl friend, that will bring him out . . ."

"That's another thing," she cried. "Guess whose cause he was championing a week or so ago."

"I haven't the slightest idea . . ."

"The chemist girl—the one who everyone says is touched. Rescued her from the village lads who got a bit overexcited and chased her up onto the ridge."

"Poor girl. She has a hard life if anyone does. I'm glad Luke has her cause at heart."

"Oh really, Graham . . . !" She sounded exasperated. "I sometimes think he gets it from you, his stubbornness . . ."

Night curled round the house. It blocked out the view from the huge picture window, the view that Margaret Crantock was so afraid of losing through a housing development. She knew better than to pursue an argument with her husband when he was in his present mood. She got to her feet and went to draw the long curtains with a flick of irritation.

6

Neil said he must be mad; fancy burying himself in overcrowded, polluted London when he could be working out in the open air.

"In overcrowded, polluted cowsheds, you mean," said Luke.

"You're obsessed by cows," was Neil's reply. "You think the country means nothing but cows. It must be in your subconscious—a psychological cow in your past . . ."

"Mrs. Bennett, maybe," said Luke. "She's a real cow in my present. She's just rung up and invited me over but I said I was going away and that you would go instead."

"Tell that to your auntie," Neil said rudely.

Luke was feeling benign toward the family these days. He had taken Rosie's old transistor to pieces, cleaned it up and was fixing it back together.

"With new batteries the tone will be mellifluous."

"Anyone got new batteries?"

"You'll have to go into Barton and get some."

"Will you come too, Luke? I'll get the wrong size."

"Take the transistor . . . open it up . . . show it to the man . . ."

"Be a sport!"

He gave in with his newfound graciousness and they set off together, the dog as usual running in front. It had rained continuously over the last few weeks. Everything in the lane had a muted shine that had nothing to do with brightness. The noise of water was everywhere, in the trees and hedges; in the overfull ditch; even the light paws of the dog squelched on the sodden grass verge. She was covered in mud within seconds of being out.

Rosie waved her arms like a windmill in a wisp of damp cloud that hung low over the road; the air, loaded with moisture, felt heavy to breathe, muffling conversation.

"You don't like being at home," she suddenly flung at him.

"Why did you say that?" he asked, startled by her swift change of mood.

"You've been in a far better temper since you knew you were going up to London."

"Oh, sorry!"

"How shall I manage without you to do my maths?" she grumbled. "Anyway I shall come up and you can take me to a pop concert at the Festival Hall. Everyone screaming."

"Sounds great. Perhaps I'll stay in Wyndsham after all."

She said with a sigh, "Can't you be more with it, Luke?"

They walked through Wyndsham. As they rounded a bend on the far side of the village, they were confronted by a small figure sitting as near as possible on the central white line of the road. It was endeavoring to remove a wellington boot.

"Heavens!" Rosie cried, forgetting her irritation with Luke, "just look at that child. It will be run over by the next car that comes along." She rushed forward and gathered it up, wellington and all, and got a thump on the nose for her pains.

"Lemme alone," it said as she plonked it on the wet grass and fished for a tissue because her eyes were watering.

"You wretched brat," Rosie cried indignantly. "I'll leave you to be run over the next time if you lash out like that."

The small lump of mostly-anorak had a kind of familiarity to Luke.

"Who on earth do you thing it belongs to?" Rosie said.

"I don't think. I know. It's the chemist's child and its name is Paul."

Paul looked unmistakably the same; his nose was still running.

"The chemist lives on that new estate, doesn't he? Well Paul shouldn't be wandering down here by himself . . ."

Luke shrugged. He looked up the road but there was no sign of anyone about. "Perhaps he was with his mother in Wyndsham . . ."

"Are you on your own, Paul?" Rosie asked. But Paul had gone back to the difficult task of removing his wellington. He went red in the face with effort as his pulling brought no result.

"What do you want it off for?"

"Wet," Paul said graphically.

Rosie got down on her haunches on the wet grass and pulled. The boot was tight. It wouldn't move. "Pull!" she commanded him.

When it did come it was with a sucking squelch. A stream of water poured out.

"Help!" said Rosie. "He must have been paddling in something deep to get as wet as this."

Paul turned round where he sat and pointed back the way he had come. "There," he said. "Pond."

Luke said, "If he's been in that pond on the corner, it's deep enough to drown him in the middle."

"Where's your mum?" Rosie asked Paul severely. "You must never go wading in ponds on your own."

"At home," Paul said unmoved. "Grissel's with me."

"Where is Grissel? Whoever Grissel is. Your sister . . . ?" Light suddenly dawned. "I know who she is . . . she's that . . ." Rosie didn't finish her sentence.

"Somewhere . . ." Paul said vaguely. He was trying to empty the other boot.

Rosie gave a sigh of resignation and got down to tussle with the other boot; that emptied and both boots back on Paul's feet, they stood him up.

"What are you intending to do with him?"

"We can hardly leave him here."

"C'mon, Paul." Luke made bicycle motions with his hands. "Get cracking, you've a long way to go."

But Paul just stood on the wet grass by the side of the road and looked at them. Then his bottom lip stuck out and he said tearfully, "Can't come on. Boots wet."

"Didn't seem to stop you up to now."

"Can't," shouted Paul.

"Oh, lord," said Rosie, "We're going to have a scene. How does one tackle small bad-tempered boys?"

"Same as large bad-tempered boys, I suppose, only halve it." Luke walked off down the road with his hands

in the pockets of his duffle. He whistled cheerfully as though it presented no problem. Full of doubt, Rosie walked after him, resisting the temptation to turn round and see if Paul was following. He obviously wasn't.

"Can't!" he shouted again at their retreating backs.

"Luke! Do something."

"Can't," said Luke mockingly.

Oh honestly . . . men! she thought savagely. She turned round and snapped at Paul, "We shall leave you by yourself in the road, if you don't jolly well WALK . . ."

Paul glared balefully, not in the least intimidated. He was used to empty threats.

At that moment there was a scream and almost immediately another one, and another. They were earsplitting and full of terror. By the pitch of the cries they indicated another small child—in trouble. For a moment the Crantocks listened uncertainly, trying to locate the sound.

"That's Kevin," Paul said laconically. "S'in the pond too."

The pond was on the corner ahead of them, where the road from Paul's house joined the bigger road to Barton. It was half in a field and partially fenced, very much overhung with trees so that even from a few yards away in the lane, one might pass it by without really noticing it.

Luke and Rosie sprang forward together, Paul temporarily forgotten.

Luke reached the pond a good five yards in front of Rosie.

A small figure stood in the middle of the pond, waist deep in water. His cries were continuous now. His eyes

were wide with panic and he was in great danger of completely losing his balance and toppling forward, face downward, as he made convulsive efforts to turn round toward the bank.

"Don't move," Luke shouted, ripping off his coat. "I'll get you now!" He plunged into the pond without even waiting to wrench off his shoes. It was a nasty pond; the mud was soft and sucking and he sank halfway up his calves within two steps of the edge. He marveled that the little boy had managed to get as far as he had without sinking deeper.

The child was nearly out of his mind with fright and attempted to fling himself at Luke before Luke reached him. Luke made a grab. For a moment it was all in the swaying balance as to whether they both fell.

"Keep still," Rosie shouted from the edge. She hung on to the branch of an overhanging tree and leaned out as far as she could. "Pass him to me!"

"He's stuck!"

"My boots are comin' off," wailed the child. "You're pulling me out of m'boots."

Luke cursed the boots and told the child where they could go. "Never mind your boots. Grab Rosie! There!"

Rosie, praying that the branch would hold, leaned dangerously far out and managed to reach the child's wrist. She grabbed it tightly, ignoring his shriek of pain, and pulled with all her might. Luke heaved as best he could from behind. With a sucking *plunk*, the child's feet came out of his mud-locked boots and he shot toward the bank, his arm nearly pulled out of its socket by the ferocity of Rosie's grip. As he came forward, she swung herself back and both of them landed in a heap in the

mud at the edge of the pond.

Their attention centered on the child, neither Luke nor Rosie had been aware of approaching feet. Kevin's screams had been piercing. Despite the heavy atmosphere, they had reached up the road to the houses. Kevin's mother, recognizing a familiar note even at that distance, rushed into the garden and, finding her son gone, had run down the road at breakneck speed. The noise had also attracted a couple of shoppers making their way homeward along the Barton Road.

As Kevin's mother reached the pond, her dripping, mud-covered son catapulted at her feet like a football. She disentangled him from Rosie, jerked him to his feet and shook him hard, all in one practiced movement.

"You naughty boy! What have I told you! What have I told you about this pond? What's your Dad said? Time and again . . . . over and over . . . You wait till he hears about this . . . you wait."

Each sentence was punctuated by a vicious shake. Kevin, without even time to appreciate land beneath his feet, found himself in a situation quite as uncomfortable as the sucking mud, even if in the long run not so treacherous. He shut his eyes, and the breath being jerked out of his body by each shake, was reduced to a red-faced, gasping, speechless bundle.

"Where yer boots?" shrieked his mother. "In the pond, I suppose. What you got to say about that?"

Rosie having got to her own feet and helped Luke to scramble out of the dank water—he'd lost one of his shoes as well—turned on Kevin's mother in some anger.

"Don't hurt him, he was awfully frightened."

The woman stopped shaking Kevin and looked at

Rosie as if seeing her for the first time.

"He's only little. You shouldn't let him come down here on his own."

"Do you think I did?" blazed the woman. "He was playing in the garden and that's where he was told to stay."

Rosie recognized Kevin's mother; she was the wife of one of the postmen in Barton and was called Mrs. Platt. Rosie realized that she had had a real fright and that her anger with Kevin partly stemmed from relief at seeing him safe. She said more mildly, "Well he's all right now so I should take him home and dry him off."

Mrs. Platt took a handkerchief from her pocket and, squatting down, wiped Kevin's face with quick sharp movements. "Why did you go outside, when you knew you shouldn't?"

Kevin was still wracked by the occasional sob. He jerked away from his mother's heavy hand and looked round. He pointed. They followed the direction of his finger.

Behind the group stood Paul, an interested but silent spectator to all this drama. And behind Paul—Luke caught his breath with surprise—stood Hare.

Mrs. Platt had been calming down; the sight of the Bingleys, however, had the most strange, provocative effect. And not only on her. The two other women from the village who had been clucking in sympathy with Luke and Rosie, alternately shaking and nodding their heads at the sight of the dripping Kevin, were likewise affected.

The three of them stared at the Bingleys for perhaps ten seconds in utter silence. There was such a feeling of hatred and hostility building up in the atmosphere it

was like an electric charge in a storm. Luke thought, This is it; this is what the village feels. This is what Hare encounters.

Then Mrs. Platt hissed at her, "So it was you. I might have known."

One of the others said, "Nearly lost your boy, didn't you, Mrs. Platt . . ."

"And where was your precious sister . . . egging you on . . . drawing you into the water . . ."

Paul said innocently, "Grissel was over there somewhere—in the field."

"How does she dare let her out . . . with the boy?"

"Here she is," said the first one. "You can ask her."

She was Mrs. Bingley.

It was an unfortunate moment for her to appear. She too had heard the cries from the house and, thinking it might be Paul, had come at her rather slower pace to investigate.

Mrs. Platt screamed at her, "Look what she's done now. Brought these kids down here to the pond and left them to drown. Kevin was right in . . . up to his neck."

"Oh look here," Luke started to say but no one took the slightest notice. Mrs. Bingley was scarlet from the exertion of hurrying down the lane. She stood still and faced her accusers. She put her hand on her side to ease her stitch but she didn't give an inch. She said coldly—just as she had spoken to Luke when he called for his jacket—"If your child followed mine down the lane, it's not my business." She went up to Paul to take his hand, but he snatched it quickly back.

"And what good would that do you in a court of law?" Mrs. Platt shouted. She was fast becoming beside her-

self. "If my boy were drowned, I'd have that girl of yours up for murder."

Mrs. Bingley bit her lip. "She doesn't usually look after Paul but I was hard pressed." She didn't look at Mrs. Platt but made another effort to gather up Paul.

Then the other two women began to have their say in strident accusing voices. ". . . Ought to be under lock and key where she can do no harm . . ." The shouting became an ugly hubbub. Kevin's mother took a step forward, menacingly. For a moment it looked as if she would strike Mrs. Bingley but Rosie took a step forward too and grabbed her by the arm. It wasn't in Rosie's nature to stand aside and see someone hurt, especially in Mrs. Bingley's condition.

Mrs. Platt swung round and for one awful moment Luke though she would claw at Rosie. There was going to be melée of scrapping women. He felt sick with distaste. He reached out to pull Rosie away.

But Mrs. Platt thought the better of it.

"Mind yer own business," she snapped. "You don't have to live in the same road as this . . . this . . . oddity . . . what's it got to do with you?"

Rosie said with spirit, "I'm not taking sides, you needn't think I am, but it just happens that my brother went into the pond and rescued Kevin. If it isn't our business, we'll leave him to sink next time." She had a blistering tongue when roused.

For a moment the wind was taken out of Mrs. Platt's sails. "Well . . . that was good of you. I'm grateful. I didn't realize. But if it hadn't been for *her* you'd not have to have done it . . ."

Kevin at this point started to cough. It might have

been that he had swallowed some water in his corklike exit from the pond; or perhaps he was merely wet and cold. The morning, if anything, had deteriorated. It was no day to hang about. He coughed and coughed as if he would never stop.

"He's going to throw up," said one of the spectators.

"Get him home, he seems bad."

That was a merciful piece of advice. Mrs. Platt gave her son a look of alarm.

"And you'll know whose doorstep to lay it on if he's sick . . ."

With the venom of a snake, Mrs. Platt turned and spat her parting shot at Mrs. Bingley. "And let's hope your next isn't of the same ilk!"

She went off up the lane at a fast pace with little regard for Kevin. He dragged behind her on the end of her hand; his coughs and sobs faded into the morning.

The climax of the scene was over, it had merely to play itself out.

The two women went off together with many backward glances. In a matter of minutes the incident would be all over the village.

They were left in the lane, the Bingleys and the Crantocks. Rosie said, "Well they were a nice friendly lot!" To cover her embarrassment she turned to Luke. "Any hope of getting your shoe out . . . ?"

But Luke was looking at Hare, and Rosie, realizing that in all this fracas she had given no thought to the cause of it, followed his gaze with some curiosity.

Hare stood outside the group, as if completely uninvolved. She might have been waiting for a bus for all the notice she took of people around her. She showed no

sign of emotion when insults were hurled about. Her face wore that faraway look to which Luke was growing accustomed. This, he supposed, was the main reason why she drove the people of the village mad. They could not hurt her with words. Could not reach her in her own private world. They had to resort to physical blows, screaming at her and chasing her. But they could hurt her stepmother, he realized. Paul, with his usual recalcitrance, had kicked off his wellington for the second time since Mrs. Bingley had struggled to put it on. And as she bent over to thrust his foot into the tight wet boot yet again, Luke was horrified to see a tear slide down the side of her nose.

She straightened up and turned away quickly and blew her nose as if she had a cold. When she faced the Crantocks again it was in her normal abrupt manner that she said, "I'm sorry if you've lost your shoe after all that."

Luke said it really didn't matter too much, they were only old training shoes. And he looked away because he knew now that underneath this cold uncaring front, she was vulnerable. How could anyone not be? The viciousness of the women could hardly be ignored; he had not experienced anything like it before. But he knew better now than to show her any sympathy. She wouldn't respond. She had built up a protective wall around herself —and he didn't want the brush-off for the second time.

There was no word of reproach from her to Hare.

Paul said, "Not walking home," as if he was an old gramophone returning to a familiar tune.

"Oh Paul!" She sounded exasperated then. "Granny will be here any minute."

But he dug his toes into the road and wouldn't move.

Luke made up his mind. "Want a ride?" and before Paul could object, he lifted him off his feet and sat him astride his shoulders. Paul, up in the air, at first looked surprised and apprehensive but then, deciding on balance that he had come off rather well, he became smug.

"Gee-up horse!"

"No holding my ears or hair," Luke warned, "or you'll be back on the ground."

They straggled off up the lane, Mrs. Bingley leading, having voiced a brief "Thank you" to Luke for his solution to her immediate problem. Rosie, seeing no alternative, accompanied Luke. "Didn't know you were so uncle-ish!"

"Shut up!" It wasn't easy to avoid the stones with his one bare foot when he couldn't look down.

"I hope you realize," she said, *sotto voce*, "that you are declaring your sympathies to the whole village . . ."

"I couldn't care less," he said coldly.

He might not be able to look down, but he could study the soft outline of Hare's face as she walked just ahead of him. He found himself unable to believe that such features hid evil intent. Detachment yes. Caprice maybe. But not deliberate mischief.

Paul shouted, "I like this. I like this, Mum."

Mrs. Bingley's unresponsive back spoke eloquently for her as she plodded home.

"Can he come again? Give me another ride. Tomorrow."

Rosie said, "He's going to London."

"What you going to London for . . . ?"

"To see the Queen."

"*I* want to see th' Queen."

Hare stood still so abruptly in front of him that he had to step round her. He put his bare foot on something sharp and lunged badly so that Paul nearly tipped over his shoulder.

Hare said, "London!"

Luke, still limping, looked at her in surprise. It was the very first time she had addressed him of her own accord since their paths had crossed. Her eyes had lost their vague look and were fixed on him intently. He stood and rested his foot.

"I'm going on Tuesday."

"Do you go on the train?"

"Yes."

"How long does it take?" she said.

"Oh . . . an hour and a half perhaps . . . less on a fast train. Why?"

Hare looked ahead. Mrs. Bingley had not stopped in her steady plod homeward. She was well in front.

Hare asked, "How much is the train fare to London?"

"I can't remember exactly. About four pounds. They'll tell you if you ring the station."

"It's not more than five pounds?"

"I don't think so but I wouldn't like to swear to it."

She said no more. Her hair fell over her face, screening her from Luke. She walked on up the lane.

Luke shook his head in bewilderment. Nothing could be more intelligent than the way those questions were asked. Why on earth did she want to know about the train fare to London? She was a complete enigma.

At the gate of the Bingleys' house, he set Paul on the ground. Mrs. Bingley had already gone inside. Hare followed her. Paul said, "Will you come again?"

Rosie said, "No," in an angry emphatic voice that made Luke look at her.

She said, "Talk about gratitude . . ."

But Mrs. Bingley reappeared at the front door. "I had to see that the pie wasn't burning." She moved to let Paul push inside. "Thank you for carrying him. Can I lend you a pair of my husband's shoes to get home?" The offer was formal, not friendly.

Luke said it was all right, he could manage.

"Thank you then, if you're sure . . ." She didn't ask them in to dry off Luke's wet trouser legs.

Paul came out again. "Bye," he shouted. "Bye. See you." He waved vigorously. There was no sign of Hare.

They left quickly and walked back down the lane without saying anything. The Platts' house was ominously silent as they passed.

Rosie said sourly, "What's the betting she's behind the curtain . . ."

Luke burst out. "Thank God I'm leaving this village. . . . How sickening. How utterly sickening it all was."

"It was," Rosie agreed and she gave an involuntary shiver as she thought of Mrs. Platt in her frenzy against the Bingleys. "I can't see that what she did was so dreadful. If any other girl from the village had been sent out to keep an eye on some small children and she let them go in a pond, she wouldn't be accused of trying to drown them."

"It's because she's different," Luke said slowly. "Not different in an ordinary way like having one leg longer than the other, or a crooked nose; but in a way they can't understand. They can't communicate with her—whatever they say to her it doesn't seem to touch her and

so they're frightened. It's a sort of defense of themselves, this persecution of her."

"You know what it's like in the village—only one vicious person needs to start up something against her and it spreads like wildfire; the whole lot of them take it up."

"The cruelty of people is unbelievable." Luke dodged to one side to avoid a puddle. "And once it starts you can't stop it. God in heaven! It's right out of the Middle Ages. She would have been branded as a witch in those days and it's just the same now. I would have thought we had progressed over the centuries, got more understanding, but doesn't it just show how superficial civilization is . . . ?"

"You go back in your Time Machine and you'll find out whether people are just the same!" Then she said soberly, "But you've admitted it yourself, Luke, she *is* different. She's very odd . . . not like other people. That sort of vacant look she has . . . it's creepy . . . as if she's not seeing you at all."

"She doesn't conform, you mean. What is conforming?" Luke asked violently. "And who sets up the standards? Do we all have to be like the people in Wyndsham, Mrs. Dobwalls, the Bennetts . . . God save me from that fate. I'd rather be like Hare, Griselda, any day."

"I believe you're quite struck on her," Rosie said quietly and slyly. "She is very pretty. All that flaxen hair . . . like Rapunzel. That's the second time you've come to her rescue, isn't it? Mum said something about you being up on the ridge."

"Of course I'm not *struck*," Luke almost shouted, his emotions jumbled round like pieces in a kaleidoscope. "I'd just like to know how her mind works . . ."

"Oh! Her mind is it!" Rosie nodded maddeningly. "I say, you are in a bit of a state. Well, you never know, you might have her up in London with you. She seemed most interested in going up there."

"That was . . ."

"Odd!" Rosie suggested quizzically, raising an eyebrow.

Next morning, Mrs. Dobwalls came to the house with the self-important air of a bringer of news. She bided her time to tell it until both Rosie and Luke as well as Mrs. Crantock were within earshot.

"You've heard then, have you?"

"No. Heard what?" Mrs. Crantock backed out of the pantry with the potato basket.

"About the Bingleys . . ."

Rosie stole a look at Luke across the kitchen but he was cleaning his shoes with great concentration and not a muscle of his face moved to show he was listening.

"They had a brick through their window last night . . ."

"A brick through the window! Whoever did that . . . ?" said Margaret Crantock.

Mrs. Dobwalls shrugged. "They've got . . . enemies. There's no saying who it was."

"But what a strange thing to do!"

"Mrs. Bingley, she was ironing in the kitchen with the light on. Must have been deliberately aimed at her."

"She wasn't hurt, was she . . . isn't she expecting a baby?"

"Cut 'er head. She had to go to the hospital for stitches." Mrs. Dobwalls looked out of the corner of her eye. "I thought as you knew the family, you might be interested . . ."

7

Luke left for London on Tuesday. It was now well into April. His mother took him to the station. He would have preferred it if she had left him in the booking hall and gone home. He hated being seen onto a train. It was just a time of hanging about and meaningless small talk, endlessly repeated.

"Look, don't wait. It's jolly cold and there's no need. The train isn't even in yet."

"Trying to get rid of me," said his mother, only half joking. "It's gone like a flash, this time at home."

Luke thought, How can she forget so quickly—all those mornings which must have dragged, when she wanted him up and energetic. He said politely, "It has gone quickly." Which was true—now. Now he was off, the four months had shrunk to nothing.

"I see you've got your coat back," she said. "I meant to mention it before. I would have got it cleaned." They had not spoken of the incident on the ridge or Hare after that day it happened. Luke, with great deliberation, had walked out of the kitchen when Mrs. Dobwalls reported the attack on Mrs. Bingley.

"It's perfectly all right. It doesn't need cleaning."

"Rosie said you were rather struck on that chemist's girl."

"Rosie said what!" He tried not to show his anger. He told himself that in fifteen minutes at the most he would have left it all behind.

But his mother realized she had said the wrong thing and tried to put it right, hastily. She was desperately anxious not to part on a note of discord.

"It's probably just as well you're going up to London. There's not much for you to do at home at your age. It's different for Neil with his farming . . . and it's such a small community."

He made a superhuman effort to be charitable and gripped her hand. For a moment she looked expectant, hopeful of some sort of thread between them. But it was asking for the moon. The train came in and with relief he wrenched open a door and was inside looking for a seat, putting his bag on the rack. He hung out of the window.

"Don't stay in London forever," she said. "Come home sometimes, even if it's only for your washing—or you'll smell worse than Neil!"

He promised to do all that she asked; it was easier that way.

"Ring us up—you can reverse the charge."

"Yes," he began to say.

It was then that he saw Hare. She was walking up the platform looking at her ticket. She was wearing a black coat with the hood up over her head so that her long fair hair was completely covered up. In her hand she carried a small holdall. As she drew level with Luke, she looked up and saw him. As usual her eyes showed no recognition.

They might have been looking at a perfect stranger. She went on down the platform toward the end of the train. He lost sight of her among the fringe of people who were seeing off their friends.

"Luke!"

"What?" he said, innocently—too innocently.

"Wasn't that the girl . . ."

"What girl?"

"The chemist's . . ."

"For heaven's sake. You've got her on the brain. What if it was? I really don't know."

"You do know, Luke. You're not meeting up in London?" His mother looked quite frightened.

He could have laughed. It was all too ironic. There were so many things he could say.

We're meeting in the buffet car when the train goes through Newbury . . .

Didn't you know, she's going to the Institute too . . .

"Look!" is what he did say. "I've no idea what she is doing or where she's going. She's not spoken more than two words to me in her life. And I'm not interested . . . see!"

"Promise," said his mother, only partially reassured.

"Promise," he said automatically as he had when he was small. He was so bemused by Hare's appearance on the scene that he didn't even stop to think how intolerable it was that his mother should be making him, Luke, eighteen years of age and just setting out to earn a wage, promise that he had no sights on a girl getting on the train.

"It's for your own good, you know, dear. It's only that I care . . ." Anything more guaranteed to annoy him

was hard to imagine. How many times had he heard it before when his mother wanted justification. It had hardly been a success, this last minute tête-à-tête, as he had known it wouldn't be . . . But no point in making things worse. Why didn't the train go?

The whistle blew.

"Good-bye. Good-bye, Luke!" She seemed unusually torn by his departure although she had seen him off in the past and been unmoved. The train jolted forward; stopped; jolted again. Then it began to slide smoothly. The platform moved away slowly, then faster as the train gathered speed. His mother grew small in the distance; a line; a mere dot—there to the bitter end. The train rounded a curve and she was rubbed out.

He went and sat down. He took out a science fiction paperback he had seized from Neil's bookcase as he came out. This was what he had been waiting for, these last few weeks—the moment when he had thrown off the trammels of Wyndsham, cut himself adrift; when he could at last live his life without questions asked.

He must savor it, remember it, this first time of freedom. He settled down and opened his book.

But his moment of glorious independence was tarnished. He stared at the print in the book and didn't read a word.

Hare, on the train, had completely unsettled him.

The facile promise he had made to his mother had not been entirely untrue. Over the last few days with so much to do, sort out, fix up, he had given Hare only a passing thought. Or had he? Had she been there, more than he realized, just below the surface of conscious thought?

Now seeing her like that—so totally unexpectedly . . .

Blast the girl, upsetting his peace of mind! Upsetting

his enjoyment of the moment. He might fly to her defense against his mother but he could still feel thoroughly put out by her cutting him dead in the way she did. The feeling of annoyance that she had previously aroused in him came to the fore.

Where was she going? She could not be that unreliable if her parents let her go up to London on her own. He felt a niggling curiosity. Go and ask her, he challenged himself. She can't be more than two or three coaches away. But he didn't relish the blank reception he might get in a public compartment.

Oh it was all ludicrous. *Ludicrous.* That was the word for it. As for his mother's accusations . . . and Rosie's tattle (just wait till he got hold of Rosie!) . . . talk about a veritable mountain and a nonexistent molehill.

He flipped over the cover of Neil's book and with determination started again. Forget her. London was a vast place. She would get out of the train at Paddington and he would never see her up there again.

When, some time later, the train hissed to a standstill in Paddington Station and lay breathing heavily, Luke was one of the first passengers to leap out. He sped up the platform looking neither to right nor left, collided with a trolley selling mugs of steaming tea ("Steady up, guv. Yer'll meet yerself comin' back!") and was outside the station. He left its billowing acrid smell and its hurrying, struggling, worrying mob of travelers (Hare among them) behind him.

He stood on the edge of the pavement and stepped back quickly as a honking taxi nearly cut off his toes. He was in London to stay. A wave of excitement that had eluded him on the train now swept over him.

PART TWO

LONDON

8 "No," said Mrs. Popham. "You're not here for another week." She stated this with finality as if by doing so she could exterminate Luke from her doorstep in a mushroom-shaped cloud. She took a step outside and let the door close softly behind her.

"I'm here now," said Luke rather desperately. "It's all booked."

"It's that Institute then," she said and looked Luke up and down as if he were already tarred with something unpleasant. "Never known such a place for muddles. And I don't altogether like it from what I hear. Full of all sorts from the Continent who think they can run this country and—" (her voice became a tone lower) "—they're tampering with nature, I gather from things said. Doing experiments that are best undone. If they make such a muddle over booking rooms," she said with a sniff, "I hardly think they should tamper with nature. Doesn't fill you with confidence, does it!"

How did one stop the flood?

Luke shrugged. "Well, will it be all right if I come next week then? I'll go and book in a hotel or something for the time being."

"Whatever for!" she said shocked. "You got all that money to waste? Hotels in London are something shocking. If you can afford to stay in them you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Luke looked at her hopelessly. It was difficult to know what tack to take with this lady.

"No one can have a name like that," the family had said when the letter came from the Institute confirming they had fixed him up with a room at Eleanor Popham's. But there it was in black type, E-L-E-A-N-O-R P-O-P-H-A-M. He had telephoned the Institute in some desperation. Student rooms were impossible to find in London, it seemed, at the present time. He had had no luck with Accommodation Bureaux, Private Agencies or Newspaper Ads. The Institute did not usually fix up digs but, as luck would have it, someone was going over to Sweden for a few months and his room had fallen vacant at Mrs. Popham's. Luke had thought it was all fixed up satisfactorily. It seemed there had been some slipup.

He had caught the bus outside Paddington Station and the excitement he had felt at first arriving stayed with him as he swayed upstairs and the bus threw him down onto a seat as it pulled out from the curb with a lurch. The pavement below him swarmed with people. He had never seen so many. Luke was used to the busy city center of Bristol but here in Praed Street in London, the atmosphere was not the same. Was it the cosmopolitan atmosphere of a capital, the enormous variety of color, shape and size that made it different? How marvelous to merge in with this great patchwork of humanity, to lose one's identity . . . He composed his face and hoped he gave no

hint of the elation he was feeling.

His digs were out near Archway Station and after the bus he had to catch a tube train going northward. Only once did he think of Hare and wonder if she was sitting impassively on some similar train, being carried to her destination, wherever that might be. The thought was fleeting.

When he emerged at Archway Station, it was to a positive cacophony of grinding gears and diesel fumes as an endless stream of juggernauts started up the hill which became the A.1. going north out of London. Out of London! How could anyone think of leaving? He pitied them with all his heart.

He got out his street map and made sure he was going in the right direction The huge junction was confusing. Then he set off in the wake of the traffic up the hill. The fumes hung in the air and caught the back of his throat and he was glad to turn off down a side road marked Lyndown Gardens.

It seemed a haven of peace after the main road; the houses were tall, narrow Victorian semis which had seen better days. Many of them were let out as flats by the look of the number of bells on each house. Most of the fences had gone and the small front gardens were concreted over to enable cars to stand right up to the door.

Mrs. Popham's house was number 11. It was one of the few which had retained its garden and some straggling forget-me-nots had a kind of gritty charm. It stood out among its neighbors, not only for its flowers but because it was painted an ugly mauve. On the front door, in colored glass, were a pair of jazzy birds of paradise. Luke stood for a moment taking it all in.

For the next few months he would call this home. Anything less like the esthetically simple, tasteful Grimms was hard to imagine. It pleased him enormously that it was so different. A small brown head poked out from the basement steps next door and he winked solemnly at it. It disappeared as swiftly as it had come.

That was all before Mrs. Popham opened the door, stood two steps above him and told him that he was not wanted.

She pricked the bubble of his elation effectively and swiftly. The feeling of joy at being alone and unknown in London suffered a severe blow.

Where on earth should he go and where should he even start looking for somewhere to stay?

But she was unpredictable—or Luke had got her all wrong in thinking she was sending him away, homeless. She stepped backward up the front steps, opening the door again, and jerked her head.

"A mattress on the floor," she said. "It won't hurt you at your age. You can go in Mr. Smith's room. Two of a feather."

Quite what that meant, Luke did not know but it was obvious she was letting him in. With a feeling of relief he followed her into the hall.

She took him up the stairs past three busts of Beethoven and although his mother would no doubt have said the whole place was desperately in need of a coat of paint, it smelled pleasantly of polish and not at all of the proverbial cabbage water for which he had been prepared. The house was full of sound. A piano was being played downstairs and at least two stringed instruments on the

first floor. As they paused at a second smaller flight of steps leading to the top of the house, someone started to tune what might have been an oboe. Mrs. Popham stood to get her breath; she must have seen her sixtieth birthday several years before.

"We mostly take music students," she said. "And it's no use complaining about the instruments. In this house music and music students come first. I hope your Institute made that clear. Institute people are on sufferance only."

The Institute had not made it clear at all. But Luke had no thought of complaining about anything. He followed her meekly.

When they reached the top, she knocked briefly on one of the doors and went straight in. A young man was sorting out some books on the bed. He had his back to the door. He turned round slowly. He was as tall as Luke and thin, with dark, rather greasy curls that lapped the collar of the old navy greatcoat that he wore—Luke was to discover that he rarely took it off at Mrs. Popham's for there was no heating on the top floor. He had more than his fair share of spots and wore dark-rimmed glasses. He was not at first sight someone with whom you would leap to share a room, but Luke told himself firmly that beggars could not be choosers and he shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth—whichever was applicable—and hoped that Mr. Smith might improve on acquaintance.

"Your Institute," Mrs. Popham said, "has made its usual muddle. Here's Mr. Crantock and no empty room until next week. I'll get a mattress put down here for him."

No apology; not even a request for agreement; merely a statement and an insinuation that the young man, com-

ing from the Institute, must share part of the blame for the mix-up.

But Mr. Smith didn't seem in the slightest bit put out. "All right," he said as if he were thinking of other things; he spoke slowly and his vowels were as broad as the shoulders of his coat. He looked at Luke thoughtfully and scratched his head. "Seems like a book's crawled off somewhere, flipping thing."

Luke looked round. There was a book on the floor, half sticking out from under the bed. He picked it up. "Is this the one?"

"Yep! Thanks! Thought I'd left it on the tube." He smiled with relief and when he smiled he looked altogether less unattractive.

Mrs. Popham had already gone off downstairs. Having flung them abruptly together without any introduction, she left them to it.

"Arthur's the name," the young man said. "Want to sit down, do you?" He removed the other books from the bed because there was nowhere else to sit. He flung them in a pile on the floor. The room was sparsely furnished, just a bed and a chest of drawers and a cupboard on the wall. There was no carpet but one small mat by the bed. It would be quite a squash with a mattress down for Luke.

Luke said awkwardly, "I'm Luke Crantock. Er . . . look. I've been thrust in on you here but I'm quite willing to go and look for a hotel or something until my room is free."

"What for?" Arthur said in surprise. Then he looked at Luke, as if sizing him up. "If you're a solitary, you'll find it a crush but you'll be willing to put up with it to have a roof over your head for the week. I don't mind

company, so I'm happy anyway. Okay?"

Floored by such a prompt piece of logic, Luke said meekly, "Well, if you're sure."

"That's settled then." Arthur turned to get something out of his drawer.

"She seems to have it in for the Institute."

"It's her manner." Arthur found what he was looking for; a packet of polos. "You'll get used to it. She's kind enough. Just letting you know who's boss. A whole house-load of students like this, they could easily take advantage."

"And the rest of the house—they're all music students?"

"Her old man was a musician. Killed in an accident several years ago. She's gone out of her way to help music people since then. That's the sort she is. Even harder for musicians to get digs because no one will stand their racket." He jerked his thumb downward as the oboist below did a slithering scale. "You can see why. He's keen, that boy under us; he'll either drive you nutty or you'll get to kind of like it." He slit the polos and offered one to Luke. "What about lunch. You have it?"

"Usually. But I'm easy . . ."

"I'm off to Kent Street," he said. "Come in with me if you want."

He was splendidly uneffusive, Luke thought. "Okay, I will," he said, matching Arthur's style.

Arthur said he was having Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* for lunch that week, he had found a complete set in the Charing Cross Road and wanted to pick them up on his way into the Institute. "There's a chipper by the tube at Archway. You could get something to eat there if you're hungry."

Luke, looking at Arthur's peaky face, wondered how often he bought books instead of lunches. He said, "That sounds fine."

"Great. We might as well go then."

Luke ate a packet of chips on the tube going in and they got off at Leicester Square and purchased Arthur's books from a scruffy secondhand bookshop in a side street. Then they went to the Institute by way of Charing Cross and the Strand, which took them along past theaters, not yet woken up, and the Savoy Hotel where lunchtime customers were beginning to roll up in taxis and Bentleys.

"It's well to be some folk," Arthur said.

It was impossible to tell whether he was being humorous; his deadpan face rarely changed.

"Is it like you thought?" he asked Luke curiously as they turned in at the front door of the Institute.

"I had expected something more . . . well . . . grand," Luke admitted.

Arthur said, "Funny. Never thought of that. With physics, you see, you use a good site for an experiment like Tom's doing. Build it yourself, bit by bit, without streamlining. Doesn't mean it's less effective." Arthur had told Luke he was a qualified physicist himself and worked in Humboldt's lab. "Boy-o's away at the moment in the U.S. He'll be back in a week's time."

A professor of twenty-six obviously didn't get much veneration.

The old porter greeted them as they went in. Arthur looked at Luke, pondering. "Best take you up to Alan. He'll know where you fit. Want to see the lab first or did Tom show you round?"

"No. I had to go up and see M. Blériot and when we

came down again, Professor Humboldt had gone out."

"I should drop the surnames," Arthur said. "You'll find people don't answer."

"Oh, sorry!"

"You weren't to know. C'mon then."

They went down the dark staircase to the basement. The door of the lab was locked. Arthur produced a key and went in, switching on the light.

There was a scuffle in the corner of the room and a dark shape shot across the floor and disappeared under some pipes.

"God!" Luke jumped involuntarily.

"Looked like a rat, didn't it?" Arthur said placidly. "We're all connected up to the river. They come up from there. Never actually seen one before . . . suppose they come out when the lab's closed." He looked round as if trying to see it with Luke's eyes. "Hmm . . . not exactly sci. fi. standard, I'll admit."

"Oh, I don't know . . ." Luke said quickly; his glance had been probing apprehensively for any more lurking vermin but nothing showed itself. ". . . a bit of paint and it would look pretty good." Enough of his mother had rubbed off on him to make him think a clean coat of paint worked wonders.

"No money for paint," Arthur said simply. "It might make it glitter but it wouldn't oil the works."

Luke, thinking how patronizing Arthur must find him, hastily tried to cover his mistake, "Sorry! Unscientific of me . . ."

"Uneconomic more like," Arthur said easily. He didn't seem easily put out.

He went over to the control console and twiddled a

knob. He pointed. "My chair . . . Alan's at the other end . . . and Tom's in the middle. These electronic panels are used for balancing the critical factors when the experiment is running."

"Is this your microphone?" Luke asked, fingering it rather enviously. He imagined Arthur sitting there quietly watching the changing pattern of lights on the wall and calling a steady stream of check readings into the microphone at his right hand.

"Yep."

The far end of the room was completely walled off. The steady hum which Luke had noticed when he talked to Humboldt came from somewhere behind it.

"Drive motor," said Arthur. "It's charging the Van de Graaff generator behind there. That in its turn stores up electricity in the Cascade Multiplier. It's huge, the room they're in—goes up through two stories of the Institute. If you work upstairs with Alan you'll be machining material for the Multiplier."

There were a number of glass inspection panels in the wall; Luke peered through one but could see little. There were more control meters set at eye level and, underneath, a row of heavy switch gear.

Arthur had moved on to the far corner. "Computer terminal. Vital. Controls the balancing panels. Any parameter out of control and this switches the whole thing off."

"Where's the computer?"

"In King's College. King's is just behind here . . . faces on to the Strand. We're all connected up through these guide lines. We couldn't do the experiment without King's backing us with the computer. You'll meet the crew who run it—they're a right lot. You'll like them."

Luke tried to take it all in. It was far more involved than he had imagined.

In the near corner on the left hand side, huge cables slid into the room like gigantic pythons, each two or three feet in diameter.

"Cables from the Generating Board." Arthur gave one a kick.

"Why are they so thick?"

"They're set in cooling circuits—water running round 'em. With that colossal current you might get side effects —overheating. We use the Thames water from down the road."

"What luck having it there."

"No, not luck," Arthur said, "Design. That's what I meant. You build up an experiment on a good site, not where it will look pretty. We're using the river bed to bring in the heavy-duty cables too. One reason why the Institute is in London and not in Paris where the French wanted it. There was no handy site by the Seine."

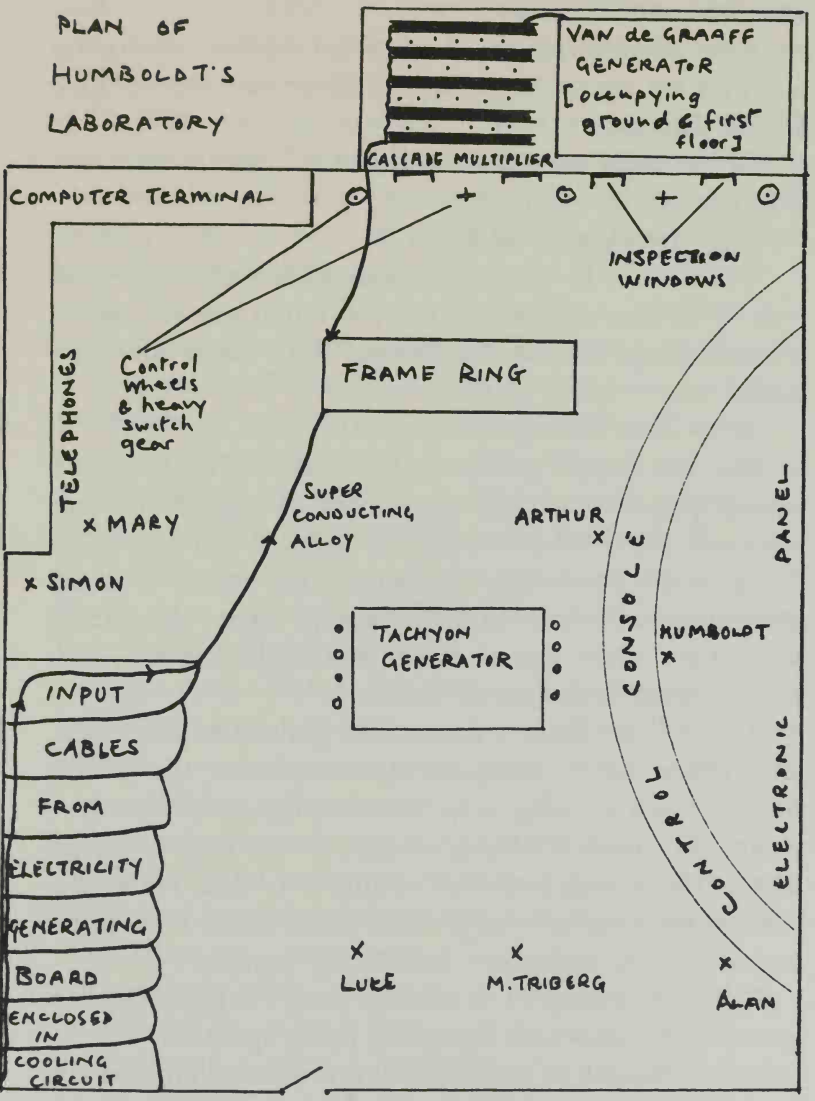
"Are the French heavily involved?"

"Up to their necks. Provide fifty percent of the funds. And other E.E.C. countries have interests, too. You'll find all kinds working here. Which reminds me"—Arthur flicked an imaginary lump of dust off the central Frame Ring—"there is an inspector coming over from Paris next week when Tom gets back. That won't please him; nothing he loathes more than interfering laymen."

"You can't blame them coming over, I suppose, if they want to see how their money is being spent."

Arthur looked at Luke. "You're a rational type, aren't you? Wonder how you'll like Tom."

Luke said, "Do people like him?"


PLAN OF
HUMBOLDT'S
LABORATORY
VAN de GRAAFF
GENERATOR
[occupying
ground & first
floor]
CASCADE MULTIPLIER
COMPUTER TERMINAL
INSPECTION
WINDOWS
TELEPHONES
Control
wheels
& heavy
switch
gear
FRAME RING
SUPER
CONDUCTING
ALLOY
x MARY
x SIMON
ARTHUR
x
CONSOLE
PANEL
TACHYON
GENERATOR
HUMBOLDT
x
INPUT
CABLES
FROM
ELECTRICITY
GENERATING
BOARD
ENCLOSED
IN
COOLING
CIRCUIT
CONTROL
ELECTRONIC
x
LUKE
x
M.TRIBERG
x
ALAN

"Yep," said Arthur. "He's great." He seemed lost in thought for a minute. He said, "He's having a row with the Generating Board at the moment."

"He mentioned it . . ."

"He wants the most colossal amount of power to run the experiment, you see. As much as London and Birmingham use at peak demand. The Board are reluctant to lay on that sort of power . . ."

"What will happen if they don't let him have it?"

Arthur shrugged his shoulders. He seemed morose, gloomy all of a sudden. "All that work wasted." He took off his spectacles and polished them on his sweater, squinting at them against the light to see if they were cleaned satisfactorily. His small myopic eyes seemed to shrink into his face without his glasses. He slapped the metal box they were now standing next to in the middle of the room. "Well, this is it, boy. The experiment."

Luke fingered the cold metal of the Tachyon Generator and found it something of an anticlimax after the mass of far more complicated apparatus he had just seen. It was merely a box facing a large frame, a Frame Ring surrounded by metal discs (for focusing, Arthur said). It seemed unlikely that such an everyday inanimate object could turn on something so alive and so revolutionary as time running backward.

Arthur seemed to sense his thoughts; in fact to share them. "My! This place is dead as mutton when no one's working here," he said, still gloomy.

"What will you see—in that Frame Ring?"

Arthur hesitated. Then he said truthfully, "I just don't know. I can't imagine. I can see from all the figures on paper how it should work—but I can't get any further.

If you're rational about it, you don't get anywhere. You end up with something like a historical play on telly, and I can't think it will be like that.'

Luke felt better when Arthur said that—he had thought he was lacking something because his mind was full of facts and instructions but he couldn't translate them into anything less concrete. The hard neon lights of the lab and the persistent hum of the Van de Graaff did nothing for him.

Arthur snapped out of his gloom suddenly. "It's all because Tom's away. It's quite different when he's here. He makes the whole place tick, you'll see . . . he's got the vision. You'll believe in anything—everything when he's around." He pushed himself off from where he had been leaning against the machine.. "C'mon, let's get up to Alan." He was his former self. He locked the lab behind them and they went upstairs.

Alan's lab was right at the top, different as could be from Humboldt's in the basement. It was the conventional laboratory of benches and sinks and bunsen burners, glass-fronted cupboards on the wall with bottles, and over all the faint smell of ammonium chloride. When Luke smelled that he realized just how much he had missed working in a lab these four months he had been at home.

Arthur walked over to the window and Luke followed him.

For some reason the lab was built out above the level of the neighboring buildings so it was full of light and looked down onto a network of skylights and rooftops. If you craned your head to the left and looked between the gap in the roofs, you could just see the river pouring its slow way toward the docks. A barge, then a police

launch were framed in the gap; a steamer hooted somewhere out of sight. Looking westward, there were towers and scattered spires and a million office blocks; above it all a row of ragged clouds gave an edge to the sky.

Arthur said, "You'd pay a couple of hundred a week for a view like that at the Hilton."

Some people had come in behind them, Alan Blériot amongst them. Arthur turned to go. "I'm off then. Over to King's to see Kelly. See you at supper."

"Thanks," Luke said. "Thanks for showing me things." But Arthur had gone.

"I wasn't expecting you until the morning," Alan said, "but now you're here let's make a start."

A girl in blue jeans and speaking American with a continental accent said, "Nice to see you around again." Luke hadn't a clue who she was but her face looked vaguely familiar. The girl in the hall with the letter maybe. He smiled at her.

With a comfortable sense of warmth and being back in a place where he felt he belonged, Luke followed Alan across the lab.

9

Despite Luke's misgivings, sharing a room with Arthur for that first week had great advantages. For Arthur, in his deadpan way, put him straight on all sorts of things both at Mrs. Popham's and at the Institute so that in a very short time he knew the ropes and felt comparatively at home.

Arthur was quite unlike anyone Luke had met before. After twenty-four hours he felt he had known him all his life. Arthur had a kind of imperturbability, an acceptance of things which made him very easy to get along with—although Luke wondered if it might on the rare occasion drive you mad.

Never once during the week did he make Luke feel an intruder nor grumble as he regularly tripped over the mattress in reaching for his cupboard or his chest of drawers.

"I told you," he said, when Luke muttered an apology, "I'm partial to company. Sleep six in a bed at home. Only way of keeping warm up north." Luke looked at his solemn face and gave up.

And he wasn't forever talking. That would have been the hardest to put up with. Imagine having Rosie as a

roommate! It was easy with Arthur to preserve a companionable silence. The number of books he devoured was phenomenal. Luke's respect for his knowledge grew daily. Behind Arthur's elliptical north country way of talking, Luke began to suspect a highly original mind.

When the room next door to Arthur's came free at the weekend (identical in size and content) Luke was glad, despite the cold, to remain on the same floor.

At the Institute, Alan announced a party—to be held in the Common Room on the following Friday night after work, to welcome Tom Humboldt back from the States.

"Just an excuse for a mild rave . . . you know the usual . . . bits to eat and some sort of plonk. Nothing elaborate," one of the girls in the lab told Luke. "You'll get an idea of who else is on tap here . . ."

Luke hated parties, at least the sort they had at home where irrelevant small talk bubbled and burst around him like the head on the beer he was drinking and people roared with laughter over unfunny jokes and tried, endlessly, to go one better. It had the effect of drying him up like a pea; even his facetiousness would desert him and, reduced to an automaton saying "yes" and "no," he would spend the evening thinking up excuses for leaving early. Neil enjoyed these parties enormously.

Luke realized it would be boorish to refuse Alan's invitation, which was typical of the friendliness he had found in the lab. Heaven knows, he was hardly staff. But he had been welcomed into Institute life as if he had every right to be there. No one treated him as anything but an equal despite his complete lack of experience. And when he asked for explanations, they all seemed only too pleased to talk about their work. Luke soon realized that

everyone who worked at the Institute was completely absorbed in it.

At least at this party he would be on common ground and have similar interests. London parties could only be an improvement on Wyndsham ones.

Nevertheless he procrastinated on Friday, spending an unnecessarily long time clearing up and telling the others he would be down in a minute. When he could put off the moment no longer, he tweaked his T-shirt straight under his sweater (like everything else, the party was very informal), ran his fingers through his hair and went down the staircase to the third floor.

Talk and laughter billowed up to meet him and people were already spilling out of the Common Room leaning against the walls of the corridor. He had no idea so many worked here. He heard at least three different languages and didn't understand a word of one as he threaded his way past backs and glasses, hoping to see a familiar face. He felt withdrawn and insular and wished that he had stayed away after all.

Then he spotted Arthur and Arthur was talking to Mary who worked in Alan's lab and they grabbed hold of him and pushed him toward the drink table where the Electro-magnetic Team from Room 18 was serving glasses of punch. It tasted pleasantly pungent and left a warm trail as it went down. Arthur said it was more lethal than it looked, the E.T. had produced it on former occasions.

"That'll shed your inhibitions for you."

"I don't have inhibitions . . ."

"You looked pretty full of 'em that day you were thrust on me at Mrs. P.'s," said Arthur comfortably and without rancor. "Not exactly overjoyed, boy . . ."

Luke felt chastened. Did he really give himself away so easily?

Mary said, "You have my sympathy, darling . . . I mean first time you see Arthur, it's all a bit of a shock. . ."

Arthur took a large gulp of punch, refusing to rise.

Mary was a tall, Pre-Raphaelite blonde. She had a vague airy-fairy pseudo-sophistication with which Luke was ill-at-ease. But obviously she intrigued Arthur. His eyes followed her round at the party and Luke noticed that whenever he could, he positioned himself at her elbow. She didn't seem to mind; in fact she appeared to like it.

Luke said, "Can't say I really like parties . . ." and then thought, What an opening gambit—just the sort of remark that killed conversation stone dead.

But Arthur noticed nothing tactless in it. "You've been to the wrong sort then," he said. "This is a good one."

And whether it was the punch or the company or both, Luke found himself beginning to enjoy it.

"Hi! Arthur! Mary!"

"Kelly! This is Luke . . . Luke, Kelly."

"And . . . ?"

"Peter Martin . . . Pete."

"Hi, Pete, meet Luke too."

"Kelly, why are you here—gatecrasher!"

"After the booze. He's after the booze . . ."

"Kelly's at King's—round the corner . . ."

". . . and where would you be without me, I ask you! The whole of Humboldt rests on us."

"Gatecrashers indeed! Guests of Honor more like . . ." Kelly was indignant.

"We're the fingers on the button of SHAIR . . ."

"Who's SHAIR?" Luke shouted at Mary. Someone had

put on a tape playing Spanish folk music. Talk-noise immediately increased by several hundred decibels.

"Computer, darling! King's computer . . . it's all wired up to the experiment."

"Super Highspeed Access, Instant Response," shouted Pete who had overheard. "Neat, don't you think!"

"Spot on!"

"Where's Professor Humboldt? Is he here?"

"Haven't you seen him? He's somewhere. He only got back this afternoon."

"I say—*Professor Humboldt.* Tom to you and me."

"Luke's only just joined the Institute . . ."

"He's over there . . . in the corner. Look! Look through that gap—beyond the girl with the glasses and the teeth."

"You mean Odette! She'd be pleased . . ."

"Oh! I can see him . . ."

"Talking to Elton . . ."

He was exactly as Luke remembered him although he was surprised all over again at Humboldt being so young, so undergraduate. Just at that moment he let out a great shout of laughter and threw his head back, showing his Adam's apple. Despite the bear garden he had managed to tuck himself away from the main stream of hurly-burly. He was talking animatedly to someone, for all the world as if he were shut up in his own office with no more noise penetrating the closed windows than the hum of distant traffic in the Strand.

"Regardez! Regardez! Prenez le dos!"

A figure climbed down behind them via the radiator.

"Kristof!"

"Luke . . . Kristof . . . from Geneva."

"*And* Becky! My dear, hullo!"

"I thought you had been transferred to Physique Française."

"Not likely. I saw to it that I was transferred right back when I heard that action was imminent." Becky was pint-sized but brisk and busy.

"*Mon Dieu!* How wise."

"What action?" Luke asked Arthur.

"Rehearsal for the experiment."

Before he could ask more, Luke felt his arm gripped. He turned round as well as he could in the crush and found himself looking into the beard of the big fair-haired man whom he had first seen at the meeting in Room 5.

"I don't think I know you. I try and know everyone around this place. Part of my job."

Luke said, "I've only just . . ."

"What?" He cupped his hand round his ear. "Wait a minute . . ."

"I've only just come," Luke shouted.

"That's better. Hell! Didn't mean to knock you like that! Here . . ." He dabbed at some drink that he had spilled over a girl in pushing his way through to Luke.

"God, what a din! I'm Simon Standen."

So this was the voice Humboldt had mistaken Luke's for on the internal phone.

"Luke. Luke Crantock."

"Pleased to meet you. I remember now—didn't you come up to see Alan? We were all in his room. You looked rather apprehensive!"

"I felt apprehensive!"

Simon laughed. "You look at home now."

"I like it here."

"Everybody does. Very good crowd—and stimulating—lots of points of view . . . have you spoken to Tom?"

"Well . . . no. Not since he came back. I saw him that day I had the interview . . ."

"Come on. Let's remind him you're here."

They pushed their way across the room. Luke was prepared to be embarrassed. Humboldt would have forgotten he had ever set eyes on him, let alone employed him.

But he was wrong. Humboldt had an amazing memory for faces.

Simon Standen said, "Here's Luke Crantock. He joined . . ."

Humboldt broke off what he was saying to Elton and said, "Hello. Hello. Nice to see you here. Have you been treated all right? What are you working on?"

Luke told him he was up in Alan's lab.

"Good. Fine. They always need help there. And I shall call on you to work on some formulae if you'll do that. Do you know I saw Grainger when I was in the States—he was visiting Stanford. I told him you were here. He was most interested; he said he would expect you to give him all the up-to-date data when he saw you in the autumn!"

Humboldt had a flattering way of talking. He looked at you intently as if, for that moment at least, you were the most important person in his world.

More people came up to welcome him back. The talk became general. There was no doubt at all that everyone was glad to see him, overwhelmingly so.

As the evening wore on, the temperature in the Common Room became tropical, the noise deafening, the laughter wilder and the jokes more ludicrous, but sucked

up as he was in the general snowballing infectious gaiety, Luke thought, They're mad—stark, staring mad, and liked them that way and felt one of them.

It was brought to an end by Alan, his ear adorned by a sausage, who leaped on a chair and shouted, "Fernando's?"

There was a cheer of approval.

"If you want something more substantial to eat than sausages on sticks . . ." Simon said to Luke in explanation.

Arthur said Mrs. Popham liked to know in the morning if they were going to be out for supper. No doubt their meal would be drying up in the oven at Lyndown Gardens at this very moment.

But both he and Luke had had enough punch not to fear the anger of Mrs. Popham. They joined the others who were gathering bags and gear to walk along the Strand in a posse toward Fernando's at Charing Cross.

Humboldt, looking all of a sudden dead beat, said he thought he would go home and get some sleep. He yawned hugely.

"Jet lag!"

Luke was sorry that Humboldt was not coming with them but Mary said, "Not absolutely his thing, you know. All right for a short time but Tom doesn't stop thinking about work long enough to get really uncool."

They virtually took over the tiny restaurant; it was a regular rendezvous on occasions like this. Fernando, an ebullient Spanish gentleman, was delighted to see them and only too anxious to please. The cooking was excellent. For a riotous couple of hours they feasted on *paella* or *fabada* or *tortilla española*, washed down with chianti and rounded off by water ices. The evening ended with some-

one (Pete, Luke seemed to remember afterward) standing on the table and crying, "Tachyons forever." Everyone cheered and drank a fervent toast.

It was getting on for midnight when Arthur and Luke wearily but triumphantly mounted the escalator at the Archway—they had come home via Kensington in order to escort Mary.

"That Kelly," said Arthur, "he's hot on Becky, don't you know? She's moving in with him and Pete. Going to cook for them . . ."

"That Arthur," said Luke. "He's hot on Mary. When's she moving in to Mrs. Popham's?"

Arthur grinned happily. "Must get you a bird, Luke, boy. You're one of the team now . . ."

"Good," Luke said, exhilarated. He had not only met everyone, he had enjoyed meeting them; he had held his own.

He was handing in his ticket at the barrier when he saw Hare.

10

If someone had thrown a bucket of cold water over Luke in his slightly inebriated state, it couldn't have had a more dramatic sobering effect than the appearance of Hare at Archway Tube.

She had been at the back of his mind over the last ten days. But as events at the Institute crowded in upon him, her image had receded and when he thought about her, it was in an abstracted kind of a way, merely wondering what sort of people were her hosts, and where.

Now as she stood gazing into space across the wide pattern of roads that met in a hub by the tube, all the emotions that he had experienced on previous encounters with Hare came crowding back—the problem of her whole extraordinary existence.

What in the name of all that was wonderful was she doing here in north London on her own at twelve o'clock at night?

He pulled Arthur behind a deserted newspaper stand.

"What's up with you now, boy?"

"Sh . . . hhh," said Luke. "Don't say anything. I'll explain when we get home. Just walk on ahead—I'll be coming along . . ."

Arthur gave Luke a look as if he thought the punch and *paella* had gone not only to his head but also to his brain. But, true to his nature, he walked on ahead without question.

Hare still wore her black cloak and she wandered along with a kind of aimlessness that Luke found disquieting. There were few people around. Some rough-looking youths leaned up against a shop window making noisy remarks. What would Hare do if they turned nasty? She had experience of that, Luke thought wryly. But she might not make the getaway here that she had made on the ridge.

In the brief moment before she moved off, he thought her face looked pinched and her hair, which had always seemed to shine like spun gold, looked dull and unkempt. He was sorely tempted to catch her up, to go and ask her what she was doing and whether her parents knew where she was. But he was so afraid of frightening her off that he kept at a discreet distance behind. This way he could find out where she was staying. All might be well for all he knew.

But it seemed too much of a coincidence that she should turn up near his digs—be staying with people a stone's throw from Mrs. Popham's when there was the whole of London to choose from.

Of course it was. When she turned down Lyndown Gardens, he knew that she must have followed him the day he arrived at Paddington—not out of any feeling for him (he had no illusions on that score) but because he was a familiar face, a straw to clutch at, in a bewildering sea of the unknown. The fact that he had not set eyes on her during the previous ten days showed that she was taking

precautions not to be seen. Did she only come out at night?

In Lyndown Gardens she crossed over the road and was momentarily screened from him by a row of parked cars. She had walked past Mrs. Popham's without giving it a glance. It was more difficult to remain out of sight now. Luke used Arthur as a screen and dropped back in case she looked round. But she didn't—she would hardly expect to be followed. She walked on about twenty yards and turned in at a house. Luke marked its position—there was a small tree on the pavement. He waited. She walked down the side of the house and opened a crumbling wooden gate that stuck and she had to force. She went through and closed it behind her.

After a few minutes Luke went to have a look at the house. It was Number 17. It looked thoroughly neglected. Like Mrs. Popham's it still had its front garden but a garden completely overgrown with grass. Hare had pushed her way through a clump of last year's dead lupins to get to the side gate. Litter had blown in off the street and spiked itself on the straggling hedge. There were curtains at the windows but they were drawn across and did not look as if they had been touched for some time. At a guess, it was empty. Was Hare living there—alone?

He wondered whether to go in after her and ask her what she was doing. Then he decided against it. He would give her the fright of her life, emerging out of the darkness. Better to greet her in daylight. He could hardly hold her by force if she ran away from him.

Was she watching him from one of the windows, he thought suddenly. But there was no sign of any movement

behind the curtain as he scanned them. It all looked utterly blind and dead.

He turned and went back to Mrs. Popham's. Arthur was waiting for him on the doorstep.

"Have you done?" he asked mildly. "I thought we'd better both go in together than have the door open twice."

He turned the key. Luke could have sworn they made no sound other than the slight click as the door closed behind them but as they crossed the hall, a voice called, "Who's that?"

Luke said, "Us."

"And how do I know who that is?" demanded Mrs. Popham. She came out of her room—she lived on the ground floor. She was in her dressing gown. Her hands looked soft and white under the long red silk cuffs. It was an elegant dressing gown, not the sort he would have expected her to wear. She must have been awake.

Had she been waiting up for them? Luke, who would have been thoroughly annoyed if his mother had done the same thing, didn't resent Mrs. Popham in the same way.

Arthur said—with creditable apology in his voice— "We had a departmental dinner—unexpectedly."

A departmental dinner sounded like dinner jackets and stiff white napkins and Dover Sole. Luke thought of Fernando's and, despite himself, nearly laughed.

He smothered the urge and said, contritely, "Sorry if you had our meal ready here."

"You look cold, do you want a drink?" she said, pursing up her lips but not reprimanding them.

"We don't want to keep you up," Luke murmured but a hot drink did sound a good idea.

"I don't sleep well," she said briefly. She went into the kitchen. "I'll make Ovaltine."

Arthur raised his eyebrows quizzically at Luke and they followed her.

She hovered over them while they drank it; it was hot and they couldn't hurry. She picked up some music from under the table and took a potted plant off the windowsill and put it on the piano. "It's cold on the windowsill at night," she said. "Very cold for April."

Hare must be cold in that derelict house.

Luke opened his mouth and then closed it again. He couldn't make up his mind whether to question Mrs. Popham or not.

"Do you know who lives in Number 17?" he blurted out abruptly and then thought how unsubtle he had been in making the enquiry; he should have led up to it gradually.

But she had no reason to suspect anything. "I know the one you mean. The Bogota boys used to play in it; they managed to get inside. But it's up for sale and the Estate Agents fastened it up. Belonged to an old gentleman who died. Yes, it's in a shocking state of repair. I don't know who would buy it; needs a fortune spending on it and who's got that kind of money these days?"

"Luke perhaps?" Arthur queried. "Going in to property after he's finished with Time Machines."

Luke blushed slightly. At least he had found out what he wanted to know.

"There are a lot of neglected houses in the road," Mrs. Popham went on. "That sort of place invites squatters. It was nice here once when Henry and I first came. But

these last few years . . . everything's going downhill."

Little did she know.

They thanked her for the Ovaltine and went upstairs.

When Luke woke—late—the birds were making an excessive lot of noise outside. Someone must have given them bread. He pulled back the curtain and there was a light covering of snow. In a room somewhere below, a bassoon player was already hard at his day's work and a piano tinkled a sad little mazurka in the distance—one of the many students who seemed to drift in and out using Mrs. Popham's instruments.

April was no harbinger of spring this year. Luke dressed quickly and raced down to the warm kitchen. Arthur was already eating his breakfast.

Someone put his head round the door and said, "Sound an A for me, can you?" (There was a piano in every room downstairs, kitchen included.)

Arthur hit the metal light which hung low over the table. "There you are."

Someone else reached over and hit the piano. It agreed with the light.

"I told you," Arthur said. "Light's very true." He looked up at Luke. "Good evening, wasn't it? Still hate parties?"

Luke said no, absentmindedly, his mind on other things. Arthur, sensing the way the wind blew, did not pursue the conversation.

Luke knew that he must go over and see Hare. It was no good putting it off. He got a sweater and went out. Would anyone be interested if they saw him go in at the side gate of Number 17? It was not like the village where

you only had to put a foot outside and every net curtain in the row twitched. Here, with so many bedsitters and flats, people's comings and goings were their own business.

The only attention he attracted was of the smallest Bogota who was kicking a ball about in the gutter. He stuck his face through the hedge after Luke and said, "S'empty."

"Buzz off," said Luke.

The hinges on the front gate had rusted through and the gate was propped up against the post. He followed Hare's track through the lupins and found the side gate was in better repair than the front, although it stuck as it had done the night before and he had to give it a kick before it would open.

Through the gate, the side of the house was overgrown with weeds that had pushed their way up through the concrete. It must be a positive jungle in the height of summer. The snow lay in little drifts round empty bottles and dirty pieces of sacking and rubbish. When he came to the back door, Luke tried to open it but it was firmly shut and gave no sign of yielding although he threw his whole weight against it. Had Hare bolted it from the inside or was it locked by some estate agent to keep out marauders? He went on round the back.

Most gardens look neglected after the winter but this one had a dismal air of decay which the snow could not disguise. The railway line lay in a cutting beyond the back fence. Unlike Mrs. Popham's garden, which was full of trees, this one was bare but so overgrown with weeds that you couldn't see whether there had once been a lawn or not. A good house for squatting, Luke noted, because if you stayed in the back rooms, no one would notice a

light; people on the far side of the railway were too remote.

He turned his attention to the house itself. At the back, it was plastered with falling-down sheds and outhouses of various descriptions. There was one large window and when Luke peered in, shading his eyes against the brightness outside, he thought it might once have been a sitting room. A large Victorian mantelpiece and striped wallpaper—now stained and torn—suggested previous graciousness. There were no curtains and not a stick of furniture. It was hardly a room one would choose to camp out in.

He moved on. There was another solid door facing the garden but that too remained fast when he pushed against it. No future there. For the first time he began to wonder if he was going to find Hare. It had not occurred to him until now that she had all the weapons to barricade herself in.

He felt defeated. Short of ringing the front door bell and telling her he had called to leave a card, there seemed to be no other way.

The last resort was the outhouses. Luke rattled the handle of what must once have been an ancient greenhouse. It was built on to the back of the scullery, he guessed. This one opened easily. It was full of garden tools and broken flower pots—the real pottery kind that his mother was always saying had become increasingly hard to get. There were rusty tins full of creosote and potash and bags of rose fertilizer. It smelled sweet and earthy and not at all unpleasant. But there was no door through there into the house. Merely a barred scullery window. As he turned away he noticed a small rickety door at the far end

of the greenhouse. An old mower was propped against it. She could hardly be behind that.

He went round to the far side of the house but apart from a small coal cupboard and an outside lavatory, it yielded nothing. The windows there were of the old-fashioned sash variety and there was nothing he could grip with his fingers when he tried to open them.

If he tackled the front of the house, he could be had up for breaking and entering. A house up for sale was not public property. With a great feeling of anticlimax, he went back round the greenhouse.

As he did so, he noticed that there was a shed joined on to it, backing on to the house. The door behind the mower must be a door into the shed. He supposed he might as well have a look. There was the remote possibility that an unlocked pantry window opened into the shed. He went into the greenhouse again and, stubbing his toe on a sack of cement which had gone hard, he pulled away the mower. The shed door opened easily. It was dark inside after the garden. It took him a minute or so to get used to the gloom. Another minute to take in what he saw.

The shed gave no access into the house. There was no door or window in the wall. But the shed was where Hare was living. There was no doubt at all about that. The mower had been propped up against the door because she was out. It was her way of locking it.

Luke hadn't bargained for Hare being out. Ignorant of why she was up in London, he had assumed that she spent her day wherever she was hiding—if she *was* hiding. Where on earth could she have gone? The answer of course was

anywhere. She had to eat. Perhaps she had gone to the shops. Perhaps she was sight-seeing.

As he looked round, Luke's heart went out to her. The girl must be desperate to get away from home, or from Wyndsham, if she was prepared to survive in conditions like this. It had been cold in the garden. In here the cold was damp and pinned you down like a straitjacket. How soon before it numbed all movement in your limbs? And the silence in the hut, woven only with tiny insects' scratchings and burrowings, was oppressive. For the first time since coming to Archway Road, Luke could hear no traffic noise. All at once it seemed familiar and desirable. He pushed the door open wider to get light from the greenhouse. It reached into the corner to a heap of straw and some old blankets. Had those been there already or had Hare somehow acquired them? A stack of boxes made a rough table and there was a small one on which she could sit. Then Luke noticed an oil stove. It was in relatively good condition and looked as if it had recently been used. Luke's father would never have an oil stove in the house at Wyndsham. Luke shuddered at the thought of the straw and wood which could blaze up in the twinkling of an eye, yet she couldn't exist in this kind of weather without some form of heat. She must have money to buy oil. Presumably she had purchased the stove itself at some secondhand junkshop of which there were plenty in the district. For someone who gave the impression of complete vagueness, she had her head screwed on in a remarkably practical way. He remembered seeing an outside tap round the side of the house. She even had an outside lavatory. All mod cons. He began to see that it was possible to survive.

On a shelf under the window were some tins of soup and some sugar. Could she heat soup on the stove? He supposed she could. Seeing the food made him feel like a burglar. What if she came back and found him standing there? Suddenly the shed seemed terribly personal to her. For all its empty coldness, it was Hare's home. She had stamped her possession on it with the food and the nest in the straw. He looked guiltily outside and thought for an awful moment he could hear her coming round the side of the house. But it was only a little wind moving a plank of wood.

What should he do? Finding the shed had solved nothing. It had merely confirmed his worst fears; she must have some dreadfully compelling reason for staying here in these conditions. And if he spoke to her, what then? He might only drive her out to something far worse than an empty shed and straw and blankets. She might fall into anyone's hands. God knows, he thought, she was so innocent. She had no idea of the pitfalls in London for a girl of her age. She might die of exposure or something worse.

On the other hand, what was happening at home? Were her parents demented with worry? Were the police looking for her? Was he an accomplice after the fact of her running away if he knew where she was and told no one? Somehow he couldn't bring himself to involve her with the police—not Hare. At least she was nearby and he knew where she was; and she knew where *he* was if she needed help.

He would leave things as they were for a day or two and see what transpired. Maybe he could find out from Rosie what was going on at the Wyndsham end . . .

11

He did not have to write to Rosie. She wrote to him. There was a letter on Monday morning. Rosie was an infrequent letter writer (this was the first one Luke had had from her) but once she got going, her letters were long and informative, written in her usual flamboyant style.

She told him in great detail about her woes at school, the terrible strain imposed by maths without him to help her; the terrible strain imposed by the Bennetts. "I had to spend a whole day going to Bristol with them—Ma wouldn't let me refuse, she says we can't continually be ungracious. At least the food was *lush*. You are still *Janey's penchant* . . .

". . . And you promised to show me London!" [He couldn't remember ever promising anything of the sort.] "Aren't you pining for your little sister? I bet you're not, you blighter. Are you ever coming home? Your godfather is coming to Sunday lunch next weekend and Ma thinks you're about due for a wash and could combine it with seeing U. Michael! As she despairs of getting an answer out of you, she has given the enclosed P.C. (stamped) on which you only have to fill in the relevant word and place it in one of those red boxes

you find on the edge of the pavement—they must have them in London. Or she says RING (reversing charge).

"Do you know Nutcase has disappeared. I mean, of course, Rapunzel. The Bingleys don't seem to be making it public but it's all around in the village—you know how it is." [Didn't he just.] "I don't think she's been home for several weeks—must have gone soon after that 'do' at the pond. She didn't come to London with you did she?!! Perhaps Mrs. Bing is glad, she never seems overjoyed by her stepdaughter. But Mr. looks even more miz than usual. *Oh my daughter, oh my ducats.* Hope it won't come to dredging ditches or anything grisly . . .

"Do come for a w/e even if only to see Uncle M. Dear old Loo . . . ook with your head in a boo . . . ook. Cough Cough." [Here was a drawing of Luke with his head in a book, waving a bottle—presumably Rosie's idea of how he spent his time in the lab.]

"Farewell, sweet prince.
Your loving sister,
R."

So he was in the picture as regards Hare. She was up in London without her parents' knowledge. She had run away from home. Why didn't the Bingleys want to make a fuss about her disappearing? Had she called too much attention to herself in the past by her odd ways? As Rosie said, Mrs. Bingley might not miss her too much. She had brought enough trouble to her stepmother. His own mother must be keeping a discreet silence about seeing Hare on the station. Did she worry that Luke was involved, despite his promises to the contrary? He could

only suppose that as the Bingleys had not made her disappearance official, his mother didn't feel it was her duty to divulge information. Her sense of propriety was overwhelming, Luke thought with some savageness. And yet . . . he suddenly realized that if he knew of Hare's squatting in Lyndown Gardens, he was just as blameworthy as his mother in not telling Mr. Bingley.

Luke told Arthur about Hare. He felt he owed him an explanation for his odd behavior on the night of the party. Not that Arthur had shown any curiosity. He also felt he would welcome an unbiased opinion on what he should do. The responsibility of the situation was beginning to weigh heavily upon him.

He certainly got an opinion. For once Arthur was jerked right out of his imperturbability.

"You mean to tell me there's a girl of fifteen living over the road in that derelict house—in the garden shed . . . for crying out loud, boy, why haven't you done something about it? She'll die of hypothermia."

"It's not as simple as that," Luke said, "and she's got an oil stove. I don't think she'll freeze to death."

"It's cold enough in this bedroom. It must be a sight colder outside, whatever sort of stove you've got."

"Just listen, will you? I can't go over and get her. She's different . . ."

"What do you mean different? Stands need to be different. A blooming Eskimo . . ."

"I can't explain. But you can't make contact with her. She's sort of . . . well . . . fey, if you like. If I tried to get hold of her, she would most probably make off and I might never find her again."

"But what about her family? They must be doing their nut."

"That's just it. Do you think I ought to let her father know?"

"You must be joking! Put yourself in that poor man's shoes for just one minute. And what about her mother?"

"Stepmother. I think the situation there is probably difficult."

"Ring them up," Arthur said forcibly and without hesitation. "Do you know their number?"

But Luke didn't want to telephone. He wanted first to find out more about the situation. If Mr. Bingley came rushing up to London to get Hare back, how could he keep her at home against her will? He said as much to Arthur.

Arthur said, "That's his problem. I still think he ought to know where she is." Then he said slowly, "Do you want me to go over and see her—would it be better if it was someone she didn't know?"

Luke couldn't help thinking how different Arthur was from the villagers at home. Arthur, he realized, came from a very close-knit family himself. But he didn't think that his going over to Number 17 was the solution to the problem.

"You've got sympathy with her, that's your trouble," Arthur said perceptively. "You don't want to spoil her game, whatever it is. But you can't sit on both sides of the fence. Her family should know where she is."

"You're absolutely right," Luke said reluctantly. "I'd better go to Wyndsham next weekend like my mother suggested. Ostensibly to see my godfather. Then I'll go and talk to Mr. Bingley."

"Any chance of more of your mother's fruitcake?"

Luke grinned and said, "I'll see what I can do."

"I'll keep an eye on Number 17 while you're gone."

"You won't go over there!" Luke was in a sudden panic lest Arthur's goodwill led to disaster.

"Don't worry, I won't. I say, she's really got under your skin, boy . . . 'Poor is the triumph o'er the timid hare.' That's what Thomson said in his *Seasons*. Your village must be a savage lot to go in for that sort of hunting."

Luke left London mid-afternoon on Friday as the work was tailing off and Alan himself was going away for the weekend. He reached Wyndsham in the evening while the sun was still lingering on the village. It looked anything but savage. Neil had picked him up from the station—proudly, in an old Morris Minor he had purchased with his farm wages. They roared through Barton disturbing the peace. The weather that week had changed like a chameleon. The snow had melted as swiftly as it had come. Even in London green was beginning to show. Here it was everywhere, in the cracks and crannies of the garden walls, giving a flush to the hedgerows, a hint of summer velvet to the lawns. The sunlight fell golden, softening and muting. The bell ringers were practicing at the church and the deep notes tumbled over the top of the cottages. The cottages were old and picturesque in Wyndsham. Neil hooted at some children playing in the road and they moved aside reluctantly, staring.

How incredibly peaceful after the roar of the Archway Road. It made one wonder what compelling force had driven Hare away from all this (hostile though it was to her) to follow a gypsy existence in the jungle of London.

Then they were home at Grimms and Neil was sweeping round in a crunch of gravel, disturbing the rooks so

that they rose noisily from the elms behind the house, announcing Luke's arrival.

They had a full-blown dinner. Scampi with tartare sauce, followed by blackberry and apple pie with cream (Arthur would be eating cod and chips). How elegant it all was with the lamplight falling softly. What comfort he had previously taken for granted.

"Doesn't she feed you, this Eleanor Popham?" exclaimed Margaret Crantock as Luke demolished his third bit of pie. She was half-hoping—Luke realized—that the answer would be in the negative so that she could feel justifiably indignant.

"Not princely stuff like this," he said, trying to please her for once.

She laughed triumphantly and slid the last few crumbs onto his plate, enjoying indulging him.

"What greed," said Rosie.

"And is it clean . . . and warm? You don't write often . . . we do like to hear, you know. And what about this sharing business? I wasn't too keen . . . I mean he might be anyone. Arthur Smith, did you say?—what a funny old-fashioned name. Is *he* clean? . . . Some students are so messy these days . . ."

"Lean?" said Luke, deliberately mishearing. "Yes. You can almost see through him. Undernourished. Eats books instead of lunch. Oh! Oh! . . . you said *clean*." He bit hugely into some cheese. "Filthy, literally filthy," he mumbled with his mouth full. "You should know all people from north of St. Albans *are*."

"Oh Luke! Stop it."

Afterward he stretched himself on the sofa in the draw-

ing room and waited for coffee to come. The rooks had still not settled for the night; they rose in their ones and twos, fussing, flapping their wings. A country sound.

"Luke's smoking a pipe!" cried Rosie. "He's smoking a pipe!"

Margaret Crantock, carrying the coffee cups, looked at her firstborn on the sofa and her heart gave a lurch, because just for a moment he looked quite distinguished lounging there . . . no longer a schoolboy but a young man.

"Your hair's getting long," she said to hide any emotion she might feel—from herself or from any onlooker.

"Oh for heaven's sake, it's not half as long as Neil's . . ."

"But I'm used to that," she said illogically.

"And what about Humboldt?" asked his father when they were sipping their coffee. Even Neil had graced them with his presence that evening. "Is he a nice chap?"

Luke thought he wouldn't describe Humboldt as a nice chap; but on the other hand his father probably would.

"He's fine."

"That tells us a lot!"

"Well . . ." (how could you convey the *vitality* of Humboldt) "he's very keen on what he's doing. He never stops thinking about it. All his talk is about his work. And if you're keen too—as everybody is at the Institute—you get on well with him."

"But he doesn't suffer fools gladly . . ."

"No. He doesn't."

"With one exception . . ." said Neil.

"And are you working on the Time Machine?"

"Indirectly, yes."

"How?"

"Do you really want to know?" Luke asked. He took his pipe out of his mouth. It had gone out; it was all very experimental and merely a defense against the turkish and french cigarettes that everyone smoked at Kent Street.

"No," said Rosie. She was hugging her knees in front of the fire which Margaret Crantock had lit against the chill of the evening. "You'll just bore us with scientific poppycock which nobody understands. I'd rather watch telly."

Their father said, "I for one would like to understand . . . and it won't hurt you either, Rosie, you are far too content to be ignorant."

She looked at her father balefully and he looked back —and then winked. She was the apple of his eye.

"All right," Luke said reluctantly. "I'll put it all in words of one syllable." He got a piece of paper and stub of a pencil from the writing desk.

He drew a diagram.

They came over to look.

"What's that?"

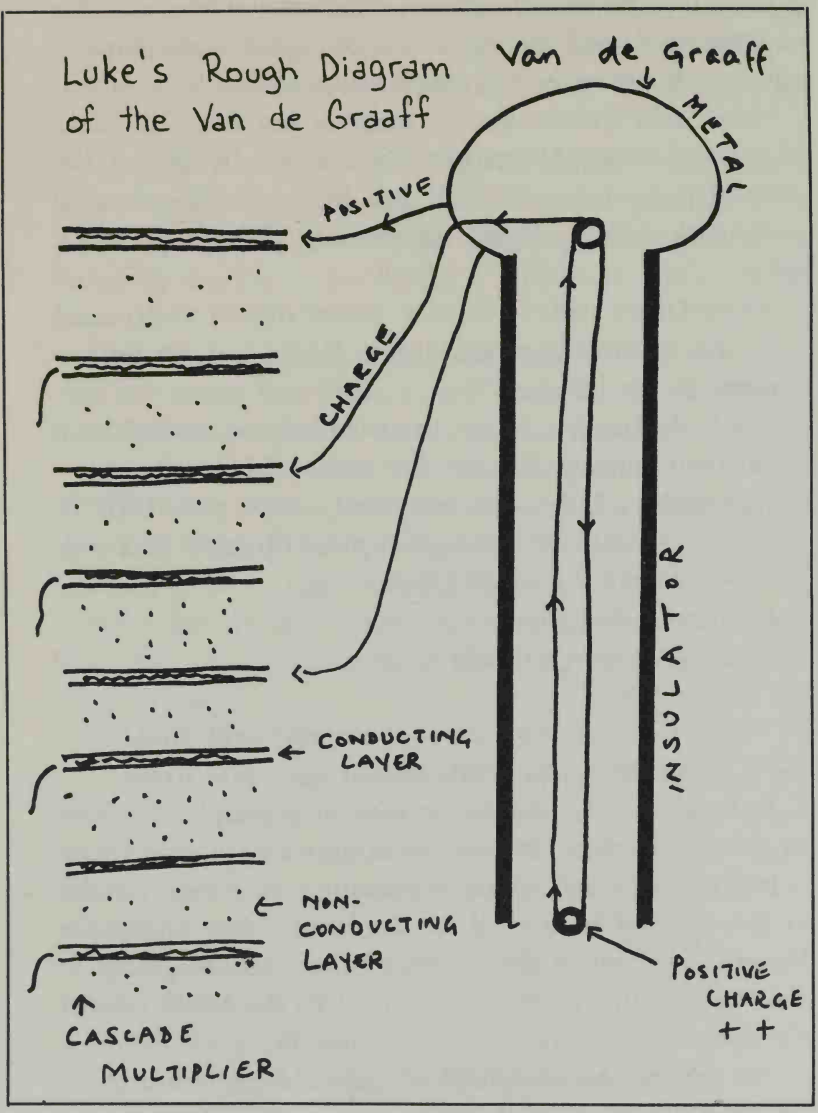
"The original hollow croquet mallet," said Neil.

"A snake that's just swallowed an egg," said Rosie.

Luke said, "This shows the general principle of a Van de Graaff generator. It has a metal sphere at the top which is hollow and a belt of paper rotating round two spindles at the top and bottom of an insulated tube. The paper becomes charged at the bottom, brings its charge up to the top and this is then transferred to the metal case of the sphere."

"So you get an enormous electric charge building up on the outer case," said Neil.

"That's right. Then the paper goes down the insulator,


Luke's Rough Diagram of the Van de Graaff
Van de Graaff
METAL
POSITIVE
CHARGE
INSULATOR
CONDUCTING LAYER
NON-CONDUCTING LAYER
CASCADE MULTIPLIER
POSITIVE CHARGE
+ +

on the righthand side, without any charge and picks up more at the bottom again. Okay so far?"

They nodded, Rosie rather doubtfully.

"This Van de Graaff is a huge thing built into a room behind the lab. It goes through two floors of the Institute and it's connected with something called a Cascade Multiplier. That's what I'm working on . . ."

"Sounds like a firework. *Is* it a firework?"

"Shut up, Rosie! It's an alloy in which Humboldt has alternated conducting and nonconducting layers in a kind of molecular stack. When the Van de Graaff is fully charged it passes the charge over to this molecular stack in chunks of ten million volts potential and then starts all over again to charge the next layer in the stack."

"So you'll finish up with some really colossal charge all stored up."

"Humboldt needs a colossal charge to start stripping the time polarity from the tachyons . . ."

"I wish you wouldn't use those sort of words," Rosie complained. "What's *time polarity?*"

"You mean to start the experiment working," said Graham Crantock, "you need a terrific surge of power, a huge bang."

"The experiment will start with an explosion of over one hundred million million volts. After that we're able to use lower potentials from the Generating Board to keep it running."

"It sounds awfully dangerous . . ." Margaret Crantock said doubtfully, "I suppose there are safety standards which the lab complies with?"

Luke couldn't help smiling. He imagined his mother asking Humboldt, with all signals poised for go, whether

he was in line with Paragraph 3 of the Scientific Precautions Act. In Humboldt's mind, Margaret Crantock would be placed in the same category as the Electricity Generating Board.

"I still don't know what *you* are doing," Neil said. "Every day, hour by hour, at this Institute place."

"Up in Alan's lab we're working on the Cascade Multiplier. We're constantly receiving material for the Multiplier and machining it to the exact dimensions—in other words fitting the conducting layers. The more of these there are, the greater the charge potential the Multiplier can store up. Therefore the work is endless . . ."

"All very high-powered!"

"Groan. Groan," said Rosie, "I think I'll stick to why Henry VIII wanted to break away from the Pope—more up my street."

"Ah but Luke will beat you every time," Neil said facetiously. "He'll be able to go back in time with this miracle machine and *ask* Henry VIII why he broke away from the Pope . . ."

Luke found his brother's laughter intolerable. He tore his diagram into little shreds and knocked the pieces into the air. "It's all just a joke to you," he said angrily. Why had he thought it would be any different coming home after only being a month away? He must have been mad to try and interest Neil in anything he was doing up in London. He felt thoroughly disgusted with the lot of them.

His father got up and went over to the trolley to put down his coffee cup.

"No, Luke. It's not a joke. But it is unreal to us. We're not scientists in the way you are and it's hard to imagine. You've seen it so you can believe in it."

Luke sensed the reproach in what his father said and knew it was justified. After all it was hard enough to believe in the Time Machine even when you had it before your eyes. He was being unfair to them. He scowled at the floor in some embarrassment and started to pick up the little bits of paper.

"Who wants a game of table tennis?" he said, making an unusual effort to smooth the moment over.

"Baggie the green bat," Rosie yelled. And in the rush for the door, the dog was trodden on and yelped and the trolley became perilously near to being overturned.

Margaret Crantock wondered why she had ever thought her son was growing into distinguished manhood.

In the morning Luke went into Barton to the chemist's shop. Mr. Bingley was behind the counter, slightly stooped as Luke remembered. He wasn't looking forward to talking to Mr. Bingley now it had come to it. He wished the interview was over. And yet he felt that here maybe he could talk to someone about Hare on his own terms. Mr. Bingley struck him as a different sort of person from his wife, an altogether softer and more sympathetic character.

The chemist looked weary. He had dark rings under his eyes and his stoop was more pronounced. Luke had a pang of conscience. He ought to have let him know before.

He waited in a small queue of people and was then confronted by the girl who was the assistant.

"I would like a word with Mr. Bingley."

She looked round. He was still serving. "He won't be a minute."

Mr. Bingley handed change to a customer and Luke edged along the counter. "Er . . . could I have a word with you . . . perhaps tonight after the shop is closed?"

The chemist, who had been smiling vaguely in the way he smiled at all his customers, suddenly looked alert and enquiring. "Yes. Of course." His eyes probed Luke. "May I ask what it is about? Perhaps I could deal with it now."

"I think it may take some time."

"Is it about Griselda?" he said and there was such eager hope in his voice that Luke felt worse than ever.

"Yes."

"Is she all right? Have you seen her?"

"Ye . . . es. I think she is."

"You sound doubtful."

Luke realized then that there *was* someone who cared about Hare. "I haven't actually spoken to her."

"The shop closes at six. Come then."

"Here?"

"Yes. It's easier than talking at home."

Luke could appreciate that.

He went along promptly at ten to six. He had no desire to keep Mr. Bingley on tenterhooks longer than was necessary. He had made a rather clumsy pretext at home of why he was going out but didn't think they suspected the truth. Ironically he would rather have stayed at Grimms. He felt apprehensive. What was he exposing himself to; what kind of involvement? Mr. Bingley, he thought, didn't look a bullying kind of man.

Mr. Bingley was closing very promptly. He turned the "open" notice to "closed" as Luke reached the shop.

He said, "Come on in."

"Thanks."

Luke stepped inside and Mr. Bingley locked the door and pulled down the blind.

"Come in to the dispensary. You don't mind sitting here?"

"Not at all."

Mr. Bingley pulled out a chair and sat on a stool himself. "You are Luke Crantock, are you not? Mr. Graham Crantock's son?"

"Yes," said Luke. He wondered how on earth to start. He studied his fingernails as he always did when he was nervous.

Mr. Bingley tried to help him. "You say you have seen Griselda?"

Now he had time to look at the chemist, Luke could see that Hare inherited some of his features—the gentle set of his mouth, maybe. But she had none of his serenity. And the blondness—that must come from her mother's side of the family.

"She's in London," he said. "I've not spoken to her but I have seen her. And I have tracked down where she is living." That sounded as if it needed explanation. Why should he want to track her down? "You haven't asked the police to look for her?"

"No," said Mr. Bingley. "We didn't tell the police when she disappeared. This may seem strange to you."

"Everything connected with Hare seems a little strange." He gave a wry grin.

Mr. Bingley said, "That, I am afraid, is an understatement." He sighed.

"I think I had better begin at the beginning."

"Before you start," Mr. Bingley said quickly, "could you put her in touch with me at this moment, if you

wanted to? I mean do you know exactly where she is?"

"Yes. I think I could. At least I know where she was when I left London yesterday."

"I just wanted to know . . . I have been wondering all day how close your contact was with her."

"Of course," said Luke. He took a breath. He no longer felt apprehensive of Mr. Bingley, but completely relaxed. He thought, I seem to have gone into this explanation before recently—he had gone over it all with Arthur. He would soon be word perfect. He started off with what had happened on the ridge on that day of heat in March. He described how he had been puzzled by Hare; he mentioned that he had visited their house to get his jacket back. He tried not to imply that Mrs. Bingley had been unhelpful, but he was afraid that Mr. Bingley saw through his polite skirting of the truth. He must be only too aware of the situation. He then described meeting Hare in the lane with Paul and her encounter with the neighbors. Mr. Bingley made no comment. He was an excellent listener. Luke mentioned the fact that Hare had enquired about London at this point and then jumped on to the day when he had seen her getting onto the train. He didn't say that his mother had seen her too. If Mrs. Crantock had decided it was no business of hers to get involved that was up to her. Luke missed out nothing else. He told how he had seen her one evening round the Underground Station at Archway. Then he described how he had found she was living in the empty garden shed in the house across the road. Mr. Bingley still made no comment but his face was keenly interested and alert, missing nothing of Luke's story.

Luke said, "You must think that I should have let you

know when I first saw her in London. But I can only say that I did not know the situation at home. And I felt that I must respect Hare's right to be on her own if she wanted to be so. I was in the dark and I hesitated to make trouble for her. She is very—how shall I put it—vulnerable."

Mr. Bingley nodded quickly. "I am not reproaching you. Go on."

Luke said, "That's all. I went across to Number 17 last Saturday, meaning to confront her, and she wasn't there. And when I thought about it, it seemed better to come here and tell you rather than scare her off into hiding in some place where we might never trace her." He leaned back. He had been sitting forward in his seat, gesticulating slightly as he talked. Mr. Bingley's eyes had never left Luke's face. "I'm sorry that it all seems so . . . inconclusive. Perhaps I should have tried to bring her back with me."

"Thank you for what you have done," Mr. Bingley said simply. "I can't thank you enough."

"Thank me?" Luke said in surprise. That was the last reaction he had expected.

"You are one of the very few people who have shown kindness and sympathy to Hare. Believe me there have been few in her life. When you told me you called her 'Hare' I knew. She very rarely tells that name to anyone unless she feels some sort of sympathy. It is a name dating back to her childhood and to her mother."

"Oh," said Luke; and he realized it was the only reward he might ever get from his singularly unrewarding relationship with Hare. He must remember it; preserve it. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I need time to digest what you have told

me. You are quite right in thinking that you can't hold her against her will. She will disappear and perhaps for good, who knows, if she thinks she is being tracked down. The relief to me to know that she is *somewhere*, alive, is enough for the present. As you can imagine, I have thought of some dreadful things that might have happened to her."

"I can well imagine," said Luke. "I should have told you earlier."

"You weren't to know," said the chemist. "Reading between the lines, you thought she probably wasn't wanted at home. I couldn't blame you for that."

Luke didn't comment.

"It's a very difficult time for my wife at the moment—our second baby is arriving at any time now and Paul is not an easy child. Something of a rumbustuous three-year-old . . . she gets very tired."

"Did Hare's mother die a long time ago?" Luke asked him. He did not want to hurt Mr. Bingley by probing into the past but he felt a need to know something of Hare's background.

"I owe it to you to tell you something of my daughter," said Mr. Bingley. He had an old-fashioned, formal way of speaking that Luke found rather attractive.

"I'd be glad to know."

"Here," said the chemist, "would you like a cup of coffee or something stronger? We've got a camping gaz thing, we can make coffee."

Luke said that coffee would do fine. Mr. Bingley got up and found a saucepan from one of the cupboards and said, "Half and half suit you?" He added water from a tap and milk from a pint kept under the sink.

There were more church bells ringing this evening, from another parish. They came faintly on the wind to Barton. The dispensary smelled clean and antiseptic; a suggestion of ether hung on the air. Mr. Bingley busied himself as he talked.

"Hare's mother was German. I met her over in Germany—Berlin—when I was doing a course there. We were married in Germany and for the first year or two of married life we lived there in a small town about twenty miles south of Hanover. I opened a dispensary. Hare was born about two years later. For the first year she just appeared a perfectly normal child"—he poured the hot milk and water into two mugs—"I often think that was the most peaceful year of my life, despite the usual upheaval a baby brings with it. We did notice then that she wasn't very affectionate, but we didn't pay much attention to it. It was not until she was getting on for two that we really knew that Hare was different. Oh—we reacted in the usual way, I suppose. We tried to believe that we were imagining things. But when we could deny it no longer, we took her to see all kinds of medical people. They performed endless tests on her. We were afraid she was autistic, you see. She didn't respond to us at all. We felt completely unwanted. On the other hand she seemed to have intelligence, even if of a rather unusual kind. And no one could find anything wrong—no doctors that is. She grew up a completely isolated little girl. She talked very little and she seemed to live in a world of her own. I can't say she was unhappy, I don't think she was. And very rarely she would laugh. We were devoted to her as you can imagine. She was a very pretty child. Sugar?" He handed Luke a steaming mug.

"Thanks. She is very beautiful—now."

The chemist gave Luke a disturbed look. "We stayed in Germany until Hare was four, then we came back to England. I had hopes that someone here might be able to help her, British doctors have a worldwide reputation. But nobody could, it seemed. My wife had never been strong. In fact she had been warned against child-bearing. Her health deteriorated. I don't think she ever really took to England although she insisted on staying here. I offered to go back and live in Germany, but she wouldn't. We used to return for holidays and in some way I felt that Hare was happier there—in Germany—than anywhere else." He paused. "It was a great worry to her—my wife, I mean—this fey child. And of course when it was time for Hare to go to school, the problem got worse. My wife would not hear of sending her to a special school. She said it condemned her to being labeled as different for the rest of her life. I think she was right. We kept hoping of course that Hare would grow out of it. There was no problem of intelligence at school; that was what was odd. Her brain was not impaired. She learned to read and write. But the problem was contact. She never made a single friend. And she was utterly irresponsible. Of course she was teased. You know what children are. Sometimes the teasing was unmerciful. This upset my wife terribly, far more than it upset Hare. Somehow she didn't seem to feel it." He was silent, staring into his mug as if he was remembering it all with great painfulness. "My wife died when Hare was seven; the child undoubtedly contributed to her worsening health. Hare, if anything, became more withdrawn. More strange. I just couldn't get near her, although I tried, God knows, I tried." His voice shook

a little with emotion. "There was just no contact. We soldiered on, we lived in the Midlands—oh, for five years . . . and then I met Stella. She was very good to Hare. She taught her, you see. She was at Hare's school. We got married and had Paul. Perhaps it doesn't seem so to you, but Stella is fond of Hare. It is just that she has her hands full and life isn't easy. She was anxious to move away from old associations and start a new life with our new family. She thought a change might help Hare anyway. So we came here, as you know, last year. And we sent Hare to the school here. But it was the same all over again. She seems to attract people's antagonism, goodness knows why. Although she is so withdrawn, she is entirely gentle and harmless. Within weeks she was branded as an oddity in just the same way as she was in the Midlands. Only in a way it was worse. She had become accepted up there. Now here she was a new object of persecution. A girl of fifteen is going to call more attention to herself than a child of five. And I have found that living in a small community is worse than living in a town. Here everyone knows everyone else's business. People like Mrs. Bennett—who I am sure have the best of motives—" Luke made a noise in his throat that indicated that he thought otherwise, "want her taken away from the school. Mrs. Bennett is a school manager and has raised the question of Hare with the Board. But I have grown stubborn over the years. I want her to finish her schooldays in the normal fashion. I feel I owe it to the memory of my first wife. She has not much more time to run before she can leave. What she does then, I do not know." He paused again and his eyes were hopeless. "You must think it strange that I didn't inform the police when she was missing. But

I have had so much limelight; and so has she. I suppose I feel overselfconscious . . . Hare needs protection but yet not interference. I can understand so well that you felt you must leave her alone. I constantly feel this. I feel that she has some life of her own that she is leading . . . it is almost as if she is looking for something. I have just kept on hoping that one day she will find what she is looking for. She will become complete. That is the only hope I can have."

There was silence for a moment. The chemist was lost in thought.

Finally Luke said, "So you find this in character with her, that she didn't let you know where she was? She wouldn't think of you being anxious."

"Absolutely in character. She has no sense of kinship. I wouldn't say no moral sense, I think that would be misleading. She has never, in fact, been dishonest in any way at all. But she doesn't seem to feel things herself and so must be incapable of understanding how other people feel. And she is amazingly strong—physically. You say she was chased by those toughs all over the hill. She must have forgotten about it immediately afterward, dismissed it from her mind. She never mentioned it to us."

"Have you any idea," Luke asked, "why she should choose to go to London?"

"That I find utterly puzzling. If she asked you about the rail fare, she must have already been planning it. She took money out of her post office savings. What lies behind it all, I can't think. She was not unhappy at home, of that I am convinced. And London is so alien to her. It's just possible that it wasn't premeditated; that your going up there put it into her mind to do the same on

the spur of the moment. Perhaps she followed you up there with the thought that you were an anchor if she was desperate . . ."

He saw Luke's look; in an unguarded moment he had given himself away. For an instant hope flashed across his face.

"Oh, my dear boy," Mr. Bingley cried. "Don't feel anything for her. She can bring you nothing but heartbreak. I know only too well. She is incapable of giving anything in return." His eyes were full of tears.

Luke said gruffly, "Sorry. I just thought for a moment . . . when you said she followed me up there . . . perhaps . . . but she can't have wanted any contact—she's been avoiding me at all costs."

Mr. Bingley looked at Luke and although he felt full of pity—for he could remember how deeply one was capable of feeling at Luke's age—he knew that he must be brutally truthful for the boy's own sake. "She must have an ulterior motive in following you. I must say it because I feel it to be a fact. What that motive is, perhaps we shall know one day. But it isn't friendship or affection, of that you must be aware."

Luke thought what suffering Hare had brought to this gentle, sympathetic man.

After a pause in which they both sought to re-create the matter-of-fact atmosphere of their talk, the chemist said, "What are we going to do about it all, that is the question."

Luke said slowly, "You think of Hare as a child. But she is growing up."

"Of course, you are right. One forgets, she is nearly sixteen. I go on treating her in my mind as if she were still

a small girl." He sighed. "It will only intensify her problems that she is beautiful."

Luke got to his feet abruptly. "What are you going to do then?" he asked, repeating the chemist's own question. It was time that he went home.

Mr. Bingley said, "What can I do? I must think and talk about it with Stella. Poor Stella, it is not a good time for her to have additional worries." He was lost in thought for a moment. Then he said decisively, "No. Can I ask you to go across and try to contact her? You have done so much already but . . ."

Luke said, "I haven't done anything. Nothing concrete."

"You've come to Barton and told me all this. What I am worried about is that her money will run out and she will be quite destitute. If I give you some, will you take it across to her? Don't suggest we are trying to get her back—that might frighten her if she feels she can't come. But let her know that she can have more money from me at any time. I leave it to you when or how you try and speak to her . . . I can't tell you how grateful I am." He put his hand briefly on Luke's arm. "I have received very little real help with Hare over the years, help like you have given. It does one good. Pray God you are not scarred by it."

"I'll give you my telephone number in London. If you want to get in touch please do."

"If it would serve any purpose, you know I would come up immediately."

Luke hesitated and then he said, "Would you mind . . . my family don't know . . . or anyone else in the village."

"I understand what you mean. I won't say anything to anyone. I have learned it is the best way."

Luke made an impatient, expressive gesture. He said angrily, "One should be able to. I despise myself . . ."

"There is no point in causing people pain, believe me. Not unnecessarily. There is too much in the world already." He spoke with quiet conviction.

He closed the shop door for a second time after Luke had gone, locked it and watched Luke walk off down the road. People too often decried the feelings of the young. Then he turned back into the dispensary to tidy away the mugs and let himself out of the back.

Luke, striding home through the evening, felt the burden of Hare had lightened. He was no longer completely in the dark and could do something concrete to help her —he fingered the envelope containing the money that Mr. Bingley had given him. What a strange, moving story; had it altered his feelings for Hare in any way? If anything, he felt, it had intensified them.

He couldn't wait to go back to London. The comforts of Grimms had been transitory in their appeal. He looked forward to his cold, bare room and Arthur's bed creaking next door every time he turned over—the plaster walls were paper-thin.

As he turned in at the gate he remembered that he must ask his mother to bake a fruitcake for him to take back to Mrs. Popham's.

12

"Oh God," said Tom Humboldt irritably, sitting back on his chair by the console and slamming down his pen.

"Are you addressing me or your Maker?" Simon Standen enquired.

"What have you to offer as a deity?"

"Cup of coffee. Not of the highest quality but instant and hot."

"All right."

"Don't force yourself," Simon said equably. "Do you want one, Luke?"

"Yes, please." Humboldt had buzzed Luke and asked him to come down to the basement to work on some figures for the computer.

"What did you say was the name of the top man at the Generating Board?"

"Sugar?" Simon deliberately ignored the question.

"No."

"Of course you have sugar."

"What the hell did you ask me for if you knew the answer!"

There was a pause. Then Simon said, "Just to see if

you were paying the slightest attention to what I was saying . . ."

Luke was seeing a new side of Humboldt. Relations with the Electricity Generating Board had come to a head. There was deadlock. They couldn't reach agreement. The frustration of the position was driving Humboldt mad. He had gone as far as he could in setting up the experiment. He couldn't move further without a promise of the power he wanted.

Tom Humboldt was so full of tension that morning that it was stopping him working. And it seemed to spread through the whole of the Institute. Arthur had been right in saying that Humboldt *was* the Institute. It reflected his every mood. If he was enthusiastic, things surged forward. If he was irritable, everyone else was edgy.

Only Simon Standen seemed relaxed, leaning against the radiator with a little smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

He said cheerfully, "Don't forget the Frenchman is coming to inspect . . ."

Humboldt said violently, "Damn the French. That's all we need. Someone poking round asking questions . . ."

Simon had no compunction, Luke thought. He didn't try to smooth things over. He seemed to be going out of his way to increase Tom's irritation. They were an oddly assorted couple, Humboldt and Simon, to be working in such close partnership. Humboldt so open, so full of nervous energy, quick in his movements and his manner of speaking; his hands never still, gesticulating, running through his hair. And Simon, ostensibly a big placid bear of a man, buried in beard and fair curling locks like a

Viking. Yet they had worked together for five years now and must know each other's moods inside out.

Perhaps they knew each other too well.

Alan came in. "Ah coffee! Any left over for me?"

"This man of yours, Alan? This inspector. Is he likely to be reasonable?"

"Yes. I have heard that he is good. Intelligent."

"Won't cause trouble?" said Simon.

"The one that causes trouble," Humboldt said, draining his cup swiftly and getting up, "is Simon Standen who can't seem to get what we want from the Generating Board."

"You can't have more power, can you?" Alan said. "Not during the week anyway. I thought you'd been over all this. You can hardly expect industry to cut back on your behalf."

"Why not! Good God, Alan, you know the sort of discovery we're making! Things will never be the same again if this breakthrough comes off. Industry! What does that matter? Industry will be archaic! What we're doing—in scientific terms—is equal at least to the journeys of Marco Polo . . . going to the moon. We're opening up new worlds! I know you're the P.R. man on this outfit, Simon, but if you don't show a bit more success, I shall step in whatever you say . . ."

Simon said mildly, "You'll step nowhere, Tom. You're not going to wreck the goodwill I've built up with the Power Stations. I know what I'm doing. It's concrete results they want, not a lot of blah about Marco Polo. And that man Blenkinsop at the top—you say he's boneheaded but there's no point in upsetting him by going over his bonehead to the Ministry."

"There's every point, if you get what you want," Humboldt said with the unreasonableness of the fanatic. "What do you think, Luke—you're keeping very silent?"

Luke was embarrassed to be asked his opinion on such a controversial point. He cleared his throat. It was the first time since coming to the Institue that he had heard anything approaching discord.

He was saved from a reply by the appearance of Mr. Mutton who came in and said there was a telephone call for Mr. Standen. "Come through on the hall phone."

Humboldt looked at him quickly. "Get a move on, Simon, for God's sake."

Simon left unhurriedly.

He was away about three minutes. When he came back, they knew it was all right. That the call had been from the Board. He was laughing. "Relax, Tom," he said. "You can stop slanging me."

Humboldt stood in front of him, his fists in the air, "You've got it? You've got them to agree?"

"June 5th. Two o'clock on Sunday morning!"

Humboldt was jubilant. "Well done, well done, Simon." He clasped his hands above his head and spun round. "Now we can really go ahead." He calmed down quickly and became brisk. "How many stations at our disposal?"

"They're being generous—ten, eleven, twelve, if you like. Acton Lane, Fulham, Battersea, Bankside, Deptford East, West Ham, Brunswick Wharf, Belvedere, Littlebrook, West Thurrock, Dungeness A if necessary . . ." Simon ticked them off on his fingers.

"At last!" Humboldt shook his head with satisfaction. "They've taken long enough to see the light." He turned to Luke. "You asked me the other day why tachyons

hadn't been observed before. Well, there's part of your answer—the amount of power needed to supply the right mass to allow the slowing down of the tachyon stream. How are those figures going? The computer has to stabilize the conditions—keep a balance between the time field, the electric field and the tachyon stream. Have you found any shortcuts?"

There was the noise of flying feet and the door burst open. Mary rushed in. The news, it seemed, had already traveled round the Institute.

The tension that had built up over the morning melted away. When Luke went back to the upstairs lab *June 5* was painted in great red letters on the wall of the corridor. It might have been written in blood. Luke supposed it was iron oxide powder.

PART THREE

NIGHTMARE

13

"Seen your Hare," Arthur had said when Luke came back from Gloucestershire. If any of his family had called her *your* Hare, Luke would have hit the roof. As it was he didn't resent it coming from Arthur. "Cor, your mother can make a fruitcake. Tell her from me."

They were sitting munching on Luke's bed.

"Where did you see her?" Luke said eagerly, feeling sorry that he couldn't pass on the compliment to his mother. (She had said, "Now I'm baking this cake for you, Luke, not for everyone else at Mrs. Popham's"—meaning Arthur. She disliked Arthur without even knowing him—why was her generosity so confined?)

"She was walking up Highgate Hill toward the village. She was with another chap, I think. Looked male."

"That couldn't have been her," Luke said quickly and felt a twinge of something—he didn't quite know what. "She doesn't know a soul up here."

"How do you know she doesn't? It was exactly as you described her—long fair hair and a black cloak . . ."

"Her father says she just doesn't make contact with other people . . . there must be masses of girls in cloaks in London and hair like that is almost a uniform . . ."

"Perhaps it wasn't her, then," Arthur said easily. "When are you going over to Number 17?"

"I'll go one evening this week."

But he didn't. Characteristically he kept on putting it off. He made the excuse that he was too late back from the Institute or just that he had something urgent to get done at Mrs. Popham's.

"You're a bit of a procrastinator," Arthur said on Thursday. "What if she's run out of money? She may be starving there for all you know."

When it came to it, Luke didn't want to confront Hare because he was so afraid of frightening her away. He hadn't set eyes on her again; she was obviously cautious in her comings and goings. But he liked to feel that she was living there, across the road with no one aware of it except himself (and Arthur). Perhaps Rosie was right. She had got some sort of hold over him.

"You'll have to go over at the weekend," Arthur said. "You'll have her father ringing up any night to see if you've made contact."

Luke realized this was true. He would go on Saturday.

Even on Saturday, he found there were other things he had to get done before he went over. By six o'clock when he could put it off no longer he went down to the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea. He might have to sit in that cold shed and wait for her for some time if she was out. He needed to start off warm.

The house was deserted, even Mrs. Popham had gone out to visit a friend. Arthur had gone in to the Institute. Supper that evening was cold and laid out on the table to eat when you came in. There was a large plate of ham covered by a cloth.

Because he wanted to spin out the time, the kettle boiled quickly with a rattle of its lid. Luke put a tea bag into a cup and squashed it against the side with a spoon. The tea was too hot to drink and he didn't really want it anyway. He hunched his shoulders; his whole body tingled with apprehension. What was he going to say to her? Why are you here? What are you doing? I've brought some money from your father—he made sure he had Mr. Bingley's envelope. And if she just didn't answer. What then? She had done it before—not answered.

Everyone *would* be out. He could have done with someone to talk to. The wood creaked and stretched as it does in an old house when one is alone. There were three ticking clocks he could hear in different rooms downstairs. He took half an hour to drink his tea.

He suddenly thought how he had not seen her all week. Perhaps she had left—gone off somewhere else and he had let her go without making a move to see her.

The thought threw him into a panic. He raced upstairs and got an extra jumper, wound a scarf round his neck and leaped for the front door. On the pavement he pulled up. He looked up and down. Even the Bogota children were indoors being fed. There was no one about.

He crossed over and went into Number 17. The house was sour, forbidding and dead. Nothing had changed from the time he was there before, not even the briar that slapped into his face as he went into the greenhouse. It was a wonder Hare hadn't fastened it back. Then he thought, she was so much smaller than he was it wouldn't catch her in the same way.

It was going to get dark early; the sky was overcast and there was rain about. He went cautiously in case she was

there. But there was no sign of anyone at home. The mower was against the door of the shed. Hare was out and had locked up. The shed was an ideal hiding place. The only light that could possibly show was from under the door and you had to be in the greenhouse in order to see that. He had borrowed a torch from Mrs. Popham's kitchen. He didn't think she would miss it for the evening.

It was more or less as he remembered it except that there seemed to be more tins of food (she must have some money left) and, he thought, more bedding. He pulled the door to behind him. She would notice that the mower had been moved but it couldn't be helped. He sat down on one of the boxes and prepared to wait. At least she was still in occupation. When would she come back? He remembered the night when he had seen her at Archway at midnight. He hoped she didn't make a habit of late hours.

Although spring had come in the last week, inside the shed it seemed as chill as ever. Should he light the oil stove? He was just going to do so when he thought that she might see the light round the door and it would frighten her away. He would have to stick out this arctic hole as it was. After an hour when he had lost the feeling in his feet, he began to realize how tough Hare must be, despite her look of fragility.

One by one the sounds of the evening died right away. With sunset the wind had settled; it no longer tapped the briar against the door of the greenhouse. A soft mist of rain began to fall.

Luke wasn't nervous of darkness but in the shed it was particularly dense. Once a cat landed with a thump on the roof and he nearly jumped out of his skin. A good

thing too. Despite being so cold, he was getting soporific. His thoughts were like thick tea; he stirred them round.

He waited another hour. Should he go back to Mrs. Popham's and come again later? But every time he thought he would leave, he felt she might be back within a moment of his going. He stood up from time to time and attempted some physical jerks to keep his blood circulating. He began to wonder if she was going to come back at all. What if he had to stay here all night! Should he stay here all night? Could he survive in these conditions? She did. He flashed the torch on to the unattractive pile of blankets and straw. Yes, he was right. There was a lot more bedding than there had been a week ago. Was this an attempt to keep out the cold?

Then, flicking the torch around the hut, he saw a pair of shoes.

They hadn't been here before. He was sure of that. His heart gave a lurch. They were boy's shoes. They were quite new and, under a superficial covering of mud, reasonably well cared for. He looked inside them. There was a smudged name written with a ball-point pen. It looked like J. Schott. If they had been in the hut any length of time they would have been covered with mildew. He was positive they must have come during the last two weeks. He looked round for more evidence of Hare's companion. It now looked as if she might have someone living here with her. Was the situation going to be easier to deal with or more difficult?

He felt an extraordinary resentment against the owner of the shoes. What business had he to latch himself on to Hare? What was he doing here? And why didn't she send him away? The shoes didn't belong to a grown man, of

that he was sure. Luke, himself, had large feet but these shoes were half a dozen sizes smaller than his own.

He remembered that Arthur had thought he had seen Hare with a companion. It looked as if it might have been her after all—with the boy who was living in this shed.

Luke put down the shoes and a newspaper cutting slipped off a shelf where it had been propped against some flowerpots. He picked it up and was just going to put it back when he noticed it was a photograph of someone; the photograph had been heavily outlined in red pencil. He shone the torch onto it and looked more closely.

It showed an intellectual face; dark hair. Poor though the reproduction was, it had caught the intensity of the eyes.

It was a photograph of Humboldt; an old one that must have been published around the time he had won the Physics Award. There was half a column of writing underneath the photo but most of this was torn away.

Luke began to shiver uncontrollably. He was not only tired and fed up and abominably cold but he was suddenly afraid. There was something going on that he didn't understand.

At that moment the door opened.

Luke had been so preoccupied with his discoveries that he was taken completely off his guard. He had not even heard the footsteps approaching through the greenhouse, the exclamation when Hare had found the mower moved to one side.

Thoroughly startled, he flashed his torch.

He was unprepared for the panic which followed.

"Hare!" he cried but his voice came out cracked and

unrecognizable. She turned, pushing someone who had come in behind her. They were both out of the greenhouse like things possessed. Luke dropped the torch in his agitation and groveled around on the floor for it, swearing. It had rolled somewhere out of reach, and, afraid that he would lose Hare, he followed her out of the greenhouse and round the back of the house, stumbling and knocking himself in the darkness on sharp corners and clinging shrubs.

He tore out of the gate and onto the road. They had turned left and were making for the Archway Road. They had a good start but he thought he could catch them without difficulty. He had no hesitation in following them.

He called again but the two figures did not slacken their pace. Luke could see by the light of a street lamp that the other figure was a boy in an anorak. Almost directly at the end of Lyndown Gardens there was a pedestrian crossing over the Archway Road. It was a nasty crossing. Luke had thought this on several occasions when he had used it; traffic came down the hill at some speed and as there was no island in the middle of the road, you could easily get caught by cars flashing past who hadn't even seen you step out onto the crossing.

The two of them made straight for it.

The boy scarcely halted. There was not much traffic at that moment, for it was now fairly late in the evening. He saw someone approach fast but judged that he could get over in time. He was in the middle of the crossing before the car saw him. The driver jammed on his brakes in a screech of agony. The boy leaped, missing the car by inches.

Hare who had followed blindly after him was caught in full flight. The car, swerving to the side, went straight into her. The impact lifted her off the ground and flung her ten yards down the Archway Road. Her body like a piece of matchwood made an arc in the car light. The boy disappeared into the dusk somewhere on the other side of the road.

What followed for Luke had the unreality of a nightmare from which one struggles to extricate oneself to no avail.

Hare lay on the road as still as death.

"Is she dead?" said the driver of the car; he was shaking from head to foot. "I couldn't avoid her. I couldn't. She just came across. Two of them. I couldn't avoid her." He went over to the pavement and was sick.

There were people everywhere, cars piling up. Someone said, "Don't move her. Don't move her." Someone else directed the traffic, sorted out the pile-up of cars; moved the car that had knocked her down that the distraught driver had left blocking the middle of the road.

"Ambulance. We'll need an ambulance."

"I've phoned already."

There were people taking charge. Taking charge of Hare who didn't like people taking charge of her. But she lay there unknowing. Luke bent over her. The man who had been into a house to phone was holding her pulse. "She's not dead." He was calm; he seemed used to sorting out accidents. Luke, who still couldn't believe it had happened, thought that his heart would choke him. It seemed to be pushing up his throat. Don't let it be Hare lying there. Not Hare.

"D'you know her?"

Luke shook his head, he couldn't speak.

The ambulance arrived and a police car and there was noise, endless noise of ambulance bells and sirens. Noise that belonged to the television or that one heard in the distance on the main road. It never involved oneself. Now it was all around and he and Hare were in the middle of it.

She was wrapped in a blanket and put on a stretcher in the ambulance.

"Where are they taking her?" said Luke suddenly frantic. Hare was about to disappear again, this time with complete strangers.

"You saw it happen?" said a policeman.

Luke said, "Yes."

"Were you with her?"

"N . . . no."

"You don't seem very sure?" the policeman looked at Luke keenly. "It's upset you. Nasty things to see . . . you're sure you don't know her?"

"Well," said Luke. "I've seen her about a bit around here." He found he could not tell the policeman Hare's personal details. A feeling came over him that it would be disloyal to her. She, for some unknown reason, was trying to keep alone up here in London. Suddenly he couldn't betray her so that messages were sent off through the night to her parents, for people in Wyndsham to know. When he thought about it later, he could find no explanation for his behavior. In the light of reason it was quite extraordinary and reprimandable. He put it down to shock.

"Where are they taking her?" he repeated. "I'll go too."

"Local hospital I should think. Hey, let me have your

name and address. You'll be a witness . . ."

Luke got into the back of the ambulance just as they were closing the door. The driver of the car was in there too. He was suffering badly from shock.

"I couldn't avoid her," he said to Luke.

"No," said Luke. He wanted to say, "It was my fault. She was running away from me." But he didn't say anything. He just sat paralyzed by events while the ambulance tore smoothly to the hospital. He couldn't see Hare; she was covered by a gray blanket and an ambulance man sat by her, blocking her from view.

It was no distance to the hospital. The doors were opened and the stretcher that was Hare was taken out, professionally and speedily.

Nobody took any notice of Luke so he followed in at a door marked *Casualty*. They went down a long corridor and round into a hall where there seemed to be a great deal of activity. On a Saturday night people got drunk, fell about into roads, off motorbikes, drove too fast in cars, hurting themselves.

The stretcher and Hare were taken into a room at the side. Luke, about to follow, was stopped at the door.

"You with her?"

"Yes."

"Sit in the hall, will you? We'll let you know as soon as the doctor has had a look at her."

Automatically, Luke sat on a chair as he was told. He let the activity go on around him without knowing about it. He heard it buzzing above his head. He sat immobile with his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. The shocked car driver seemed to have disappeared. How long

did it take doctors to tell if someone was going to die? Was she dead already?

Luke lost all count of time. People moved about and around. Even at this time of night, people brought children and they cried. Several more stretcher cases came in. There was blood all over one. There had been no blood on Hare. She was just still.

It was almost an hour later when a nurse came up to him.

"Are you with someone?"

Luke said, "A girl. She was knocked down on the road. She's in that room over there."

The nurse said, "Oh . . . I'll just go and see. I think she's been taken upstairs to the ward."

After five minutes she came back. "Are you a relative?"

"No. I saw it happen. She seemed to be alone. I came along . . ."

"There seems to be no identification on her," said the nurse. "Do you know anything about her?"

"She was living somewhere around where I live."

"Where's that?" asked the nurse, jotting something down. "You don't know her exact address?"

"Is she all right?"

"No," said the nurse. "But they can't find anything specific at the moment. She'll have to be watched. She's in a coma. Blow on the head I should think but no broken bones apparently."

"*Will* she be all right?" Luke had a desire to take the nurse and shake her and force her to say, "Oh yes, perfectly. She'll wake up in the morning as right as rain," so that his nightmare could come to an end.

"There's no telling at this point. Depends on how bad the blow is. Look, if you want to know how she goes on, ring up tomorrow . . . or come in."

"What ward?"

"Gunter," said the nurse. "They'll be able to tell you more in the morning."

"Could I . . . could I stay here?" It seemed terrible to leave Hare alone, unconscious in this vast place.

"There's really no point. You would be far better in your own bed—you look as if you could do with some sleep." She gave him a questioning look. "Is she your girl friend?"

"No," said Luke.

She never would be.

But he knew now that he loved her.

"There's bound to be some family, or some sort of relatives. The police will track them down, don't worry." She smiled at him kindly. "And she's in good hands."

He went back to Mrs. Popham's. There seemed to be nothing else he could do. And, as the nurse said, she was in expert hands.

He let himself in quietly and tiptoed upstairs. Tonight there was no voice from the front room asking who it was. While all this nightmare had happened to Luke, people in the house had come in, eaten their supper, talked, played a sonata or a prelude perhaps, gone serenely to bed. If only he had never gone to Number 17 . . . if only . . . if only. How could he go through the rest of his life knowing that he had been the cause of this terrible thing?

It was now well after midnight. He knew he must talk

to someone. He tapped lightly on Arthur's door and went in, expecting to find him reading. The room was in darkness and there was no sound of anyone sleeping. It felt unoccupied. Cautiously he switched on the light. Arthur's bed had not been slept in.

Where on earth could Arthur be?

Luke thought he would go mad.

He sat on Arthur's bed, oblivious of the cold, waiting for Arthur to come in. He must come in. The feeling of panic that Luke had experienced when the car hit Hare was still there; he couldn't get rid of it. It was like a suffocating cloud that had engulfed him and he couldn't fight clear of.

He sat in Arthur's room for the best part of an hour.

It then hit him with horrible certainty that Arthur was not coming home. The last tube had come and gone. Had something happened to Arthur too?

Was life that bad?

He dragged himself to his feet and went to his own room. He opened the door and switched on the light. On his pillow was a note.

It said (in the scrawl of one of the music students):

> Arthur phoned. He said your Prof. had got the goods and there is a dress rehearsal tonight. He said go in to the Institute.

Luke looked at the note in a dazed state of disbelief. That evening the Institute had ceased to exist for him; it had not entered his mind for one single second. But now events began to filter back. Humboldt had been agitating for a "dress rehearsal" all week—ever since the news had come through that they could have the power

on June 5th. He said that if the Generating Board would consent to his having eighty percent of the current from the stations, there were things he could test out . . .

Obviously they had consented to let him have what he wanted at the very last minute—tonight.

Luke did not feel disappointment at missing an event in the lab. He was too numb for that. All he cared about was that Arthur would not be back. He would be away for most of the night. That was unbearable, beyond endurance.

Luke started pacing up and down the room. The wind blew a spatter of rain against the window—it had changed now from the dampening mist of the early evening to a real downpour. The cold water cistern behind the thin partition of wall gurgled and trickled. The night was full of water.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he could go down to the Institute now. They would still be there; they might not even have started. Better, far better to do something than nothing at all.

He put on his duffle coat and took off his shoes. He didn't want anyone to hear him go and ask questions now.

Three minutes later he was out in the road. The Archway Road and the crossing looked just the same as they always did. He had expected . . . he didn't know what he had expected. But not that everything would be so normal.

He had no idea how one got into Central London at this time of the night. Were there all-night buses? Down near the Holloway Road, he thumbed a lift on a lorry and got dropped off somewhere in the City. Following the lorry driver's instructions, he walked from Liverpool

Street, down Cheapside, past St. Paul's, up Fleet Street to the Strand. There was hardly any traffic about and no pedestrians except for an occasional drunk asleep in a doorway and a tramp, his feet tied up in strips of cloth, shuffling along the pavement. The great office blocks stood gaunt and staring in the rain and when an isolated taxi passed down the street, they threw back the clatter of its engine. The traffic lights winked through their endless sequence.

The floodlit dome of St. Paul's dominating the sky at the top of Ludgate Hill was lost to Luke, for he had his face down against the weather, buried in the collar of his coat. But the walk in the rain calmed some of his panic.

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There were lights on in the Institute and cars parked on both sides of Kent Street. He tried the front door and thought for an awful moment it was locked but it was merely stiff and when he gave it a good push, it opened.

As soon as he stepped inside the building he was aware of noise.

There was the low surging hum to which he had grown accustomed—the drive motors of the Van de Graaff. Above this tonight was an unfamiliar vibrating, whistling, piping note that he couldn't place at all.

Under other conditions he would have been excited, anxious to know what was going on. As it was, he realized that the experiment was in progress and that all he could do was to sit on the stairs and wait for Arthur. He couldn't go into the lab at this point.

He sat on perhaps the fifth stair from the bottom, opposite the lab door. The noise was colossal. It got inside his head and pushed against his brain, his poor battered brain that had had enough for one evening. He put his head down on his knees and wrapped his arms over his ears. It was the curious piping that pierced your eardrums more

than the powered beat of the motors. How on earth could they stand it in the laboratory where it must be so much worse?

What was happening in there, he wondered, without much curiosity. Was the machine functioning? Was time rolling backward within the framework of the "window"? He found it difficult to believe. Everything in the corridor here looked too familiar and twentieth century—a mop and bucket in the corner and a dirty anorak hanging on the radiator. Was a mere plaster wall and a closed door cutting him off from some dramatic time slide?

Then he heard a new sound—a high-pitched squeal. And he thought he heard a shout. Or was it his imagination? He gripped the banister beside him and found that he was sweating.

The door of the lab burst open. Something came out; something at floor level. It was lucky that Luke was not in the corridor or he might have been knocked out. As it was he leaped to his feet and higher up the stairs. Whatever it was came from the laboratory in a living torrent of bodies and swept down the corridor.

Black bodies or brown? The corridor was badly lit and it was difficult to see. There seemed to be dozens of them. The leaders pelted for their lives, noses straight ahead. They turned and went out of sight round the corner at the end. The rest of the pack followed. It seemed as if the flood would never end. The only sound was the scrabble of feet and an occasional squeal as one animal fell over another or bit the creature in front.

Then as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. The last one disappeared down the corridor and out of sight. Luke's

legs would no longer hold him up. He sat down quickly.

He had had a hallucination. Events had piled up on him and he was no longer sane.

He thought he had seen rats. He felt sick.

He realized that the piping noise had stopped and the beat of the Van de Graaff was dying away. The experiment must be over.

Simon Standen was in the doorway of the laboratory. His face under his beard looked as white as a sheet.

He said, "Did you see something come out of here?" He seemed too shaken to be surprised that Luke was sitting on the stairs.

Luke said, "I thought they were rats."

Simon said, "That's what I thought, too." He turned back into the laboratory. Then he came out again and asked, "Where did they go?"

"Down that way—round the corner. Could they get out?"

"Let's hope so," Simon said grimly. He went down the corridor and looked cautiously round the end. Then he disappeared. After a minute he came back.

"No sign of them, thank God. It looks as if they went the way the man takes the dustbins. Come on into the lab."

Luke followed him in.

There was a great air of spent excitement. Tension over. Work over. Humboldt was standing by the control console looking tired but immensely pleased. He was talking nineteen to the dozen to a thin man with a mustache whom Luke had never seen before. They were speaking French.

Luke stood silent, apart, feeling out of it.

Then Arthur came loping over. "Didn't you get a note . . . that flipping Harry. Or couldn't you get here in

time. . . . God, what a thing to miss . . ."

"It wasn't Harry's fault. I didn't get your note till after midnight. I was out until then. I came straightaway as soon as I got it." He couldn't explain about things here, in front of everybody.

"Is there something the matter, boy?" Arthur said in concern.

"I'll tell you but not now . . ."

Then Humboldt saw him. He said, "Luke! You missed it! Couldn't you make it before?" He sounded reproachful.

"Something happened. I'm sorry to have missed your experiment."

"*Our* experiment. You're in it too."

At any other time Luke would have been delighted and flattered to be counted in with the team.

But Humboldt was too excited to dwell on it. "This is Monsieur Triberg from the French Ministry. Luke Crantock . . . he's a student here."

M. Triberg inclined his head politely and murmured a greeting. Luke, who had anticipated a handshake that didn't materialize, dropped his hand back in some confusion.

Humboldt said, "Well, that was as good as I had dared to hope. We can go ahead now. The lines on the screen were really beginning to move. A full complement of power and we shall be away." He sounded exultant.

Simon was leaning back against the console, looking at the floor. He wasn't exultant; he looked troubled.

He said, "They were rats, Tom. Luke was outside the door and he saw them too. Luckily they escaped down the corridor and out by the dustbins."

Humboldt said with a touch of impatience, "Why get

in a state about a few rats, Simon? We've seen the odd one about before, haven't we? Good gracious, man, we're all linked up to the river. Look at those pipes. There must be masses of ways that rats could get in to the lab. . . . they can gnaw through metal, you know."

"They didn't come from the river," Simon said stubbornly. "They came from in front of the frame. What do you think, Monsieur?"

"Perhaps they looked as if they did." The Frenchman shrugged. "But it was not easy to see in the laboratory with the experiment running. They must have come up from underneath somewhere."

"Exactly," said Humboldt.

"Where?" Simon demanded, going over and examining the apparatus round the "window." "There's absolutely no place where they could have come from."

"For God's sake, Simon, don't make problems where they don't exist. There are enough technical worries without getting in a panic about something like rats . . ."

Simon turned away. Luke could see him trying to check an angry reply.

"If I hadn't got the door open in the nick of time, you would have had them snapping round your feet. They are nasty things, rats. Vicious. Luke saw them out there in the corridor; you should have seen his face—he looked pretty sick."

Luke nodded slightly but he didn't say anything. He couldn't become involved in an argument between Simon and Humboldt at this point.

Humboldt didn't seem to want an argument either. He said placatingly, "Get back home and get some sleep,

Simon. I'm not arguing with you about there *being* rats if you say so. But this place must be seething with them if you stop to think. A derelict barn of a place by the river. The noise of the Van de Graaff probably drove them out into the open. The din was pretty colossal." He turned away, his interest moving to the rest of the team. He told them it had all gone splendidly. "Three weeks from now," he said. "June 5th."

Simon said no more.

He had brought his car to the Institute. He offered Arthur and Luke a lift. He lived in North London, too. He said he could drop them off without too much of a detour.

"Thanks."

They were silent going back in the car. Arthur seemed to have dropped off to sleep, his head buried in his great-coat, too tired to sustain his jubilation.

Luke was also completely exhausted. The peak of the crisis was for the moment over and past. Going to the laboratory had diluted the agony and now he realized he had to live with events as they were, however painful.

Simon drove carefully because he was tired too. There was a surprising amount of traffic in the West End. He seemed preoccupied. As they jerked to a halt at some traffic lights, Arthur woke up and murmured, "Success, wasn't it?"

Simon said briefly, "I hope so," and forced the gear into first.

Luke said, "Do you have doubts?"

"I'm afraid we're involving ourselves in something bigger than we bargained for. What if those rats are con-

nected with the frame in some way? Tom won't entertain the idea, I know, but the more power applied . . . well, your guess is as good as mine."

"If Tom's not worried, need you be?"

"Tom is interested in the technology. That is where his brilliance lies. He will achieve the results he expects in that sphere, of that I have no doubt. But he won't stop to consider any aspect of his work but the scientific side. He'll turn a blind eye to what he considers a triviality that merely irritates him . . ."

Arthur mumbled, "Jocasta said . . . to Oedipus . . . or someone, 'Search not after truth, it is ever cruel . . .'"

Simon said sourly, "Good for Jocasta. I always knew she was my type." But Arthur had dropped off to sleep again and the sarcasm was wasted on him.

As they got out of the car, Simon said, "Don't blazon it abroad—about the rats. Not good publicity."

They crawled slowly up to the top of the house. The rain had stopped. Luke lay on his bed and told Arthur about Hare. The relief of telling someone was enormous —especially someone like Arthur who listened without interruption until Luke had finished.

Then he said quietly, "Cripes, boy, you've been through it." He walked over to the window where a colorless sky was growing lighter. "I knew something was up . . . but I thought it was seeing those rats . . . not this kind of thing."

He looked with compassion at Luke who was lying motionless, his arms cushioning his head, staring at the ceiling with wide blank eyes.

"Look, you've got to get some sleep. The news may be better in the morning. And stop blaming yourself. You're

not responsible for that accident. If anyone is, it's that boy. He ran into the road first."

"If I hadn't chased them, he would never have crossed the road."

"You'll drive yourself mad if you go on thinking that way. Go to bed. See how she is in the morning. You'll have to let her father know."

Luke groaned.

"He may know already," Arthur said. "If she comes round and tells them at the hospital who she is."

"I don't think she'll tell anybody. She wants to be up here alone. There must be some reason for it. That's why I didn't tell the police about her, I suppose. It felt like going behind her back when she was lying there unconscious. It makes all this living up here in a hut to no purpose if she's just hauled back home again . . ."

Arthur pushed up his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. "Work it out tomorrow, boy."

Luke slept until eleven o'clock the next morning. He was woken by one of the music students hammering on his door.

It was Harry. He poked his head round and said something about the police being downstairs.

For a moment Luke was unable to orientate himself. When he did, he wished he hadn't. He was brought face to face with all that had happened the night before.

He pulled on some jeans and a sweater and went downstairs. Mrs. Popham was at the bottom; she said loudly, "There's some police gentlemen want to see you, Mr. Crantock. I gather you saw an accident on that crossing on Archway Road last night. Shall I tell them to come back later when you've had something to eat?"

Even in this moment of tension Luke realized that he was now part of her household. She was ready to protect him against all comers in the way she had initially protected her music students against *him.*

He said, "It's all right. I'll see them now."

"What a nasty thing to happen. I expect it upset you. That crossing is a death trap. I've said so time and again."

A death trap. Had they come to tell him that Hare was dead?

"I've shown them into my room. You can see them in there. Give a call if you want me, I'm in the kitchen." She patted his arm.

Luke padded into Mrs. Popham's room. It was full of green light from the trees in the garden at the back. It housed a grand piano and a small upright. Two policemen were sitting on her settee. They got up when Luke came in.

"Mr. Crantock?"

"Yes."

"I believe you witnessed an accident on the Archway Road last night?"

Why did they have to be so formal? *Get on, get on and say so if Hare's dead.*

"A young girl was involved and no identification on her."

Why were they telling *him* that?

"Do you know how she is?" Luke was amazed that his voice came out cool and detached as if it were another person from the one screaming with impatience in his head.

"Can't say I do," said the policeman stolidly. "I was told to come round here and see if you knew anything about

her. We've been unable to trace any kind of relative, you see."

"Most likely she's not come round," said the other one. "Else she'd have told them herself, wouldn't she?"

That's what you think.

"You don't know her name?" the first one asked Luke. "I understand you have seen her around this area."

"Yes," said Luke and his pulse beat fast. "I mean I have seen her about."

The policeman took this to mean that he didn't know her name—as Luke intended he should—and he didn't ask that question again. "Any particular spot?"

"I saw her at the Underground and she turned into this road . . ."

"But you don't know where she lives . . ."

Luke didn't answer and the policeman, busy writing down a note, said no more.

The other one said, "We'll have to knock on some doors, see if anyone else can give us a lead."

"We were hoping you might have a lead for us."

Would they go round to the back of Number 17 and find her belongings?

"And last night—you were behind her when the accident happened?"

"Y-yes."

"The driver of the car seems to think there were two of them. He said she was with a lad who crossed the road in front of her."

"You think she was with this boy?" asked the second policeman.

"It looked like it."

"You haven't seen him before?"

"No."

"And they were running? The driver said they rushed out of the end of this road and straight across without stopping to look. Would you agree?"

"Yes. My impression was that the driver didn't have a chance of avoiding them."

At least he could do his best for the poor driver.

"This running. Did you have the impression that they were running away from something?"

Luke shrugged. "Just running . . ."

"Up to no good, we think. They might have been into someone's house and were making a getaway."

"Oh!" For a moment Luke nearly gave himself away. He had it on the tip of his tongue to say that Hare was not that kind; that was the last thing she would be involved in.

"It's odd that the boy didn't stop, you see, when the girl was knocked down."

That hadn't occurred to Luke. He hadn't spared any thought for the boy. So her companion wasn't much of a friend to Hare after all.

Mrs. Popham came in and said, "Has Mr. Crantock been any help? What a terrible thing . . ."

"He'll be the most help to the driver of the car that hit her. It's a serious offense to knock someone down on a pedestrian crossing. Poor man will need a supporting witness."

"Will I appear in court?" Luke said in alarm.

"Dunno it will come to that. But you ought to be ready to witness in a case like this. It's one's public duty. Depends on the condition of the girl. Whether she dies."

Whether she dies. Just coolly like that.

"Did I hear you say you were trying to trace her family?" said Mrs. Popham. "Is she up in London without their knowledge?"

"You'd be surprised, missus, how many young girls come up to London on the loose. They get into bad company—perhaps like this boy—and end up in trouble. Their parents don't have any idea of where they are."

Mrs. Popham shook her head. Her sympathy was real. "How terrible," she said again.

Luke sat looking at his hands. She did not know how terrible.

The questions were almost over.

"Oh, one thing. What height did you say the lad was?"

Luke hadn't said. *Shoes Size 6½. Name J. Schott.* "About the same height as the girl."

"Sounds like a youngster but you can't tell."

The policemen left to continue their enquiries.

Luke declined Mrs. Popham's offer to get him something to eat—it wasn't long until lunch time anyway. He made his escape upstairs on the pretext that he must shave. Mrs. Popham, with the best of wills, obviously wanted to talk about the accident while she plied him with toast. Luke couldn't face it.

After lunch Luke got a bus and went to the hospital. When he got there all his fears of the night returned tenfold. The huge, scurrying, hurrying place where no one seemed to be anything personal was as alien to Hare as anywhere on earth. It was visiting time and ordinary people, looking oddly out of place in the clinical corridors, were making their way toward the wards.

Luke asked the way to Gunter and was sent across a big entrance hall and down a mile-long corridor to the other

end of the block. He hesitated by the door of the ward for there wasn't a nurse to be seen. He went in slowly. Most of the beds had visitors round them. In those that didn't, the patients looked up expectantly as if Luke were the person they were waiting for. In the two beds nearest the door, people were lying deathly white with their eyes closed. But not Hare. This must be the accident ward. There were flowers on a central table and quiet talk and a couple of televisions blinking from the top of the wall. Three beds had their curtains pulled right across. Was Hare in one of these? Or had she already died and been taken elsewhere? His panic increased and he turned in desperation for someone to ask.

An Indian nurse had come up like a mouse behind him. She looked very young, hardly older than Hare. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a—a girl who was brought in last night. She was in a car accident. At least knocked down . . . she was unconscious . . ."

"She still is," the nurse said quietly. "She's over there." She pointed. "Do you know her? They haven't traced her family so they'll be . . ."

"I'm not her family," Luke said hurriedly. "I saw the accident and I wanted to know how she was getting on."

"She's just the same. A coma, I believe . . ." Someone came in behind them with a query. "Excuse me a moment . . ."

The nurse turned away to speak to the other visitor.

On impulse Luke went over to the drawn cubicle. He took a deep breath and stepped inside, letting the curtain fall behind him.

Hare lay on the flat hospital bed. It was a shock to

actually see her there—in reality—so still. She was usually so mobile, always on the edge of flight. He had imagined her head would be bandaged but there was nothing to show that she was injured. Her face was drawn and thin and as white as marble. Her big eyes closed, she looked more peaceful than he had ever seen her. She was so slight that her thin body hardly raised the blanket.

Luke felt an awful contracting of his throat. He stood and looked at her.

"I didn't mean to kill you, Hare," he whispered.

It might have been ten minutes or ten hours that Luke stood there. Time made no impression. His mind was filled with the sadness and the waste, the sheer hopelessness of everything.

The curtain flicked back and a surprised voice said, "Good gracious me, what are you doing here?" Luke composed his face before turning round. A brisk staff nurse stood behind him.

"I wanted to know how she was. I saw her knocked over . . ."

"Are you connected with the poor man who did it? I understand that he is in bad shape. Well, this one shows no sign of coming round. Her heart's strong though and so's her pulse."

"Is it?" said Luke trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"You shouldn't have come in like this," she said. "Did someone say you could?"

"No," Luke said quickly not wanting to implicate the little Indian nurse. "I just came, I'm afraid, and no one seemed to be about . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"Ring up tomorrow," she said. "There may be some

change after forty-eight hours. Pretty child, isn't she?"

Luke's stomach contracted this time. Hare's golden hair lay against the white hospital pillow.

"Yes."

"It's not hopeless," said the nurse who under her briskness seemed human after all. "Some of these comas, they come out of them quite normal."

But what if they were strange when they went in?

"Ring up tomorrow," she repeated. "And tell your father—or whoever it was—that it won't do any good worrying. Children like this ought to be cared for. Not left to run about on the streets at all hours of the night."

How old did she think Hare was? Six? Then he saw that the nurse, who genuinely thought him to be a relative of the driver of the car, was only trying to be kindly. He left.

On the way home he thought he would go in to Number 17 and collect Hare's belongings. She would be unlikely to be going back there, he thought grimly. It seemed wrong to leave them outside to moulder. And when he was truthful with himself he didn't particularly want the police to find them if they went looking around there. Better that Hare remained a mystery to them at least for the time being. He felt no guilt in doing this; he was in it up to his eyebrows as regards the police, he thought. What difference did it make to be a step further in?

He hated going in there when it came to it. He wondered momentarily if anyone was watching him. But the two policemen had asked all their questions and had left the road. It didn't look at all disturbed and Luke doubted that they had gone round the back of Number 17.

But once inside the shed and looking round, he saw that some things *had* gone. The boy's shoes for instance. This

gave him a start. So the boy had been back. The thought of him did not please Luke. Had he spent the night here after disappearing into the darkness?

He looked down. Hare's bag with the few things she had brought from home stood where it had stood last night. It seemed a lifetime ago. Luke could not help dwelling on how he had sat there then—free of care—and how he stood here now—Hare unconscious, the guilt of her injury resting on him. A sound made him prick up his ears. Someone was coming in round the house.

The police. He was in a tricky situation. How would he handle it? Say that he had just discovered Hare's hideout? Luke did not like telling deliberate lies. He had tried to be evasive that morning, not directly untruthful.

As if things were not bad enough.

The steps came through the greenhouse. He had his back to the door. He expected someone to ask him what he was doing but no one spoke. He couldn't put off turning round for ever. The hair on his neck began to prickle. He spun round.

In the doorway stood the boy. There was no doubting who he was. He looked at Luke in silence.

Then he said, "Where have they taken her?"

Luke looked back at him. *J. Schott.* A conflict of emotions passed through him. At last he said, "She's in the local hospital. Unconscious."

The boy said no more. He turned and left.

Luke didn't attempt to follow this time. He didn't even ask him the questions that might have flashed through his mind on the previous day. He didn't even think to say, if you go to the hospital, they will catch you. They think you have committed a crime, led Hare astray.

What took Luke's breath away and robbed him of the power to think or act, was one fact. The boy had the same look as Hare. He was of her kind.

15

Luke was glad to get back to work in the lab on Monday. At least it gave him a few hours' relief when he did not think exclusively of what had happened over the weekend.

Everyone seemed to be delighted with the way in which the experiment had run on Saturday night. No one mentioned the subject of rats again.

There was now a real race against time to get the Cascade Multiplier finally de-bugged before June 5th.

"It ran pretty well," Alan said, "Tom was pleased."

"Congratulations and celebrations," intoned Kelly. His voice was muffled by the cupboard where he was half-buried, trying to wrench something from the back.

"It's got to be absolutely perfect," Alan said uncompromisingly. "No congratulations at this stage. Or at least only modified ones. A lot of hard work ahead. Everyone had better prepare to stay overtime . . ."

"Night shifts," said Kelly. "And no sex discrimination." He waggled a finger at Mary. "Women do their fair share."

"A pity you missed the first send-off." Alan squeezed past Luke who was gazing out of the window, his mind dwelling on the multitudinous shapes of the rooftops and only half on the conversation around him. "It really was

something to hear the ripple-over discharge . . ."

"Do you mean to say," Kelly got to his feet, "that lad missed the rehearsal? Tch . . . tch. Whatever could have kept you away?"

Luke said, "There was a mix-up . . ."

"Tied up with some girl, I'll be bound," Kelly said raucously. "Looks a woman-killer, doesn't he . . ."

This was so near the mark—although not in the way that Kelly intended—that Luke couldn't say anything. Mary looked at him, tight-lipped and silent. Arthur had put her in the picture about the events of Saturday night.

She growled at Kelly, "Can't you just shut up, darling . . ."

He said, "All right. Keep your cool. Everyone in the lab's so touchy this morning, it's not true," and went on his way to College, whistling and undaunted.

"June 5th will be doubly an experience," Alan said calmly and the moment passed.

Luke worked late that evening and there was a delay on the Underground on his way home. By the time he got to Mrs. Popham's it was long past visiting time at the hospital.

"Ring up," said Arthur. "There's no point in going over there. You'll flog yourself to death at this rate. See if there is any news first."

But Luke couldn't get through. The line was endlessly engaged and then it merely crackled. He telephoned the operator and got no satisfaction. "There's a fault on the line," said a soothing, impersonal voice. "The engineers will be on to it in the morning."

"But it's a hospital I'm trying to get through to," Luke grated desperately.

"I'm sorry," said the unsorry voice and Luke pictured her with her earphones on, knitting cozily in some distant exchange amid rattling tea cups. "It can't be dealt with tonight."

Luke slammed the receiver down.

Arthur said, "Even if she had come round you couldn't go and see her now." He suggested that Luke join in a game of backgammon.

"Did you try and get Mr. Bingley?" he asked later when Luke's lack of concentration made it apparent that any attempt at a game that evening was merely a farce.

"No."

"Well, I think you should."

"Look," Luke shouted, "it's the fourth time you've asked me if I've rung Mr. Bingley. I know I should but I haven't. So could you shut up about it?"

"It's all very well," Arthur said with unusual stubbornness. "You may not feel strongly about your family but some people's parents are close . . ."

"When have I said I don't feel strongly about my family?" said Luke, enraged.

"You haven't. Not in so many words, but I'm not daft."

Luke swung out, banging the door.

God. The cheek of some people. Bloody Arthur. Who did he think he was!

Later he went in to Arthur and said, "Sorry."

Arthur said, "I shouldn't have said it, anyway." He went downstairs to the kitchen and wheedled his way round Mrs. Popham so that he came up ten minutes later with two steaming mugs of drinking chocolate.

In the morning, they had cleared the hospital line but when Luke did get through there seemed to be some kind

of confusion. No one knew how Hare was.

"Is that Gunter ward?" he asked for the fourth time. Yes it was. But they could not say how the girl was.

"Do you mean she's died?" said Luke and his calm, detached self took over as it had done in front of the policeman.

No, no she certainly hadn't died.

"Has she recovered consciousness?"

"Yes." Whoever he was talking to seemed to think she had, the night before.

Could he speak to the nurse? But the nurse was busy and couldn't come to the telephone. Could he call again tonight? And who was he? Not a relative. He patiently went through the explanation of having been at the scene of the accident.

He felt uneasy all day. Something was going on. He wouldn't try to telephone again, he would go straight to the hospital on his way home.

He went up to the ward. He thought if he walked purposefully, no one would question him. It worked. At the desk near the door was the staff nurse he had seen on Sunday. He went in to her.

"Oh! Hullo!"

Luke looked down the beds. The cubicle where Hare had been was empty, the curtains pulled right back. He looked round quickly to see if she was in any of the other beds.

"How's the girl? I thought I would call in. I couldn't get through on the telephone."

The nurse gave him an uneasy look. "You're not family."

"No."

The nurse took a deep breath. "She's gone."

"Gone? Do you mean . . ." His lips framed the word but no sound came.

"No. No, not dead. She's disappeared."

"Disappeared?" said Luke like a robot.

"She came round yesterday . . . late afternoon. But she wouldn't say anything. We got no information from her at all. We thought the head injury must have affected her and we didn't press her. And then this morning . . . she wasn't there."

A spark of joy lit up in Luke, deep down.

"But how could she have got up and gone without anyone knowing?"

"Ask me another," the staff nurse said wearily. "As you can imagine there has been a great search. She's not anywhere in the hospital. She must have got up and gone in the night. There was only one nurse on duty and she has a lot to look after—we're very short-staffed, the usual story. She must have been attending to someone else and the girl slipped past her."

"But she was in no fit state to go out," said Luke and the joy refused to be quenched.

"I wouldn't have thought so. I mean . . . not talking. This is what is worrying. She may have collapsed somewhere."

Not talking. Luke could have told her that this meant Hare was her usual self.

"She had some soup last light. She was moving her limbs on the bed all right."

Luke realized that all this put the nursing staff responsible for the ward in a very tight corner. He began to feel sorry for the nurse. Was she taking the rap? This

accounted for no one being willing to tell him on the telephone this morning that she was missing—and why they were anxious to know if he was a relative.

"She may turn up," he said, trying not to sound as overjoyed as he felt. "She may not have gone far."

But he knew he could have said with more truth—"You'll not see her again. She's got away."

"And she hadn't got any clothes. The patients don't have clothes by the bed when they come in as accidents."

That was a slight poser. Luke had her hold-all with her change of clothes in his room at Mrs. Popham's—or had he?

"It seems tragic," said the staff nurse suddenly, and her tight look of efficiency crumpled. "Her lying there unconscious and no one knowing or claiming her. And when she came round, she looked so . . . how shall I put it . . . lost. She was a lovely-looking child. And where on earth has she got to? There are so many of these children in London . . lost, morally and socially. Life is harsh."

She was obviously under pressure, Luke thought, to talk in this fashion. He had caught her in an unguarded moment. Because some of his own tension was at last released, Luke felt desperately sorry for the nurse in her dilemma.

"She might turn up," he said as the only shred of comfort he could offer.

"The only clue we have," she said, "is that Nurse Yussef heard her call 'Johann' several times. Or something that sounded like Johann. Which makes it worse, if she was German—goodness knows where her home is; it might not even be in this country."

Johann? Johann. German for John. That didn't make any sense to Luke at all. He said, "Perhaps she misheard.

Anyway, if she turns up in our district again, I will let you know."

"Please do," she said, "especially if she is in need of treatment." And for a moment she looked happier.

Luke raced home. He raced for the bus and once off it, raced for Mrs. Popham's. He tore up to his room so that Arthur came out and said, "Cripes! What's up?"

Luke was scrabbling in a hold-all that was by his cupboard. He looked up at Arthur and his face had a new calmness. "She's come round and she's left hospital." He laughed for the first time since Saturday.

"D'you mean she's okay, boy? She's all right?"

"Sounds like it. Sounds like she's the normal Hare."

"What do you mean 'sounds'? Didn't they let you see her?"

"She's not there," Luke said triumphantly. "She's escaped. They're all het up. I suppose they are responsible for her."

"It wasn't a prison."

"It would be to her."

"You can't be in a coma; get up and walk out . . ."

"Hare could," Luke said, remembering how Hare had thrown off her other two nasty experiences that he had witnessed. "She walked out in the night. They thought she didn't have any clothes but—" he held up her hold-all—"I brought this back from the shed on Sunday thinking I was collecting her clothes . . . and there aren't any clothes in here. They've gone. It must be that boy. He had already taken them out; that's why he wanted to know where she was."

"You mean he worked her 'escape'?"

"I don't know about that. But they must have met

somewhere. He took these clothes to her. I'm sure that must be the explanation."

Arthur looked nonplussed. "I'm glad for you, Luke. I can see what it means to you . . . but there's still plenty to be resolved . . ."

"If you thought you had killed someone," said Luke simply, "and then they recovered, wouldn't that outweigh everything else?"

"You didn't kill her. I kept telling you . . ."

"That's as may be."

"It's back to where it was a week ago. Except that you don't even know where she is. Will she come back to Number 17?"

Luke didn't think she would. She would find other lodgings. Both she and the boy knew now that Luke was on their track and that if they wanted to remain undiscovered they would have to move elsewhere.

"And I never gave her that money from her father," said Luke, stricken.

It seemed to Arthur that money was the least of Hare's problems.

PART FOUR

FINALE

16

Warm weather came at last. The expanse of sky seen from the top lab, bright blue when Luke arrived in the morning, was white with heat by lunch time. The glaring light of the sun grilled the rooftops below the window, stabbed the glass of the skylights as if it would set them on fire. So bright was the glare that it dazzled the eye and you could not look.

Sweating in the Underground, they merely existed until they could get out at the Archway. The fumes in the Archway Road hung longer, more densely in the warm air and on the pavements the dust grew dry and was kicked in clouds by the Bogota children playing football. Their games did not change with the season. By the end of the week when the dustcarts were due, there was a rancid smell of rubbish in the basement areas of Lyndown Road.

Only by the river was it cool and fresh for the sun could not plumb the heaviness of the water. In the lunch hour they took rolls and ham and ate them on the Embankment steps.

Luke felt happy because this warmer weather must make life a whole lot easier for Hare, wherever she was.

For that first week he was sustained by the thought that she was alive and free to live as she wanted to live.

But after a week he started to fret. Suppose he never found her again? Suppose she never returned home? Suppose she had left her family for good? Mr. Bingley, when Luke finally rang him, made every effort to sound optimistic but Luke had none of the chemist's stoical philosophy and became increasingly irritable. He was short-tempered at work and short-tempered at Mrs. Popham's. There were evenings when the sound of the oboe and bassoon, floating up from below, and the piano tinkling endlessly in the front room drove him out of the house to walk up Highgate Hill to the back of the Heath.

But there his irritation was fed by seeing people of his own age all around him enjoying the summer weather with their girl friends; entwined; holding hands, laughing; sharing pleasures. He was only now realizing what a dead-end relationship he was doomed to have with Hare, even if he ever found her again. He would never get to know her as a person, talk to her, touch her; *they* wouldn't go on the river or to the theater or walk along the Embankment drinking endless cans of Coke like Arthur and Mary.

The relationship between Arthur and Mary was flourishing. "It won't last," said the gossips at the Institute. (The Institute abounded in gossip.) Luke didn't think so either. As far as he could see Arthur and Mary had not a thing in common. But it did last, and they thrived together. Arthur became less deadpan and Mary more natural, they went from strength to strength.

Luke got to like Mary, too. When he broke through

the crust of her pose and began to know her, he found she was good fun and a perceptive girl in her way. But he didn't find it easy to be charitable when the two of them constantly went off for meals together, or up on the Heath, or watched television in the kitchen. Mrs. Popham was surprisingly tolerant of girl friends if she liked them.

Arthur and Mary, conscious on their part of Luke's misery, put out frequent invitations for him to join them, but most of these he refused, having no wish to be a gooseberry.

"Where can I find her—Hare?" he repeatedly asked Arthur.

"You can't," Arthur said, thinking sympathy was now misplaced as the case looked so hopeless. It was the lunch hour and they were by the Thames. Arthur was making a dilatory attempt at an old *Sunday Times* crossword. "Turn your mind to 13 down. *Given a hard knock lie back, having passed the ball to someone.* Five, four beginning with B . . ."

But Luke couldn't turn his mind to anyone but Hare, it seemed.

Mary lit a cigarette and took a puff before passing it to Arthur. "Why don't you throw away that pipe, Luke—" it had gone out for the third time in as many minutes—"Must do murder for your blood pressure. And it does look rather like a stage prop . . . Here, have a relaxing fag . . ."

But Luke was in no state of mind to take criticism kindly. He bit the end of his pipe savagely; it burned the back of his tongue.

It was a good thing that he had the intensive work of the lab to occupy his thoughts and energy for most of the day.

That same afternoon, Luke overheard a conversation between Alan and Mary. He was working at the next bench and at first his concentration on his own work was such that he did not lend an ear to their talk. Moreover they were talking French which they frequently did. Mary was fluent in the language for she had a French grandmother. Most people at the Institute were bilingual.

His school French was good enough for him to pick up some of their phrases . . . *les enfants . . . à peu près bizarre. . . . moroses. . . . silentes.*

He leaned over the intervening bench and said quickly, "What children?"

Mary looked at Luke in surprise. "Gracious, Luke! What's hit you? You'd think the kids were under your chair . . ."

"What children are you talking about?"

Alan said, "Have you some interest in them? I was telling Mary that I have seen the same group several times this week when I've gone down to the Temple Underground. They seem to hang about in the gardens there."

"What were you saying they looked like?"

"Do you mind—that's my arm you're gripping! They looked rather peculiar. That's what first attracted my attention. Different from the usual gangs. They don't seem to say anything, just wait about. And if you look at them, they turn away or just stare as if you weren't there . . ."

"A gang of dropout kids," Mary suggested. "Maybe a

sit-in from some school. They have them at all ages now, you know."

"When did you see them? When were they waiting?" Luke's hands felt quite clammy.

"Er . . . was it last night? Or the night before. I was going home with Tom. Must have been Friday the first time . . . and then again yesterday evening. If you keep on dropping that plate, Luke, it will chip . . ."

"Sorry," said Luke turning away and biting his lip in a furor of doubt and hope that had sprung up quite irrationally in his breast.

"Don't you see," he said to Mary when Alan had gone away to do something on the other side of the lab, "it might be them? It might be Hare and that boy . . ."

"Ohh . . . ohh," she said. "I couldn't think what had got into you." Then she looked carefully at Luke. "Don't be too hopeful . . . there are gangs of children all over London. And you said she was only with one other boy . . ." She tried to toss it off casually. She felt Luke was clutching at hopeless straws.

"I expect you're right." But he would go down to the Temple that evening. It was after all the only straw he had to clutch at.

He went down to the Temple after he had finished work. He went into the entrance of the tube and took up a vantage point where he could look over the gardens without being seen himself. He waited for what seemed ages—over half an hour. There was no suggestion of a group of children among the secretaries and lawyers that came hurrying into the station, eager to beat the rush hour home. That was on Tuesday. On Wednesday he

went again with the same result.

On Thursday he worked much later than usual. When he came out of the Institute the rush hour was long past. Tom Humboldt came down the steps behind him.

"Hello. I didn't know you went this way home, Luke."

Luke muttered something about meeting someone. He knew that Humboldt went on the District line from the Temple, eastward to the outskirts of London round Snaresbrook.

"Only another ten days; I think everything is going to schedule. Alan seems happy with your lab."

"Yes . . . I think he is."

"Don't miss it this time, will you!"

"No." Luke attempted a rueful grin.

"Damn," said Humboldt, "I meant to go into the travel agent this lunch hour. I have to get an air ticket to go over to Germany at the end of June and the flights get very booked up at this time of year."

"Where do you go?"

"To a small town, a kind of spa, just to the south of Hanover. Not really a holiday place but I have an aunt and uncle there and they have no family so I try to go and see them once every summer."

In Germany—near Hanover. Something stirred in Luke's memory. He couldn't for a moment think why. Then it came to mind—Mr. Bingley talking in his dispensary, saying where he had lived when he was first married, where Hare had been born—in Germany, in a small town twenty miles south of Hanover . . .

Humboldt was saying, "I wondered, Luke, if you would do us a report on the experiment. An eye witness account. We shall need to have one—and you haven't a

specific job. We shall have to limit the number of people who watch the experiment to those who *have* got jobs, otherwise we'll have the whole university wanting to come . . . it would justify your existence there."

"Oh! Thanks!" He was struck, not for the first time, by Humboldt's thoughtfulness on his behalf. "I should like to."

"Good. That's settled then."

They had now reached the bottom of Kent Street. Automatically Luke looked across to the gardens.

They were there.

There was no doubt who they were—the children that Alan had spoken of.

They were in a group, clustered round the entrance to the booking hall of the Underground.

Luke, his heart pounding, searched frantically for one face.

"You going east?" To Luke, distracted as he was, Humboldt's voice came from the far distance.

"No . . . no, you go ahead. Don't wait. I've got to buy a ticket and everything . . ."

"Right. Good-bye then. See you tomorrow."

Luke said good-bye, hardly knowing that he said it.

Hare. Hare. You must be here. You must be one of them.

He saw J. Schott first and knew then that he had hope.

Then he found her, standing a little apart from the group and behind someone else so that in his first panic-stricken search he had missed her.

Luke had not set eyes on Hare since the day he had seen her lying like a dead thing under the sheet in the hospital. A crushing wave of emotion swept over him. He

wanted to run out and touch her and speak to her.

With difficulty he stayed where he was. He sidestepped and didn't go into the Underground after Humboldt. He watched the group.

There were about ten of them, of varying ages, he thought, although for the most part adolescents like Hare rather than children. They looked scruffy in the extreme, travel worn and unkempt. If you walked past with only a cursory glance you would take them for a band of hippy urchins such as one saw in all parts of London these days. It was only when you stopped and really looked that you saw this strange fey remoteness. It was the brand of each one of them, of that there was no doubt.

To see it collectively in the group when he thought it existed only in Hare—and J. Schott—gave Luke the most tremendous jolt.

They were drawing back now from the entrance of the Underground. It had been another hot day and the evening was still very warm. They wandered into the gardens and sat down—on the grass or on one of the benches, of which there were several. They didn't seem to talk. Just sat. Hare had her back against someone else. She looked as if she was threading bits of grass together quite aimlessly. Luke moved round to see if he could see her back rest. As he thought, it was J. Schott. Were they still sharing a roof? Luke wondered with a pang. How long would they stay in the gardens?

He was late for supper already. It wasn't a good night to follow them. If Alan had seen them on more than one occasion they must come here fairly often. He found it difficult to tear himself away and waited, watching them for some time. At last he felt he must go—but it was with

a heart lighter than it had been for days that he made his way back up Kent Street to catch his train.

Arthur, that evening, was home before him.

"Guess what?"

"You've found Hare!"

"How did you know?"

"It's written all over your face, boy."

"Down by the Temple Underground. Where Alan said he had seen them."

"What does she look like, is she in bad shape?"

Luke paused, considering. "No . . . I wouldn't say so. Messy and dirty perhaps but not starving or anything. Some of them looked pretty rough, though."

"There *are* more of them?"

"Ten or eleven . . . what have they come for, d'you think?"

Arthur shook his head, quite baffled. He couldn't make head nor tail of the business. "I suppose it's logical for them to find their own kind. That's why she must have come to London . . . not to get away from Wyndsham as you thought, but to find soul mates."

"Not soul mates," Luke corrected him. "Anything but that . . ."

"You know what I mean. *You* must be incidental, Luke. The fact that she followed you in the first place . . . it must have been that she knew no one." He stopped because he didn't want to be hurtful.

But Luke merely sighed without bitterness now. "Don't worry. I know. I could never kid myself really that she wanted any connection with me other than a familiar face across the road. She just didn't know where to start looking for somewhere to live so she followed me off

the train. Now she has found others like herself."

"But *how* did they find each other? And that they should turn up again around the Institute, when there's the whole of London—that is incredible." Arthur frowned.

"That reminds me—"

"Of what?"

Luke said slowly, "—of something I found in the garden shed, that night I was there." Ever since he had seen it, it had been buried in some dark recess of his mind. So much had happened immediately afterward that he hadn't given it another thought. "A newspaper cutting of Humboldt. A photograph of him."

"Of *Tom!!*"

"Yes. What do you make of that?"

After a pause, Arthur said, "I make nothing at all. You're the Sherlock Holmes round here, pipe and all."

"Another thing. She was born in the same part of Germany as Tom goes to see his relatives—might even be the same town—somewhere south of Hanover."

Arthur stirred uneasily. "He goes every year . . ." He tapped his teeth with his pencil. "How could Tom have any connection? We're reading things into it that aren't there. It's all too farfetched."

"I was with Tom tonight when they turned up," Luke said quietly. "I walked down to the Temple with him. On previous evenings when I've been alone, they're not around."

Neither of them said anything for a moment. Luke leaned with his back against the window, blocking out the last of the light. Arthur got up and fumbled through a pile of work he had brought home.

"I'd better get on with this." He wished this hadn't happened now just when they were all so tied up, so tense about work.

"Luke!"

"Yeah?"

"Don't get too desperate . . . about Hare. It's not likely to be . . . well, fruitful, boy."

"Mr. Bingley said that." His mother had said that, too, with underlying reasons that were different from Arthur's and Mr. Bingley's. But one had no control over one's emotions however many warnings one had. Warnings were so many words.

Arthur said, "Talking of Mr. Bingley . . ."

"I know. I'm going to do it . . . now." Luke grinned and went off downstairs. Arthur, who knew when he was treading on delicate ground, settled into his work with relief.

When Luke told Mr. Bingley that Hare had reappeared, there was silence at the other end of the telephone. It was obvious that Mr. Bingley found it hard to speak for a moment. Then he said, "Thank God." The fact that there were more of these children stunned him. He had no suggestion to offer as to why they were in London. Luke promised to find out what he could—where they were living. He could do no more. They left it at that.

On the days following, rather than hang about waiting for Tom Humboldt near the Institute or round the entrance to the Underground, Luke found a seat across the road from the gardens, on the pavement by the river. Here he could watch in more comfort and with less likelihood of being seen.

Tom Humboldt, who was utterly and totally absorbed in last-minute preparations for the experiment, showed no sign of noticing the group in the gardens. Luke wasn't surprised. He was ready to wager that not one moment of Humboldt's waking existence was spent in thinking of anything outside the lab. It crossed his mind to draw Humboldt's attention to the children. But who would it profit—and what would it precipitate? There was time for that after June 5th.

On the Sunday evening when Luke was sitting on the seat—they were working a seven-day week at Kent Street as Alan had said they might have to—an American voice said, "D'you know those kids?"

He turned quickly. His neighbor on the seat was a woman of about forty. She was suntanned but thin and knobbly under her tan and she was nervously puffing a cigarette, which she stubbed out, only half smoked.

He had had no idea that someone was watching him, as he watched the children. He said cautiously, "Not really."

"Oh. You seemed kind of interested. I've seen you here before."

"Do you know them?" he asked her in his turn.

She hesitated a moment, then she said, "One of them is my son."

Luke said, "Oh." There was silence for a moment. Then he said, 'I'm sorry . . . for you, I mean." He felt he must offer some explanation for his remark as she had confided in him. "One of the girls comes from the same village as I do . . . so I do know something about them."

She lit another cigarette and said with desperate eagerness, "Oh really! Which one?"

"The very fair one . . . with the long hair, on this side of the grass."

"Well, what do you know! Griselda! She's been to my flat!"

"Been to your flat?" Who was this woman and could she supply an answer to some of the things that were taking place?

For a moment he was at a loss as to which line to take. Then he asked, "You wouldn't know where she is living by any chance? Her father is anxious to get in touch with her. She left home without saying where she was going and you can appreciate how worried he is."

"I can well appreciate it. But I can't help you. She came in one night with my boy—" She nodded across at the group. There was one lad who looked infinitely neater and better cared for than the others; Luke had noticed him previously for this very fact. This American lady was the answer; he was living at home. "She brought another boy too, John. I gave them something to eat. They seemed pretty hungry. But they left without saying where they were going." She looked at Luke keenly. "They are difficult to hold down to anything . . . one can't question . . ."

Luke said, "I know. I've frightened Griselda away by appearing suddenly in front of her on a previous occasion. That's why I sit over here. I'm afraid that if she goes off again, I may never find her." *John.* Was that J. Schott? No doubt it was.

The woman said, "Right. You might not." She took a puff at her second cigarette, inhaling deeply. She looked at Luke and her deep drawling voice had a quaver in it as she said, "You are the first person I have spoken to

who has any experience of these children. I thought I was alone in producing one."

"I can understand how you feel. Griselda's father thought he was the same. When I told him she was meeting others like herself, he couldn't believe it."

The woman said nothing for a moment. She was obviously pulling herself together. Then she said more briskly, "My name is Cheryl Kiser. We're from California. I have been all over the United States trying to get opinions on what is wrong with Barry. No one has been able to help."

"Why are you in London?"

"We're on our way to Germany. We have a two-year hitch there. My husband wanted that posting because his grandfather originally came over from Germany and he still has relations around that part of Europe. But Barry had this overwhelming desire to stop off in London. We've been here since March. We have borrowed an apartment of a business acquaintance. I gave in to Barry because I got the feeling that I could not stop him. That if I didn't bring him here, he would have come on his own—as the other children have obviously done. How they all manage to survive in London, I do not know."

"They nearly haven't," Luke said.

"I can believe that. I have always been so afraid . . . that Barry would go off and I would never see him again. I have followed him everywhere and although he kind of ignores me—he doesn't seem to have feelings the way other people do—he has never actually tried to give me the slip."

What a life this poor woman had had. It didn't sound as if Mrs. Kiser had any other children. Loneliness and

fear like Mr. Bingley; worse possibly for a mother, because at least Mr. Bingley had his work.

She went on talking, she couldn't stop now she had found a sympathetic listener. "I suppose I'm lucky that I have the resources to follow him . . . to indulge him." She stubbed out the next cigarette. She had hardly smoked an inch of it. This is what these children do to you, Luke thought. Make you a nervous wreck.

"Why do you think they have come here? Have they been looking for the others for some time? Have they suddenly felt some compulsion drawing them together?"

"They have come to some time of crisis," she said. "I am not sure that it is each other that they are looking for, although at first I thought it was. Every day is the same, they meet here—or around here somewhere—they can be elusive—" how elusive Luke knew only too well. "Now I am beginning to think it is a man they are after."

Luke said, "Yes . . ." urging her to go on.

"He must work round here," said Cheryl Kiser. "He comes to the Underground each evening, some nights later than others. He is thin and dark. The children watch him every step of the way in to the Underground and then they disband for the night."

Luke let his breath hiss out between his teeth and his bottom lip.

She said, "Look, he has gone now. They will go too, shortly." She put her packet of cigarettes into her bag. Her face looked pale and drawn, the evening light accentuating the shadows of her high cheekbones.

She said, fumbling with the clip, "Shall I meet you again here? You don't know what it means to find someone else . . ."

Luke said, "Wait a minute . . . just let's talk a bit more. That man is Thomas Humboldt. He is a professor at the European Institute in Kent Street there. A physicist."

She said, surprised, "A professor. He looks real young."

"He is young but very clever. Now. Can you tell me more about any of those children? Have others been to your flat? Have they dropped any hints who they are . . ."

"Yes. Two boys have been in the last week. They were in very bad shape. I wanted them to stay so that I could do something for them but they left after only one afternoon. They looked as if they had come a terribly long way. I glanced in one of their bags they had left in the hallway"—she looked at Luke as if to say she thought she was justified in this bit of snooping, and he nodded—"there was a cross-channel timetable in German."

"You think they might have come all the way from Germany?"

"Not might. They have. They talk German."

Germany. Germany. It was always Germany.

"Schott could be a German name," she said suddenly, as if following his train of thought. "But now John . . ." she wrinkled her brow as if trying to recollect, "I thought at the time he might have come from the north, Scotland perhaps. He had a dialect. I'm not too nifty on English inflections of speech but it didn't seem to me to be the way you talk in London."

"He could have German origins," Luke said, thinking of Hare. He turned to her abruptly. "Do you know the country round Hanover?"

"Round Hanover?" she repeated and looked puzzled. He felt disappointed. He had hoped this piece of common

ground between Humboldt and Hare might prove to have some significance.

"Hanover," she said again. Then her face cleared. "Just a minute," she said, "we spent some time in Hanover, the year before Barry was born. I told you, my husband has relatives . . . we explored the countryside round there quite extensively, stayed in several places."

Luke said, "Griselda was born in a town near there. This man they are interested in—he has relatives there, too. Could there possibly be some link . . . ?" He got up. The children had gone and it was getting cold. He was anxious to get back to Lyndown Gardens to talk to Arthur. "If any more of them come to your flat, could you do your best to find out something about them? Whether they have German connections. It may be important."

She promised she would. She would have promised him anything. He felt embarrassed by her gratitude for he had done nothing—merely sat on a bench.

"I felt a real ding-a-ling sitting here, but now you're here too . . ." She wrung his hand and he thought she would never let it go.

He in his turn promised to meet her here again. He dashed off then, across the road, back up Kent Street to the Aldwych. Somehow he didn't want to watch her make her solitary way back to her West End flat.

17

"That's five of them who might," Luke said.

"Might what?"

"Have connections in Germany around Hanover."

Arthur, fatigued beyond words by the number of hours he had put in at the Institute, wished that Luke could rest—just until after the experiment was over at least. But he knew it was no good suggesting this. And having now seen for himself this group of extraordinary children in the Embankment Gardens, Arthur appreciated Luke's concern, his frenzy to get to the bottom of the business.

"Hare and this American boy and who else?"

"I'm only stating a possibility," Luke said, "but John Schott with a name like that could have a German background even if he comes from Scotland *now*. And then there are the two boys that Mrs. Kiser actually knows came across the Channel."

"Where does all this lead you?"

"It doesn't lead me anywhere." Luke grimaced. "But at least it's a beginning. A point to start from."

"It's the end that matters." Arthur yawned hugely. "It's always the end that's important . . ."

"Perhaps the start will lead to the end," Luke said not

very hopefully. "Anyway I'm going to follow Hare tomorrow and see if I can give her the money from her father. They look as though they might need it."

"I need rest. I should have thought you did too, boy—instead of chasing off God knows where."

But Luke was determined.

He followed them after work at a good distance. He didn't want to greet Hare in front of the whole group. Also he wanted to know where she was living.

They went west along the Strand, under Admiralty Arch and up the Mall. By this time six of them had left the group and gone a different way. At Hyde Park Corner, Barry Kiser went straight on along Knightsbridge. The remaining five turned up Park Lane, Hare among them. They had been walking for miles. Luke was more than weary; physical toughness seemed a characteristic of all these children, not only of Hare.

But at Marble Arch they went in to the Underground. Luke had a moment of panic when he thought he had lost them. He had to follow fairly close in order to get on the same train. He traveled in the next carriage where he could glance through the window of the connecting door and see when they stood up to get off. The train wasn't crowded. They got off at Shepherd's Bush. What miles they traveled each day. No wonder they had to walk part of it—it must cost them a fortune in fares.

At Shepherd's Bush they crossed the Green and took to the back streets. Luke supposed that in this area it might be easier to squat without too many questions asked. There were plenty of derelict houses. Perhaps the district was planned for redevelopment.

They stopped in front of a house that was already half

demolished. Compared to this slum, No. 17 Lyndown Gardens had been a palace. They climbed through the gaping doorway and disappeared inside.

After a moment's hesitation, Luke followed them.

They went right through the house—it smelled of decay and the corners were full of rubbish either dumped there or blown in from the road. They went out at the back into a garden half full of rubble. The only thing of beauty was an apple tree heavy with blossom at the far end.

They obviously did their cooking outside. There was a blackened ring of bricks. John Schott went straight over to them and picked up some pieces of wood from a pile neatly stacked. Meal time.

Luke deliberately made a noise coming through the back of the house so that he did not take them by surprise. He had a sick feeling in his stomach. He remembered the other occasion—was it really three weeks before? It seemed like yesterday.

There were five of them: John and Hare and another girl and two boys. Luke took a guess that the boys were the ones who had been to Mrs. Kiser's flat. Their clothes were indescribably dirty and so were their faces. Their hair, shoulder length, hadn't seen a brush for weeks. One of them had a loose flapping sole on his shoe and the other one's toes had come through the uppers. The dirtier of the two looked older than Hare; the other, considerably younger. The girl was in better trim; she was thin and hollow-eyed but she had a certain neatness about her in spite of her messy clothes.

They stood in a group and looked at Luke. No one said a word. Hare's face was as devoid of recognition as it had

ever been. They looked at him—but in fact they did not look at him; for when he tried to engage their gaze, their eyes slid away.

Luke said, "Hullo." He held out the envelope to Hare quickly in case they thought he had an ulterior motive in following them. "Your father sent this. It's money. He thought you might need it."

Hare took the envelope. She slit it open and took the money out. She counted it and put it in a bundle in the back pocket of her jeans. The others melted away as if the situation was of no interest to them. John Schott turned his attention to making a fire.

"Are you all right?" His stomach was doing peculiar turns.

"Yes," said Hare.

"Your father. . . is worried about you in case you haven't enough money to manage."

Hare said, quietly, "Tell him I'm all right."

"Will that money be enough?"

"The boys can pick up jobs from time to time . . . I can too."

Luke moved a brick with his toe. How much could he ask her? How much would she respond, anyway?

"Do you know Humboldt?"

"Humboldt?"

Luke was sure that her puzzlement was genuine. "The man you see at the Temple Underground. The dark chap . . ."

"No."

"Why do you wait for him, then?"

She didn't answer.

He had got no further, learned nothing by coming to

this desolate house which they had made their home. He had been better off not knowing where they lived. It all seemed unutterably sordid and sad.

He said, "Hare," softly in a final appeal and wondered if a flicker of something crossed her eyes. But it was his imagination.

He reached out impulsively and took her hand. She did not snatch it away but just left it there in his, a dead weight, unfeeling. He looked down at it; the nails were split and the skin hard and cracked in places through rough living.

He half wished she would snatch it away; do something; anything, rather than this utterly negative lack of response.

For a split second he felt that he knew why the village had attacked Hare.

Overcome by the hopelessness of the situation, he let her hand drop to her side. He looked at the ground for a long moment, not caring where he went or what he did.

When he looked up, she had gone over to help John Schott with the fire.

He turned to go. He made no attempt to say good-bye. Nobody watched him.

He clambered out through the dirty house and went back to Mrs. Popham's.

18

Luke didn't mention Hare's name again. He didn't go down to the seat on the Embankment. He didn't even show any guilt about failing Mrs. Kiser.

Arthur, after asking one or two questions about whether Luke had found where Hare was living and receiving short and curt answers, respected his feelings and said no more. He was puzzled, however, and uneasy about the way in which Luke threw himself almost frantically into the last few critical days of work at the lab.

"You're never satisfied, Ar dear," Mary said mildly. "You tell Luke not to get chewed up about the girl and now he's cut himself off for some reason, you worry your poor noddle stiff."

"What reason? That's the point."

Arthur wasn't the only one to feel edgy. He was checking some material in one of the storerooms when Simon Standen came in.

"Did you see that!" Simon's startled exclamation interrupted his counting.

"What?"

"I thought I saw a face at the window."

They were on the ground floor at the back of the In-

stitute. The windows looked out onto a small square of concrete where the dustbins were.

"How could anyone get into that yard?"

"There must be a way in—from King's I should think. They have to get at the dustbins to empty them, don't they?"

"Dustman chap, maybe then . . ."

But there was no noise of bins being moved about.

"Why should anyone be looking in at the window, for heaven's sake?"

"Forget it," Simon said. "It must just be me. Getting jittery."

Arthur didn't think Simon was a person to get jittery for no reason.

"I keep getting this feeling that we're being watched. Quite irrational . . ."

"Watched by who . . . ?"

"Forget it," Simon said again. "It's just stupid of me."

When Arthur went to put away some sodium chloride that they kept in a drum in a large floor-to-ceiling cupboard at the end of the first floor corridor, he opened the cupboard door to find a girl standing in the corner.

She was about ten years old at a guess; she was clearly one of the children.

She was pressed against the back wall of the cupboard. She didn't look at Arthur but her big eyes sought quickly for a way of escape. She was desperately thin and undernourished and her denim trousers and sweater and anorak looked as if they had been lived in for some time without ever being removed. She had a bloodstained piece of cloth tied round one ankle where she had scraped herself.

The shock to a normally shockproof Arthur was tre-

mendous; actually to see this small creature in front of him at close quarters made him feel—in some small measure—what Luke had been experiencing.

He said quite stupidly, "I say . . ." and put out his hand as he would to a terrified foal. But the girl wasn't terrified; he had misread her. Merely bent on escape. She was past him like an eel and off down the corridor and away.

If Arthur thought that Luke had exaggerated the situation, if he thought that the connection with Humboldt had been embroidered by Luke's imagination—he no longer did so. Were the children getting bolder? Invading?

He went back to the lab, pondering deeply, but said nothing to anyone. Things were too critical at this point in time to raise other issues.

The actual time of the experiment was two o'clock in the morning of Sunday, June 5th. Arthur had gone into the Institute after lunch on Saturday with a whole bag of food. He wasn't coming back to Mrs. Popham's again that day. He said the experiment would take some ten hours to set up. He suggested that Luke have his supper at Lyndown Road and then come in—or leave it even later if he felt like it. Luke's job of writing a report didn't begin until the experiment went critical.

Luke ate his supper in an abstract kind of way. The afternoon had seemed to go on forever. His mind now was full of restless anticipation.

Mrs. Popham said, disapprovingly, "I gather there's something big on tonight at your place. Well, let's hope you know what you're doing. I've no desire to wake up

with my bed at the top of Highgate Hill. Just mind your tamperings, will you?"

"Progress, Mrs. Popham," Luke said with his mouth full of lamb chop. It was a hot Saturday night supper for a change.

Mrs. Popham gave a snort in fair imitation of a horse and said she didn't believe in progress, it seemed to her to be mostly retrograde.

Luke went upstairs to get another sweater. He had no idea whether it would be hot or cold in the lab. He picked up the purchases he had made that afternoon to tide himself and Arthur over the long evening—a couple of individual fruit pies, crisps—one packet of bacon flavored and one chicken baked—a mixed packet of peanuts and raisins, yogurt and four tins of Coke. He threw open the window and leaned out. You could see nothing but leaves now in June in Mrs. Popham's garden. Luke was continually surprised at how green London was if you got behind the façade of streets and the endless parked cars. The evening was drenched with the smell of late blossom, lilac and laburnum. He let the smell waft over him. He felt quite calm, not at all as if he was on the edge of something tremendous. Would it, in fact, all go as planned or be the most awful flop?

Humboldt did not work for failure.

He ran downstairs two at a time, feeling clearer of emotion than he had done for days.

When he arrived at the Institute they had been setting up the experiment since lunch time. There was still, however, an air of casualness which somehow surprised Luke. He had expected more tension than during the preceding

week. Instead, now that the critical moment had arrived, there was less. It was as it should be.

On the other hand, he had never seen the laboratory so full of life. There was a constantly changing pattern of lights on the wall panels above the console and on the control meters the needles hovered and kicked. Simon Standen was calling over into a microphone a steady stream of check readings.

Humboldt seemed entirely his normal self, intense and perhaps even more brisk than usual but not nervous.

Arthur was leaning against a bench near the computer terminal. He was talking to Kelly and Pete. They were both wearing shirts of horrific colors, vying in violence of contrast. Pete's said, "Come a little closer or you won't be able to read this," across the back. Kelly was wearing what looked like a black and white minstrel's hat. Was it an experiment or merely a party that he had come to?

Somewhere a voice was already calling the time. The countdown had started.

Six hours fifty-four, six hours fifty-three, six hours fifty-two.

"Hi, Luke!"

"If we have a negative time field what happens after zero?" Pete was asking, "Do we count one, two, three, four or minus minus one, minus minus two, minus minus three . . ."

"Stop your rotten jokes. We'd best be thinking of getting back," Kelly stretched and yawned. "A long, hard grind ahead."

Luke thought anyone looking less like a long, hard grind would be difficult to imagine.

Arthur nodded across the room. "Mary has been put on Odette's job. Odette's gone down with some sort of summer flu."

Pete grimaced. "That's rotten luck for Odette." Odette manned the telephone which checked the computer links with SHAIR.

". . . but good for Mary."

"What luck indeed, darling," said Kelly in fair imitation of Mary. "Fancy maintaining contact with yours truly all night long."

Even as they watched Mary lifted the receiver.

"Who's she contacting now if you're here?"

"Dotty Lowenstein's on SHAIR at the moment."

"We'd best be off," said Kelly again. "See you," and raising his hand in salute he strolled off with Pete back to King's.

Arthur looked at Luke's face and grinned. "You're thinking, what a tawdry set up. What utter chaos. If you were Triberg you wouldn't lend us the contents of your piggy bank, let alone give us the use of a large proportion of the scientific effort of a whole continent . . ."

Luke said composedly, because he knew Arthur now, "Quite right. But I'm so used to it, I'd be even more worried if things looked shipshape."

"There's old Triberg," Arthur said. "He looks pretty sick."

"He always looks like that," Luke said, "he's not a bad chap really."

Arthur thought Luke seemed more like his old self than he had done for some time. Arthur himself was chain-smoking. Luke had never seen him do so before, only sharing the odd cigarette with Mary. Was it tension?

Was all this jokey atmosphere merely a front? Arthur stubbed out his cigarette in a handy ashtray absolutely full of fag ends. "You'll see," he said. "It will work itself together . . . there's plenty of time yet."

"I've brought some food," Luke said. "Tell me when you want it."

"Now," said Arthur. "I'm starving."

At one fifteen A.M., forty-five minutes before the instant of time reversal—or I.T.R. as they called it—there was a significant change of atmosphere in the laboratory.

Everyone had now assembled and Luke was aware that an underlying quiet professionalism was beginning to show through the complexities and limitation of detail. He himself sat at the back of the laboratory with Monsieur Triberg. M. Triberg had surprisingly come to life and was finding it hard to suppress his excitement. His eyes darted hither and thither and he was continually folding and unfolding a piece of paper he had on his knee.

Much of the cabling had been secured and stowed tidily; the ashtrays, newspapers, sandwiches and apple-cores had all gone. The four main members of the team were now concentrating on bringing their own part of the experiment on stream in perfect order at precisely the right moment. Arthur was one of these. Arthur played a leading role in Humboldt's laboratory. He was always so offhand about his capabilities that one was misled into thinking he played no part at all. He sat at one end of the control console; at the other end sat Alan. They were both talking to Simon, who controlled the computer terminal, and to the other research staff individually, working to bring each phase of the experiment onto line

and into computer control. If Simon had any doubts about the outcome of the experiment, he did not show it.

Tom Humboldt sat at the central control console, his head tilted backward, and his eyes closed. For one startled moment Luke thought he was asleep but then he knew that he was listening. Humboldt was aware of every single thing that was going on, every single thing that was being said. Not only what, but when. He was controlling each item against a check tape in his mind for each step at each precise moment of time.

The four of them, no longer individuals, were bonded together into one single close-knit unit, sensitive and accurate.

Time was slipping by fast. Luke listened to the minutes being counted away.

Thirty-five, thirty-four, thirty-three . . .

"Stacks 0 to 8 at 98% and holding. On program and holding. Repeat and holding. Stack 9, 94% and rising. Stand by computer. Take stack 9 at 95%. Now reads 94.2 and rising 94.3 and rising."

"Computer ready, program on 0 to 8, running 9, standing by for take at 95."

"94.7, 94.8, 94.9, 95.0. Yours."

"95.00 0 to 9 stacks go and rising. Steady on green. Out to minus 26."

"Purple lines 1, 2 and 4 running at 2.5 k.g.p.s. Line 5, phase 5 filter block. Bypassed. Extra on phase 3. 5 now running at 1.7 k.g.p.s. Will hold, repeat, will hold at o.k. level."

"Helium tanks on standby. All monitors read go. Computer hold o.k. All checks green."

Thirty-one, thirty, twenty-nine.

"Tach. Generator reads high. Repeat flow high, alert yellow. Balance please control."

"Computer checks green on Tach. Generator."

"Match on panel five, please, match on panel five please."

"Generator falling . . . off yellow. Tach. Generator green and stabilized green. Continue buildup, repeat continue buildup."

Twenty-eight, twenty-seven, twenty-six.

"Stack 10 computer on standby."

"Computer ready."

"Take stack 10."

"Computer program running."

"All stacks with you now. Green and rising. All controls green."

Slowly the checks and controls were completed. One by one the computer took up first the running of the equipment, then the running of the monitors and finally the monitoring itself. The control lights winked from white to green and the panel lights on balancing glowed as SHAIR took over at King's, matched in programs, unit for unit, phase for phase. Concentration was intense but overall there was a relaxed confidence, as if they all now shared certainty of success.

Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three.

"Battersea 1 to 5 on speed and running."

"Stand by to take Battersea 1 to 5."

"Program running green, control green. Standing by for Bankside 10 to 20."

The sounds in the room reflected the strain of machines driven to the limit of performance. The Van de Graaff

drive motors were making a low surging hum as they labored hard now against the tremendous potential stored in the stacks at nearly 98% of their ten 10,000,000-million-volts design potential. The cooling pumps whined as they drove the water round the cooling circuits and back to the Thames. Over all this there was a slow vibrating whistling piping noise as the power stations connected, waiting to pour the energy of a large part of Southeastern England into this tiny little room. Luke found the lights and steady murmur of voices hypnotic; his concentration narrowed and narrowed until he was aware only of the hard glitter of the machinery and the empty black Frame Ring with the strange box-like generator glowing in front of it.

Then he found himself humming and the piping wail of the overdriven machines was no longer just a fortuitous wail—it had a tune; it was a refrain. A refrain that touched on the tip of his tongue and then was off before he could capture the words. It teased him for some minutes but when he did catch up with it and pounced upon it and tried to frame the words, they still got away.

Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen.

The count went remorselessly on.

"All power on standby. All banks running full energy on line. System green. Controls green, computer links green, maintaining visual to minus 20 seconds."

"All stacks at 98% off hold and rising. Repeat rising. System green, controls green, link green maintaining visual out to minus 5 secs."

"Tach. Generator build up on target, controls green, link green, maintaining visual to minus 12 secs."

"Final check on equipment!"

The final check on the equipment, benches, floors, walls—everything—was rapidly carried out. All loose items, particularly metal, were put away. The inspection ports to the Van de Graaff were sealed against the blinding flash of the Cascade discharge.

All this time Tom Humboldt had not moved. He still sat there with his head tilted back and his eyes closed. The stance was uncharacteristic of Humboldt, usually so dynamic.

Only at minus eight minutes did he move.

Then everyone put on heavy ear mufflers. The discharge of the Multiplier would be like a lightning bolt. Nobody fancied this at a distance of ten to fifteen yards.

With his ear mufflers on, Luke found the clear crisp sound of the lab was immediately replaced by the canned tone of the intercom; clear enough and distinct but hollow and artificial. The intercom system run by the computer would shut out five seconds before the I.T.R. and be restored immediately the Cascade discharge had finished. Luke spared a thought for Kelly and Pete at King's. He could still hear quite clearly the calm voices calling the checks and the hum and piping of the machines.

Seven, six, five.

"Stacks at 99.5 and rising. Systems green, controls green, link green."

Da de da. Dee dee. Da de da. Dee dee.

There it was still, that ridiculous refrain, woven into the wail of the machines . . .

The last minutes of the experiment were ticking away.

Luke had been conscious for some time of the feeling of the team working as one, but now it suddenly overwhelmed him—this complete rapport as if all of them in

the laboratory were one being, one soul. It was only then that he fully understood how deeply every person in the room was commited to this enterprise; not only Humboldt—although it was his brainchild—but Arthur, Alan, Simon, Mary, and all the rest; they had each willingly surrendered their own selves to a complete group experience; they created a living group being, which was, with a calm and supreme confidence, about to challenge the structure of the very universe itself.

Luke was terrified by what they were trying to do and yet, at the same time, felt an elation such as he had never known before.

Was this the kind of elation that sustained Humboldt in his work—gave him his certainty and his energy?

The count switched to seconds.

Twenty-five seconds, twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one, twenty . . .

"Energy. All stations. Systems green, controls green, link green—out."

"Pumps running 1—4. 2.5 k.g.p.s. and holding, 5 at 1.9 will, repeat, will hold for duration."

"Systems, controls and link—green green green—out."

"Helium running—green green green—out."

"Computer all systems—green green green—out."

"Balancing—green green green—out."

"Tach. Generator—green green green—out."

"Van de Graaff. All stacks at 99.99 plus and rising . . . systems, controls and link—green green green—out."

As each person dialed "out" he spun his chair round and faced the Frame Ring. Humboldt alone still scanned the console. Seven rows of green lights shone unwinking.

Eight, seven, six, five seconds.

The last humming, piping sounds were instantly cut out. Luke found he was singing alone.

Tom Humboldt turned in his chair to see the Frame Ring. In five seconds of utter silence he faced eternity.

When it came it was enormous.

The whole building shook.

It was reported afterward that they felt the blast five miles away. The shock came when the computer triggered the Cascade Mutiplier. Despite their muffled ears, the discharge rent them apart in a tearing, shattering, crescendo of sound. It seemed a million times bigger than the most enormous crash of thunder anyone had ever heard. The charge was greater than they believed possible.

In an instant the intercom was back. All was deathly quiet except for the thin piping of the circuits and the muted scream of the cooling pumps.

Power lived in the air; they breathed it in; it entered their beings and their minds. And from that moment there was a joining; a sense of oneness apparent to everyone in the room when time was no more and eons, decades, centuries, seconds past and seconds future all merged to become a single unity.

Their attention was concentrated hypnotically on the Frame Ring.

For an instant nothing happened.

It had failed. Luke was sure that it had failed. For a moment he could have wept—tears of disappointment for all their lost hopes; the unity that had no purpose.

And then—incredibly—he saw a trace, a flicker of mist, a thin line of intensity. The whole screen lightened in the center as if someone behind it had raised a lamp and

the beams were penetrating a white swirling fog, making broad streaks of light. Then the entire Frame Ring was filled from side to side with a milky white brilliance, clear, smooth, unruffled, unchanging, timeless.

Slowly, to his utter disbelief, it rolled back, stroke by stroke, line by line. It spiraled in reverse, unwound . . .

He saw the far end of the laboratory and then, his sight falling through the window in the world to all times past, he thought he would witness the very beginning of the primeval atom.

But as he looked he saw a mirrored reflection, and realized with a great start that there was other company in the room—behind him. Were the rest of the team aware of this intrusion, focusing their attention, as he was, so intently on the small area of the Frame Ring? There was no way of telling. But *he* saw a moving outline and felt a presence. And he thought he knew who it was without turning round—he couldn't turn round because his eyes were held by the Frame Ring and he had no power to turn them away.

Now the Frame Ring was clearing slowly and Luke this time saw blue sky and hills, dappled with sunlight. He sensed the coolness of a cave out of which he was looking on to the warmth of the day beyond. Below the cave was a path leading down to a small town of checkered roofs and pointed spires and weathercocks. The town was walled and even at this distance one could sense its busyness from the little cluster of market stalls set up around the gate. Luke caught the flash of sunlight on water—a river ran in the distance. Up the path came a group of children, making a noise with talk and shouting; teasing one an-

other as children do in a crowd. Somehow they had an air of familiarity and yet how could they, for they were wearing clothes that were completely foreign and of another time.

Behind him, Luke felt the children stir, felt the press of their movement around him—through him—as they slipped forward.

They ran toward the Frame Ring of the Time Machine.

Luke had known it was the children. Their presence in the lab had startled him but not surprised him.

Had they come to wreck the experiment?

His brain recoiled at the thought, yet he could not speak or make a move to stop them. He could only watch them go.

They ran to meet their destiny, their own souls. There was an instant of utter joy when for the first time they felt a love previously denied to them.

For the moment, the whole frame quivered and Luke held his breath for disaster.

But the blue sky was still there, the town in the distance was there; the cave; the children on the one side—

The laboratory, the twentieth century, the children on the other; face to face; eye to eye, hand to hand; like to like; one to one . . .

"Oh God!" Luke heard Tom Humboldt cry out. "I forgot the free pole. *There is no free pole.*"

19

It was dark and utterly still. No one spoke or moved.

Then there was a sigh and what might have been a sob.

The darkness gave a little and after a while someone stirred. The children moved to the door. They moved slowly but no one tried to stop them or interfere. They went out into the dawn.

In the laboratory there was still silence.

Then someone said, "Christ!"

At last Humboldt got up, almost listlessly it seemed. Dead tired and drained of all feeling and emotion. His shoulders were stooped as if with a great weight. He blew his nose, "The computer will shut it down. Leave it. Let's go."

Everyone moved then. They, too, moved in a slow and exhausted fashion like people who have just conquered a mountain peak and have no resources left.

Simon said, "Go upstairs. We'll make some coffee."

Luke looked out of the window as he staggered up the stairs. He found it difficult to collect his thoughts and his wits that had been shattered by events in the lab. The weather had broken at last. He looked on to a wet, gray

morning, the building across the street sweating with rain and the narrow piece of sky above only looking a lighter patch of gray in a gray world. There was no dawn as such.

They went up to the Common Room and Simon filled the kettle and plugged it in. Alan found a tin of biscuits in the cupboard. They flopped into the chairs. No one had any desire to speak. The mind of each one of them was a jumble of reactions and emotions. Did they feel elation—disappointment—anticlimax? Although they had not known what the experiment would achieve, what had actually happened had startled them beyond measure. What was the significance of the scene they had witnessed?

Humboldt sat down at a table, staring into space, saying nothing at all. His very silence made the others feel unwilling to break it. They knew he was thinking it all through, retracing each step as it had happened, reexamining, ordering, interpreting and storing away in his mind the events of the night.

Luke had no doubt that the experiment had been successful—or at least in some measure successful. He had seen the swirling lines in the Frame Ring slow down and stop and then—unbelievably—spiral backward. But what on earth had happened afterward?

How had the children broken into the laboratory? He had begun to feel, only a day or two before, that the interest in Humboldt might have its connection with the experiment. But why had they wanted to wreck it? Why had they gone straight for the Frame Ring? It was typical of the Institute's casual approach that there had been no security arrangements—that it had been possible for the children to get into the laboratory at all.

They had shown no sign of awareness of the other

people in the lab. They had merely run blindly at the picture in the Frame.

It was all beyond Luke.

He looked at Humboldt but he was still withdrawn. He sipped a cup of coffee that Simon had put in front of him but Luke thought he was probably unaware that he was even drinking it.

Opposite Luke sat Arthur and Mary on the only settee that the Common Room boasted. Arthur had his arm round Mary and she had dropped off to sleep on his shoulder. The whole room might still have been in a kind of hypnotic trance that no one wanted to be the first to break.

Luke felt his own eyes closing with weariness. What was that picture of the town in the mountains? For a moment he recaptured the warm summer wind and the happiness of the children running up the path. Had it all been a dream? And the weird music too, the humming, fluting sound from the overstrained equipment which had reminded him so strongly of a song that he couldn't pin down.

They had been under the most tremendous strain over the previous few months. The excitement of pioneering a new dimension of knowledge; the exacting routine of checking and doublechecking every detail of the experiment; the difficult negotiations with the Generating Board; headaches over the budget, the constant discipline of keeping everything up to the critical time schedule—had it all made its effect, taken its toll? Had the whole group of them worked themselves into such a stupefied state that they had experienced a mass hallucination? Such things were not unheard of.

But the experiment had stopped. *It had stopped.* The computer must have shut it down. Something had happened to cause the computer to do that.

And the children—of whom Hare was one, Luke had no doubt. What of them? Where had they gone off to and were they all right? He sat up suddenly. Anything could have happened in those electrical force fields. Had any of the children been injured? No one had lifted a finger to do anything for them—himself included—they had just let them go, out into London.

Luke looked round wildly and half pushed himself up out of the chair. Should he go down and look in the Embankment Gardens? Blast Humboldt. For a moment Luke hated him. Could he not think of one damned thing outside his own experiment?

But Tom Humboldt was stirring. The tremendous lines of concentration and absorption on his face were relaxing. He had fought for an understanding of what had taken place and he had solved his problem. He knew now what had happened, of that Luke had no doubt. He was ready to tell them. It was only a matter of hours, Luke thought still savagely, and, knowing Humboldt's energy, he would be planning his next experiment.

Simon, too, realized that Tom had come to some conclusion. He went over to refill his coffee cup. "For God's sake, what happened? Those children—how did they come in? What had they to do with it? Do you know yourself?"

Everyone was awake now, jerked out of their great weariness by the sound of Simon's voice. They hung on to the fabric of Tom's reply, forcing their overstrained minds to digest the explanation he was giving.

Tom Humboldt said very slowly, "Ye . . . es, Simon.

I think I know. In fact, I *know* I know." He smiled wryly and sadly for a moment. "I made one enormous, stupendous, idiotic blunder . . . easy enough to make, I think I can say. But crucial."

Because of his acute weariness, Tom showed in his face for a moment the pain he felt over his mistake. "You all heard me say, I think, that there was no free pole." He looked round enquiringly. They nodded. "I will explain to you what that means. You'll remember from the physics you did at school that there is a big difference between electric charges and magnetic poles. Electric charges exist on their own and magnetic poles don't. You can charge up this pen, for example, or this ashtray with an electric charge, positive or negative as you like. Say positive for the sake of argument. You can carry the pen around with the charges stuck onto it. You have got a little bundle of positive charges on the pen and they are quite free on their own. Right?

"But you cannot do this with magnets. If you magnetize the same pen, then one end will be north and the other end, south. *You can never separate the north from the south.* The poles are not free as they are in electricity. *They are joined.* If you have the one at one end, then you must have the opposite at the other end.

"Time is like that. That is what I missed. Time is like magnetism, not like electricity. It has no free poles.

"One of the poles was at the surface of the Frame Ring and—like a magnet—the opposite pole existed and had to be *somewhere* in the past, at the opposite end of the world event line." Tom looked round their painfully concentrating faces. It was all a great effort to understand him at

this point in the dawn. "Monsieur Triberg. You see what I mean?"

"I am trying to see," said the Frenchman, "but I fear I am lost."

Tom Humboldt took a pen from his pocket. "I will try and make it clearer. Think of our experiment as being like this pen—as if it were magnetized. We were here at the nib end. This nib (call it the north) was our Frame Ring. It was joined down the length of the pen by the force lines to the opposite pole, this other end. Here." He touched the end of the pen. "And at the other end of the pen was the place that you saw. Our Frame Ring was, in other words, directly connected to another point in time. We were physically and mentally joined in one at the surface of the Frame Ring. Two different times were directly united across the centuries."

"You mean," Simon said and his voice shook a little, whether with tiredness or incredulity you couldn't tell. "You mean that we were actually *there*—joined to that place, the cave, the hills. Those children were real!"

"Yes."

"My God. What have you done, Tom!" he burst out. "What have you started off? Doesn't it worry you . . ."

"No," Tom said quietly. "No. I am not worried. You see it had to be."

"What do you mean, *it had to be*. You can't be right. The children, as far as I could see, were almost identical. They were a reflection each of the other, although the ones in the frame belonged to their own time and the children in the laboratory were twentieth century."

"They were *almost* identical but they were different. It

was *not* a reflection. A long time ago those children passed out of their own time. They disappeared. No one knew where they went. They were, in fact, called by us here in the laboratory in the twentieth century. Their souls have been crossing the time surface we made last night. Their physical bodies could not cross, they were left somewhere in their own time—but their souls, spirits if you like, have been journeying, seeking bodies to reemerge with the world they left so long ago. No, Simon, I'm not worried, because as I say, it had to be. You know the story as well as I do and now the parts are made whole again."

There was a spatter of rain blown against the window and the same gust of wind brought the chimes of a city clock striking half past five. It had a dismal, cheerless sound.

Alan sighed. "Tom, I still don't know what you're talking about. Who were those children? Where was that place?"

Tom said, "You *do* know who those children were, I promise you . . ."

He looked at Alan for a long time, but Alan shook his head, still mystified. Tom looked round at them all; his brown eyes had a tranquillity that Luke had never seen before. He sat completely still. For once Tom was at peace.

After what seemed an age, he spoke quietly. "That place —the hills and the path running up from the town—it was a small German town in the twelfth century. Although it is bigger now, I recognized it because I go there myself every summer. It is on the River Weser, south of Hanover. It is called Hamelin."

No one stirred or looked at anyone else. Each was wrestling in his own mind with what he had been told. Tom

had explained and it must be true. But their minds fought against something so fantastic being possible.

Arthur said hesitantly, "What you are telling us, Tom, is—that those were the children of Hamelin that followed the Pied Piper. In twelfth-century Germany they ran into the side of the hill and were never seen again . . ."

"Yes," said Tom and elation had crept back into his voice; yet elation tempered with soberness as if he was conscious of a responsibility. "But there was *no* Pied Piper. That is merely a legend devised by later storytellers. It was me, Thomas Humboldt, with my Time Machine, calling those children through the centuries that caused them to disappear from Germany so long ago; I led them out of Hamelin. If you like, call me the Time Piper."

20

When Luke woke up on Sunday, to the sound of an oboe scale climbing up from below, he had been dreaming that he was drowning but had surfaced suddenly and uncomfortably at great speed. As he broke the surface he took a great gulp of air and woke up. His throat felt dry and his ears were buzzing. It took him several minutes to gather up his scattered thoughts and arrange them in an orderly and recognizable fashion.

They told him that he had gone to bed at six o'clock that morning after a night of devastating experience and relevation. He had wanted to go out and look for Hare but Arthur had stopped him and made him go to bed. He had been angry with Arthur and shouted at him but he was so near to falling asleep on his feet that his arguments for setting out into Central London with no idea of where even to start his search carried no weight and made little sense.

Stiffly he got out of bed and stood up; his ears refused to clear even then and he could only suppose that it was reaction to the violent cataclysm of sound he had somehow tolerated the night before.

Despite his ears, he was hungry and thought that if he

had something to eat, it might make his mind function more actively so that he could make use of the rest of the day—what was left of it. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was three o'clock in the afternoon.

He looked in on Arthur but he was still asleep—looking quite unlike Arthur, without his glasses on and with his mouth open and his feet sticking out; Arthur always slept untidily. He pulled on some jeans and went down to the kitchen to see what he could scrounge. Mrs. Popham heard him and followed him.

"All in one piece, then," she said.

"Just."

She looked startled. "Was it bad?"

"Terrible."

She didn't know whether he was pulling her leg.

"I suppose there isn't something to eat?"

"How about some baked beans? Would that tide you over until supper?"

"Super. You're a brick, Mrs. Popham."

She was startled again, but pleased. Luke wasn't usually one of her most expansive tenants. She put a piece of bread under the grill and tipped a tin of baked beans into a saucepan.

"Feel all right, do you?"

"Lousy. I've an awful head."

"Get up onto the Heath for a bit. That'll clear it."

He thought perhaps it would but he felt drained of energy; drained of the will to do anything.

"Could Arthur have some, too?"

He took it upstairs on two plates. Arthur had just woken. They sat on his bed and ate.

There was a clatter of footsteps on the stairs. A voice

said, "Are you up, darlings?" and then answered itself. "Yes, I can hear you are . . ."

Mary had come.

She said her ears were bad too. Only Arthur seemed unaffected.

"I don't wash them too often. Dirt probably cushioned the sound!"

Luke said, "It wasn't all a dream, was it? I mean our ears prove that."

"It was pretty fantastic . . ."

"Unbelievable . . . those claims Tom made. Were they true?"

Arthur said, "Of course they were true. You should know Tom well enough by now. He doesn't speak lightly." He looked at Luke. Luke had been in something of a state when they came back to Mrs. Popham's in the early hours.

"But you must admit it is hard to believe . . ."

"Everything Tom does is hard to believe. Producing tachyons was thought to be impossible . . . until he did it."

"If what he said *is* true," Luke said slowly, "Hare will be a new person. A *whole* person for the first time."

Mary said, "She'll be like everyone else now."

"But how do we *know*?" Luke said. "Where did they all go off to—Hare and the rest? What if we never see them again—they might have gone anywhere . . ."

"Calm down, boy," Arthur said abruptly. "We'll go up onto the Heath. Get some air."

"They'll turn up, I'm sure," Mary said, emphatically. "They have done in the past, haven't they?"

"But it's all different now, they're different people."

"But don't you see," Mary said, "you'll be able to communicate? It will be all right."

But it didn't seem to Luke as if it would be all right at all. If Hare was a new person, would she remember the circumstances of her life in Wyndsham before the experiment? Was she wandering around somewhere not knowing who she was or where she belonged . . . yet where did he start to look for her? The situation seemed to him to be as fraught as it had ever been.

"What about that Kiser woman?" Arthur said suddenly. "Can't you get in touch with her? She'd probably know where they are. Find out if her son has turned up anyway."

Luke said, "I don't know where she lives . . . except that it's somewhere in Knightsbridge. I haven't even got a telephone number . . .

"You're a real fool sometimes, Luke."

"He was hardly to know," Mary said, reasonably.

They went up Highgate Hill, crawling with Sunday traffic, and cut through the village to the Ponds.

Luke, dragging one foot in front of the other, thought, Look at all these people enjoying themselves. He felt as if he would never enjoy anything again.

Arthur and Mary had drawn ahead. They stopped to wait for him.

Mary put her hand on his shoulder. "Stop thinking about her."

Arthur squeezed Mary's other hand. "If it helps him, let him talk about it . . ."

Mary said, "I'd like to talk about it too. About what happened. I'm not at all clear even after Tom's explanation . . ."

"Is anybody?"

Mary said, "Those German children in eleven hundred and something—they disappeared because Tom was calling them out of the future with his Time Machine. They ran out of their own century and into ours. At least their souls passed through time. People in their own day had no idea where they had gone and so gradually the legend of the Pied Piper grew up . . . to explain what they couldn't understand . . . to give it some sort of reason."

"That's how all legends come into existence . . . as an explanation of some inexplicable phenomena . . . some event," Arthur said.

"Why did only their souls pass through time? Why couldn't their bodies come through too?"

"Souls are immortal," said Arthur. "But their bodies could hardly exist in the time warp for eight centuries and come through to us unchanged."

"If their bodies were left behind in their own time, why didn't someone find them?" Mary wanted to know.

"Perhaps they were in the hillside somewhere; perhaps there was a fall of rock . . . maybe they vaporized."

"Vaporized! Oh, don't be silly, Ar . . ."

"Well . . . isn't it all rather strange? Aren't tachyons themselves strange? And they are only the beginning. Isn't *time* unimaginably strange, when you start thinking about it . . ."

"Let's go on to the children this end," Mary said, "the children of the twentieth century." She put her arm round Arthur. "Goodness, it's nice to have you without that old greatcoat; I can see what shape you are . . ." They were walking downhill now, curving round to the Heath. They constantly had to sidestep to avoid the flocks of people meandering in the sun. "They were born normally but

without part of their personality . . . without souls. So they were ready for the souls of the children of the past to make them complete. They were fused through the Time Machine."

"The twelfth-century children came from Hamelin and the modern children had some connection with Hamelin too, at least the ones we know about—and it seems a reasonable hypothesis to work on—that they were all probably born there; Hare certainly was and it seems likely that Barry's mother became pregnant there."

"They must have been born over a period of years; they aren't all the same age."

"Creepy," Mary said. "People didn't realize that they were laying themselves open to this risk by having children in Hamelin at that time."

"Only about a dozen over six or seven years . . . the risk wasn't all that great."

"Unless you had one of them," said Luke wryly, thinking of Mr. Bingley.

"And Tom had that connection with Hamelin too—his aunt and uncle."

"All part of the pattern, I suppose . . ."

"What I can't see," Mary said, "is why they were born at this particular point of time . . . they could have been born at any point over the last eight centuries."

"No they couldn't," Arthur said. "Those children disappeared from Hamelin into the twentieth century eight hundred years ago. If the children in the twentieth century hadn't been here, then the Hamelin story would have been a different one. Tom was right. It had to be—because that was the way it happened."

"Though they were scattered round the world, they all

came together at the critical time of the experiment. They felt this tremendous *compulsion* to come to London, although they obviously didn't understand it . . . didn't know what they were here for. John Schott recognized Humboldt in the newspaper as the man he was seeking although he knew nothing about him, nor *why* he had to find him . . ."

"What gave them this compulsion . . . this driving force?"

Luke kicked a stone into the gutter. What indeed. It had certainly been strong; driven them to endure all kinds of privations.

"*There are more things in heaven and earth . . .*" began Arthur.

"Not platitudes," Luke said hurriedly. "I can't bear it."

"Curious," said Arthur, "how it all fitted in. That piping. Did you hear it, Luke?"

"I can still hear snatches of it now," Luke said, "I can't get it out of my ears."

"And the rats coming through first . . ."

"No, they didn't come through. They were drawn up from the river, where they had collected, by the piping."

"There were more children in the legend," Mary said, still pondering. "In the Pied Piper there was a whole crowd."

"It's no doubt been exaggerated over the years . . . you know how stories grow. A dozen children disappearing in those times would seem an enormous lot."

They were at the top of the hill now, above the Highgate ponds.

"It's not true what Simon once said." Luke narrowed his eyes into the distance. "Tom isn't only interested in

the technology . . . I think he felt deeply about what he had done . . ."

Arthur agreed. "Tom is a thinker as well as a scientific brain; he must be only too aware of what he's opened up. I mean if you can get into contact with points of time at random, it may not be too long before you can deliberately . . ."

"Don't talk about that," Mary said quickly. "We haven't solved this one yet."

They sat on the grass. Luke watched the people passing, up and down the hill; the lovers hip to hip; the children kicking balls, shouting; the elderly people keeping to the path; he remembered the day he had first arrived in London and wanted to melt into anonymity, just be one of the faces . . . uninvolved. But you couldn't remain uninvolved. As soon as you were in the crowd, your life was affected by something, someone.

He thought of all the people he had become involved with over the last month or two. Arthur, Mary, Humboldt. *No man is an island*; Arthur would quote Donne at him if he knew what he was thinking. Too true.

And Hare. What of her? He was more involved. Not less.

Where was she now? Hare had been a caged skylark; now she was free. How could he possibly regret that. But for some reason his mind shied away. With all the perversity of human nature, Luke grieved for the Hare he had known—shy, elusive, beautiful . . . soulless. At least if he had no contact, no one else had either. But now. He couldn't imagine her different. Did he want to imagine her different?

Arthur, breaking in on his thoughts, said, "Just think,

years and years ago, shepherds sitting up here round their fires, picking their teeth and grunting to each other, sheep wandering off down the hill . . ."

"And London, a little cluster of dwellings in the far distance . . . smoke rising." Mary laughed.

Luke thought, Was London like that in the twelfth century when the children ran out from Hamelin . . .

Quite without warning his eyes were brimming over with tears.

"I'm going back," he said, furiously embarrassed, not looking at the others but staring into the distance. "You stay on up here."

"We might as well come too, it's getting on for supper time."

But Luke was off ahead and didn't wait for them, desperately ashamed because he hadn't cried for as many years as he could remember. He rushed along, head down, looking at no one.

But when the tears eventually stopped and he pulled up to blow his nose, he felt calmer. It was as if he had had to get rid of all that pent-up emotion, the emotion of the past few weeks.

He must look to the future, whatever it might bring. And for heaven's sake, it held enough promise . . . friends in London over the summer, plays and concerts, exhibitions, river trips, college in the autumn; and in later years he could come back to the Institute if his interests still lay in that direction.

And Hare.

He had to wait and see. He could now accept the fact that he could do nothing. But whatever transpired, he must meet it with calmness and dignity.

As he opened the front door, Mrs. Popham came out from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron. She had obviously been listening for his return. She said, "There's been a telephone call for you, from a Mr. Bingley. He left a message. Sounded a queer sort of a message to me. I got him to repeat it. He said you'd understand what he meant."

"What was the message?" said Luke and despite his recent resolutions to be calm, his legs felt like water.

"I wrote it down," said Mrs. Popham, maddeningly slow. "It was so odd. He said, *Hare has come home.* Hare. H.A.R.E. I made him spell it out. And he said, queerer still, *She's learned to love.* Does it make any sense to you?"

"Oh yes!" said Luke and his whole being became suffused with joy. "It makes sense to me all right, Mrs. Popham."

She said, disgruntled, "I thought you were quite a sensible young man. It seems you're as balmy as the rest of them from that Institute."

But Luke didn't hear her. He had turned and gone out again into the street. This time he ran with great leaping strides. He went back to meet Mary and Arthur and to tell them that whatever the future held for himself and Hare, whatever the problems that might arise through his or her reactions, through the family, the village or work, at least the two of them would have a chance to know each other.

For a new Hare was at home.

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