

It should have been a very ordinary journey from Holborn to Hounslow, but somewhere West of Piccadilly the train entered another dimension— one where the Allies had lost World War II. That wasn't all either...

THE WRONG TRACK

By GEORGE WHITLEY

Illustrated by QUINN

You will have heard, no doubt, of the "Circle of the Globe." It sounds like the title of something by the late Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton—but it's not, although it might, quite possibly, have appealed to him. The Globe is a pub in Hatton Garden. There, every Thursday night, all those living in or visiting London and in any way connected with fantasy and science fiction gather to drink, to talk shop. Its centrally situated and, as most of us live in the suburbs, a convenient meeting place.

We live, Margaret and I, in Hounslow, which is the Ultima Thule of the Piccadilly Line. The nearest station to Hatton Garden is Chancery Lane, which is on the Central Line. To get there we take a Piccadilly Line train from Hounslow to Holborn, changing there for the Central Line. We always have done so and have neither reason nor desire to change our routine. It's returning home from the Globe that we have had to make use of a new and less convenient and speedy route.

The funny part of it all is that we were exceptionally abstemious that night. Perhaps that was the trouble. Had we boarded the train in our usual mellow and slightly drowsy mood, homeward bound we should have been in no frame of mind to notice oddities, to experiment. But we knew that we had to arise early the following morning—the plumber who was engaged in ripping our bathroom to pieces had promised to start work promptly at 0900 hours—and so we left the Globe early and sober. We had dinner at the small restaurant across the way with Arthur Clarke, returned to the pub and enjoyed one glass of port wine each, and resolutely refused to join Peter Phillips and Bertram Chandler in a beer and bawdy song session. After I had handed a manuscript to John Carnell we said our goodnights and left.

It was a fine night—crisp, a touch of frost in the air, the full moon lending a spurious glamour to the ugly, red-brick-romantic offices of the Prudential Insurance Company—and my wife and I quite enjoyed the short walk from the Globe to Chancery Lane station. There we had only a minute to wait for a train. We changed at Holborn, from the Central Line to the westbound Piccadilly Line. When, after having negotiated the various escalators and tunnels, we walked on to the platform, I looked at the indicator board. The next train, I saw, was going to be for Hounslow and not, as so often is the case, Uxbridge or Rayner's Lane.

"Not long to wait," I said—then, seeing that Margaret was wandering off to the right, asked, "where do you think you're going?"

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

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

"No. The front."

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

"I always have it," she said.

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

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

We stood there on the platform, just looking at each other. Any casual passer-by would have taken it for a case of love at first sight, or of a loving reunion after many years. And it was that, or almost that. It was a new and intriguing mental intimacy added to the mental and physical intimacies of a decade of marriage. It may seem absurd—but we were quite excited by the discovery of yet another shared experience.

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

"Yes. But it doesn't work. And then, suddenly, when I'm not worrying about it, I realise that the train is travelling the right way.

"It could be," I said. "Like that diagram affair that's supposed to show you if you're an introvert or an extravert. You know, the drawing of a skeleton cube, and when you first look at it it seems to be a certain way, and then there's a sudden shift of perspective and you're looking at it from an altogether different angle. Tell you what—we'll both try to will the change and we'll see which one of us gets it first."

A strong draught from the far tunnel, the rumble of steel wheels on steel, warned us of the approaching train. It swept into the station, drew to a halt. The sliding doors opened. After the disembarking passengers were clear Margaret and I boarded the first coach, which was only half full, found two seats. The doors sighed shut, the lights flickered, the train got under way.

It's wrong," said my wife softly. " But why should it be? "

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

"I read a story once. A Moebius strip on the Boston underground railway system . . ."

"So did I. One of George O. Smith's. Heard from Walter Willis the other day. He said that George had asked to be remembered to me ..."

The train stopped.

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

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

A few passengers drifted out, a few drifted in. It was too early for the after theatre traffic. The train started again.

"Are you concentrating?" asked Margaret.

"Yes. That Phillip's Rubber Soles ad. always annoys me. That daft blonde is supposed to be mucking around with the controls of her TV—and yet she's grinning at the camera or the artist or whatever like a Cheshire Cat . . ."

"Never mind Phillip's Rubber Soles. Or blondes. Concentrate."

"All right, all right," I said.

"Leicester Square," she said.

The train stopped and, after the usual pause, started.

We concentrated.

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

"Still the wrong way."

Next time, I thought, I must bring a pocket compass. Would it work? Too much steel? All sorts of electromagnetic fields? I tried to visualise the little instrument, the swinging, trembling needle. But I had visualised the disadvantages attending its use all too well. As, in my mind's eye, I tried to turn the case so that the North of the azimuth ring coincided with the North seeking end of the needle, the needle pivoted too. It was like one of those nightmares in which you desperately strive to do something that stubbornly refuses to be done.

"Wake up," said Margaret.

"I am awake."

"You had your eyes shut."

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

"Any moment now," she said.

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

"No. Any time now."

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

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

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

"The right way," I heard her gasp.

"The right way," I agreed. The lubber's line of my imaginary compass was steady on 270°.

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

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

"What's wrong with the Martian Mail, anyhow?" I asked. "But here's an idea. Suppose the Tories had got back in the first postwar election . . . The odds are that now we should be living in a Communist state. The people'd never have stood for old Winnie and his hunch of rogues and incompetents right after the war."

"They would so. And they're not rogues and incompetents."

"They are so. I wouldn't trust any of 'em to run a sailors' home in Tristan d'Acunha."

"What's that got . . ."

"No ships ever call there. Yes—that's the way I'll do it. A Communist state, all very 1984."

A chill settled over the heat of our argument. It was like the sensation you get when you suddenly realise that you are being watched—huh worse. Much worse. It was like the sensation you get when you realise that you have dropped a large, dirty, irretrievable brick.

I knew vaguely that the seat on the other side of me from Margaret was now occupied. I looked furtively at the little man—an inoffensive looking citizen he was, shabbily dressed—obviously trying to ignore me and with his nose buried in his newspaper. I glanced at it, as one does, saw that its title was, as far as I can remember, *Der Anglischer Zeitung*. That, in itself, was not surprising—you can buy all manner of foreign language papers in London.

I allowed my regard to stray from the newspaper to the advertisements on the opposite side of the carriage. Phillip's stupid blonde was no longer there to annoy me, and the Mona Lisa-ish model employed by Kent Hair

Brushes was not to be seen. There was one poster from which a once familiar face—black cowlick and black toothbrush moustache—glared at all beholders. There was too much heavy, Gothic printing. There were too many swastikas.

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

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

But was it our own city any longer? There was the newspaper, and there were the advertisements on the walls of the carriage. "Dunkirk," I whispered. "Or the Battle of Britain . . . Margaret clutched my hand painfully.

"We have to get back," she said urgently. "The children . . ." I looked at her. Her hair and her lips were startlingly vivid against the pallor of her face.

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

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

"Do something," whispered Margaret.

"Where's yer papers?"

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

I shut my eyes. I tried, hard, to visualise that gyro compass again, the instrument that had got us into this trouble. Faintly, as from a great distance, I heard Margaret stalling, playing for time, heard her say, in a placating voice, " We left them at home . . . " The click that the pistol made as it was cocked merged with the clicking hunt, the normal train noises merged, and once again the familiar machine was before me, almost tangible. Yes—it was easy to visualise the thing, but it wasn't easy to visualise it on the heading I wanted. Let me get it back to 090°, I prayed, back to East, and we shall be back in our own world . . . The lubber's line crept around the card—and steadied on 180°.

Once again came the change.

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

It took us, as I said, some little time to make the discovery. At first we lay back in our seats, recovering from the fright we had suffered, blandly assuming that all was well and that we were back in our own world and time. We opened our eyes sufficiently long to assure ourselves that neither the black-uniformed officer nor the man with the swastika brassard and the pistol were among those present. And, as far as I was concerned, the first attempt at rationalisation of it all was already being made. I had slept, and I had dreamed, and I had been the victim of a particularly vivid and plausible nightmare.

And yet ...

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

I opened my eyes properly, looked cautiously around. As before—and it was not until later that we discovered what may be an explanation—nobody seemed to have noticed our arrival. They were a queer lot, our fellow travellers, and . . . foreign. Not foreign as the Nazi officer had been—but with a foreignness that was, somehow, of Time as well as of Space, that called to mind old pictures of Leftish intellectuals and honest proletarians manning the barricades during the days of the Paris Commune. Almost all of the men were bearded—some with neat imperials, some with growths that were more luxuriant than tidy. Some wore black jackets and checked trousers, some brown velveteen, some were in working rig of blue denim. The dress of the women was not so outlandish, would have drawn scarcely a second look in any big city. There was something of Second Empire about it, and something of New Look, and it made Margaret's tailored tweed costume look harsh and ungraceful by comparison.

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

"Wait a little," she said. "I can't stand any more just now. And there's no . . . immediate danger here—wherever 'here' is."

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

"And that's wrong," I said to Margaret. "Place De Trafalgar? It can't be."

"It is," she said.

The train stopped. We saw, across the platform, another, city-bound train. This was, as I had already suspected, a mono-rail system with the coaches suspended from the overhead track. I was pointing this out to Margaret when a girl came in.

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

She looked at me, and her face lit up. She came straight to us, burst into a torrent of rapid French. All I could do was to shake my head and smile. Her face fell. She said, in slow, precise English, "I am sorry. I thought that you were a very dear friend of mine. But he is in Paris, on business." She sat beside me, carefully arranging her dress as she did so. She smiled again. "You are his double. He, like you, wears American clothes. You are American, of course."

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

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

"Dunstan," she said. "Andre Dunstan. He has gone to attend the . . . the . . . how do you say it? Le Congress Astronautique Internationale. You know, these people who would fly us all to the Moon in their foolish rockets. He is a friend of Monsieur Leclerc, the President of the society that interests itself in these matters."

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

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

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

"We're strangers here," I said, "as you've already guessed. We're interested in this city of yours. Tell me—what is there to see in Trafalgar Square? We have heard so much . . ."

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

"The Admiral?" I asked, looking as puzzled as I felt. "Why, yes. The great Villeneuve."

"Somebody," I said to Margaret, "seems to have ruined his career by

mucking around with redheads. Or, perhaps, one of his earlier wounds or illnesses was fatal . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We looked outside. We didn't see the street lights, the house lights, of suburbia, the illuminated clock towers of the factories along the Great West Road. We saw the fires. We saw dark, hulking masses like truncated pyramids and, belching from the tops of them, ruddy flames and billowing, black smoke. We saw a column of fire, springing, apparently, from ground level, that must have been all of a thousand feet high. We saw what could have been rivers of flowing flame. The low clouds glowed crimson.

I tore my regard from the lurid landscape outside, stared at the chart of stations, tried to gain from it some idea of our whereabouts both in space and in the alternative times. The chart was not helpful. It was no more than a black line with circles marking the stations, and the stations had no names—merely letters and numbers. As I looked the train stopped at C14. A few of the grey people got up, moved like automatons to the door which, I noticed, they had to open themselves. After they had left another half dozen or so of men and women entered. They could have been twins of those who had gone. With a jerk the train started again.

Margaret grasped my hand tightly. I felt better then—and it wasn't altogether the very real comfort I drew from her company.

It was as though some of the weight on my brain had been lifted, some alien element of compulsion partially removed.

"Where are we?" she said.

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

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

I tried. It was useless.

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

There was no reply.

With my free hand I reached out and shook the man.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Where is this train going?" I had to shake him again before I got a reply.

He spoke then, his voice as dreary and characterless as his appearance. He said, "They will not approve. They say that we are not to waste our strength in idle conversation."

"Who the hell are they?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll have to try," Margaret was saying. "This is the worst of all. They aren't human. I know it. If they get us—we're trapped. There'll be no going back."

I looked at her. Even in her fear she was vivid and lovely. I thought of her like one of the drab, grey women in the coach, and I hated the thought. I caught both her hands in mine, felt—of this I am sure—power flow through them from her to me. I concentrated hard on the mental technique that had been getting us into and out of trouble ever since we had left the Globe. Or, to be more exact, I tried to concentrate. It was impossible. Compellingly, monotonously, the words—"We will meet you at D3"—kept running through my brain to the exclusion of all else.

"I can't," I gasped. "Some sort of hypnotic control."

The train shuddered to a halt.

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

"But . . ."

"Do you want to meet them?"

"No . . ."

"Then out!"

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

The door was stiff. As I wrestled with it I felt a nightmare panic. It came open at last to a complaining of long ungreased hinges. Margaret and I stumbled out on to the platform just in time. We didn't bother to shut the

door after us. We saw the locomotive, before it pulled out of sight around the bend, saw that it was steam powered, an ugly little brute of a thing with an almost spherical boiler and a long, crazily tilted smokestack. The train left a wake of ruddy sparks and sulphurous smoke, of gritty cinders.

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

The voice in my mind, the reiteration of the words, "We will , meet you at D3," was now no more than a murmur. I felt cold and frightened.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"We take the next train back to town," she said. "Away from them. It will give us time to work out some way to return to our own world. And if we don't manage it—well, we stand a better chance of hiding out in a city than here."

"From them?"

"Why not? There's bound to be an underground. The entire population of London can't be like the zombies we've already seen."

"How do we find the underground?"

"Dammit!" she exploded. " You're supposed to write this kind of stuff. I'd have thought that you'd have been able to cope with it in real life! "

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

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

Then I was sorry that I'd said it. It wasn't very funny. I caught her to me and held her tightly.

"All right," I said. "We'll manage. Somehow. After all—they can't shoot us."

"Can't they?" she asked.

I looked at her, saw, in the dim, flickering light, that she was trying to grin.

"Won't then," I said. "Not if we can help it."

"That's better," she said.

We started to walk slowly along the platform, away from the lights, away from the little shed that might have been a booking office, that might have housed—anything. Suddenly, ahead of us, I saw what at first I took for two glowing coals on the platform, pulled up sharply. At that moment the reflected glare from the sky brightened suddenly and I saw that the two

sparks were the eyes of some creature. It was black, and apparently shapeless, and seemed to have too many legs. There was a familiar animal there, too—a cat. The cat was dead. The alien thing was feeding noisily on the furry body.

I like cats.

It was a silly thing to do, I know, but I lifted my foot, brought it down hard on the elongated head of the strange beast. I felt something give and crack. The screaming started then, a thin, high screeching that held pain and hate. The thing reared up— it must have stood all of five feet tall—and started for me. The ruddy light gleamed from teeth and claws.

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

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

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

"Is it, was it, one of them?" asked Margaret.

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

"How do you know?"

"It was nothing from this world, nothing Earthly."

"Here comes our train," she said, pointing to the locomotive slowly approaching under its cloud of steam and smoke and sparks. It rattled into the station slowly, too slowly—for I had seen movement under the dim light over the station entrance. Six men, walking in single file, trooped on to the platform. Only they weren't men. Men don't normally walk with the jerkiness of a poorly manipulated marionette. Men don't have almost globular bodies, and they don't have more than four limbs. Men have necks—and those things had no necks. Their heads were hemispheres set on top of the spheres that were their bodies. They did not seem to have seen us—yet. A cloud of smoke and steam from the ugly little engine blew across the platform and hid them from view.

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

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

"The other worlds make sense, of a sort," said Margaret, as soon as we were well under way. "Of a sort. But this one . . . How did it happen? How did it ever happen?"

"I can't do any better than guess," I said, "and my guess, for what it's worth, is this. Some time in the past—in Victorian days? —there was an invasion from Outside. A successful one. In the other worlds, in our world, it never happened. Some little thing intervened, we shall never know what it was. Here's what it might have been—just suppose that the crew of Mary Celeste were captured by a flying saucer . . . In our world one of them carried some sort of disease that wiped out the aliens or persuaded them that Earth was not a safe planet on which to make a landing . . . In this world that particular disease, or that particular carrier of the disease, was absent, and the aliens had all their specimens for leisurely study, for use as guinea pigs for testing weapons and techniques, before their invasion. They invaded, and they conquered, and they have their supply of slave labour for whatever it is they are doing."

"But where are they from?"

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

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

I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts from it that were drifting in from outside. Icy fear contracted the muscles of my stomach.

"It wasn't me that was saying it," I muttered. "It was them."

They know that we've got away, that we're wandering around loose. All the members are on the lookout for us now, and all the . . . the Zombies . . . There's a mind back there—a mind, big, and powerful, and . . . and stupid. As stupid as those beings we saw back on the station. But keep hold of me. You're immune somehow. As long as there's physical contact I share your immunity."

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

"I wish I were. But when it almost had me, just now, its mind, or their mind, was in mine . . .

"I felt something too," she said slowly. "No, not this group mind, or whatever it is, of yours—but something human. Somebody is looking for us. Somebody wants us as badly as they do."

"Your underground movement?"

The train stopped at a poorly lit station.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Knives flashed into sight. The tall leader drew a weapon that looked like one of the old muzzle loading, single shot pistols. They've got into the next coach."

Who are you?" I asked.

The leader grinned, showing uneven, discoloured teeth.

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

It was no time for either modesty or squeamishness. It was obvious that the coveralls—like skimpy, ill-made boiler suits they were—would not go on over our outer clothing and so, while the train rattled and groaned over the uneven track, we stripped to our underthings, pulled on the dirty garments. The touch of them was harsh to the skin; harsh, and greasy with the muck and perspiration of at least months of wear.

One of the red haired strangers produced a sack made of the same coarse material as his clothing. Into it went my jacket, and my trousers, and Margaret's costume. Reluctantly I removed my necktie—"That gaudy rag round your neck," the leader called it—dropped it into the bag after the other clothes.

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

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

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

"That's as may be—but I'm in charge now. Where do you come from?"

I hesitated. For all that we knew to the contrary we might have escaped

from the frying-pan only to fall into the fire. And yet—these, for all their ruffianly appearance, were free men and women. I decided to talk.

I said slowly, "We come from a parallel time track."

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

"Even so," said the tall man, "they're on the run. Our watchers have picked up the Dring orders—that's why we got here first. They're on the run—so they're no friends of the Dring."

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

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

"I've heard of traitors," said the shorter of the two women. "I've heard of traitors—people like ourselves who aren't under Dring control, and yet who've sold out to the Dring for what filthy extra comforts they're allowed. There was Carter . . ."

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

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

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

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

"But we do come from another world," I said desperately. "Not another world exactly, but this world as it would have been, might have been, had there never been a Dring invasion. This is the third world that we have visited to-night. In one of the others we heard of, but did not meet, my . . . twin? No, not twin. Myself."

"Where is your proof?" sneered the leader.

"Here. Look at the resemblance between my wife and . . . and . . ."

"Margaret," said the tall red haired woman.

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

"I was married," said the woman.

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

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

"I don't know—but I can guess. Either he never existed, or he's dead, or he's a zombie, a slave. One thing I've noticed since we got here—Margaret's immune to the long range hypnosis of the Dring. I'm not—although the brute seems to have stopped trying to order me around now. Margaret has red hair, I haven't. She's immune. I'm not. Am I right in supposing that all red haired people are proof against this remote control? "

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

He pulled his muzzle loading pistol out of his pocket and looked at it ruefully.

"This," he said, "against guns that shoot thunderbolts!"

"But what can you do?" asked Margaret.

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

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

"I don't think they're spies, Elsa. I've been probing their minds as much as I can—and I've had glimpses of the strange world they come from. They live in London, like we do—and their house is not a dirty burrow in the ruins, but stands in the air and the sunlight ... "

"It will do her good," said Margaret's "twin," "to live as we do."

Margaret flushed angrily, but I could feel for the other girl. Her bitterness was understandable. I pinched my wife's arm before she could make a cutting reply.

"What do you want of us?" I asked.

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

"I'm sorry," I said. "If I knew myself, I'd tell you willingly. But we've been trying to get back, and we can't."

"What can you tell us of weapons?" demanded John.

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

breeder pile and make plutonium? "

"You're talking in riddles."

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

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

"Peter's the best judge of that," said John. "But—I'm disappointed."

"I wish they'd never come," said the widow Margaret.

She took the sack from the man who was holding it, pulled out my wife's costume, fingered the material with an expression of combined longing and envy that I hope never to see again.

"Put that back!" snapped John.

The rest of the journey passed in a glum silence.

We left the region of the great fires, drove through what, in the darkness, was an almost featureless waste, broken only at sparse intervals, by yellow, flickering lights. We stopped briefly at station after station—all of them bare, dirty, wind-and rain-swept platforms. Occasional parties of slaves, of zombies, entered our com-partment, travelling to unknown destinations. They never noticed us. They were looking—if they were looking for anything at all—for a man and a woman in strange, bright clothing. Once we saw a full dozen of the Dring marching in single file beneath the glimmering lamps at one of the halts. Their globular bodies were crosscrossed with a sort of harness, and from this hung metal tubes that could have been weapons.

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

He led us along the platform, past the dim light and the stairs.

There was a loose slat in the fence at the end of the platform, and this he pulled aside. He wriggled through the opening, vanished, and was followed by Elsa. One of the other men said that Margaret and I were to go next. On the other side of the fence. I found a rough embankment, steep, well overgrown with coarse weeds. I heard John below me, the scraping noise of shoes, an occasional sharply drawn breath. I was surprised when at last I found myself standing on reasonably level ground. Seconds later Margaret almost fell into my arms.

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

But we were given no time to admire the scenery. John grasped Margaret's arm, and the other Margaret grasped mine, and we were hurried along over a rough track. There was no street lighting, but the reflected glare from the great fires that we had seen earlier served to light our path after a fashion. We followed the line of the railway embankment, passing under another station, for what must have been a full half hour.

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

"The word?" croaked a voice.

"Security," whispered John.

"Then enter."

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

"Good. Follow me."

John lit another lantern from the first, led us along a maze of tunnels. The air was heavy with the smell of old, stale earth, of mildew, of the smoke of rancid, burning oil. There was another guard to pass, this one stationed outside a heavy, wooden door. He contented himself with a long and minute inspection of Margaret and myself, opened the door without a word. Through it, we found ourselves in a room about twenty feet square and ten high. There was a desk—a heavy Victorian piece of furniture—and behind it a matching chair. An old man, with white, yellow stained hair and beard, was sitting at the desk. He acknowledged John's military salute with a casual wave of his hand, motioned us all to the plain, hard benches before him.

"What are your names?" he asked as soon as we were seated.

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

"Where do you come from?"

I told him. I told him the whole story. He did not seem too incredulous. After all, I reflected, the interplanetary invasion must have been a very recent memory when he was young; he must, through his parents, have felt, even at second hand, something of the wonder as well as the terror of it all.

"I am an old man," he said, when I was finished. "I am older, perhaps, than you think—I can remember the Dring ships in the sky, the fire that

rained down upon London—and that was all of a hundred years ago. I can remember being herded, with other children, into the Dring nurseries. Like ants they are, the Dring, and when they conquer they enslave. I knew, from the first, that I was not the same as most of the others—the Dring never got my mind. But I was cunning enough to act as the other children did.

"For a while I worked in one of their factories. What was the work? I cannot say. I shovelled loose earth into a succession of little trucks, each of which was wheeled away after being filled. I never did anything else. None of the slaves, the real slaves, engaged in other processes would, or could, tell me what they did.

Then came the day—I must have been fourteen—when I was turned out of the factory with the ending of the day's work, pushed on to a train bound in to what had been the city. It is the policy of the Dring to let its workers house themselves among the ruins, scratch a bare livelihood out of their scraps of gardens—which is, of course, supplemented by a ration of synthetic food—and, of course, breed. They are under control the whole time, naturally.

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

"But it was my mother. She and a dozen others who had escaped both massacre and slavery were living together in holes and crannies, plotting a hopeless vengeance. They never knew how hopeless it was. We know—but still we plot.

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

"How?"

"From what you have told me—your world is not at peace. Your people have weapons, powerful weapons. Could you remember how they are made? "

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

"I was afraid of that.

"Now, here is another way. Not all of the humans are either slaves or rebels. There is a class, a pampered class, that rarely leaves the Dring hives. They are people like ourselves who are immune to mesmerism. But they see nothing wrong with the present state of affairs—to them the Dring is father and mother, comfort and security. Now and again, as you know,

perhaps, one of our number has turned traitor, has deserted us for the easy living of the hive. We have thought, often, of sending in a pseudo traitor—it has been tried. But minds, in this world, are read far too easily. Those whom we have sent have been returned—their bodies dumped in the street, tortured and mutilated.

"Another technique we have attempted—prisoners whose capture has been a matter of intention on our part. But they, no more than have the others, have never penetrated the outer guard of members and tame humans to the Dring itself. But the Dring will want to make a personal—if it can be called a person—examination of you and your wife. If it can be killed, then . . ."

"Killed? But how?"

"We have a limited supply of dynamite. A stick, hidden in the bag that your wife carried . . . But it will not be your wife, of course. It will be Margaret, wearing her clothes. You must go. We have no double, no 'twin,' that we can use in your place."

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

"If you're going," she said, "I want to go, too."

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

"We have reason to believe that the Dring ships have been able to cross the strange barrier between your world and this. Over three years ago, one was observed by our people flying low over London, drifting down to the landing field. Hanging from its underside was a strange flying ship—a thing with wings and a fishlike body. We have never seen such a machine in our sky. We did not know, until tonight, where it could have come from. Now, having heard of your world, and the others, we can do more than guess. But, John, the clothing . . ."

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

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

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

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

"But the bomb . . . It's simple, isn't it? This little tube contains the detonator, the spring that works the firing in and a strand of wire. It contains, too, a very fragile phial of acid. When the phial is broken the acid eats through the wire, releasing the spring. For this bomb we have chosen an almost instantaneous fuse.

"So whoever uses the bomb . . ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I wanted to keep to the edge of the road, but Margaret would have none of it. We were to be captured, she insisted, and the sooner this came about the better. So, incongruously arm in arm, we walked through the ruined city with no attempt at concealment. And we talked. "Your wife," said Margaret, "she's—me. I was able to get inside her mind—and she in mine. If we are probed too closely I shall be able to deceive the Dring, for a while, at least . . ." Then, a little later, "Why don't you smoke?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Can we talk?" I asked. "Is there any danger of anybody overhearing, or eavesdropping on our thoughts?"

"No," she said. "I should feel it if they were probing. I did gain the impression, when we were brought into the ship, that we were to be taken straight to the Dring, that there was to be no attempt at interrogation by any lesser being."

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

The deck seemed to tilt more steeply, throwing us together. I became alarmed again about the lethal contents of the handbag.

I said, "But the stupidity! You'd think they'd have searched us for weapons!"

"The Dring is stupid," she said. "Powerful and stupid. The Tamies are stupid—they have lived for too long the lives of petted animals."

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

Two of the humans came into the cramped cabin, pointed the metal tubes at us and told us to get up. We did so, followed a third human along the short alleyway, down the steps to the ground. We found that we were standing at the base of one of the huge pyramids we had seen earlier. It towered all of a thousand feet into the sky. Down each of the angles formed by its walls ran a stream of what could have been blazing oil. Billowing smoke half obscured the hurrying figures of men and Dring, all of

whom seemed to be moving with the frantic activity of a disturbed ant hill. There was the dull, rhythmic clangour of some sort of machinery.

We were led by our guards to a ramp, the angle of which was a little too steep for human feet and legs. It zigzagged up the face of the pyramid, at each change of direction bringing us far too close to the blazing oil for comfort. The heat seared our lungs, the acrid smoke half blinded us, made us choke and cough. We passed numbers of downward bound Dring members and human slaves, all of whom stood to one side to allow us free passage. One of the slaves, I remember, lost his footing, fell from the ramp down the face of the pyramid. Not one, human or alien, raised a hand to try to save him. Not one seemed to even notice his going.

It was half way up the huge erection that we came to the door. It was the entrance to a tunnel of almost circular section, the walls of which glowed with a pale, cold luminosity. Once I put out a hand to steady myself, and found that they were slimy to the touch, seemed to crawl beneath the pressure. It was at this time, too, that I felt the first attempted invasion of my mind since the escape from the train. At once I began mentally to recite the Articles, the seafarer's Rule of the Road, that long list of regulations which every officer commits to memory. Also I caught Margaret's hand, held it tightly in mine.

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

"Has it got you?" asked Margaret urgently.

"No," I managed to say.

We came at last to a room, a spherical chamber. Its interior surface glowed with the same cold light as had the walls of the tunnel. It must have been all of forty feet in diameter. Strands of silk, each no thicker than a lead pencil, converged to the centre of the sphere, merged to form a huge cocoon. Around this guards, both Dring and Truman, supported themselves on the seemingly frail webbing. Of the thing inside the cocoon we could see nothing. There was a faint, dry whispering noise, a half heard stridulation.

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

"We know," he said, where you come from. We know that you are from the third level. How did you get here?"

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

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

"You will serve the Dring," it said. "All beings serve the Dring. You will open your mind. The Dring would learn of the third level, of its power and its weaknesses. Open your mind. Open your mind."

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

Two of the almost globular Dring members started towards us, swinging through the web like enraged spiders. Margaret fumbled inside the handbag, threw it. Straight and true it skimmed through the air, not touching any of the strands of the web. The Dring must have realised its danger; its probing, questioning mind was withdrawn from mine. Almost instantaneous, I thought, and let go of the silken strand that I was holding. I pulled Margaret down to the curved floor with me, tried to scramble with her to the mouth of the tunnel. And we made it. The blast caught us, drove us like projectiles in the barrel of a gun. There was heat, and pressure, and noise that was felt rather than heard.

Then there was blackness.

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

"Margaret!" I said.

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

"You did it," I said.

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

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

"Tell her," she said, "tell her, thank you . . ."

"You must keep them."

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

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

There was fighting in the open space below the pyramid. Dark human figures milled around, the glare of the fires shone from the bright steel of

knives and axes. Now and again there was the bright, intensely blue flare of the Dring weapons, now and again the orange flash of a black powder-loaded pistol. The sound of yells and screams, of explosions, drifted up faintly.

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

It was Margaret.

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

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

I walked down to meet her.

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

"Dead," I said.

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

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

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

"Who?"

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

"Who is fighting?"

"The Tamies. They're shocked and disorganised, but they're fighting back. The Dring members are just wandering round like chickens with their heads cut off, but the Tamies are fighting. There's another Dring mind somewhere, and they're trying to wake it so it can take over."

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

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

When we got down to ground level all seemed to be over but the mopping up. The fires were dying, and dawn was grey in the sky, and the small rain was seeping down on the sprawled, untidy bodies. John received us—a John

whose face was burned, whose left arm hung limply at his side, whose clothing was torn and bloodstained.

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

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

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

I climbed up into the cab.

One of the two men threw a shovel load of coal on to the furnace, the other opened a valve. The engine snorted, its wheels screamed on the greasy metals before they gained traction. Then, with a jerk, we were off. Past the huge pyramids we sped, past the columns of smoke; through the bare, sterile countryside. Through drab, comfortless stations we rattled, ignoring the hordes of grey-clad slaves who, dumb and uncomprehending, waited patiently for the trains that would never come to bear them to their hovels in the ruined city.

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

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

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

John," I said, not believing what I was saying, "it must be John. He must have captured one of the things, found out how to fly it . . ."

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

The driver watched his controls intently, the fireman threw on more shovels of coal, raked and sliced. He said, curtly, "Weapons. Back of cab. Use 'em."

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

Ignoring the driver's curses I leaned far out of the side of the cab, tried to bring the weapon to bear on the flying ship. My first shot was yards to the

right, my second in line, but under. And the answering fire from the saucer sent the rails up in an eruption of molten iron not two feet behind our rear wheels. Margaret was firing now, and her aim, if anything was worse than mine. All that saved us, I am convinced, was the unskillful pilotage that made it impossible for our enemies to bring their own, heavier weapon accurately to bear.

The saucer swished overhead, roaring like a hive of angry bees.

It fled along the tracks ahead of us, diminishing rapidly as it increased the range. Then it stopped, hovering directly over the lines. It was impossible to get a fair shot at it as it hung there, even after I had battered out the dirty glass of the cab windows. From its underside lightning flared for long seconds, from the track sprayed a fountain of sparks and smoke.

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

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

But nobody heeded her. Driver and fireman were still fighting to bring their engine under control, and I, or so I was told later, was shouting, "I'll get the bastards! I'll get the bastards!"

We were so close to the saucer now that I could fire over the boiler of the locomotive. The long, ugly smokestack went with the first shot, and then I scored a direct hit on the underbelly of the lenticulate ship. The firing stud hurt my thumb as it tried to jump back to the "off " position, but I kept it pressed. The tube heated rapidly. The blue glare of the continuous discharge blinded me—and then the weapon went dead.

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

And . . .

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

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

"Hounslow Central," I said.

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

The house was empty—the children, luckily, were spending a week with their grandparents. We let ourselves in. We went to the kitchen and, in

silence, brewed ourselves a pot of tea. While we were drinking it there was a knock at the door. Margaret started violently, knocking her cup over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—George Whitley.